

*Immodesty Without Mirrors—Making Sense
of Wittgenstein's Linguistic Pluralism**

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1. Is assertion a natural kind?

Wittgenstein is often thought to have challenged the view that assertion is an important theoretical category in a philosophical view of language. One of Wittgenstein's main themes in the early sections of the *Investigations* is that philosophy misses important distinctions about the uses of language, distinctions hidden from us by 'the uniform appearances of words.' (1968, #11) As Wittgenstein goes on to say:

It is like looking into the cabin of a locomotive. We see handles all looking more or less alike. (Naturally, since they are all supposed to be handled.) But one is the handle of a crank which can be moved continuously (it regulates the opening of a valve); another is the handle of a switch, which has only two effective positions, it is either off or on; a third is the handle of a brake-lever, the harder one pulls on it, the harder it brakes; a fourth, the handle of a pump: it has an effect only so long as it is moved to and fro. (1968, #12)

Few contemporary philosophers share Wittgenstein's evident familiarity with cabin of a steam locomotive, and in general, most of us are increasingly remote from all but the most superficial understanding of the underlying functions of the tools on which we rely. So we are perhaps even more prone to the mistake that Wittgenstein thinks that philosophy makes with respect to language, that of regarding it as one tool rather than many: 'Think of the tools in a tool-box: there is a hammer, pliers, a saw, a screw-driver, a rule, a glue-pot, glue, nails and screws.—The functions of words are as diverse as the functions of these objects.'¹ (1968, #11)

* I am grateful to Richard Holton, Max Kölbel, Bernhard Weiss, and a conference audience in Sydney in June, 2002, for many comments on previous versions of this paper.

¹ It is worth noting that in these passages Wittgenstein offers us two significantly different metaphors. The handle metaphor compares uses of language to a single kind of tool—a handle—that does different jobs in different applications. The toolbox metaphor compares uses of language to the diverse kinds of tools to be found in a toolbox. I shall be proposing that the former metaphor is the more useful one, in the case of assertions.

Like the steam locomotive, this aspect of Wittgenstein's philosophy is apt to seem a relic of a quaint but happily bygone age, in which philosophy showed an excessive interest in ordinary language. But whatever one's view of ordinary language philosophy, it would be a mistake to dismiss Wittgenstein's view of language by association. For Wittgenstein's view is a view about language itself—a contribution to philosophy of language, not a linguistic approach to other philosophical topics. True, if Wittgenstein is right then the view may have applications of the latter kind. But distaste for these applications is not an argument against the view of language on which they rest.

To assess Wittgenstein's view we should try to connect it with mainstream ideas in the philosophy of language—to ask what it amounts to, if couched in such terms. Perhaps it involves rejection of mainstream views, but we ought to be able to say what is being rejected. However, there seems to have been little serious attempt to connect Wittgenstein's view to more conventional philosophy of language in this way. The present paper is a contribution to this project.

One of few prominent writers who does discuss Wittgenstein's view is Michael Dummett. In the chapter on 'Assertion' in *Frege: Philosophy of Language*, Dummett raises the question as to 'whether there is ... any genuine point in grouping together all those utterances which we class as assertions.' He goes on:

This question is answered negatively by Wittgenstein in the *Investigations* #25: 'But how many kinds of sentence are there? Say assertion, question and command?—There are countless kinds: countless different kinds of use of what we call ... "sentences"'. (1973: 356)

Dummett is interested in contrasting Wittgenstein's view to Frege's. However, he thinks that it isn't entirely clear what Wittgenstein's view is. He suggests two interpretations of what he calls Wittgenstein's 'repudiation of the notion of assertion', (1973: 360) but argues that both are unattractive.

For my part, I have considerable sympathy with what I take to be two important ingredients of Wittgenstein's view, on any adequate interpretation. One of these

ingredients plays down the theoretical significance of the idea that a function of (a large part of) language is to ‘describe’ or ‘represent’ reality. The other plays up the idea that the language concerned has many different functions, in a way that is not evident ‘on the surface’. I’ll call these ingredients *non-representationalism* and *functional pluralism*, respectively.

It isn’t controversial that these two ingredients are present in Wittgenstein’s later thinking in some form, or that they comprise important parts of what is new in the shift from the early to the later Wittgenstein. But it is far from clear how to make these rather vague ideas precise, and connect them with other projects and frameworks in the philosophy of language.

In this respect, Dummett’s discussion provides a useful anchor. While I think there is a more promising version of Wittgenstein’s view than Dummett allows, it depends on a different conception from Dummett’s of the task of a philosophical theory of language. In the relevant respects, moreover, Dummett’s is the orthodox view. The possibility of making sense of Wittgenstein’s view has thus been hidden by some deep-seated presuppositions of modern philosophy of language, I think, and the interest of the view coincides in large part with the interest of the landscape revealed if those presuppositions are given up.

As I’ll explain, the resulting position is a kind of generalised or global expressivism. Its expressivism consists in theorising about language in a non-representational key, its generality in prescribing this key universally (in contrast to a local expressivism, say about ethical discourse). A useful comparison is therefore with Robert Brandom, who is one of the very few contemporary writers to endorse a non-representationalist, expressivist starting point for a theory of meaning. I think that although my version of Wittgenstein’s view diverges from Brandom’s project in an important way—Brandom is ultimately less non-representationalist than my Wittgenstein—they start at the same point. Because the starting point is unorthodox, a large part of the dialectical task is simply to make it visible—to show that it is possible

to begin the relevant enquiry *there*. Brandom is therefore a useful ally, from my point of view.

I don't claim that the view outlined here is exactly Wittgenstein's. But I do think that in making interesting sense of non-representationalism and functional pluralism, it is Wittgensteinian in spirit. It is an under-appreciated position, which provides one interesting way of filling out the intuition that assertion is a less homogeneous linguistic category than tends to be assumed, especially in the tradition stemming from Frege—a tradition to which the early Wittgenstein belonged, and against which his later linguistic pluralism is evidently directed.

2. Themes from Frege

According to Dummett, the first way of understanding Wittgenstein's view 'would be [as] a denial of the idea, common to most philosophers who have written about meaning, that the theory of meaning has some one key concept.' (1973: 360) As Dummett notes, the idea thus denied is due in particular to Frege: 'Frege viewed the key concept of the theory of meaning as being the notion of truth: to grasp the sense of a sentence is to grasp its truth-conditions.' (p. 360) Moreover, although some philosophers (including Dummett himself) have proposed replacing truth with some other central notion, such as method of verification, the basic Fregean structure has been thought to survive this modification. As Dummett says:

Other candidates for the role of key concept have been put forward: but it has been common to philosophers to suppose that there is some one feature of a sentence which may be identified as determining its meaning. (1973: 360)

Dummett goes on to explain the standard view of connection between this Fregean 'key concept' conception of meaning and the explanation of linguistic *use*:

[T]he implicit assumption underlying the idea that there is some one key concept in terms of which we can give a general characterization of the meaning of a sentence is that there must be some uniform pattern of derivation of all the other features of the use of an arbitrary sentence, given its meaning as characterized in terms of the key concept. It is precisely to subserve such a schema of derivation

that the [Fregean] distinction between sense and force was introduced: corresponding to each different kind of force will be a different uniform pattern of derivation of the use of a sentence from its sense, considered as determining its truth-conditions. (1973: 361)

In using the phrase ‘each different kind of force’, Dummett reflects the orthodox but not incontestable view that there is more than one kind of force. On this orthodox view, sense and force comprise what we might think of as orthogonal dimensions of variations of meaning. The resulting two-dimensional structure is illustrated by the examples in Figure 1. Within each column of the table, the utterances listed have the same *sense* (or *descriptive content*), but differ in *force*. Within each row, the various utterances have the same *force*, but differ in *sense* (or *descriptive content*).

		SENSE			
FORCE		The door is shut	Grass is green	The art of conversation is dead	...
Assertoric		‘The door is shut’	‘Grass is green’	‘The art of conversation is dead’	...
Imperative		‘Shut the door!’	‘Make it the case that grass is green!’	‘Make it the case that the art of conversation is dead!’	...
Interrogative		‘Is the door shut?’	‘Is it the case that grass is green?’	‘Is the art of conversation dead?’	...
Optative		‘Would that the door were shut!’	‘Would it were the case that grass is green!’	‘Would that the art of conversation were dead!’	...
...	

Figure 1: The Fregean sense–force distinction.

A virtue of the Fregean approach is that it does capture the powerful intuition that meaning is (at least) two-dimensional in this sense—i.e., that there is something that the meanings of the utterances across each row have in common, in respect of which they differ from the utterances in the other rows; and also something that the meanings of the utterances in each column have in common, in respect of which they differ from the utterances in the other columns. But it is worth noting that the apparent two-

dimensionality alone does not show that the variation of meaning in one dimension is of a fundamentally different kind from that in the other. After all, we get a similar two-dimensionality from the most basic two-place relational expression Fxy , if we consider the two kinds of variations of meaning that result from (i) substituting a fixed name for x and then a range of names for y , and (ii) substituting a fixed name for y and then a range of names for x . In principle, it might be maintained—as it is by David Lewis (1970), for example—that all the utterances in Figure 1 have assertoric force, and that what distinguishes the rows is a particular kind of variation of sense.

However best explained, the particular kind of two-dimensionality provided by the Fregean sense–force distinction seems to deserve prominence in a theoretical account of meaning. One of Dummett’s interpretations of Wittgenstein takes him to be challenging the sense–force framework. On the face of it, any such challenge is going to be hard-pressed to explain the intuitions about meaning reflected in the structure of Figure 1. (Dummett himself objects to the proposed view in similar terms.) I take it to be an advantage of my version of the Wittgensteinian view that it does retain the sense–force framework, or something recognisably related to it.

Dummett makes a converse point about the apparent necessity of the sense–force distinction:

It is difficult to see how, on any theory of meaning which takes meaning as to be characterized in terms of some one key concept, whether that of truth or that of verification or some other, some such distinction between sense and force could be dispensed with. (1973: 361)

The thought behind this is the one Dummett expresses in the earlier passage: one of the tasks of a theory of meaning is to explain the *use* of an arbitrary utterance, in terms of its meaning. If the ‘key concept’ invoked by the theory in question is not immediately a specification of use, then the task is to show how use is determined by something not characterised in terms of use. For each variety of Fregean force, this requires a function whose input is specified in terms of the ‘one key concept’, and whose output is a use prescription. In other words, it requires, as Dummett says, ‘some uniform pattern of

derivation of all the other features of the use of an arbitrary sentence, given its meaning as characterized in terms of the key concept.’ (1973: 361)

Such functions are therefore use-determining or ‘pragmatic’ rules, and the sense–force distinction is commonly characterised as a ‘semantic–pragmatic’ distinction. Across each row in the Figure 1, the difference in meaning between the utterances concerned is a *semantic* difference—a difference of truth conditions, for example, if this is the central semantic notion in play, in terms of which sense is characterised. Down each column, the difference in meaning is a *pragmatic* difference—a difference in the use of the utterances in question, in virtue of their different forces.

We now have sufficient terminology for a rough characterisation of the view for which I’m aiming. We’ve seen that for Frege and Dummett, the project is to generate the pragmatic from the semantic—to explain *use* in terms of *content*—by appealing to a set of principles, one for each variety of force. Each such principle needs to stipulate how the use of an utterance with the force in question depends on the descriptive content of the utterance concerned. My goal is to identify a second and more fundamental role for pragmatic considerations. Roughly, I want to give a pragmatic account of *how there come to be* descriptive contents, or thoughts, of particular kinds—in effect, we might say, a pragmatic account of the origins of the semantic.²

Consider a familiar example. On a Fregean view, specification of the meaning of a typical utterance of ‘Snow is white’ involves two components. The first component specifies the sense of the utterance, typically by telling us something of this form: ‘Snow is white’ is true iff *p*. (There are two importantly different conceptions of what is involved in such a ‘telling’, but let’s ignore this for the present.) The second component invokes some general principle governing the assertoric force, to describe the use of an utterance with the specified truth conditions—e.g., the principle that when making assertions, speakers aim to utter true sentences.

²More precisely, what I’m after is a pragmatic account of the linguistic practices which we’d ordinarily describe as application of particular concepts, or expression of particular thoughts. The distinction is important because I am interested in the possibility that the semantic notions—content, truth and the like—are not among the theoretical ontology of the view in question. More on this below.

On my view, this Fregean specification is not misconceived—at least under one of the two possible conceptions of ‘telling’ of truth conditions—but it is seriously incomplete. Roughly, what it leaves out is an account of *how there comes to be* a thought to the effect that snow is white. One component of this thought is the concept *white*, for example. My proposal looks for a pragmatic account of the origins and ‘possession conditions’ of this concept, for creatures like us—natural creatures, in a natural environment. It asks, in effect, how does such a creature have to *be*, and what does it have to *do*, to count as possessing and employing the concept?³

It is far from obvious how an answer to this question could amount to what Wittgenstein thought he’d found—a position in tension with much orthodox philosophy of language. After all, doesn’t everybody need an account of concept possession? In order to reveal the tension, we’ll need to be more explicit about the tasks of a theoretical account of language. For one thing, it turns out that in the orthodox approach there are actually already two distinct roles for pragmatic considerations in such a theoretical enterprise (one of them commonly elided). My proposal is therefore to add a third role, and it will be important not to confuse it with a mere rediscovery of the second. For another thing, the proposal needs to be distinguished from two other possible views, one more radical and one less so. Finally, there are several distinct conceptions of the goals and methodology of a ‘theory of meaning’, and the proposal is at home in some but not in others. I address these various distinctions in the following four sections.

3. Three roles for pragmatism in linguistic theory

Science often proceeds by formulating abstract or idealized models, models that are thought to ‘fit’ reality more or less well. In the case of the science of language, these models may be more or less inclusive in scope. They may be models simply of languages, or of languages-in-a-world, or—perhaps most usefully of all—of languages-

³As we’ll see, this project has two importantly distinct parts to it. We want a general pragmatic account of the origins of judgement or assertion in general, and specific accounts of the origins of particular concepts.

and-language-users-in-a-world. As linguistic theorists, then, we are likely to have an abstract or idealized conception of a language, or language-plus-world, or language-plus-world-and-speakers, and face the question as to what counts as fitting reality—what it takes for such a model to ‘fit’ a given community of (real) speakers.⁴ (Notice that this is a different question from one that may arise *within* the model, as to whether a given sentence ‘fits’ or is ‘true of’ the world.)

By thus distinguishing the model—the abstract, formal, idealized conception of a language—from the issue of what it takes for that model to fit sociological reality, we give ourselves two locations where pragmatic considerations may play a part. In the latter location, indeed, it seems that nothing but pragmatic considerations can be relevant. In some sense, whether our model correctly represents the linguistic activity of the community in question can depend on nothing but the *use* of linguistic items in the day-to-day practice of that community.

In the former location—that is, *within* the formal model—the obvious example of a pragmatic factor is Fregean force. In a model language conceived in Fregean terms, the basic items are something like possible speech acts—at any rate, sentences considered as possessing force, as well as sense. As we have already noted, it is usual to say that force needs to be explicated in terms of pragmatic or use-determining rules.

It is a nice question to what extent this formal use of pragmatic considerations can be detached from the considerations which bear on the correctness of the ascription of a given model language to a particular community. There seem to be different theoretical strategies possible at this point. As I noted, one attractive option is to model language users, as well as languages themselves. According to this approach, a typical item within the model is a particular speech act, by a particular speaker. The pragmatic or use-related distinctions between speech acts with different Fregean forces will then be represented explicitly within the model. But we’ll still need to appeal to *real* use, in order to justify the claim that a particular such model fits the linguistic practice of a

⁴A classic description of the task in these terms is that of David Lewis (1975).

given real community. So use will be relevant in two places: theoretically, within the model, and practically, concerning the fit of the model to sociological reality.

In this orthodox approach, the models in question ascribe semantic properties to certain linguistic items, such as sentences. The semantic properties themselves are part of the model. In effect, my proposal is to model languages in different terms, replacing semantic properties with (additional) pragmatic or usage-grounded properties.

The proposal is most easily visualized if users and usage patterns are themselves an explicit component of our linguistic models. In this case, as we noted, the model itself embodies the full two-dimensional structure associated with the Fregean sense–force distinction. On the orthodox view, sense differences correspond to differences in semantic properties (e.g., differences in truth conditions), while force differences correspond to differences in usage rules. In my proposal, both kinds of differences correspond to differences in usage properties—differences of different kinds, of course—and semantic properties are absent from the model altogether. As we’ll see, this doesn’t imply (absurdly) that the theory says nothing about language–world relations, but only that the theoretically significant such relations are not the familiar semantic relations.

The possibility and character of such a model will become clearer as we go along. For the moment, the point I want to stress is that this approach will provide a crucial role for pragmatic or usage-grounded factors, which is different both from the roles associated with Fregean force distinctions, and with the issue as to whether a given linguistic model fits a given body of sociological data—i.e., as to whether the model fits the linguistic community in question.

4. Idealism, ‘mere presentationalism’ and semantic deflationism

In presenting this proposal, one important task is to show that it differs from two others proposals with which it is liable to be confused. Earlier I characterised the view as offering a pragmatic account of how there comes to be a thought to the effect that snow is white—how the possibility of such a thought depends on contingent features of the thinker. On one side, it is important that this is not the (‘idealist’) view that the *fact* that

snow is white is ‘mind-dependent’, or a product of human linguistic practices. I want to say that the fact that we have the conceptual machinery to judge that snow is white depends on broadly pragmatic (and broadly contingent) factors concerning ourselves.⁵ But the whiteness of snow does not depend on these factors.

Why is the proposed view not idealism? Simply because *it doesn't say anything* about snow, or whiteness. It is a view about our use of the terms ‘snow’ and ‘white’, or the concepts *snow* and *white*, not about snow itself, or about the colour white. It holds that the use of the terms (or possession of the concepts) depends on contingent features of us, but it would be a category mistake to interpret this as the view that snow, whiteness, or the fact that snow is white depend on these features of us.⁶

On the other side, it is important to distinguish the proposed view from the familiar and uncontroversial claim that what depends on contingent pragmatic factors is merely our ‘mode of presentation’ of the fact that snow is white—the particular way in which we humans think that thought. This more familiar view admits contingency at the level of concepts, but finds reassurance in the idea that these contingently different concepts will in many cases ‘pick out’, or refer to, the same worldly objects or facts. (The term ‘mode of presentation’ conveys this idea.) For example, suppose we thought that colours were physical properties, complex attributes involving the wavelength of electromagnetic radiation. A familiar view is that these physical properties are actually presented to us under a description something like this: that which produces certain visual effects in normal human subjects under normal conditions. On such a view it is a contingent fact about us that we pick out the colours under a description, or mode of presentation, of this kind. Martians might pick out the same properties under a different mode of presentation, involving normally-sighted Martians. Nevertheless, according to this view, we and the Martians are talking *about—referring to—the same things*.

⁵ Again, this conceptual machinery has two levels to it: roughly, the general machinery that supports assertoric judgements, and the specific machinery associated with the particular concepts in question.

⁶ Another way to put this: the idealist reading thus involves a use–mention confusion, because the proposed view *mentions* the terms, but doesn't *use* them.

In principle, there are two ways in which someone who agrees about the contingency of the concepts might distance himself from this familiar view—‘mere presentationalism’, as I’ll call it. One way would be to extend contingency to the referents, as well as to the concepts. That would lead to idealism—i.e., to the conclusion that the fact that snow is white depends on contingent facts about ourselves. The other way is to leave reference out of the picture altogether, *for theoretical purposes*. This is the approach that I favour, and that I want to propose as a way of making sense of Wittgenstein’s remarks about assertion.

The conceptual space for this view thus turns on the possibility that reference—and related ‘word–world’ semantic notions, such as truth itself—might play no significant explanatory role in a mature scientific theory about language use. As noted earlier, the interesting possibility is not that a mature theory might simply have nothing to say about the relations between language, on one side, and the world, or environment inhabited by language users, on the other. It is rather that the theoretical notions important in describing these relations might not be the semantic notions, such as reference, truth and content itself—a mature scientific view of language might not treat *representation* as a significant theoretical relation between language and the world.⁷

This possibility is almost invisible to many contemporary philosophical audiences, in my experience. It is odd that this should be so. For one thing, non-representationalism is a major theme of twentieth century pragmatism.⁸ For another, to take seriously the idea that linguistic theory is a matter for empirical science is surely to acknowledge, *inter alia*, that it is an empirical possibility that mature linguistic theory

⁷Two notes. First, this view should not be confused with the view which does treat representation as a significant theoretical relation, but argues that it is less widespread in language than we tend to assume. That view is (or is close to) orthodox noncognitivism, or nonfactualism, whereas the view envisaged here is more radical. It lacks the theoretical vocabulary in which to say that some part of language is or is not, cognitive, factual, or genuinely representational. (More on this contrast in §7 below.) Second, the view that reference, truth and the like are not significant theoretical notions is compatible with acknowledging that there is a legitimate non-theoretical role for these notions—e.g., a ‘merely disquotational’ use, in the case of truth.

⁸Menand (2001: 361) quotes Dewey as writing in 1905 that pragmatism will ‘give the *coup de grace* to *representationalism*.’ More recent pragmatist writing in the same vein includes Rorty’s *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Rorty 1981), and—with some significant qualifications, as we’ll see below—that of Robert Brandom. In contrast, a striking aspect of Dummett’s work is that despite pragmatist elements—especially a focus on assertibility in preference to truth—it fails to provide a sympathetic bridge between the non-representationalist strand in pragmatism and the Fregean tradition.

will not turn out to require the folk semantic notions, such as reference and truth.⁹ But perhaps most importantly, such a view of the theoretical significance of reference, truth and the like is an immediate consequence of views familiar under the labels *deflationism* or *minimalism*. Deflationism has a number of aspects, but one central element is the thesis that truth or reference are not ‘substantial’ notions—in particular, not such as to play a significant role in mature scientific theory.

Wittgenstein himself is well known as an early advocate of a deflationist or redundancy theory of truth. Dummett notes Wittgenstein’s view of truth, and says that it is incompatible with a Fregean approach to meaning, which characterizes sense in terms of truth conditions. I think that Dummett is only half right at this point. Roughly, there are two conceptions of the role of truth conditions in a Fregean theory of meaning, depending on two conceptions of the task of such a theory. On one conception—the one he himself evidently has in mind—Dummett is right, for the use of truth conditions depends on a non-deflationary conception of truth. But on the other conception, a theory of meaning needs only a deflationary truth predicate. This suggests that it may be possible to combine a version of the Fregean project with the non-Fregean view I want to advocate—a view that points to pragmatic contingency in the domain of concepts, without ameliorating that contingency by appeal to further semantic facts.

In order to make this possibility clear, we’ll thus need two distinctions: first, a distinction between two versions of the Fregean project, only one of which requires non-deflationary truth; and second, a distinction between the Fregean project in either form, and a different theoretical perspective concerning language. I’ll discuss these distinctions in the following two sections.

For the moment, the point to emphasise is that semantic deflationism supports the following response to the suggestion that the proposed version of Wittgenstein’s view reduces to mere presentationalism—i.e., to the familiar contingency of ‘modes of presentation’. In one sense, the view *is* just the familiar contingency. Where it differs from the orthodoxy is in not ameliorating that familiar contingency by anchoring the

⁹I develop this theme in (Price 2003a).

contingent concepts via reference to items in a non-contingent world. Because the view says *nothing* of a theoretical nature about the referents of terms, it doesn't provide such anchors. For the same reason, it is in no position to say that two different terms or concepts have the same referents. It doesn't say that they have different referents, either. It simply remains silent on the matter. In so far as it is committed to deflationism about the semantic relations, it denies that there is anything of theoretical interest to be said, *in these semantic terms*.¹⁰

5. Two conceptions of the task of a Fregean theory of meaning

The first distinction we need is between two versions of the Fregean meaning-specifying project. Let's approach this distinction by looking at why Dummett thinks that Wittgenstein's deflationary view of truth is incompatible with the Fregean project:

The ideas about meaning which are contained in Wittgenstein's later writings in effect oppose the view that the distinction between the sense of a sentence, as given by a stipulation of its truth-conditions, and the force attached to it is fruitful for an account of the use of sentences. In particular, whereas for Frege the notions of truth and falsity play a crucial role in the characterisation of the sense of a sentence, for the later Wittgenstein they do not. He expressly avowed what I have elsewhere called the 'redundancy theory' of truth, namely that the principle that 'It is true that A' is equivalent to 'A' and 'It is false that A' is equivalent to 'Not A' contains the whole meaning of the words 'true' and 'false'. ... *If this is all that can be said about the meaning of 'true', then learning the sense of a sentence 'A' cannot in general be explained as learning under what conditions 'A' is true: since to know what it means to say that 'A' was true under certain conditions would involve already knowing the meaning of 'A'*. For Wittgenstein 'meaning is use', and this involves among other things, that we must describe the use of each particular form of sentence directly, instead of trying to specify the use of an arbitrary sentence of some large class, such as assertoric or imperative sentences, in terms of its truth-conditions, presupposed known. (1973: 359, emphasis added)

¹⁰This attitude of 'principled theoretical silence' is the key to nonrepresentationalism, in my view, and plays a crucial role in what follows. Again, it needs to be emphasised that such an attitude is quite compatible with acceptance of ordinary, non-theoretical uses of notions such as truth and reference, so long as these can be read in a deflationary spirit.

At first sight, the highlighted claim is puzzling. Suppose we accept with the redundancy theory that ‘N is prime’ and ‘“N is prime” is true’ are equivalent in meaning. Does this imply that it cannot be informative about the meaning of ‘N is prime’ to be told that ‘N is prime’ is true if and only if the natural number N has no divisors other than one and itself? Surely the most it implies is that this can be *no more informative* than being told that N is prime if and only if N has no divisors other than one and itself. But isn’t that informative? Isn’t it precisely the kind of thing we would say to explain the meaning of ‘N is prime’, to someone who did not know it?

In defence of Dummett, however, it might be said that we can’t explain the meaning of primitive concepts in this way, and that Dummett’s point is therefore valid in such cases. More generally, we can make sense of Dummett’s argument by means of a distinction he himself draws between two conceptions of a Fregean theory of meaning.

The distinction turns on the issue as to whether a theory of meaning is allowed to help itself to the full expressive power of the theorist’s home language, and to specify the meaning of expressions of the object language by (in effect) offering paraphrases of those expressions in the home language. The alternative theoretical perspective is more austere. To use an image that Dummett employs in making a related point, we might think of it as the perspective of an alien and not necessarily linguistic intelligence, who encounters human language as a phenomenon to be explained and described in the natural world—as Dummett puts it, ‘a Martian, say, who communicated by means so different from our own that he would not for a long time recognise human language as a medium of communication.’ (1979: 133–4)

Dummett calls these two conceptions of the task of a theory of meaning *modest* and *full-blooded*, respectively. As he says, a modest theory aims to ‘give the interpretation of the language to someone who already has the concepts required’, while a full-blooded theory ‘seeks actually to explain the concepts expressed by primitive terms of the language.’ (1975: 102)

It is a familiar idea that a modest theory of meaning needs only a deflationary notion of truth. In particular, Davidson’s truth-theoretic approach is widely interpreted

both as modest,¹¹ and as requiring only a disquotational notion of truth. In the heyday of Oxford Davidsonianism, for example, John McDowell described what he called ‘the best version’ of the Davidsonian proposal ‘along these lines’:

We may reasonably set ourselves the ideal of constructing, as a component of a complete theory of meaning for a language, a sub-theory which is to serve to specify the contents of (for instance, and surely centrally) assertions which could be made by uttering the language’s indicative sentences. ... [A] direct assault on that task would be to look for a sub-theory which generates, on the basis of structure in the object-language sentences, a theorem, for every appropriate sentence, of this form: ‘*s* can be used to assert that *p*’. Now there is a truistic connection between the content of an assertion and a familiar notion of truth ...; the connection guarantees, as the merest platitude, that a correct specification of what can be asserted, by the assertoric utterance of a sentence, cannot but be a specification of a condition under which the sentence is true. A radical proposal at this point would be as follows: as long as the ends of the theorems (think of them as having the form ‘*s* ... *p*’) are so related that, whatever the theorems actually say, we can use them as if they said something of the form ‘*s* can be used to assert that *p*’, it does not actually matter if we write, between those ends, something else which yields a truth in the same circumstances; our platitude guarantees that ‘is true if and only if fits that bill, and this gives a more tractable target than that of the direct assault. (1981: 228-9)

So conceived, the task of a theory of meaning is modest. Given a target sentence *s* of the object language, the task is to produce a sentence *p* of the metalanguage such that by *using p*, we show what it is that *s* itself may be used to say. McDowell points out that for indicative sentences, ‘*s* can be used to say that *p*’ is true in the same circumstances as ‘*s* is true iff *p*’, so that producing a biconditional sentence of the latter form achieves our goals just as well. The ‘truistic connection’ on which this depends is just the disquotational schema, so the move calls for nothing more than a deflationary truth predicate.¹²

¹¹ As Dummett himself says, ‘a Davidsonian theory of meaning is a modest theory.’ (1975: 103). Later in the same paper Dummett withdraws this interpretation, however.

¹² It might be maintained that the resulting theory amounts in the end to a more substantial theory of truth. If so, so much the worse for deflationism. However, it will still be true that the individual theorems of a McDowellian theory do not rely on the ‘substance’ of a thicker notion of truth, but only on the disquotational property.

Indeed, the connection between deflationism and the modest/full-blooded distinction may need to be even closer than this. For the distinction can easily appear tendentious. What can a full-blooded theory employ *except* the conceptual resources of the metalanguage, after all? Yet if it does the content-specifying job using these materials, why does it not count as modest?

The issue of the theoretical role of the semantic notions comes to the rescue here. We've just seen that a modest theory doesn't need substantial semantic notions. In effect, content (as a substantial theoretical notion) simply drops out of such a theory.¹³ It is open to us to make the converse a matter of definition—to say that the distinguishing characteristic of a full-blooded theory is precisely that it does employ the semantic notions in a substantial way.

In favour of this proposal is the following argument. A full-blooded theory takes the specification of the truth conditions of a sentence to amount to more than a mere paraphrase. But this requires that the semantic notions bear theoretical weight somewhere other than in the clauses specifying truth conditions. Why? Because we know that in that place—in those clauses—the disquotational aspect of truth is all we need. If truth wasn't doing some theoretical work somewhere else, in other words—in a theory of judgement, for example, or a substantial account of the representational function of the relevant part of language—there would be nothing to stop us reading the proposed theory in modest terms. To prevent this 'slide into modesty', there must be something that the theory does that couldn't be done with a deflationary notion of truth; and this can't be done in the clauses specifying truth conditions, because in that place, disquotation is all we need.

The connection between semantic deflationism and the possibility of a full-blooded theory of meaning thus seems to be a close one: to be precise, the two views

¹³One manifestation of this is that the modest approach works equally well for parts of language not thought to be descriptive. If we are simply *showing* the meaning of a sentence of the object language by *using* a sentence of the metalanguage, then we are doing something which can be done equally with non-indicative as well as indicative sentences. Indeed, as I noted in (Price 1988, ch. 2), McDowell's schema 's can be used to say that p', interpreted in terms of Davidson's paratactic analysis, yields 's can be used to say this: p'—which allows straightforward substitution of non-indicative sentences for 'p', without violating any grammatical rules.

appear to be mutually exclusive. This makes immediate sense of Dummett's view of the consequences of Wittgenstein's redundancy theory of truth. Dummett has a full-blooded theory of meaning in mind, and in the full-blooded theory, truth does substantial theoretical work. To accept Wittgenstein's redundancy theory would thus be to abandon the Fregean approach, as Dummett sees it.

However, there is a less drastic alternative, which at the same time makes more interesting sense of Wittgenstein's remarks about the plurality of things we do with language. This alternative view takes the lesson of deflationism to be that the Fregean content-specifying project is necessarily modest, but notes that the resulting theoretical 'thinness' on the side of semantics may be compensated by 'thickness' in a different theoretical vocabulary for linguistic theory. This brings us to the second of the two distinctions foreshadowed at the end of §4, a distinction between the Fregean content-specifying project in either its modest or full-blooded form, and a different, non-content-specifying conception of linguistic theory.

6. Two conceptions of the task of linguistic theory

We've seen that a modest theory of meaning needs no distinctively linguistic theoretical vocabulary. If a linguistic concept occurs in some target sentence *s* of our object language, then a 'corresponding' concept will be needed in our metalanguage, in order to express a content specification of the form:

s may be used to say that *p*.

But this requirement doesn't distinguish linguistic concepts from any other concepts in the object language. Such a theory has no *new* need for linguistic concepts.

Let's use the term *immodest* for linguistic theories of which this is not true—i.e., for theories with a distinctively linguistic theoretical vocabulary, the need for which is independent of the existence of corresponding linguistic concepts in the object language. A full-blooded theory in Dummett's sense thus counts as *immodest*. It requires substantial semantic notions—truth, reference, content, and the like—regardless of whether the object language in question is sophisticated enough to contain these notions

itself. But as we're about to see, the converse is not true. Not all immodest linguistic theories count as full-blooded theories of meaning, in Dummett's sense.

Why not? Because there are possible immodest theories which are simply not in the business of ascribing *contents*, or *meanings*, in the sense that Dummett has in mind. One way to see this is to note an ambiguity in the term 'explain', in the Dummett's remark above that a full-blooded theory 'seeks actually to explain the concepts expressed by primitive terms of the language.' According to one possible reading—the one that Dummett has in mind—to explain a concept is to put oneself in a position to use that concept. According to the other possible reading, explanation of a concept need confer no such ability. We might come to understand the role of a concept in the lives of a community to which we ourselves could not belong—come to understand the relation of a concept to a perceptual sense we do not ourselves possess, for example. If use of the concept requires possession of the perceptual sense in question, our new knowledge of the concept does not enable us to use it. Nevertheless, we certainly know something about the concept that we did not know before. It has been *explained* to us, in one reasonable use of that term.

The crucial distinction at work here is that between *content-specifying* and *use-specifying* theories. A content-specifying theory tells us what is said *in*, or *by*, saying an object language sentence *s*—in other words, as we have seen, it tells us something of the form '*s* may be used to say *that ...*'. (This is what puts us in a position to say the same thing ourselves.) Whereas a use-specifying theory tells us something about an object language expression by telling us *when* it is typically or properly *used*. The above example shows that knowledge of normal or proper use need not enable us to use the expression in question ourselves. Its use conditions may be conditions that we ourselves cannot satisfy.

In a use-specifying linguistic theory, *use* itself functions as a theoretical concept. (We could easily imagine applying such theoretical approach to an object language that lacks the concept *use*.) Hence a use-specifying theory is automatically immodest, according to the above criterion. In contrast, we have seen that a content-specifying

theory may be either modest or immodest—only full-blooded content-specifying theories are immodest.

	Modest theories	Immodest theories
Content-specifying theories	1	2
Use-specifying theories		3

Figure 2: Three species of linguistic theory

Thus we have the three possibilities shown in Figure 2. Dummett’s preferred full-blooded approach occupies Cell 2. My Wittgensteinian alternative occupies Cell 3, and exploit the fact that Cell 3 and Cell 1 are not incompatible places to be. A modest Fregean content-specifying theory is compatible with the view that the interesting *theoretical* vocabulary for linguistic theory is pragmatic or use-theoretic, rather than semantic as required in Cell 2. In the next section I want to illustrate this possibility by thinking about how the modest and immodest views come apart, in a familiar kind of philosophical example.

7. Expressivism: immodesty without mirrors

Consider a familiar kind of expressivism, say about evaluative judgements—the view that what is distinctive about evaluative judgements is that they express psychological states with a motivational character. This view is often characterised, in part, as the view that evaluative judgements lack truth conditions. However, a modest truth-conditional approach of the kind described by McDowell is blind to what the expressivist takes to be distinctive about evaluative judgements, viz., their distinctive psychological ‘history’. The sentences

‘Le bonheur c’est bien’ is true iff happiness is good

or

‘Le bonheur c’est bien’ can be used to assert that happiness is good

tell us nothing about the expressive origins of such evaluative remarks, but are none the less useful for that, in the context of a modest theory of meaning.¹⁴

Many writers—McDowell himself is an early example—have been inclined to take this as an objection to expressivism.¹⁵ If truth is minimal, it is easy to be truth-conditional, and implausible to claim that evaluative claims are not truth-conditional. However, this is not an objection to the central expressivist claim that evaluative judgements are to be understood as expressions of motivational states, but only to the additional claim that such judgements are not truth-conditional—and even then, only if the additional claim is understood in a deflationary way. So it is simply a mistake to think that minimal truth rules out expressivism.

In fact, I think, the boot is on the other foot. If we take it that the expressivist's core claim is that linguistic role of the judgements in question is non-representational, then deflationism about the key semantic notions is at least close to a *global* motivation for expressivism—a global reason for thinking that whatever the interesting theoretical conclusion about a class of judgements turns out to be, it cannot be that they are 'referential', or 'truth-conditional'. For deflationism amounts to a denial that these notions *have* an interesting theoretical role!¹⁶

Note that in contrast to a McDowellian theory of meaning grounded on deflationary truth, expressivism about evaluative judgements is *essentially* immodest.¹⁷ Whatever else it does, expressivism tells us something of a theoretical nature about evaluative judgements—something that may be both inaccessible to ordinary speakers who make those judgements, and accessible to theorists who don't or can't make such

¹⁴ Indeed, we've already noted that McDowell's version of a theory of meaning is blind even to the indicative–nonindicative distinction.

¹⁵ The argument may be found for example in Boghossian (1990), Wright (1992), and Humberstone (1991). For McDowell's early version of a similar point, see his (1981: 229).

¹⁶ The objectors are right to think that minimalism poses a problem for 'local' varieties of non-factualism—views which are non-factualist about some topics but not about others. Minimalism does indeed make that position unstable, but it does so because it implies global expressivism, in my view, not because it implies global factualism. See also O'Leary-Hawthorne & Price (1996) and (Price 2003a).

¹⁷ We noted above that the same is true of any use-specifying theory.

judgements themselves (because they lack the relevant motivational psychology, for example). Moreover, what it tells us is not couched in representationalist terms.

Expressivism about evaluative judgements thus illustrates the possibility of the following combination of views:

- (i) An immodest explication of the linguistic role of a particular class of judgements, in non-semantic or non-representational terms.¹⁸
- (ii) A modest specification of meaning of a truth-conditional sort, along the lines suggested by McDowell.

Stage (i) of such an approach would provide a pragmatic account of how there come to be the kind of judgements whose contents may be specified by the modest theory of stage (ii).

As I have noted, such a pragmatic account must itself combine two components. For a start, we need to be told what is distinctive about evaluative judgements, as opposed to other sorts of judgements. This part of the theory might appeal to the distinctive motivational role of associated psychological states, for example, along familiar lines. By itself, however, this part of the theory cannot explain why the expressions of motivational attitudes come to have the character of assertoric judgements. To do that, we need some general theory of what judgement or assertion is ‘for’—of what is at stake in treating something as an assertion.

The program might come unstuck at this point. It might turn out that an adequate account of what is involved in treating something as a judgement needs to invoke a substantial notion of truth. In effect, the notion of assertion would then be dependent on that of representational content.¹⁹ (The same might apply to the non-assertoric forces.) So there is a general onus on the kind of account I am recommending to show that this is not the case. And one large part of this task is to provide an account of what the

¹⁸ Immodesty without mirrors, in other words. As we’ve noted above, such a theory will not be a theory of meaning at all, in Dummett’s sense.

¹⁹ And expressivism would be ruled out, unless it could be combined with the view that despite their expressive origins, evaluative judgements achieve a genuinely representational status.

assertoric or declarative part of linguistic practice is ‘for’, without *presupposing* representational content.

This is very a large project, of course, and although I’ll provide a slightly more detailed sketch in a moment (see §9), my present aims are necessarily limited. I want to show simply that there is a intelligible theoretical program in the offing here—an unorthodox but apparently coherent approach to a philosophical theory of language which does embody the key ingredients of Wittgenstein’s view of assertion, viz., non-representational and functional pluralism. In the hope of enhancing the visibility of this unusual approach, I want now to compare it with Robert Brandom’s pragmatist approach to meaning. Although I think that my proposal diverges from Brandom’s in significant ways, it starts at a similar point. Since a large part of the battle is to establish that it is possible to start one’s theory of language at this unconventional location, Brandom is certainly an ally, from my point of view.

8. Brandom on platonism v. pragmatism

Earlier I characterised my approach as seeking to explain in pragmatic terms how there come to be contents, concepts or thoughts of particular kinds. I contrasted this to the orthodox Fregean approach, which takes a semantic notion as fundamental, and goes on to explain the pragmatic in terms of the semantic. Here is Brandom’s description of what I take to be a closely related contrast between these two orders of explanation:

Here is another strategic methodological issue. An account of the conceptual might explain the use of concepts in terms of a priori understanding of conceptual *content*. Or it might pursue a complementary explanatory strategy, beginning with a story about the practice or activity of applying concepts, and elaborating on that basis an understanding of conceptual content. The first can be called a *platonist* strategy, and the second a *pragmatist* (in this usage, a species of functionalist) strategy. One variety of semantic or conceptual platonism in this sense would identify the content typically expressed by declarative sentences and possessed by beliefs with sets of possible worlds, or with truth conditions otherwise specified. At some point it must then explain how associating such a content with sentences and beliefs contributes to our understanding of how it is proper to use sentences in making claims, and to

deploy beliefs in reasoning and guiding action. The pragmatist direction of explanation, by contrast, seeks to explain how the use of linguistic expressions, or the functional role of intentional states, confers conceptual content on them. (2000: 4)

Brandom goes on to say that his own view is ‘a kind of conceptual pragmatism’:

It offers an account of knowing (or believing, or saying) *that* such and such is the case in terms of knowing *how* (being able) to do something. ... The sort of pragmatism adopted here seeks to explain what is asserted by appeal to features of assertings, what is claimed in terms of claimings, what is judged by judgments, and what is believed by the role of believings ...—in general, the content by the act, rather than the other way around. (2000: 4)

Later, Brandom distinguishes between views which understand the conceptual ‘in representational terms’ (2000: 7), and his own view, which seeks ‘to develop an expressivist alternative’ to this ‘representational paradigm.’ (2000: 10)

In some respects, then, Brandom’s project seems close to mine. In endorsing expressivism and rejecting platonism, Brandom aligns himself, at least initially, with non-representationalism. But does Brandom want to remain a non-representationalist, or to build representationalism on pragmatic foundations? These are very different projects, as we see we think about the case of truth. There’s a big difference between deflationism about truth, and the kind of pragmatism which wants to say what truth is—to give a reductive *analysis* of truth—in terms of practice (for example as what works, or what we converge on in the long run). Deflationism tells us how the term ‘true’ is *used*, and may well explain this use, in the sense of telling us what useful difference it makes to language users to have a term with this usage pattern. But it doesn’t tell us what truth *is*. Conversely, a reductive analysis of truth—even in terms of pragmatist raw materials—is not a form of deflationism.²⁰

A similar distinction may be drawn in the case of content. There’s an important difference between an approach which *analyses* content, or meaning, in terms of use—

²⁰I say more about these issues in (Price 2003b).

which says what it is for an expression to have a particular content, in terms of how it is used—and an account which simply tells us how expressions are used, without thereby claiming to offer an account of *content*. For an account of the latter kind, ascriptions of content may figure as part of the explanandum. Part of the task of such a theory may be to explain the use, and function, of terms such as ‘content’ and ‘meaning’ in ordinary contexts. But just as explaining the use of the term ‘true’ is different from saying what truth *is*, explaining the use of the term ‘content’ is different from explaining what content *is*. A thoroughgoing non-representationalist view just tells us about use. It doesn’t explain content by analysing it in terms of use. It is not entirely clear to me whether Brandom counts as a non-representationalist in this sense—I suspect not.

A lot rests on this issue. Representation is a word–world relation. An account that begins with *terms*, and adds a representation relation, thus ends up including in its ontology what lies at the other end of such a relation—the referents of those terms, or what they represent. And if these objects are not things already present in the naturalistic framework within which we theorise about language, the result is likely to be an embarrassment. Either we find a place for these objects—values, possibilities, numbers, or meanings themselves, for example—in the natural world, or we endow our representation relations with the ability to reach beyond this world. Neither option seems appealing.

But as Wittgenstein surely saw, the problem may be self-imposed, a product of our own theoretical preconceptions. If our linguistic theory is non-representational, no such problem arises.²¹ Hence the appeal of expressivism in many areas, where ontological commitment seems naturalistically problematic. Of course, these anti-metaphysical advantages require that the expressivist stay non-representationalist, and not proceed to construct representational or semantic relations on pragmatic foundations. If Brandom stands on the side of analysis, the side of constructing representational relations rather than explaining representational idioms, then it is doubtful whether he is entitled to these advantages. Nevertheless, his raw materials are

²¹I expand on these ideas in (Price 2003a).

avowedly pragmatic. He takes it that our thoughts and expressions have to earn their representational contents in use. Brandom's approach and mine thus start at the same point, even if they diverge later.

Since neither such approach can start with representational states—states already thought of as possessing content—they need to start with something more basic. Their raw materials need to be psychological states construed in non-representational or non-conceptual terms—behavioural (or more broadly, functional) dispositions of various kinds, or what Brandom calls 'knowings how'. Assertion can then be thought of, most primitively, as a kind of expression or product of states of this kind. It is not mere involuntary expression, but a kind of deliberate 'taking a stand'—in Brandom's terms, a 'making explicit'—of one's dispositions in the relevant respect, in a way which invites challenge by fellow speakers who have certain conflicting dispositions.²²

What point could there be to a linguistic practice for 'taking a stand', in this sense? In my view, a plausible answer is that it serves to encourage useful modification of such commitments, in the light of conflict and subsequent resolution of conflict. I'll say a little more about this proposal in a moment, though again, of course, it requires a great deal more elaboration than I can give it here. For the present, the important task is to show that a model of this kind allows for interesting functional plurality *within* the class of assertions—a functional plurality not explained, as in the orthodox picture, merely by differences of representational content.²³

9. Non-representationalism and functional pluralism

To this end, imagine a theoretical enquiry which begins by thinking about the biological functions of the mental states we call beliefs, or commitments, setting their (apparent) semantic properties explicitly to one side. How has it served our ancestors to develop the capacity to have such mental states? What role did they play in an increasingly complex psychological life? It would not be surprising to discover that there is no single answer,

²² Good question: What counts as conflict? I discuss this issue in (Price 1988).

²³ Indeed, the direction of explanation is the reverse, in my view. That's what it means to say that this approach explains in pragmatic terms how there come to be particular representational contents.

satisfactory for all kinds of commitments. Perhaps the function of some commitments can be understood in terms of the idea that it is advantageous to have mental states designed to covary with certain environmental conditions, but for many commitments, the story might be much more complicated. Consider causal or probabilistic commitments, for example. On anybody's story—even a realist story, if it is minimally adequate—these commitments manifest themselves as dispositions to have certain sorts of expectations in certain sorts of circumstances. Plausibly, there's an interesting story to be told about the biological value of having an internal functional organisation rich enough to contain such dispositions.

Or consider any of the other cases in which it has seemed difficult to give a straightforwardly truth-conditional account of the content of judgements of certain kind—the kinds of cases in which noncognitivism commonly seems an attractive option, for example, and perhaps others as well: universal generalisations, indicative and subjunctive conditionals, logical claims, and so on. Suppose that in each of these cases we have some sense of what the commitments in question enable us to *do*, which we couldn't do otherwise—some sense of the role of the commitments in question in the psychological architecture of creatures like us.

And suppose that we are able to get to this point, without invoking the idea that states we are talking about have contents, in any substantial sense. (Where we mention the environment, we talk about causal covariance and the like.) So far, then, we'd have a sketch of an understanding of what these various kinds of commitments do for us, but no understanding of why they manifest themselves *as* commitments—no understanding of why we take them to be truth-valued, for example, or expressible in declarative form.

As noted earlier, one option would be to invoke semantic properties to answer this question. We would then incur at least three obligations. First, presumably, we'd need to explain the functions of the various kinds of commitment in terms of their content or semantic properties. (This is the kind of obligation that, at least in some of the cases canvassed, drives noncognitivists to deny that the commitments concerned do have genuine descriptive content.) Second, we'd need to say what these semantic properties

are. And third, we'd need to show how invoking them explains the practice of declarative judgement. Perhaps these obligations can be met, but for the moment let's choose a different course. Let's think in the same explanatory spirit about the functions of the various manifestations of the declarative form. With respect to the various non-representationally characterised commitments we have described, let's think about the question, why do we give voice to *those* mental states in *that* form?

Here deflationists are allies, for they offer us some aspects of a possible answer. They offer us an account of the function of the truth predicate, for example—an account which, as noted earlier, is compatible with the view that commitments serve many different functions. But this is at best only part of the story. We need an account of the function of assertoric discourse, which explains how commitments with many different functions of their own usefully get cast as 'public' judgements, presented in language for others to use or to challenge.²⁴

It isn't difficult to find a place to start. For social creatures like us, there are often advantages in aligning our commitments across our communities, and especially in copying the commitments of more experienced members of our communities. To some extent we could achieve this kind of alignment by nonlinguistic means—deducing the commitments of our fellows from their behaviour, for example—but it seems much facilitated by a linguistic means of giving voice to and discussing commitments. That's one kind of thing that assertion seems especially well-suited to *do*. Moreover—and for the moment this is the crucial point—it is something it can usefully do in application to commitments with a wide variety of functional roles of their own.

This approach thus turns on the idea that assertions are intentional expressions of psychological states which are initially construed in non-representational terms. These underlying psychological states may themselves have a variety of functional roles, within the internal psychological architecture of the speakers concerned (or better, within the complex network of relations involving both these internal states and the creatures'

²⁴As several writers have noticed, it is puzzling why the deflationist's 'same again' notion of truth is not applicable to non-declarative speech acts.

external environment). Crucially, then, the possibility of plurality comes from the fact that the states in question are not thought of as *primarily* representational in function. Representational states have a single basic function, viz., to ‘mirror’ reality. Plurality, if any, must then flow from plurality of content—from differences in *what is represented*. But a non-representational starting point allows that the commitments in question have a variety of functional roles; a variety obscured in their expression, when they take on the common ‘clothing’ of the assertoric form.

The view thus leaves space for functional pluralism, and does so precisely in virtue of its non-representationalism. Yet in another sense it still treats assertion as a single tool—in the imagined version, a tool for aligning commitments across a speech community. Assertion thus becomes a multi-purpose tool, in much the same way as the handle turns out to be, in the cabin of Wittgenstein’s locomotive. In one sense, as Wittgenstein’s stresses, the various different handles have very different functions. Yet they are all ‘designed to be handled’, as Wittgenstein puts it, and *in that sense* members of an important single category (in contrast, as I noted at the beginning, to the assorted tools—‘a screw-driver, a rule, a glue-pot, glue ...’—mentioned in Wittgenstein’s toolbox example). Handles as a class are importantly different from pedals as a class, for example (though many jobs could be performed by either).

So here’s the proposal. Thinking of the function of assertions as uniformly representational misses important functional distinctions—distinctions we can’t put back in just by appealing to differences in what is represented. To get the direction of explanation right, we need to begin with pragmatic differences, differences among the kinds of things that the assertions in question *do* (or more accurately, differences among the kinds of things that their underlying psychological states *do*, for complex creatures in a complex environment). And to get the unity right, we need to note that in their different ways, all of these tasks are tasks whose verbal expressions appropriately invoke the kind of multi-purpose tool that assertion in general *is*. To say this, we need to say what kind of tool it is—what general things we do with it that we couldn’t do

otherwise.²⁵ If the answer is in part that we expose our commitments to criticism by our fellows, then the point will be that this may be a useful thing to do, for commitments with a range of different functional roles (none of them representation as such).

It is worth noting that this kind of explanatory structure also exists elsewhere in biology. A good example—almost a mirror image of the one from Wittgenstein with which we began—is the human hand. The hand and its precursors must have been useful to our ancestors for many distinct survival-enhancing purposes (many of which could also be performed, though perhaps less well, in other ways). Plausibly, the hand's net contribution to our species' biological success turned on the cumulative advantage of these many distinct functions. In explaining the hand's evolution, then, we need to recognise that it is a multi-purpose tool.²⁶

The same would be true, only perhaps more so, if we simply studied the function of hands in contemporary human life, ignoring their biological origins. We would find that our hands serve a huge range of functions, practically all of which can also be served by other means. Although there is no doubt that hands in themselves are theoretically significant objects of study, we miss their true significance if we fail to recognise that the category of manual tasks—of things done by hand—is not a unitary natural kind. If we say that the function of the hand is *manipulation*, and leave it at that, we miss something very important: we miss the underlying functional diversity. On my reading, Wittgenstein makes a closely analogous point about assertion—a point in which representation plays the role of manipulation, as the notion whose homogeneity needs to be challenged.

10. The survival of the sense–force distinction

I claimed earlier that my version of the Wittgensteinian view preserves something analogous to the Fregean sense–force structure. The first thing it preserves, as I've just

²⁵ Or could only do with the help of some different tool—some different solution to the problem that assertion solves for us.

²⁶ As Menand (2001: 361) notes, Dewey too uses the hand as an analogy for what we do with words and thought. In his case, the point is to counter the representationalism of traditional epistemology, but the present use of the analogy seems nicely complementary.

stressed, is the idea that there is something that assertions have in common. Despite the fact that it introduces a new kind of pragmatic diversity within the class of assertoric utterances—a diversity not found in the Fregean picture—it nevertheless allows that there is some significant sense in which all assertions are ‘doing the same thing’. For they are all applications of the same linguistic tool—a multi-purpose tool, certainly, but a single tool for all that.²⁷

Of course, an approach of the proposed kind should not restrict itself to the utterances we think of as assertoric, or declarative. Importantly, therefore, the idea that assertions are the applications of a single multi-purpose tool has the implication that other utterances are *not* applications of this tool. And when it comes to saying something more positive about non-assertoric utterances, there is an appealing strategy available—a strategy that seems to guarantee that the existing pragmatic elements of the Fregean model will survive in this more general theory.

The strategy turns on the fact that the proposed account seems able simply to help itself to the work of its Fregean rivals, at least wherever a modest theory of meaning is possible—wherever the conceptual resources of the metalanguage are at least as rich as those of the object language. By her own lights, for example, a Fregean owes us an account of the use of the imperative ‘Make grass green!’ in terms of the truth conditions of the sentence ‘Grass is green’. As speakers of a language with the required conceptual resources, we know—modestly, as it were—what those truth conditions are. That is, we know that ‘Grass is green’ is true if and only if grass is green. So we know enough to understand what the Fregean tells us about the use of the imperative sentences. This knowledge surely remains available to us, even if we add our pragmatic account of the origins of the thought that grass is green.

It might be objected that in virtue of its modesty, this account will end up treating too much as part of the theoretical ontology. For example, won’t it give an account of

²⁷In allowing this much unity to the class of assertions, the account might be thought insufficiently Wittgensteinian. Certainly it conflicts with the radical pluralism of some of his examples, such as that of the tool-box. However, we have seen that taken this literally, his examples are not consistent with one another. And the proposed view is certainly compatible with the pluralism of the less radical examples.

use conditions for the imperative ‘Make grass green!’ which actually refers to colours? If so, then we are once more saddled with the problem which non-representationalism promised to avoid, of accommodating within the natural world the objects of colour talk, normative talk, causal talk, meaning talk, and all the rest. But the difficulty is merely apparent, I think. If it is to provide a useful account of what a speaker must know in order to use an utterance correctly, the theory must appeal to speakers’ *judgements* about colours, not to colours themselves. It will have to say, not that the command is obeyed if grass is made green, but that one should *judge* it to be obeyed when one *judges* grass to have been made green. Judgements of the latter kind are something we already have in the first-stage theory here proposed. So as long as project is ultimately grounded on use or judgement conditions in this way, there will no embarrassing problem of unwelcome ontology.²⁸

11. Conclusion

I’ve argued that to make sense of Wittgenstein’s view, we need to reject a representational conception of the core function of assertoric language. As long as this conception remains in place, the key theoretical notions of a theory of language will be sought in the semantic stable. Reference, truth, content and the like will seem the central notions we need, as linguistic theorists. And the prime task of a theory of meaning will seem to be that of *specifying* these semantically-characterised properties, for arbitrary linguistic items of appropriate kinds.

It might appear that abandoning the representationalist conception means abandoning the project of specifying semantic properties. But we need to be careful. We’ve seen that there are two versions of this project, distinguished by whether the semantic notions play a deflationary or non-deflationary role in the theory in question. I argued that this distinction lines up with the one that Dummett draws between modest and full-blooded versions of a Fregean theory of meaning. Only a full-blooded theory

²⁸The same move enables the proposal to deal with the possibility of imperatives whose significance is inaccessible to us, because we lack the contingent features that the pragmatic account identifies as essential to the use conditions of the thoughts in question.

requires the representationalist presupposition, and a modest theory hence survives its rejection.

However, the very resilience of the modest theory perhaps makes it hard to see that the representationalist presupposition really is optional. After all, it seems a truism that we can say something informative about the meaning of a metalanguage sentence *s* by noting that *s* is true iff *p*, for some appropriate object language sentence *p*. It takes sensitivity to the issue of the theoretical role of the truth predicate to see that this truism isn't a vindication of representationalism at all. On the contrary, it is a truism precisely because the use it makes of truth is so 'thin'.

The resilience of the modest theory may also tend to obscure the fact that it is not the only theory left standing, if we reject representationalism. In addition to the modest theory, there remains a space for a different kind of immodest theory, employing non-representational conceptions of linguistic function. This is where we find the proposed expressivist version of Wittgenstein's linguistic pluralism.

Getting to this view from a Fregean starting point thus takes two steps. We need to distinguish modest and full-blooded versions of the content-specifying approach. And we need to see that the full-blooded approach is not the only immodest option for linguistic theory. Instead of using the semantic notions in a substantial voice, we have the option of finding a different theoretical vocabulary altogether.²⁹

²⁹Dummett takes the first step, but apparently not the second. I think that in this respect, despite his advocacy of alternatives to truth as the key concept a theory of meaning, he stays too close to the Fregean orthodoxy. (This is the source of the tension between Frege and pragmatism in Dummett's work, on which I commented in fn. 8 above.) Clearly, this is a topic on which much needs to be said. But in my view one relevant distinction, insufficiently drawn in Dummett's work, is between two conceptions of the role of an assertibility condition. As I put it in an early paper:

[I]t is doubtful whether the view that the meaning of a sentence is determined by its assertion conditions—by *when* it may be correctly asserted—need offer this as a revised account of what it is *that* a person who makes an assertion is claiming to be the case. The alternative is to say that although the content, or sense, of an assertion is ultimately determined by its assertibility conditions, it does not *state* that these conditions hold. 'Eric is flying' states that Eric is flying, and not that it is assertible that this is so, even if what it is to state that Eric is flying is ultimately to be understood in terms of *when* this may correctly be stated. (Price 1983: 163)

In other words, an account of when an assertion is typically or properly *used*, need not be a specification of what it *says*. With this distinction in place, we are already close to recognising the possibilities (a) that the only kind of content specification is the modest kind, and (b) that use-based accounts are therefore, in the present terminology, immodest but not full-blooded.

This summary makes the path to the proposed view seem somewhat tortuous. But it all depends on where we start. In one sense, the view should seem easy to reach, from somewhere quite familiar. This fast-track route to expressivism turns on the fact that—as I noted in §4—everybody needs an account of concept possession. On everybody’s view, then, there is some more-or-less used-based fact about what it takes to employ a given concept. In the orthodox picture, the items thus characterised are thought of in representational terms, as ‘modes of presentation’ of worldly objects. What is distinctive about the present view is not that it does *more* but that it does *less*—it just asks about use conditions, without supplementing the resulting theory with truth conditions, semantic relations, and the like.

In one sense, the possibility of this ‘contraction’ of the orthodox picture ought not to seem surprising, to contemporary philosophers. Why? Because the idea that the semantic notions not have a substantial theoretical role is itself a familiar one in contemporary philosophy, in a way in which it wasn’t in Wittgenstein’s time. Unsurprising does not imply uncontroversial, of course. As long as deflationism itself is controversial, so too will be this corollary. At present, in fact, deflationism probably generates less controversy than it deserves, because its consequences are systematically underrated—because people don’t see how radical a challenge it poses to the representationalist orthodoxy.

All the same, many philosophical views are both well-known and controversial. In calling attention to global expressivism as a framework within which to make sense of Wittgenstein’s linguistic pluralism, I don’t claim to have shown that the resulting view should not be controversial. I do claim to have shown that it should be better-known.

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