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The Meaning of ‘Sentences’

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In this brief note, I consider the following argument.

1. *The Argument*

Premise 1: Only sentences can be used in isolation.

Premise 2: Meaning in isolation derives from use in isolation.

Premise 3: If only sentences can be used in isolation, and meaning in isolation derives from use in isolation, then only sentences have meaning in isolation.

Conclusion: Only sentences have meaning in isolation.

It seems to me that the argument has a certain initial plausibility, especially when ‘sentence’, ‘used in isolation’ and ‘meaning in isolation’ are explicated in a certain way. (For instance, one must take sentences to include elliptical sentences; and one must take ‘use in isolation’ to entail use in the performance of a genuine speech act.) It also seems to me that the argument is important. For one thing, the Conclusion can be recruited in reasoning to the effect that, because the complete set of sentence-meanings underdetermines word-meaning, the latter must be indeterminate. That is, as will emerge, if sentences are the only fundamental source of meaning, and if the meaning of all sentences still leaves word-meaning underdetermined, then there can be no such thing as the determinate meaning of a word. Its plausibility and importance notwithstanding, I will nevertheless argue that the argument ultimately fails. Specifically, after saying a preliminary (hopefully uncontroversial) word about what meaning in isolation and use in isolation amount to, I will suggest that ‘sentence’ can be read in at least three different ways in both P1 and the Conclusion. This ambiguity is crucial, I maintain, because on one reading of ‘sentence’, the premises of (1) are plausibly true. But on this reading, the Conclusion is uninteresting—because, on this reading of ‘sentence’, the Conclusion does not exclude lexical items, or

plain-old phrases (Noun Phrases, Adjective Phrases, etc.), from the class of things which are meaningful in isolation. On the other hand, taking the other two readings of ‘sentence’, the Conclusion is interesting—it does exclude many things from the meaningful-in-isolation class—but it is not supported: because, on those readings of ‘sentence’, P1 is likely false. Hence the argument can either retain its plausibility or its interesting conclusion, but not both.

A clarification, however, before I begin. I fear that some philosophers have been moved by an argument not radically different from the above to hold positions which the argument actually does not warrant. Indeed, I fear they have done this precisely because they have failed to recognize the polysemy of ‘sentence’. (One plausible example is Michael Dummett, in his *Frege: Philosophy of Language*. See especially pages 4, 194, and 364.) Still, generally speaking I won’t defend exegetical theses in what follows. I will be content if (a) the argument above appears both sound and interesting at the outset and (b) the argument ceases to do so once my objection has been registered.

I. Meaning and Use In Isolation

In explaining the argument above, the first point of business is: What is use in isolation? First off, to repeat, when I speak of use in isolation, I intend use to perform a genuine speech act. And that amounts to an act with both a propositional content and an illocutionary force, like asserting, asking, commanding, etc. This stipulation is important because it can seem a truism that ordinary words can be used, unembedded, in *some* circumstances—as book titles for instance. Similarly, names can be used vocatively, to catch someone’s attention; and one might reasonably suppose that such an action has no straightforward illocutionary force. But, whatever the status of these non-sentential uses, they are not the ones I will be interested in.

Secondly, use in isolation does not require use with no background linguistic context. Still less does it amount to use in some imagined “null context”, devoid of specified addressee, time, place, etc. Rather, what is intended by the phrase ‘use in isolation’ is: used when not embedded in any larger syntactic structure. That is, an expression counts as used in isolation when the token expression is the maximal node of the whole token: i.e., the token is not itself a proper part of a larger tree token. Thus, in the mini-discourse below, the sentence ‘Unfortunately there was no one home’ is used in isolation, in the desired sense; but the sentence ‘I should stay put’ is not:

2. Meera: I went to the store. It was closed.
 Karl: Then what happened?
 Meera: I phoned my brother’s place to ask whether I should stay put.
 Unfortunately there was no one home.

To phrase the point yet another way, whereas ‘Unfortunately there was no one home’ is a matrix sentence, ‘I should stay put’ is not: it is embedded in a larger

structure. What P1 effectively rules out, then, is the use of non-sentences—unless they occur embedded in some larger sentential tree. Applied to the dialogue above: the inflected verb 'phoned' is used by Meera, but it is not used in isolation because 'phoned' is used embedded in the sentence 'I phoned my brother to ask whether I should stay put'.

So much for use in isolation. I turn now to meaning in isolation. This is a slippery notion, but here are some suggestive thoughts. To say that an expression does not have meaning in isolation is to say either (3a) or (3b) (*Lack of Meaning in Isolation*):

- 3a. The expression has no meaning whatever. (It is gibberish.)
- 3b. The expression has meaning—it isn't gibberish—but it gets its meaning solely in virtue of its impact upon the meaning of expressions within which it may embed.

In the context of argument (1), those who say that only sentences have meaning in isolation certainly don't wish to commit themselves to the claim that, for example, sub-sentential expressions are so much babble. Rather, their claim is that sub-sentences (i.e., words and phrases) have meaning solely because they appear in things which do have meaning in isolation: i.e., sentences. In what follows, then, to say that something lacks meaning in isolation is to say that it falls under category (3b). At no point will I use 'lacks meaning in isolation' in sense (3a).

Having introduced the key concepts, and explicated P1, let me briefly consider P2. If the Conclusion is true, the meaning of a sub-sentence (i.e., a word or phrase) must be determined solely by what it contributes to the meaning of sentences. But not everything can get its meaning "derivatively", in this way: to avoid a regress, there must be expressions which do have meaning in isolation; and those items must get their meaning not from what they contribute to larger expressions, but from some other source. What might that source be? In a word: use. More specifically, use in isolation. So we have: things which are used in isolation get their meanings non-derivatively, from their use; they then endow meanings upon their parts (which parts cannot be used in isolation) in terms of how those parts contribute to the meanings of things which have meaning in isolation. That, in effect, is what P2 says.

It's worth noting, in passing, that P2 does not commit one to everything that philosophers have meant by the slogan "meaning is use". This slogan can, after all, be read in quite different ways. Of interest here, it can be understood to say either (4a), or (4b) (or both):

- 4a. Meaning derives from (supervenies on) use.
- 4b. To give the meaning of an expression is simply to give the rules for its appropriate use.

The difference between (4a) and (4b) can be brought out by noting that someone who took meanings to be, say, sets of possible worlds could nevertheless concede that the set of possible worlds a sound was paired with depended exclusively upon how the sound was used. Such a person might, however, find something at least misleading about (4b)—after all, meanings are sets of worlds, hence giving the meaning is not felicitously described as “simply giving the rules for appropriate use”. Yet this same possible worlds semanticist could endorse (4a) without reservations. (One thinks here of David Lewis, including especially Lewis 1975.)

Put otherwise: ‘meaning is use’ can be read as either a semantic doctrine, a meta-semantic doctrine, or both. P2 commits one only to the meta-semantic doctrine—the reading of ‘meaning is use’ captured in (4a)—which says: That in virtue of which a sound has meaning in isolation at all, and that in virtue of which it has the particular meaning in isolation it does, is how the sound is used in isolation. P2 doesn’t commit one to (4b), or to any other semantic doctrine. Thus the argument in (1) remains open to those who take meanings to be given by a Tarski-style truth definition, or who take them to be internal mental representations, or what-have-you, as long as they agree that what a (usable-in-isolation) expression means—what “meaning it is paired with”—supervenes exhaustively on use.

II. Three Senses of ‘Sentence’

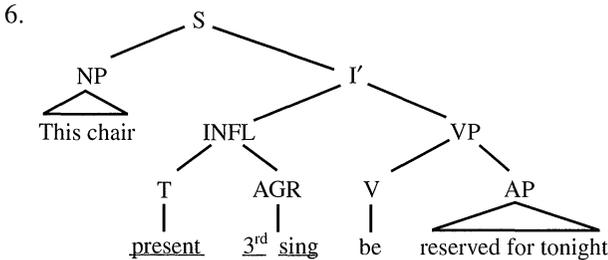
At this point it may seem fairly clear what the premises and the conclusion of (1) really say. In fact, however, there’s a lingering ambiguity shared by P1 and the Conclusion. To see this, I need to make a final key distinction.

There are, I maintain, at least three ways of understanding ‘sentence’. These are (*Three Senses of ‘Sentence’*):

- 5a. Sentence_{syntactic}: An expression with a certain structure/form.
- 5b. Sentence_{semantic}: An expression with a certain content/meaning.
- 5c. Sentence_{pragmatic}: An expression with a certain use.

An example of a syntactic characterization of sentence can be found in Chomsky’s (1986) Government and Binding Theory.¹ There, a sentence_{syntactic} is any phrasal projection whose grammatical “head” is an INFL node. Cashing this out, the idea is that, just as a Verb Phrase is built by adding material before and/or after a verbal “head”, and a Noun Phrase is built by adding material around a nominal “head”, a sentence is constructed by (as it were) starting with an INFL node, and placing material before and/or after it—where INFL nodes contain tense markers (present, past, future) and agreement markers (person, gender, number). In short, in GB syntax, sentences are those things whose “core” consists of tense and agreement markers.

To take one example, 'This chair is reserved for tonight' is a sentence. Its (simplified) tree looks something like:



Here the INFL node has been conjoined with a VP as its complement, and an NP as its subject, INFL being the core, around which the rest is built. The details of the GB characterization of sentencehood don't really matter for present purposes. The important thing is the kind of considerations that are brought to bear in determining whether something is a sentence in this first sense, namely: what its syntactic elements are (AGR, T), and what syntactic relations those elements stand in (head versus complement, etc.).² (A more traditional syntactic characterization might be: "A sentence_{syntactic} has a subject, verb and (optional) object". Here again, this categorizes expressions by the kinds of syntactic elements that they are built from, and how they are combined.)

What about the second sense of 'sentence'? Here, one might say: "A sentence_{semantic} is any element which expresses a proposition". Of course this will need to be refined, to cover sentences which are context sensitive—and which do not, therefore, express propositions independently of context. Better would be: "A sentence_{semantic} is an expression, tokens of which, once reference has been assigned to all context sensitive elements, express propositions". For present purposes it is enough to say, in the notation of Montague grammar, that sentences, in this semantic sense, are of type $\langle t \rangle$. Thus the predicate 'red' is not a sentence_{semantic}, because it is of type $\langle e, t \rangle$. And the quantifier phrase 'several dogs' is not a sentence_{semantic}, because it is of type $\langle \langle e, t \rangle, t \rangle$. On the other hand, 'He saw several dogs' and 'That is red' are both sentences_{semantic}, as indeed is 'Two plus two equals four'. (Whether there might be, in addition to the predicate 'red', the one-word sentence_{semantic} 'Red', whose semantic type is $\langle t \rangle$, will be discussed shortly.)

Finally, it's possible to divide up expressions into those which can be, and those which cannot be, used on their own (i.e., unembedded in any larger structure) to perform a speech act. These would naturally be called sentences_{pragmatic}.

One might think that these three are merely distinctions in intension. But, I believe, (5 a–c) actually have different extensions. This will be important because, to look ahead a little, this means that P1 of (1) may be true on some readings of 'sentence', while being false on others. Which means, in turn, that the Conclusion of (1) may be supported on some readings of 'sentence', but unsupported on others.

The first step is to argue that ordinary words and phrases, with the syntax of words and phrases, are sentences_{pragmatic}: that is, they can be used, unembedded, to perform speech acts. This will show that (5a) and (5c) have different extensions. In particular, (5a) patently includes no lexical items, and no lexical projections (e.g., Noun Phrases, Adjective Phrases, etc.); but (5c) includes both of these.³ Moreover, I will maintain, what get used in such cases are not sentences_{semantic} either: they are genuine phrases, with the meaning of phrases. (They are not “one-word sentences”.) So (5b) and (5c) differ in extension as well, since only the latter contains genuine words and phrases.

Here is the sort of case I have in mind. I might approach an apple cart, and say: ‘Two red apples’. Or, to take a different case, I might point at a chair, and say: ‘Reserved for tonight’. In neither of these cases do I produce a sentence_{syntactic}. These are not tokens of things which contain either tense or agreement markers, hence they aren’t projections of INFL. (To use the modern, Chomskian criterion.) Nor should we treat them as tokens of subject-verb-object constructions. (To avert to a more traditional criterion.) Rather, they are tokens of lexical projections: the first is headed by a noun, the second by an adjective.

A natural reply to such cases is to insist that what are used, in such examples, are not really phrases at all. Rather, though these items sound just like the phrases found embedded in (7a) and (7b) respectively, they are actually “elliptical sentences”.

- 7a. Steve bought [_{NP} two red apples]
7b. That table is [_{AP} reserved for tonight]

What would such a claim of “ellipsis” really amount to? Unsurprisingly, there are three senses of ‘elliptical sentence’, to go along with the three senses of ‘sentence’ (*Three Senses of ‘Elliptical Sentence’*):

- 8a. Elliptical sentence_{syntactic}: An expression which has the structure/form of a sentence_{syntactic}, but which is pronounced just like a sub-sentence_{syntactic}. (E.g., a structure which is headed by INFL, but whose phonological “spell out” is identical to that of the adjective phrase [_{AP} reserved for tonight].)
- 8b. Elliptical sentence_{semantic}: An expression which has the content/meaning of a sentence_{semantic}, but which is pronounced just like a sub-sentence_{semantic}. (E.g., an expression which encodes the same propositional character as ‘I want two red apples’, but whose phonological “spell out” is identical to that of the quantifier phrase [_{NP} two red apples].)
- 8c. Elliptical sentence_{pragmatic}: An expression which is neither a sentence_{syntactic} nor a sentence_{semantic}, but which can nevertheless be used in isolation to perform a speech act. (E.g., a plain-old word, like ‘red’, which is somehow used unembedded to communicate a proposition.)

Clearly, one cannot defend the idea that (5 a–c) are co-extensive by saying that 'Two red apples' and 'Reserved for tonight' are elliptical sentences in the pragmatic sense. To classify them as such is *ipso facto* to acknowledge that there are things which are sentences_{pragmatic} but which are not sentences_{syntactic} or sentences_{semantic}. I want to drive this point home because ignoring it can easily engender a dismissive attitude towards non-sentential speech. It is easy enough to disregard (apparently) non-sentential speech, by saying: "Oh yes, but that's just ellipsis". The thing is, if all that is meant by this is: "Oh yes, but that's a matter of using a word/phrase to communicate a proposition", then saying "That's ellipsis" concedes the point that non-sentences_{syntactic} and non-sentences_{semantic} can be used in isolation, instead of refuting it. Coming at it another way, consider again P1 of (1). It says: Only sentences can be used in isolation. If this claim is to be interesting, it must exclude the use of plain-old words and phrases. But saying, "Whenever someone (apparently) uses a word or phrase, what they are doing is using an elliptical sentence_{pragmatic}", commits one to speakers using plain-old words and phrases. It amounts to admitting that apparent non-sentential speech is real, and not merely apparent. What must be meant by someone who means something interesting by P1, when they explain away the cases at hand by saying "That's ellipsis", must, therefore, be either (8a) or (8b).⁴

That said, let's look at the remaining options. Applied to the cases at hand, the idea is (*Two Ellipsis Hypotheses*):

- 9a. The sounds *reserved for tonight* and *two red apples*, as uttered in the cases described, do not correspond to phrases_{syntactic}, though these sounds are shared by the phrases [AP reserved for tonight] and [NP two red apples] respectively. Rather, the expressions which were tokened have the structure/form of a sentence_{syntactic}, even though what was pronounced sounds exactly like a sub-sentence_{syntactic}.
- 9b. The sounds *reserved for tonight* and *two red apples*, as uttered in the cases described, do correspond to phrases_{syntactic}; but these phrases express a proposition in context. (I.e. they are "one-phrase sentences", semantically—though not syntactically—distinct from the homophonous ordinary phrases. Specifically, whereas these sounds correspond to expressions of type ⟨t⟩, the homophonous phrases are of type ⟨e,t⟩ and ⟨⟨e,t⟩,t⟩ respectively.)

Option (9b), which I called "the semantic ellipsis hypothesis" in Stainton (1995), violates the semanticist's version of Occam's Razor: Do not multiply ambiguities beyond necessity. For, in order for the sound *reserved for tonight* to sometimes express a proposition in context, the sound type must have at least two meanings, namely the property RESERVED FOR TONIGHT (which it contributes, for example, in 'This table is reserved for tonight') and the proposition that the contextually salient object is reserved for tonight (which it purportedly contributes in the case described above). That is, if some tokens of it

express propositions, and some tokens of it express a property, then the type cannot have a single meaning. Token meaning can, of course, shift with context: ‘he’ refers here to John, there to Stephen. But this isn’t a shift of logical type. It is a shift of reference within the logical type: ‘he’ is always of type ⟨e⟩, because tokens of it always are of type ⟨e⟩. In contrast, on the proposal under consideration, some tokens of *reserved for tonight* are of type ⟨e,t⟩, while others are of type ⟨t⟩. This can only be because the sound type is ambiguous.⁵ Now, ambiguities do happen. But one shouldn’t posit them unnecessarily. Especially when what’s at stake is the multiple ambiguity of essentially every phrase in the language. And that is, indeed, at stake—because, as Barton (1990) argues, any phrase whatever can be used in isolation, to perform a speech act: consider ‘Another glass of that delicious German beer’, ‘Nice car’, ‘Three letters from Spain’, and so on. The thing is, the ambiguity posited here is unnecessary, because pragmatics can easily fill the gap between the content of the word uttered (i.e., a property) and the content of the thing communicated (i.e., a proposition). After all, the speaker couldn’t possibly be communicating a property—what would that be? So the hearer, to preserve the assumption (in familiar Gricean fashion) that the speaker is cooperating, must look for a proposition communicated. She could find such a proposition directly, by applying the property encoded in the word produced to some salient object or property.

What about option (9a)? This line of thought is natural and initially plausible. But, ultimately, and on empirical grounds, it just isn’t supported by the evidence—given what linguists know about syntactic ellipsis. The evidence that the things produced have covert subjects or a covert INFL node is simply lacking. Rather, what was produced were the lexical projections [_{AP} reserved for tonight] and [_{NP} two red apples].

There isn’t space to go through all the evidence here, but let me note three salient facts.⁶ First, syntactically elliptical sentences cannot occur discourse initially, except under very special circumstances: one cannot, without awkwardness, walk into a room and say ‘Alex does too’. In contrast, ‘Reserved for tonight’ and ‘Two red apples’, along with many other bare phrases, can occur as freely in discourse initial position as non-elliptical sentences.

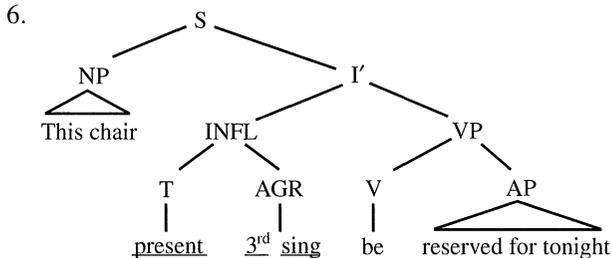
Also, syntactic sentences (including syntactically elliptical sentences) can license sluicing⁷ and VP-ellipsis constructions in ways that a non-sentence_{syntactic} cannot. Consider in this regard the contrast between the (a) and (b) discourses (*Sluicing post-sentence_{syntactic} and post-non-sentence_{syntactic}*):

- 10a. Peter: Who is at the door?
 Ernie: The man from Paris
 Rob: I wonder why
- 10b. Peter: The man from Paris!
 Rob: *I wonder why

In the (a) case, the sound *the man from Paris* is plausibly paired with a syntactic sentence, occurring as it does in reply to a wh-interrogative. That is,

though Ernie produces only the sound *the man from Paris*, the sentence he tokened could well be (something like) [_S [_{NP} The man from Paris][_{I'} is at the door]]. And here the sluicing construction, 'I wonder why?', is fine as a follow-up. In the (b) case, in contrast, the sound *the man from Paris* is plausibly taken to correspond simply to the phrase [_{NP} The man from Paris], since here the sluicing construction is not licensed. The inference being: this construction isn't licensed precisely because, in the (b) case, what was produced was not a sentence_{syntactic}—not even an elliptical sentence_{syntactic}. And sluicing demands a sentence_{syntactic}.

Finally, syntactic ellipsis, in so far as it's understood at all, can only delete syntactic constituents. (A constituent is an element which is completely contained under a single node in a phrase structure tree.) Thus, returning to the sluicing example, now for a different purpose: while it's permissible to delete the single-bar constituent [_{I'} is at the door] from [_S [_{NP} The man from Paris] [_{I'} is at the door]], to give the answer which was actually pronounced in (10a), one cannot willy nilly delete parts of larger expressions. Specifically, to repeat, deletion of non-constituents from the "source sentence" generally yields an ill-formed result.⁸ But notice what would have to be deleted, in the case of 'Reserved for tonight'. Presumably, the source sentence would be something like 'This chair is reserved for tonight', whose simplified tree structure is repeated below:



The thing which would need to be deleted is clearly not a constituent: no single node dominates everything except 'reserved for tonight'. In which case, what was produced was not an elliptical version of 'This chair is reserved for tonight'; rather, the thing uttered was the bare phrase [_{AP} reserved for tonight].

Of course all three of these arguments are empirical in nature. And that makes them susceptible to confutation by further evidence. In particular, it may turn out that the foregoing generalizations—i.e., about use in discourse initial position, the licensing of sluicing constructions, and deletion only of constituents—do not hold up over time; or, possibly the generalizations will hold up in the long run, but it will turn out that apparently non-sentential utterances wouldn't be exceptions after all. That said, for now, the evidence weighs heavily enough against (9a) to make it plausible that sub-sentences_{syntactic} are used in isolation to perform speech acts. So I tentatively conclude, on empirical grounds, that

not all sentences_{pragmatic} are sentences_{syntactic}. Moreover, the argument against positing an ambiguity in every phrase of the language weighs heavily against the claim that only sentences_{semantic} can be used in isolation, to perform speech acts. So not all sentences_{pragmatic} are sentences_{semantic}. Hence (5 a–c) are distinctions not only in intension, but in extension as well.

III. Understanding the Argument

Having noted the three senses of ‘sentence’, and having argued that they are not co-extensive, I now return to the argument in (1), repeated below. My question now is, “Is the argument sound?”

1. *The Argument*

Premise 1: Only sentences can be used in isolation.

Premise 2: Meaning in isolation derives from use in isolation.

Premise 3: If only sentences can be used in isolation, and meaning in isolation derives from use in isolation, then only sentences have meaning in isolation.

Conclusion: Only sentences have meaning in isolation.

It should be obvious, given the foregoing, that this question cannot receive a simple answer—precisely because P1 can be read in three quite different ways. Taking ‘sentence’ in P1 to mean ‘sentence_{pragmatic}’, P1 is unquestionably true. Indeed, it’s true by definition. But, I have argued, P1 is not true if ‘sentence’ is read either in sense (5a) or sense (5b). I should stress: I do not maintain that P1 is obviously false, or that it’s necessarily false, on these readings. Indeed, I suspect there could have been creatures which always used sentences_{syntactic}; and there could have been creatures which only used sentences_{semantic}. But we humans—at least we English speaking humans—are not such creatures. Rather, as I just argued, as an empirical matter of fact, non-sentences_{syntactic} and non-sentences_{semantic} can be (and often are) used in isolation.

Given this, let us look at the Conclusion. Reading ‘sentence’ in P1 as ‘sentence_{pragmatic}’, the first premise is on very solid ground, to put it mildly. But, of course, it would be a fallacy of equivocation to infer from ‘Only sentences_{pragmatic} can be used in isolation’ to the conclusion that only sentences in either of the other two senses are meaningful in isolation. Hence, reading P1 in this truistic way, the Conclusion must amount only to:

11. *Conclusion:* Only sentences_{pragmatic} have meaning in isolation.

Suppose we grant (11). Exactly what does it rule out? Not very much, I think. For instance, it does not entail, all on its own, that the predicate ‘red’ or the quantifier phrase ‘several dogs’ lack meaning in isolation. That would require the extra premise that such things cannot be used, unembedded, to per-

form speech acts. Put another way, for all (11) says, predicates and quantifier phrases—with the syntax and meaning of predicates/quantifier phrases—just are among the sentences_{pragmatic}.

To see why this might matter, consider the following argument, rather loosely reconstructed from Putnam (1981) and Quine (1960). (I repeat, exegesis isn't my concern in this paper. Moreover, whether the following argument is unsound on independent grounds, or whether a related argument could be constructed without employing the Conclusion of (1), I will not attempt to adjudicate here. My point, for the present, is simply that how the Conclusion of (1) is read makes a significant difference to how it may be employed.)

12. *An Argument for Indeterminacy of Sub-Sentence Meaning*

Premise 4: It is possible to hold sentence meanings constant while systematically assigning quite different meanings to the words of the language.

Premise 5: If only sentences have meaning in isolation, and if it is possible to hold sentence meanings constant while systematically assigning quite different meanings to the words of the language, then word meaning is indeterminate.

Conclusion 2: Word meaning is indeterminate.

Again, let me briefly explain the premises, starting with P4.

To slightly modify an example of Quine's, even assuming that 'Ech utpal gavagai' has determinate truth conditions, such that it is true if and only if there is a rabbit nearby, these truth conditions could be generated by assigning quite different meanings to the word 'gavagai'. (I pause to stress: 'gavagai' here is a lexical item, a sub-sentence, rather than a "one word sentence". Quine allows that 'Gavagai' also exists, as a one-word sentence. But my concern here is 'gavagai', not 'Gavagai'.) By appropriately modifying the meanings of 'ech' and 'utpal', and/or by altering one's compositional semantic rules, the sentence

13. Ech utpal gavagai

could be assigned a constant meaning, while 'gavagai' was translated as any of (14 a–d) (*Divergent Translations for the word 'gavagai'*):

- 14a. temporal rabbit stage
- 14b. undetached rabbit parts
- 14c. portion of rabbit-stuff
- 14d. rabbithood

It is this sort of example which supports P4.

As for P5, the point is that even given determinate sentence meanings one cannot arrive at determinate meanings for sub-sentential parts: sentence meanings underdetermine sub-sentence meanings. That's precisely because, as was just

seen, sentence meanings can be held fixed while sub-sentence meanings are altered. But if sentences are the only things which have meaning in isolation—so that, as I explained above, they are the only source of meaning—then the fact that sentence meaning underdetermines sub-sentence meanings makes it natural to conclude that there simply is no such thing as “the unique thing which a given word contributes, as its meaning”. That is, reflections on ‘gavagai’, conjoined with the conclusion of (1), yield that word meaning is indeterminate. Even if sentence meanings are determinate.

Finally, my punch line: notice that when the Conclusion of (1) is read as (11), it does not support the inference that, because sentence-meaning is all that is fixed, word-meaning is indeterminate. Because, for all (11) says, words are among the things which have meaning non-derivatively! If words and phrases can be used on their own, then they just are sentences_{pragmatic}; so they can have meaning in isolation (i.e., not derivatively from how they embed). Put differently, P4 is false, when ‘sentence’ there is read as ‘sentence_{pragmatic}’: for P4 would have us hold all sentence_{pragmatic} meanings constant—but then, if words just are sentences_{pragmatic}, you can’t do that while altering word meanings.

On the other hand, the Conclusion, if read as about sentences_{syntactic} (or sentences_{semantic}) would rule out genuine/ordinary words and phrases having meaning in isolation. So, if the Conclusion on those readings were true, then words/phrases would need to get their meaning from sentences_{syntactic} (or sentences_{semantic}). And Putnam-Quine considerations might convince us that these latter do not determine word meanings. The thing is, as I’ve argued above, the Conclusion so read is not supported—because P1, read as being about sentences_{syntactic} or sentences_{semantic}, is false.

One last remark, about what my argument does *not* show. One cannot read the Conclusion without thinking of Frege’s notorious context principle. Hence it might reasonably be asked whether my arguments call the context principle into serious question. Having promised generally to eschew exegesis, I will make only one quick point about this question. Pretty clearly, what Frege really cared about, when he insisted on the context principle, was resisting psychologism. And, for those purposes, it is sufficient if truth-bearers are fundamental. The reason is, as long as truth-bearers are given a central place, Frege can say: “When asking for the meaning of an expression, ask what its meaning must combine with to yield a meaning capable of being true or false”. And this methodological precept will keep one from taking the meanings of numerals and quantifier phrases to be images or other mental entities. So far as I can see, however, this precept does not require Frege to fetishize the sentence, in either the syntactic or the semantic sense—because Frege can take the “truth bearers” in question to be not sentences but his Thoughts. Reading the context principle as saying, in effect, that *propositions* are central is perfectly fine—and perfectly in line with everything I have argued above. The mistake, I believe, is to move from the centrality of propositions to the centrality of, say, Inflectional Phrases. (Indeed, this mistake amounts to some sort of global use/mention error.) One can be tempted to

make sentences central if one is suspicious of abstract propositions, taken as characterizable independently of any purely linguistic criteria. But, I take it, Frege had no such suspicion. Thus, as far as I can see, there is nothing in the foregoing arguments which poses a problem for Frege's anti-psychologism. Whether there is a problem for certain neo-Fregeans—who, for whatever reason, really do take *sentences* to be central—is another matter entirely.

To sum up, then: the argument in (1) can seem both exciting and sound. But, I suggest, it can be at most one of those. It is likely sound if 'sentence' is taken to mean thing-which-can-be-used-in-isolation; but on that reading the Conclusion carries very little punch—because it does not rule out words/phrases having meaning in isolation. The Conclusion is exciting if 'sentence' is read as either sentence_{syntactic} or sentence_{semantic}. But read in this way the argument's first premise is likely false. So, given current empirical evidence, it seems that (1) is not sound on those readings of 'sentence'. To put the whole thing in a nutshell, the only way to make (1) seem both sound and exciting is by equivocating on 'sentence': taking it to mean sentence_{pragmatic} in the premises, and sentence_{syntactic} (or sentence_{semantic}) in the conclusion.⁹

Notes

¹He writes: "The maximal projection INFL' consists of INFL' and its specifier, the NP subject of INFL"; this maximal projection is what we have called S" (Chomsky 1986, 161). An aside: in more recent work NPs, the usual subjects of sentences, have been replaced by Determiner Phrases, DPs. The idea is that phrases like 'This cat' and 'The dog' actually have Determiners as their "heads", rather than having nouns as their "grammatical core". Since talk of DPs is less familiar to philosophers, I will continue to speak of NPs in what follows.

²You might wonder how the verb 'be' gets inflected. One common view is that it moves into the INFL head. But I won't be concerned with such details here.

³In addition, there appear to be expressions which are sentences_{semantic} which are (likely) not sentences_{syntactic}. For example, 'Nice car that' doesn't appear to have an inflected verb, so it isn't a sentence_{syntactic}. And yet it does seem to be of type ⟨t⟩. I ignore such cases here, since my point can be made without them, and their real status remains unclear.

⁴I've heard it said, purportedly as an objection, that whenever one does use a word or phrase, one could have used a sentence (in the syntactic or semantic sense). Two points should be made in reply. First, as Elugardo and Stainton (1999) have argued, it's probably not true that for every instance of non-sentential speech there is an available sentence which precisely encodes what the speaker of the non-sentence meant. But anyway, even if it were true that a sentence could always have been used, it's crucial to see that this grants that P1 is false. P1 doesn't, after all, say that it's possible to use only sentences; rather, it says that it's not possible to use non-sentences.

⁵A useful analogy came up in discussion with Robert Pinto, at the 1999 Canadian Philosophical Association meeting in Sherbrooke. There are certain music groups whose names are sentences: 'Frankie goes to Hollywood', 'They might be giants', etc. Since certain tokens of the sound *they might be giants* can refer to an object, namely a rock band, it won't do to say that the sound has just one meaning, namely a propositional character. (Consider what that would entail about the meaning of 'Last night They might be giants played a great concert in Ottawa'.) Rather, since different tokens are of different logical types—here ⟨e⟩ and ⟨t⟩—we must grant an ambiguity in the sound-type. The same would hold if phrase tokens sometimes meant propositions and sometimes meant objects/properties.

⁶These “salient facts” are noted in Barton 1990, Stainton 1998 and Radford 1988 respectively. See also Yanofsky 1978 for related discussion.

⁷For present purposes, take sluicing to be ellipsis of a clause after an appropriate wh-word. Further examples are: ‘A friend of yours caught a pike. Guess who ___!’, ‘John killed someone, but I don’t know who ___’, etc. There are, in effect, two standard accounts of this construction. On the deletion view, at a “deep” level the sentences are just like non-elliptical sentences, but, at a later stage of derivation, some parts are erased. On the proform view, an empty clause is base-generated in the ellipsis site. Applied to ‘Guess who!’, the analyses would be, on the one hand, that the underlying structure is ‘Guess who it was’, and, on the other hand, that, even at the “deepest level”, the structure is ‘Guess who [_s e]’.

⁸An exception may be what syntacticians call “gapping”, which does seem to elide a non-constituent. An example might be: ‘John really likes Leonard Cohen’s music, and Bill ___ his novels’. Simplifying, the pre-deletion constituent structure of the ellipsis site in this case would seem to be [really [likes his novels]]. Here, ‘really likes’ is not a constituent, yet it does seem possible to elide it. Crucially, however, gapping always leaves material surrounding the ellipsis site. (Thus, in the example given, the words ‘Bill’ and ‘his novels’ are not deleted, though the material in-between is.) So it’s quite clear that the examples discussed in the text do not derive from gapping. Hence the ability of gapping to delete non-constituents is not relevant. For useful overviews of ellipsis, including sluicing, gapping, and so forth, see Chao 1988. Another excellent resource is the collection of papers by Lappin and Benmamoun (1999).

⁹I fondly dedicate this paper to Ann and Nollaig MacKenzie, who got me hooked on philosophy. In addition, I am grateful to many friends and colleagues for assistance with this material; they are, however, too numerous to list here. That said, I must especially thank Alex Barber, Andy Brook, Ray Elugardo and William Lycan for helpful comments on an earlier draft. Research for this paper was supported by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, held jointly by myself and Ray Elugardo.

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