

Knowing meanings and knowing entities

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I

The main claim of this paper is that meanings are not entities; more cautiously, it is the claim that the hypothesis that meanings are entities can make no contribution to an understanding of meaning. This claim is familiar and one might suppose it needed no repetition. However, the idea that meanings are entities still seems to be considered a live option. I hope to make some slightly different attacks upon it, and also to suggest a positive account of how knowledge of meaning is to be understood if meanings are not entities (§V).

I shall assume that meaning and understanding are correlative: meaning is whatever must be accessed in understanding. Consequently, if meanings are entities, they must be essentially involved in an account of understanding. Since understanding an expression involves knowing its meaning, the most straightforward way to connect the claim that meanings are entities with understanding is to construe “knows its meaning” as having the same overall logical form as “loves Mary”: that is, to identify understanding an expression with knowing the entity which is the expression's meaning.

There is certainly an extensional two place relation of knowing, the relation which Russell had in mind when he developed the notion of acquaintance.¹ Let us use an asterisk after the word to fix this two-place relational use. Knowing* something normally involves having encountered it, or having had some kind of epistemic contact with it, the kind of contact that engenders cognitive abilities concerning it. If John knows* Paris, presumably he has been there

¹Russell (1912, p. 23) claims that although “know” is ambiguous in English, the relevant sense is unambiguously expressed by the German by “kennen” and the French “connaître”.

and knows his way around; and if Paris is Europe's smallest capital, John knows* Europe's smallest capital, whether or not he knows *that* he knows* Europe's smallest capital. The most straightforward account of how meanings as entities figure in understanding is that meanings are objects of this relation: knowing what an expression means is knowing* the entity it means.

A Wittgensteinian idea might suggest in a general way that there is something wrong: meanings can be stated, but entities cannot be (they can only be named or otherwise referred to). A more detailed argument against this view would draw upon the fact that the extensionality of the knows*-relation would permit inferences from truths to falsehoods. Since, for example, "chien" and "dog" are synonymous, the entity view must say that each means the same entity:

(1)The meaning of "dog" = the meaning of "chien".

For Pierre, a monolingual French speaker, to understand "chien" is (on the entity theory) for him to know* the meaning of "chien".

(2)Pierre knows* the meaning of "chien".

These ought to entail

(3)Pierre knows* the meaning of "dog".

Given that knowledge* is being used to explicate knowledge of meaning, (3) amounts to the claim that Pierre knows the meaning of "dog"; but since he is monolingual, this is false. So either (1) or (2) is false. So either meanings are not entities, or else they are entities which connect with understanding in some way yet to be made clear.

An objection is that this argument would prove too much. Compare it with:

(4)the reference of "Hesperus" = the reference of "Phosphorus".

(5)John knows the reference of "Hesperus".

(6)John knows the reference of "Phosphorus".

In this case, the objection runs, (4) is unquestionably true; but (5) could be true without (6) being true. John might never have encountered the word "Phosphorus"; or might have done so without realizing that its reference was the same as that of "Hesperus". However, it

would be folly to conclude that Venus (that is, the reference of “Hesperus”) is not an entity.² Responding to this objection involves distinguishing ways in which what may appear to be cases of knowledge* are not really so; and distinguishing reference from referent.

Many constructions of the form “X knows the F” do not express knowledge*. For example, if the police do not know *the identity of the murderer*, we should not think of this as an example of failure of knowledge* (i.e. an example of ignorance*), but as something expressible only by a non-extensional idiom. What the police do not know is who the murderer is. In such an indirect question, the non-extensionality of “knows” is active, for it may be that Sam Jones is the murderer and the police both know who he is (they know his identity) and also know* him, but little suspect that he is the murderer. So ignorance or knowledge of identity is not ignorance* or knowledge*. We can hear a sentence like “John knows the capital of France” as equivalent to “John knows which (city) is the capital of France”. Thus understood, the sentence does not express knowledge*, and it may be that Paris is the smallest capital of any country in Europe, that John knows that Paris is capital of France and yet that John does not know that the smallest capital of any country in Europe is capital of France. So the first point is that if knowing the reference of “Hesperus” is heard as equivalent to knowing what it is that “Hesperus” refers to, the argument in (4)–(6) does not mirror that in (1)–(3).

We are helped to hear (4)–(6) as involving a notion other than knowledge* by the use of “reference” as opposed to “referent”. The referent of an expression is the object itself; by contrast, the reference of an expression is more fact-like, and so is apt to suggest *knowledge that* rather than knowledge*. One can *state* the reference of “Hesperus” (e.g. by saying that it refers to Hesperus); but Hesperus itself, that is, the object to which “Hesperus” refers, that is, the referent of “Hesperus”, is not the sort of thing that could be stated. If we replace “reference” by “referent” in (4)–(6), and keep to knowledge* throughout, then the argument is, I believe, valid.

²Thanks to David Chalmers for making this objection at the Conference.

It is just as valid as a corresponding argument in which “sees” replaces “knows”: that is the sort of relation knowledge* is supposed to be. So the objection that (1)–(3) proves too much fails.

Expressions like “knows the meaning of ‘dog’” do not express knowledge*. Consequently, it would be wrong to regard “the meaning of ‘dog’” as a referring expression or as a denoting phrase: either construal would liken the overall logical form of “knows the meaning of ‘dog’” to “loves Mary”, and this is what sets up the premises for the defective inference of (1)–(3).

The argument in (1)–(3) applies straightforwardly to Fregean senses.³ If we take seriously Frege’s view that senses are entities, then grasping the sense of an expression, which is supposedly necessary and sufficient for understanding it, would be a relational matter: “grasps” would induce the same logical form as “knows*”. So one could replace “knows*” by “grasps” in (1)–(3) and arrive at the unpalatable conclusion: the sense of “dog” = the sense of “chien” but one may grasp the sense of “chien” without grasping the sense of “dog”.

Philosophers of our own time who have been concerned to develop Frege’s views (for example Dummett, McDowell, Evans) have seen grasping a sense as knowing a fact, for example, the fact that something satisfies “dog” iff it is a dog. In these facts there is no reference to such entities as senses.⁴ The view that knowledge of meaning is knowledge of fact is not the

³This paragraph and the next were prompted by a question from Ed Zalta.

⁴Many of Frege’s main claims can be phrased with recourse merely to the same-sense relation, without invoking senses as entities. An exception is his view of indirect reference, if customary senses are not available as *Bedeutungen* in these contexts. But a highly Fregean position on indirect discourse can be developed just in terms of substitution conditions, without senses as entities. If there were a single relation of synonymy, and if it were an equivalence relation, there could be no more objection to meanings as entities than to directions as entities (whatever objection there might be to using meanings in an account of understanding). I do not accept the antecedents of the conditional, though that is a topic for another occasion.

only alternative to the view that knowledge of meaning is knowledge* of an entity. It might be that the knowledge is practical, not necessarily formulable in terms of a fact or proposition known. Both these alternatives to knowledge of meaning as knowledge* of entities are left open in what follows.

II

The claims so far establish only that either meanings are not entities, or else they are entities which connect with understanding in some way yet to be spelled out. In order to be better placed to consider alternative ways of incorporate meanings as entities into an account of understanding, I will introduce another two-place extensional relation, that of meaning, holding, supposedly, between expressions and the entities they mean. To signal this use, let us call the relation “meaning*”. Horwich (1998) argues that meaning* is (a) a relation which occurs outside semantics and (b) is the right relation for connecting expressions and the entities they mean. Yet he agrees, essentially for the reasons I have offered, that even though “dog” means* DOG (the capitalization is introduced by stipulation to refer to the entity which is the meaning of the corresponding lower case expression) knowing that “dog” means DOG does not suffice for understanding “dog”. Why, then, bother with meanings as entities?

Concerning the “use” theory of meaning which Horwich aims to establish, he says that it is a point in its favour that

it accommodates our ordinary way of speaking of *meanings* as a species of entity to which words stand in the relation “*x* means *y*”. Moreover, it makes do with the familiar, non-semantic use of the word “means”. When we say, for example, that black clouds mean it will rain, or that the expression on his face means that he is sad, we are deploying a notion of *means* which is, roughly speaking, the notion of *indication*. To say, in this sense, that *x* means *y*, is to say, roughly, that *x* provides a good reason to believe in the presence of *y*. (Horwich (1998) p. 47)

Though the symbolism “*x* means *y*” is presumably supposed to introduce meaning*, with the variables marking positions fit to be filled by singular terms, Horwich’s examples strike

me as inappropriate. “Black clouds mean it will rain” has “it will rain” in *y*-position, and the subsequent example has “that he is sad”. Although there are views according to which sentences mean entities, or do so when prefaced by “that”, these are highly controversial, and cannot be used for his purpose of showing that quite ordinary beliefs sustain the view that meanings are entities.

Horwich’s gloss on what, I presume, is the means*-relation also fails to apply to the examples. It is not grammatical to affirm either that black clouds provide a good reason to believe in the presence of it will rain, or that the expression on his face provides a good reason to believe in the presence of that he is sad. The English “means” can be used for purposes other than to express a two-place relation between entities. So we remain in need of a reason for thinking of meanings as entities.

III

Horwich (1998) suggests that whole sentences stand in the means* relation to their meanings, and that this fact is exploited in propositional attitude ascription. On this view, if I say that John believes that snow is white, “that snow is white” means* that snow is white, and John’s belief consists in a relation to this meaning-entity. This gives the basis for constructing the following argument whose conclusion evidently could not be true, though someone of Horwich’s persuasion must accept that the premises could be:

(7)The meaning of “snow is white” = that snow is white.

(8)Pierre is amazed that snow is white

(9)Pierre is amazed the meaning of “snow is white”

The argument refutes only a conjunction: meanings are entities and are referred to by the “that”-clauses of propositional attitude ascriptions.⁵

⁵This kind of argument is used by Moltmann (forthcoming) against the view that propositional attitudes are relations to propositions: “Pierre is amazed the proposition that snow is white” does not follow from (8) together with the assumption that, in (8), “that snow is white” refers to the proposition that snow is white. Paul Horwich pointed out that

IV

Returning now to ways of using meanings as entities in an account of understanding, an obvious defect in the simple way envisaged in §I is that knowledge* of meanings as entities doesn't connect an expression to the known* entity. A better theory might make the following claim:

(10) Someone knows the meaning of an expression, e , iff the person knows that there is an entity x such that e means* x .

This moves away from a two-place extensional relation of knowledge* to the more familiar non-extensional *knowledge that*, but retains the entity account of meaning by invoking meaning*. I do not argue that this version of the entity theory leads to straightforward contradictions, as the first does; only that entities turn out to play no essential role in a viable version of this theory.

(10) cannot be what we are looking for, as it expresses no more than knowledge that the expression means something, as opposed to knowledge of what it means. A serious candidate must have a more de re character, perhaps the following:

(11) Someone knows the meaning of an expression, e , iff the person knows, concerning some entity x , that e means* x .

A standard view is that although substituting co-referring names in a “knows that” context does not guarantee that truth will be preserved, names in such contexts do provide a basis for existential generalization. On this view, “Pierre knows that Marie is engaged” entails “There

the same considerations would tell against various other accounts of propositional attitude ascription, including Davidson's. To show that there is a difficulty for the paratactic analysis, one needs no identity premise: it is enough to observe that whereas “John believes that” or “John said that” are, in a suitable context, capable of making an assertion (with the demonstrative referring forwards or backwards), the same does not hold for “Pierre was amazed that”. This suggests that it is worth exploring the view that there is no unified category of “propositional attitude ascriptions”; such a conclusion would, of course, weaken the case made in §3 here.

is someone whom Pierre knows is engaged”. Now suppose that the capitalized expressions used by Horwich to refer to meanings are names. Then

(12) Pierre knows that “dog” means* DOG

would entail

(13) Concerning some entity, x , Pierre knows that “dog” means x .

Suppose Pierre is our monolingual Frenchman, and that (12) is true of him because he knows how to operate the capitalization convention, and he does, in fact, know* the meaning of “dog”, thanks to knowing* the meaning of “chien”. If the entailment holds, then (13) would be true and would provide a counterexample to (11): there would be something such that Pierre knows “dog” means it, even though he does not understand “dog”, that is, does not know its meaning. However, this argument raises some difficult questions.

Arguably, “DOG” functions like a definite description, in a way that does not support existential generalization across “knows that”. If Pierre knows that Marie is engaged to the fiancé of Marie, there is room for doubt whether it follows that there is someone whom Pierre knows Marie to be engaged to. This latter, “de re”, ascription of knowledge, requires the knower to know* the relevant object, which in turn entails having a good range of information about the object. This explains why the inference is arguably valid when the position of the existential variable in the conclusion is filled by a name in the premise: understanding a name involves associating it with a fairly rich body of information. But in the case of a description, like “the fiancé of Marie”, one may understand the expression without associating any further information with it; one may understand the description without knowing* its denotation. In such a case, it would be true that Pierre knows that Marie is engaged to the fiancé of Marie, yet false that there is someone of whom Pierre knows that Marie is engaged to him. So if “DOG” functions like a description, the inference from (12) to (13) is invalid, and we no longer have a counterexample to (11).

As we envisaged Pierre, in the discussion relating to (12) and (13), the entity view must allow that he did in fact know* the meaning of “dog”, thanks to understanding “chien”. So

the relevant question is not just about existential generalization into “knows that” contexts, but rather concerns the following inference pattern:

(14) S knows* x .

S knows that the G is F .

The $G = x$.

so: For some x , S knows that x is F .

An example not connected with meaning: suppose that Pierre knows* Marie’s fiancé: he is a colleague at work, though if asked in the presence of this colleague whether that man was due to marry Marie, Pierre would profess ignorance. He does, however, know that Marie is engaged to the fiancé of Marie (having inferred it soundly from his knowledge that Marie is engaged). Is there someone whom Pierre knows is engaged to Marie? It is tempting to answer affirmatively, for the idea was that knows* is an extensional relation, and that knowing* an entity will justify a *de re* ascription of knowledge concerning it. If this is not right, then at a minimum the entity theorist must offer some serious further theorizing on the nature of *de re* ascriptions of knowledge.

If, however, the suggestion is right, so that the pattern of (14) is valid, then the original counterexample stands. Pierre knows* the meaning of “dog” (thanks to knowing* the meaning of “chien”), and knows that the meaning of “dog” is the meaning of “dog”. So there is something such that Pierre knows that it is the meaning of “dog”. The right hand side of the relevant instance of (11) is satisfied, but not the left, for Pierre knows no English. This does not show there is anything amiss with the supposition that meanings are entities; only that such entities have not yet been found a role in an account of understanding.

V

The view that meanings are entities may be encouraged by theory, for example, by the view that meanings as entities help one explain understanding, or that the connection between language and the world requires the meanings of words to be entities in (typically extra-linguistic) reality. The first of these I have attacked; the second, though I believe it to be

mistaken, cannot be addressed here. The entity view is also encouraged by certain idioms. The seemingly ubiquitous “means” (in the sense of means*) has already been discussed. In this section, I will mention two other idioms, and also point to the form (though not the content) of an entity-free account of knowledge of meaning.

Meanings, it seems, can be counted, and questions of identity and difference arise. For example, an ambiguous expression is one with more than one meaning, and we can wonder if the meaning of “chien” is the same as the meaning of “dog”. This, I suggest, is mere idiom, which should not drive us to entities. There are relations between expressions of being alike or different in meaning, but we are not obliged to think of the respects of similarity or difference as further entities. “Bank” applied to financial institutions does not mean the same as “bank” applied to sides of rivers; but we need not analyse this as saying that financial “bank” is related to a different meaning-entity from that to which river “bank” is related. Similarly, the fact that to do it for John’s sake is not the same as to do it for Mary’s sake does not require us to think of sakes as entities.⁶

The idioms most apt to encourage the entity view have the form “what ... means” or “the meaning of ...”, as in “John knows what ‘dog’ means” or “John knows the meaning of ‘dog’”. There is a temptation to construe these as referring (or at least as denoting) expressions, satisfied by entities. As we have already seen in other cases (knowing the identity of a person), such appearances often mislead. In the present case, I suggest that “the meaning of ...” can always be rephrased as “what ... means”, and that this latter is an indirect question (whose direct form is “What does ... mean?”). It is not a referring or denoting expression, and nor is a referring or denoting expression normally usable in answering the question. Once again, the Wittgensteinian idea provides the explanation: meanings can be stated, but entities cannot be.

⁶I believe that synonymy can be used to provide a good understanding of such claims as that “dog” might have meant something different, without appeal to meanings as entities.

Knowing what in some ways resembles *knowing who*. In both cases, a sufficient condition for possessing the relevant knowledge is knowing a satisfactory answer to the questions which these idioms indirectly formulate. In the case of *knowing who*, contextual factors play a large part in determining what counts as satisfactory. Often, a proper name of the right person counts as a good answer; but we can also fail to know who N is (where “N” holds the place for a proper name).

In the case of knowing what an expression means, there is less room for contextual variation, but also less clarity about what would constitute a satisfactory answer. Indeed, to insist upon an answer formulable in words seems mistaken. Infant language users may show that they understand what an expression means, without being at all good at answering a question of such a sophisticated kind.

I suggest we take our cue from cases like this: he knows what to do in an emergency. In an emergency, the question may arise: what is to be done? Someone who knows what to do may not have formulated the question in words, and may not be able to formulate a correct answer in words. Perhaps one has to tie a bowline, but he might be incapable of describing the complex manual process this involves, especially if the situation is stressful. However, if he does indeed know what to do, his behaviour will demonstrate an answer. Someone who can reliably (non-accidentally) demonstrate an answer has the knowledge in question. Similarly in the case of language: knowing what an expression means is being able reliably to demonstrate in one’s behaviour a correct answer to the question “what does it mean”?

One may know that such an answer has been demonstrated without oneself knowing the answer. The boat is righted, the emergency is over. Evidently what he did saved the day: he showed he knew what to do. But we may know all this without knowing exactly what he did (let alone that it involved tying a bowline). One may know that someone has demonstrated a correct answer to a “what does it mean” question without knowing an answer oneself, as one can be sure that the foreigner whom one does not oneself understand does understand his own language.

Demonstration of an answer will only convey the answer to adequately equipped observers, just as pointing out someone in a line-up will only convey to adequately informed observers that that man is the murderer.

It is another issue whether or not it is possible to say anything in more detail, yet still at a level of generality that would hold for every linguistic expression, about what demonstrating a correct answer consists in. A large variety of approaches is left open, including Horwich's use theory. The proposed shape of knowledge of meaning is neutral even on such questions as whether the capacity to demonstrate an answer to questions of the form "what does ... mean?" can be expressed (or in some way captured) in terms of propositional knowledge, explicit or implicit. The point of the present remarks is not to try to take these issues further, but only to show that certain idioms (like "knows the meaning") which might seem to call for entities as meanings do no such thing.

VI

Meanings are not entities, but a huge number of expressions mean something, and, typically, different expressions mean different things. How are we to understand these last apparent quantifiers ("something", "different things")? Many metaphysicists have addressed the fully general form of this question (often in rather different terminology). Two contrasting views refuse to allow a distinction between things and entities. A lean, Quinean, version is that everything is an entity and so, given that meanings are not entities, there are no things which expressions mean: we must say instead something like "expressions are meaningful". A more exotic version is that, precisely because everything is an entity, we must count things as entities too, and so to the extent that we hold that expressions mean something we must allow they mean entities.

The safest position for me to take, and the one I would insist upon if pushed, is that one cannot systematically distinguish between things and entities. Hence in rejecting meanings as entities, one must also reject any literal affirmation to the effect that expressions meaning

something.⁷ However, it seems to me that our ordinary thought does make a distinction, and in a way that treats things as somehow ontologically non-serious. Perhaps this distinction would ultimately have to be rejected, if our metaphysical project were transcendent: the attempt to say what there is, absolutely. But if we are aiming only at immanent metaphysics, an account of the commitment of our actual beliefs, there is at least a *prima facie* case for recognizing things which are not entities. In the following pairs, the first member, using “thing”, states an uncontroversial truth (except possibly (17a), though I believe even this would sound uncontroversial to ears untainted by philosophy), whereas the second is doubtful (in point of truth or in point of intelligibility):

(15a) Some things simply are not done (e.g. swearing in front of the children).

(15b) Some entities simply are not done.

(16a) Some things are quite impossible (e.g. putting a girdle round about the earth in forty minutes).

(16b) Some entities are quite impossible.

(17a) Some things don't exist (e.g. Vulcan, dragons).

(17b) Some entities don't exist.

(18a) He said some amazing things (e.g. that he is Lazarus, come from the dead).

(18b) He said some amazing entities.

The methodology would require further refinement, for even those firmly committed to the existence of events and who found “Something unpleasant happened this morning” an impeccable truth might look askance at “Some unpleasant entity happened this morning”. I do not pretend that examples (15)–(18) establish any more than that we have here something (a thing?) worth exploring.

⁷Horwich said that he would not mind whether meanings are called entities or things, so long one recognized their existence. Within the framework of the present argument, I would insist upon what I have called the safest position.

Candidates for things which are not entities, other than meanings, are propositions, truth conditions, sayings, questions and facts. Ways may be more like things than like entities: there may be one or more ways of doing something, but not one or more entities of doing it. This would have consequences for possible worlds (ways the world could have been), qualia (ways of experiencing the world) and properties (ways of classifying the world).⁸

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⁸This is an expanded version of the first part of my contribution to the 22nd Wittgenstein Conference at Kirchberg in August 1999, under the title "Meaning, Composition, Homophony". For helpful comments I would like to thank audiences at that Conference and at the first Polish–English Graduate Seminar in Toruń (September 1999); and, especially, Paul Horwich.