

Introduction

There has frequently been taken to be a tension, if not an incompatibility, between “externalist” theories of content (which allow the make-up of one’s physical environment and the linguistic usage of one’s community to contribute to the contents of one’s thoughts and utterances) and the “methodologically individualist” intuition that whatever contributes to the content of one’s thoughts and utterances must ultimately be grounded in facts about one’s own attitudes and behavior. In this dissertation I argue that one can underwrite such externalist theories within a methodologically individualistic framework by understanding semantic norms in terms of the need to reach, for each of one’s terms, a type of “equilibrium.” Each speaker’s commitment to making her *own* beliefs and applications consistent allows one to incorporate these ‘external’ factors into the contents of their thoughts and utterances in a way that remains methodologically individualistic.

Methodologically individualistic accounts are typically taken to be unable to incorporate ‘external’ factors such as the world’s physical make-up or communal usage because of arguments suggesting that the individual’s own beliefs and usage underdetermine or even misidentify what, according to externalist accounts, they mean by their terms. These arguments, however, only seem plausible if one presupposes a comparatively impoverished conception of the individual’s beliefs. The beliefs a speaker associates with a given term extend far beyond the handful of sentences they would produce if asked to list such beliefs. In particular, speakers have an implicit, but rich, understanding of their language, their world, and the relation between them. Speakers typically understand languages as shared temporally extended practices about which they can be, both individually and collectively, mistaken. Once this conception of language is taken into account, the ascriptions which purportedly forced ‘non-individualistic’ conceptions of content upon us (particularly ascriptions which seemed to tie what we meant to social use

rather than our own beliefs) turn out to be ultimately grounded in the individual's own beliefs.

Indeed, our self-conception does much more than merely underwrite 'non-individualistic' ascriptions. Our understanding of languages as temporally extended particulars turns out to underwrite our important, but seldom noticed, practice of retroactively reading present conceptual developments back into the thoughts and utterances of our past selves and ancestors. We can both endorse a picture of linguistic norms that is, ultimately, methodologically individualistic and allow that future use (as with communal use) contributes to what we mean by our terms. External factors are relevant to what we mean because we take them to be so, and the ascriptions we make reflect our often deep commitment to a picture of languages as shared practices extending through time.

The course of the dissertation runs roughly as follows. The first chapter argues that the possibility of misrepresentation can be understood as arising from the tension between those items to which we apply our terms (their putative extensions) and the beliefs we associate with them (their general characterizations). Both information-based and inferential role semantics are presented as unsuccessful attempts to explain semantic norms in terms of just one of these two elements. It is further argued that a term's actual extension should be understood as what one gets when one reaches an "equilibrium" between a term's general characterizations and its putative extension. However, when semantic norms are understood this way, a number of problems become salient. There is no guarantee that there will an equilibrium to be found for the practices associated with a term, and even if one can be found, there is no guarantee that there will be *just* one. Bifurcationism and indeterminacy about meaning are presented as the outcomes of these two possibilities respectively.

Discovering whether (1) what a particular term means remains indeterminate until an equilibrium is actually reached for it, or (2) whether reaching an equilibrium makes

manifest what the term meant all along, is one of the overarching projects of the dissertation. Doing so, however, requires finding an equilibrium for the interplay between the putative extensions and general characterizations of semantic terms such as “meaning” and “reference,” and many contemporary disputes about meaning and content can be understood as the product of conflicting attempts to find such equilibria. The first chapter presents a number of general beliefs about meaning along with a number of ascription types brought to our attention by Kripke, Putnam, Burge and Wilson that provide evidence for the putative extensions of our semantic terms. The next three chapters investigate just how much of the putative extension made manifest in these ascriptions can be incorporated into an equilibrium for our semantic terms.

The second chapter argues that the “expressive constraint,” which requires that speakers have beliefs with the same content as their sincere utterances, effectively forces whatever equilibrium we find for either thought or utterance content to be an equilibrium for both. Given that this ‘internal’ connection between thought and utterance content required by the expressive constraint makes finding an equilibrium for our semantic terms considerably harder, one might try to do without it. However, attempts to explain away the constraint as an overstatement of a merely *empirical* generalization about the frequent correlation between thought and utterance content are discussed and found to face serious difficulties. Not only do most philosophical accounts of thought and language commit themselves to the expressive constraint, but a number of counterintuitive consequences also follow from giving it up. In particular, rejecting the constraint makes problematic the intelligibility of successful communication and belief attribution. Indeed, it is argued that if the constraint is given up, not only would there be little reason to think that even our *self*-ascriptions would usually be true, but there would also be nothing wrong with the sincere utterance of a ‘Moore sentence’ such as “Carburetors are expensive, but I don’t believe it” (since one could have good reason to think that one lacked beliefs with the content of even

one's sincere utterances). After establishing that we should not give up the expressive constraint, the chapter argues that the two most obvious explanations of the constraint (giving an independent account of linguistic meaning and understanding thought content in terms of it, and giving an independent account of thought content and understanding linguistic meaning in terms of it) are both inadequate. The chapter ends with a less reductive and more synthetic account of the constraint that stresses the *interdependence* of belief content and linguistic meaning stemming from the fact that our language is itself one of the things about which we have many beliefs.

The third chapter picks up on some of the themes introduced in chapter two, and argues that we should incorporate the non-individualistic ascriptions that Burge appeals to into an equilibrium for our semantic terms. Not only are such ascriptional practices themselves fairly deeply entrenched, but they also cannot be clearly isolated from the extremely well entrenched practices that Kripke appeals to. Attempts to dismiss or 'explain away' non-individualistic ascriptions by appealing to more 'pragmatic' factors are shown to rely upon a number of unrealistic assumptions about what we take ourselves to be doing when we make ascriptions or defer to correction. Even those ascriptional practices that might have seemed to favor individualism (those associated with slips, malapropisms and serious misunderstandings) turn out to be best understood within a non-individualistic framework.

General beliefs associated with our speaking a shared language whose terms have determinate extensions favor incorporating the non-individualistic ascriptions, and the third chapter argues that the most frequently cited candidates for entrenched general beliefs incompatible with non-individualistic ascriptions (those relating to self-knowledge and behavioral explanation) turn out to be compatible with them after all. Indeed, accounting for self-knowledge ultimately turns out to cause more problems for the individualist. Reconciling our ascriptional practices with these general beliefs will involve stressing (1)

that the proposed equilibrium is *non-individualistic* rather than *anti-individualistic*, (2) that the *de dicto/de re* distinction is a distinction between types of ascriptions, not between types of beliefs, (3) that the position is *methodologically*, rather than *ascriptionally*, individualistic, and (4) that the position relies heavily on our *self*-interpretations to fund the non-individualistic ascriptions.

As stated above, the third chapter stresses the importance of our self-interpretations when reaching an equilibrium for our semantic terms, and argues that our practice of interpreting others in terms of social usage should be incorporated into an equilibrium because speakers understand *themselves* as engaging in a shared practice when using language. In much the same way, the fourth chapter argues that, because we understand this shared practice as itself extending through time, we can adopt a “T-externalistic” position in which we endorse the everyday ascriptions of content that reflect a sensitivity to future usage. Most of the potentially unintuitive consequences of allowing future use to contribute to what we mean (such as, say, those associated with self-knowledge and behavioral explanation) will have already been defused if we have succeeded in incorporating the non-individualistic ascriptions Burge appeals to. Furthermore, the ways in which those consequences were made palatable for the non-individualist discussed in chapter three work equally well for the T-externalist. Alternative ways of describing the relation between present and future usage are discussed and found to have a number of unintuitive consequences of their own. Finally, it is argued that since attempts to find a more temporally-bound equilibrium turn out to be no more intuitive than their T-externalistic competitors, there is no reason why we cannot endorse our temporally sensitive ascriptions in these cases.