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HOW “MEANING” BECAME “NARROW CONTENT”^{1,2}

Abstract. The paper traces how disappointment with the notion of linguistic meaning has led to a shift towards the new, technical term of “narrow content”. In the first part of the paper I analyze the ways “narrow content” is understood in the literature. I show two important distinctions which have to be applied to the term in order to avoid confusion – the difference between context and functional theories of narrow content, and the difference between mental and linguistic narrow content. I argue that the most controversial combination of both distinctions is the idea of functional linguistic narrow content. In the second part of the paper I show that, contrary to the initial impression, this controversial, cut back notion of narrow content sheds some much needed light on several key semantic phenomena which we might otherwise be unable to explain – and because of this can be seen as a rightful descendant of the notion of meaning.

Keywords: Narrow content, content, linguistic meaning, Frege, functional role semantics.

1. The dissolution of Fregean meaning

Even though there is still much disagreement over the Fregean notion of “sense”, it is probably pretty safe to say that it was a notion which was set up to do too many things at once. Two of its functions are especially important for the purpose of this paper. The first function in question is the determination of reference. The second function is how the notion of sense explains different perspectives the user can reach the referents through. Sense and reference cannot thus be the same, as alternate senses can present the same referent differently – we all learned this with the help of the famous example of Phosphorus and Hesperus (and it is very easy to devise more).

Unfortunately, as some other famous examples have taught us, things are not that simple. Hilary Putnam’s thought experiments have shown us that the discrepancy between sense and reference works both ways. It seems

that entertaining the same sense could lead two different language users to pick different referents. That this has led to major skepticism towards meaning³ shouldn't be a surprise to anyone. After all, one of the main functions meanings were supposed to perform was gone – our internal states no longer determined the reference of our words.

That meanings were always rather suspicious didn't help their cause. They were mostly explained via metaphors or far-fetched analogies and worked more as a functional notion – they were supposed to be simply “those cognitive devices which we use in order to hook our words to the world”. But now when it looks like they do no such thing (or at least are not sufficient for it) – is there still a point of keeping them? And if so – what else are they good for? Is the second function I mentioned at the beginning (the ability to present different points of view) enough to warrant their usefulness?

Some philosophers, most notably W.V. Quine, have used this opportunity to dispose of the concept of meaning. But some of us still believe that at least some selected aspects of the original notion can be saved under the more modern and precise label of “narrow content”. Unfortunately, when judged by the severity of criticism this new notion has attracted (for example (Fodor, 1994), (Sawyer, 2007)), this rebranding strategy didn't work as well as planned. I believe that there are two opposing reasons for this controversy. First of all, the notion of narrow content appears in different theories, which taken together look even more misguided and unfocused than the original notion of meaning. Second of all, some of these theories cut back so many aspects of the original idea that it is starting to look useless. In section 2 of the paper I present the different ways narrow content can be understood and I point out the proposition that seems to be the most controversial. In section 3 I show that, contrary to the initial impression, this controversial, cut back notion of narrow content sheds some much needed light on several key semantic phenomena which we might otherwise be unable to explain.

2. What's “narrow content”?

If we disregard more in-depth differences between competing theories, it is quite easy to see that there are at least two major paths for theories of narrow content. For the sake of current discussion we can label them as “context theories”⁴ and “functional theories”⁵. Even though, as I argue further down, there are important connections between them, it is best to

start with contrasting them by pointing out the differences in intuitions that back them up.

2.1. Context theories

Even though the connection between narrow content and the notion of context might not be initially obvious, it is in fact rather easy to explain. What’s more, context dependence can probably be considered to be a paradigmatic, fairly uncontroversial case of how narrow content manifests itself in language (Carruthers & Botterill, 1999, p. 133). Consider the following example. During a New Year’s Eve party a husband says to his wife “Next year I will finally quit smoking”. “Sure, you promise me this every year” – replies the wife sarcastically. “So technically every time I promise something different” retorts the husband. Who’s right? If you root for the wife, you are thinking about narrow content, if you root for the husband, it is broad content you are thinking of.

After the idea that sense determines reference lost its impact, some people were eager to keep the notion of narrow content because they saw its usefulness in the analysis of indexicals. A key addition to this idea was that semantic phenomenon revealed in Twin-Earth experiments could have been explained similarly (Fodor, 1987). What this means is that natural terms also are, in a way, context dependent. The term “water” is synonymous with “H₂O” because it was coined around H₂O and not around xyz. Thus, during her visit to Twin Earth, the Earth user of the term “water” remained out of her usual context. But the longer the user uses the term in contact with XYZ the more the context shifts towards Twin Earth. What we discover is that there is much more indexicality in the world than we expected, but there is nothing especially surprising or new in the phenomenon itself.

Thus, in this perspective narrow content remains the internal mechanism cognitive systems use to hook their words to the world, but what they actually hook up to also depends on the circumstances in which they end up being used. Narrow content understood this way remains a crucial part of the reference mechanism. Because of this, context theories retain the first of the Fregean intuitions we started with. But what about the second intuition? After all, even if we understand how narrow content contributes to reference, we can still ask whether it can be done in more than one way.

2.2. Functional theories

As it happens, this is exactly the sort of question the second branch of narrow content theories ask. It is natural to call these theories “functional”,

as instead of asking how a given content can be deployed in the environment (which is the question for context theories) they ask how a given content is deployed within the system – what function it plays in it or how it contributes to the overall system’s behavior. There are several possibilities functional theories can explore. They can see how the terms are connected to each other, to other internal states of the system or to its actions. They can track inferential connections between states of the system, etc.

There is one tempting simplification that we should quickly get out of the way. Couldn’t we say that the difference between context and functional theories is in fact more of a difference between expressions themselves? Maybe it is the vocabulary that should be split into functional and context parts (indexicals being an obvious part of the latter)? I believe that this is not the case – the difference between context and functional theories runs deeper than that. It is easy to see, once we realize that even indexicals can gain something from functional treatment. Consider the following thought experiment. Imagine a shipwreck castaway who keeps a diary. In the diary he uses dates as well as indexical expressions, like “today”, “tomorrow”, “yesterday” and so on. Unfortunately, the particular date our castaway started his diary with was wrong. Because of this, the reference of all the indexicals he uses is incorrect. For this reason, whenever he says something like, “today is the 18th of July” he expresses a false statement. But even if every statement containing these indexical expressions is false, we can still say that he uses these terms correctly as they relate to each other the way they were supposed to. So even in the case of indexicals there is a functional story to be told.

2.3. How to understand “narrowness”?

Despite differences between the general aim of both types of theories, there is at least one thing that unites them – the way they understand the “narrowness” of narrow content. Although providing a single definition everyone agrees with isn’t possible, a handful of similar definitions appear in the literature devoted to both approaches.

It seems that most researchers resort to one of three strategies for defining narrowness of content. They refer to internality (Stalnaker, 1990), to the notion of intrinsic properties (Chalmers, 2003), or to the notion of local supervenience (Kriegel, 2008). Let’s analyze them starting with the first one as it seems to be the least philosophically loaded. Appealing to internality seems to work the best whenever it is taken literally – narrow content is the content of the internal states of the system. Some researchers talk about anything that does not reach beyond the surface of the skin (Jack-

son & Pettit, 1993), others prefer to talk about brain states (Stich, 1991), some do not want to take any risks and talk only about the total internal state without specifying an actual boundary (Brown, 1993). Generally speaking, it is safest to say that deciding on what is internal depends on the type of system in question. If you have a way of differentiating the system from its environment, then you can quite easily talk about internality of this sort.

The second strategy of explaining the narrowness of narrow content takes advantage of the notion of supervenience. The content of a state is narrow if it is locally supervenient, that is, when it supervenes on internal states of the system. The main advantage of this approach is that it does not identify narrow content with actual states of the system – it still can be its own thing (which the philosopher should of course later specify), but it is still tied to the internal states of the system in an important manner. Another advantage is that supervenience enables us to define broad content in an analogous manner – it is a content which supervenes on the states of the system and its environment (as opposed to being supervenient only on the system’s states). This helps to express the idea that both types of content are just two species of the same thing.

An obvious objection to this strategy is that the notion of supervenience isn’t free of controversies (Kim, 1993) and some people might be reluctant to use it. Note also that this way of defining narrow content cannot be understood as an autonomous alternative to the previous one as it specifically points to internal properties (which narrow content is supposed to supervene on).

Last but not least, some researchers prefer to say that narrow content is simply “intrinsic to the system”. There are several ways of defining intrinsic properties and I don’t have the space for a detailed analysis of this controversial notion. Roughly speaking, researchers appeal either to the way properties are defined (whether the definition contains necessary relations to anything besides the defined property) or to their ontological status (whether said properties could be predicated on the object even if nothing else existed) (Francescotti, 1999).

There are two drawbacks to this approach. First of all, the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic properties has been criticized numerous times. Second of all, as intrinsic properties are oftentimes explained simply as non-relational properties of the object, using this notion to define narrow content may very well lead to a misunderstanding. The reason for this is that even though narrow content could be said to be non-relational in the sense that it is not based on any relations between the cognitive

system and its environment, it still does not prohibit content from being based on relations within the system itself. In fact, most functional theories interpret narrow content exactly this way ((Fodor, 1994) being a notable exception). This possibility for confusion is, by no means, specific to the discussion of narrow content. The same thing could be said, for example, about the property of being H₂O. It is an intrinsic property of water but the property itself boils down to a relation between atoms of the right sort. The point I am trying to make is only that in the case of a term as ambiguous as “narrow content”, the less possibilities for confusion, the better.

Still, even if the details are a bit controversial it is not hard to grasp what the “narrowness” of content comes down to. Unfortunately, this can’t be said about the notion of “content” itself. Even though, contrary to notions like “meaning” or “sense”, the notion of “content” functions as a term of art (Jackson & Pettit, 1993) and not as an explication of a common word, it still ends up being rather elusive. I believe that the biggest reason for this is that it is oftentimes very hard to say whether content is to be understood as mental or linguistic. Unfortunately, although this distinction is oftentimes mentioned, it is rarely discussed at length ((Jacob, 1990) is a worthy exception to this rule). The result of this is that it is sometimes completely unclear whether a given theory of mental content should also be considered as a semantic theory or if it only results in some consequences for semantics (Segal, 2000, p. 24).

2.4. Linguistic vs mental content

At first glance it might be tempting to say that context theories present the linguistic narrow content whereas functional theories are more about the mental narrow content but this would be a misleading simplification. (Fodor, 1994) interprets narrow content as sentences in mentalese, which makes it at least as much a theory of mind as a theory of language.

There are many reasons why it is oftentimes hard to decide whether narrow content in question is mental or linguistic. First, note that classic philosophical theories of linguistic meaning (starting with John Locke) identified it with narrow mental content (ideas in the mind). Second – linguistic narrow content can be treated as a linguistically relevant subset of internal states of the system. Thirdly, philosophical terms such as “belief”, “proposition”, or “concept”, used to discuss linguistic meaning, have also been oftentimes used in theories of mind. Consider the notion of “concept”. Sometimes concepts are taken to be simply meanings of certain types of words (Frege, 1980) and sometimes as building blocks of propositions or

categorization devices (see (Machery, 2011) for a summary of positions). In the last case they may even have nothing to do with linguistic content (Grabarczyk 2016, Sawyer 2007).

The biggest reason why it is important to distinguish between linguistic and mental content is that it is perfectly possible to have a theory of linguistic narrow content and broad mental content at the same time (or the other way around). Let me give an example. Consider a functional theory based on the idea of response dependency (Kriegel, 2008). The theory explains that the narrow meaning of terms can be understood as a set of relations of said terms with other terms and with some other, non-linguistic mental states (for example perceptual receptor states). But when it comes to perceptual states themselves the theory tells us a completely different story. They are individuated according to what they systematically respond to and not according to their internal structure or relations between them and other states. Linguistic content is narrow but mental content is wide.

2.5. Is narrow content genuine content?

Let’s look at the distinctions we have made so far and see how they relate to each other. As pointed out above, the crucial difference between context and functional theories is that the former can replicate the connection between meaning and the reference. What they typically do is simply add another component or layer to the familiar structure. Instead of having a single function from meaning to reference, they propose two functions – narrow content works as the first of these functions by taking context parameter and giving broad content in return. Broad content is the second function which gives a user the reference. Contrary to this, functional theories either overtly disregard reference or relegate it to another theory (they can, in fact, just as easily relegate it to context theories).

It is exactly this feature that makes them very suspicious in the eyes of some researchers. It is quite often argued that reference determination is an essential characteristic of content (Kriegel, 2008). This view gives functional theories a taste of paradox – you might rightfully ask whether functional narrow content should be considered to be content at all (Baker, 1987), (Recanati, 1994). There are at least two ways out of this. First, one could bite the bullet and say that functional narrow content isn’t content even though the name suggests it. It simply is its own thing needing its own theory and the whole debate boils down to an unfortunate name. But if you, like me, prefer to understand functional narrow content as the rightful descendant of the notion of linguistic meaning than you might prefer the second option.

You might simply deny the necessary connection between content and reference. That's what philosophers initially assumed, but it just wasn't to be. Couldn't content be just as well understood as an "internal characteristic which differentiates the state from all the other states"? Whatever option we choose it is clear that it is the functional (and not the context) version of narrow content that needs defending.

What's interesting, if you look at the mental/linguistic distinction you can easily see a similar disproportion. Many people believe that there is nothing especially controversial in the idea of narrow mental content if we understand it as internal states characterized and triggered independently from their external correlates. Hallucinations are typical examples of that. It is significantly harder to come up with uncontroversial examples of narrow linguistic content. What would the semantic counterparts of hallucinations be? If you look at representation theories which operate on the notion of homomorphism, then you can see that mental content could be related to its target only because of their similarity.⁶ This difference can be even felt once we turn to philosophical thought experiments – it is much easier to explain to people that they could be brains in a vat (mental narrow content) than swampmen (linguistic narrow content).

Thus the picture emerging from our considerations is this: The most controversial variant of the idea of narrow content, the one that needs defending the most, is a functional theory of linguistic content. In the next section I am going to argue why it still may be needed.

3. What's "narrow content" good for?

I believe that there are three main reasons why we should not disregard functional theories of linguistic narrow content. The first reason is that without them we will not be able to solve the two fundamental semantic puzzles we talked about in previous sections. The second reason is that they help us explain some of our preconceptions about linguistic meaning. The third reason is that they seem to be the crucial element which explains how language connects with a user's actions. Let's analyze all of these reasons in detail.

3.1. How to navigate between Putnam's and Frege's Puzzles

The two puzzles in question are, of course, Frege's Hesperus/Phosphorus example and Putnam's Twin Earth. The first puzzle asks how it can be possible that the same referent is sometimes reached by means of differ-

ent referent matching mechanisms. The second puzzle asks how it can be possible that two people using the same internal referent matching mechanisms could end up getting different referents. The easiest and (at least *prima facie*) the most elegant solution is to say that the referent matching mechanism turned out to be more complicated than we initially expected and consists of two parts – internal and external. Whenever two different internal parts are employed in the same act of referent matching what we get is Frege’s scenario. Whenever the same internal part of the mechanism gets coupled with two different external parts of the mechanism we end up with Putnam’s scenario. It is hard to deny that it sounds like a pretty plausible story. The only thing is that we have to fill the gaps now – we have to say what the internal and the external parts of the referent matching mechanism are.

So the proper question we should ask when we want to know the internal part of the story is – what is the relevant part that me and all my duplicates have in common? In all variations of Twin-Earth experiments we are assured that our doppelgangers share everything with us. But we suspect that this is much more than is needed in order to share the same internal part of the semantic mechanism. How much is needed then? In a way the main role of functional role semantics is to narrow down the doppelganger hypothesis and find the genuinely relevant part that has to be identical if meanings are to work the way we expect.

Stories about our doppelgangers might get the point across quickly because they are rather spectacular. But they make much more sense once you consider them as exaggerated examples of something much more familiar and mundane. Even though it has been criticized, most people still subscribe to the idea that you could express the same thought in many different languages. So there should be something that unites thinkers of the same thought, no matter which language they use. But if the only thing you demand from a translation is that it preserves the reference, you lose a lot of what good translations are about. Good translations should also play the same role in communication: they should have the same effect on the speakers of translated languages, etc. Functional theories of linguistic narrow content are best suited to meet this expectation even if they have to be coupled with auxiliary theories of reference in order to preserve the reference of translations.

The same goes for the related idea of shared understanding of a term (Kriegel, 2008, p. 317). It needs no explanation that we are oftentimes interested in the extent to which we understand each other. But even when we know that we have used the same expressions and referred to the same

objects, we may still be curious whether we understood these expressions the same way. This worry might be taken to be hairsplitting in everyday communication, but there are situations where it matters. For example – we may be interested in details of understanding of a given term because we wish to predict future inferences the speaker is most probably going to make later.

This need calls for a theory of narrow content because we assume here that even if we know the broad content of the used term there is an additional fact of the matter to be known, namely – which of several possible narrow content types have been used by the language user. Note that contextual theories give us only a part of the answer since they do not tell us enough about the way narrow content is deployed within the system and the role it plays within it. So the upshot of the discussion is this: you need some functional theory of narrow content to find your way between Frege’s and Putnam’s puzzles and the way you maneuver between them dictates how you are going to understand some crucial philosophical notions like “translation”, “synonymy”, or “understanding”.

3.2. Cartesian intuitions

Researchers have argued that the reason why people suspect there really is some narrow content to be discovered is that they know about it from their own first person experience. This idea ties the notion of linguistic narrow content to Cartesianism and this philosophical heritage may very well end up being its kiss of death as it starts to look like a remnant of the criticized myth of an internal mental theater. But let’s not be so hasty.

If you believe that everything could have been different without changing the content of any of your thoughts, then this surely starts to sound familiar (Crane, 1991). But you don’t have to be so extreme. If you believe that some aspects (or parts) of your thoughts, or some of your thoughts would have stayed the same even in a completely different environment, then there is a need for a theory which helps you to discover which parts or which thoughts are like this.

Similar intuitions have been probed and tested in many famous thought experiments. Even supporters of the causal theory of reference tend to feel uneasy when they consider the Swampman thought experiment (Davidson, 1987). When it comes to broad linguistic content the Swampman cannot be more different than us. But then, if you wonder how it would be to be a creature so different from us in this respect, we are told that it is in fact quite easy to imagine – it would be exactly the same as we feel now since the difference is impossible to discover “from the inside”. Because

of this, disregarding narrow content seems to be more biting a bullet than debunking a myth. And it is a pretty big bullet.

There is a striking similarity between narrow content and qualia. Both seem to result in a dissonance. On the one hand we are told that they are completely superficial and we can safely ignore them in our theories. On the other hand they seem to be constitutive to our experience. But the big methodological difference between them is that, contrary to qualia, narrow content is not said to be inherently unknowable from the third person perspective. On the contrary – that is what functional theories are for, they should enable us to dissect and compare narrow contents of different subjects, no matter if we are one of them or not. Believing that narrow linguistic content exists and that we have some kind of access to it does not have to presume that the access is easy, full, and exclusive. If we do suppose all of that, then we surely are postulating a very Cartesian semantics, but there is nothing in the idea of linguistic narrow content that forces us to make these assumptions. Narrow content may very well end up being discoverable only by an army of skilled linguists.

3.3. Action prediction

The third reason why people may look keenly at linguistic narrow content is that they seem to be indispensable whenever we wish to systematically predict the actions of complex cognitive systems. As Zenon Pylyshyn once joked: cats seem to be less intelligent than rocks because rocks “know” that they should not come back once we kick them (Fodor, 1994, p. 89). The important point of the joke is this: some objects’ behavior may seem inexplicable and almost random if you resort only to external causes. You have to include chains of internal states in your predictions. But this is something you can only guess with some probability. Theories of narrow content should at least increase this probability.

The connection between narrow linguistic content and our actions can be spelled out in the following manner – our thoughts, beliefs, or reasons are the causes of our actions. And beliefs, thoughts, and reasons are individuated by their content (Carruthers & Botterill, 1999, p. 151). Is this content broad or narrow? Remember that if they are to be the cause of our actions, they had better be local⁷ – it would be really surprising if we had to decide that objects which are so distant from us as, let’s say, Aristotle is, could still affect our actions causally (Loar, 1988). But this is exactly what we would have to assume should we decide that it is broad and not narrow content that determines our actions. So does this mean that narrow content is everything that is needed to determine action?

The position I wish to endorse is fairly mild – I believe that narrow content is a part of the story and not the story itself. Let me explain. When we read about Twin Earth we learn that Twin Earth inhabitants behave the same way Earth inhabitants do even though their broad content differs. But this just seems odd. Can Twin Earth inhabitants really behave the way we do? After all, they do a lot of things we don't – they drink XYZ, they wash in XYZ, bath in XYZ etc. Their actions are not the same. The point is that even if the way we individuate linguistic and mental content is debatable (and as I try to show in this paper, it is), there is much less space for discussion over how we individuate actions. Consider a classic fictitious example. As we all know, Oedipus married Jocasta not knowing that she is his mother. How do we describe his action? Do we go with a broad interpretation and say that he “married his mother” or do we go with a narrow interpretation and decide that at the time he couldn't have married his mother as he didn't know her true identity (and his actions were determined by his narrow content). I don't think it is a much of a puzzle since situations similar to this happen all the time and we cope with them pretty easily. What we normally do is choose a broad interpretation but feel obliged to add something about the narrow content. So we say something like “he married his mother but he thought she was not related to him” (or something to that effect).

Thus, even if we individuate actions broadly, in order to fully explain them, we often add narrow content to the mix. So even if narrow content isn't necessary for describing and predicting every action, there are cases where it seems to be indispensable. What are these cases?

Generally speaking we could say that narrow content is needed the most whenever we suspect that the actions we observe are the results of defective cognition. And even if you strongly support broad content theories you have to admit that sometimes the error lies on the side of the system. And if this error leads to an action, you won't be able to predict it without speculating on the chain of internal states that led to it. There are at least four cases of such faulty cognition that are worth mentioning (all of which call for a narrow content component).

3.4. Errors which call for narrow content hypothesis

There are four types of errors that we should consider. The first case is the Oedipus scenario we analyzed above. It is hard to argue that sometimes our actions are the results of our false beliefs. And saying that errors of this type result from a mismatch between narrow and broad content looks like a pretty simple solution. Yet some people might argue that there

is no need for that. We don't have to speculate about narrow content, as the only thing we need in order to explain these errors is to say that they come from the wrong usage of broad content. What this means is that even though a given belief does not match the circumstances it was engaged with, we can meaningfully talk about this belief only because we can specify it broadly. But this boils down to saying that we know what the belief means because we know what circumstances are the right circumstances for it (even though this time the circumstances were different). So the reason why we are allowed to talk about Oedipus' wrong belief isn't that we have some way of specifying the belief and one that is independent of its broad content. We can talk about it because we know what would have to happen if it was to be used properly. But if you put it this way, the notion of broad content starts to look like a different dressing for the verificationist theory of meaning. (And we thought that Cartesian heritage was problematic!)

Note that this explanation might become less and less believable the more systematic the error becomes. Sometimes actions generating false beliefs can be completely disconnected from the external object they are about. If someone has a set of strong dogmatic *a priori* beliefs it is quite possible that the only way to predict her actions is to focus on the content of her internal states.

Secondly, a very important set of false beliefs which we have to attribute to cognitive systems in order to understand their actions are beliefs about non-existing objects. This category of beliefs is notoriously hard to reconcile with broad theories of content as there is simply no external component to determine (or co-determine) the content of (Kriegel, 2008, p. 324) (Segal, 2000, p. 31). Typical examples of such beliefs are religious beliefs⁸ (Segal, 2000, p. 33) and beliefs about fictitious characters introduced in various narratives. The reason why I was able to use Oedipus' example in the paragraph above and anticipate the reaction of the reader is because I assumed that we share beliefs about Oedipus. But of course no belief is really about Oedipus, so what I really assumed is that we share beliefs with the same narrow content.

Dismissing beliefs about non-existing objects as less important or second-rate beliefs (contrary to ones which are cognitively successful) would have been a huge mistake. It might be hard to realize how ubiquitous they are. Apart from acting accordingly to religious beliefs, people often behave like their fictional heroes, cite them, dress like them, name their pets after them. And the fact that we could march through most of our lives without realizing that objects we refer to do not exist reinforces the idea that

from the internal point of view of the subject there really is no difference – false beliefs about non-existing objects play their internal role just as well as true ones.

Interestingly, even someone who wishes to disregard religion and narratives as unworthy of philosophical analysis will probably have to eventually surrender and commit herself to beliefs about non-existing objects, as science would have to severely limit its expressive power if it was to restrain itself and talk only about what exists. The reason for this is that this requirement greatly blocks our ability to freely form hypotheses (Segal, 2000, p. 35).

The third category of faulty cognition processes should probably not be called faulty as it boils down to cognition involving partial or incomplete belief sets. If linguistic content is to be determined by what the terms refer to, it means that internal differences of belief nets have no bearing on the content. But this is very counterintuitive. Consider a child, an adult layman, and an adult specialist – can they use the same linguistic content when they talk about diamonds? It would be surprising, but, more importantly, it would not explain why we often make different predictions about their actions and the inferences they make. I may save a lot of money if I predict that my son might throw the family diamonds away as he does not know that they are expensive⁹. But isn't "being expensive" a rather stereotypical property we expect any adult language user to associate with diamonds? So the point is this – being able to talk about narrow content gives me many more options when it comes to ascribing beliefs. For example – there is nothing that prevents me from ascribing a partial or defective narrow content to someone, and this might give me a predictive advantage.

There are additional profits that come as a result of the ability to ascribe partial narrow content to cognitive agents. It gives us more flexibility when it comes to the idea of similarity of content. Again – the increased granularity of narrow content (which manifested itself for the first time in Frege's puzzle) pays off. For example – we can say that two meanings are similar when they share the same partial content. Another advantage is that it is much easier to explain meaning acquisition if we allow ourselves to talk about the changes in the internal structure of content. Note that many times the reference of a term (and because of this, of the broad content) does not change during the years of the term's usage. But the meaning (that is, the linguistic narrow content) may undergo many more or less severe alterations.

The fourth and the last example of defective cognitive processes which result in actions predictable thanks to narrow content theories are faulty mental operations. Although arguably the least important one, this is especially relevant for inferential semantics. Roughly speaking, the idea is that if

we know the capabilities and, most importantly, limitations of a given cognitive system, we are in a better position to predict the system’s behavior. The point here is that while focusing on narrow content we are able to relativize the content to a particular cognitive system (or the type of system). There is one broad content that users share but there is nothing that prevents us from postulating as many narrow contents as there are systems.¹⁰

4. Conclusion

As we have seen, theories of narrow content can be considered to be a form of damage control after the Fregean project of linguistic meaning proved to be unsuccessful. The two main types of these theories reflect the two important intuitions that the original notion of linguistic meaning covered – that meanings determine reference, and that the same reference can be reached by several different internal mechanisms. Since context theories focus on the first intuition, and functional theories focus on the second, they can very well be considered to be compatible with each other. Once narrow content becomes disassociated from reference and starts to mirror only the internal functions of content it begins to look useless to many philosophers. My main aim in this paper was to dispel this worry by showing the numerous tasks linguistic narrow content could perform. Researchers have pointed out that reconciling both needs (the internal functional need and external contextual need) proves difficult (Bach, 1998). But maybe there is nothing to reconcile. Maybe what we need are just two separate theories – of narrow and broad content – understood as modern descendants of the meaning/reference dichotomy. The big difference between the old and the modern approach is that we do not have to treat both types of content as two necessary components that have to be specified every time we explain language usage. Sometimes we are interested only in what has been said – in such cases, broad content suffices. But sometimes we are interested in how what had been said was actually understood by the speaker – what beliefs we should ascribe to her, how to best translate his words, what her next action is going to be, and why he sometimes errs.

Similar sentiments have been expressed in the literature but they are oftentimes accompanied by additional remarks which downplay the role of narrow content (Carruthers & Botterill, 1999). If I am right there is no need to do this. When it comes to a grand project of “making sense of other people”, both broad and narrow content play equally important, albeit different, roles.

N O T E S

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³ I use the term “meaning” interchangeably with the term “sense”.

⁴ Examples of context theories are: (Fodor, 1987), (Stalnaker, 1990) and to a lesser extent (Chalmers, 2003).

⁵ Examples of functional theories are: (Ajdukiewicz, 1978), (Loar, 1981), (Block, 1986), (Rey, 1998) and to lesser extent (Segal, 2000).

⁶ And similarity theories seem to be gaining momentum again, see (Ramsey, 2010).

⁷ Similar argumentation can be found in (Fodor, 1980), (Kim, 1982) and (Brown, 1993).

⁸ Note that you don’t have to be an atheist to attribute false beliefs of this type to people. Hardly anyone believes that every religion is right so even religious people accept that some predictions they make have to take into account the false beliefs of their peers.

⁹ (Perner, 1991) calls these partial beliefs “prelief”.

¹⁰ In fact more – as we pointed out earlier, a given system can change its meanings during time.

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