

# Linguistic Understanding and Belief

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In a recent paper, Dean Pettit (2002) argues against the view that understanding a bit of language *consists in* the possession of propositional knowledge of its meaning—what he labels the *epistemic view* of linguistic understanding.<sup>1</sup> His objection to the epistemic view is that it entails that it is *necessary* to understand a bit of language that one possess propositional knowledge of its meaning, but this necessity claim is false: for linguistic understanding, unlike knowledge, does not fail in Gettier cases, does not require epistemic warrant, and does not require belief; in supplying cases demonstrating this, one supplies cases of linguistic understanding without such knowledge.

Pettit's arguments, if successful, thus establish the falsity of a variety of weaker claims in addition to that of the epistemic view. They would establish, for example, the falsity of necessity claims as weak as the weakest modality allowing the possibility of his cases. Further, the third argument—that linguistic understanding does not require *belief* that the bit of language means such-and-such—establishes, if successful, the falsity of parallel claims concerning belief. Given the case Pettit appeals to in his third argument, this would include the falsity of the claim that belief about an expression's meaning is *nomologically* necessary for a human speaker to possess linguistic understanding of it. Pettit's case thus poses a challenge to prominent empirical accounts of semantic competence that advert to states with such propositional content.

It is this third argument that I wish to question. Perhaps Pettit's other arguments suffice to establish that linguistic understanding does not consist in and neither metaphysically nor nomologically requires propositional *knowledge* of meaning. But I do not think he succeeds in showing that the case he describes is one of linguistic understanding without *belief*. In particular, a case has not yet been made against those

<sup>1</sup> Pettit intends his arguments to be neutral as to the form and content such knowledge of meaning should have (beyond being knowledge that). For concreteness, he uses such locutions as 'knowledge that a means such-and-such' and 'knowledge that a means M'. I will follow him in this.

who would hypothesize, as part of an empirical theory, that human linguistic understanding involves (tacit) belief about meaning.

Pettit argues that it is possible to possess linguistic understanding without the relevant belief about meaning, because it can suffice for understanding a bit of language with a certain meaning that ‘it *seem* to the speaker that the bit of language have a certain meaning, even if the speaker does not believe (tacitly or otherwise) that it does’ (Pettit 2002, p. 543). In support of this, he presents a case in which a speaker is subjected to an elaborate hoax: the speaker is told and convinced that neuroscientists have induced a bizarre aphasia in her so that all of the mass nouns in her vocabulary will seem to her to mean something other than what they in fact mean—when actually nothing of the kind has occurred.<sup>2</sup> In such a situation, Pettit argues, the speaker’s prior understanding of mass nouns will persist, even though she does not believe that they mean what they do (which in fact is what they seem to her to mean). The speaker, if she possesses sufficient will-power, will not *act* on her understanding, given her belief that it is inaccurate; but still she understands:

your brain has not been tampered with and you are still a perfectly competent speaker of the language. You merely have a false belief about your competence ... You still have the same *ability* to use and interpret the word ‘water’ in the correct way, even though you no longer believe that this is the correct way. (Pettit 2002, p. 545, italics in original, a typo corrected)<sup>3</sup>

Suppose we grant that the speaker *understands* these mass nouns: the hoax, if you will, merely induces a top-down performance limitation on the speaker’s competence. Does she, in such a situation, lack true *beliefs* that the words mean such-and-such?<sup>4</sup>

As Pettit lays out the case, if it seems to the speaker that a mass noun means *M*, then she believes that it does not mean *M*. It does not follow from this, however, that she doesn’t *also* believe that it *does* mean *M*. Pettit anticipates this worry:

I am supposing that you [the speaker] thoroughly behave as though mass nouns do not mean what they seem to you to mean ... Since your disbelief

<sup>2</sup> It might prove difficult for the hoaxers themselves to avoid using mass nouns in describing and explaining what has ‘happened’. A thoughtful speaker might find the descriptions and explanations at least to that extent self-undermining. But suppose either that the hoaxers can indeed avoid using mass nouns or that the case is recast to avoid this difficulty—perhaps it is a more specific aphasia affecting only a certain class of mass nouns, or perhaps the hoaxers convince the speaker in advance of what a certain procedure will do.

<sup>3</sup> One might suggest that the perpetration of the hoax itself constitutes a tampering with the brain. But Pettit needs only that this ‘tampering’ is not such as to provide reason for questioning the speaker’s continued understanding, her continued competence with that bit of language.

goes this deep, there is nothing about you that would support the attribution of the belief that ‘water’ means *W*. You don’t believe it even a little bit, and you don’t believe it tacitly. (Pettit 2002, p. 547)

But arguably there *are* facts about the speaker that would support the attribution at least of this *tacit* belief. There is, first, her *past* behaviour; second, the fact Pettit emphasizes that *actually* no one has tampered with her brain; and, third, the fact that the expression *seems* to her to mean *W*. Suppose you believe that linguistic understanding of a bit of language—linguistic competence with respect to it—*is* or *requires* belief that it means such-and-such. Then it is at least open for you to claim that the speaker’s past behaviour provides grounds for holding that such a belief was present; that her unchanged brain-state provides grounds for holding, not only that her understanding persists (as Pettit allows), but also—since such understanding consists in or requires belief about meaning—that the belief persists; and, finally, that this tacit belief could explain at least in part the *impression* of meaning the

<sup>4</sup> Before presenting my own reason for a negative answer, let me note how Pettit might avoid one based on an appeal to the phenomenon of deference. The objection is that Pettit gives us no reason to doubt that, upon hearing others use the word ‘water’ and taking it to be a mass noun (which is necessary for the speaker to doubt her impression of what it means), the speaker comes to believe that ‘water’ means water (whatever water is) and would assent to such an ascription. There are a variety of ways one might respond. First, one could question whether such minimal interaction suffices to enable the speaker so to use the term. Pettit might prefer, however, a response that didn’t require him to commit on such matters. Second, one might argue that, even if mechanisms of deference can enable a speaker minimally exposed to an expression to use it, this case has been so designed that the ambient speech fails to provide the speaker’s deferential use with meaning: for, as Pettit lays out the case, the speaker after the ‘surgery’ encounters people using mass terms ‘as though they meant something they don’t in fact mean. [The speaker hears] them say things like: “Let’s have mud for lunch” and “The rain made big puddles of pudding”’ (Pettit 2002, p. 544). However, since Pettit wants it to be the case that the speaker does understand what ‘water’ means, it might be difficult for him to deny the speaker the ability to use the term to express the concept it in fact expresses, even if the speaker falsely believes that the meaning she thereby ascribes to the term is not the meaning it seems to her to have (and so the speaker wouldn’t herself use the term to characterize what meaning it seems to have). Third, one might focus on mass nouns that are not in fact uttered in the speaker’s presence after the ‘surgery’. But why couldn’t the deference attach to her past uses or to the past uses of others in part responsible for the term’s presence in her lexicon? Now, these responses all involve taking a position as to what deference can enable in Pettit’s particular case. But, it’s possible to by-pass such matters by altering the case. This fourth response is perhaps the best, least committing available to Pettit. So, suppose the speaker is told and convinced (1) that neuroscientists are about to induce surgically an aphasia in her that involves its seeming to be the case that any encountered term with the syntax of a mass noun has a certain meaning even when the term in fact has no meaning at all but rather is a made-up bit of nonsense, and (2) that, after she awakes from the operation, the only sentences containing mass nouns that she will hear for several hours will be ones with such ‘nonsense’ terms, so that the neuroscientists can see whether they have successfully induced the impression of sense. The operation is then faked, and afterwards assistants utter such sentences as ‘There is some water in the other room’ and ‘Let’s have mud for lunch’ in the presence of the speaker. Asked if she would assent to what’s expressed by the sentence “‘water’ means water (whatever that is)”, the speaker answers negatively, on the grounds that ‘water’ doesn’t mean anything at all.

speaker experiences. For Pettit simply to deny that the speaker's past behaviour, unchanged brain-state, and impression of meaning provide evidence of such tacit belief would beg the question.<sup>5</sup>

This does not mean that linguistic understanding in fact is or requires propositional belief about meaning: I have only claimed that Pettit has not provided an argument against such views; I have not argued in their favour. But there are indeed those who *do* advance such arguments. Cognitivist accounts of semantic competence, for example, hypothesize that aspects of normal linguistic behaviour in humans is explained by our tacitly believing a compositional semantic theory in large part inaccessible to consciousness. They thus hold that it is nomologically necessary for a human to understand a bit of language that she (at least tacitly) believe that the term mean such-and-such.<sup>6</sup> The evidence they cite, both for their general approach and for specific hypotheses within it, comprises much specifically linguistic data as well as convergence with data and theories from neighboring disciplines in the cognitive sciences. For instance, such cognition is held to explain our ability to discern certain ambiguities, the occurrence of certain sorts of systematicity in our semantic competence, our failure ever to produce certain sorts of sentences, our ability to understand certain kinds of newly encountered sentences, aspects of our *inferential* competence, etc.—while meshing with data and theories concerning cognitive

<sup>5</sup> Although the speaker would have beliefs that are inconsistent, it is not clear that it would follow that the speaker is irrational. One of the beliefs is tacit and thus possibly not under the right sort of control for the speaker to be responsible for it, hence not apt for rational assessment. At least so one might try to argue—especially if the tacit belief were one in principle inaccessible to consciousness. It might be replied that this would preclude the attitude from being belief; but perhaps it just would show that the belief must be tacit. (Cf. fn. 8 below.) In any event, even if the speaker would be irrational if she also believed that 'water' means *W*, this need not constitute an objection to the ascription. She believes something (and has grounds to), but it is also the case—it is claimed—that her antecedent belief in its negation tacitly persists (perhaps psychologically cannot but persist, at least for a while). This is not an uncommon occurrence.

<sup>6</sup> Again, it is not required that the propositions believed take precisely this form—in particular, that they involve ascriptions of *meaning*. I am simply following Pettit in using this formulation as a place-holder. Larson and Segal (1995), for instance, advance such an empirical hypothesis but hold that speakers cognize a theory the delivers statements of truth-conditions. (They also ascribe to speakers tacit *knowledge*, not just belief.)

Let me note too that the empirical claim can be qualified: one might hold that linguistic understanding only nomologically requires human speakers to have such beliefs concerning terms normally acquired as part of the normal acquisition of a first language. This would still apply to Pettit's case. But even if there were a case like Pettit's in which a human speaker understood an expression normally acquired as part of a the normal acquisition of a first language but lacked even a tacit belief about its meaning, this need not pose a deep challenge to cognitivist accounts of semantic competence. First, there may be grounds for declaring the case non-normal in some other respect (certainly, Pettit's case might seem a candidate for such treatment), and, second, a scientific theory can be correct and important even if it only explains an important range of a phenomenon and not every instance.

development, acquired deficits, syntactic competence, etc.<sup>7</sup> Insofar as the speaker in Pettit's case is human, this accumulated evidence would provide general background support for the attribution of the specific tacit belief that 'water' means *W*, given the specific evidence cited in the previous paragraph. Of course, cognitivist accounts of semantic competence, being scientific hypotheses, may prove a complete bust—not just some of the specific semantic treatments that have been advanced, but the whole approach. But showing this on empirical grounds would require delving into the available evidence and doing some empirical theorizing oneself.<sup>8</sup>

I conclude that Pettit has not established that understanding a bit of language does not require propositional belief about what it means and that, in particular, his case poses no challenge to empirical accounts of semantic competence.<sup>9</sup>

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## References

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<sup>7</sup> Pettit (2002, pp. 523–4) himself alludes to such evidence as providing a 'theoretical' motivation for the epistemic view in addition to its conceptual naturalness.

<sup>8</sup> Without challenging the empirical credentials of cognitivist accounts of semantic competence, one might challenge the suggestion that the ascribed attitudes ought to count as belief. This, however, would be to offer a different argument than Pettit's. He emphasizes that his argument 'does not rely on any particular way of cashing out the notion of tacitly held belief' (Pettit 2002, p. 543), while noting that others have indeed argued against attributing tacit belief in a semantic theory by appealing to a failure to satisfy some criterion for belief. Pettit's argument against linguistic understanding requiring belief thus differs from his argument against linguistic understanding requiring knowledge. Against the objection that his arguments just show that not all knowledge fails in Gettier cases and requires warrant and belief (in particular, tacit knowledge need not), Pettit replies that the failure to satisfy these conditions disqualifies an attitude or state from counting as knowledge. I will not pursue these conceptual arguments beyond noting two lines of response they might elicit. First, the target might try responding that the proffered criterion concerns not knowledge/belief, but rather one particular (perhaps in some sense 'core') kind of knowledge/belief. Alternatively, she might simply shrug off such debates, suggesting that it is not of great moment and perhaps not a substantive matter whether one applies or extends the concept of knowledge/belief to the hypothesized tacit state or rather introduces a new technical term (such as 'cognizes') to characterize it. (Cf. Chomsky 1975, pp. 164–6.)

<sup>9</sup> I am grateful to Dean Pettit for helpful correspondence.

- Larson, Richard, and Gabriel Segal 1995. *Knowledge of Meaning*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
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