

The Journal of Philosophical Ideas, Special Issue, 201-221, 2017.

DOI : <http://dx.doi.org/10.15750/chss.65s.201708.009>

## Non-holistic Meaning Anatomism and the No-Principled-Basis Consideration

Chun-Ping Yen\*

**【Keywords】** Meaning, Atomism, Anatomism, Holism, Jerry Fodor, Ernest Lepore, Michael Devitt

**【ABSTRACT】** Jerry Fodor and Ernest Lepore (1999/2002) frame the debate over meaning holism in terms of a distinction between meaning atomism and meaning anatomism. The former holds that the meaning of an expression  $E$  is determined by some relation between  $E$  and some extra-linguistic entity. The latter holds that the meaning of  $E$  is at least partly determined by some of  $E$ 's "inward" relations ( $IRs$ ) with other expressions in the very language. They (1992) argue that meaning anatomism inevitably collapses into meaning holism, which is the view that the meaning of  $E$  is determined by  $E$ 's  $IRs$  with every other expression in the very language because there is no principled distinction for the anatomist to divide the meaning-determining  $IRs$  from the non-meaning-determining ones. In response, the non-holistic anatomist urges that Fodor and Lepore's no-principled-basis consideration is groundless because the lack of a generally accepted criterion for such a distinction does not undermine the viability of the distinction itself. While this point is well taken, I think that Fodor and Lepore are onto an important question here. That is, what does it make non-holistic anatomism distinctive

---

\* Postdoctoral Fellow, The Graduate Institute of Philosophy, National Tsing Hua University, Taiwan, [chunping.yen@gmail.com](mailto:chunping.yen@gmail.com)

from its holistic counterpart if without a principled basis for the distinction among *IRs*? I look into this question and give an alternative argument from Fodor and Lepore's to suggest that non-holistic atomism cannot bypass the no-principled-basis consideration. The non-holistic anatomist will need a principled distinction in kind between *IRs* to back her point.

## I . Meaning Anatomism and Some of the Problems of Meaning Atomism

Jerry Fodor and Ernest Lepore (1999/2002) frame the debate over meaning holism (hereafter holism) in terms of a distinction between meaning atomism (hereafter atomism) and meaning anatomism (hereafter anatomism). The former holds that the meaning of an expression *E* is determined by some “outward” relation (*OR*) between *E* and some extra-linguistic entity,<sup>1)</sup> and the latter holds that the meaning of *E* is at least partly determined by some of *E*'s “inward” relations (*IRs*) with other expressions in the very language.<sup>2)</sup> The idea of anatomism comes from the criticism of atomism (Fodor & Lepore, 1999/2002, p. 11). If the meaning of an expression *E* is determined by some *OR* between *E* and some extra-linguistic entity as atomism maintains, then whenever there is identity of *ORs*, there must be identity of meaning. However, there are examples where two expressions have the same *OR* but different meanings.

---

1) Some candidates of *OR* include association, causation, reference, correspondence, and so forth. It is a popular statement that it is in terms of these *ORs* that expressions have their meanings. For some examples in the literature, see J. Fodor & E. Lepore (1999/2002, p. 11).

2) Some candidates of *IR* include inferential relations, conceptual connections, interdependence, or syntagmatic and associative (now usually called “paradigmatic”) relations (in Ferdinand de Saussure's structuralism).

Consider Gottlob Frege's example of 'Phosphorus' and 'Hesperus'. The relations between the two expressions and an extra-linguistic entity, Venus,  $OR('Phosphorus', Venus)$  and  $OR('Hesperus', Venus)$ , are the same, but the two expressions do not have the same meaning. 'Phosphorus' means the morning star, and 'Hesperus' means the evening star. Thus there must be something other than  $OR$  which at least partly determines the meaning of an expression  $E$ . For anatomism, it is the "inward" relations ( $IRs$ ) among expressions to play this role. Anatomism holds that  $E$ 's  $IRs$  with other expressions in the very language must take part in determining  $E$ 's meaning. In this way, anatomism can claim that 'Phosphorus' and 'Hesperus' have different meanings because they have different  $IRs$  and thus different determinants of their meanings.

Emma Borg (2010) recently also posts similar challenges to the explanatory adequateness of the atomistic theories. She lists four "intra-linguistic" features that the atomistic accounts seem doomed to fail to predict or explain. For these features involve the syntactic interactions of expressions, phenomena a semantic theory with  $ORs$  as the only determinants of meaning lacks resources to cope with. They demonstrate what she calls the "intra-linguistic burden on semantics" which "concerns properties of, and relations among, expressions" (Borg, 2012, pp. 167-8).

Firstly, consider the possible and impossible readings for natural language sentences.

- (1a) Jack is too clever to catch Jim.
- (1b) Jack is too clever to catch.
- (2a) Jill is eager to please.
- (2b) Jill is easy to please.

Despite the surface similarities of each pair of these sentences, they require very different readings. For example, while Jack and Jill are the agents of (1a) and (2a) respectively, they do not play this role in (1b) and (2b). It is argued that an adequate semantic theory must explain the difference as such. To do that, however, “we need to appeal to more than the syntactic structure of the sentence and the denotational content of the terms involved” (Borg, 2010, p. 61), and yet, the task seems beyond what atomism is able to offer. For, as Borg (2010, p. 61) correctly points out, for the current example, it does not help to simply say that ‘easy’ means, say, the property of being easy.<sup>3)</sup>

Moreover, the phenomenon of syntactic interactions of expressions seems everywhere. Consider the second case in Borg’s list—verb behaviors. The observation suggests that there is a sort of non-arbitrary patterns of syntactic distribution in verb behaviors which an adequate semantic theory is expected to explain and predict. For example, the fact that some of the following sentences are admissible but some are not suggests there are different patterns how these verbs behave (Borg, 2010, p. 62).

- (3a) I hit the wall with the bat.
- (3b) I hit the bat against the wall.
- (4a) I cut the rope with the knife.
- (4b) \*I cut the knife against a rope.
- (5a) She touched the cat with her hand.
- (5b) \*She couched her hand against the cat.

According to Borg (2010), we can say that (4b) and (5b) are not admissible because ‘cut’ and ‘touch’, unlike ‘hit’, do not “care about the

---

3) See also P. M. Pietroski, (2005, pp. 263-264).

kind of motion which precedes the contact” (p. 62). Something is a hit “not merely if it makes a specific kind of contact but also if it involves a certain kind of motion beforehand,” but there is nothing like that involved with a cut or a touch (Borg, 2010, p. 62). Again, this kind of explanation seems something that atomism is short of. Nothing in the claim that ‘hit’ means HIT, ‘cut’ means CUT, or ‘touch’ means TOUCH can help explain the patterns of the behaviors of these verbs.<sup>4)</sup>

The third group of semantic relations on Borg’s list of the intra-linguistic burden of semantics includes relations such as synonymy, analyticity, entailment, and polysemy. Suppose ‘vixen’ and ‘female fox’ are synonymous. How can atomism show that the meaning of ‘vixen’ is somehow a combination of the meaning of ‘female’ and ‘fox’? How can atomism capture the inferential relation between ‘red’ and ‘colored’ or ‘dog’ and ‘mammal’? How can atomism explain the facts that words can have “multiple meanings where those meanings seem related to one another in non-arbitrary ways” (Borg, 2010, p. 64)?

Some of these relations may be easier to handle than others. Someone like Michael Devitt may respond that, say, it is in terms of the fact that ‘vixen’ refers to anything that ‘female’ and ‘fox’ both refer to that ‘vixen’ and ‘female fox’ are synonymous.<sup>5)</sup> Polysemy is probably the most challenging case here. Consider the meaning of ‘book’ as in ‘the book weighs two pounds’ versus ‘the book is in every shop in the city’ where ‘book’ has different meanings in each sentence (Borg, 2010, p. 64).<sup>6)</sup> As Michael Dummett (1976/1993) says, “any acceptable theory of meaning must give recognition to the interconnectedness of language” (p. 43), cases like this seem to suggest that we cannot exclude the contribution of

---

4) I use capital letters to indicate the name of the meaning assigned to the indicated expression.

5) See M. Devitt (1996, pp. 18-26).

6) See also Borg (2012, p. 172).

the linguistic environment that an expression *E* is within when considering the meaning of *E*.<sup>7)</sup>

The fourth case in Borg’s discussion is “impossible words.” They are words that “do not occur in any natural language, despite their having apparently cogent meanings” (Borg, 2010, p. 64), and it is thought that their absence is not an accident “in the way that it is an accident[, say,] that there is no noun that picks out one’s tallest friend’s relatives” (K. Johnson, 2004, p. 334) and thus need to be explained. It becomes another challenge to atomism if that is the case. For example, we can say someone broke something but not something bliked someone (where ‘bliked’ means ‘was broken by’). One suggestion of the explanation of the absence of the impossible word ‘blik’ is to attribute it to a general fact “that whenever a transition verb of English expresses a relation between the doer of an action and the thing that is acted upon . . . the former is the subject of the verb and the latter is the object” (Johnson, 2004, p. 334). Such explanation seems nothing an atomistic theory can afford.<sup>8)</sup>

All these cases provide a strong demonstration that lexicons contain more information than simply pairing expressions with extra-linguistic entities. Lexicons contain also additional “rules which indicate the kinds of arguments [they] can take and the rules of composition relevant to those different arguments” (Borg, 2012, p.196). As Borg points out, there are some complex patterns of the syntactic interactions of expressions in natural language that require us “to appeal to the complex structures and information” in the lexicons (Borg, 2010, p. 65). That it is not enough to

---

7) For similar remarks, see also Devitt (1996, p. 11); A. Bilgrami (1998); M. Greenberg & G. Harman (2006); J. Peregrin (2008).

8) See also J. Collins’s (2011) where he argues “only on the assumption that lexical items contain a semantically relevant structure can we plausibly explain why certain would-be verbs are impossible” (p. 235).

have *ORs* as the only determinants of meaning gives us reason not to be an atomist but an anatomist.

## II. Holistic and Non-holistic Meaning Anatomism

Fodor and Lepore (1992, pp. 23-25) believe that the renouncement of atomism inevitably leads to holism, the extreme version of anatomism which holds that the meaning of *E* is determined by *E*'s *IRs* with every other expression in the very language. They argue that once we allow the *IRs* of *E* to take part in determining the meaning of *E* and follow W. V. Quine to deny the analytic/synthetic distinction, as they think we should, it is unlikely that there is a principled distinction to tell the meaning-determining *IRs* from the non-meaning-determining ones. Consequently, we get holism. The argument can be written as follows:

- (6) Anatomism: that the meaning of *E* is at least partly determined by some of *E*'s *IRs* with other expressions in the very language.
- (7) No-principled-basis consideration: that there is no principled distinction to divide the meaning-determining *IRs* from the non-meaning-determining ones.
- (8) Holism. [from (6) and (7)]

In response, the non-holistic anatomist urges that Fodor and Lepore's "no-principled-basis consideration," as Devitt (1996, p. 12) calls it, is groundless because the lack of a generally accepted criterion for distinguishing meaning-determining *IRs* from those are not does not undermine the viability of the distinction itself. It does not follow from the claim that the distinction is indeterminate that there is no distinction

at all.<sup>9</sup>) Accordingly, the non-holistic anatomist rejects (7), and thus (8) does not follow.

I think that the non-holistic anatomist's point is well taken. Fodor and Lepore do not successfully justify (7), and their argument is not decisive. There can still be a principled distinction for the non-holistic anatomist to divide *IRs*. Nonetheless, I think Fodor and Lepore are onto an important question here. That is, what does it make non-holistic anatomism distinctive from its holistic counterpart if without a principled basis for the distinction among *IRs*? In section II.1, I give an alternative argument from Fodor and Lepore's to suggest that non-holistic anatomism cannot bypass the no-principled-basis consideration. The challenge of the no-principled-basis consideration remains, and the non-holistic anatomist needs a principled distinction dividing *IRs* to make her claim that not all *IRs* of *E* can be the meaning determinants of *E*.

### 1. Reconsider the No–principled–basis Consideration

As aforementioned, holism is the extreme version of anatomism. Like atomism, it characterizes a determination relation that such-and-such determines so-and-so. I suggest that we understand these doctrines in the way we understand other determination relations. It is generally held that a determination claim entails that only the cited determinants enter into the determination of the determinable. That is to say, the cited determinants are necessary and jointly sufficient for determining the cited determinable. Accordingly, the truth of holism depends on the following facts:

---

9) See P. A. Boghossian (1996, p. 384); J. Perry (1994); Devitt (1996; pp. 87-94); N. Block (1998).



- (9) that there is no additional determinant other than the cited determinants ( $IR_1, IR_2, \dots, IR_n$  of  $E$  to every other expression in the given language), and
- (10) that the cited determinable ( $E$ 's meaning) does depend on each cited determinant ( $IR_1, IR_2, \dots, IR_n$  of  $E$ ).<sup>10)</sup>

Holism is falsifiable as understood this way. One can demonstrate holism as flawed with a counterexample of either (9) or (10).<sup>11)</sup> The intuition behind non-holistic anatomism in the literature is the idea that not all  $IRs$  of  $E$  are meaning determining for  $E$ . It is claimed that there must be a few crucial  $IRs$ , but not all, play the role because it seems obvious that only relatively small subset of the  $IRs$  of  $E$  is to really affect the meaning of  $E$ .

One might think, for example, that if the change of the  $IR$  between 'bachelor' and 'frustrated' does not affect the meaning of 'bachelor' as that of the  $IR$  between 'bachelor' and 'unmarried' does, then there seems no ground to say that the  $IR$  between 'bachelor' and 'frustrated' is one of the determinants of the meaning of 'bachelor.'<sup>12)</sup> The seemingly difference between the  $IR$  between 'bachelor' and 'unmarried' and the  $IR$  between 'bachelor' and 'frustrated' gives a reason to think that we do have a principled distinction in kind between  $IRs$ . The  $IR$  between 'bachelor' and 'unmarried' is a determinant of the meaning of 'bachelor', while the  $IR$  between 'bachelor' and 'frustrated' is not.

What can examples like this buy for non-holistic anatomism? Not much, I am afraid. Firstly, we need to carefully note what such determination does and does not imply. A determination claim only tells

---

10) This explication of determination is in debt to Martin L. Jönsson (2008, pp. 22-3).

11) For example, non-holistic anatomism, if true, presents a counterexample against (10) and thus against holism.

12) The example is from Devitt (1996, p. 30).

us that if the determinants are the same, then the determinable must remain the same. It does not imply that whenever there is a change in one (or more) of the determinants, the determinable must change accordingly. It does not imply differences on the determinants side must lead to differences on the determinable side, either. These may not be evident when we think of meaning atomism which has only one determinant of the meaning of *E*. But consider other determination claims for a second. Take Newton's second law of motion for example (Z. G. Szabó, 2010, pp. 256-257). It states that mass and acceleration jointly determine force —  $F$  (Force) =  $m$  (mass) \*  $a$  (acceleration). Or consider the claim that one's final letter grade in a class is determined by the result of one's exams, quizzes and attendance (H. Jackman, 1999). Suppose we change the values of all the determinants, will the value of the determinable in these examples change as well? Not necessarily. For there can be different combination of the determinants with the same result. We talk about determination like this all the time. The relation between the determinants and the determinable considered here is like that. When there is a change in the *IR* between 'bachelor' and 'frustrated' on the determinants side, it is not supposed that the change of the meaning of 'bachelor' will follow on the determinable side. We need a reason other than that the change of the *IR* between 'bachelor' and 'frustrated' does not affect the meaning of 'bachelor' in order to exclude the *IR* between 'bachelor' and 'frustrated' as one of the determinants of the meaning of 'bachelor'. The non-holistic anatomist does not offer us one such reason.

Secondly, the example of bachelor may appear as a counterexample against (10), but it is not. To make the case of bachelor a counterexample against (10), we need to show not only

- (11) that the meaning of ‘bachelor’ stay intact when the change of the *IR* between ‘bachelor’ and ‘frustrated’ occurs, but also
- (12) that none of the other *IRs* of ‘bachelor’ is affected by the change of the *IR* between ‘bachelor’ and ‘frustrated’.

The condition (12) appears a sheer difficulty to demonstrate, given the interdependence among “the cited determinants of *E*” in (10). The non-holistic anatomist’s belief that it is not the case that all *IRs* of *E* are meaning determinants of *E* is groundless without suitable counterexamples against (10). In that case, the non-holistic anatomist will need a principled distinction in kind between *IRs* to back her point. A principled distinction to divide *IRs* is still needed in order for non-holistic anatomism to be a well-motivated alternative to holism. Otherwise, why not simply go all the way to holism after renouncing atomism?

Surprisingly, given the popularity of non-holistic anatomism in the debate over holism, few theorists take the no-principled-basis consideration seriously enough to respond to it.<sup>13</sup> As of my knowledge, Devitt is one rare exception among non-holistic anatomists who has made an effort to live up to the demand of the no-principled-basis consideration. In the rest of the paper, I will argue that while Devitt’s non-holistic anatomism is well-motivated with a principled basis for the distinction between meaning-determining *IRs* and non-meaning-determining ones, he provides no reason to favor non-holistic anatomism over holism.

---

13) Paul Horwich is one of these anatomists. He (1998, pp. 59-60) maintains that only some but not all *IRs* of *E* can determine the meaning of *E* without giving a principled distinction in kind between *IRs*.

### III. Devitt's Non-holistic Meaning Anatomism

Devitt rightly points out the reason that we need a principled basis for counting an *IR* as meaning-determining is because we need such a criterion for counting any factor as meaning-determining. On his view, it is a demand applies not only to non-holistic anatomism but to any theory of meaning (Devitt, 1997, p. 378). He (2001) takes “[t]he meaning of a word [as] its property of referring to something in a certain way, its mode of reference” (p. 461) and think that *IRs* are meaning-determining only when they are reference-determining. Thus, for him, *IRs* are divided into two groups. One are reference-determining, and the other are not. Only the former group can determine meaning. Devitt's account provides a principled basis for the distinction between meaning-determining *IRs* and non-meaning-determining ones and thus is a well-motivated alternative to holism.

Meanings, according to Devitt, are supposed to serve at least two semantic purposes: to explain one's behavior, and to use one's thoughts and utterances as guides to reality (Devitt, 1996, pp. 57–60). To understanding what meanings are, for him, is to determine which properties to ascribe for these two purposes.<sup>14)</sup> He conducts three arguments for his version of non-holistic anatomism which holds that *ORs* (causal links, the semantically significant relations of expressions to the world, for him) must be taken into account for meaning determination (Devitt, 1996, p. 160). If I understand it correctly, on this account, there must be at least some expressions which are semantically

---

14) For example, suppose that A is in a kitchen, drinking from a glass that was filled from the tap. Why is A drinking it? Devitt would take the putative meanings as the properties ascribed to explain A's behavior for the reason that these properties serve one of the semantic purposes: they explain A's behavior.

self-standing in the sense that their meanings are determined by the causal links they possess with objects in the world. But is there any good reason to support his theory? Let's scrutinize his arguments to find out.

### 1. The Argument from Representationalism

One of the arguments for non-holistic anatomism proposed by Devitt is based on Representationalism. Representationalism, as Devitt has it, is a truth-referential theory of meaning which holds that meanings are entirely constituted by representational properties, i.e. properties that determine reference or truth-conditions. According to this view, *ORs* are required to explain truth conditions.<sup>15)</sup> It maintains that the meaning of an expression in a sentence is determined by its contribution to the truth condition of that sentence (Devitt & K. Sterelny, 1999, p. 22).<sup>16)</sup> If meanings are entirely constituted by referential properties, as Representationalism has it, then they cannot be holistic.

As Devitt admits, this argument is very theory-laden (Devitt, 1996, p.

---

15) According to Devitt and K. Sterelny (1999, p. 20), truth conditions describe states of affair in the world which have to hold for a given sentence to be true. It is the property of a sentence in virtue of which it is true if a certain situation in the world obtains and not true if that situation does not obtain. It is claimed that the meaning of a sentence is exhausted by its truth condition, and the truth condition represented by the sentence is the core of the meaning of the sentence.

16) For example, consider a simple sentence *S*, 'Snow is white'. The sentence is true if and only if snow is white. The truth of the sentence depends on the sentence having the simple structure of a one-place predication. It also depends on its containing 'snow', referring to snow, and 'is white', referring to white things. The sentence has its truth condition in virtue of the facts that there is some object that 'snow' refers to, and that 'white' applies to that object. In virtue of the truth condition of a sentence, we can identify linguistic items across, say, languages. For example, one can say that the German sentence 'Schnee ist weiss' and the French sentence 'La neige est blanche' mean the same thing because they have the same truth-condition that snow is white.

135). It assumes Representationalism which bears specific weight on the idea that reference-determining conditions yield meaning-constitutive features. Although Devitt takes a strong Representationalist approach, he is aware of the problem that it will raise controversy in the current debate if we rest our opposition to holism on any specific semantic theory. Hence Representationalism can only play an auxiliary role in support of non-holistic atomism. The power of Devitt's arguments against holism relies mainly on the other independent arguments discussed below. If they work, we have a strong reason to favor non-holistic atomism. If they don't, the argument from Representationalism by itself will appear weak anyway due to its theory-laden characteristics. If that is the case, the room of arguing for holistic accounts remains.

## 2. The Argument from the Success of Meaning Ascriptions

Devitt argues that the success of our ascriptions of meaning provides a good reason to suppose that meaning is non-holistic rather than holistic. For, according to Devitt, we ascribe to others' expressions shared meaning in ordinary circumstances, and shared meaning cannot be holistic. Suppose that A is in a kitchen, drinking from a glass that was filled from the tap. Why is A drinking it? The following attitude ascription serves as a plausible explanation: 'A wants her thirst quenched and believes that water quenches thirst'. What properties are we attributing to 'water' in ascribing the belief that water quenches thirst to A? Devitt would claim that while we are presumably attributing properties of 'water' that capture the way in which A represents reality, we are not attributing all of the inferential properties of the word since, for him, only some of the properties are actually shared across individuals. That our ascribing the putative meaning of 'water'

successfully explains A's behavior shows that meaning of 'water' must be non-holistic because only non-holistic meaning can be shared and thus can serve the task of explaining A's behavior.

Joseph Levine raises a question that one may naturally wonder about this argument. After all, "[i]t is one thing to say that our explanatory practice is successful and that it involves the attribution of properties of a certain sort (the sort the moderate localist endorses) and another to say that it's in virtue of the properties attributed that it's successful" (Levine, 1997, p. 67). If *P* successfully explains *Q*, it does not follow that *P* determines the success of the explanation of *Q*. That the match was struck could successfully explain why it lit, but the lighting is not determined by the striking. The lighting of the match is determined by the striking and the presence of oxygen, the dryness of the match, and so forth. Without the existence of other factors, even if the match was struck, it would not light. We cannot obtain a nomologically or metaphysically necessity of non-holistic properties from Devitt's argument unless the success of our ascriptions is proved to be completely determined by the non-holistic properties.

Devitt is quite aware of the problem which worries Levine as he admits that the argument from the success of our ascriptions does not rule out the possibility of holistic meanings (Devitt, 1996, p. 127). Nevertheless, he chooses to stick with the faith on the effectiveness of the evidence in our folk practice. Given the support that for the most part, we have been successfully ascribing to each other certain attitudes to tokens with certain non-holistic properties, Devitt urges that we can have strong confidence on non-holistic anatomism unless there is a powerful alternative explanation of the success of these ascriptions.

I am not as optimistic about this as Devitt is. Levine's challenge is exactly to the point that we cannot derive the normative non-holistic

anatomism from the descriptive premise. Moreover, I think holism can provide an alternative explanation of the success of meaning ascriptions as Devitt demands because holistic meanings, like their non-holistic counterparts, are sharable either across individuals or time slices. Even if we agree with Devitt's observation that people ascribe to others' expressions shared meaning in ordinary circumstances, there is no ground to think that the ascribed meaning is non-holistic rather than holistic.

The problem alleged here as a challenge to holism is that the change of meaning becomes so global and overwhelming as holism seems to imply that it is impossible for the meaning of an expression *E* in one's language to be the same at different times and for the meaning of *E* to be the same in different individuals' languages. In other words, it is necessarily not the case that the meaning of *E* in one's language is the same at different times and that the meaning of *E* is the same in different individuals' languages. But then, as we have noted in section II.1, this is not a problem that holism is committed to. Different determinants can result in the same determinable.<sup>17</sup>) Sharing meaning across systems is no miracle to holism, for holism does not dismiss the possibility that the meaning of *E* stays the same when there is a change in one (or more) of its *IRs*. Holism has all we need for meanings to be "stable" in the sense that it is possible for meanings to be shared because all that is required is for it to be possible that the meaning of *E* stays the same across time slices or individuals.

---

17) For example, if meaning determines reference, then despite the fact that 'Phosphorus' and 'Hesperus' have different meanings, they can still have the same referents.



### 3. The Argument from Our Interest in Generality

According to Devitt (1996), “we ascribe meanings to *explain behavior*” (p. 126, italics in the original). In searching for meanings that are suited for playing the explanatory role, Devitt claims, we want to allow for common explanations of the common behavior of different individuals, but then, he adds, only non-holistic meanings can be shared across individuals. It seems an undeniable doctrine that we have an interest in generality accompanying any semantic purpose we may have. There is a pervasive worry among philosophers that holistic meanings do not have the sort of generality we are interested in semantics because of the following concern which Devitt shares:

Holistic meanings would be so difficult to learn, teach, and use. . . . The more holistic the meaning, the more the theory that would have to be grasped; and more the likely variation from person to person, time to time; and so on. (Devitt, 1996, p. 124, n. 13).<sup>18)</sup>

Among the various challenges which holism faces, Devitt regards the failure of meeting our interest in generality as most serious (Devitt 1996: 7). On his view, the putative meaning has to be common and peculiar to the tokens to which one ascribes the very meaning in order to be shared. Non-holistic properties are constituted by only a few of the relations of

---

18) Take ‘water’ for example. According to Devitt’s line of thinking, the more holistic the meaning, the more *IRs* would be included to determine the meaning of ‘water’. Consider *IR*<sub>1</sub> between, say, ‘x is water’ and ‘x quenches thirst’ and *IR*<sub>2</sub> between ‘x is water’ and ‘x is H<sub>2</sub>O’. The meaning of ‘water’ determined by both *IR*<sub>1</sub> and *IR*<sub>2</sub>, on Devitt’s view, would be more holistic than the meaning of ‘water’ determined only by one of the two *IRs*. Devitt thinks that in the former case, the meaning of ‘water’ is less likely to share across individuals than in the latter case because those who embrace one of the two *IRs* may not embrace the other one. The more holistic the meaning, the less likely for the meaning to be shared.

any token that has them and so they have the feature to be shared by many things. Holistic properties, on the contrary, are more unlikely to be shared since they are constituted by a large proportion of the inferential properties of its tokens.<sup>19)</sup> Therefore, he concludes that only non-holistic properties can meet our interest in generality and serve our purposes of explaining behaviors. Holistic properties are too fine-grained to meet our interest in generality. According to Devitt, this explains the non-holistic doctrine why we tend to ascribe non-holistic properties rather than holistic ones.<sup>20)</sup>

Once again, Devitt's arguments rely heavily on the idea that holistic meanings cannot be shared across individuals, a pervasive misunderstanding among the opponents of holism. As noted in section III.2, holistic meanings can be shared across time slices or individuals. The fact that we successfully ascribe shared meanings to others' thoughts and utterances thus fail to serve as a criterion on whether meanings are holistic or not as Devitt supposes.

This concludes my argument that Devitt's non-holistic anatomism is not well-grounded. While Devitt's account does provide a principled basis to draw the distinction among *IRs* and thus is a well-motivated alternative to holism in the sense discussed in section II.1, a good reason to support his account over holism is still wanting.

---

19) Devitt (1996, pp. 10-15) prefer talking about the meaning of word-tokens rather than of word-types. For him, *IRs* are inferential properties of word-tokens.

20) Cf. Devitt (1996, pp. 125-127). See also Fodor (1987, Ch. 3); Fodor & Lepore (1992) for a similar point.

## IV. Conclusion

This paper explores the motivation of non-holistic anatomism. The problem that *ORs* cannot solely determine the meaning of an expression gives rise to anatomism, and the intuition of the existence of some principled distinction between the meaning-determining *IRs* and the non-meaning-determining ones gives reason to support non-holistic anatomism. I argue that this intuition cannot stand once we take a close look. Instead, non-holistic anatomism needs a principled distinction in kind between *IRs* to set a criteria for what counts as meaning determining factors in the theory. As Devitt points out, it is a criterion that any theory of meaning should equip us with, and non-holistic anatomism is no exception. Devitt himself gives a well-motivated account of non-holistic anatomism on the ground that it specifies that meaning determining factors must be reference-determining. Thus, on his account, the criterion for an *IR* to be meaning determining is for it to be reference-determining. Devitt's arguments for non-holistic anatomism are further examined and rejected. While Devitt's account demonstrates a well-motivated non-holistic version of anatomism, he fails to give reason why we should favor non-holistic anatomism over the holistic one. To conclude, a well-grounded non-holistic version of anatomism to defeat holism is still in absence.<sup>21)</sup>

Submitted: 2017. 02. 28

Reviewed: 2017. 07. 05

Confirmed for Publication: 2017. 07. 10

---

21) I thank the three anonymous reviewers for their useful suggestions and comments.

## References

- Block, N. (1998). Holism, Mental and Semantic. In E. Craig (Ed.), *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. London: Routledge.
- Borg, E. (2010). Minimalism and the Content of the Lexicon. In L. Baptista, & E. Rast (Eds.), *Meaning and Context* (pp. 51-77). New York: Peter Lang.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2012). *Pursuing Meaning*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bilgrami, A. (1998). Why Holism is Harmless and Necessary. *Noûs* 32(12), 105-126.
- Boghossian, P. A. (1996). Analyticity Reconsidered. *Noûs* 30(3), 360-391.
- Collins, J. (2011). Impossible Words Again: Or Why Beds Break but Not Make. *Mind and Language* 23, 234-260.
- Devitt, M. (1996). *Coming to Our Senses: A Naturalistic Program for Semantic Localism*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1997). **Responses to the Maribor Papers.** In D. Jutronic (Ed.), *The Maribor Papers in Naturalized Semantics* (pp. 353-411). Maribor: Pedagoska Fakulteta Maribor.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2001). A Shocking Idea about Meaning. *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 218, 449-472.
- Devitt, M., & Sterelny, K. (1999). *Language and Reality: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Language* (2nd ed.). Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Fodor, J. (1987). *Psychosemantics: The Problem of Meaning in the Philosophy of Mind*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Fodor, J., & Lepore, E. (1992). *Holism: A Shopper's Guide*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

- \_\_\_\_\_. (2002). Why Meaning (Probably) Isn't Conceptual Role. In J. Fodor, & E. Lepore, *The Compositionality Papers* (pp. 9-26). New York: Oxford University. (Reprinted from *Mind and Language* 6(4), 1999, 329-343.)
- Greenberg, M., & Harman, G. (2006). Conceptual Role Semantics. In E. Lepore, & B. Smith (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Language* (pp. 295-322). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Horwich, P. (1998). *Meaning*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Jackman, H. (1999). Moderate Holism and the Instability Thesis. *American Philosophical Quarterly* 36(4), 361-369.
- Johnson, K. (2004). From Impossible Words to Conceptual Structure: The Role of Structure and Processes in the Lexicon. *Mind and Language* 19, 334-358.
- Jönsson, M. L. (2008). *On Compositionality: Doubts about the Structural Path to Meaning*. Dissertation. Lund University.
- Levine, J. (1997). Troubles with Moderate Localism. In D. Jutronic (Ed.), *The Maribor Papers in Naturalized Semantics* (pp. 59-72). Maribor: Pedagoska Fakulteta Maribor.
- Peregrin, J. (2008). An Inferentialist Approach to Semantics: Time for a New Kind of Structuralism?. *Philosophy Compass* 3(6), 1208-1223.
- Perry, J. (1994). Fodor and Lepore on Holism. *Philosophical Studies* 73, 123-158.
- Pietroski, P. M. (2005). Meaning before Truth. In G. Preyer, & G. Peter (Eds.), *Contextualism in Philosophy: Knowledge, Meaning, and Truth* (pp. 255-302). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Szabó, Z. G. (2010). The Determination of Content. *Philosophical Studies* 148, 253-272.