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IDIOLECTAL ERROR

Alex Barber

Department of Philosophy, The Open University

Abstract: A linguistic theory is correct exactly to the extent that it is the explicit statement of a body of knowledge possessed by a designated language-user. This popular psychological conception of the goal of linguistic theorizing is commonly paired with a preference for idiolectal over social languages, where it seems to be in the nature of idiolects that the beliefs one holds about one's own are *ipso facto* correct. Unfortunately, it is also plausible that the correctness of a genuine belief cannot consist merely in that belief's being held. This paper considers how best to eliminate this tension.

1. The Psychological Conception of Linguistic Theories and the Independence Principle

A linguistic theory is correct exactly to the extent that it is the explicit statement of a body of linguistic knowledge possessed by a designated individual language-user. This knowledge is hypothesized as being partially responsible for the successful linguistic behaviour, the appropriate utterances and responses to others' utterances, of that designated individual.

This popular psychological conception of linguistic theories has been criticized on the grounds that *knows that* is an implausible way to construe the relation holding between an individual and the clauses of a linguistic theory ostensibly applicable to her. Objections generally take the form of isolating a supposedly essential ingredient of genuine knowledge, then claiming

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that this ingredient is absent from the relation ordinary users of language bear to linguistic theories.[1]

One such allegedly essential but absent ingredient of knowledge is the constitutive independence of correctness-conditions from holding-conditions. It is plausible that genuine belief (and hence genuine knowledge—though see section 4 below) must conform to the following principle:

The independence principle for belief

The correctness of a genuine belief cannot consist merely in its being held.

Yet such independence is worryingly missing from the relation borne by most individuals to the clauses of the linguistic theories ostensibly applicable to them. Or rather, it is arguably missing once the psychological conception is coupled, as it commonly is, with a preference for idiolectal

[1] *Consciousness*, *verbalizability*, *possession of the requisite concepts*, and *inferential promiscuity*, are four such allegedly missing and allegedly essential ingredients of knowledge. Whereas a professional linguist might reasonably be said to know, say, the clauses of a given grammar, her subject—the designated individual—arguably has no such knowledge because she is not conscious of having it, could not verbalize it, lacks many of the concepts that make up its content, or is unable to properly integrate it into the rest of her deliberative system. There is a very considerable literature on this issue, but a representative sample of the critical camp could include: Searle (1990) on consciousness; and Stich (1978), Evans (1981) and Miller (1997) on concept possession and promiscuity. Barber (1997, 1998) addresses the charge that ordinary speakers lack the concepts needed to genuinely know the clauses of a linguistic theory. Discussion bearing on the contentious feature that is the topic of the present paper, *independence*, can be found in Chomsky (1980), Wright (1989), George (1990), Higginbotham (1991), and Smith (1998).

over social languages (French, English, *etc*.). For it appears to be in the nature of idiolects that the beliefs one has about one's own are *ipso facto* correct.

The next section spells out in greater detail how it is that the psychological conception is in danger of being inconsistent with the independence principle. After rejecting a number of possible ways out of the difficulty, I end the paper by advancing a more promising defence of the psychological conception. Throughout the discussion I confine my attention specifically to referential semantic theories.

2. How the Problem Arises

According to the psychological conception of the goal of linguistic inquiry, a clause within a semantic theory, though perhaps represented as, for example:

$\forall x$ (val (x, 'is alive') iff x is alive)

is properly to be understood as embedded within a psychological claim:

Janet believes that $\forall x$ (val (x, 'is alive') iff x is alive),

where Janet, here, is a designated individual. The clause would be inappropriate if it failed to express any belief held by Janet, and in this sense we can talk of the potential for the *theory* to be mistaken. But this is yet to have established that the *subject's belief itself* could be being held erroneously by that subject. It is also yet to have established that what the belief is contending to be the case could still be the case without the belief's being held. And it is these latter two types

of mismatch whose possibility is individually sufficient and disjunctively necessary for satisfaction of the independence principle by Janet's putative belief.

The only way for Janet's belief to be mistaken qua belief of the designated individual, not just qua clause of the theory, is for it not to be the case that $\forall x$ (val (x, 'is alive') iff x is alive). Unfortunately this is not something that can be or fail to be the case *simpliciter*. We need to relativize to a language to fix the semantic properties of 'is alive'. Once we do so, mismatch looks to be perfectly possible in the full sense of allowing the subject's belief, and not merely that of the theorist, to be potentially out of step with what would be required for its truth. For suppose we embed the original clause in this second way:

Janet believes $\forall x$ (val (x, 'is alive') *in English* iff x is alive).

Although Janet's belief happens to be true, English could have been different than it is without Janet's belief being other than it is; and Janet's belief could have been other than it is without English being different than it is. The independence principle is doubly satisfied.

The language to which Janet's previously naked belief has been tied down, here, is English. But all that mattered was that it be tied down to *some* language. We thus have a choice: relativize to a social language like English, or relativize to an idiolectal language such as *Janetese*. Before considering which is the more promising way of embedding the original semantic clause in a psychological context we need some understanding of what idiolects are and of how they are to be distinguished from social languages.

An idiolect is a language, which is to say, an abstract, structured object. We can refer to languages in two quite distinct manners, each manner of referring being associated with a

distinct principle of individuation. The first manner is via a *direct description* of the grammatical properties of that language, indexed to a time if we are concerned to allow for the possibility that languages can develop (Wiggins 1998). So we might claim that English—or French, or Janet's idiolect, *etc*.—is the abstract object described by such-and-such a grammar (at a particular time). Any languages with distinct grammars (grammatical histories) will be distinct objects.

A second manner of referring to and individuating a language is via its *possessor(s).* For idiolectal languages this is simple enough. Janet's idiolect, Janetese, is the abstract object that is the value of a suitably characterized possession function, -*ese*, given Janet as argument. And in general, to be thought of as an idiolect is to be thought of as the value of some possession function given a *single individual* as argument. By contrast, to be thought of as a social language is to be thought of as the language possessed by a *collection* of people.

To be thought of as an idiolect, a language must not only be characterized as the value of a possession function given a particular individual as argument; that possession function must itself be construed individualistically. The first of the following will not do:

(*x*)*ese* = the shared language of the linguistic community to which *x* belongs.

(*x*)*ese* = the abstract object described by the theory that captures all and only *x*'s actual and potential utterances.

(*x*)*ese* = the abstract object whose properties are read off from *x*'s grammatical beliefs.

The second, behaviourist construal is idiolectal, but problematic for familiar reasons (Chomsky 1959, Fodor 1981). The third is likely to be the construal of choice for anyone sympathetic to the psychological conception presently under discussion.

The fact that there are these two distinct ways of referring to and individuating language—by description or via its possessor(s)—provides a way of reconciling two apparently competing conceptions of the goal of theory construction in linguistics. Linguistic theories can be thought of as aimed *both* at describing a language *and* at rendering explicit the linguistic knowledge of designated individuals. The goal will be to describe not just any language, but the language whose properties are read off from the propositions known by a designated individual.[2]

Having outlined the difference between idiolectal and social languages it is time to return to the question broached earlier. The independence of the truth-value of a linguistic belief from the fact of its being held was judged to be contingent on viewing that belief as being about a language. But which kind of language, social or idiolectal, is it best for us to build into the content of the belief?

I want to rehearse an argument against the first option, an argument that may tempt anyone familiar with reservations commonly voiced about social languages. The argument is unsuccessful for reasons to be acknowledged in section five, but the (dummy) argument would run as follows. The individuation conditions of social languages include socio-political factors that make them unfit for objective study.[3] So the aim of objective linguistic investigation cannot

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[2] Higginbotham (1983) and Fodor (1981) use this point to effect in rejecting (a strong version of) Platonism in linguistics. It should be borne in mind, of course, that linguists are rarely interested in the specifics of a designated individual's idiosyncratic beliefs per se, as opposed to the broader, often species-wide features of those beliefs.

[3] David Wiggins (1998) argues, against Noam Chomsky, that social languages can be given individuation conditions, albeit vague ones. Chomsky does indeed often maintain that the ordinary notion of a language is so confused that social languages cannot be given coherent individuation conditions (*e.g.* 1980, pp. 217-9). Yet his more challenging claim (see especially 1995, pp. 48-51), that nothing having the individuation conditions of a

be to offer accurate descriptions of social languages. But if the aim is to render explicit the grammatical properties of the object of Janet's beliefs *and* we were to take the object of Janet's linguistic beliefs to be a social language, then we would seem to be committed to offering a description of a social language. If they are to be about a language at all (as it seems they must), Janet's beliefs should be viewed as being about an individualistically individuated language—an idiolect—rather than a social language.

Unfortunately, if we choose to view Janet's beliefs as being about her idiolect then it is unclear how we can maintain the independence between holding-status and content required for genuine belief. For if Janet's idiolect is nothing more than that entity which is read off from the propositions making up the content of her grammatical beliefs, such as the proposition that:

$\forall x$ (val (x, 'is alive') in Janetese iff x is alive),

the result is that Janet's beliefs are *correct because they are held*. This is flatly inconsistent with the independence principle. Linguistic beliefs will be bound to correctly describe their object, but only because the object of those beliefs—the believer's idiolect—is *constituted out of* the fact that those particular beliefs are held.

It looks as though all three ways of embedding the original semantic clause in a psychological context (not relativising to any language, relativising to a social language, relativising to an idiolect) must be rejected, along with the psychological conception of semantic theories that requires some such embedding.

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social language would have a role to play in a 'naturalistic inquiry' into the phenomenon of language, goes largely unaddressed by Wiggins.

3. Routes Out of the Difficulty

Retracing the steps that led to this *cul-de-sac*, several potential avenues of escape are available to anyone sympathetic to the psychological conception:

Route one: Reject the independence principle.

Route two: Overturn the decision to eliminate social languages from the scene.

Route three: Present an alternative (but still idiolectal) construal of the possession function, so that one's idiolect is not constituted out of the beliefs one has about it.

Route four: Deny that relativization to a language need enter into the determination of a truth-value for linguistic beliefs.

I consider each proposal in turn. None is attractive in isolation, but combining aspects of the second and fourth routes leads to a suggestion that seems to point in the right direction.

4. Reject the Independence Principle (Route One)

Some may feel that, for one's own language at least, it is not possible to be mistaken. For example, to the extent that he endorses the position he labels *representationalism*, James Higginbotham holds that:

> competence...involv[es] an epistemic relation between a person and the principles *that determine her language*. In this setting, a person knows (or in Chomsky's neutral

> substitute "cognizes") certain general principles... . [T]he properties of my language are... *just what I represent them to be*. (1991, pp. 556-7, italics added.)

Higginbotham allows that we can be mistaken when we make *judgements about* whether we know these general principles, since although 'knowledge of one's own mental states' is 'in practice authoritative', it can break down in principle (pp. 556-7). But he is tentatively committed to the position that the *first-order* knowledge-states are constitutive of their own correctness.

The pressing difficulty with this proposal is that it requires an exception to be made to an otherwise plausible constraint on beliefs, solely in the case of linguistic beliefs. That the independence principle is plausible can be maintained on two grounds: a general argument in its favour, and a lack of any significant counterexamples in other domains.

The general argument is that a distinction needs to be maintained between the *content* of a belief, that which the belief is about, to be interpreted in terms of the conditions for that belief to be a correctly held belief, and the *holding* of that belief, the having of a certain attitude towards this content. A belief whose correctness conditions were caught up in the fact of its being held, that 'carr[ied] with it the guarantee of its own success',[4] would lack an independent subject matter. It is the having of an independent subject matter that is so difficult to reconcile with the supposition that having a belief about one's own idiolect appears to be enough to secure the truth of that belief (see Smith 1998). A strong position would be that a state that had no independent topic, that was not about anything, could not be a belief state at all. But even this

[4] Jane Heal (1989), p. 18. Heal's *Principle Of Minimal Epistemological Independence* is advanced as a constraint on *realist* judgement rather than on judgement *per se*.

strong position were let go so that beliefs with no independent subject matter were admitted as intelligible, it would surely be preferable if semantic beliefs could be shown not to be in the category of lacking an independent subject matter.

Nor is the principle susceptible to easy counterexample in a way that would render plausible the case for an exception's being made in the instance of linguistic beliefs. This is not to deny the existence of interesting candidates. *Cogito* is an infamous example, and there are other cases such as my (self-referential) belief that this is a belief. But on the one hand, these appear to be sufficiently *sui generis* that they can excusably be set aside for the present discussion; and on the other, *cogito* is held to be problematic *precisely because* it is so hard to explain how to secure its objectivity when thinking it seems to secure its truth. A candidate of a different type is the indexically true belief that I am here now. This, however, is no counterexample since I would still be here now even if I were not thinking it, whereas $\forall x$ (val (x, 'is alive') in Janetese iff x is alive) appears to require for its truth that Janet believe it.

For these reasons, simply overriding the independence principle in the linguistic case should be a move of last resort. The same could be said of a strategy made popular by a leading proponent of the psychological conception, a strategy with strong affinities to route one. Noam Chomsky has frequently urged that we override objections to that conception if they rely on aprioristic strictures concerning what is to count as genuine knowledge (1980, 1986). He suggests dropping the expression 'knows' in favour of a specially introduced term-of-art, 'cognizes', to pick out the relation ordinary speakers bear to the principles of their language—typically adding that, because it is both empirically motivated and in some ways closer to ordinary usage, the notion thus picked out is more worthy of the label 'knows' than is the notion invoked by many philosophers (1980, pp. 69-70, 90). This manoeuvre provides valuable leeway

when negotiating objections that cite an allegedly essential but allegedly missing feature of knowledge—*e.g.* the constitutive independence of correctness-conditions from holding-conditions. Indeed, Chomsky and others may wish to allow that "knowledge"/cognition of a grammar may not even imply belief (1980, p. 91), let alone belief of a kind that must respect the independence principle.

There is much that could be and has been said about the general strategy (see *e.g.* George 1989, Searle 1990, Matthews 1991, Dwyer & Pietroski 1996). All I want to maintain here is that we should be reluctant to embrace it in the current case. To begin, the absence of a knowledge-to-belief implication does not get to the heart of the issue. Even if we are happy with knowledge without belief, anyone appealing to a rump notion of *representation* will be confronted with a reformulated version of the independence principle, governing representation instead of belief: The obtaining of what is represented cannot be constituted out of the fact that it is represented. Chomsky often seems prepared to go further and drop the connotation the term 'representation' has of a second relatum: '"representation" is not to be understood relationally, as "representation of"' (1995, p. 53). In this case a reformulated independence principle would be irrelevant since it would be exploiting a quite different usage of 'represents'. The reason for being hesitant about following Chomsky in his usage is not so much that it is terminologically deviant as that it is liable to render the connection between hypothesis and explanatory paradigm unhelpfully opaque (see Rey, forthcoming). An easy answer to the question of which explanatory paradigm the hypothesis of representational structures takes place within—*viz.* some version of the standard computationalist-representationalist paradigm—is jeopardized. (Equally, abandoning 'belief' for

a term-of-art puts any appeal to the paradigm of intentional explanation out of reach.) Though inconclusive, this consequence gives us reason enough to look elsewhere for a solution.[5]

5. A Role for Social Languages (Route Two)

The suggestion that the content of Janet's linguistic beliefs be indexed to English was dismissed earlier on the grounds that it trades on a bankrupt ontology of social languages by making their description a goal of linguistic inquiry. But on reflection, though it introduces social languages into *Janet's* ontology, this suggestion does not introduce them into the *theorist's* ontology. To assume otherwise is comparable to assuming that anthropologists must believe in tree-magic (a point also made by Pateman 1987, p. 73). It is one thing for a theorist to propose studying Janet's beliefs about a social language, quite another for her to propose studying social languages themselves. Social languages could be integrated into the psychological conception as intentional objects, thereby providing the requisite distance between the content of Janet's beliefs and the fact of their being held.

This sees off the earlier reservation about viewing social languages as the standard against which Janet's beliefs can be measured as correct or incorrect, but a further difficulty remains. The beliefs that *directly* inform speakers' utterances and audiences' interpretations of those utterances are simply not beliefs about a social language. Beliefs of the latter kind may serve at most to provide defeasible evidence for the beliefs that most directly inform utterance and interpretation. This indirect role will be fully acknowledged in the final account I offer of how to embed the clauses of a semantic theory within a psychological account of linguistic

[5] In section 9 below I offer a narrower reading of Chomsky's claim about representation, with which I am in greater sympathy.

activity. But my purpose in this section is limited to defending the claim just announced: that the linguistic beliefs most immediately informing utterance production and utterance interpretation are not beliefs about a social language, so still need to be treated. The agenda for achieving this purpose: a phenomenon, an explanation of that phenomenon, and from that explanation an argument to the desired conclusion. First the phenomenon.

Wittgenstein challenged his readers to try uttering 'It's cold here' while meaning that it's warm here (1958, I: 510). He is surely right to imply that in ordinary circumstances this is difficult. But he does not appear to notice how easy it would be to utter 'It's cold here' and mean that it's warm here given evidence that one's intended audience would interpret the utterance as meaning that (or, as being true iff) it's warm here. In such a situation the exact inversion of the challenge emerges: to try uttering 'It's cold here' with a view to performing an action that means (is true iff) it's cold here. The phenomenon illustrated by the difficulty of meeting these challenges (Wittgenstein's original one and, more especially, its inversion) is that our ability to perform an utterance with particular truth-conditions is sensitive not to our beliefs about English or any other social language, but to the beliefs we have concerning the truth-conditions our intended audience will attach to that utterance.

That this is a genuine phenomenon is open to question. Someone who utters 'It's cold in here' has, it could be claimed, *ipso facto* performed an action that is true iff it's cold in here. After all, this is what the utterance means in English, the only salient social language in this context. This will be so no matter what her beliefs are concerning how the utterance will be interpreted.

I want to insist that there is a genuine phenomenon here. *Something* gets easier when one believes one's intended audience would place the deviant interpretation on one's mouthing of

‘It’s cold here’, and something else gets harder. What is being challenged by the remark in the previous paragraph is a decision over how to describe this phenomenon (as the sensitivity of our ability to perform an utterance with particular truth-conditions to our beliefs about how that utterance will be interpreted rather than to the dictates of a social language). But as for other phenomena, how one describes what is going on can be theoretically committed to some degree, especially if that theoretically committed description allows it to be explained. I am going to continue to hold that what gets easier is a capacity to perform an utterance that is true iff it’s warm here, and that what gets harder is a capacity to perform an utterance that is true iff it’s cold here. I deny that this amounts to being proprietorial with the expressions ‘means that’ or ‘is true iff’, but recognize that in order to sustain this denial I need to offer an account of why people are prone to make the contrary judgement, that the truth conditions of one’s utterances are in thrall to the salient social language. This I shall do shortly. In the meantime, since there is undeniably a phenomenon, and since I have undertaken to offer a defence of my preferred description of it, I move now to the second agenda item: an explanation of the phenomenon thus described.

Utterances are intentional actions, subject to the same psychological constraints as intentional actions more generally. First, a *confidence constraint* on intentional action makes it impossible to form an intention to do *X* in the absence of an expectation that acting on that intention is likely to result in one’s *X*ing.[6] Second, an *involuntarism condition* on belief formation means that only evidential reasons can be effective in generating beliefs; pragmatic

[6] For example, most of us cannot form the intention to leap to the moon. The exact formulation of the confidence constraint is controversial, as is the claim that there is any true formulation. I shall assume that some formulation is both correct and strong enough for present purposes.

reasons simply do not suffice, even if sometimes we wish they did.[7] Because of this involuntarist constraint on belief formation, willful formation of expectations that would suffice for satisfaction of the confidence constraint is impossible. The net result is that one cannot form intentions merely out of a wish to do so.

These two general facts about intentional action can be used to explain the phenomenon extracted from Wittgenstein's challenge and its inversion. If, as is normally the case, one lacks an evidential reason to believe that its intended audience would interpret a mouthing of 'It's cold here' as being true iff it's warm here, one cannot even intend in so mouthing to perform an action that will be so interpreted. Given a bridging premise (below), this accounts for why it is impossible to utter this sentence with these truth-conditions, which was one half of the thing to be explained. Conversely, when one believes that one will be interpreted in the deviant way, it becomes impossible to intend to be interpreted in the standard way. Given the same bridging premise, this accounts for the other half of the explanandum. The bridging premise is that we identify an utterance's truth-conditions with the truth-conditions the utterer intends it to be recognized as having by the intended audience.[8]

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[7] For example, no massive financial incentive to form a belief for which there is massively contrary evidence will suffice to enable one to have the belief. Again, the involuntarist constraint fails to command universal acceptance in any particular formulation.

[8] This explanation—in both the bridging premise and the appeal to the constraint on intention formation—draws on suggestions found in papers by Davidson (see 1986, p. 439, 1990, p. 310, 1992, pp. 258-9). I defend the bridging premise in Barber (forthcoming), where I also qualify it in ways that are required for it to be true in view of the intensionality of 'intends that', but irrelevant in the present context. The result is: An action U is true-iff-$p \Leftrightarrow \Xi q$ ((U is performed with the intention that its intended audience recognize it as true-iff-q) & (q iff p)). ('Ξ' is a substitutionally interpreted existential quantifier ranging over sentences in the metalanguage; '∃' would do if

Defending this bridging premise, and hence the explanation, would also amount to keeping an earlier promise to deal with the contrary intuition that truth-conditions depend not on intentions but on the salient social language. This intuition is illustrated in the judgement that to have uttered 'Ich bin ein Berliner', as opposed to 'Ich bin Berliner', is, Kennedy's intentions notwithstanding, to have performed an action that is true iff one is a jam-doughnut of a kind special to Berlin.[9] Examples like this make plausible the thought that, where there is a clash, one's intentions when mouthing a sentence are trumped by the truth conditions of expressions in the salient social language or dialect.

Intuitions of this kind are best accommodated by seeing them as a reflection of a further constraint on what one can mean—additional that is, to the domain general psychological constraints already mentioned as governing utterances qua intentional actions. This third constraint commands us not to mean that *p* by uttering *S* (as opposed to using some distinct expression) unless doing so is sanctioned by community wide norms. These norms are codified in the form of 'facts about English'. When we judge a given utterance of 'It's cold here' always to be true iff it's cold here, trumping the utterer's intention to be interpreted differently, we are expressing our commitment to a norm that permits the use of this phonological form in, but only in, the performance of actions that have these truth-conditions. And when we judge an utterance

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objectual quantification over propositions were acceptable; 'iff' can be read at any strength at all, so long as it is read at the same strength on both occurrences.)

[9] The facts are less elegant than the myth that is assumed (for the sake of the example) in the text. The absence of the indefinite article is felt by native speakers to require the *spiritual-resident* reading, whereas its presence is compatible with either reading.

of ‘It’s cold here’ to be true *in English* if it’s cold here, we are describing the code without necessarily committing to the norms contained in it.

Thus understood, ‘“It’s cold here” is true iff it’s cold here’ gives voice to a norm that, unlike the domain-general psychological constraints, can be and regularly is violated. It *is* possible to perform an utterance with the phonological form of ‘It’s cold in here’, without that utterance being true iff it’s cold in here. Any assertion that this is not possible is most charitably re-interpreted as an expression of rebuke for the use of an unlicensed vehicle of expression. Likewise, Kennedy’s misdemeanour was not that on an historically poignant occasion he performed an action that was true iff he was a jam-doughnut, for he did no such thing. His misdemeanour, rather, was to have performed an action that was true iff he was a spiritual resident of Berlin, using an unlicensed (and coincidentally humorous) vehicle in that performance.

I call these biconditionals ‘norms’, and as such they would seem to have an obvious rationale. But it needs to be acknowledged that there is something potentially misleading about this way of putting it. At the very least these are self-maintaining norms. Since we expect others to interpret us in accordance with the salient norm, the confidence constraint and the involuntarist principle together make it impossible for us to intend to use anything other than particular vehicles of expression (at least in typical circumstances). For this reason there will rarely be any role in language-use for convention or agreement, even of an implicit nature.[10]

Few would claim that semanticists ought to have as their goal the explicit and exhaustive description of the norms (as I shall continue to call them) of English. Striving to achieve such a

[10] Shared genetic endowment will add to the pressure towards convergence, again without requiring any convention. See Laurence (1996) on the redundancy and implausibility of Lewis-style conventions.

goal could be intended either as an endorsement of the norm or as a description of it, and neither would seem to serve much purpose. It seems extremely unlikely that any real moral, political, legal, or linguistic gain would be had from an endorsement. And there is enough variation in what people take the norms governing proper usage to be that sooner or later any attempt to characterize these norms will betray a descriptive bias. Still, even if semanticists should not take themselves to be concerned with providing a recursive characterisation of the semantic properties of English, perhaps they should be concerned with rendering explicit aspects of a designated speaker's *beliefs about* English. That is the present ('route two') proposal, and it is finally time to bring out the lacuna in that suggestion.

If the explanation offered of the phenomenon linked to Wittgenstein's challenge is correct then the beliefs that serve to constrain the intention underlying a projected utterance include beliefs about how the intended audience will interpret that utterance. Suppose we accept that beliefs about the norm codified as a fact about English or French (e.g. that one should mouth 'la neige est blanche' only when performing an action that is true iff snow is white) figure as defeasible evidence for the belief about how one's audience will interpret one's utterance. Still, it is this latter belief and not the belief about French *per se* that enters most directly into the formation of the intention, and so which is most directly implicated both in the explanation of linguistic performance and in the determination of truth-conditions. Even if we do draw on beliefs about a social language, there are other beliefs that need to be accommodated whose content is devoid of any mention of social languages. Showing this was what the present section had as its principal goal.

6. Alternative Construals of the Possession Function (Route Three)

Alexander George is reluctant to accept any attempt to explain the possibility of linguistic error that makes essential appeal to social languages. Instead, he makes a distinction between an individual's idiolect and this same individual's *beliefs about* that idiolect. He calls these beliefs the individual's *grammar*. 'A speaker will be in error if his grammar does not agree with (or generate) his idiolect' (1990, pp. 291-2).

For there to be such disagreement, individuals must have *independent* idiolects, that is, languages the nature of which is independent of the beliefs the individual has of that nature. To generate this independence, George pursues a version of route three, denying that what I am calling the possession function needs to be construed as it was earlier. The properties of an idiolect, for George, are not simply read off from ('generated by') its possessor's linguistic beliefs. Recognising that he owes an alternative account of how properly to construe the possession function, George makes a positive proposal amounting to the following:[11]

(*x*)*ese* = the abstract object read off from the considered beliefs *x* would adopt after observation of and communication with others in *x*'s extended linguistic community

[11] '[A] speaker's idiolect...is not to be identified with the language generated by the speaker's grammar, for otherwise there would be no accounting for error. Nor is it to be identified with some prior notion of communal [*i.e.* social] language[.] Part of the story is that the identity of one's idiolect is sensitive to considered changes to one's linguistic beliefs that one would make as a result of communication with others or observation of them.' (1990, p. 292)

He illustrates using a popular example. Upon discovering that, say, dictionary writers take 'livid' to refer to a shade not of red but of white, most would realign their beliefs accordingly. This shows that in their idiolects, 'livid' refers to a shade of white, even if in their grammar it refers to a shade of red. In keeping with another of his examples, the proper adjectival form of 'idiolect' in my idiolect would be 'idiolectical' rather than as per the current title of this paper if there are some 'as yet unrealised, and perhaps never to be realised, situations in part determin[ative of] the identity of' my idiolect in which I would be 'persuade[d] to revise [my] linguistic beliefs' about the proper adjectival form, perhaps out of respect for prestige, perhaps out of respect for reasoned argument.[12]

Without asking us (theorists) to assume there is any fact of the matter about what 'livid' *really* means, or to make a judgement as to the *proper* adjectival form of 'idiolect', George has provided a nice account of the possibility of one kind of error. Language-users frequently stand corrected upon being apprized of further information or offered novel etymological or other arguments, and sense that they 'got it wrong before'. This is all well catered for by the supposition that they aim to have their linguistic beliefs match those they treat as figures of linguistic authority.[13]

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[12] George (1990), pp. 292, 292 n. 37. I have also heard a spontaneous use of 'idiolectic'. Both prestige and reasoned argument guided my eventual decision. Linguists tend to use 'idiolectal' because of the parallel with the already widely established 'dialectal' ('dialectical' having been taken already by Socrates and then Marx). The OED has an entry for 'idiolectal' only.

[13] George is explicitly concerned with this 'phenomenology' of error, as he describes the tendency we have to stand corrected. He makes no mention of the need to conform to any equivalent of the independence principle. Likewise, his reservations about appealing to social languages are not my own, but spring from a desire for theoretical parsimony (p. 291, though see also p. 292, n. 38).

But this supposition fails to provide a plausible account of the content of the beliefs that immediately inform either the intention to perform an utterance, or the interpretation of that utterance. For this reason, George cannot be said to be providing an account of how *these* beliefs could be in error. We do not normally aim to express ourselves in the language described by the beliefs we would have after reflection on counterfactual communication with and observation of others in our community. We express ourselves, rather, in accordance with how we expect our *intended audience* to interpret us, even if that audience is ill-informed about the norms of the social language. The only authority figures in the cauldron of communication are our interlocutors, and their only relevant 'appealing personal attribute' (*pace* 1990, p. 292, n. 37) is that we want them to interpret our utterance in a particular way or we want to figure out what they are attempting to get us or someone else to recognize them as meaning by their utterances.

At this point a different solution to our problem is calling out for consideration. Why not say that the utterer's belief is aimed at capturing properties of the *intended audience's* idiolect and that an interpreter's belief is aimed at capturing properties of the *utterer's* idiolect? A flawed but educational proto-version of this idea would hold that Janet aims to have her linguistic beliefs match those of her intended audience in content (just as any interpreter will aspire to capture in her beliefs the content of Janet's beliefs). That is, the proper embedding would be:

Janet believes that *IA* believes that 'is alive' is satisfied by and only by living things,

letting '*IA*' be the name of the intended audience. This will not do, since *IA* can no more have bare belief than can Janet. Assuming Janet realizes this, we need:

Janet believes that *IA* believes that Janet believes that 'is alive' is satisfied by and only by living things.

But this is merely the first step of a regress. The only promise of closure lies in imposing some arbitrary limit on how far we need to go in telescopically analysing the content of Janet's belief.

That is why this proto-version is flawed. It is educational because it raises a concern about the suggestion that an utterer's belief aims to capture properties of the intended audience's idiolect. Perhaps the regress just seen is also present inside the appeal to an interlocutor's idiolect, in a way that is merely more readily apparent in the proto-version. The proposal is to embed the semantic clause thus:

Janet believes that 'is alive' is satisfied in *IA*-ese by and only by living things.

'*IA*-ese', here, is the abstract structure read off from *IA*'s beliefs. But since the relevant one among *IA*'s belief will be a belief about Janetese, Janet's belief, above, will be equivalent to:

Janet believes that *IA* believes that 'is alive' is satisfied in Janetese by and only by living things.

Given our understanding of the term 'Janetese', this in turn amounts to:

Janet believes that *IA* believes that Janet believes that 'is alive' is satisfied in *IA*-ese by and only by living things.

As suspected, a regress lay hidden within the term '*IA*-ese' waiting to uncoil.

7. No Languages (Route Four)

The routes considered so far have failed to incorporate a proper perspective on the role played by linguistic beliefs in the cauldron of communication. Speakers and hearers are not immediately informed by beliefs about others' social languages or idiolects, or about the content of beliefs they themselves would adopt under certain counterfactual conditions. So what *is* the exact content of these beliefs? One possibility is that they are not beliefs about a language at all. The challenge will be to say how semantic beliefs could be correct or incorrect other than relative to some language.[14]

The most promising way to develop this suggestion is once again to take seriously the fact that utterances are intentional actions, albeit actions that are unusual in respect of having truth-conditions. Certain beliefs inform the utterer in the formation of the intention out of which such actions are performed; certain other beliefs inform her audience in the assignment of truth-conditions to the resulting action. It is these beliefs that we are interested in. The suggestion being canvassed is that an explicit representation of the content of these beliefs will contain no mention of the utterer's idiolect, of the intended audience's idiolect, or of either of their social languages.

[14] David Wiggins (1998, pp. 522-3) writes: '[I]f we omit from the account of linguistic communication all mention of the language in which speech is conducted, if we take this piece from out of our philosophy of language, then [no] locus remain for judgements by speakers or theorist of error/ineptness/aptness/excellence in an utterance'.

Before proceeding to the details, I want to stave off an argument for the view that these beliefs *must* be about a language. This argument appeals to yet another principle governing intentional actions, one that echoes the independence principle for belief. It asserts that an acted-upon intention, like a belief, 'cannot carry with it the guarantee of its own success':

Independence principle for intentional action

For any action-type *X*, the conditions on an action-token's being an *X*ing extend beyond its being performed out of an intention to *X*.

For example, a lullaby sung with the intention of sending its audience to sleep may or may not succeed in doing so, but if it does so this fact will not consist in its having been performed out of an intention to do so.

If the generalisation is correct, then there must be some constitutive gap between my performing an action intending it to have particular truth-conditions, and that action's in fact having those truth-conditions. What is the extra element required? Upon being confronted with this question there is an almost overwhelming temptation to suppose that in order to succeed in, say, performing an action that is true iff Elvis is alive, the more that is required over and above an intention to do so is that one be participating successfully in the activity we call speaking a language. After all, one could mouth 'Elver is a bube', intending to perform an action that is true iff Elvis is alive, but one would not thereby have done so, because 'Elver is a bube' does not mean that in English.

By extension, respecting the independence principle for intentional action commits us to viewing linguistic beliefs as beliefs about a language. For if, as just implied, an action has truth-

conditions only relative to a given language, then any action intended to have particular truth-conditions had better be informed by beliefs about that language. Likewise, the content of beliefs guiding interpretation should contain some mention of the language to which the utterance belongs. Of course, we could just pretend to ignore the independence principle for intentional action, but given the echo found within it of the original independence principle for belief, any resulting progress would be suspect.

This argument against the current proposal is predicated on a mistaken assumption, the assumption that for an utterance to have truth-conditions that vary with the utterer's intention (in a way that cannot be overridden by any salient language), the relevant intention must be the intention to perform an utterance with particular truth-conditions. But if we suppose instead that the relevant intention is the intention to be *recognized as* performing an utterance with particular truth-conditions, we can avoid violating the independence principle for intentional action. For one can easily intend to be recognized as performing an action with particular truth-conditions, act on that intention, and fail in so acting to satisfy that intention. This failure need not be thought of as getting it wrong relative to a language. Instead, the failure is simply a failure to be recognized by one's intended audience as doing what one intended oneself to be recognized as doing. The supposition that this *is* the proper way to construe the intention guiding an utterance is quite plausible. There seems little to be gained and much to be lost by positing a second intention in normal performance, one of intending to perform an action having particular truth-conditions, in addition to the intention to be recognized as performing an action with given truth-conditions.[15]

[15] Davidson (1992) rightly characterizes the relevant intention as being 'to have a certain effect on a specific hearer', including that of 'assign[ing] certain truth conditions to... the speaker's... utterance' (p. 258). The

Given this proper understanding of the content of the relevant intention, what are the beliefs informing this whole performance, and are they compatible with the independence principle for belief? From the utterer's perspective, the belief would have something approaching the following general form, which contains no mention of a language, idiolectal or social:

> Were I to perform an action satisfying the condition for being a mouthing of such-and-such phonological form, my intended audience will be led to believe that I have performed an action with such-and-such truth-conditions.

For example, I believe that if I were to mouth 'Elvis is alive', my intended audience would believe that this action would be true were Elvis alive, untrue otherwise. This is clearly a belief that could be mistaken.

From an interpreter's perspective (perhaps though not necessarily that of the intended audience) the pertinent belief would be that the utterer has just performed an action with such-and-such truth-conditions. Is the independence principle for belief satisfied here? Are an interpreter's beliefs error-prone in the manner desired? They certainly would be if they could be

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temptation to treat the intention as being to conform to some standard usage, he goes on, springs from the fact that 'under usual circumstances a speaker knows he is most apt to be understood if he speaks as his listeners would, and so he will intend to speak as he thinks they would' (p. 261). The present route-four account is indebted not only to Davidson's later work, but to Pietroski (1994), especially the section entitled 'In search of an L'. One way in which I diverge from both is in accepting the need for beliefs about a social language to arrive at a default interpretation (see below). Also, Davidson has been consistently skeptical about linguistic knowledge (e.g. 1990, p. 312).

viewed as embodying beliefs about the utterer's intentions; and luckily this perspective is made available by the 'bridging premise' discussed in section five:

> An utterance has such-and-such truth-conditions iff it was performed with the intention that its intended audience recognize it as having those truth-conditions. [16]

Putative counterexamples to this biconditional were argued to emerge from conflation of the truth-conditions an utterance *in fact* has, with the truth-conditions it *ought* to have in view of its phonological form and some background set of assumed norms.

Route four thus described forms the core of the approach I wish to advance as correct, but it has an obvious shortcoming. Setting aside inborn beliefs, any belief attribution must be compatible with the believer's coming to have that belief. Taking the case just of the utterer's belief, we need to supplement this route-four account in two ways. First, we come to have our beliefs about how our sentential assertions will be interpreted on the basis of our beliefs about how the sub-sentential components of those assertions will be interpreted. What is the content of these latter beliefs? Second, we are frequently able to successfully interpret and be interpreted by total strangers. For this to be so, the beliefs they and we use must be correct. And the only way of

[16] See note 8 above for a qualification to this. Several people have also suggested that the biconditional leaves no space for soliloquy, or for 'thinking verbally'. This concern is addressed, I believe, by viewing soliloquy as a case of talking to oneself. One is one's own intended audience. There are, no doubt, cognitive advantages to be had from expressing one's thoughts in a verbal form. Other cases can be thought of as involving talking to a person who is not in fact present, as when rehearsing for a court appearance or addressing posterity. See Schiffer (1972), section 3.4 for discussion.

accounting for how we settle on the correct beliefs would seem to be that we have beliefs *about a language*, treating strangers' utterances as couched within that language. In the next section I attempt to supplement the route-four account in the two ways just indicated.

8. How We Come to Have the Right Beliefs

It is our beliefs about the significance of sub-sentential expressions and of concatenation that explain how we come to have the beliefs we do about the significance of utterances of whole sentences. So far, these latter beliefs are the only ones whose content has been addressed. The account needs to be somehow extended to include beliefs corresponding to the clauses of a semantic theory rather than to its whole-sentence theorems alone, along the lines of:

> ***For sub-sentential expressions (illustration)***
>
> Were I to mouth the expression 'is alive' in the context of the upcoming utterance, my intended audience would believe that mouthing to be satisfied by and only by living things.
>
> ***For concatenation (illustration)***
>
> Were I to mouth a concatenation of an *NP* with a *VP* in the context of the upcoming utterance, my intended audience would believe that mouthing to be true iff the referent of the *NP*-mouthing satisfies the *VP*-mouthing.

Parallel accounts for an interpreter rather than for the utterer would be easy to construct. In each case, these beliefs are error-prone, as desired.

In normal circumstances we arrive at beliefs about the truth-conditional significance of an utterance performed by (to take the hardest case) a stranger only through having beliefs about a social language. We treat the expressions involved in the utterance as belonging to that language, and interpret accordingly unless given particular reason to think some deviant interpretation would be appropriate. That is, we typically develop the beliefs we deploy in interpreting utterances—beliefs whose content is free of any mention of languages—out of prior default beliefs about a language.

In the other direction, arriving at a belief that would typically be used to communicate with a stranger is the result of combining two beliefs, perhaps resembling (1) and (2) below. These are comparable to a pair of equations with a shared variable ('in English'), solved to yield a third belief that lacks the variable. The latter belief then informs an intention to utter:

(1) The expression 'is alive' is satisfied in English by and only by living things.

(2) My intended audience is familiar with and will exploit the relevant fragments of English in interpreting any expressions mouthed within the context of the utterance I am about to produce.

(3) Were I to mouth the expression 'is alive' in the context of the upcoming utterance, my intended audience would believe that mouthing to be satisfied by and only by living things.

The first belief is about a norm governing which vehicle of expression is appropriate (or perhaps merely a belief about common usage) in a population; the second is a belief that my audience is familiar with the norm and will treat me as conforming to it; the third is an inferred belief about

how my utterance will be interpreted. I have already indicated how the third belief satisfies the independence principle for belief. But because they are about a social language, the first and second are also capable of being held in error, as was allowed in the discussion of route two.

9. Conclusion

I have sought to deal with the specific problem of reconciling the independence principle with a psychological conception of the status of linguistics. The two-tier solution offered distinguishes beliefs about a social language (capable of being mistaken but not used directly to interpret others' utterance or to inform an intention to perform an utterance) from beliefs that enter directly into utterance interpretation and utterance intention-formation (not about a language at all, but capable of being mistaken nonetheless). I shall close by drawing out some implications this solution has for the notion of an idiolect and for our knowledge of our own idiolects.

An idiolect, it turns out, should not be thought of as something the person whose idiolect it is has beliefs *about*. The properties of a person's idiolect will, it is true, be *read off* from her beliefs. Suppose Janet believes that English has a certain property (*e.g.* that in it, 'is alive' is satisfied by and only by living things); and she also believes that her immediate interlocutor will take her upcoming mouthing of 'is alive' to be satisfied by and only by living things. From either of these beliefs we can abstract away and talk of an idiolect of Janet's as having the property that, in it, 'is alive' is satisfied by living things. However, in neither case would it be correct to say that Janet's belief is about her idiolect. (Actually, it should also be obvious that people don't have idiolects in the sense of single structures that can be read off from the totality of their beliefs. The most we can reasonably expect are stable patterns in their linguistic beliefs, allowing a single idiolect to be abstracted as an interesting idealisation.)

By the same reasoning it is wrong, on my view, to say with Higginbotham that 'the properties of my language are... just what I represent them to be' (1991, cited earlier). Or at least, this is wrong if one reads it as saying that something, the subject's idiolect, is *represented as having* certain properties that it *ipso facto* does have. Better would be to say that the properties of a subject's idiolect are just those properties that are *read off* from the subject's representations, where these representations are not representations *of* the idiolect as having those properties. Only on this reading is it fair to say that the idiolect is 'represented'. (This, coincidentally, suggests a narrower and more agreeable reading of the passage already quoted from Chomsky 1995, p. 53: '"representation" is not to be understood relationally, as "representation of"'.)

Weakening the key relation between a linguistic belief and an idiolect (from the former being about the latter, to the latter's being read off from the former) helps to demystify the relation between belief and knowledge in this context. Chomsky and Higginbotham talk of the distinction between belief and knowledge as collapsing, or else as being trivial (Chomsky 1972, p. 169n; Higginbotham 1991, p. 556). This gives the false impression that there is some special sort of linguistic belief, to have which is to have a true belief, so that 'in language, how you represent things is how they are' (Higginbotham 1991, p. 556). This impression can be avoided so long as one understands the claim being made as follows: it makes no difference to the end result of a process of reading off an idiolect from a linguistic belief that one is reading off from a true rather than a false belief. There will be no such thing as idiolectal error, or for that matter idiolectal accuracy, since the relevant beliefs are not beliefs *about* an idiolect, and the relevant representations are not representations *of* an idiolect.

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