

# Meaning, Context, and Background

Christian Beyer

It is widely held that (truth-conditional) meaning is context-dependent. According to John Searle's radical version of contextualism, the very notion of meaning "is only applicable relative to a set of [...] background assumptions" (Searle 1978, p. 207), or background know-how. In earlier work, I have developed a (moderately externalist) "neo-Husserlian" account of the context-dependence of meaning and intentional content, based on Husserl's semantics of indexicals. Starting from this semantics, which strongly resembles today's mainstream semantics (section 2) I describe the (radical) contextualist challenge that mainstream semantics and pragmatics face in view of the (re-)discovery of what Searle calls the background of meaning (section 3). Following this, and drawing upon both my own neo-Husserlian account and ideas from Emma Borg, Gareth Evans and Timothy Williamson, I sketch a strategy for meeting this challenge (section 4) and draw a social-epistemological picture that allows us to characterize meaning and content in a way that takes account of contextualist insights yet makes it necessary to tone down Searle's "hypothesis of the Background" (section 5).

## Keywords

Background hypothesis | Borg | Content | Context | Contextualism | Evans | Externalism | Husserl | Intentionality | Interpretation | Knowledge | Meaning | Minimalism | Reference | Searle | Williamson

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## 1 Introduction

"Meaning" is a popular term in philosophical slogans. Meaning is said to be normative; not to be in the head. The notion of meaning is (nevertheless) said to be the key to the notion of intentional content, to only be applicable relative to a set of background assumptions, and meaning is said to be context-dependent. These slogans are not unrelated, and all of them have a reading, I suppose, in which they are true. Here I shall mainly focus on the last two slogans, regarding background and context. My main question will be twofold:

1. In which sense, and to which extent, can the meaning of assertive utterances be said to be context-dependent?

2. Does this context-dependence have an impact on the validity of Searle's Background Hypothesis, which states that the intentional experiences expressed by assertive utterances, and bearing their respective meaning, and the mental acts of grasping this meaning, both require a non-intentional background on the part of the speaker/hearer, relative to which the truth-conditional content and the satisfaction conditions of the relevant experience are determined?

The upshot will be that (1) whilst there may be expressions lacking the context-sensitivity that many expressions (namely, the indexicals) possess in virtue of their conventional linguistic

meaning, there is a sense (to be explained in terms of the background) in which context-dependence is ubiquitous; but that (2) this context-dependence does not prevent competent language users who lack the sort of individual background in terms of which this particular context-dependence can be defined (the “consumers”) from grasping the literal truth-conditional meaning (the semantic content) which an assertive utterance expresses on a given occasion.

## 2 Three levels of meaning

An early proponent of the view that meaning is context-dependent is Husserl. His thought on meaning, as manifested in his first major work [Logical Investigations](#), starts out from the problem of what it is for a linguistic expression, as used by a speaker or (scientific) author, to function as a meaningful unit.<sup>1</sup>

Husserl’s approach is to study the units of *consciousness* that the respective speaker deliberately presents herself as having—that she “intimates” or “gives voice to”—when expressing the meaning in question. This is what Searle refers to as the condition of sincerity of the relevant speech act ([Searle 1983](#), pp. 9-10). These units of consciousness Husserl labels INTENTIONAL EXPERIENCES or ACTS, since they always represent something—thus exhibiting what Brentano called intentionality. They are “about”, or “as of,” something. For instance, if you claim “One of my goals is to defend contextualism,” you give voice to a judgment or belief-state to the effect that defending contextualism is among your goals. This judgment is intentional, in that it represents a state of affairs, namely your having a particular goal; it is “about” that state of affairs, even if the latter does not exist (i.e., obtain) because you do not have that goal. Now it is the content of this judgment (which may be empty or unfulfilled, i.e., made in the absence of a corresponding intuition, such as a corresponding perception) that a hearer has to know in order to understand your utterance, i.e., to grasp its literal meaning. Thus, the (unfulfilled) judgment functions as the “meaning-

bestowing” or “meaning conferring act” ([Husserl 2001](#), p. 192) regarding the sentence uttered. This act is given voice to, or intimated, “in the narrow sense” ([Husserl 2001](#), p. 189)—it is the condition of sincerity of the speech act. However, in the present example (“One of my goals is to defend contextualism”) the speaker also deliberately presents herself as someone who wants to defend contextualism; after all, she explicitly ascribes that intention to herself. This latter act (the intention in question) is given voice to “in the broader sense” only ([Husserl 2001](#), p. 189), as it fails to be the meaning-bestowing act regarding the sentence uttered and thus to be given voice to in the narrow sense. In other words, the speaker intentionally presents herself as performing or undergoing that act, but if the hearer does not recognize that intention he does not *thereby* fail to grasp the literal truth-conditional meaning of the utterance. Again, if you assert “This is a blooming tree,” you give voice, in the narrow sense, to a demonstrative judgment; but you also present yourself as perceiving (or having perceived) something as a blooming tree, where the act of perception is given voice to in the broader sense. This perceptual act verifies the unfulfilled judgment by intuitively “fulfilling” it ([Husserl 2001](#), p. 192). Since the meaning-bestowing act finds its aim, so to speak, in this intuitive fulfilment, Husserl also refers to it as the corresponding “meaning intention” ([Husserl 2001](#), p. 192). Since any meaning intention aims at its intuitive fulfilment, every meaningful utterance can in principle be made to give voice (in the broader sense) to such an act of fulfilment, provided its literal meaning is not evidently inconsistent. In sections 3 and 4 I shall argue that only the group of speakers capable of both making and understanding such epistemic implicatures (the “producers”) must meet the requirements of Searle’s [Background Hypothesis](#). One does not have to meet these requirements in order to express, or correctly ascribe, a meaning intention and thus grasp the literal truth-conditional meaning of an (assertive) utterance.

The “original function” of linguistic expressions is their communicative use in giving voice to meaning-bestowing acts, or meaning intentions ([Husserl 2001](#), p. 189). However, this “indicating (*anzeigende*)” function is not essen-

<sup>1</sup> For the following presentation of Husserl’s theory of meaning cf. [Beyer & Weichold 2011](#), p. 406.

tial to their functioning as meaningful units, as they can also be employed “in [the] solitary life [of the soul] (*im einsamen Seelenleben*),” thanks to meaning-bestowing acts not actually given voice to but experienced all the same (Husserl 2001, pp. 190-191). But these acts and the meanings they bear are constrained by semantic factors concerning the linguistic expressions employed, with these factors being determined by linguistic conventions regarding the relationship between their meaning and the features of non-linguistic reality they serve to represent:

[...] it pertains to the *usual* [i.e., conventional; CB] sense of these classes of expressions, that they owe their determinate meaning to the occasion [...] [T]heir [respective] meaning is oriented in each case to the individual instance, though the manner of this orientation is a matter of usage.<sup>2</sup> (Husserl 2001, p. 221)

Husserl’s theory of meaning strongly resembles the mainstream view in philosophy of language attacked by Searle and other contextualists. In the following passage Searle gives a concise summary of that view:

Sentences have literal meanings. The literal meaning of a sentence is entirely determined by the meanings of its component words (or morphemes) and the syntactical rules according to which these elements are combined. [...] The literal meaning of a sentence needs to be sharply distinguished from what a speaker means by the sentence when he utters it to perform a speech act [...]. For example, in uttering a sentence a speaker may mean something different from what the sentence means, as in the case of metaphor; or he may even mean the opposite of what the sentence

means, as in the case of irony; or he may mean what the sentence means but mean something more as well, as in the case of conversational implications and indirect speech acts. [...] For sentences in the indicative, the meaning of the sentence determines a set of truth conditions [...] Sometimes the meaning of a sentence is such that its truth conditions will vary systematically with the contexts of its literal utterance. Thus the sentence ‘I am hungry’ might be uttered by one person on one occasion to make a true statement and yet be uttered by another person, or by the same person on another occasion, to make a false statement. [...] It is important to notice however that the notion of the meaning of a sentence is absolutely context free. Even in the case of indexical sentences the meaning does not change from context to context; rather the constant meaning is such that it determines a set of truth conditions only relative to a context of utterance.<sup>3</sup> (Searle 1978, pp. 207-208)

To bring out the relevant semantic factors, consider what Husserl calls “essentially occasional expressions,” i.e., systematically context-sensitive, or indexical, expressions such as “I,” “here,” “now,” “I am here now.”<sup>4</sup> In his pioneering discussion of these expressions in the first *Logical Investigation*, paragraph 26, Husserl introduces the semantic distinction between, on the one hand, an expression’s *general meaning-function* (i.e., the linguistic meaning of the expression, roughly corresponding to what Kaplan calls “character”) and, on the other hand, the propositional, or sub-propositional,<sup>5</sup> content – the “*respective meaning*” – expressed in a given context of utterance (Husserl 2001, p. 218). If, for example, you and I both say “I,” then our two

<sup>2</sup> The German original runs: “Es gehört zur *usuellen* Bedeutung dieser Klassen von Ausdrücken, ihre Bedeutungsbestimmtheit erst der Gelegenheit zu verdanken [...] [Sie orientieren] ihre jeweilige Bedeutung erst nach dem Einzelfall, während doch die Weise, in der sie dies tun, eine usuelle ist.” (Hua XIX/1, pp. 91f.) So Husserl does not subscribe to a Humpty-Dumpty view of meaning, according to which the meaning of an expression in the mouth of a speaker is solely determined by what the speaker wants the expression to mean on the respective occasion; cf. Beyer 2000, pp. 78-79.

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of more recent developments in semantics and pragmatics, cf. Lepore & Smith 2006, and the entries in Barber & Stainton 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Unlike mainstream semantics, Husserl considers such expressions to be ubiquitous in empirical thought and speech; cf. Husserl 2001, p. 7. The approach to meaning I shall sketch below supports this contention.

<sup>5</sup> A sub-propositional content is a non-propositional content (or respective meaning) that is a subpart of a propositional content. Singular and general terms may be used to express sub-propositional contents.

utterances share the same general-meaning function but express different respective meanings, with different referents. Again, if you and I both assert “I have blood type A,” our utterances share the same general meaning-function but express different respective meanings, with different truth conditions. These respective meanings, or truth-conditional contents, are often referred to as *propositions* expressed by the utterance of a sentence.

Husserl regards the general meaning-function as fixed by common usage (Husserl 2001, p. 221). The *respective* meaning determines the expression’s reference, or truth condition, in the sense that two expressions sharing that meaning are thus bound to refer to the same object(s), or to represent the same state of affairs, if any. Husserl construes “respective meanings” as two-factored, with the general meaning function plus the relevant context of utterance (if any) determining the meaning in question. Thus we have two levels of meaning<sup>6</sup> being expressed when a meaning intention is given voice to:

*General meaning-function (conventional linguistic meaning, “character”)* =<sub>Df</sub> The general meaning-function of an expression is a function yielding a respective meaning for a use of that expression in a given utterance context; where the assignment of this meaning-function to the relevant expression is generally a matter of (implicit or explicit) linguistic convention.

*Respective meaning ([sub-]propositional content, semantic content)*<sup>7</sup> =<sub>Df</sub> The respective meaning of an expression as used

in a given utterance context is a function yielding a reference or extension for that expression as used in that context, given particular circumstances of evaluation (see below).

In the case of indexical expressions, the respective meaning, alias semantic content, is a function of both the context of utterance and the general meaning-function of the expression used, which differs from the respective meaning; in all other cases, the two levels can be said to coincide.

*Indexicality* =<sub>Df</sub> An expression is used as an indexical if and only if it is used in such a way that its respective meaning is dependent on both the utterance context (see below) and its general meaning-function, such that it may acquire different referents or extensions in different utterance contexts in virtue of its general meaning-function.

The level of respective meaning is subject to what Husserl calls “pure grammar,” which is the study of what distinguishes sense (i.e., respective meaning) from nonsense.<sup>8</sup> On this view, semantic content displays something like formal, syntactic structure. This idea helps to explain the compositionality of meaning, which in turn explains how speakers and hearers, or interpreters, are able to grasp the meaning of an infinite number of sentences, many of which they have never heard before, on the basis of a finite vocabulary and a finite set of linguistic rules or conventions.

It is at the level of *respective* meaning that the bearers of truth-value (that is, of truth and falsity, respectively) are located—i.e., propositions. In modern semantics, truth-value ascriptions are relativized to what Kaplan calls *circumstances of evaluation*, consisting of possible worlds and, according to Kaplan, also times, on occasion. To illustrate one of the theoretical merits of this relativization to possible worlds, consider an utterance of mine of the sentence

<sup>6</sup> The corresponding idea of different levels (*Stufen*) of understanding, which include the grasping of both character, content, and implicatures, is borrowed from Künne, who is also to be credited for pointing out the close similarity between Kaplan’s character/content distinction and Husserl’s distinction between general meaning-function and respective meaning; cf. Künne 1982. In Beyer 2000, I worked out the consequences of this distinction for Husserl’s semantics and theory of intentional content (“noematic sense”) in detail, arguing that the latter is to be rationally reconstructed as a moderate version of externalism, and that it can be fruitfully compared to Evans’ (radically externalist) neo-Fregean conception of sense, among others. That Husserl’s view can be read this way lends support to Dagfinn Føllesdal’s so-called Fregean interpretation of Husserl’s notion of noema (cf. Føllesdal 1969).

<sup>7</sup> Note that “semantic content” is used by some authors to refer to conventional linguistic meaning rather than respective meaning (which Kaplan calls “content”).

<sup>8</sup> Husserl’s investigations into pure grammar, especially his notion of a syntactic meaning category, had an important impact on modern linguistics (due mainly to Ajdukiewicz 1935).

(S0) I exist.

If we make the relativization in question, we can say two things: first, for every context of utterance it holds that the respective proposition expressed in an utterance of this sentence is true in the possible world of that context, so that the *sentence* can be said to be *a priori* or *logically true* (Kaplan 1989). Second, the *proposition* expressed in a particular utterance of S0, the respective meaning, is only *contingently true* – after all, the speaker need not exist: there are, in other words, possible worlds in which the proposition in question is false. Note that:

*Context of utterance* =<sub>Df</sub> The utterance context consists of the possible world in which the utterance is (assumed to be) performed, the speaker, the addressee, the time and the place of utterance *and/or* all other entities that (according the general meaning-function of the expressions uttered) have to be identified in order to evaluate the utterance in terms of truth, falsity, or reference, relative to given circumstances of evaluation.

Or thus goes the rather common definition of “utterance context” I have used in earlier writings (e.g., Beyer 2001, pp. 278-279).

It is generally agreed upon, in mainstream semantics, that the levels of meaning mentioned so far – character and respective semantic content – do not exhaust what is communicated in speech. As Husserl puts it, there are mental states given voice to “in the broader sense,” and their contents are candidates for what the speaker non-literally means or suggests, which Grice calls “implicature.” At the same time, these contents are further candidates for what the hearer grasps when understanding, or successfully interpreting, the utterance.

This has been standardly regarded as a third level of meaning that is not the subject matter of formal semantics but rather of pragmatics: the study of the use of language for purposes of action other than the expression of literal meaning.

*What is implicated (suggested, indirectly communicated)* =<sub>Df</sub> By using an expression in an utterance context, a speaker implicates the intentional contents of the mental acts she gives voice to in the broader sense. These contents can be made out on the basis of the respective meaning of the expression in that context by applying certain conversational maxims (cf. Maibauer 2010).

### 3 A contextualist challenge

This, then, is more or less the received opinion, which has been challenged by philosophers on the basis of ideas that partly go back to Husserl—in particular the notion of *background*. Thus, in his 1978 essay on “[Literal Meaning](#)” Searle claims that:

[...] for a large number of cases the notion of the literal meaning of a sentence only has application relative to a set of background assumptions, and furthermore these background assumptions are not all and could not all be realized in the semantic structure of the sentence in the way that presuppositions and indexically dependent elements of the sentence’s truth conditions are realized in the semantic structure of the sentence. (Searle 1978, p. 210)

On this view, the role of context is not simply that of fixing the reference of indexical expressions in a semantically well-regulated manner. There is contextual content determination everywhere, and correspondingly there is semantic underdetermination all over the place. There is no propositional meaning content attached to a sentence independently of context; and (some authors would add) *context* itself is not a well-defined notion: there is no neat list of semantically fixed context-factors and context-sensitive expressions. There is a huge and confusing background of assumptions, or know-how, that we bring to a given linguistic utterance, without which the utterance would fail to express any semantic content, and to thereby



determine truth conditions; and there is no hope of constructing a formal theory of this background (or “context”) and the way it determines truth-conditional content. Thus runs Searle’s radical contextualist challenge to mainstream semantics and pragmatics.

To motivate contextualism (so conceived) about meaning and content, consider a situation in which an object is hidden in a box. All we know about that object is that it is the only object in that box. Unlike us, the speaker knows which kind of object is in the box. She does not know that we do not know this; she intends to refer to a particular object of that kind, the one she takes to be in the box, or to one of its aspects (dependent features). She utters the sentence

(S1) This is red.

to make a statement about the object or aspect, without implying or suggesting anything else. What statement does she make? What is the respective meaning expressed in this utterance? What does the speaker say? According to radical contextualism, this depends on a wide variety of factors, not encoded in the linguistic meaning of the sentence uttered.

For a bird to be red (in the normal case), it should have most of the surface of its body red, though not its beak, legs, eyes, and of course its inner organs. Furthermore, the red color should be the bird’s natural color, since we normally regard a bird as being ‘really’ red even if it is painted white all over. A kitchen table, on the other hand, is red even if it is only painted red, and even if its ‘natural’ color underneath the paint is, say, white. Moreover, for a table to be red only its upper surface needs to be red, but not necessarily its legs and its bottom surface. Similarly, a red apple, as Quine pointed out, needs to be red only on the outside, but a red hat needs to be red only in its external upper surface, a red crystal is red both inside and outside, and a red watermelon is red only inside. [...] In short, what counts

for one type of thing to be red is not what counts for another. (Lahav 1989, p. 264)

So, in which way does the relevant meaning of S1 (“This is red”) depend on context? I want to consider three options.

1. *Speaker intentions*: Are the referential intentions of the speaker, such as their intention to refer to a particular *bird* by “this,” part of the relevant context? One problem with this answer is that it prevents us from adopting a conception of context according to which shared knowledge of context is what (in addition to shared knowledge of conventional linguistic meaning) enables both speaker and hearer to grasp one and the same respective meaning in cases of successful communication. After all, context, thus understood, is supposed to help the hearer make out the speaker’s referential intentions, among other things. So the present answer does not help—provided we conceive of context in a communication-theoretical way—as a means, so to speak, that in accordance with the relevant linguistic meaning enables the hearer to determine the respective meaning expressed.<sup>9</sup>
2. *Object referred to*: Is the relevant context simply identical to what’s in the box? But the speaker might only be referring to a particular aspect of the object in the box, rather than to the whole object. So we are thrown back to the speaker’s referential intentions—which do not help us, as we saw above.
3. *Background assumptions*: Does the relevant context consist of background assumptions about the object, or kind of object, in the box? Which assumptions, exactly? It seems to be impossible to make a comprehensive list, because every set of assumptions brings with it further assumptions. For example, suppose that the speaker takes an apple to be in the box. *Apples* normally count as red even if their *skin* is not completely red. However, consider a social group who have only encountered two kinds of apples thus far (as far as their colour

<sup>9</sup> The epistemic availability of this means may require further means, to be found in a wider context itself not necessarily predelineated semantically.

is concerned): apples whose skin is completely red and apples whose skin is completely green; imagine that their apples instantaneously turn red when ripe. These people probably wouldn't classify an almost-ripe apple of the kind we know as "red." In fact, they wouldn't know what to say, because they have always assumed that there are only two kinds of apple-colour, and because this background assumption determines the meaning they conventionally associate with S1 as applied to apples. So shall we regard the assumption that there are grades of apple-redness corresponding to their ripeness as part of the context of our assertive uses of the sentence "this [the speaker refers to an apple] is red"? But how many grades are relevant? What if there had been exactly three apple colours? This would probably again lead to a different use, and hence respective meaning, of S1, as applied to apples, and so on and so forth.

Obviously these sorts of examples can easily be multiplied. Is there any way to avoid the following radical contextualist conclusion?

*Radical contextualism* =<sub>DF</sub> There is no fixed relation between

- (i) the linguistic or literal meaning of a sentence S;
- (ii) a neatly defined set of context parameters; and
- (iii) the respective meaning and truth condition of S in the context of utterance, such that (iii) is uniquely determined by (i) and (ii).

Rather, the respective meaning is always determined differently, from situation to situation, so that the notion of a conventionally (co-)determined semantic content is untenable.

#### 4 Two kinds of knowledge about truth conditions

The best strategy I can think of to avoid this radical conclusion draws upon a distinction made by Emma Borg. In her 2004 book *Minimal Semantics*, Borg distinguishes between minimal se-

mantic understanding, i.e., knowledge of what she calls "liberal" truth conditions, on the one hand, and knowing how to "verify" (or knowing what would make it the case) that the truth condition *is met*, on the other hand (Borg 2004, p. 238). Thus, the members of the social group who only know (what we would call) completely red-skinned and completely green-skinned apples are unable to know whether the truth condition of the sentence "this [the speaker refers to an apple] is red" is *met* regarding a not fully ripe apple, but they nevertheless *know* the truth condition—namely that the object the speaker wants them to attend to be red—whatever the latter may require in the case at hand. *They have full semantic knowledge but lack background know-how.* However, the latter is only required for "verification," or

1. knowledge of the proposition *p* stated (i.e., knowledge that *p*),

but not for the less demanding

2. knowledge of *which* proposition was stated (i.e., knowledge that *p* is the proposition literally expressed by the speaker).

The latter is sufficient for semantic knowledge regarding the statement.

I like this answer to the contextualist challenge, but I think that it eventually leads to a more moderate version of contextualism, rather than to a full-scale rejection: it leads to a version that makes room for semantic knowledge without background assumptions or know-how, knowledge whose content can indeed be investigated by formal semantics.

Clearly, the advocate of the present answer needs to explain how one can understand a sentence while lacking the kind of background know-how regarding which Searle would claim that in the absence of such capacities the "notion of the meaning of the sentence" has no clear "application" at all (see quotation above). Searle would stress that in the absence of appropriate background assumptions or know-how we have no clear idea of how to understand a sentence like "This (apple) is red;" which mani-

festes itself in the fact that we do not, for instance, know how to follow the corresponding order “Bring me the red apple!” (cf. Searle 1983, p. 147). In the light of Borg’s distinction, this can be described as lack of knowledge about “verification,” but what about the strong intuition that in the absence of such background know-how the sentence fails to express a content that can be evaluated in terms of truth and falsity? To strengthen this intuition, consider Searle’s examples S2–S4 (cf. Searle 1983, Ch. 6):

- (S2) Bill opened the mountain.
- (S3) Bill opened the grass.
- (S4) Bill opened the sun.

These sentences are syntactically well-formed and contain meaningful English expressions; yet they do not express clear semantic content—unless we imagine some background know-how regarding what it means to open a mountain, the grass, or the sun.<sup>10</sup> The mere combination of the literal meaning of the verb “opened” with the literal meanings of other English expressions in accordance with the English syntax does not seem to be enough to produce a clear truth-evaluable content, despite the fact that “to open” does not look like an indexical that yields as reference a unique behavioural relation (or type of action) referred to as “opening,” for a neatly defined type of context—in the way that “I” always yields the speaker of the utterance context as its referent. Borg would disagree; she says about an analogous example by Searle (“John cut the sun”):

If the competent language user understands all the parts of the sentence (she knows the property denoted by the term ‘cut’, she grasps the meaning of the referring term ‘John’ and she understands the meaning of the definite description ‘the sun’) and she understands this construction of parts, then she knows that the utterance of this sentence is true just in case

[...] John stands in the cutting relation to the sun. Now clearly any world which satisfies this condition is going to be pretty unusual (and there may be some vague cases [...]) but there will be, it seems, some pretty clear cases on either side of the divide. For instance, any world where John’s actions do not have any effect on the physical status of the sun is clearly going to be a world where the truth-condition is not satisfied. While any world where John’s actions do result in some kind of severing of the physical unity of the mass of the sun is a world where the truth-condition is satisfied. (Borg 2004, p. 236)

This reply to Searle is unconvincing for at least two reasons.

*First:* To begin with, Borg here equates semantic knowledge concerning the verb phrase “cut” with knowledge of the property it denotes (see the first brackets in the quotation). But arguably this phrase does not denote any property in isolation; it only does so in the context of a *sentence* (by the “context principle”).<sup>11</sup> And Searle’s parallel point about “opened” is that this verb phrase denotes quite *different* properties in S2–S4, respectively, without being ambiguous. That the verb is unambiguous in these cases becomes intuitively plausible if we apply the “conjunction reduction” test (cf. Searle 1992, pp. 178–179). Instead of asserting the conjunction of S2–S4 we can just as well say: “Bill opened the mountain, the grass, and the sun” and perhaps add: “he used a secret universal device for the task recently developed by NASA.” This may be a weird example, but its

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Beyer 1997, p. 341, where I raise the same point in order to criticize one of Searle’s arguments for the Background Hypothesis. As for the precise content of the context principle, Robert Stainton distinguishes between three readings:

“The first [is] merely methodological, a claim about how to find out what particular words mean: To find word meanings, look at what they contribute to sentences. The second reading [is] metasemantic, a claim about why words have the meanings they do: words only have meaning because of how they affect sentence meanings. The third reading of the Principle is interpretational/psychological. [...] [T]he idea underlying it is that the only things we are psychologically able to understand are whole sentences.” (Stainton 2010, pp. 88–89) In the present context, a consequence of the *metasemantic* reading is intended which follows from the conjunction of that reading and the assumption that the meaning of a predicate (like “... cut ...”) denotes a property or relation, if anything.

<sup>10</sup> Another option might be to admit category mistakes as semantic contents. (I wish to express my thanks to Adriana Pavic for reminding me of this option.)



weirdness does not seem to be due to the ambiguity of “opened.” Rather, unlike the imagined NASA devisors we simply have no background know-how that would enable us to assign truth conditions to this sentence.

Borg would probably reject the context principle (thus paying a high price for her view) and answer that there may be vague cases in which we do not know whether the opening relation obtains or not, but that “there will be [...] some pretty clear cases on either side of the divide” (Borg 2004, p. 236); after all, in the preceding quotation she makes a parallel claim about the example “John cut the sun.” But this answer is, again, unconvincing (as is Borg’s parallel claim). One might just as well argue that both S5 and S6 describe the same relation, the opening relation, as obtaining between different objects.

(S5) Bill opened his hand.

(S6) Bill opened the door.

But opening a hand is an intentional bodily movement, while opening a door is a more advanced or complex action that merely *involves* such bodily movements. These are different kinds of behavioural relation. Of course, clear examples of the obtaining of both of these relations may have something in common, but this common feature does not seem to constitute a common *type of action*. And what (if anything) is the verb phrase in S5 and S6 supposed to denote, if not a type of action?

Nor is the verb phrase in this pair of sentences ambiguous. This is made plausible by the conjunction reduction test: it is perfectly fine to abbreviate the conjunction of S5 and S6 as follows: “Bill opened the hand and the door.”

The (to my mind) false impression that the unambiguous verb phrase in S2–S4 denotes the same behavioural relation or feature as in, say, S6, merely comes from the fact that we tend to think of *established* uses of “*a* opened *b*” sentences (or “*a* cut *b*” sentences) when trying to construct an interpretation for cases like S2–S4 that we do not really understand. But there is no such use in these cases (see the next paragraph but one).

*Second:* Moreover, Borg’s claim that “any world where John’s actions do result in some kind of severing of the physical unity of the mass of the sun is a world where the truth-condition [of ‘John cut the sun’] is satisfied” is simply false. If John causes an explosion whose effect is that the physical unity of the mass of the sun is severed (such that it breaks into, say, two halves),<sup>12</sup> he does not thereby *cut* the sun. I suppose that any attempt to secure a minimal truth condition for S4 (and S2–S3, for that matter) is doomed to failure. In order to have at least a slight chance of getting off the ground, any such attempt will have to mention something that can be done using sharp-edged tools (or devices simulating such tools),<sup>13</sup> and it seems impossible to define (let alone imagine) a procedure of this type that could in principle be applied to the sun.

To anticipate the alternative approach I am going to take, in cases like S2–S4 there is no established sentence-use because there is no appropriate background know-how to be found in the relevant social group (including its late members), hence no group of (current or former) “producers” (see below), and hence no relation conventionally denoted by the verb phrase that could enter the respective truth condition. Therefore, these sentences have “literal meaning” (as Searle puts it) but lack semantic content. Literal meaning is not usage (in the current sense), nor does it require a particular usage—unlike respective meaning.

On similar grounds (to return to the last example about S1), if in the envisaged social group there is no background know-how regarding certain apples that *we* would readily classify as “red,” against that background, the sentence S1 has no clear application to such apples in the language use of that group, and it *does not have the same truth condition* as in ours. An in-

<sup>12</sup> A reviewer claims that “to sever” means to cut. Even if the corresponding interpretation of “severing” were admissible, it could not be the one intended by Borg. Have a look at the preceding quotation. If you replace “severing” by “cutting” there, you obtain: “While any world where John’s actions do result in some kind of cutting of the physical unity of the mass of the sun is a world where the truth-condition [of ‘John cut the sun’] is satisfied.” If this sentence is meaningful at all, it expresses a triviality that does nothing to support Borg’s view.

<sup>13</sup> See the entry on “cut” in the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English.

terpretation problem occurs. I am attracted by an interpretation-theoretical principle proposed by Timothy Williamson, probably inspired by Gareth Evans, which Williamson calls the principle of knowledge maximization (as opposed to the principle of *truth* maximization to be found in traditional hermeneutics, and endorsed by Donald Davidson):

The shift from conventions of truthfulness to conventions of knowledgeableness also has repercussions in the methodology of interpretation. The appropriate principle of charity will give high marks to interpretations on which speakers tend to assert what they know, rather than to those on which they tend to assert what is true [...]. (Williamson 2000, p. 267)

The right charitable injunction for an assignment of reference is to maximize knowledge, not to minimize ignorance. (Williamson 2007, p. 265)

According to the principle of knowledge maximization, an interpretation is correct to the extent that it maximizes “the number of knowledgeable judgements, both verbalized and un-verbalized, the speaker comes out at making” (McGlynn 2012, p. 392). To motivate this principle, although in a somewhat modified version, imagine that in the above example about the box there are in fact two objects in the box—a red ball and a yellow apple—but that we know that the speaker does not know about the ball, which was already hidden in the box before we put the apple into the box while the lightning was such as to make the apple look red.<sup>14</sup> The speaker, who observed how we put the apple into the box, mistakenly believes it to be red and exclaims: S1 (“this is red”). No doubt, if this utterance has any truth condition, it involves an apple rather than a ball, and the utterance is false. A suitably modified version of

the principle of knowledge maximization yields this result as the correct interpretation, while the principle of truth maximization fails to do so. After all, the speaker would only give voice to a true belief here if her statement concerned the *ball* rather than the apple. However, this belief would not qualify as knowledge, in the described situation, and by assumption the speaker lacks any other knowledge regarding that ball. By contrast, the speaker possesses some knowledge about the apple, which is in fact yellow. In Evans’ terms, the speaker has opened a mental dossier (a dynamic system of beliefs) about the apple, which contains quite a number of (correct) information about it, even though the addition of the belief that the apple is red does not enlarge that body of knowledge. Thus, the speaker ought to be interpreted as giving voice to that false belief, Davidson and traditional hermeneutics notwithstanding. This interpretation takes into account more relevant knowledge on the part of the speaker than the other.

The principle of knowledge maximization needs to be modified in terms of, or supplemented by, a more traditional theory of justification in order to yield this result. To see this, let us first consider another example, inspired by Husserl (cf. Husserl 1987, p. 212), which I have used in earlier writings to motivate my “neo-Husserlian,” moderately externalist reconstruction of his view on respective meaning and intentional content.

Let’s assume that at a time  $t_1$  Ed points at a certain table in the seminar room where he has just been lecturing and exclaims:

[(S7)] This table wobbles.

One of the students is prepared to take Ed to the caretaker, to make sure that the table gets repaired immediately. The way from the seminar room to the caretaker’s office is rather complicated. But they manage to find it. The caretaker asks Ed to take him to the seminar room with the wobbling table. The student has other things to do. So Ed has to take the care-

<sup>14</sup> Following the realism inherent to ordinary language use, I assume that the everyday world of experience involves objects displaying real colours. It may be possible to eliminate real colours, but such attempts at revisionary metaphysics should have no impact on the study of the actual use of language, unless they lead to a change of language use, which has not happened yet in the case of colour words.

taker to that room by himself. Finally, they arrive at a seminar room that Ed falsely believes to be the room with the wobbling table. At  $t_2$  Ed points at a certain table, which he regards as that wobbling table, and once again declares [S7]. The caretaker investigates the table and contradicts Ed—who reacts somewhat irritatedly. (Beyer 2001, pp. 284-285)

It is unclear which referent (table 1 or table 2) the interpreter is supposed to assign to the demonstrative term “this” according to the (unmodified) principle of knowledge maximization. After all, both of these assignments would lead to an ascription of knowledge to the speaker: knowledge about table 1 (to the effect that it wobbles) and table 2 (to the effect that it is a table he takes to be wobbling), respectively.

To decide the issue, the interpreter needs to take a closer look at the speaker’s epistemic motivation for making the judgment given voice to in her utterance of S7 at  $t_2$ —he needs to consider the experience(s) with recourse to which the speaker can *justify* her claim to knowledge. If the judgment is motivated by a perception the speaker is having, thus qualifying as an *observational* judgment, it will be about the object of that perception: that object is perceived as thus-and-so and for this reason (on this ground) judged to be thus-and-so. This is what happens at  $t_1$ : the speaker perceives table 1 as wobbling and is sincerely giving voice (in the narrow sense) to an accordingly motivated judgment to the effect that it wobbles. However, at  $t_2$  the epistemic situation is different. The speaker’s judgment is motivated by a *memory of table 1* rather than by her current perception of table 2. It is this memory that rationalizes her judgment, and could be self-ascribed by the speaker when justifying her judgment. Therefore, the speaker gives voice, in the narrow sense, to a judgment about table 1, namely that it wobbles. I have elsewhere called this epistemically-determined truth condition the utterance’s *internal truth condition*.<sup>15</sup> According to

the neo-Husserlian approach, respective utterance meaning determines the *internal* truth condition.

So in order to yield interpretations that adequately reflect the meaning intentions actually given voice to by the speaker, and thus the respective meanings of their utterances, the principle of knowledge maximization needs to be supplemented by (or reformulated in terms of) a more traditional theory of justification, drawing upon notions like *observation*, *memory* and *testimony* (referring to sources of justification). Note that the present approach to reference supports a version of the context principle: it is only in the context of a judgment that a referent can be assigned to a mental act of reference given voice to by a singular term.

Let us finally return to the example about the two objects in the box. In this example the speaker gives voice to a judgment about the yellow apple rather than the red ball in her utterance of S1, because she (falsely) remembers that ball as being red, having opened, on an earlier occasion, a mental dossier about it containing the (incorrect) information that the ball is red, while she neither remembers nor perceives, nor has heard about the ball that also happens to be in the box. Thus, the judgment given voice to can only be motivated by, and justified with recourse to, that memory—even if it does not yield knowledge in the case at hand. And that memory concerns the apple rather than the ball, because it belongs to the speaker’s body of information about the apple. Thus, on a version of the principle of knowledge maximization modified in accordance with the foregoing neo-Husserlian approach to reference assignment, the utterance in question concerns the apple, if anything.

Now by the principle of knowledge maximization (in both versions), if there is no back-

ternal truth-condition is the state of affairs represented by the (intentional content of the) judgement the speaker should give voice to, given (a) the linguistic meaning [i.e., the general meaning-function] of the employed sentence and (b) the external context.” The external context is the actual (observable) context of utterance, which on the neo-Husserlian approach may differ from the phenomenologically relevant (“internal”) context, which is determined by the motivational structure of experience with recourse to which the speaker could justify the judgment given voice to. In the present example, the internal context involves table 1.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Beyer 2001, p. 289: “The internal truth-condition of an assertion is the state of affairs represented by the (intentional content of the) judgement actually given voice to in that assertion. Whereas the ex-

ground that enables members of a social group to express knowledge by a sentence like S1 in a situation where we would readily apply that sentence—on the basis of our own knowledge *and* background know-how—, then the following conclusion recommends itself: in the language use of this social group the sentence lacks the determinate truth-evaluable meaning it expresses in our own language use, in a given context. (Contrast what Borg says about “John cut the sun;” see the above quotation from Borg 2004, p. 236.)

This speaks in favour of contextualism. However, it does not speak in favour of a radical version of contextualism, which would not allow for a notion of minimal semantic knowledge that can indeed be possessed in the absence of personal background know-how—a version that thus ignores the above-described difference between two types of knowledge regarding truth conditions. In what follows, I shall sketch a more moderate version of contextualism that does take this difference into account.

## 5 Towards a moderate contextualism about meaning

It is plausible to assume that all that is required for semantic knowledge, conceived as knowledge *which* truth condition has been stated, is that the following two conditions be met. First, a sufficient number of current or former (late) members of the *speech community* to which the speaker belongs possess appropriate background know-how. Second, the speaker stands in an appropriate social relation to these members (a relation that would enable the speaker to express communal knowledge by a true sentence whose content she may be unable to “verify” herself).

These members are experts; they are capable of “verifying” or “falsifying” the semantic content of the sentence in question, as opposed to merely grasping it. Other members of their social group participate in their knowledge thanks to intersubjective processes of information transfer. The main idea behind this approach is an adaptation of Evans’ distinction between what he calls name-producers and mere name-consumers, which is used to substantiate

the above distinction between two kinds of knowledge regarding a sentence’s truth condition.<sup>16</sup> This strategy leads to a social-epistemological conception of the background of meaning and to a version of contextualism that preserves basic insights of anti-contextualists like Borg. Evans writes:

Let us consider an ordinary proper-name-using practice, in which the name ‘NN’ is used to refer to the person x. The distinctive mark of any such practice is the existence of a core group of speakers who have been introduced to the practice via their acquaintance with x. They have on some occasion been told, or anyway have come to learn, a truth which they could then express as ‘This is NN’, where ‘This’ makes a demonstrative reference to x. Once a speaker has learned such a truth, the capacity to re-identify persons over time enables him to recognize later occasions on which the judgement ‘This is NN’ may be made, and hence in connection with which the name ‘NN’ may be used. [...] Members of this core group, whom I shall call ‘producers’ [...], do more than merely use the name to refer to x; they have dealings with x from time to time, and use the name in those dealings – they know x, and further, they know x as NN. [...] [T]he expression does not become a name for x unless it has a certain currency among those who know x – only then can we say that x is known as NN. [...] Perhaps in the early stages of its existence all the participants in the name-using practice will be producers, but this is unlikely to remain so for

<sup>16</sup> As Evans acknowledges, this distinction is inspired by Putnam’s notion of a “linguistic division of labour” (see Putnam 1975, pp. 145-146); cf. Evans 1982, p. 377. I should stress that on the view proposed in this contribution, the producers do not grasp the respective meaning of relevant expressions more “fully” than the mere consumers. Rather, they help sustain the common practice necessary for those expressions to be usable (by both producers and mere consumers) to express a respective meaning (a truth-conditional “semantic content”). I should also stress that I take the producer/consumer distinction to be universally applicable, and not just in the case of rigid designators, and that on my view the capacities of the producers (unlike the capacities of what Putnam calls “experts”) need not include scientific knowledge. (Thanks to Adriana Pavic for pressing me on these points.)



long. Others, who are not acquainted with  $x$ , can be introduced into the practice, either by helpful explanations of the form ‘NN is the  $\varphi$ ’, or just by hearing sentences in which the name is used. I shall call these members ‘consumers’, since on the whole they are not able to inject new information into the practice, but must rely upon the information-gathering transactions of the producers. [...] Let us now consider the last phase of a practice of a name-using practice, when all the participants are consumers. [...]. Later consumers manifest the intention to be participating in this practice, and, using a name which, in the practice, refers to Livingstone, themselves refer to Livingstone. Thus the practice is maintained with a constant reference, perhaps for very long periods of time. (Evans 1982, pp. 376-393)

If we adapt Evans’ distinction between two types of name-users for present purposes, we can say that in a given community there have to be, or have to have been (see the last three sentences of the quotation), people “in the know” regarding (what we use to call) the red colour of apples, or regarding a particular practice of opening mountains, grass, or the sun, in order for the sentences S2–S4 to be candidates, in virtue of their literal meaning, for the expression of knowledge available to us through these sentences.<sup>17</sup> There have to be (current or late) “producers” in order for these sentences to express a semantic content determining truth conditions, thus displaying a clear, interpretable respective meaning in that linguistic community—and this requires that the sentences have a community-wide usage upheld by recourse to (current or late) producers. They know (or knew) how to “verify” the respective meaning of assertive utterances of the sentence, in the relevant usage; i.e., they know which fact (if any) would make it the case that the truth condition

is satisfied; they know how to follow a corresponding order, and so on.

The rest of the speech community merely knows the truth condition and can gain and transfer information an utterance of the sentence bears without themselves being in the know—that is, without having the original knowledge only the producers have in their possession. They may acquire and transfer knowledge (sometimes) by testimony, thanks to the existence of a community-wide practice of sentence-usage sustained by intersubjective processes of information transfer, in a way yet to be understood in more detail.

Eventually, mere consumers “must rely upon the information-gathering transactions of the producers,” to use Evans’ formulation. Mere consumers have semantic knowledge, but they lack more substantive knowledge. Semantics is concerned with the content of their semantic knowledge. Mere consumers need a background of what Searle calls *social practices*, including social practices of language use. However, they lack the producers’ individual or personal background know-how and thus their substantive knowledge regarding truth conditions, which requires such know-how (i.e., the knowledge of how to “verify” those conditions).

What kind of individual background do the producers need in order to be able to make possible social practices of language use that allow all members of their speech community to express and grasp semantic contents determining particular truth conditions? In his 1978 paper, which some regard as the constitutive document of contextualism, Searle stresses the importance of background assumptions, such as the assumption that there is a field of gravitation or that things offer resistance to pressure, which is usually taken for granted, quite unreflectedly, when we speak about middle-sized everyday objects such as apples and boxes. This may at first sound like the requirement of what might be called background *knowledge*, consisting of intentional states, i.e., certain epistemically distinguished beliefs. However, especially in his later writings, Searle stresses the non-intentional character of the background, characterizing it as consisting of non-intentional capacities

<sup>17</sup> The point is not that we cannot describe uncommon practices (such as using a metal saw) for actions like opening a can, say. Rather, the point is that there have to be common practices, known to the producers, in order for a sentence like “Bill opened the can” to be usable to express a respective meaning representing any practice in the first place. (Thanks again to Adriana Pavic for helping me to make this clear.)



—which I have referred to above as background *know-how*, and which would include the ability to perform social practices. Searle has formulated a thesis about the relation between intentionality, on the one hand, and background know-how on the other, a thesis he calls the “hypothesis of the Background”:

Another way to state [the hypothesis of the Background] is to say that all representation, whether in language, thought, or experience, only succeeds given a set of nonrepresentational capacities. In my technical jargon, intentional states only determine conditions of satisfaction relative to a set of capacities that are not themselves intentional. (Searle 1992, p. 175)

Later in the same book chapter he explains:

The actual content [sc. of an intentional state] is insufficient to determine the conditions of satisfaction. [...] Even if you spell out all contents of the mind as a set of conscious rules, thoughts, beliefs, etc., you still require a set of Background capacities for their interpretation. (Searle 1992, pp. 189-190)

This addition to the formulation in the penultimate quotation is, I think, false—or even absurd. The respective meaning of an utterance is the intentional content of the mental state given voice to in the narrow sense, which means that intentional content is precisely what determines the truth condition (or, more generally, the conditions of satisfaction). Indeed, Searle seems to agree:

[...] I want to capture our ordinary intuition that the man who has the belief that Sally cut the cake has a belief with exactly the same propositional content as the literal assertion ‘Sally cut the cake.’ (Searle 1992, p. 184)

I take it to be a definitional truth that intentional content provides the answer to Wittgenstein’s question “What makes my representation

of him a representation of *him?*”. A conception of intentional content must spell out this answer. It makes no sense to conceive intentional content along the lines of Searle’s addition in the penultimate quotation, just as it makes no sense (*pace* Searle) to say of semantic content, properly construed, that it is not self-applying, or that it needs to be interpreted against a non-representational background in order to determine reference or satisfaction conditions.

In the following passage Searle commits himself to radical contextualism:

An utterance of [the sentence ‘Sally gave John the key, and he opened the door’] would normally convey that first Sally gave John the key, and later he opened the door, and that he opened the door with the key. There is much discussion about the mechanisms by which this additional content is conveyed, given that it is not encoded in the literal meaning of the sentence. The suggestion, surely correct, is that sentence meaning, at least to a certain extent, underdetermines what the speaker says when he utters the sentence. Now, the claim I’m making is: sentence meaning radically underdetermines the content of what is said. (Searle 1992, p. 181)

Thus, Searle explains, nothing in the literal meaning of the sentence referred to excludes crazy interpretations like: “John opened the door with the key by swallowing both door and key, and moving the key into the lock by way of the peristaltic contraction of his gut.” (Searle 1992, p. 182) Note that we are dealing with a claim about linguistic meaning here, not about semantic content—properly construed as *representational* content, uniquely determining satisfaction conditions.

From the viewpoint of the social-epistemological picture of semantic content sketched above, the Background Hypothesis should be restricted to the *producers* of sentences figuring in linguistic representation. On this picture, only the producers’ intentionality requires background know-how regarding the application of

those sentences. Mere consumers merely need an appropriate background of *social practices*. If the advocate of this picture did not restrict the Background Hypothesis to the producers, he would be committed to the view that mere consumers can give voice, in the narrow sense, to intentional states in which they cannot be, due to lack of background know-how. This would mean that only the producers can be *sincere* in their assertive utterances of sentences regarding which they are producers. But this seems wrong. It is possible for mere consumers to deliberately express knowledge by testimony. Hence, the (unrestricted) hypothesis of the Background ought to be rejected, on the present view. Meaning-intentions (meaning-bestowing acts) do not generally require a non-intentional background relative to which their (truth-conditional) content and satisfaction conditions are determined; while their intuitive fulfilments (the corresponding “verifications”), if any, do. For instance, it is impossible to *perceive* something as an elm without being able to distinguish elms from other sorts of trees. This of course means in turn that one ought to reject the present picture if one accepts the Background Hypothesis (in unrestricted form). In order to decide the issue, more needs to be said to explain this hypothesis. I cannot decide the issue here. But it may be helpful in this regard to end by saying a bit more about the content of Searle’s Background Hypothesis.

In *The Rediscovery of the Mind* Searle plausibly contends that *mental representation*, i.e., underived, original intentionality is realized just in case a given mental state “is at least potentially conscious” (Searle 1992, p. 132). We find similar claims in Husserl.<sup>18</sup> Due to the “as-

pectual shape” of intentional states (the fact that they have perspectival, intentional content) there are no “deep unconscious mental intentional phenomena” (Searle 1992, p. 173), such as reflectively inaccessible belief states. There is an important sort of background elements whose distinctive mark is that they are *capacities to be in intentional states*; that is, they are dispositions to have (actually or potentially) conscious representations, such as occurrent beliefs. The general assumption that things offer resistance to pressure is a case in point. We normally do not form a belief to this effect but are nevertheless committed to it by the way we behave towards things (cf. Searle 1992, p. 185).

One may call these capacities for (at least potentially) conscious representation “background assumptions” or “network beliefs” if one likes, but according to Searle one must keep in mind that these capacities fail to be intentional states: “the Network of unconscious intentionality is part of the Background” (Searle 1992, p. 188) and “the Background is not itself intentional” (Searle 1992, p. 196). If Searle is right about this, then many elements of the so-called “web of belief” are part of the non-intentional background.

This view has far-reaching consequences for the theory of intentionality. For, if Husserl is basically right about the structure of consciousness (as I believe he is), then conscious states must be embedded in a holistic structure, which Husserl calls the “intentional horizon,” whose future elements are predelineated (at least in part) by the intentional content of the respective state of consciousness. For example, if you consciously see something whose front side you

consciousness iff they are both intentional objects of a dispositional higher-order belief of the sort “I am now having such-and-such experiences” that would be actualized by one and the same higher-order judgment (where the temporal demonstrative specifically refers to the moment of (internal) time at which both of these experiences occur). (2) Two diachronous intentional experiences belong to the same stream of consciousness iff both of them are intentional objects of a dispositional higher-order belief of the sort “I just (or earlier) had such-and-such experiences” that would be actualized by one and the same higher-order judgment. This approach fits in well with Husserl’s contention that “[i]ntentionality is what [...] justifies designating the whole stream of [experiences] as the stream of consciousness and as the unity of *one* consciousness” (Husserl 1982, p. 199). It also fits in well with a view on which Husserl conceives of consciousness as “pre-reflective self-awareness;” cf. Beyer 2011.

<sup>18</sup> Husserl has a dispositionalist higher-order judgment view of consciousness, according to which conscious experiences are “essentially capable of being perceived in reflection,” such that “they are there already as a ‘background’ when they are not reflected on and thus of essential necessity are ‘ready to be perceived’” (Husserl 1982, p. 99; also cf. p. 80, where Husserl cites as an example a case in which “we are reflecting on a conviction which is alive right now (perhaps stating: I am convinced that ...)”). (Compare Searle 1992, p. 156: “This idea, that all unconscious intentional states are in principle accessible to consciousness, I call the connection principle [...].”) In Beyer 2006, Chs. 1-2, I defend a dispositionalist higher-order judgment view of intentional consciousness and argue that it explains the unity of consciousness (1) at a time as well as (2) across time, as follows: (1) Two simultaneous intentional experiences belong to the same stream of con-

are visually confronted by *as a house*, then you will anticipate<sup>19</sup> visual appearances of a back side and an inside, respectively, as future experiences you would undergo if you walked inside or walked around the object while observing it. But is the corresponding set of anticipations really an *intentional* structure? Searle's arguments regarding the background cast doubt on this, given his view that consciousness (or what is consciously accessible) is the only occurrent reality of intentionality. After all, it is plausible to equate (a large subset of) the set of anticipations determining the respective intentional horizon with a relevant part of what Searle calls the "Network," given that they cannot be described properly as occurrent beliefs or conscious judgments, but rather as mere dispositions to form higher-order beliefs. For, as Husserl explains, the anticipations in question concern the way the represented object would present itself to consciousness in possible worlds compatible with what is currently experienced, and they also concern the way this object relates to other objects in the world—thus constituting the core of one's current *world* horizon, which core Husserl calls the "external horizon" (Husserl 1973, p. 32) of the experience (see below). It is only when these anticipations are intuitively fulfilled, in the sense that relevant conscious episodes of (what seem like) *verification* (such as perceptual verification) occur, motivating corresponding acts of judgment, that there will be entries into the relevant mental dossier associated with the object in question. As Husserl puts it (referring to mental dossiers associated with proper names as "individual notions"):

I see an *object without an 'historic' horizon* [footnote: without a horizon of acquaintance and knowledge], and now it gets one. I have experienced the object multifariously, I have made 'multifarious' judgements about it and have gained multifarious [pieces of] knowledge about it, at various times, all of which I have connec-

ted. Thanks to this connection I now possess a 'notion' of the object, an individual notion [...] [W]hat is posited in memory under a certain sense gains an epistemic enrichment of sense, i.e., the x of the sense is determined further in an empirical way.<sup>20</sup> (Husserl 2005, p. 358; my translation)

The "historic" horizon and the objects of the relevant anticipations constitute the "internal horizon" (Husserl 1973, p. 32) of the experience. They all belong to the same "*x* of the sense" (also referred to by Husserl as the "determinable X"), i.e., they share a sense of identity (of represented object) through time. Other past and anticipated experiences bring it about that one's "'notion' of the object" is *networked* with other notions of objects. They constitute the external horizon of the experience.

If the anticipations in question were part of a non-intentional background, then it would be wrong, of course, to describe them as being directed at objects; as a consequence, the Husserlian conception of intentional horizon just sketched would break down. To avoid this consequence, Searle's Background conception needs to be altered, such that the background may indeed contain intentional elements, albeit in a derived sense.

This can be fleshed out as follows. The primary bearers of intentionality are (at least potentially) conscious units, such as judgments and the experiences that motivate them. It is true that respective meaning and intentional content only function against a background the elements of which lack this primary form of intentionality. However, this background contains some elements that possess a *derived* form of intentionality, so that it is misleading to describe it as completely non-intentional. In particular,

<sup>20</sup> The German original runs: „Ich sehe einen *Gegenstand ohne einen „historischen“ Horizont* [Fn.: ohne Bekanntheithorizont und Wissen-shorizont], und nun bekommt er ihn. Ich habe den Gegenstand vielfältig erfahren, „vielfältige“ Urteile habe ich über ihn gefällt, vielfältige Kenntnis von ihm in verschiedenen Zeiten gewonnen und habe sie verknüpft. Nun habe ich durch diese Verknüpfung einen „Begriff“ von dem Gegenstand, einen Eigenbegriff [...]. [D]as in [der Erinnerung] mit einem gewissen Sinn Gesetzte erfährt eine erkennt-nismäßige Sinnbereicherung, das heißt, das x des Sinnes bestimmt sich näher erfahrungsmäßig.“ (Husserl 2005, p. 358).

<sup>19</sup> For the close connection between anticipation and (internal) horizon, cf. Husserl 1973, para. 8. For an insightful interpretation of Husserl's notion of horizon, cf. Smith & McIntyre 1982, pp. 227–265.

it contains mental capacities or dispositions to form beliefs about the further course of experience which Husserl (in 1973, para. 8) calls “anticipations.” Some of the experiences thus anticipated correlate with an internal horizon. Their occurrence may lead to entries being made in a mental dossier, which are empirical beliefs (informational states) to which a “referent” (an object they are about) can be assigned in a principled way, in accordance with the modified principle of knowledge maximization. Here is an example of such a principle of reference assignment, which I have proposed in earlier work.<sup>21</sup>

The logical subject  $x$  of [...] a belief of the form  $a$  is  $F$  [...] whose acquisition goes together with the opening of a mental dossier about  $x$  is identical with the logical subject  $y$  of the judgement *initiating* that belief (or  $x$  would be identical with  $y$ , if  $x$  and  $y$  existed). (Beyer 2001, p. 287)

“Logical subject” here refers to the object the relevant belief is about (such as table 1 in the case of the persisting belief actualized by the judgment given voice to at  $t_2$  in the above example about the wobbling table); and the judgment initiating that belief is understood to have its logical subject assigned in accordance with the modified principle of knowledge maximization, as explained at the end of section 3, above.

I conclude, first, that the background of meaning and intentional content may be looked upon as being at least in part itself intentional, albeit in a derived sense, but that, second, the applicability of the Background Hypothesis still needs to be restricted, as far as the part of the background (co-)determining truth-conditional content is concerned, to what I have called the producers.

## 6 Conclusion

In summary, I have distinguished three levels of meaning, the first of which (general meaning-function) is a matter of linguistic convention, while the second level (respective meaning) is

truth-conditional and partly dependent on the first, purely semantic level, but also dependent on the reference or extension determined by the intentional state actually given voice to. This intentional state has its intentional object (the reference of the corresponding utterance) fixed epistemically, in accordance with the modified principle of knowledge maximization. Furthermore, this epistemic reference-fixing depends on the informational states (or dossiers) of the producers only. Only the producers need to possess the kind of background that Searle wrongly takes to be required for all speakers or hearers capable of giving voice to or grasping the respective meaning in question, the grasping of which then serves as the basis for accessing the third, purely pragmatic level of meaning (namely, what is implicated).

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<sup>21</sup> For further neo-Husserlian principles of reference assignment, see Beyer 2000, para. 7; Beyer 2001.

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