

## JOHN PERRY ON COGNITIVE SIGNIFICANCE

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Many contemporary philosophers accept the theory of direct reference as the correct semantic theory for proper name. According to this theory, the sole semantic content of a name is its referent. A consequence of this theory is that co-referential names have the same meaning. The theory of direct reference, along with some other theses, constitute a theory which I call "Naive Theory". The following is the Naive Theory.

### The Naive Theory

- I) The content of a proper name (if it has one) is its referent.
- II) The content of an indexical, or a demonstrative in a context (if it has one) is its referent in that context.
- III) The content of a predicate (if it has one) is a property or relation.
- IV) The content of a sentence (if it has one) is a proposition. A proposition is a structured entity, containing individuals and/or relation as constituents. The proposition content of a sentence contains the contents of the sentence's meaningful parts as constituents.
- V) The content of a logical connective (for example, "not", "and") is an appropriate property of propositions, or a relation between propositions.
- VI) The content of a quantifier (if it has one) is a second-order property or relation, that is, a property of properties, or a relation between properties.

Truth conditions for sentences and proposition are the following:

- VII) A sentence is true (in a particular language) if its content is a proposition that is true (that is, it expresses a true proposition).

- VIII) Let  $P$  be a proposition of the form  $\langle X_1, X_2, X_3, \dots, X_n, F_n \rangle$  where  $X_1$  through  $X_n$  individuals or relation and  $F_n$  is an  $n$ -place relation. Then  $P$  is true if  $X_1$  through  $X_n$  instantiate  $F_n$  (Or  $F_n$  hold of  $X_1$  through  $X_n$ )
- IX) Let  $P$  be a proposition of the form  $\langle Q, \text{NEG} \rangle$  where  $Q$  is a proposition. Then  $P$  is true if  $Q$  is false. If  $P$  is not true, then it is false.
- X) Let  $P$  be a proposition of the form  $\langle Q, R, \text{CONJ} \rangle$  where  $Q$  and  $R$  are propositions. Then  $P$  is true iff  $Q$  is true and  $R$  is true. If  $P$  is not true then it is false.

For example the semantic content of "Twain" is Twain. "Twain is an author" expresses a singular proposition which contains Twain and the property of being an author as constituents. According to this theory "Twain is an author" and "Clemens is an author" express the same proposition, since "Twain" and "Clemens" refer to the same individual.

The problem about assent and dissent is a problem about cognitive value. The Naive Theorist holds that "Twain is an author" and "Clemens is an author" express the same proposition. He also holds that believing what the first sentence expresses just is believing what the second sentence expresses. But the cognitive values of the two sentences seem very different. One can understand both sentences, accept the first as expressing the truth, while not accepting the second. The same problem arises with indexicals.

### Perry's view

John Perry (Perry 1988) both advocates the Naive Theory and proposes a theory of cognitive value. He claims that his theory of cognitive value is consistent with the Naive Theory. He accepts that "Cicero is an orator", and "Tully is an orator" express the same *singular proposition* a proposition that contains Cicero as a component or constituent. Further, he thinks that if Cicero says "I am an orator", and someone addressing Cicero says, "You are an orator", then both of their utterances express the same proposition. Each of them said, in their different ways, that Cicero is an orator.

Perry accepts that if a rational person who understands two sentences in

which co-referential names occurs, accepts one but not the other, then the proposition expressed by those sentences will not explain the difference in the responses of the person. Perry thinks that there is some aspect of meaning of those sentences which will explain the difference in the responses. Perry suggests that a semantics theory should describe the aspect of meaning that explains the responses of the person. He claims that his theory of cognitive value (which I will describe soon) provides the aspect of meaning that will explain why a rational person, for example, can accept "Twain is an author" but not accept "Clemens is an author."

Perry (1988) talks about the cognitive significance of an *utterance* of a sentence, in contrast to the cognitive significance of a *sentence*. Cognitive significance and cognitive value are the same thing for our purpose. Utterances are physical event in the world. A speaker utters a sentence at a particular time. A speaker can utter a sentence twice but cannot reproduce an utterance. Speakers can use the same sentence but can utter only different utterances. Obviously an utterance is different from a sentence. Utterances of a sentence have cognitive value.

My claim in this paper will be that Perry creates fresh problem while trying to solve the old problems. Those fresh problems are sufficient reasons for rejecting his theory.<sup>1</sup>

According to Perry the cognitive significance of an utterance of a sentence has the following features:

- (a) The cognitive significance of an utterance of a sentence *S* in language *L* is a semantic property of that utterance.
- (b) It is a property which a person who understands the meaning of *S* in *L* recognizes.
- (c) The cognitive significance of an utterance of *S* in *L* is a proposition.
- (d) A person who understands the meaning of *S* in *L*, and accepts as true an utterance of *S* in *L*, will believe the proposition that is the cognitive significance of the utterance.
- (e) A person who understands the meaning of *S* in *L*, and sincerely utters *S* will believe the proposition that is the cognitive significance of his

utterance.

This analysis of "cognitive significance" looks plausible at first glance. But a more careful consideration of the analysis is necessary before we accept it. A *prima facie* reason for taking such a precaution is Wettstein's (1986) view that the semantic aspects of a sentence need not explain the cognitive aspects of the sentence. According to Wettstein, a theory of meaning which specifies the meaning of "Twain is an author" should not explain speaker's beliefs and the way the meaning of the sentence affects the speaker's thinking.<sup>2</sup> If Wettstein's view is the right view, some features of cognitive significance as explained by Perry are questionable. For example, one may doubt that the cognitive significance of an utterance of a sentence is a semantic property of the utterance. Perry on the other hand, says that if a semanticist is interested in a semantic theory as a theory of linguistic meaning for natural language, then he cannot be indifferent to the study of cognition. Some aspects of meaning are very crucial to the different uses of language, such as communicating beliefs, inspiring action, have other effects on what we think and do. A theory of linguistic meaning should provide us with an understanding of the properties of sentences that leads us to use them for all these purposes. Some of the uses of language are for cognitive purposes.<sup>3</sup> There is a conflict, or so it seems, between the goals Perry and Wettstein set for semantics. However, the initial plausibility of (a) is lost if Wettstein is right. One may reasonably wonder whether the cognitive significance of a sentence is really a semantic property of the sentence,<sup>4</sup> after listening to the conflicting roles Wettstein and Perry assign to a semantic theory.<sup>5</sup>

In order to appreciate Perry's view on cognitive significance, we need to understand what he calls the "relation theory of meaning." According to that semantic theory, the meaning of a sentence is a multi-placed relation among an utterance, speaker, context, and proposition content. Thus for Perry, the meaning of "you are spilling coffee" should be expressed in the following way.

(PC1) An utterance *u* of "you are spilling coffee" by an agent *a* at a time *t* in circumstances *C* expresses singular proposition *P*, iff There is an individual *x* such that (i) *a*'s addressing *x* at *t* is part of *C*; (ii) *P* is the singular proposition that *x* is spilling coffee.<sup>6</sup>

Let us take Perry's own example to this point. Ellsworth and McDuff are standing in the lobby of the hotel talking philosophy. Coffee is sloshing over the sides of Ellsworth's cup and spilling on the carpet. Perry notices this, and says to Ellsworth, "You are spilling coffee". This utterance expresses a proposition, that Ellsworth is spilling coffee, in virtue of the following features:

- (i) it is the production by a speaker at a time of a certain pattern of sound
- (ii) that counts as a sentence of a certain type in English
- (iii) with which English conventionally associates a certain meaning
- (iv) that utterance takes place in certain circumstances, one of which is that speaker is addressing Ellsworth.

Notice that the proposition that Ellsworth is spilling coffee is not a part of the meaning of "You are spilling coffee". But it is necessary that a singular proposition be expressed, no matter which one, as long as a speaker is addressing someone who was spilling coffee. It is not necessary that the person really is spilling coffee. In other words, the proposition expressed need not be true.

For sentences that contain proper names, we need a different analysis, for they are not context sensitive. On Perry's analysis, the semantics for the sentence "Cicero is an orator" should roughly be the following.

(PC2) An utterance *u* of "Cicero is an orator" by an agent *a* at a time *t* in circumstance *C* expresses proposition *P*

iff

*P* is the proposition that Cicero is an orator

The meaning of "Cicero is an orator" is not just the proposition expressed. It is rather a relation between speaker, time, circumstance, and the propositional content, though it is not obvious in such a sentence. If the relation obtains, then the speaker, by uttering "Cicero is an orator" at the time, expresses the propositional content. Perry says that if one understands the meaning of a sentence, one grasps the cognitive significance of an utterance of that sentence. It seems that the proposition expressed by (PC2) cannot be the cognitive significance of *u*, since (PC2) describes the relation which is the linguistic meaning of the sentence uttered and understanding the meaning of the sentence comes logically prior to grasping the cognitive significance of an utterance of a

sentence. Perry claimed earlier that the cognitive significance of an utterance of a sentence is a proposition. There must be some other proposition to serve as the cognitive significance, since neither the proposition expressed by an utterance of "Cicero is an orator" nor the proposition expressed by (PC2) is the right one. Let us see what kind of proposition is pressed into service by Perry.

Perry says that a relation theory of meaning requires that a distinction be made between the proposition expressed by an utterance of a sentence and the proposition *created* by that utterance. Given a context in which Ellsworth spills coffee, the proposition expressed by an utterance of "You are spilling coffee" is that Ellsworth is spilling coffee. The proposition created by the utterance, on the other hand is the proposition that the person uttering the sentence is addressing someone who is spilling coffee. If *u* is an utterance of "You are spilling coffee" then a precise formulation of the proposition created is something like this:  $\langle u, \text{being true iff the speaker of } u \text{ is addressing someone spilling coffee} \rangle$ . One of the constituents of the proposition created is the utterance. The proposition that Ellsworth is spilling coffee is not a constituent of the proposition created. The proposition created would be true, even if the proposition expressed is not true, as long as Perry is speaking to someone who is spilling coffee. Ellsworth, naturally, is not a constituent of the proposition created. Similarly, the proposition created by an utterance of "Cicero is spilling coffee" has the utterance as a constituent. We saw that the proposition expressed by an utterance is not a constituent of the proposition created where the sentence contains an indexical. Similarly the proposition expressed is not a constituent of the proposition created in the case where a sentence contains a proper name. I think according to Perry the proposition created in case of an utterance of "Cicero is an orator" is something like the one expressed by (PC3) or proposition (PC4). (PC3) is a sentence that expresses a proposition. (PC4) is a proposition. The proposition expressed by (PC3) is different from the proposition (PC4).

(PC3) The referent of utterance of *u* of "Cicero" is an orator.

(PC4)  $\langle u, \text{being true Cicero is an orator} \rangle$

Let us assume for argument's sake, that Perry is right about cognitive significance, that the proposition created is identical with the cognitive significance of the utterance. Then the distinction between the proposition expressed and the proposition created must solve the problems. Let us take the

first problem, the problem about non-referring names. The proposition created in such cases seems to avoid the first problem. When one utters "Vulcan is a large heavenly body", one grasps the proposition that the referent of utterance *u* of "Vulcan" is a large heavenly body. The fact that "Vulcan is a large heavenly body" expresses no proposition (according to a Naive Theorist), and has cognitive value (according to a Fregean) does not create any problem for Perry. The proposition that the referent of utterance *u* of "Vulcan" is a large heavenly body is a perfectly good proposition. Formerly the problem was this: how can an utterance which does not express a proposition have cognitive value? Now we see that we have a proposition to serve as the cognitive value namely the proposition created by the utterance.

Perry's approach also seems to reap good results in solving the second problem. The second problem was to explain how utterances of two sentences which express the same proposition can have two different cognitive significances for a single person. How do the cognitive significances of utterances of "Cicero = Cicero", "Cicero is an orator", and "He is about to be attacked", for example, differ respectively from "Cicero = Tully", "Tully is orator", and "I am about to be attacked?" "Cicero = Cicero" and "Cicero = Tully" express the same singular proposition. "Cicero is an orator" and "Tully is an orator" express the same singular proposition. Some examples of this sort involve demonstratives. Consider the example in which a speaker is looking at a series of mirrors. He is looking at the victim who is about to be attacked through those mirrors. He does not know that he is the victim. In such a context, his utterances of "He is about to be attacked" and "I am about to be attacked" express the same singular proposition. The cognitive values of these two utterances seem to be different. Perry's apparatus adequately explains these phenomena. The proposition created by an utterance *u* of "Cicero is an orator" is different proposition from the proposition created by an utterance *u'* of "Tully is an orator." One of the constituents of the former proposition is *u*. One of the constituents of the latter proposition is *u'*. *u* and *u'* are two distinct utterances. The semantics of "Cicero is an orator" gives us the following result.

- (1) The referent of utterance *u* of "Cicero" is an orator, or
- (1')  $\langle u, \text{being true iff Cicero is an orator} \rangle$
- (2) The referent of utterance *u'* of "Tully" is an orator, or



(2')  $\langle u' \text{ being true iff Cicero is an orator} \rangle$

Now the very occurrence of  $u$  creates a proposition.<sup>7</sup> In our example the proposition created by  $u$  is expressed by (1) or is identical with (1') and the proposition created by  $u'$  is expressed by (2), or is identical with (2'). We can see that an utterance  $u$  of "Cicero is an orator" creates a different proposition from the proposition created by an utterance  $u'$  of "Tully is an orator." No wonder that the cognitive significance of  $u$  is different from  $u'$ .

Unfortunately, Perry's approach generates some new problems. Take for example two utterances  $u_1$  and  $u_2$  of "Cicero is an orator."  $u_1$  and  $u_2$  express the same proposition, but they create two different propositions. Thus the cognitive significance of  $u_1$  is different from the cognitive significance of  $u_2$ , according to Perry's view. This is an unpleasant consequence. The new problem we now face is how two utterances of the sentence like "Cicero is an orator" can have different significance for a person, while intuition does not seem to support the difference. Until now, Perry's distinction between the propositions created in terms of the utterances, the contextual factors, and the linguistic meaning of the sentence, seemed plausible with regard to indexicals. But we now see that the distinctness of the utterances does not help much where contextual factors are irrelevant.

The motivation behind the distinction between the proposition created and the proposition expressed, was to explain the behaviour of the speaker. A speaker understands the meaning of a sentence and grasps the cognitive value of it. The difference in cognitive value is supposed to explain the difference in behaviour. The difference in cognitive value of two utterances of two different sentences explains the difference in responses of the speaker. Moreover the difference in cognitive value of two utterances of the same sentence also will explain the difference in responses of the speaker. For example if a speaker assents to an utterance of "Clinton is the world leader" but dissents from another utterance of the same sentence, without getting a chance to change his mind, the explanation will come from the difference in the cognitive value of two utterances of the sentence. Here, Perry's proposal seems to be effective.

Perry's idea solves one problem but creates a fresh problem. It fails to explain the similarity in the responses. For example a supporter of Clinton utters



"Clinton is the world leader." Robert who is in the audience says "Yes." Another supporter immediately utters "Clinton is the world leader" again and Robert says "Yes" again. Both the utterances seem to have the same cognitive value for him. It is plausible to suppose that he responded in the same way because the utterances have the same cognitive value for him. However, according to Perry's theory the proposition created by the first utterance is different from the proposition created by the other. The proposition created is the cognitive value of an utterance. So the cognitive value of one utterance is different from the cognitive value of the other. Given Perry's theory, it is not at all clear why Robert assents to both the utterances if they differ in cognitive value.

A competent speaker who understands the meaning of "Twain is an author" and "Clemens is an author" grasps the cognitive values of utterances of those. He assents to the former but does not assent to the latter. That suggests that the sentences differ in cognitive value. Perry has come up with the idea that they differ in the proposition that they create. The difference between the propositions created is supposed to explain the difference in response. It is doubtful however that speakers grasp the proposition created when they use the sentence. Hardly any speaker grasps the proposition that the referent of "Twain" is an author, when they use "Twain is an author". Perry may say that a speaker grasps the proposition created but is not aware of it. This will create another new problem. It is not immediately clear how a speaker can respond to an utterance of a sentence because of the proposition it creates, yet be unaware of the proposition created.

Proper names and common nouns create some general problems for Perry's approach. If Perry is right that cognitive significance of an utterance is a semantic property of that utterance, then it seems plausible to suppose that if an utterance is true, then what the utterance signifies is also true. But this is not necessarily the case. Consider an utterance of "George is a son of George's parents." The utterance supposedly expresses a necessary truth. But the cognitive significance of the utterance, that the referent of utterance *u* of "George" is a son of George's parents, is false in a world where the referent of utterance *u* of "George" is different from George Bush. In such a world, George Bush does not cease to be a son of George's parents. But the referent of "George" may not be a son of Mr. Bush and Mrs. Bush. Similarly "Gold is a metal with

number 79" expresses a necessary truth, but "The referent of "Gold" is a metal with atomic number 79" does not. Gold does not cease to be a metal with atomic number 79. But the referent of "Gold" might not be a metal with atomic number 79 in a different world. "Gold" may name fool's gold in that world. If Perry is trying to capture the cognitive significance of a proper name or a common name by a definite description of the form "the referent of "...." or "The utterance *u* of "...."refer to ...." and that again is to be regarded as the semantic property, then it seems to me that he faces a problem. The problem is that the proposition created may be contingent, while the proposition expressed is necessary on Perry's view.

Perry may reply that the proposition expressed by an utterance may be a necessary truth while the proposition created is a contingent truth. No harm is done if the proposition expressed has property different from the properties the proposition created has.

I think, however, that the problem is much deeper than it looks. The proposition expressed is a semantic property of an utterance. Perry has claimed that the proposition created is also a semantic property of an utterance. Now according to the current proposal, it is possible that the former proposition is true while the latter is false. In that case the propositions have contradictory properties. However the meaning of a sentence is the proposition expressed. Perry cannot disagree with this if he sincerely accepts the Naive Theory. An utterance of the sentence expresses the proposition. The following is the consequence of Perry's view : the proposition created is not part of the meaning of the sentence.

Now every utterance of "Twain is an author" expresses the same proposition. The sentence as well as the utterances of it express the same proposition. Since the proposition expressed is the meaning of the sentence and an utterance expresses the proposition, it makes perfect sense to say that utterances of the sentence have the same meaning. It presupposes that utterances have meaning. What is strange about Perry's view is this : on a traditional Fregean view, a speaker understands the meaning of the sentence and grasps the cognitive value of it. The cognitive value of an utterance is the only proposition that a speaker or a hearer grasps. This is not so in Perry's view. According to Perry's view, there are two propositions, one for the meaning of an utterance

and the other is for its cognitive value.

If the above line of thinking is correct, it is not necessary that one who understands the meaning of a sentence, will believe what Perry claims to be the cognitive significance of an utterance of that sentence. In that case the second, the fourth and the fifth features of cognitive value that Perry cites are questionable. Further evidence against Perry's claim comes from the fact that one may understand and believe the proposition expressed by "Necessarily George is a son of George's parents" but may reject or disbelieve that necessarily the referent of the utterance *u* of "George" is a son of George's parents.

There are at least two of reasons why a speaker might reject or disbelieve a metalinguistic proposition of the form that the referent of an utterance *u* of "....."..... One reason is that there is hardly any evidence that speakers grasp such a metalinguistic proposition while they grasp the proposition expressed by a sentence. The second reason is this. When someone understands and believes the proposition that George is a son of George's parents, one knows in some sense that George is a son of *George's* parents. On the other hand, one who gasps the proposition that the referent of an utterance *u* of "George" is a son of George's parents may not know that the referent of "George" is a son of *George's* parents because it is quite possible that the referent of an utterance of *u* of "George" may not be a son of George's parents. The above reasons are plausible evidence, I think, against Perry's view that one who understands and believes the proposition expressed, will also believe the proposition created.

What shall we say of Perry's attempt to show that the semantics of a sentence is adequate to explain the cognitive value of the sentence? He is adopting the Fregean condition of adequacy. The condition of adequacy is that a semantic account of a language must provide answers to questions concerning the cognitive value of utterance in the language. Specifically the condition requires that the meaning of a sentence should explain the assents and dissents of speakers who understand the sentences. The meaning of the sentence "Twain is an author" and the meaning of the sentence "Clemens is an author" should explain, according to the traditional view, why a speaker may accept one but not the other. We should reject the condition of adequacy as well as the explanation of cognitive value in accordance with that condition. We should

reject Perry's explanation of cognitive value.

### NOTES

1. Braun (1991) argues persuasively against Perry's theory of cognitive significance. I am not discussing Braun in this paper. However my criticism of Perry has been influenced by Braun's ideas.
2. Wettstein (1986) notes that the three competing account of the semantics of "that" concern the question of which rule governs our linguistic practice. It does not concern nor does it have any obvious implication for the question of how speakers cognize the referents of their demonstratives. None of these rules given us a plausible candidate for that role.
3. Perry (1988) pp 4-5.
4. Before starting the discussion a clarification is necessary. The discussion is oscillating between the cognitive significance of a sentence to the cognitive significance of an utterance of a sentence. The reason is that Frege did not talk about an utterance of a sentence when he raised the problem. However, Perry and Wettstein discuss the cognitive significance of an utterance of a sentence. Further philosophers have not made a clear distinction between cognitive significance of a sentence and cognitive significance of an utterance of a sentence. Intuitively however, it seems that the cognitive significance of an utterance of a sentence is more appropriate since the problem of cognition arises when the cogniser comes in contact with an utterance of a sentence as a speaker or listener (writer or reader) *Prima facie* it seems appropriate. So, I will stick to an utterance of a sentence.
5. Braun (1991) gives persuasive argument for the view that the semantic content of a name is illsuited to serve the role of cognitive value.
6. Perry (1988) p. 7.
7. Perry (1988) p. 8.

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