

DUMMETT ON SEMANTIC ANTI-REALISM : A CRITIQUE

SATRUGHNA BEHERA

Michael Dummett propounds a theory of anti-realist semantics in the philosophy of Language¹. He argues against classical semantics which assumes a form of realism. This form of realism is based on two significant propositions, viz (i) to understand a statement (either partially or completely) is to grasp its truth-conditions and (ii) these truth-conditions are not instantiated in assertions themselves, but they somehow transcend the assertions. The first proposition entails the truth-functional applicability of assertions mappable with the facts available in the world. The second proposition suggests the objective existence of certain truth-elements that transcend verification. Semantic anti-realism is generally advocated in an exclusive refutation of one of the above mentioned propositions though some attempt to refute both the propositions². In other words, one may deny the first (realist) proposition without arguing the second (realist) proposition and, so also, one may deny the second proposition without arguing against the first proposition. An attempt is made in this paper to show that Dummett never succeeds to deny the first (realist) proposition and his anti-realist arguments are more concerned with the denial of the second (realist) proposition. Dummett in his several papers argues against the realist standpoint about a class of statements that understanding a statement in the class involves truth-conditions, at least in some cases, capable of being satisfied³. These truth-conditions are called "recognition-independent"⁴ and more significantly characterized as "evidence-transcendent"⁵ or "verification-transcendent"⁶. I attempt to show that Dummett's anti-realism appeals to truth conditions, though not in the very way the realists propound, because a grasp of truth-conditions is not sufficient for linguistic understanding and defining a general theory of meaning for the natural language.

I

According to Dummett, the semantic anti-realist holds that "the meaning of a statement is intrinsically connected with that which we count as evidence for or against the statement"⁷. The conditions which determine the evidence for a statement can be asserted (or denied). These assertibility conditions are never verification-transcendent. If assertibility-conditions are satisfied, then it is possible in principle, to detect their satisfaction. Anything that is called 'evidence' is a condition in a linguistic situation. Semantic anti-realism, for Dummett, is then the view that the meaning of a statement is determined through its assertibility-conditions. That is, assertibility conditions, not truth-conditions, constitute the meaning. As Dummett puts it,

The fundamental difference between the anti-realist and the realist lies in this : that...the anti-realist interpretes' 'capable of being known' to mean 'capable of being known by us', where as the realist interpretes it to mean 'capable of being known by some hypothetical being whose intellectual capacities and powers of observation may exceed our own'⁸.

The obvious consequence is that in order to understand a statement one must know its assertibility-conditions. This amounts to that we do not first come to understand, for example, what a statement means and then ask ourselves about the appropriate conditions which determine its meaning. If we have no idea what counts as the evidence for or against it, then, according to Dummett, we have no idea that what the statement means. Thus anti-realist semantics contends that if we do understand a statement, we arrive at a position that our understanding involves a grasp of assertibility conditions which determine the semantic evidence for or against it. This thought leads to two arguments such that (i) We cannot understand a statement if we have no grasp of its assertibility-conditions and (ii) that we understand a statement (and therefore grasp its truth conditions, if that is what understanding involves) by grasping its assertibility-conditions. Dummett presents the anti-realist arguments more explicitly in "The Reality of the past"⁹, and "The philosophical Basis of Intuitionistic Logic"¹⁰. The main thrust of the arguments is that the meaning of a statement is 'exhaustively determined' by its use. Dummett means that there can be nothing in our understanding a statement "which is not manifest or capable of becoming manifest-in the use made of it". This anti-realist theory thus denies the fact that linguistic understanding always involves a grasp of truth-conditions. Because in certain

cases the need of these conditions lies beyond our capability to recognize them. This suggests that in certain cases a grasp of truth-conditions is irrelevant and redundant to our linguistic uses, to our linguistic practices. When our linguistic practices are insensitive to the satisfaction of certain conditions, a grasp of these conditions can make no contribution to our understanding. However, it does not follow from this argument that linguistic understanding never involves a grasp of truth-conditions. Rather the argument establishes the fact that understanding always involves certain conditions which are not necessarily the assertibility conditions.

Dummett seems to be highly impressed by later Wittgenstein's slogan that 'meaning is use'. This leads him to express the idea that to determine the meaning of an expression is to know its contextual employment i.e. to know the circumstances in which it can be asserted or denied. These circumstances (conditions) are concerned with the linguistic acts of the person to whom the understanding is attributed¹¹. The use of assertions itself matters with the meaning. The doctrine 'meaning is use' accentuates the fact that semantic ascription is quite public and conventional. The meaning of expressions are constituted by linguistic convention resulted from our continuous use of language in socio-linguistic situations available. Dummett's semantic anti-realism greatly acknowledges these attributions.

Dummett's conception of a theory of meaning is framed by his criticism of the traditional belief that meaning determines extension. No one, as Dummett rightly says, "has ever supposed that meaning by itself determines extension"¹². Instead, he suggests "what people have supposed is that nothing conventional, save meaning, is relevant to fixing the extension of a word, since very relevant convention must be part of the meaning"¹³. This argument goes against Frege who accepts the belief that meaning determines extension from words to sentences or statements. Frege believes in the objective existence of senses where the truth is the central notion to determine the semantic values of the statements. Dummett, as it is argued above, opts for the doctrine that meaning along with whatever is non-conventional (the facts) determines the truth-values of our statements. That is to say, the semantic theory accomodates a theory of meaning in which truth is not the central notion. Truth is not primitive to the language use; it is involved in it. Meaning is conventional since linguistic conventions constitute it¹⁵.

By discussing the task of a theory of meaning what he urges in this connection applies to those for whom truth is not the basic notion as well as to those for whom it is. As Dummett puts it,

The conception of the semantic value of a predicate as a function from the domain of objects to the semantic values of sentences is of quite general validity for any possible semantic theory, and gives the only way in which we may arrive at the correct notion for a given theory¹⁶.

In his "What is a theory of Meaning?II"¹⁷ he also maintains this thought. He suggests that the 'first stage' of a theory (semantic) that it determines the meaning of an expression involves the principles governing the conditions under which we decide it to be true or false¹⁸. He asks "what but the meaning of a sentence can determine what we count as a ground for accepting as true?". For him, 'meaning alone' determines whether or not something is a ground for accepting the sentence. And, finally he comes to the conclusion :

To replace a realistic theory of meaning by a verificationist one is to take a first step towards meeting the requirement that we incorporate into our theory of sense on account of the basis on which we judge the truth-values of our sentences, since it does explain meaning in terms of actual human capacities for the recognition of truth¹⁹.

It is in this conception of a semantic theory that accounts for Dummett's hostility towards holism. Dummett views a molecular view of language. But according to holistic view 'meaning consists in the place which a statement occupies in the complicated network... of our linguistic practices. This holistic conception of a semantic theory becomes unimpressive²⁰. This is because holism calls into question the distinction between fact and convention on which Dummettian semantic theory is based. The basic purpose to construct a general theory of meaning, as Dummett understands it, is to explain our assignments of semantic value²¹. The protagonists of a realist theory of meaning, Dummett claims, share this understanding which embodies an explanatory aim. This explanatory aim of a theory of meaning is semantically unwarranted. For, a theory of meaning can be framed through our linguistic competence²². A theory of meaning is a theory of understanding. A theory of understanding consists in our linguistic competence which, in turn, is instantiated in our actual mastery of language.

II

Thus, according to semantic anti-realism what is significant in our understanding of a statement must make a difference to our performance (actual or potential). This contends that since a grasp of verification-transcendent truth-conditions can make no performative difference, it does say nothing about the linguistic understanding. Verification-transcendent truth conditions neither constitute our linguistic competence nor are they part of it. But anti-realist may agree that to understand a statement (at least in some cases) is to grasp its truth-conditions since truth-conditions cannot be completely excluded from the semantic considerations. That is, in minimal sense anti-realist accepts the realist's first proposition (i.e. to understand a statement is to grasp its truth conditions) without advocating a theoretical realism. To say explicitly that we grasp truth conditions (even verification-transcendent ones) by virtue of our grasp of assertibility-conditions. In other words, truth conditions are involved in the assertibility conditions. Semantic anti-realism, in this sense, appears as a form of friendly formidable semantic realism by bringing the notion of meaning into the centre of linguistic understanding.

We may now argue that if a grasp of truth conditions is nothing over and above an appropriate grasp of assertibility-conditions and where an appropriate grasp is one accompanied by the recognition that the fulfilment of such conditions is no guarantee of truth, then the realist propositions can be accepted by the anti-realist. What semantic anti-realism suggests us is; we should not take the model of grasping truth-conditions seriously. Understanding a statement is not as if one takes hold of something lying beyond the detectable (decidable) conditions that justify assertion. Knowing the assertibility conditions of a statement and to know them along with the assertibility-conditions of other statements is also to know truth-conditions (factual evidence). Grasping truth-conditions is not a queer separate act; it is inevitably related to our mastery in the recognition of evidential facts. The temptation of replacement of truth-conditions by assertibility conditions proves to be logically superfluous. This temptation ponders Wittgensteinians in the discussions of following a rule. We train to respond in following a particular rule in a certain way in limited cases and then we know who to go on. It is tempting to say that our going on is regulated by our grasp of a rule. And we can certainly do this as long as it is not conceived as an interpretation. Interpretations at last do not constitute the

meaning. Semantic anti-realist makes this argument for our grasp of truth-conditions²³.

Moreover, a careful examination of Dummett's semantic anti-realism reveals that he does not, in principle, advocate a verificationist theory of meaning. He writes:

I should now be inclined to say that under any theory of meaning whatever... we can represent the meaning (sense) of a statement as given by the condition for it to be true²⁴.

The problem here, as Dummett suggests, "is not whether meaning is to be explained in terms of truth-conditions but of what notion of truth is admissible"²⁵. This makes room for the realist's propositions. That is, truth-conditions are to be accepted on the refutation of verification-transcendence. Dummett excludes the doctrine of conclusive verification because "often such conclusive verification is not to be had"²⁶. Further more he says in "Realism", "there may indeed be some empirical statements whose truth can never be known with certainty, for which there cannot be any wholly conclusive evidence"²⁷. He adds to this by saying, "for such statements there will, for the anti-realist, be no question of their being anything in virtue of which they are definitively true but only of things in virtue of which they are probably true; the notion of absolute truth simply will not apply to such statements"²⁸. These arguments of Dummett puzzle other protagonists of semantic anti-realism²⁹. The problem is, if the sense of absolute does not apply and it is inadmissible in such cases, how can we have a conception of verification at all? Dummett's reluctance to accept verification-transcendence completely stems from his failure to distinguish between theoretical realism and the realist's propositions. Dummett was aware that if he acknowledges verification transcendence and at the same time would commit to the doctrine of representing meaning as a grasp of truth-conditions, then he will do nothing for the semantic anti-realism. Dummett's interpretation shows that he accepts truth conditions when these are disconnected from objectionable notion of truth. According to assertibility- condition the theoretical realist's notion of absolute truth is rejected and at the same time Dummett, in a minimal sense, accepts the realist's proposition. And since he rejects the theoretical realism, he fails to satisfy the sceptic need of rational justification in order to establish absolute certainty of a semantic theory.

III

Dummettian semantic anti-realism, therefore, seems to be compatible with scepticism. On the one hand it rules out theoretical realism and on the other hand it does not take truth-conditions or any constitutive matter of fact as the sole determinant of semantic values. But Dummett's argument shows that his anti-realism involves realist propositions which lead us to get hold in the sceptic's argument. The sceptic arrives at his doubts by means of two presumptions. The first presumption asserts the possibility of a statement being false in spite of the facts (evidences) available (or may be available) for its truth. These facts may be called as, "the best evidence we now possess," "the best evidence we will ever possess" or, so also, "the best possible evidence available to us with our cognitive capacities". The second presumption states that unless the facts we have rule out the possibility of a statement's falsehood, it is impossible to know that the statement is being true. It is obvious that anti-realism is conditioned with the second presumption and in its most extreme form its argument is consistent with the first one. Thus anti-realism endorses the sceptical uncertainty even with the most extreme form of Cartesian scepticism. In other words, Dummett's epistemic commitment leads this sceptical position. This distorts anti-realism by drawing attention away from the possibility as emphasised by Dummett himself that one can be anti-realist without being a reductionist. A reductionist anti-realist, Dummett suggests, commits to the view that a statement of the disputed class (for instance, a statement about the person's outer behaviour) is also true³¹. This reductionist commitment entails that the 'suitable statement of the reductive class' reduces (equates) the meaning to the associated statement of the disputed class. Dummett calls it as reductivism in semantics.

According to Dummett, a reductivist proposes the view that "no statement of the given (or disputed) class can be true unless some suitable statement or statements of the reductivist class are true, and ...the truth of those statements of the reductivist class guarantees the truth of the corresponding statement of the class"³². Semantic anti-realism in this sense "does not...need to take on a reductionist form"³³. On the contrary, it holds that the use of a statement (of the disputed class) expresses the views which establish conditions by which the statement becomes true or false. For there remain no use-independent facts to

determine the truth/falsity of a statement (of any class). This shows that reductionist's proposal is too limited as it permits us, in principle to express truth-conditions of any statement in the disputed class without using the semantic characteristic of that class. A reductionist, thus, fails to save meaning for the matter of truth. This amounts to that reductivism always directs arguments for the refutation of the scepticism. A reductionist significantly assumes the reality of the physical facts. The sceptic about other minds, on the reductionist account, can be refuted once we succeed in reducing statement about the mental content to statement about behaviour. A reductionist in this sense is called behaviourist or physicalist. Dummett accepts non-reductivism, not because that the evidence he provides fails to guarantee the truth, but because that it is open to doubt the meaning of the statement as it is meant to support. If we are satisfied with what we ordinarily conceive as facts that do not take care of the sceptic's (or reductivist's) account of facts. The problem of anti-realism lies in that it epistemically commits to the conditions for the truth in terms of a kind of non-reductionist evidence which does not impress the sceptic.

Dummett advocates the principle of bivalence and argues that the principle follows from the realist propositions. The principle of bivalence states that 'every statement is determinately either true or false'³⁴. Dummett supposes that "we have succeeded in ascribing to our statements a meaning of such a kind that their truth or falsity is, in general, independent of whether we know, or have any means of knowing, what truth-value theory have. Since, in understanding a statement, we know what it is for the statement to be true, we thereby also know what it is for it to be false, i.e. it is false precisely in all cases in which the condition for its truth does not obtain; since this condition is taken to be one which either does or does not obtain independently of our knowledge, it follows that every statement is either true or false, likewise independently of our knowledge"³⁵. That is, a statement is false in all cases in which it is not true where the bivalence holds.

Dummett denies the verification-transcendence of truth. This leads us to believe that on the assumption that there are undecidable statements, Dummett cannot accept the principle of bivalence. His "Realism" attempts to show this. Dummett tells us that anti-realist shows, for statements of a given class, that "we possess no legitimate objectivist notion of truth, no notion of truth transcending our capacity to recognize such statements as true, and a fortiori no

notion of truth subject to the principle of bivalence"³⁶. And he continues " if such a statement as " Jones was brave' is true, it must be true in virtue of the sort of fact we have been taught to regard as justifying us in asserting it. It cannot be true in virtue of a fact of some quite different sort of which we can have no direct knowledge, for otherwise the statement 'Jones was brave' would not have the meaning that we have given it"³⁷. The limitation of anti- realist's argument, as Dummett represents it, is that bivalence will separate the statement 'Jone was brave' from the meaning we have given it, which is the only meaning it has. However, if it is true that the anti-realist opts to accept the realist propositions, then he has no room to deny bivalence. This argument for the acceptance of the principle of bivalence shows the anti-realist's accomplishment with the realist. That is, the anti-realist argument does not threaten the realist's propositions and these propositions are all about the sceptic's need formulate his doubts.

Dummett can argue that anti-realism about linguistic understanding is a view about meaning that promises to advance our understanding. However, if he commits it to be the only view about meaning it will not stand against scepticism. Dummett's failure to meet the sceptic need does not lie in his arguments but in the assumption that the arguments seem to be relevant to the contemporary concerns of epistemology. This leads some contemporary thinkers, e.g. Richard Rorty³⁸ to suppose that anti-realism offers a round about but improved way of doing anti-sceptical epistemology. Richard Rorty thinks that "Dummett sees philosophy of language as fundamental because he sees epistemological issues, now at least, being formulated correctly as issues within the theory of meaning"³⁹. According to Rorty, Dummett " argues with Descartes about the importance of the issues which emerged out of the ways of ideas"⁴⁰. But he thinks that we have only recently been able to state them precisely.⁴¹ Dummett as it seems to Rorty, believes that once the old questions are expressed in the right way as the questions in the philosophy of language the linguistic philosophers will surpass the traditional epistemologists. Nevertheless, Dummett's anti-realist approach to understand language has a considerable direct effect on the work of linguistic epistemologists⁴². Admitted that, it, I suggest, leaves room to accept Dummett as an anti-realist semanticist at a first glance than to be a linguistic epistemologist.

NOTES

1. Dummett, M. *Truth and Other Enigmas* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass, 1978).
2. See Michale Devitt, "Dummett's Anti-Realism" *Journal of Philosophy*. 80 (1982), pp.197-225.
3. For detail discussion on this point see Dummett's "The Reality of the past", p.358, "The justification of Deduction" P.136, "Realism"(1963), p.146 and the preface to *Truth and Other Enigmas*. pp.XXI and XI.
4. See Dummett's Critical notice of L. E. J. Brouwer, *Collected Works, Mind*, 89 (1983), p.609.
5. See Devitt, "Dummett's Anti Realism", *Journal of Philosophy*, 80 (1983), p.74.
6. See Crispin Wright "Truth conditions and criteria (II)", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Suppl.* Vol. 50(1976) p.225.
7. See Dummett, "Realism" (1963) in *Truth and Other Enigmas* p.162.
8. Dummett, "Truth" in *Truth and Other Enigmas* p.24.
9. See Dummett, "The Reality of the past" in *Truth and Other Enigmas*. pp.358-374.
10. See Dummett, "The Philosophical Basis of Intuitionistic Logic" in *Truth and Other Enigmas*, pp. 215-248.
11. *Ibid.* p.216.
12. Dummett "The Social Character of Meaning" in *Truth and Other Enigmas*. p.420.
13. *Ibid.* p.420.
14. See G. Frege, "Thoughts" in *Logical Investigations*, Ed. by P. T. Geach, (Blackwell, Oxford, 1977).
15. See Dummett, *The Interpretation of Frege's Philosophy*. (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1982).
16. *Ibid.* p.168.
17. Dummett, "What is a theory of Meaning? II" in *Truth and Meaning*. eds G. Evans and J. McDowell, (Clarendon Press, Oxford,1976) pp-67-137.
18. *Ibid.* p.131.

19. *Ibid.* p.136.
20. This conception of holism follows from "The Philosophical Basis of Intuitionistic Logic". p.218.
21. This explanatory aim that Dummett assumes is firstly observed by J. McDowell. See J. McDowell" On "The Reality of the past" in *Action and Interpretation* eds. C Hookway and P. Pettit, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1978), pp. 142-143.
22. Dummett suggests that the theory of meaning has not explanatory aim, but it aims to represent the real linguistic competence of language users. See Dummett "What is a theory of Meaning? (II)" in *Mind and Language*, p.70.
23. For detail discussion of this issue see Saul A. Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language. An Elementary Exposition* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1082).
24. Dummett. Preface to *Truth and Other Enigmas* p.xxii.
25. *Ibid.* p.XXII.
26. *Ibid.* p.XXXVIII.
27. Dummett "Realism" (1963) in *Truth and Other Enigmas*, P.162.
28. *Ibid.* p.162.
29. See Crispin Wright, "Anti-Realist Semantics : The Role of Criteria" in *Idealism: Past and Present*, ed. G. Vesey (Cambridge University Press Cambridge, 1982)
30. Dummett, however, suggests that anti-realiam argument is inconsistent with scepticism. See Dummett, Realism (1963), p.153 in *Truth and Other Enigmas*.
31. Dummett, "Realism (1963)", in *Truth and Other Enigmas*, p.156.
32. See Dummett "Realism" (1982), p.70.
33. Dummett "The Reality of the Past", in *Truth and Other Enigmas*, p.361.
34. See Dummett, preface to *Truth and Other Enigmas* p. XXIX.
35. See Dummett, "The Reality of the Past", in *Truth and Other Enigmas*, p.358.
36. See Dummett, "Realism" (1982), p.94.
37. See Dummett, "Truth" in *Truth and Other Enigmas* p.16.
38. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton University Press, 1979).

39. *Ibid.* p.263.
40. *Ibid.*
41. *Ibid.*
42. See Noam Chomsky, *Knowledge of Language : Its Nature, Origin and Use* (Newyork: Praeger publishers, 1986).