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978-0-521-49887-6 - Coming to our Senses: A Naturalistic Program for Semantic Localism

Michael Devitt

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Michael Devitt is a distinguished philosopher of language. In this new book he takes up foundational issues in semantics.

Three important questions lie at the core of this book: What are the main objectives of semantics? Why are they worthwhile? How should we accomplish them? Devitt answers these “methodological” questions naturalistically and explores what semantic program arises from the answers. The approach is anti-Cartesian, rejecting the idea that linguistic or conceptual competence yields any privileged access to meanings.

This new methodology is used first against holism. Devitt argues for a truth-referential localism and in the process rejects direct-reference, two-factor, and verificationist theories. The book concludes by arguing against revisionism, eliminativism, and the idea that we should ascribe narrow meanings to explain behavior.

A substantial contribution to the literature on meaning and intentionality, this important study will be of particular interest to philosophers of language and mind and could be used in graduate-level seminars in these areas. The book will also appeal to readers in linguistics and the other cognitive sciences.

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Preface

Two things led to this book. The more immediate, but less important, cause was my concern about semantic, or meaning, holism. Holism has, as Jerry Fodor says, “something of the status of the received doctrine in the philosophy of language” (1987: 57). And it is urged, or taken for granted, in psychology and artificial intelligence. Yet it seemed to me, as it did to Fodor, clearly false (“crazy” was his word). So, in 1989, I set out to show this.

First, I had to show that the arguments for holism were no good. The main argument stems from Quine: The localist idea that *some but not all* inferential properties of a token constitute its meaning (or content) is alleged to yield an analytic–synthetic distinction with epistemologically objectionable consequences. You can accept this argument without becoming a holist, of course, if you are prepared to adopt an “atomistic” localism according to which *no* inferential property *ever* constitutes the meaning of a token. That is Fodor’s path. However, atomism strikes me as implausibly extreme. Very likely, the meanings of some tokens are atomistic, but surely the meanings of others – perhaps ‘bachelor’ is an example – are not. I want to defend a “molecular” localism, according to which *a few* of the inferential properties of a token *may* constitute its meaning. I think that I can have what I want because I reject the Quinean argument: Molecular localism does *not* have epistemologically objectionable consequences unless it is saddled, gratuitously, with an epistemic thesis. I also reject other arguments against there being a “principled basis” for the molecular localist’s distinction among inferential properties.

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It is one thing to reject arguments against there being a principled basis, it is another to show that there is one. This was the second thing I had to do to refute holism and establish localism. I found doing this much harder than I expected.

Attempting to do it soon raised some very general questions. What are the semantic tasks? Why are they worthwhile? How should we accomplish them? I have been bothered by these “methodological” questions from my semantic beginnings, long before holism marred my horizon. Signs of this bother are to be found scattered through my earlier writings.

That brings me to the less immediate, but more important, cause of this book: my desire to confront the methodological questions directly and thoroughly and to see what semantic program would follow from my answers. This cause is largely independent of the one arising from holism but, as I have indicated, not entirely so. My first use of my methodology is to show that localism has the principled basis it needs. So the program I urge is localistic.

Some parts of my semantic program – for example, truth-referentialism – are common enough. Some parts – for example, molecular localism – are not common at all (although I am here, unusually, in agreement with Michael Dummett). Some parts – for example, the view that a token has more than one meaning – are positively rare. I think that the main interest of this book lies not so much in these substantive theses as in its proposal of a novel methodology and in its use of this to support those theses.

I had a problem finding a title. A straightforwardly descriptive title using some combination of such well-worn terms as ‘meaning’, ‘mind’, ‘semantic’, ‘reference’, ‘representation’, ‘content’, ‘truth’, even ‘holism’ or ‘localism’, and certainly ‘realism’ or ‘reality’ would make the eyes glaze (and likely raise the question, “Wasn’t that one of Putnam’s books?”). I sought the help of my colleague, Michael Slote. In describing the book to him, I said that it proposes a methodology that it then uses against some popular but, in my view, very implausible views in semantics. Among these are holism, “two-factor” theories, and verifica-

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tionism. Among them also is the “‘Fido’-Fido,” or “Millian,” theory of names, recently resurrected by “direct-reference” philosophers. According to this theory, a name lacks a sense, its meaning being simply its property of referring to its bearer. Finally, I emphasized to Slote that the semantic program proposed in the book was intended to be naturalistic and hence “derived from experience.” Putting all this together, in a divine moment of inspiration while “in the bathroom,” he thought of the nice pun “Coming to Our Senses.” (I should add that the senses I come to for names are not Fregean; they are nondescriptive senses made up of causal modes of reference.) The subtitle was easy and all my own work.

Work on the book led to two “unpublications,” “Meaning Localism” and “What Did Quine Show Us about Meaning Holism?,” and then to several publications. These are “Localism and Analyticity” (1993a), which is a brief early version of some ideas in Chapters 1 and 3; “A Critique of the Case for Semantic Holism” (1993b), of which Chapter 1 is a modified version; “Semantic Localism: Who Needs a Principled Basis?” (1994a), which is a brief early version of some ideas in Chapters 2 and 3; and “The Methodology of Naturalistic Semantics” (1994b), of which Chapter 2 is a modified version.

These papers, as well as draft chapters, have been delivered at many conferences and universities over the last five years. The book has benefitted from the ensuing discussions. It has also benefitted from the comments on some of these items of at least the following (my apologies to those omitted): Louise Antony, Ned Block, David Braun, Alex Byrne, Fiona Cowie, Rey Elugardo, Harry Field, Jerry Fodor, Peter Godfrey-Smith, Dorothy Grover, Gil Harman, David Lewis, Eric Lormand, Peter Ludlow, Bill Lycan, Graham Oppy, Greg Ray, Michael Slote, Kim Sterelny, Corliss Swain, Ken Taylor, and, especially, Georges Rey.

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