

Against Expressionism: Wittgenstein, Searle, and Semantic Content

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Introduction

In this paper, I present Wittgenstein's criticisms of a group of popular theories, which I call "expressionism." Expressionist theories of meaning claim that means of representation (e.g. sounds) represent semantic content by virtue of their relation to mental states. Wittgenstein, however, presents strong criticisms of such a theory. As an example of an expressionist theory of language, I will focus on the work of John Searle. Searle explicitly argues for a sophisticated version of expressionism that does not rely on phenomenal mental rules. Nevertheless, Searle's theory succumbs to Wittgenstein's criticism.

1. Searle and Expressionism

According to Searle, a speaker typically has two intentions in performing a linguistic act: 1) a meaning intention and 2) a communicative intention (Searle 165-166, 1983). Searle holds that meaning intentions are prior to communicative intentions in the sense that a person must represent the world in some fashion if she is to communicate that representation. Indeed, a person may intend to perform a meaningful linguistic act without intending to communicate with an interlocutor. A person cannot, by contrast, intend to communicate with an interlocutor without intending to perform a meaningful linguistic act. For example, a person can intend that her vocal performance be an utterance of the statement "Property is theft" even in a case where she does not address herself to an interlocutor. She cannot, on the other hand, intend to communicate with an interlocutor without intending that her vocal performance mean something – that it be, for example, an illocutionary act like the utterance of "Property is theft." As Searle sees it, a linguistic act is performed communicatively if and only if a speaker intends that an interlocutor recognize the performance of the action as a particular illocutionary act (Searle 168, 1983).

Searle's notion of a meaning intention is at the heart of his semantic theory. A speaker's meaning intention is her intention that a means of representation (R) represent some content (C). For Searle, this intention makes the difference between the production of meaningless physical facts and the performance of a meaningful linguistic act. Sounds and marks become representations when a person utters or scribbles them with the intention that they have conditions of satisfaction (Searle 164, 1983). The conditions of satisfaction for some linguistic act are the states of affairs that must obtain or come about in order for it to be satisfied. For instance, if a person makes the statement "The war in Iraq is a moral and political disaster," the conditions of satisfaction for this statement are that the war in Iraq is a moral and political disaster. A linguistic act is meaningful in that it is performed with the intention that it specify a possible state of the world that will satisfy it.

According to Searle, linguistic acts derive their meaning from intentional mental states. Intentional mental states, on the other hand, are directly and inherently related to their conditions of satisfaction. Nothing further is required to establish this link (Searle vii, 1983). The syn-

tactic or formal properties of the state are irrelevant to whether it specifies particular conditions of satisfaction (Searle 12, 1983). For example, a belief that there is life on Mars is different from a belief that neo-liberal economic policies impoverish much of the world because they are true under different circumstances. For Searle, linguistic acts derive their capacity to represent the world from the direct and inherent relation of intentional mental states to the world.

2. The Paradox: Meaning and Rules

Throughout his later work, Wittgenstein gives examples of mental rules with the intention of showing that means of representation cannot be linked to represented contents by such rules. In the *Philosophical Investigations*, he considers several kinds of mental rule which might be thought to effect such a connection. He writes, for instance,

When someone defines the names of colours for me by pointing to samples and saying "This colour is called 'blue', this 'green'...." this case can be compared in many respects to putting a table in my hands, with the words written under the colour-samples... One is now inclined to extend the comparison: to have understood the definition means to have in one's mind an idea of the thing defined, and that is a sample or picture. So if I am shown various different leaves and told "This is called a 'leaf'", I get an idea of the shape of a leaf, a picture of it in my mind. (*PI*, §173)

Wittgenstein levels two basic objections at such attempts to link means of representation to represented contents: 1) a mental rule can offer no more guidance in acting than does a physical rule and 2) with respect to a mental rule there is no distinction between being guided by or obeying the rule and merely *seeming* to be guided by or obey the rule.

To establish the first point, Wittgenstein shows that a mental rule is no better than a physical rule in that it can be used differently. He writes,

Well suppose that a picture does come before your mind when you hear the word "cube", say the drawing of a cube. In what sense can this picture fit or fail to fit a use of the word "cube"? – Perhaps you say: "It's quite simple; - if that picture occurs to me and I point to a triangular prism for instance, and say it is a cube, then this use of the word doesn't actually fit the picture." – But doesn't it fit? I have purposefully so chosen the example that it is quite easy to imagine a *method of projection* according to which the picture does fit after all. (*PI*, §139)

The possession of a mental rule cannot be the bridge linking a means of representation (R) to some content (C) since even a mental rule must be understood or meant in some way. A diagram illustrating parallel parking, for instance, may be understood accidentally or deliberately as a diagram illustrating how to pull out from a parking spot along the street. Simply bringing such a diagram to mind, then, when given an order to park along the street (say at a licensing exam) cannot amount to understanding the order. (*PI*, §140)

To establish the second point, Wittgenstein stresses what is today called the “normative” character of rules (Kripke 37, 1982). A rule prescribes how things ought to be done under certain circumstances and serves the purposes of guidance, instruction, and justification for this reason. Mental rules, however, lack this quality. Wittgenstein explains

Let us imagine a table (something like a dictionary) that exists only in our imagination. A dictionary can be used to justify the translation of a word X by a word Y. But are we also to call it a justification if such a table is to be looked up only in the imagination? – “Well, yes; then it is a subjective justification.” – But justification consists in appealing to something independent. – “But surely I can appeal from one memory to another. For example, I don’t know if I have remembered the time of departure of a train right and to check it I call to mind how a page of the time-table looked. Isn’t it the same here?” – No; for this process has got to produce a memory which is actually *correct*. If the mental image of the time-table could not itself be *tested* for correctness, how could it confirm the correctness of the first memory? (*PI*, §265)

Since a mental rule is private, there is no standard by which to judge whether it is followed other than that it *seems* to be so to the person who possesses it. The distinction between what the rule *actually* prescribes and what it *seems* to prescribe thereby collapses.

3. A Rejoinder

It may seem that these arguments do not apply to the kind of expressionism offered by Searle. Whereas Wittgenstein is concerned in these passages with a theory that links means of representation to their represented contents using mental rules, Searle’s theory links means of representation to their represented contents via Intentional mental states. These states are not specters in the phenomenal theater of the mind like the tables Wittgenstein considers. Searle argues that these states are related directly and inherently to their conditions of satisfaction. As he explains,

A belief is intrinsically a representation in this sense: it simply consists in an Intentional content and a psychological mode... It does not require some outside Intentionality in order to become a representation, because if it is a belief it already intrinsically is a representation. Nor does it require some nonintentional entity, some formal or syntactical object, associated with the belief which the agent uses to produce the belief (Searle 22, 1983).

Linguistic acts, conversely, are indirectly linked to their conditions of satisfaction in virtue of this direct relation.

It is doubtful that Wittgenstein would view this position as an improvement on a theory according to which mental rules are this link. In the *Blue Book* he writes,

Now we might say that whenever we give someone an order by showing him an arrow, and don’t do it ‘mechanically’ (without thinking), we *mean* the arrow in one way or another. And this process of meaning, of whatever kind it may be, can be represented by another arrow (pointing in the same direction or the opposite of the first). In this picture of ‘meaning and saying’ it is essential that we should imagine the processes of saying and meaning to take place in two different spheres. Is it then correct to say that no arrow could be the meaning, as every arrow could be meant the opposite way? (*BB*, 33-34)

According to Searle, meaningless physical facts become meaningful representations by being related to Intentional

mental states. As he writes, “Entities which are not intrinsically Intentional can be made Intentional by, so to speak, intentionally decreeing them to be so” (Searle 175, 1983). An arrow, for instance, is an instruction because someone so intends it. However, according to Wittgenstein, this “decree” that some means of representation represent something relies on a means of representation. Thus, one can think of it as a mental arrow or a mental sentence like “Means of representation (R) represents content (C)” accompanying the other, external means of representation. But, of course, such mental representations fall prey to Wittgenstein’s criticisms of mental rules.

Searle might argue in response that Intentional mental states are *inherently related* to their contents. There is no such thing as “using an Intentional state differently,” since the relationship between the state and the content it represents is inherent in the state itself (Searle 22, 1983). In opposition to this Wittgenstein writes,

What one wishes to say is: “Every sign is capable of interpretation; but the *meaning* mustn’t be capable of interpretation. It is the last interpretation.” Now I assume that you take the meaning to be a process accompanying the saying, and that it is translatable into, and so far equivalent to a further sign. You have therefore further to tell me what you take to be the distinguishing mark between a *sign* and *the meaning*. If you do so, e.g., by saying that the meaning is the arrow which you *imagine* as opposed to any which you may draw or produce in any other way, you thereby say that you will call no further arrow an interpretation of the one which you have imagined. (*BB*, 34)

Intentional mental states are themselves embodied in means of representation and to claim of these that they are inherently related to their content is to *decide* that they cannot be used differently, not to *discover* this fact.

In fact, Searle argues for the importance of a background of dispositions, abilities, etc. on the basis of considerations similar to these. He writes,

Suppose you wrote down on a huge roll of paper all of the things you believed. Suppose you included all of those beliefs which are, in effect, axioms that enable you to generate further beliefs, and you wrote down any ‘principles of inference’ you might need to enable you to derive further beliefs from your prior beliefs... About this list I want to say, if all we have is a verbal expression of the content of your beliefs, then so far we have no Intentionality at all. And this is not because what you have written down are ‘lifeless’ marks, without significance, but because even if we construe them as Fregean semantic entities, i.e., as propositional contents, the propositions are not self-applying (Searle 153, 1983).

To have an Intentional mental state is to be able to “apply” it – i.e. to be able to discern the conditions that satisfy it. This requires a background of dispositions, abilities, etc. But, for Searle this background is a mental structure (Searle 153-154, 1983). One might have such dispositions, abilities, etc. even if one were a brain in a vat. But, to link means of representation to their represented contents in this manner denies that there is an independent standard according to which they could be said to represent one state of affairs rather than another (Kripke 22-37, 1982). One’s Intentional mental states thus represent whatever they *seem* to represent. But, people are often inclined to their count beliefs true when they are manifestly false. A belief’s truth-conditions are independent, that is, of anyone’s inclination to count it true.

Conclusion

In this paper I have presented Wittgenstein's criticisms of Searle's expressionist semantics. Expressionist theories of meaning hold that means of representation (e.g. sounds) are linked to their represented contents by virtue of their relation to mental states. This way of thinking about language presupposes that means of representation are fundamentally meaningless; that they are dead and must be animated by the mind. This picture of meaning, however, is beset by paradox and disquiet. Wittgenstein does not seek to link dead means of representation to semantic content. Rather, he shows that in people's everyday experience language is already alive. In general, people experience *representations*, not meaningless *means of representation*.

Literature

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