2009

Perry, Wittgenstein's Builders and Metasemantics

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The paper discusses in detail John Perry's important article "Davidson's Sentences and Wittgenstein's Builders". Perry argues, on the basis of Wittgenstein's famous block/slab language, that words make direct metasemantic contact with the world. The present paper urges that, while Perry's conclusions are correct and important, the arguments provided for them, in his 1994 article, ignore essential features of genuine words in natural language. A more empirically-oriented alternative tactic for supporting the same philosophical conclusions is then provided, and its advantages and disadvantages are weighed.

1.   Introduction

Fear not, Perryphiles. I come not to bury, but (ultimately) to praise. In particular, John Perry deserves praise for recognizing, in his important 1994 article "Davidson's Sentences and Wittgenstein's Builders", not only that words may be used to perform speech acts, but also that this usage carries an important metasemantic implication. This being philosophy, however, it will come as no surprise that my praise comes with a caveat. Not about these two main points, with which I very heartily agree, but rather about some details of Perry's argument.

The main aim of this paper is thus to offer a friendly amendment. There will be two additional conclusions: First, about some essential properties of words; second, taking this as a "case study", about the advantages and costs of an empirically-inclined methodology in the philosophy of language. The game plan is as follows. I begin with two elements of background: Perry's target, an argument for sentence priority in metasemantics, and his use of Wittgenstein's Builder's language game (i.e., the one in §2 of the *Investigations*) to rebut this argument. I then turn to the novel bits: a critique of Perry, in which I urge that the elements of this "language"

lack certain essential properties of genuine words, and my positive friendly amendment, which presents a related critique of the argument for sentence priority.

2.   An argument for sentence priority in metasemantics

Sentence Priority, to borrow a helpful label from a very insightful article by Eli Dresner (2002), is a thesis about in-virtue-of-what facts about linguistic meaning obtain. It holds that it is sentences that have meaning in the first instance. Sentences thus are the source of all other linguistic content. In particular, words have meaning only derivatively, from the roles they play within sentences. Proponents of this metasemantic view include Robert Brandom, Donald Davidson and Michael Dummett.[1]

Among the possible arguments for Sentence Priority is one that focuses on the centrality of sentence use in fixing linguistic meaning. As Perry puts it: "The thought comes in two parts. First, the meaning of words is to be explained by their connection with human actions… Second, this means that the connection must be made at the level of sentences" (Perry 1994: 24). Representative variants on this argument follow:

> **a.** Indeed, it is certainly part of the content of the dictum (i.e., the context principle) that sentences play a special role in language: that, since it is by means of them alone that anything can be *said*, that is, any linguistic act (of assertion, question, command, etc.) can be performed, the sense of any expression less than a complete sentence must consist only in the contribution it makes to determining the content of a sentence in which it may occur (Dummett 1973: 495).

> **b.** Words have no function save as they play a role in sentences: their semantic features are abstracted from the semantic features of sentences, just as the semantic features of sentences are abstracted from *their* part in helping people achieve goals or realize intentions.
>
> If the name "Kilimanjaro" refers to Kilimanjaro, then no doubt there is *some* relation between English (or Swahili) speakers, the word, and the mountain. But it is inconceivable that one should be able to explain this relation without first explaining the role of the word in sentences; and if this is so, there is no chance of explaining reference directly in non-linguistic terms (Davidson 1977: 220).

> **c.** "… all the evidence for interpreting language must come at the sentential level (for only sentences have a use in communication)" (Davidson 1997: 78).

> **d.** In the *Grundlagen* (Frege 1884), Frege follows this Kantian line in insisting that "only in the context of a proposition [*Satz*] does a name have any meaning". Frege takes this position because it is only to the utterance of sentences that pragmatic force attaches.

Since semantics must in this way answer to pragmatics, the category of sentences has a certain kind of explanatory priority over subsentential categories of expression, such as singular terms and predicates. For sentences are the kind of expression whose free-standing utterance (that is, whose utterance unembedded in the utterance of some larger expression containing it) has the pragmatic significance of performing a speech act (Brandom 2000: 125).

e. Sentences are assigned semantic contents as part of an explanation of what one is doing in asserting them, what one claims, what belief one avows thereby. But the utterance of an essentially subsentential expression, such as a singular term, is not the performance of this sort of speech act. It does not by itself make a move in the language game, does not alter the score of commitments and attitudes that it is appropriate for an audience to attribute to the speaker. Accordingly, such expressions cannot have semantic contents in the same sense in which sentences can. They can be taken to be semantically contentful only in a derivative sense, insofar as their occurrence as components in sentences contributes to the contents (in the basic, practice-relevant inferential sense) of those sentences (Brandom 2000: 126).

This argument for Sentence Priority — the only one directly addressed in this paper — may, for ease of discussion, be summarized as follows:

P1: Necessarily, meaning comes from using expressions to perform speech acts (e.g., statements, requests, and commands).
P2: Necessarily, it is not mere words but rather complete sentences that are used to perform speech acts.
P3: If it is necessary that meaning comes from using expressions to perform speech acts, and it is necessary that it is not mere words but rather complete sentences that are used to perform speech acts, then it is necessary that word meaning derives exclusively from the use of sentences.
P4: If it is necessary that word meaning derives exclusively from the use of sentences, then it is necessary that semantic facts about words derive from semantic facts about the sentences of which the words are parts.
C: Necessarily, semantic facts about words derive from semantic facts about the sentences of which the words are parts.

Before discussing the soundness of the argument, a number of clarifications are called for. First, the crucial premises are P1 and P2, and they will be the focus of my discussion. I have included P3 and P4 merely to render the argument as explicit as possible. Second, the conclusion is not intended to carry an existential presupposition to the effect that there are semantic facts about words. An eliminativist about lexical meanings could still endorse all four premises. Indeed, such a philosopher might well use C, together with the presumption that semantic facts about sentence-meanings underdetermine word-meanings, to argue *for* the indeterminacy of word meaning. The intent of the argument, rather, is that if words have

meanings, such meanings must derive from semantic facts about sentences. Third, there is the issue of the modality. Both Perry and his target Davidson write of the "conceivability" of word-meanings which do not derive from sentence-meanings. The overtones of this term notwithstanding, it is clear that they do not intend anything psychological — e.g., about what we humans are capable of imagining. I have thus couched the conclusion alethically, in terms of necessity. It's natural to ask how strong the necessity is meant to be. My answer is that it is very strong, certainly more than merely nomic — but that it is up to the argument's proponents to be more specific than that. Fourth and finally, it is important to stress what rejecting the argument does and does not entail. To rebut this argument would not, of course, show that sententialism (as I will sometimes call it) is false: there may be other reasons to endorse conclusion C. Also, even those who ultimately reject Sentence Priority in metasemantics — as Perry and I both do — are not committed to either of the following theses:

i.   That words are the *only* source of meaning, with sentences deriving their meaning entirely from the antecedently fixed meaning of words.[2]
ii.   That *all* sub-sentential elements can acquire meaning non-derivatively — e.g., it may well be that syncategorematic terms and bound morphemes derive their meaning entirely from their contribution to larger wholes.

And, of course, to reject the conclusion of the target argument is not, *per se*, to endorse any semantic thesis. Metasemantics (like metaethics) is about in-virtue-of-what certain facts obtain, whereas semantics (like normative ethics) is about what facts *do* obtain. Thus, though Perry (1994: 26 and 28) writes of "direct contact between words and the world", and about the "Augustinian picture" — each of which carries semantic connotations — linguistic semantics is not at issue in this paper.

3.   Perry's rebuttal

Perry's important insight, put in terms of my reconstruction, is that P2 is false. He writes: "I think, however, that this argument is wrong, and that Wittgenstein's example of the builder's language game can show us why" (1994: 27). The language he is referring to is described by Wittgenstein as follows:

> Let us imagine a language for which the description given by Augustine is right. The language is meant to serve for communication between a builder (A) and an assistant (B). A is building with building-stones: there are blocks, pillars, slabs and beams. B has to pass the stones, and that in the order in which A needs them. For this purpose they use a language consisting of the words "block", "pillar", "slab", "beam". A calls out; — B brings the stone which he has learnt to bring at such-

and-such a call. — Conceive this as a complete primitive language" (Wittgenstein 1953: §2).[3]

Perry would have us understand language (2), as Wittgenstein calls it, as follows: "In the builder's language game, each utterance is a command of the form N where N is a noun. A command N is executed if the assistant passes a building stone of [the] type designated by N to the builder. Blocks are designated by "Block", pillars by "Pillar", slabs by "Slab" and beams by "Beam"… The nouns do not occur as parts of sentences, and their meanings do not derive from the meanings of sentences, or their use from the use of sentences" (Perry 1994: 28).

Perry does not merely offer this language game as a counterexample. He adds an insightful diagnosis of where sententialists go wrong. They mix up the priority of certain propositional speech acts with the priority of certain linguistic forms: "To say that the semantic facts about words derive from the semantic facts about the commands of which they are a part is not to say that these facts derive from semantic facts about sentences of which they are a part. Words can play a role in the articulation of commands without being parts of sentences…" (Perry 1994: 28–29). That is, as I like to put the point, those who take sentences to be metasemantically prior fall prey here to a kind of global use/mention confusion: they notice the primacy of a certain kind of content (the proposition) and a certain kind of act (stating), and they slide from there to the primacy of a certain kind of linguistic formative, namely the sentence.

So far, this has all been background: what Sentence Priority in metasemantics amounts to, an argument for it, and Perry's attempt to undermine the argument on the basis of Wittgenstein's builders' language game. My own interventions come next. I begin with the failings of language (2) as a counterexample to P2. I then present my friendly amendment: it shares the overarching strategy of Perry's critique, but its tactic is more empirical.

4. The failings of language (2)

My negative plaint will unfold in three steps. I will suggest that what Wittgenstein's builders are engaging in is arguably not linguistic action at all. I then urge that, even setting that concern aside, the items used aren't really words: First, because they lack essential syntactic properties of words, second because they lack essential semantic properties of words as well.

I begin with a quote from Dresner (2002: 56):

> … when monkeys acquire the disposition to make a certain cry when a lion approaches, we would not be justified in saying (and we wouldn't say) that the

> monkeys' cries are utterances of nouns, referring to lions. All we can say of the builders and the monkeys is that they *react differentially* to each other's (auditory) behavior, and that *our* description of their differential reaction involves talk of objects.

This is surely right: from all that we have been told by Wittgenstein, this animalistic analogy could be the best account. If so, the builders' language game patently would not afford a counterexample to P2, for it would involve neither words nor speech acts.

Moving on, let us grant for sake of argument that the activities of the builders are too sophisticated to be handled in this behaviorist way (they involve, after all, human agents interacting in fairly complex ways with artifacts such as pillars). Even so, the elements deployed lack three essential syntactic properties of genuine words. Real words are elements in a productive and systematic language. Because of this, it is essential to being a word (i) that it embed, (ii) that it be subject to a combinatorics, and (iii) that it belong to some lexical categories and not others.[4]

But consider /*blok*/, /*pɪlər*/, /*slæb*/, and /*bim*/. (I prefer to represent Wittgenstein's "moves" with simplified phonetic spellings, rather than with quotation marks. The latter would implicitly suggest that we have genuine linguistic expressions, specifically words, at play. But, at this point, we should only allow that /*blok*/ *et al.* are sound patterns.) We do not have a genuine language here: It contains only four items, hence it is not productive; and if one is lost, the other three are not at risk, hence it is not systematic. Nor do its items meet the necessary conditions noted immediately above: they do not embed, they are not subject to any syntactic rules, and they do not belong to any grammatical category.[5]

One might say: "Surely they are nouns". Now, one reason for such a supposition can be set aside immediately: the mere fact that these items are not sentential does not entail that they are nominal. Those two categories are not exhaustive. Moreover, once we think of them as sound patterns, we lose any reason for placing them in *any* given lexical category. Dresner (2002: 55) brings out the point nicely by suggesting that we change "the expressions that are put into the builder's mouth into ones that are meaningless in English". For instance, suppose Wittgenstein had described his game with "filpt", "tywi", "avopi" and "ult". Here, we would not be taken in by the fact that the items in the game *sound like* our nouns. Or again, had the game consisted in lifting the right hand straight up for a slab, pointing out to the right for a block, lifting the left hand for a pillar, and pointing out to the left for a beam, there would be no temptation to assimilate each arm movement to any grammatical category, let alone to the specific category of noun.

In sum, even if we grant that language (2) is a linguistic practice of some sort — it's not merely a matter of differential reactions to certain sound cues — its elements lack essential syntactic properties of words. So, far from affording a direct

counterexample to P2, Wittgenstein's thought experiment seems wholly irrelevant to the sententialist argument.

A possible defense of Perry's Wittgensteinian critique comes immediately to mind. Grant that the items of language (2) lack the syntax of words. Insist, however, (a) that they have the semantics of words and (b) that the useability of such things is all that is required to refute P2.

In light of (a), this response will necessitate a careful consideration of the essential semantic properties of words. Before turning to that, it is worth noting that conjunct (b) is also problematic. To see why, recall the dialectic. The sententialist says that words cannot be used, and concludes that they must derive their meaning from the meanings of sentences. The move considered here would have Perry concede that, in reality, he has given no reason to think that full-fledged words in the syntactic sense can be used. What he purports to provide, given the concession, is merely evidence that things having the semantics of words can be used. Nothing more. Hence a variant on conclusion C, one restricted to the meaning-sources *for words in the syntactic sense*, would remain untouched by Perry's appeal to the builders. The problem is, as I will stress below, the real issue is the metasemantics of *our* words — and those have not just essential semantic features, but also essential syntactic ones.

In the end, however, such fine points about the dialectic can be put to one side, because the items in language (2) lack essential semantic properties of words as well. First, genuine words do not have illocutionary force as part of their type meaning. The contrast here is with sentences exhibiting the various syntactic moods. Take interrogative sentences — which, in English, are marked by subject-auxiliary inversion or the presence of a wh-word in the appropriate syntactic position. They have a speech act theoretic job as part of their standing meaning, namely that they are used to ask questions (see Stainton 1999 for discussion). Someone who does not recognize a difference in content between "Juan is hungry" and "Is Juan hungry", for instance, simply does not understand what the latter means in English. But now consider /*blok*/, /*pɪlər*/, /*slæb*/, and /*bim*/. They are conventionally tied to just one kind of speech act. They therefore have a linguistically assigned use. And that endows them, the types that is, with illocutionary force. Thus, they do not satisfy this first semantic necessary condition for word-hood. In addition, genuine words must be of some Montagovian type other than <t>. (To be clear: this is not to say that genuine word types — the expressions, that is — are those items which fail to be true or false *tout court*. Context sensitive sentences satisfy *that* condition. Rather, the necessary condition at issue is this: in order to be a genuine word, an expression must be such that, even when relativized to a context, it remains subpropositional. That is, real words, even relative to a context, stand for "things": objects, properties, and higher order functions.) How do the sound patterns /*blok*/

et al. fare in terms of this second semantic necessary condition? They fail it too. The propositional content of /*slæb*/, for instance, is not SLAB but rather THAT YOU BRING ME A SLAB. In sum, and combining the two observations above, if we were to provide a translation of /*slæb*/, its English correlate would be the force-bearing and fully propositional sentence "Bring me a slab".[6]

5.   Three possible rejoinders on Perry's behalf

There are three natural gambits open to Perryphiles. One might insist — indeed, Perry himself does insist — that the builders' initial practice can be rendered more complex, leaving the language itself unchanged. Alternatively, a defender of Perry might concede that Wittgenstein's original language (2) fails to provide a counter-example, but propose that a slightly more complex linguistic system would have elements exhibiting the aforementioned essential properties. Either maneuver might buttress the claim that the items in such Wittgensteinian games really can be words. Finally, it is important to remember that the issue in any case is "conceivability". Hence, it might be thought, it simply does not matter whether the items in the builders' language are very like natural language words. I consider each response in turn.

Recall the worry. It has been urged that the items in language (2) lack essential properties of words. In particular, and what will be the focus of the next few paragraphs, I have urged that they are actually semantically sentential: unlike genuine words, they have both illocutionary force and a fully propositional content. Thus, their use does not afford a counterexample to P2.

Perry anticipated precisely this complaint:

> Davidson uses "Block" and "Slab" to illustrate the blurring of the distinction between words and sentences… And one might say, at this point, that all that I have said is beside the point, since the utterances in the builder's language game should be thought of as one-word sentences (Perry 1994: 32).

His reply involves language (2), but put to work in a more complex practice.

As a preliminary, Perry reminds us that it is a fallacy to infer a semantically sentential character for an expression used, from the semantically sentential nature of the action performed: "I think when people say the utterances in question are "one word sentences" they have one conception of a sentence in mind, as that which conveys a complete thought. Since "Slab" conveys a complete thought, it must be a sentence…" (1994: 32). This is fallacious because there can be a gap between the standing content of the item spoken, and the contextually completed content of the speech act. Applying the point to language (2): Despite what the

builder A does when he speaks, namely to command his assistant to bring over such-and-such stone, the meaning of each item is just the difference between the commands. This gap between the meaning of /*slæb*/ and the command is provided by the circumstances: the content is "completed" thereby (Perry 1994: 32–33).

To drive the point home, Perry describes a slightly more sophisticated practice in which, allegedly, it is clear that /*slæb*/ *et al.* are not semantically sentential:

> Suppose that as the builder grows frail and the assistant learns the trade, the builder has the assistant not only fetch blocks but, later in the day, place the blocks into a wall… Now this is a different language game, in the sense that it is a different family of actions that the commands pick out. But I think it would be rather natural to suppose that once the builder has shown the assistant what the pattern of action was, he could use the very same words he had been using in the original language game and things would work fine. He would say "Block" and the assistant would put a block in the place designated, and so forth (Perry 1994: 31).

As it happens, I am very sympathetic to the idea of an occasional gap between what an expression means in a language, and the contents of the various speech acts which one may perform with it. More strongly, in light of a panoply of independent evidence about real human languages, I believe that there often are compelling reasons for maintaining, about certain linguistic items, that they are frequently or even standardly used in ways that deviate from their standing meaning. That is, in some cases there may exist a *persistent* gap between meaning and usage. (I will revisit this point at the end of the paper.) But Wittgenstein's builders present us with a degenerate case. The linguistic practice, if such it be, is so simple, even in this more elaborate variant, that we lack grounds for contrasting literal from non-literal talk therein. Even when a few more "moves" are added, all usage is of a piece: we cannot reasonably separate out usages that consume the conventions "literally" from usages that consume them merely to flout them. So, when it comes to Wittgenstein's builders, I do not see why one shouldn't read sentential content into the items on the basis of their perfectly standard use

Turning to the revised practice as an example, like its predecessor it can easily be treated as containing "one word sentences" rather than genuine words. Two possibilities come immediately to mind: the items could be ambiguous, or each could have a disjunctive meaning. On the first option, the sound pattern /*blok*/ would be ambiguous between:

> <THAT YOU BRING ME A BLOCK, **order**>
> <THAT YOU PLACE A BLOCK THERE, **order**>

On the second option, the sound /*blok*/ would mean univocally:

> <THAT YOU BRING ME A BLOCK OR THAT YOU PLACE A BLOCK THERE, **order**>

Both options fit the more elaborate practice as Perry describes it. And both treat its elements as semantically sentential.

Complicating the practice failed to ensure that the items used are genuine words. It may reasonably be supposed that what is needed instead, to provide a counterexample to P2, is a somewhat more complex imaginary language. Wittgenstein again (seemingly) provides us with just what is required:

> Let us now look at an expansion of language (2). Besides the four words "block", "pillar", etc., let it contain a series of words used as… numerals (it can be the series of letters of the alphabet); further, let there be two words, which may as well be "there" and "this" (because this roughly indicates their purpose), that are used in connection with a pointing gesture; and finally a number of colour samples. A gives an order like: "d — slab — there". At the same time he shews the assistant a colour sample, and when he says "there" he points to a place on the building site (Wittgenstein 1953: 5).

Call this language (8). (It appears in §8 of the *Investigations.*)

The key idea here is to add more kinds of words, and more combinations of them, until we arrive at a productive and systematic language, with a combinatorics, embedding, and syntactic categories. One could then point to the fact that the words of this language can be used, to provide a counterexample to P2.

I do not find this rejoinder any more successful than the previous one, for two reasons. First, it is unclear that the elements of language (8) really could be used unembedded. Second, and deeper, there will surely arise other essential properties that call into question whether the elements of such a language count as words. On the syntactic side, it is plausible that a genuine word must belong to a closed class of categories (e.g., nominal, verbal, adjectival, adverbial) which are either in the base lexicon (e.g., "man", "run", and "fast") or are built from such a base item by morphological processes like inserting infixes and adding prefixes and suffixes (e.g., "*un*man*ly*", "runn*ing*", and "fast*er*"). Even in the expanded language, this necessary condition is not met. On the semantic side it may well be essential to natural language words that they belong to categories more fine-grained than Montagovian types. For instance, some expressions of type <e,t> are semantically mass terms, others are semantically count terms. Now, which sub-class do /*blok*/, /*pɪlər*/, /*slæb*/, and /*bim*/ belong to? Even language (8) leaves this underdetermined. The sound pattern /*slæb*/ could share the semantics of any of "slab", "slabs", "slab stuff", etc. (See Dresner 2002: 59 for related remarks.)

Before turning to the third and final rejoinder, two comments are in order. First, my objection is not that one simply could not devise an artificial language

which had useable elements with all the essential properties of words, but contained no sentences. My point is that there is a serious disadvantage to pursuing this tactic vis-à-vis an alternative which I will present below. Second, it is worth pausing to consider: Is there not an obvious "work-around" with respect to this worry? If the basic concern is that the items in language (8) still lack essential properties of words, why not simply stipulate about an imaginary tongue both that its bare elements can be used, and that all essential properties of words are present? It must be granted: that would indeed overcome the problem. But it would do so by begging the question. To stipulate that there is a possible language which contains genuine words that can be used in isolation amounts to stipulating that P2 is false!

Third rejoinder. I have urged that the items of languages (2) and (8) lack salient properties, both syntactic and semantic, of our words. Language (2) is neither systematic nor productive, and its elements do not embed, do not belong to grammatical categories, and are not subject to a combinatorics; and its so-called "words" have illocutionary force and express propositions relative to a context. The elements in language (8) do not belong either to a base lexicon, nor are they generated by morphological processes; moreover, whereas lexical items in natural languages exhibit semantic features — animate versus inanimate, concrete versus abstract, stuff versus particular, and so on — its elements do not. Thus, I have insisted, even if such items are useable, that would not afford counterexamples to P2. But maybe the whole discussion of the recherché syntactic and semantic properties of human words is a red herring. The issue, after all, is whether there *could be* a language whose bare words are used. Davidson claims that such a thing is inconceivable. Perry demurs. Insofar as the disagreement is modal, why should the bare words of the imagined language need to closely resemble ours?

This might be a reasonable defense of Perry if the debate were about the sources of meaning and representation in general. But the issue is the metasemantics of *our* words: the disagreement between Brandom, Davidson and Dummett on the one hand, and Perry and I on the other, is in-virtue-of-what items of human language — whether fully sentential or sub-sentential — manage to have content at all, and manage to have the content that they do. Perry and I wish to maintain that, for all the sententialist argument above shows, it is conceivable that *our words* have non-derivative content. Hence, that sound patterns which lack essential properties of English or Swahili or Urdu words might be useable in isolation is irrelevant. (To give a stark comparison, to provide an account of how a drawing could represent is not yet to explain how linguistic items like "and" or "several" or "unicorn" could come to have meaning. In the same vein, to provide a story about how "filpt" or arm-raising could conceivably have non-derivative content does not directly touch the question of whether the English words "slab" and "beam" could do so.)

6.   Towards the friendly amendment

Let us take stock. At issue is the soundness of the following argument:

> **P1**: Necessarily, meaning comes from using expressions to perform speech acts (e.g., statements, requests, and commands).
> **P2**: Necessarily, it is not mere words but rather complete sentences that are used to perform speech acts.
> **P3**: If it is necessary that meaning comes from using expressions to perform speech acts, and it is necessary that it is not mere words but rather complete sentences that are used to perform speech acts, then it is necessary that word meaning derives exclusively from the use of sentences.
> **P4**: If it is necessary that word meaning derives exclusively from the use of sentences, then it is necessary that semantic facts about words derive from semantic facts about the sentences of which the words are parts.
> **C**: Necessarily, semantic facts about words derive from semantic facts about the sentences of which the words are parts.

Perry rejects P2 on the basis of an imaginary language, namely the language of Wittgenstein's builders. In effect, he urges on that basis that ◊[words are used], and concludes that ~□[~words are used]. My complaint, in a nutshell, is that no grounds for ◊[words are used] have in fact been provided, because the items in the imaginary language are not really words.

The strategy of my friendly amendment will be very like Perry's. I too think the argument unsound because its second premise is false. My tactic for counter-exemplifying P2, however, will be to urge that @[words are used]. In which case ~□[~words are used]. To do so, I will appeal (albeit briefly) to empirical facts about human speech, rather than to a thought experiment. I will end by considering both the advantages and risks of this empirically-inclined approach.

I have described sub-sentential speech at great length elsewhere (Stainton 2006), and will not revisit the evidence here. The fundamental point is easily made by means of examples such as the following, most of which are attested:

– "Coffee. Black. No sugar."
– "Faster!"
– "A: Coke, please. B: Ice? A: Sure"
– "A: Citizenship? B: Canadian"
– "Salmon" [Identifying a food]
– "Nova Scotia" [Describing the weather as comparable to Nova Scotia's]
– "A: Married? B: Yes. A: Children? B: Two."

These are perfectly ordinary words. They are the very things which embed in sentences. And they are used in these examples to perform speech acts. (What's more, if we expand our purview to include phrases, then there are thousands of sub-sentence uses by any given speaker every day.) Each such usage provides a counterexample to P2. QED.

Such talk is commonplace. It has been ignored, I believe, because philosophers too quickly dismiss such speech as "elliptical". In a merely pragmatic sense of the term, I agree that such usages are "elliptical": that is, speakers mean more in using them than what the words themselves express. But to characterize these usages as elliptical in this weak sense is to concede that P2 is false: it amounts to saying that bare, ordinary words really are used to perform speech acts. There is a more theory-internal sense of "ellipsis" according to which what seem on the surface to be uses of words are really, underlyingly, utterances of "elliptical sentences" — that is, of expressions which sound less-than-sentential, but have unpronounced syntactic structure. If all apparent sub-sentential speech involved such recherché structures, then P2 would be safe: only sentences (whether the familiar ones, or the ones containing inaudibilia) would be useable. However, as I have urged at length elsewhere it is ultimately implausible that sub-sentence use actually involves any such thing. Some of the evidence derives from theoretical and comparative syntax, of course: observations about case assignment, embedding proclivities, licensing conditions on ellipsis, and much else besides. What's more, the reality of sub-sentential speech acts is supported by recent work in the cognitive sciences: for example, from language acquisition and language deficits, both acquired and genetic. (See Stainton 2006 for detailed discussion. Authors who have denied the reality of sub-sentential speech acts include Ludlow 2005; Merchant 2004; and Stanley 2000.) In brief, if it strikes you as obvious that ellipsis is at play, then you are using "ellipsis" is a way that would not rescue the sententialist argument; and if it strikes you that ellipsis would aid the sententialist, then, as careful empirical scrutiny shows, it is false that ellipsis is at play.

Having presented my empirically-oriented friendly amendment, I end with its benefits and costs. There are two important advantages of my own approach, as opposed to Perry's. First, the worries about begging the question are abated. In appealing to actual usage, one is arguing on the basis of observation that P2 is incorrect. One need not stipulate that all essential properties of natural language words are present, to be sure that they are — because the items used just *are* our words. Second, in turning to actual talk one can deploy Perry's insightful point about semantics versus pragmatics to greater effect: English and other natural languages are plenty rich enough to allow a wary theorist to distinguish the meaning of the expression relative to the context (in the cases at issue, an object, property, etc.) from the richer content that the speaker meant. Indeed, in English and other

natural languages, we need such a distinction on independent grounds: to account for conversational implicatures, indirect speech acts, metaphor, etc. Thus, here we really do have grounds for decrying an inference from a fully propositional and force-bearing speech act to a sentential content for the expression uttered.

I would highlight two disadvantages, however. My proposed tactic, unlike Perry's, runs the risk that what seems empirically established now could turn out to be false. At present, the weight of evidence heavily favors the reality of lexical speech acts (as against, for instance, an ellipsis account). Nonetheless, there is no denying that empirical "findings" have a habit of getting overturned. So, approaching the issue more empirically, certainty eludes us — even in metasemantics, a sub-branch of metaphysics.

There is a second disadvantage — or rather, what may seem to be one for certain orthodox Wittgensteinians. It should be a truism that ordinary English words do not express propositions — not even relative to a set of parameters. Similarly, it ought to be a truism that ordinary English words do not have illocutionary force as part of their standing meaning. That's part of what it is to be an *ordinary* word. (The contrast here is with proper one-word sentences, such as "Dosado", "Gosh", "Attention!", and "Fire!".) Yet the speech acts performed with ordinary words can be fully propositional and exhibit illocutionary force. What this means is that Perry was very much on the right track: when words are used unembedded to state, order or request, there is indeed a very significant gap between standing meaning on the one hand and speech act content on the other. (I would say the same thing about the use of ordinary phrases like "From France" and "Three pints of lager".) More than that, as hinted at above, there is a persistent gap. Thus usage in this case — even perfectly standard, literal usage — does not reflect type semantics at all well. I myself happily embrace this consequence, phrasing it this way: stating is something that people do; and in sub-sentential speech, pragmatics makes an especially large contribution to the speech act. This may seem a disadvantage, however, from the perspective of a certain sort of strict Wittgensteinian. That's because, in sub-sentential speech, not only should we not identify meaning with actual use, but meaning and use come very much apart. Thus the famous Wittgensteinian slogan, if taken too literally, is terrifically wrong.

This is not to say that the content of words floats free from human action. (It had better not.) But if P2 is to be defended in this empirically-oriented way, then there can be no immediate, straightforward, path from one cluster of actual usages to meaning. Finding the meaning of a word, instead, will require looking at its global usage, both inside and outside sentences. More than that, it will demand that we carefully tease apart which usages do and which do not closely reflect standing meaning — and that, to revisit the first disadvantage, entails paying attention to an enormously rich and complex range of empirical evidence.

Finally, by way of an epilogue, let me address what has been alleged to be a disadvantage of my approach, though I think it is not. It is frequently suggested that the sententialist argument can be defended by contending that it is only because words get their meaning derivatively, on the basis of their role within antecedently meaningful sentences, that bare words can be used communicatively. The ability to perform speech acts with mere words is, therefore, parasitic upon sentence use; and the important metasemantic asymmetry between words and sentences is retained.[7] My reply is simple. Suppose, as per the alleged defense, that the kind of word-use that I have drawn attention to actually is parasitic upon sentence-use. If so, there is such a thing as word-use. That means that P2 of the sentenialist argument is false. In short, far from defanging my empirically-inclined criticism of the sententialist argument, this "defense" actually concedes that the argument on p. 3 above is unsound.

At best, the "parasitic usage" point might afford a different argument for Sentence Priority. In fact, however, what is on offer is rather less than that, because no positive reason has here been offered in favor of sentence priority in metasemantics. I belabor the point because the issue arises so frequently: Sentence Priority is not the "null hypothesis"; hence, showing that it might be able to deal with empirical observation such-and-such cannot provide a positive reason to endorse the view. No more than the compatibility of word priority with sentence use could provide evidence for the former.

So, my appeal to actual talk is not at a disadvantage when it comes to responding to the original sententialist argument. Nor is it disadvantaged in terms of making room for this alleged positive argument for Sentence Priority.

One last thought regarding benefits and costs. One might urge that my empirical approach cannot, even in principle, refute Sentence Priority. More specifically, if language (2) did indeed contain genuine words which could be used in isolation, then there could be conventional word-use, and hence word-meaning, in a language that entirely lacked sentences. Thus a Perry-style appeal to thought experiments could show Sentence Priority to be out-and-out false — if only it worked. But, continues the idea, there can be no hope of an actual human linguistic practice like that: one that has no sentences, but nevertheless does have items with all the essential properties of words.

Now, as I have stressed repeatedly, the aim of this paper (and Perry's aim in his), was not to rebut all arguments for Sentence Primacy. Still less have I attempted to refute the sententialist's view. Properly speaking, then, such a reproach demands more than what was originally on offer. Nonetheless, I will end with a few words about it.

It comes as something of a surprise that there is some hope for an empirical refutation of the kind desired. There seem to be individuals who lack sentences,

but who are able to use words: this shows up in both normal and pathological language acquisition, and as a result of acquired deficits. It also seems plausible, though it has frequently been denied, that there are actual human languages which lack sentences in the currently accepted syntactic sense. It would take me too far afield to press the point, but if one is willing to see through antecedent theoretical commitments, there appear to be languages which do not have projections of the right functional category: headed by tense and agreement markers, a left periphery containing a complementizer and force-marker, and so forth. Hence, in this specialized sense of "sentence", these languages do not have any. But might there be actual human languages which have genuine words yet are free of sentences *in the semantic sense*? I grant that the idea is implausible on the face of it. Yet, Carstairs-McCarthy (1999, 2005) has persuasively argued on independent grounds that, as far as the demands of communicative success go, there could be sophisticated linguistic systems that entirely lacked truth-bearers. (This is not, of course, to imaging a culture whose *speakers* fail to make truth claims.) Finally, Ileana Paul has drawn my attention to the Malayo-Polynesian family, some members of which *just might* be construed not only as lacking sentences in the syntactic sense, but as tongues whose speakers make all their statements either wholly pragmatically, by using lexically headed phrases that are sub-propositional, or by paratactically concatenating such phrases. (Compare, respectively, using the bare word "salmon" to describe a food, and English expressions like "Winner by a nose: Chomsky's Joy", "Rupert? Always smoking. Maria? Total non-smoker" and "Pepsi. The choice of a new generation".) Setting such wild speculations aside, what the mere possibility drives home is that such a sentence-free language would have genuine words by my lights, because it would have a productive and compositional grammar *of phrases* — with embedding, a combinatorics, grammatical categories, and all the rest. What it would not have are phrase markers that, even relative to a context, express propositions. In light of this, though I concede that I myself will be surprised if it turned out this way, there is no *principled* reason why an empirically-inclined approach must always fall short of out-and-out falsifying Sentence Priority in the way desired.

7.   Conclusion

The overall conclusion with respect to Perry's important article is this. He is to be applauded not only for finding the sentalist argument unsound, but for pinpointing as problematic its second premise. Equally important is his insight that the argument only appeared plausible because of a conflation, namely between the primacy of propositional linguistic acts and the primacy of certain linguistic

forms, viz., complete sentences. His misstep is, as it were, tactical: he appealed to a "language game" which was too simple to contain genuine words. Happily, given my friendly amendment, Perry's refutation of the sentientialist argument can be repaired. As a result, what is warranted is praise as opposed to burial.

Beyond establishing this, I hope along the way to have highlighted some essential properties of genuine words, and to have offered a (very brief) illustration of the usefulness and costs of a more empirically-inclined methodology in the Philosophy of Language.

Notes

*. A draft of this paper was presented at the Instituto de Investigaciones Filosóficas in Mexico City, February 25th, 2008 and at the Department of Philosophy, York University, September 12th, 2008. My thanks to the members of both audiences for their helpful questions. I am also grateful to a host of linguists and philosophers for comments on an earlier draft, specifically: Eros Corazza, Eli Dresner, Ben Hill, Henrik Lagerlund, Jacques Lamarche, Dave Matheson, Ileana Paul, Richard Vallée, Catherine Wearing, and the (very insightful) anonymous referees for this journal. I also received especially helpful comments from my stalwart friend and partner in crime, Ray Elugardo. This paper is dedicated to him.

1. Gottlob Frege is often included in this list. In fact, however, he may only have endorsed a sentence-oriented methodology in semantics, rather than a sentence-oriented metasemantics. More specifically, he may only have held that one should *investigate* word-meanings by looking at their contrastive semantic impact upon whole sentences. See Stainton (2006: Chap. 10) for extensive discussion.

2. That Perry rejects thesis (i) is not entirely clear from his text: contrast, for instance, p. 24 to p. 26. He has stressed in conversation, however, that sentences of course are used, and hence will play an important role in fixing meanings.

3. One cannot help but relish the irony here. At the heart of the argument on p. 3 lies the Wittgensteinian (1953, 1958) idea that "meaning is use". Linguistic meaning cannot float free of how we humans use linguistic symbols. Yet Perry deploys a Wittgensteinian thought experiment to undermine this very sentientialist argument.

4. Dresner (2002: 55) stresses much the same point. By the way, to my mind this is the real kernel of truth in holism about language. Holism in semantics strikes me as poorly motivated, for reasons rehearsed in Fodor and Lepore (1992). In contrast, holism in syntax seems unavoidable: a shape/form, even one that "indicates", is not an item of a language if it does not combine, in restricted ways, with other such items. See Stainton and Viger (2000) for discussion of the import of this for atomism with respect to Mentalese.

5. In reality, it is contentious whether words bear category labels in and of themselves (i.e., as items of the lexicon), or whether they acquire their categorial status only when embedded in some tree structure. (see Borer 2005 for discussion.) To give a simplified example, it's possible that "grey" itself, considered unembedded, is neither a noun, an adjective, nor a verb. However,

it can become any of these by embedding in "__ is my favorite color", "Pass my __ hat" and "Joan's hair is __ing day by day", respectively. This issue is orthogonal to the probity of language (2), however, because it does not allow embedding at all, let alone embedding in contrasting categorial frames.

6. The point about the semantics of the items in Wittgenstein's language (2) can be reinforced if we once again consider "filpt" and arm-raising. Because we do not, in these cases, have items which sound like English words, we are not at all tempted to say that they exhibit the essential force-theoretic and truth-theoretic properties of words.

7. The point was raised by an anonymous referee. See also Dresner (2002) and Machery (2007).

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