

Meaning just ain't in any individual head, an inter-subjective approach to meaning.

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Abstract. Putnam's Twin Earth thought experiment creates a division between externalist and internalist approaches to meaning regarding whether we believe that internal duplicates can differ in meaning when they utter the same word or not. I argue that Putnam's externalist approach is wrong because he treats individuals as the subjects of the thought experiment when the appropriate subject for such thought experiments should be communities of individuals, thus acknowledging the social dimension of meaning. I reconstruct Putnam's argument and show that it depends crucially on whether Oscar1 and Oscar2 mean the same thing when they say water. By means of analogy to another thought experiment, Archimedes' Gold, I show that indeed they mean the same thing, relative to the context provided in the thought experiment. In the process of doing so I highlight what we lose if we take an invariantist approach to meaning.

I also provide an example against internalism and in favour of inter-subjectivism about meaning, arguing that the external elements to meaning are not in the world, but are properties of communities of speakers and their contexts. This is done through showing a proposition whose truth value does not seem to depend neither solely on internal characteristics nor the state of the external world, but rather on the characteristics of the relevant community of speakers. In this way I highlight what is wrong with the usual interpretations of what Putnam's Twin Earth experiment shows.

Introduction

In 1975, Hilary Putnam published a paper called "The Meaning of 'Meaning' ". Among the claims made in the paper we find him expressing that "Meaning just ain't in the head".⁶² This phrase is meant to summarize the semantic view he proposes in the paper, namely Semantic Externalism. In this essay I will explain, analyse, and evaluate that view as well as propose an alternative view focused on the inter-subjectivity of meaning as a middle ground between Semantic Externalism and Semantic Internalism.

When Putnam claims that meaning is not in the head, he is saying that there are elements of meaning that are external to our mental processes. From this a distinction is drawn between views that support or reject the statement. Semantic Externalism would be the view that supports the statement, i.e. there is

⁶²Hilary Putnam, "The meaning of 'meaning'," In *Mind, Language and Reality* ed. Putnam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1975) 227.

some element to meaning that is external to the mind, and Semantic Internalism would deny it, i.e. everything in meaning is mentally internal, i.e. relative and reducible to psychological states and ideas.

Putnam supports his view mainly by means of a thought experiment now referred to in the literature as Twin Earth. Summarizing, Putnam asks us to imagine that there is a distant planet called Twin Earth where everything is exactly the same as here on Earth except some key factors. One such difference between Earth and Twin Earth is that water is not H₂O on Twin Earth but a liquid with a very intricate formula abbreviated to XYZ. Furthermore, the water in Twin Earth has the same behaviour as H₂O in the normal temperatures and pressures as to be indistinguishable in normal contexts to our water here on Earth. Then Putnam asks us to think of the context of Earth in 1750 when the chemical structure of water was unknown and assume something similar of Twin Earth, then he presents Oscar₁ and Oscar₂, which are internal duplicates (they share all internal features, in particular they possess identical psychological states) from Earth and Twin Earth respectively. Putnam's point is that while Oscar₁ and Oscar₂ have the same psychological state towards water and waterte respectively they do not mean the same when they say the word "water", since the first is referring to H₂O and the latter is referring to XYZ. The point Putnam was trying to show in his paper is that psychological state does not determine extension. Putnam's argument, if sound, would show that there are external elements to meaning, proving the externalist thesis (Putnam 1975).⁶³

The argument is simple, since most of the heavy lifting is done by the context provided by the thought experiment:

(P1) Oscar₁ and Oscar₂ mean different things when they say the word "water"

(P2) If Oscar₁ and Oscar₂ mean different things when they say the word "water", then meaning is not purely internal.

(C) Meaning is not purely internal.

The argument is a straightforward application of Modus Ponens, and therefore is undoubtedly valid. If we want to deny the conclusion of the argument we need to either deny (P1) or (P2). If Oscar₁ and Oscar₂ are internal duplicates (which they are by assumption) it would be very difficult to deny (P2), since that would require to affirm that meaning is purely internal but that internal duplicates can differ in meaning when they speak. This seems to lead to contradiction with the concept of "purely internal". Therefore, if someone were to maintain that meaning is purely internal, he would need to deny (P1), i.e. he would need to present an argument explaining why Oscar₁ and Oscar₂ mean the same thing when they say the word "water".

⁶³Putnam, "The meaning of 'meaning'."

In this essay I will argue that Oscar1 and Oscar2 mean the same when they say the word “water” but that nonetheless meaning is not purely internal.

To establish that I will also discuss a different thought experiment presented in the Putnam paper. I will refer to said thought experiment as Archimedes’ Gold. Summarizing, it consists of imagining Archimedes, or any man of science for that matter, who had a number of methods for determining if a given piece of metal was gold or not. Said methods were more rudimentary than those available to us nowadays, therefore there were some metal pieces, which were for Archimedes, as far as his methods for identifying gold were concerned, undistinguishable from gold and that consequently Archimedes did refer to with the ancient Greek word for gold. What Putnam argues from this is that we want to be able to say that Archimedes was asserting falsehoods when he claimed that a non-gold metal piece was gold, even if everyone would have agreed with him that it was gold and it met the standards of its time for being considered gold. This example is relevant to the discussion at hand since it provides good intuition on why it is desirable to affirm that Oscar1’s and Oscar2’s utterances have different meaning when referring to different things even if water from Earth and Twin Earth are, as far as their methods for distinguishing them are concerned, indistinguishable. That is the crux of the meaning of Putnam’s “meaning just ain’t in the head”: he means that we need certain facts about the state of affairs of the world to be able to tell the meaning of certain utterances. This is so because when Archimedes says that something is gold, he is saying that that thing has a certain chemical structure consisting of gold atoms in a certain proportion and structure and so on, even if he or no one is aware of that fact. There is also a very clear parallelism between the Twin Earth example and the Archimedes Gold example, since both rely on comparing the meaning that we perceive in our current situation (either temporal or spatial) with an alien situation in which some terms seem to differ in meaning. Putnam’s argument is especially concerned with natural kinds, like water or gold, which he argues have definitions for their extension that do not depend on our knowledge of them.⁶⁴ In a sense when we start referring to water as “water” we are designating the set of chemical and physical properties that constitute the extension of the natural kind of water. That is why, for Putnam, “water” refers to water H₂O here, in Twin Earth and thousands of years ago, and it did so since we picked a word for that distinctive kind of thing that nowadays would translate to “water”. Concisely, for Putnam, it is contingent that “water” refers to water but it is necessary that water is H₂O⁶⁵.

⁶⁴Ibid., 222.

⁶⁵It may help to elucidate the point to think of “water” as a rigid designator (Kripke 1979), where our word “water” refers to water (i.e. water in the actual world, H₂O) across all possible worlds. Putnam also follows Kripke insofar as identities between rigid designators are necessary (although it is contingent that “water” happens to pick out water).

Archimedes and the time traveller

What I want to argue is that Archimedes can speak truthfully when he says that a non-gold piece of metal is gold if certain conditions are fulfilled when he says it. As I have explained, Archimedes' situation is analogous to that of Oscar1 and Oscar2, so establishing that Archimedes can speak truthfully in this way implies that "gold" means somethings that is not gold, then "water" can mean XYZ under certain circumstances. Putnam is mistaken in the way he frames these two thought experiments since in both of them he treats the subjects (Oscar1, Oscar2 and Archimedes) as isolated subjects failing to recognize the social web that underpins meaning. I want to argue that meaning has an external component but that said external component does not lie in the world as such (as an object) but rather in the relations of concepts we establish as a society. If tomorrow we all decided to start using the word "water" differently (say to refer to H₂O₂ or to XYZ) it would be very hard to argue that the meaning of "water" has not changed, at least in some sense. Hence, I would like to argue that the non-internal component of meaning should be inter-subjective rather than objective.

I want to propose a follow-up thought experiment to Archimedes' Gold. It involves two subjects, Archimedes and a time traveller, who we will name Bob. Let us suppose that Bob, a regular nowadays human with extensive chemical and physical knowledge, meets Archimedes and informs him that a given piece of metal that Archimedes had identified as gold is not in fact gold. Furthermore, he provides Archimedes with the reasoning for claiming so and with the adequate scientific methods shows Archimedes the difference in behaviour between the non-gold piece and the true gold piece. In this moment, Archimedes can recognize the error he made and can claim that he was mistaken when he identified that piece as gold. The thing is, the meaning of gold has changed during the conversation that Archimedes and Bob have had. At time t1, the beginning of the conversation, "gold" for Archimedes had a meaning that was in line with what his peers considered to be gold, and at a subsequent t2, at the end of the conversation, Archimedes had bettered his understanding of gold and had aligned it to the nowadays understanding of the term. Still, the meaning of the term "gold" generally in 3rd century B.C.E. Greece had not yet changed, it would be customary for that, that Archimedes went out and shared his discovery with the rest of the scientific community so that the meaning of "gold" could be updated⁶⁶.

One may wonder why go through so much trouble when we could just affirm,

⁶⁶It may be argued that this would lead to arbitrariness in regards to the question of which percentage of the scientific community/ general population needs to agree to update the meaning of a term. I think I am content to keep these boundaries fuzzy or context-relative (within reason). Some communities of speakers may be more or less resistant to updating their terms on the basis of scientific agreement. In any case, the solution will involve considering groups of speakers as the subject in regards to meaning.

like Putnam does, that meanings are invariant in time. I will call this being an invariantist (in regard to meaning). Consider the case in which Archimedes, by himself, finds out, through some properties or experiment, that a non-gold piece of metal behaves different than gold. If we take the invariantist approach we want to say that when he asserts “I was wrong, this metal is not gold” he is right and speaking truthfully. Then imagine that he possesses a piece of gold, that while being gold is, say, a different isotope of gold which leads the piece to behave slightly different than gold in certain circumstances, and in a similar vein Archimedes may notice this difference and assert “I was wrong, this metal is not gold”. Putnam would have to say that in this case Archimedes is wrong, but on what ground is he wrong? Archimedes does not have any means of differentiating between the two cases, and the only way that we can differentiate is if we know *a priori* by assumption which pieces of metal are gold and which are not in regard to our current definition of the term. But said definitions, the cutting points between what is and what is not an X, are somewhat arbitrary. In other words, Putnam takes the set of natural kinds as a given, but even what counts as a natural kind in a theory is arbitrary⁶⁷. It is conceivable that in a possible world, maybe where different isotopes of gold are more prevalent, these are given concrete terms to pick them apart. In that world Archimedes is right in both cases when he says “I was wrong, this metal is not gold”, but the natural kind of gold is unchanged. The problem here with semantic externalism, like with externalism about knowledge and justification, is that it requires to know truth *a priori* to be able to assess truth, but we would like to be able to assess truth without knowing truth to begin with, since that is when we need the most to be able to assess truth. Without knowing *a priori* which pieces are gold and which aren't, semantic externalism cannot tell us a thing about the proposition “I was wrong, this metal is not gold”.

Example against the Internalist Approach

Therefore, as I argued, we ought to reject the externalist approach to meaning which relies in objective facts about the world. Some may enquire then, why not embrace a fully internal conception of meaning? I will present an example against this, which in turn supports the inter-subjectivity of meaning. I assume that this example represents a common intuition that could be generalized further into a proper argument. The example relies in the proposition “The arbitrary dog is a golden retriever”. I assume that for most people this

⁶⁷Here I am taking a more radical position than Putnam and Kripke. It is not only that “water” contingently refers to water, but the fact that we choose to differentiate certain natural kinds from others, by giving them different names (the cutting points for something to count as an X or not X) are themselves contingent, and to some extent, arbitrary. The tendency of treating the world (objective reality) as a given (extremely common in contemporary analytical philosophy) is criticized by Nagel (1984, 27).

proposition seems false, since it is rather arbitrary, even for those for which the term “arbitrary dog” conjures in their mind a golden retriever. Hence, there has to be more to meaning than the ideas and the psychological states of a given individual. One reason for which someone, for whom his own *personal* “arbitrary dog” is indeed a golden retriever, would be hesitant to affirm that the proposition is true is in part because he knows that that is not necessarily the case for everyone. Here we can appreciate that we believe that meaning is a shared construct that can sometimes differ to the ideas and states that conform what we could call the “private meaning” of words, which I would argue is out of the scope of language. We could think of internal copies making this claim and the truth-value varying and the sufficient condition for this change would not be the state of affairs of the world but rather the aggregate of knowledge of the subject in said world. Let me explain: It is not necessary that all dogs are golden retrievers for the proposition to be true. It is sufficient that the community of people for which that utterance is meant to make sense has only come into contact with golden retrievers, so that they all associate “golden retriever” with “arbitrary dog”. The subject in the case of meaning is not an individual but a community of speakers.

Conclusion

When I underline the social aspect of meaning I do not want to imply that all there is to meaning are social language games, as some readings of Wittgenstein may imply (1953: §43)⁶⁸. I believe that the rules (presupposition, accommodation, etc.) that our language games possess, as showcased by Lewis,⁶⁹ are an integral part of language and conversation but are certainly not the whole picture. In my example, I have hinted to the idea of our own “private meanings” and the aggregate collective of shared ideas and concepts interact to form what we call “meaning”. In the time-travelling example, Archimedes knowledge of the natural kind gold has advanced, but until he communicates that discovery, the meaning of the term “gold” at his time has not changed yet. In Archimedes Gold, the pieces that are thought to be gold act as if they were gold for all their social and relevant physical uses and Archimedes would be certainly deceiving someone at his time were he to tell him that that wasn't gold, and in a similar vein, as established, Oscar1 and Oscar2 mean the same when they say the word “water”, since their respective communities of speakers are identical.

⁶⁸The referenced passage is “For a large class of cases—though not for all—in which we employ the word “meaning” it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language”. For more detail on Wittgensteinian “Use” theories and their relationship with language games, see Lycan (2018, 77-79). More examples of the kind of thinking I am eluding to can be found in the “slab” and “block” languages in §§2-10 and in the Private Language Argument (§§243-315).

⁶⁹David Lewis, “Scorekeeping in a Language Game,” In *Journal of Philosophical Logic* (1979).

Therefore, if the arguments, ideas, and examples I have presented are correct I would have succeeded in showing that Oscar1 and Oscar2 mean the same when they say the word “water” and if so, (P1) of Putnam’s argument would turn out to be false. Nonetheless, in the process of showing this we have established the need for external elements of meaning, namely those of inter-subjective nature, drawing attention to the social aspects of meaning and to the advantages of thinking of communities of speakers as the true subjects of the thought experiments regarding meaning. As explained, if this is the case, meaning would not be purely internal. In conclusion, meaning just ain’t in the head, at least not in any individual head, but not in the way Putnam thought.

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