
Meaning, Context, and Background

Christian Beyer

It is widely held that (truth-conditional) meaning is context-dependent. According to John Searle's radical version of contextualism, the very notion of meaning "is only applicable relative to a set of [...] background assumptions" (Searle 1978, p. 207), or background know-how. In earlier work, I have developed a (moderately externalist) "neo-Husserlian" account of the context-dependence of meaning and intentional content, based on Husserl's semantics of indexicals. Starting from this semantics, which strongly resembles today's mainstream semantics (section 2) I describe the (radical) contextualist challenge that mainstream semantics and pragmatics face in view of the (re-)discovery of what Searle calls the background of meaning (section 3). Following this, and drawing upon both my own neo-Husserlian account and ideas from Emma Borg, Gareth Evans and Timothy Williamson, I sketch a strategy for meeting this challenge (section 4) and draw a social-epistemological picture that allows us to characterize meaning and content in a way that takes account of contextualist insights yet makes it necessary to tone down Searle's "hypothesis of the Background" (section 5).

Keywords

Background hypothesis | Borg | Content | Context | Contextualism | Evans | Externalism | Husserl | Intentionality | Interpretation | Knowledge | Meaning | Minimalism | Reference | Searle | Williamson

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1 Introduction

"Meaning" is a popular term in philosophical slogans. Meaning is said to be normative; not to be in the head. The notion of meaning is (nevertheless) said to be the key to the notion of intentional content, to only be applicable relative to a set of background assumptions, and meaning is said to be context-dependent. These slogans are not unrelated, and all of them have a reading, I suppose, in which they are true. Here I shall mainly focus on the last two slogans, regarding background and context. My main question will be twofold:

1. In which sense, and to which extent, can the meaning of assertive utterances be said to be context-dependent?

2. Does this context-dependence have an impact on the validity of Searle's Background Hypothesis, which states that the intentional experiences expressed by assertive utterances, and bearing their respective meaning, and the mental acts of grasping this meaning, both require a non-intentional background on the part of the speaker/hearer, relative to which the truth-conditional content and the satisfaction conditions of the relevant experience are determined?

The upshot will be that (1) whilst there may be expressions lacking the context-sensitivity that many expressions (namely, the indexicals) possess in virtue of their conventional linguistic

meaning, there is a sense (to be explained in terms of the background) in which context-dependence is ubiquitous; but that (2) this context-dependence does not prevent competent language users who lack the sort of individual background in terms of which this particular context-dependence can be defined (the “consumers”) from grasping the literal truth-conditional meaning (the semantic content) which an assertive utterance expresses on a given occasion.

2 Three levels of meaning

An early proponent of the view that meaning is context-dependent is Husserl. His thought on meaning, as manifested in his first major work [Logical Investigations](#), starts out from the problem of what it is for a linguistic expression, as used by a speaker or (scientific) author, to function as a meaningful unit.¹

Husserl’s approach is to study the units of *consciousness* that the respective speaker deliberately presents herself as having—that she “intimates” or “gives voice to”—when expressing the meaning in question. This is what Searle refers to as the condition of sincerity of the relevant speech act ([Searle 1983](#), pp. 9-10). These units of consciousness Husserl labels INTENTIONAL EXPERIENCES or ACTS, since they always represent something—thus exhibiting what Brentano called intentionality. They are “about”, or “as of,” something. For instance, if you claim “One of my goals is to defend contextualism,” you give voice to a judgment or belief-state to the effect that defending contextualism is among your goals. This judgment is intentional, in that it represents a state of affairs, namely your having a particular goal; it is “about” that state of affairs, even if the latter does not exist (i.e., obtain) because you do not have that goal. Now it is the content of this judgment (which may be empty or unfulfilled, i.e., made in the absence of a corresponding intuition, such as a corresponding perception) that a hearer has to know in order to understand your utterance, i.e., to grasp its literal meaning. Thus, the (unfulfilled) judgment functions as the “meaning-

bestowing” or “meaning conferring act” ([Husserl 2001](#), p. 192) regarding the sentence uttered. This act is given voice to, or intimated, “in the narrow sense” ([Husserl 2001](#), p. 189)—it is the condition of sincerity of the speech act. However, in the present example (“One of my goals is to defend contextualism”) the speaker also deliberately presents herself as someone who wants to defend contextualism; after all, she explicitly ascribes that intention to herself. This latter act (the intention in question) is given voice to “in the broader sense” only ([Husserl 2001](#), p. 189), as it fails to be the meaning-bestowing act regarding the sentence uttered and thus to be given voice to in the narrow sense. In other words, the speaker intentionally presents herself as performing or undergoing that act, but if the hearer does not recognize that intention he does not *thereby* fail to grasp the literal truth-conditional meaning of the utterance. Again, if you assert “This is a blooming tree,” you give voice, in the narrow sense, to a demonstrative judgment; but you also present yourself as perceiving (or having perceived) something as a blooming tree, where the act of perception is given voice to in the broader sense. This perceptual act verifies the unfulfilled judgment by intuitively “fulfilling” it ([Husserl 2001](#), p. 192). Since the meaning-bestowing act finds its aim, so to speak, in this intuitive fulfilment, Husserl also refers to it as the corresponding “meaning intention” ([Husserl 2001](#), p. 192). Since any meaning intention aims at its intuitive fulfilment, every meaningful utterance can in principle be made to give voice (in the broader sense) to such an act of fulfilment, provided its literal meaning is not evidently inconsistent. In sections 3 and 4 I shall argue that only the group of speakers capable of both making and understanding such epistemic implicatures (the “producers”) must meet the requirements of Searle’s [Background Hypothesis](#). One does not have to meet these requirements in order to express, or correctly ascribe, a meaning intention and thus grasp the literal truth-conditional meaning of an (assertive) utterance.

The “original function” of linguistic expressions is their communicative use in giving voice to meaning-bestowing acts, or meaning intentions ([Husserl 2001](#), p. 189). However, this “indicating (*anzeigende*)” function is not essen-

¹ For the following presentation of Husserl’s theory of meaning cf. [Beyer & Weichold 2011](#), p. 406.

tial to their functioning as meaningful units, as they can also be employed “in [the] solitary life [of the soul] (*im einsamen Seelenleben*),” thanks to meaning-bestowing acts not actually given voice to but experienced all the same (Husserl 2001, pp. 190-191). But these acts and the meanings they bear are constrained by semantic factors concerning the linguistic expressions employed, with these factors being determined by linguistic conventions regarding the relationship between their meaning and the features of non-linguistic reality they serve to represent:

[...] it pertains to the *usual* [i.e., conventional; CB] sense of these classes of expressions, that they owe their determinate meaning to the occasion [...] [T]heir [respective] meaning is oriented in each case to the individual instance, though the manner of this orientation is a matter of usage.² (Husserl 2001, p. 221)

Husserl’s theory of meaning strongly resembles the mainstream view in philosophy of language attacked by Searle and other contextualists. In the following passage Searle gives a concise summary of that view:

Sentences have literal meanings. The literal meaning of a sentence is entirely determined by the meanings of its component words (or morphemes) and the syntactical rules according to which these elements are combined. [...] The literal meaning of a sentence needs to be sharply distinguished from what a speaker means by the sentence when he utters it to perform a speech act [...]. For example, in uttering a sentence a speaker may mean something different from what the sentence means, as in the case of metaphor; or he may even mean the opposite of what the sentence

means, as in the case of irony; or he may mean what the sentence means but mean something more as well, as in the case of conversational implications and indirect speech acts. [...] For sentences in the indicative, the meaning of the sentence determines a set of truth conditions [...] Sometimes the meaning of a sentence is such that its truth conditions will vary systematically with the contexts of its literal utterance. Thus the sentence ‘I am hungry’ might be uttered by one person on one occasion to make a true statement and yet be uttered by another person, or by the same person on another occasion, to make a false statement. [...] It is important to notice however that the notion of the meaning of a sentence is absolutely context free. Even in the case of indexical sentences the meaning does not change from context to context; rather the constant meaning is such that it determines a set of truth conditions only relative to a context of utterance.³ (Searle 1978, pp. 207-208)

To bring out the relevant semantic factors, consider what Husserl calls “essentially occasional expressions,” i.e., systematically context-sensitive, or indexical, expressions such as “I,” “here,” “now,” “I am here now.”⁴ In his pioneering discussion of these expressions in the first *Logical Investigation*, paragraph 26, Husserl introduces the semantic distinction between, on the one hand, an expression’s *general meaning-function* (i.e., the linguistic meaning of the expression, roughly corresponding to what Kaplan calls “character”) and, on the other hand, the propositional, or sub-propositional,⁵ content – the “*respective meaning*” – expressed in a given context of utterance (Husserl 2001, p. 218). If, for example, you and I both say “I,” then our two

² The German original runs: “Es gehört zur *usuellen* Bedeutung dieser Klassen von Ausdrücken, ihre Bedeutungsbestimmtheit erst der Gelegenheit zu verdanken [...] [Sie orientieren] ihre jeweilige Bedeutung erst nach dem Einzelfall, während doch die Weise, in der sie dies tun, eine usuelle ist.” (Hua XIX/1, pp. 91f.) So Husserl does not subscribe to a Humpty-Dumpty view of meaning, according to which the meaning of an expression in the mouth of a speaker is solely determined by what the speaker wants the expression to mean on the respective occasion; cf. Beyer 2000, pp. 78-79.

³ For an overview of more recent developments in semantics and pragmatics, cf. Lepore & Smith 2006, and the entries in Barber & Stainton 2010.

⁴ Unlike mainstream semantics, Husserl considers such expressions to be ubiquitous in empirical thought and speech; cf. Husserl 2001, p. 7. The approach to meaning I shall sketch below supports this contention.

⁵ A sub-propositional content is a non-propositional content (or respective meaning) that is a subpart of a propositional content. Singular and general terms may be used to express sub-propositional contents.

utterances share the same general-meaning function but express different respective meanings, with different referents. Again, if you and I both assert “I have blood type A,” our utterances share the same general meaning-function but express different respective meanings, with different truth conditions. These respective meanings, or truth-conditional contents, are often referred to as *propositions* expressed by the utterance of a sentence.

Husserl regards the general meaning-function as fixed by common usage (Husserl 2001, p. 221). The *respective* meaning determines the expression’s reference, or truth condition, in the sense that two expressions sharing that meaning are thus bound to refer to the same object(s), or to represent the same state of affairs, if any. Husserl construes “respective meanings” as two-factored, with the general meaning function plus the relevant context of utterance (if any) determining the meaning in question. Thus we have two levels of meaning⁶ being expressed when a meaning intention is given voice to:

General meaning-function (conventional linguistic meaning, “character”) =_{Df} The general meaning-function of an expression is a function yielding a respective meaning for a use of that expression in a given utterance context; where the assignment of this meaning-function to the relevant expression is generally a matter of (implicit or explicit) linguistic convention.

*Respective meaning ([sub-]propositional content, semantic content)*⁷ =_{Df} The respective meaning of an expression as used

in a given utterance context is a function yielding a reference or extension for that expression as used in that context, given particular circumstances of evaluation (see below).

In the case of indexical expressions, the respective meaning, alias semantic content, is a function of both the context of utterance and the general meaning-function of the expression used, which differs from the respective meaning; in all other cases, the two levels can be said to coincide.

Indexicality =_{Df} An expression is used as an indexical if and only if it is used in such a way that its respective meaning is dependent on both the utterance context (see below) and its general meaning-function, such that it may acquire different referents or extensions in different utterance contexts in virtue of its general meaning-function.

The level of respective meaning is subject to what Husserl calls “pure grammar,” which is the study of what distinguishes sense (i.e., respective meaning) from nonsense.⁸ On this view, semantic content displays something like formal, syntactic structure. This idea helps to explain the compositionality of meaning, which in turn explains how speakers and hearers, or interpreters, are able to grasp the meaning of an infinite number of sentences, many of which they have never heard before, on the basis of a finite vocabulary and a finite set of linguistic rules or conventions.

It is at the level of *respective* meaning that the bearers of truth-value (that is, of truth and falsity, respectively) are located—i.e., propositions. In modern semantics, truth-value ascriptions are relativized to what Kaplan calls *circumstances of evaluation*, consisting of possible worlds and, according to Kaplan, also times, on occasion. To illustrate one of the theoretical merits of this relativization to possible worlds, consider an utterance of mine of the sentence

⁶ The corresponding idea of different levels (*Stufen*) of understanding, which include the grasping of both character, content, and implicatures, is borrowed from Künne, who is also to be credited for pointing out the close similarity between Kaplan’s character/content distinction and Husserl’s distinction between general meaning-function and respective meaning; cf. Künne 1982. In Beyer 2000, I worked out the consequences of this distinction for Husserl’s semantics and theory of intentional content (“noematic sense”) in detail, arguing that the latter is to be rationally reconstructed as a moderate version of externalism, and that it can be fruitfully compared to Evans’ (radically externalist) neo-Fregean conception of sense, among others. That Husserl’s view can be read this way lends support to Dagfinn Føllesdal’s so-called Fregean interpretation of Husserl’s notion of noema (cf. Føllesdal 1969).

⁷ Note that “semantic content” is used by some authors to refer to conventional linguistic meaning rather than respective meaning (which Kaplan calls “content”).

⁸ Husserl’s investigations into pure grammar, especially his notion of a syntactic meaning category, had an important impact on modern linguistics (due mainly to Ajdukiewicz 1935).

(S0) I exist.

If we make the relativization in question, we can say two things: first, for every context of utterance it holds that the respective proposition expressed in an utterance of this sentence is true in the possible world of that context, so that the *sentence* can be said to be *a priori* or *logically true* (Kaplan 1989). Second, the *proposition* expressed in a particular utterance of S0, the respective meaning, is only *contingently true* – after all, the speaker need not exist: there are, in other words, possible worlds in which the proposition in question is false. Note that:

Context of utterance =_{Df} The utterance context consists of the possible world in which the utterance is (assumed to be) performed, the speaker, the addressee, the time and the place of utterance *and/or* all other entities that (according the general meaning-function of the expressions uttered) have to be identified in order to evaluate the utterance in terms of truth, falsity, or reference, relative to given circumstances of evaluation.

Or thus goes the rather common definition of “utterance context” I have used in earlier writings (e.g., Beyer 2001, pp. 278-279).

It is generally agreed upon, in mainstream semantics, that the levels of meaning mentioned so far – character and respective semantic content – do not exhaust what is communicated in speech. As Husserl puts it, there are mental states given voice to “in the broader sense,” and their contents are candidates for what the speaker non-literally means or suggests, which Grice calls “implicature.” At the same time, these contents are further candidates for what the hearer grasps when understanding, or successfully interpreting, the utterance.

This has been standardly regarded as a third level of meaning that is not the subject matter of formal semantics but rather of pragmatics: the study of the use of language for purposes of action other than the expression of literal meaning.

What is implicated (suggested, indirectly communicated) =_{Df} By using an expression in an utterance context, a speaker implicates the intentional contents of the mental acts she gives voice to in the broader sense. These contents can be made out on the basis of the respective meaning of the expression in that context by applying certain conversational maxims (cf. Maibauer 2010).

3 A contextualist challenge

This, then, is more or less the received opinion, which has been challenged by philosophers on the basis of ideas that partly go back to Husserl—in particular the notion of *background*. Thus, in his 1978 essay on “[Literal Meaning](#)” Searle claims that:

[...] for a large number of cases the notion of the literal meaning of a sentence only has application relative to a set of background assumptions, and furthermore these background assumptions are not all and could not all be realized in the semantic structure of the sentence in the way that presuppositions and indexically dependent elements of the sentence’s truth conditions are realized in the semantic structure of the sentence. (Searle 1978, p. 210)

On this view, the role of context is not simply that of fixing the reference of indexical expressions in a semantically well-regulated manner. There is contextual content determination everywhere, and correspondingly there is semantic underdetermination all over the place. There is no propositional meaning content attached to a sentence independently of context; and (some authors would add) *context* itself is not a well-defined notion: there is no neat list of semantically fixed context-factors and context-sensitive expressions. There is a huge and confusing background of assumptions, or know-how, that we bring to a given linguistic utterance, without which the utterance would fail to express any semantic content, and to thereby

determine truth conditions; and there is no hope of constructing a formal theory of this background (or “context”) and the way it determines truth-conditional content. Thus runs Searle’s radical contextualist challenge to mainstream semantics and pragmatics.

To motivate contextualism (so conceived) about meaning and content, consider a situation in which an object is hidden in a box. All we know about that object is that it is the only object in that box. Unlike us, the speaker knows which kind of object is in the box. She does not know that we do not know this; she intends to refer to a particular object of that kind, the one she takes to be in the box, or to one of its aspects (dependent features). She utters the sentence

(S1) This is red.

to make a statement about the object or aspect, without implying or suggesting anything else. What statement does she make? What is the respective meaning expressed in this utterance? What does the speaker say? According to radical contextualism, this depends on a wide variety of factors, not encoded in the linguistic meaning of the sentence uttered.

For a bird to be red (in the normal case), it should have most of the surface of its body red, though not its beak, legs, eyes, and of course its inner organs. Furthermore, the red color should be the bird’s natural color, since we normally regard a bird as being ‘really’ red even if it is painted white all over. A kitchen table, on the other hand, is red even if it is only painted red, and even if its ‘natural’ color underneath the paint is, say, white. Moreover, for a table to be red only its upper surface needs to be red, but not necessarily its legs and its bottom surface. Similarly, a red apple, as Quine pointed out, needs to be red only on the outside, but a red hat needs to be red only in its external upper surface, a red crystal is red both inside and outside, and a red watermelon is red only inside. [...] In short, what counts

for one type of thing to be red is not what counts for another. (Lahav 1989, p. 264)

So, in which way does the relevant meaning of S1 (“This is red”) depend on context? I want to consider three options.

1. *Speaker intentions*: Are the referential intentions of the speaker, such as their intention to refer to a particular *bird* by “this,” part of the relevant context? One problem with this answer is that it prevents us from adopting a conception of context according to which shared knowledge of context is what (in addition to shared knowledge of conventional linguistic meaning) enables both speaker and hearer to grasp one and the same respective meaning in cases of successful communication. After all, context, thus understood, is supposed to help the hearer make out the speaker’s referential intentions, among other things. So the present answer does not help—provided we conceive of context in a communication-theoretical way—as a means, so to speak, that in accordance with the relevant linguistic meaning enables the hearer to determine the respective meaning expressed.⁹
2. *Object referred to*: Is the relevant context simply identical to what’s in the box? But the speaker might only be referring to a particular aspect of the object in the box, rather than to the whole object. So we are thrown back to the speaker’s referential intentions—which do not help us, as we saw above.
3. *Background assumptions*: Does the relevant context consist of background assumptions about the object, or kind of object, in the box? Which assumptions, exactly? It seems to be impossible to make a comprehensive list, because every set of assumptions brings with it further assumptions. For example, suppose that the speaker takes an apple to be in the box. *Apples* normally count as red even if their *skin* is not completely red. However, consider a social group who have only encountered two kinds of apples thus far (as far as their colour

⁹ The epistemic availability of this means may require further means, to be found in a wider context itself not necessarily predelineated semantically.

is concerned): apples whose skin is completely red and apples whose skin is completely green; imagine that their apples instantaneously turn red when ripe. These people probably wouldn't classify an almost-ripe apple of the kind we know as "red." In fact, they wouldn't know what to say, because they have always assumed that there are only two kinds of apple-colour, and because this background assumption determines the meaning they conventionally associate with S1 as applied to apples. So shall we regard the assumption that there are grades of apple-redness corresponding to their ripeness as part of the context of our assertive uses of the sentence "this [the speaker refers to an apple] is red"? But how many grades are relevant? What if there had been exactly three apple colours? This would probably again lead to a different use, and hence respective meaning, of S1, as applied to apples, and so on and so forth.

Obviously these sorts of examples can easily be multiplied. Is there any way to avoid the following radical contextualist conclusion?

Radical contextualism =_{DF} There is no fixed relation between

- (i) the linguistic or literal meaning of a sentence S;
- (ii) a neatly defined set of context parameters; and
- (iii) the respective meaning and truth condition of S in the context of utterance, such that (iii) is uniquely determined by (i) and (ii).

Rather, the respective meaning is always determined differently, from situation to situation, so that the notion of a conventionally (co-)determined semantic content is untenable.

4 Two kinds of knowledge about truth conditions

The best strategy I can think of to avoid this radical conclusion draws upon a distinction made by Emma Borg. In her 2004 book *Minimal Semantics*, Borg distinguishes between minimal se-

mantic understanding, i.e., knowledge of what she calls "liberal" truth conditions, on the one hand, and knowing how to "verify" (or knowing what would make it the case) that the truth condition *is met*, on the other hand (Borg 2004, p. 238). Thus, the members of the social group who only know (what we would call) completely red-skinned and completely green-skinned apples are unable to know whether the truth condition of the sentence "this [the speaker refers to an apple] is red" is *met* regarding a not fully ripe apple, but they nevertheless *know* the truth condition—namely that the object the speaker wants them to attend to be red—whatever the latter may require in the case at hand. *They have full semantic knowledge but lack background know-how.* However, the latter is only required for "verification," or

1. knowledge of the proposition *p* stated (i.e., knowledge that *p*),

but not for the less demanding

2. knowledge of *which* proposition was stated (i.e., knowledge that *p* is the proposition literally expressed by the speaker).

The latter is sufficient for semantic knowledge regarding the statement.

I like this answer to the contextualist challenge, but I think that it eventually leads to a more moderate version of contextualism, rather than to a full-scale rejection: it leads to a version that makes room for semantic knowledge without background assumptions or know-how, knowledge whose content can indeed be investigated by formal semantics.

Clearly, the advocate of the present answer needs to explain how one can understand a sentence while lacking the kind of background know-how regarding which Searle would claim that in the absence of such capacities the "notion of the meaning of the sentence" has no clear "application" at all (see quotation above). Searle would stress that in the absence of appropriate background assumptions or know-how we have no clear idea of how to understand a sentence like "This (apple) is red;" which mani-

festes itself in the fact that we do not, for instance, know how to follow the corresponding order “Bring me the red apple!” (cf. Searle 1983, p. 147). In the light of Borg’s distinction, this can be described as lack of knowledge about “verification,” but what about the strong intuition that in the absence of such background know-how the sentence fails to express a content that can be evaluated in terms of truth and falsity? To strengthen this intuition, consider Searle’s examples S2–S4 (cf. Searle 1983, Ch. 6):

- (S2) Bill opened the mountain.
- (S3) Bill opened the grass.
- (S4) Bill opened the sun.

These sentences are syntactically well-formed and contain meaningful English expressions; yet they do not express clear semantic content—unless we imagine some background know-how regarding what it means to open a mountain, the grass, or the sun.¹⁰ The mere combination of the literal meaning of the verb “opened” with the literal meanings of other English expressions in accordance with the English syntax does not seem to be enough to produce a clear truth-evaluable content, despite the fact that “to open” does not look like an indexical that yields as reference a unique behavioural relation (or type of action) referred to as “opening,” for a neatly defined type of context—in the way that “I” always yields the speaker of the utterance context as its referent. Borg would disagree; she says about an analogous example by Searle (“John cut the sun”):

If the competent language user understands all the parts of the sentence (she knows the property denoted by the term ‘cut’, she grasps the meaning of the referring term ‘John’ and she understands the meaning of the definite description ‘the sun’) and she understands this construction of parts, then she knows that the utterance of this sentence is true just in case

[...] John stands in the cutting relation to the sun. Now clearly any world which satisfies this condition is going to be pretty unusual (and there may be some vague cases [...]) but there will be, it seems, some pretty clear cases on either side of the divide. For instance, any world where John’s actions do not have any effect on the physical status of the sun is clearly going to be a world where the truth-condition is not satisfied. While any world where John’s actions do result in some kind of severing of the physical unity of the mass of the sun is a world where the truth-condition is satisfied. (Borg 2004, p. 236)

This reply to Searle is unconvincing for at least two reasons.

First: To begin with, Borg here equates semantic knowledge concerning the verb phrase “cut” with knowledge of the property it denotes (see the first brackets in the quotation). But arguably this phrase does not denote any property in isolation; it only does so in the context of a *sentence* (by the “context principle”).¹¹ And Searle’s parallel point about “opened” is that this verb phrase denotes quite *different* properties in S2–S4, respectively, without being ambiguous. That the verb is unambiguous in these cases becomes intuitively plausible if we apply the “conjunction reduction” test (cf. Searle 1992, pp. 178–179). Instead of asserting the conjunction of S2–S4 we can just as well say: “Bill opened the mountain, the grass, and the sun” and perhaps add: “he used a secret universal device for the task recently developed by NASA.” This may be a weird example, but its

¹¹ Cf. Beyer 1997, p. 341, where I raise the same point in order to criticize one of Searle’s arguments for the Background Hypothesis. As for the precise content of the context principle, Robert Stainton distinguishes between three readings:

“The first [is] merely methodological, a claim about how to find out what particular words mean: To find word meanings, look at what they contribute to sentences. The second reading [is] metasemantic, a claim about why words have the meanings they do: words only have meaning because of how they affect sentence meanings. The third reading of the Principle is interpretational/psychological. [...] [T]he idea underlying it is that the only things we are psychologically able to understand are whole sentences.” (Stainton 2010, pp. 88–89) In the present context, a consequence of the *metasemantic* reading is intended which follows from the conjunction of that reading and the assumption that the meaning of a predicate (like “... cut ...”) denotes a property or relation, if anything.

¹⁰ Another option might be to admit category mistakes as semantic contents. (I wish to express my thanks to Adriana Pavic for reminding me of this option.)

weirdness does not seem to be due to the ambiguity of “opened.” Rather, unlike the imagined NASA devisors we simply have no background know-how that would enable us to assign truth conditions to this sentence.

Borg would probably reject the context principle (thus paying a high price for her view) and answer that there may be vague cases in which we do not know whether the opening relation obtains or not, but that “there will be [...] some pretty clear cases on either side of the divide” (Borg 2004, p. 236); after all, in the preceding quotation she makes a parallel claim about the example “John cut the sun.” But this answer is, again, unconvincing (as is Borg’s parallel claim). One might just as well argue that both S5 and S6 describe the same relation, the opening relation, as obtaining between different objects.

(S5) Bill opened his hand.

(S6) Bill opened the door.

But opening a hand is an intentional bodily movement, while opening a door is a more advanced or complex action that merely *involves* such bodily movements. These are different kinds of behavioural relation. Of course, clear examples of the obtaining of both of these relations may have something in common, but this common feature does not seem to constitute a common *type of action*. And what (if anything) is the verb phrase in S5 and S6 supposed to denote, if not a type of action?

Nor is the verb phrase in this pair of sentences ambiguous. This is made plausible by the conjunction reduction test: it is perfectly fine to abbreviate the conjunction of S5 and S6 as follows: “Bill opened the hand and the door.”

The (to my mind) false impression that the unambiguous verb phrase in S2–S4 denotes the same behavioural relation or feature as in, say, S6, merely comes from the fact that we tend to think of *established* uses of “*a* opened *b*” sentences (or “*a* cut *b*” sentences) when trying to construct an interpretation for cases like S2–S4 that we do not really understand. But there is no such use in these cases (see the next paragraph but one).

Second: Moreover, Borg’s claim that “any world where John’s actions do result in some kind of severing of the physical unity of the mass of the sun is a world where the truth-condition [of ‘John cut the sun’] is satisfied” is simply false. If John causes an explosion whose effect is that the physical unity of the mass of the sun is severed (such that it breaks into, say, two halves),¹² he does not thereby *cut* the sun. I suppose that any attempt to secure a minimal truth condition for S4 (and S2–S3, for that matter) is doomed to failure. In order to have at least a slight chance of getting off the ground, any such attempt will have to mention something that can be done using sharp-edged tools (or devices simulating such tools),¹³ and it seems impossible to define (let alone imagine) a procedure of this type that could in principle be applied to the sun.

To anticipate the alternative approach I am going to take, in cases like S2–S4 there is no established sentence-use because there is no appropriate background know-how to be found in the relevant social group (including its late members), hence no group of (current or former) “producers” (see below), and hence no relation conventionally denoted by the verb phrase that could enter the respective truth condition. Therefore, these sentences have “literal meaning” (as Searle puts it) but lack semantic content. Literal meaning is not usage (in the current sense), nor does it require a particular usage—unlike respective meaning.

On similar grounds (to return to the last example about S1), if in the envisaged social group there is no background know-how regarding certain apples that *we* would readily classify as “red,” against that background, the sentence S1 has no clear application to such apples in the language use of that group, and it *does not have the same truth condition* as in ours. An in-

¹² A reviewer claims that “to sever” means to cut. Even if the corresponding interpretation of “severing” were admissible, it could not be the one intended by Borg. Have a look at the preceding quotation. If you replace “severing” by “cutting” there, you obtain: “While any world where John’s actions do result in some kind of cutting of the physical unity of the mass of the sun is a world where the truth-condition [of ‘John cut the sun’] is satisfied.” If this sentence is meaningful at all, it expresses a triviality that does nothing to support Borg’s view.

¹³ See the entry on “cut” in the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English.

terpretation problem occurs. I am attracted by an interpretation-theoretical principle proposed by Timothy Williamson, probably inspired by Gareth Evans, which Williamson calls the principle of knowledge maximization (as opposed to the principle of *truth* maximization to be found in traditional hermeneutics, and endorsed by Donald Davidson):

The shift from conventions of truthfulness to conventions of knowledgeableness also has repercussions in the methodology of interpretation. The appropriate principle of charity will give high marks to interpretations on which speakers tend to assert what they know, rather than to those on which they tend to assert what is true [...]. (Williamson 2000, p. 267)

The right charitable injunction for an assignment of reference is to maximize knowledge, not to minimize ignorance. (Williamson 2007, p. 265)

According to the principle of knowledge maximization, an interpretation is correct to the extent that it maximizes “the number of knowledgeable judgements, both verbalized and un-verbalized, the speaker comes out at making” (McGlynn 2012, p. 392). To motivate this principle, although in a somewhat modified version, imagine that in the above example about the box there are in fact two objects in the box—a red ball and a yellow apple—but that we know that the speaker does not know about the ball, which was already hidden in the box before we put the apple into the box while the lightning was such as to make the apple look red.¹⁴ The speaker, who observed how we put the apple into the box, mistakenly believes it to be red and exclaims: S1 (“this is red”). No doubt, if this utterance has any truth condition, it involves an apple rather than a ball, and the utterance is false. A suitably modified version of

the principle of knowledge maximization yields this result as the correct interpretation, while the principle of truth maximization fails to do so. After all, the speaker would only give voice to a true belief here if her statement concerned the *ball* rather than the apple. However, this belief would not qualify as knowledge, in the described situation, and by assumption the speaker lacks any other knowledge regarding that ball. By contrast, the speaker possesses some knowledge about the apple, which is in fact yellow. In Evans’ terms, the speaker has opened a mental dossier (a dynamic system of beliefs) about the apple, which contains quite a number of (correct) information about it, even though the addition of the belief that the apple is red does not enlarge that body of knowledge. Thus, the speaker ought to be interpreted as giving voice to that false belief, Davidson and traditional hermeneutics notwithstanding. This interpretation takes into account more relevant knowledge on the part of the speaker than the other.

The principle of knowledge maximization needs to be modified in terms of, or supplemented by, a more traditional theory of justification in order to yield this result. To see this, let us first consider another example, inspired by Husserl (cf. Husserl 1987, p. 212), which I have used in earlier writings to motivate my “neo-Husserlian,” moderately externalist reconstruction of his view on respective meaning and intentional content.

Let’s assume that at a time t_1 Ed points at a certain table in the seminar room where he has just been lecturing and exclaims:

[(S7)] This table wobbles.

One of the students is prepared to take Ed to the caretaker, to make sure that the table gets repaired immediately. The way from the seminar room to the caretaker’s office is rather complicated. But they manage to find it. The caretaker asks Ed to take him to the seminar room with the wobbling table. The student has other things to do. So Ed has to take the care-

¹⁴ Following the realism inherent to ordinary language use, I assume that the everyday world of experience involves objects displaying real colours. It may be possible to eliminate real colours, but such attempts at revisionary metaphysics should have no impact on the study of the actual use of language, unless they lead to a change of language use, which has not happened yet in the case of colour words.

taker to that room by himself. Finally, they arrive at a seminar room that Ed falsely believes to be the room with the wobbling table. At t_2 Ed points at a certain table, which he regards as that wobbling table, and once again declares [S7]. The caretaker investigates the table and contradicts Ed—who reacts somewhat irritatedly. (Beyer 2001, pp. 284-285)

It is unclear which referent (table 1 or table 2) the interpreter is supposed to assign to the demonstrative term “this” according to the (unmodified) principle of knowledge maximization. After all, both of these assignments would lead to an ascription of knowledge to the speaker: knowledge about table 1 (to the effect that it wobbles) and table 2 (to the effect that it is a table he takes to be wobbling), respectively.

To decide the issue, the interpreter needs to take a closer look at the speaker’s epistemic motivation for making the judgment given voice to in her utterance of S7 at t_2 —he needs to consider the experience(s) with recourse to which the speaker can *justify* her claim to knowledge. If the judgment is motivated by a perception the speaker is having, thus qualifying as an *observational* judgment, it will be about the object of that perception: that object is perceived as thus-and-so and for this reason (on this ground) judged to be thus-and-so. This is what happens at t_1 : the speaker perceives table 1 as wobbling and is sincerely giving voice (in the narrow sense) to an accordingly motivated judgment to the effect that it wobbles. However, at t_2 the epistemic situation is different. The speaker’s judgment is motivated by a *memory of table 1* rather than by her current perception of table 2. It is this memory that rationalizes her judgment, and could be self-ascribed by the speaker when justifying her judgment. Therefore, the speaker gives voice, in the narrow sense, to a judgment about table 1, namely that it wobbles. I have elsewhere called this epistemically-determined truth condition the utterance’s *internal truth condition*.¹⁵ According to

the neo-Husserlian approach, respective utterance meaning determines the *internal* truth condition.

So in order to yield interpretations that adequately reflect the meaning intentions actually given voice to by the speaker, and thus the respective meanings of their utterances, the principle of knowledge maximization needs to be supplemented by (or reformulated in terms of) a more traditional theory of justification, drawing upon notions like *observation*, *memory* and *testimony* (referring to sources of justification). Note that the present approach to reference supports a version of the context principle: it is only in the context of a judgment that a referent can be assigned to a mental act of reference given voice to by a singular term.

Let us finally return to the example about the two objects in the box. In this example the speaker gives voice to a judgment about the yellow apple rather than the red ball in her utterance of S1, because she (falsely) remembers that ball as being red, having opened, on an earlier occasion, a mental dossier about it containing the (incorrect) information that the ball is red, while she neither remembers nor perceives, nor has heard about the ball that also happens to be in the box. Thus, the judgment given voice to can only be motivated by, and justified with recourse to, that memory—even if it does not yield knowledge in the case at hand. And that memory concerns the apple rather than the ball, because it belongs to the speaker’s body of information about the apple. Thus, on a version of the principle of knowledge maximization modified in accordance with the foregoing neo-Husserlian approach to reference assignment, the utterance in question concerns the apple, if anything.

Now by the principle of knowledge maximization (in both versions), if there is no back-

ternal truth-condition is the state of affairs represented by the (intentional content of the) judgement the speaker should give voice to, given (a) the linguistic meaning [i.e., the general meaning-function] of the employed sentence and (b) the external context.” The external context is the actual (observable) context of utterance, which on the neo-Husserlian approach may differ from the phenomenologically relevant (“internal”) context, which is determined by the motivational structure of experience with recourse to which the speaker could justify the judgment given voice to. In the present example, the internal context involves table 1.

¹⁵ Cf. Beyer 2001, p. 289: “The internal truth-condition of an assertion is the state of affairs represented by the (intentional content of the) judgement actually given voice to in that assertion. Whereas the ex-

ground that enables members of a social group to express knowledge by a sentence like S1 in a situation where we would readily apply that sentence—on the basis of our own knowledge *and* background know-how—, then the following conclusion recommends itself: in the language use of this social group the sentence lacks the determinate truth-evaluable meaning it expresses in our own language use, in a given context. (Contrast what Borg says about “John cut the sun;” see the above quotation from Borg 2004, p. 236.)

This speaks in favour of contextualism. However, it does not speak in favour of a radical version of contextualism, which would not allow for a notion of minimal semantic knowledge that can indeed be possessed in the absence of personal background know-how—a version that thus ignores the above-described difference between two types of knowledge regarding truth conditions. In what follows, I shall sketch a more moderate version of contextualism that does take this difference into account.

5 Towards a moderate contextualism about meaning

It is plausible to assume that all that is required for semantic knowledge, conceived as knowledge *which* truth condition has been stated, is that the following two conditions be met. First, a sufficient number of current or former (late) members of the *speech community* to which the speaker belongs possess appropriate background know-how. Second, the speaker stands in an appropriate social relation to these members (a relation that would enable the speaker to express communal knowledge by a true sentence whose content she may be unable to “verify” herself).

These members are experts; they are capable of “verifying” or “falsifying” the semantic content of the sentence in question, as opposed to merely grasping it. Other members of their social group participate in their knowledge thanks to intersubjective processes of information transfer. The main idea behind this approach is an adaptation of Evans’ distinction between what he calls name-producers and mere name-consumers, which is used to substantiate

the above distinction between two kinds of knowledge regarding a sentence’s truth condition.¹⁶ This strategy leads to a social-epistemological conception of the background of meaning and to a version of contextualism that preserves basic insights of anti-contextualists like Borg. Evans writes:

Let us consider an ordinary proper-name-using practice, in which the name ‘NN’ is used to refer to the person x. The distinctive mark of any such practice is the existence of a core group of speakers who have been introduced to the practice via their acquaintance with x. They have on some occasion been told, or anyway have come to learn, a truth which they could then express as ‘This is NN’, where ‘This’ makes a demonstrative reference to x. Once a speaker has learned such a truth, the capacity to re-identify persons over time enables him to recognize later occasions on which the judgement ‘This is NN’ may be made, and hence in connection with which the name ‘NN’ may be used. [...] Members of this core group, whom I shall call ‘producers’ [...], do more than merely use the name to refer to x; they have dealings with x from time to time, and use the name in those dealings – they know x, and further, they know x as NN. [...] [T]he expression does not become a name for x unless it has a certain currency among those who know x – only then can we say that x is known as NN. [...] Perhaps in the early stages of its existence all the participants in the name-using practice will be producers, but this is unlikely to remain so for

¹⁶ As Evans acknowledges, this distinction is inspired by Putnam’s notion of a “linguistic division of labour” (see Putnam 1975, pp. 145-146); cf. Evans 1982, p. 377. I should stress that on the view proposed in this contribution, the producers do not grasp the respective meaning of relevant expressions more “fully” than the mere consumers. Rather, they help sustain the common practice necessary for those expressions to be usable (by both producers and mere consumers) to express a respective meaning (a truth-conditional “semantic content”). I should also stress that I take the producer/consumer distinction to be universally applicable, and not just in the case of rigid designators, and that on my view the capacities of the producers (unlike the capacities of what Putnam calls “experts”) need not include scientific knowledge. (Thanks to Adriana Pavic for pressing me on these points.)

long. Others, who are not acquainted with x , can be introduced into the practice, either by helpful explanations of the form ‘ NN is the φ ’, or just by hearing sentences in which the name is used. I shall call these members ‘consumers’, since on the whole they are not able to inject new information into the practice, but must rely upon the information-gathering transactions of the producers. [...] Let us now consider the last phase of a practice of a name-using practice, when all the participants are consumers. [...]. Later consumers manifest the intention to be participating in this practice, and, using a name which, in the practice, refers to Livingstone, themselves refer to Livingstone. Thus the practice is maintained with a constant reference, perhaps for very long periods of time. (Evans 1982, pp. 376-393)

If we adapt Evans’ distinction between two types of name-users for present purposes, we can say that in a given community there have to be, or have to have been (see the last three sentences of the quotation), people “in the know” regarding (what we use to call) the red colour of apples, or regarding a particular practice of opening mountains, grass, or the sun, in order for the sentences S2–S4 to be candidates, in virtue of their literal meaning, for the expression of knowledge available to us through these sentences.¹⁷ There have to be (current or late) “producers” in order for these sentences to express a semantic content determining truth conditions, thus displaying a clear, interpretable respective meaning in that linguistic community—and this requires that the sentences have a community-wide usage upheld by recourse to (current or late) producers. They know (or knew) how to “verify” the respective meaning of assertive utterances of the sentence, in the relevant usage; i.e., they know which fact (if any) would make it the case that the truth condition

is satisfied; they know how to follow a corresponding order, and so on.

The rest of the speech community merely knows the truth condition and can gain and transfer information an utterance of the sentence bears without themselves being in the know—that is, without having the original knowledge only the producers have in their possession. They may acquire and transfer knowledge (sometimes) by testimony, thanks to the existence of a community-wide practice of sentence-usage sustained by intersubjective processes of information transfer, in a way yet to be understood in more detail.

Eventually, mere consumers “must rely upon the information-gathering transactions of the producers,” to use Evans’ formulation. Mere consumers have semantic knowledge, but they lack more substantive knowledge. Semantics is concerned with the content of their semantic knowledge. Mere consumers need a background of what Searle calls *social practices*, including social practices of language use. However, they lack the producers’ individual or personal background know-how and thus their substantive knowledge regarding truth conditions, which requires such know-how (i.e., the knowledge of how to “verify” those conditions).

What kind of individual background do the producers need in order to be able to make possible social practices of language use that allow all members of their speech community to express and grasp semantic contents determining particular truth conditions? In his 1978 paper, which some regard as the constitutive document of contextualism, Searle stresses the importance of background assumptions, such as the assumption that there is a field of gravitation or that things offer resistance to pressure, which is usually taken for granted, quite unreflectedly, when we speak about middle-sized everyday objects such as apples and boxes. This may at first sound like the requirement of what might be called background *knowledge*, consisting of intentional states, i.e., certain epistemically distinguished beliefs. However, especially in his later writings, Searle stresses the non-intentional character of the background, characterizing it as consisting of non-intentional capacities

¹⁷ The point is not that we cannot describe uncommon practices (such as using a metal saw) for actions like opening a can, say. Rather, the point is that there have to be common practices, known to the producers, in order for a sentence like “Bill opened the can” to be usable to express a respective meaning representing any practice in the first place. (Thanks again to Adriana Pavic for helping me to make this clear.)

—which I have referred to above as background *know-how*, and which would include the ability to perform social practices. Searle has formulated a thesis about the relation between intentionality, on the one hand, and background know-how on the other, a thesis he calls the “hypothesis of the Background”:

Another way to state [the hypothesis of the Background] is to say that all representation, whether in language, thought, or experience, only succeeds given a set of nonrepresentational capacities. In my technical jargon, intentional states only determine conditions of satisfaction relative to a set of capacities that are not themselves intentional. (Searle 1992, p. 175)

Later in the same book chapter he explains:

The actual content [sc. of an intentional state] is insufficient to determine the conditions of satisfaction. [...] Even if you spell out all contents of the mind as a set of conscious rules, thoughts, beliefs, etc., you still require a set of Background capacities for their interpretation. (Searle 1992, pp. 189-190)

This addition to the formulation in the penultimate quotation is, I think, false—or even absurd. The respective meaning of an utterance is the intentional content of the mental state given voice to in the narrow sense, which means that intentional content is precisely what determines the truth condition (or, more generally, the conditions of satisfaction). Indeed, Searle seems to agree:

[...] I want to capture our ordinary intuition that the man who has the belief that Sally cut the cake has a belief with exactly the same propositional content as the literal assertion ‘Sally cut the cake.’ (Searle 1992, p. 184)

I take it to be a definitional truth that intentional content provides the answer to Wittgenstein’s question “What makes my representation

of him a representation of *him?*”. A conception of intentional content must spell out this answer. It makes no sense to conceive intentional content along the lines of Searle’s addition in the penultimate quotation, just as it makes no sense (*pace* Searle) to say of semantic content, properly construed, that it is not self-applying, or that it needs to be interpreted against a non-representational background in order to determine reference or satisfaction conditions.

In the following passage Searle commits himself to radical contextualism:

An utterance of [the sentence ‘Sally gave John the key, and he opened the door’] would normally convey that first Sally gave John the key, and later he opened the door, and that he opened the door with the key. There is much discussion about the mechanisms by which this additional content is conveyed, given that it is not encoded in the literal meaning of the sentence. The suggestion, surely correct, is that sentence meaning, at least to a certain extent, underdetermines what the speaker says when he utters the sentence. Now, the claim I’m making is: sentence meaning radically underdetermines the content of what is said. (Searle 1992, p. 181)

Thus, Searle explains, nothing in the literal meaning of the sentence referred to excludes crazy interpretations like: “John opened the door with the key by swallowing both door and key, and moving the key into the lock by way of the peristaltic contraction of his gut.” (Searle 1992, p. 182) Note that we are dealing with a claim about linguistic meaning here, not about semantic content—properly construed as *representational* content, uniquely determining satisfaction conditions.

From the viewpoint of the social-epistemological picture of semantic content sketched above, the Background Hypothesis should be restricted to the *producers* of sentences figuring in linguistic representation. On this picture, only the producers’ intentionality requires background know-how regarding the application of

those sentences. Mere consumers merely need an appropriate background of *social practices*. If the advocate of this picture did not restrict the Background Hypothesis to the producers, he would be committed to the view that mere consumers can give voice, in the narrow sense, to intentional states in which they cannot be, due to lack of background know-how. This would mean that only the producers can be *sincere* in their assertive utterances of sentences regarding which they are producers. But this seems wrong. It is possible for mere consumers to deliberately express knowledge by testimony. Hence, the (unrestricted) hypothesis of the Background ought to be rejected, on the present view. Meaning-intentions (meaning-bestowing acts) do not generally require a non-intentional background relative to which their (truth-conditional) content and satisfaction conditions are determined; while their intuitive fulfilments (the corresponding “verifications”), if any, do. For instance, it is impossible to *perceive* something as an elm without being able to distinguish elms from other sorts of trees. This of course means in turn that one ought to reject the present picture if one accepts the Background Hypothesis (in unrestricted form). In order to decide the issue, more needs to be said to explain this hypothesis. I cannot decide the issue here. But it may be helpful in this regard to end by saying a bit more about the content of Searle’s Background Hypothesis.

In *The Rediscovery of the Mind* Searle plausibly contends that *mental representation*, i.e., underived, original intentionality is realized just in case a given mental state “is at least potentially conscious” (Searle 1992, p. 132). We find similar claims in Husserl.¹⁸ Due to the “as-

pectual shape” of intentional states (the fact that they have perspectival, intentional content) there are no “deep unconscious mental intentional phenomena” (Searle 1992, p. 173), such as reflectively inaccessible belief states. There is an important sort of background elements whose distinctive mark is that they are *capacities to be in intentional states*; that is, they are dispositions to have (actually or potentially) conscious representations, such as occurrent beliefs. The general assumption that things offer resistance to pressure is a case in point. We normally do not form a belief to this effect but are nevertheless committed to it by the way we behave towards things (cf. Searle 1992, p. 185).

One may call these capacities for (at least potentially) conscious representation “background assumptions” or “network beliefs” if one likes, but according to Searle one must keep in mind that these capacities fail to be intentional states: “the Network of unconscious intentionality is part of the Background” (Searle 1992, p. 188) and “the Background is not itself intentional” (Searle 1992, p. 196). If Searle is right about this, then many elements of the so-called “web of belief” are part of the non-intentional background.

This view has far-reaching consequences for the theory of intentionality. For, if Husserl is basically right about the structure of consciousness (as I believe he is), then conscious states must be embedded in a holistic structure, which Husserl calls the “intentional horizon,” whose future elements are predelineated (at least in part) by the intentional content of the respective state of consciousness. For example, if you consciously see something whose front side you

consciousness iff they are both intentional objects of a dispositional higher-order belief of the sort “I am now having such-and-such experiences” that would be actualized by one and the same higher-order judgment (where the temporal demonstrative specifically refers to the moment of (internal) time at which both of these experiences occur). (2) Two diachronous intentional experiences belong to the same stream of consciousness iff both of them are intentional objects of a dispositional higher-order belief of the sort “I just (or earlier) had such-and-such experiences” that would be actualized by one and the same higher-order judgment. This approach fits in well with Husserl’s contention that “[i]ntentionality is what [...] justifies designating the whole stream of [experiences] as the stream of consciousness and as the unity of *one* consciousness” (Husserl 1982, p. 199). It also fits in well with a view on which Husserl conceives of consciousness as “pre-reflective self-awareness;” cf. Beyer 2011.

¹⁸ Husserl has a dispositionalist higher-order judgment view of consciousness, according to which conscious experiences are “essentially capable of being perceived in reflection,” such that “they are there already as a ‘background’ when they are not reflected on and thus of essential necessity are ‘ready to be perceived’” (Husserl 1982, p. 99; also cf. p. 80, where Husserl cites as an example a case in which “we are reflecting on a conviction which is alive right now (perhaps stating: I am convinced that ...)”). (Compare Searle 1992, p. 156: “This idea, that all unconscious intentional states are in principle accessible to consciousness, I call the connection principle [...]”) In Beyer 2006, Chs. 1-2, I defend a dispositionalist higher-order judgment view of intentional consciousness and argue that it explains the unity of consciousness (1) at a time as well as (2) across time, as follows: (1) Two simultaneous intentional experiences belong to the same stream of con-

are visually confronted by *as a house*, then you will anticipate¹⁹ visual appearances of a back side and an inside, respectively, as future experiences you would undergo if you walked inside or walked around the object while observing it. But is the corresponding set of anticipations really an *intentional* structure? Searle's arguments regarding the background cast doubt on this, given his view that consciousness (or what is consciously accessible) is the only occurrent reality of intentionality. After all, it is plausible to equate (a large subset of) the set of anticipations determining the respective intentional horizon with a relevant part of what Searle calls the "Network," given that they cannot be described properly as occurrent beliefs or conscious judgments, but rather as mere dispositions to form higher-order beliefs. For, as Husserl explains, the anticipations in question concern the way the represented object would present itself to consciousness in possible worlds compatible with what is currently experienced, and they also concern the way this object relates to other objects in the world—thus constituting the core of one's current *world* horizon, which core Husserl calls the "external horizon" (Husserl 1973, p. 32) of the experience (see below). It is only when these anticipations are intuitively fulfilled, in the sense that relevant conscious episodes of (what seem like) *verification* (such as perceptual verification) occur, motivating corresponding acts of judgment, that there will be entries into the relevant mental dossier associated with the object in question. As Husserl puts it (referring to mental dossiers associated with proper names as "individual notions"):

I see an *object without an 'historic' horizon* [footnote: without a horizon of acquaintance and knowledge], and now it gets one. I have experienced the object multifariously, I have made 'multifarious' judgements about it and have gained multifarious [pieces of] knowledge about it, at various times, all of which I have connec-

ted. Thanks to this connection I now possess a 'notion' of the object, an individual notion [...] [W]hat is posited in memory under a certain sense gains an epistemic enrichment of sense, i.e., the *x* of the sense is determined further in an empirical way.²⁰ (Husserl 2005, p. 358; my translation)

The "historic" horizon and the objects of the relevant anticipations constitute the "internal horizon" (Husserl 1973, p. 32) of the experience. They all belong to the same "*x* of the sense" (also referred to by Husserl as the "determinable *X*"), i.e., they share a sense of identity (of represented object) through time. Other past and anticipated experiences bring it about that one's "'notion' of the object" is *networked* with other notions of objects. They constitute the external horizon of the experience.

If the anticipations in question were part of a non-intentional background, then it would be wrong, of course, to describe them as being directed at objects; as a consequence, the Husserlian conception of intentional horizon just sketched would break down. To avoid this consequence, Searle's Background conception needs to be altered, such that the background may indeed contain intentional elements, albeit in a derived sense.

This can be fleshed out as follows. The primary bearers of intentionality are (at least potentially) conscious units, such as judgments and the experiences that motivate them. It is true that respective meaning and intentional content only function against a background the elements of which lack this primary form of intentionality. However, this background contains some elements that possess a *derived* form of intentionality, so that it is misleading to describe it as completely non-intentional. In particular,

²⁰ The German original runs: „Ich sehe einen *Gegenstand ohne einen „historischen“ Horizont* [Fn.: ohne Bekanntheithorizont und Wissen-shorizont], und nun bekommt er ihn. Ich habe den Gegenstand vielfältig erfahren, „vielfältige“ Urteile habe ich über ihn gefällt, vielfältige Kenntnis von ihm in verschiedenen Zeiten gewonnen und habe sie verknüpft. Nun habe ich durch diese Verknüpfung einen „Begriff“ von dem Gegenstand, einen Eigenbegriff [...]. [D]as in [der Erinnerung] mit einem gewissen Sinn Gesetzte erfährt eine erkennt-nismäßige Sinnbereicherung, das heißt, das *x* des Sinnes bestimmt sich näher erfahrungsmäßig.“ (Husserl 2005, p. 358).

¹⁹ For the close connection between anticipation and (internal) horizon, cf. Husserl 1973, para. 8. For an insightful interpretation of Husserl's notion of horizon, cf. Smith & McIntyre 1982, pp. 227–265.

it contains mental capacities or dispositions to form beliefs about the further course of experience which Husserl (in 1973, para. 8) calls “anticipations.” Some of the experiences thus anticipated correlate with an internal horizon. Their occurrence may lead to entries being made in a mental dossier, which are empirical beliefs (informational states) to which a “referent” (an object they are about) can be assigned in a principled way, in accordance with the modified principle of knowledge maximization. Here is an example of such a principle of reference assignment, which I have proposed in earlier work.²¹

The logical subject x of [...] a belief of the form a is F [...] whose acquisition goes together with the opening of a mental dossier about x is identical with the logical subject y of the judgement *initiating* that belief (or x would be identical with y , if x and y existed). (Beyer 2001, p. 287)

“Logical subject” here refers to the object the relevant belief is about (such as table 1 in the case of the persisting belief actualized by the judgment given voice to at t_2 in the above example about the wobbling table); and the judgment initiating that belief is understood to have its logical subject assigned in accordance with the modified principle of knowledge maximization, as explained at the end of section 3, above.

I conclude, first, that the background of meaning and intentional content may be looked upon as being at least in part itself intentional, albeit in a derived sense, but that, second, the applicability of the Background Hypothesis still needs to be restricted, as far as the part of the background (co-)determining truth-conditional content is concerned, to what I have called the producers.

6 Conclusion

In summary, I have distinguished three levels of meaning, the first of which (general meaning-function) is a matter of linguistic convention, while the second level (respective meaning) is

truth-conditional and partly dependent on the first, purely semantic level, but also dependent on the reference or extension determined by the intentional state actually given voice to. This intentional state has its intentional object (the reference of the corresponding utterance) fixed epistemically, in accordance with the modified principle of knowledge maximization. Furthermore, this epistemic reference-fixing depends on the informational states (or dossiers) of the producers only. Only the producers need to possess the kind of background that Searle wrongly takes to be required for all speakers or hearers capable of giving voice to or grasping the respective meaning in question, the grasping of which then serves as the basis for accessing the third, purely pragmatic level of meaning (namely, what is implicated).

Acknowledgements

Earlier versions of this paper were presented to audiences in Göttingen and Erfurt, whom I thank for helpful discussion. For helpful comments and suggestions I would like to thank the editors and three anonymous reviewers. I am particularly grateful to Adriana Pavic for her detailed comments and suggestions.

²¹ For further neo-Husserlian principles of reference assignment, see Beyer 2000, para. 7; Beyer 2001.

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Grasping Meaning

A Commentary on Christian Beyer

Anita Pacholik-Żuromska

Christian Beyer, referring to a combination of Husserl's and Searle's theses, proposes an account of meaning that is context-dependent and that expresses not only propositional content but also the intentional state of the speaker. However, he tries to weaken Searle's Background Hypothesis, which should be restricted only to the speaker. Thus he excludes from the relation of intentional directedness the third element (called either the hearer, interpreter, or consumer). I will argue that if avoiding radical contextualism is right, it cannot be implemented at the cost of the Background Hypothesis and the triadic relation of intentionality.

Keywords

Background hypothesis | Content | Contextualism | Enactive cognition | Enactivism | Extension | Externalism | First-person perspective | Indexical | Intension | Intentionality | Judgment | Knowledge | Knowledge-how | Meaning | Meaning-function | Possession condition of concepts | Propositional attitudes | Self-identification | Sense | Twin earth thought experiment

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1 Introduction

Since the linguistic turn the main problems considered by philosophers of mind and language are the questions of how words connect with the world, what relations exist between words and objects, what makes utterances true or false, and how we can extrapolate propositional content from internal mental states on external reality. These are particular questions that stem from the general issue of meaning. Our target article is concerned with the question of grasping the meaning and intention that stands behind expressions in the process of producing and interpreting assertive utterances. Its author argues for the thesis that meaning is context-de-

pendent, but in order to properly grasp the meaning of utterances one does not need to have knowledge-how, characterized by John Searle in the form of so-called "Background". Instead, the author proposes a neo-Husserlian conception that allows the reading of intentions standing behind assertions, without reference to factors coming from external context—although this is not an internalistic standpoint. However, taking this position he excludes from the relation of intentionality its third element, namely the hearer (interpreter), depriving him of some kind of responsibility for knowledge about factors determining the truthfulness of asser-

tions. He believes that for the hearer to understand literal meaning knowledge-how is not necessary.

This commentary presents four objections against Beyer's arguments about understanding the meaning of sentences and one separate criticism of his approach to the problem of intentionality. At the beginning I shall reconstruct the thesis and arguments of the author. In the following sections the theses of Beyer will be considered in the light of the general question: what does it mean for meaning to be context-dependent? Here the issue of the differences between contextual and literal meaning will be discussed with reference to Searle's Background Hypothesis. The line of the argumentation will rest on four objections to Beyer's claim about the restriction of the Hypothesis, and will focus on: (1) the problem of indexicals; (2) the distinction between literal and contextual meaning; (3) semantic and social externalism; and (4) understanding as epistemic triangle. The last part of the commentary will be concerned with intentionality considered as a triadic relation strongly connected with the model of understanding. This assumption should lead to an answer to the question of why we cannot reduce the requirements of the Background Hypothesis to producers only.

Even at this early stage, according to Beyer's account, we might ask whether, if the interpreter of the article in question was to misunderstand the article, who has made the mistake—the speaker (producer, author) or the hearer (consumer, reader)? This is another open question that shall accompany this commentary.

2 Précis of Meaning, Context, and Background

Arguing for a version of meaning that is context dependent, yet still accessible to every competent language user, Beyer combines two standpoints toward the relation between meaning and intentionality in the work of Edmund Husserl and John Searle. Linking the theses of both philosophers, he assumes that:

1. The meaning of assertive utterances is context dependent.
2. Assertive utterances express not only propositional content but also an intentional state.
3. Searle's Background Hypothesis about the requirement of non-intentional background on the part of the speaker and hearer for recognizing intentional states expressed by assertive utterances as well as for grasping the respective meaning of the utterances could be relevant to an understanding of the context-dependency of assertive utterances, but only in a restricted form.

Beyer's main thesis can be summarized as follows:

The speaker uttering a sentence intentionally presents herself as performing or undergoing an act, but if the hearer does not recognize that intention, she does not thereby fail to grasp the literal truth-conditional meaning of an utterance. Hence, only the group of speakers (utterance producers) must meet the requirements of Searle's Background Hypothesis.

In other words, according to Beyer, context dependence does not prevent competent language users who lack the correct background from grasping the literal truth-conditional meaning of an utterance.

Beyer gives brilliant examples, which justify this main claim. The first group contains indexicals like "I", "here", and "now", which share the same general meaning function—which I generally prefer to call "sense" or "concept"—but which have different respective meanings, that is, a different extension. Take an example, in which Subject 1 asserts: "I have blood type A", and Subject 2 also asserts: "I have blood type A". Both utterances have the same general meaning-function, but express different truth-conditional contents—or propositions. Using an alternative philosophical terminology, they have the same intension but different extension, which results in the famous conclusion that intension does not determine extension (Putnam 1975). However, according to Hilary Putnam's Twin Earth Thought Experiment, even natural kinds "have an indexical unnoticed component" (1975, p. 152). This forces the con-

clusion that every sentence is somehow context dependent, including those containing concepts of natural kinds.

To the second group of examples belong sentences without established uses, such as have been proposed by Searle: “Bill opened the mountain”; “Sally opened the grass”; “Sam opened the sun”. As Searle claims, in the case of such sentences we have no clear idea what they mean, or else we fail to find a proper way of understanding the sentences because we lack the necessary background capacities and social practices.

We know how to open doors, books, eyes, wounds and walls; and the differences in the Network and in the Background of practices produce different understandings of the same verb. Furthermore, we simply have no common practices of opening mountains, grass, or suns. It would be easy to invent a Background, i.e., to imagine a practice, that would give a clear sense to the idea of opening mountains, grass, and suns, but we have no such common Background at present. (Searle 1983, p. 147)

However, Beyer claims that even if we do not have the background we can still grasp the literal meaning of such sentences. We lack knowledge about **verification**—here Beyer agrees with Emma Borg (2004)—i.e., **knowledge-how**, but we can still understand the sentence.

Another example given by Beyer concerns situations where the speaker utters a sentence that the hearer repeats, while referring to another object than that referred to by the speaker. In other words, the hearer mistakenly takes for entitlement¹ an uttered claim about an object, which he thinks is the right referent—for example, when saying “This is red”, the sentence refers to a ball in a box, which the hearer does not know about because he has seen only a

¹ The *terminus technicus* “entitlement” plays an important role in the philosophy of Robert Brandom, built on the inferential role of the semantic. In Brandom’s account, understanding relies on the participation of subjects in a language game of giving and asking for reasons, where entitlement can be defined as “giving a reason” for repeating the judgment as being true about the object it concerns. I thank Daniel Żuromski for pointing this out.

red apple being put into the box. Beyer claims that, according to the principle of knowledge maximization formulated by Timothy Williamson, the speaker should be regarded still as possessing some knowledge about the apple, even if he has a false belief about that object, because even a false judgment in certain circumstances can count as knowledgeable. However, Beyer proposes a modification of this principle, which should, according to him, be “supplemented by a more traditional theory of justification, drawing upon notions of observation, memory and testimony” (Beyer this collection). From the examples given above Beyer infers that contextualism is the right account for this phenomenon, but only in a form that allows minimal semantic knowledge concerning the literal meaning, which can be possessed even in the absence of Background.

3 What does it mean for meaning to be context-dependent?

Epistemic or semantic contextualism has been created as an answer to a sceptical challenge against knowledge in the sense of *episteme*—defined as justified, true belief. It is claimed in this conception that the satisfaction conditions for “x knows that p”—i.e., the truth-conditions of sentences—on whose basis we ascribe knowledge to a subject, depend on the context in which they are uttered, i.e., on epistemic standards obtaining in these contexts (cf. Palczewski 2013, p. 197). “Contextualists speak of the semantic value of knowledge ascriptions as somehow shifting with context [...] The parameter that shifts with the context may be the threshold of justification, the standard of epistemic position, the set of epistemic alternatives” (Preyer & Peter 2005, p. 3).

In contrast to contextualist meaning, for literal truth-conditional meaning we have to look to semantic content. As Searle claims, it is a meaning with “zero context”, determined by the meaning of its semantic components and syntactic rules of composition. However, “for a large class of sentences there is no such thing as the zero or null context for the interpretation of sentences, and that as far as

our semantic competence is concerned we understand the meaning of such sentences only against a set of background assumptions about the contexts in which the sentence could be appropriately uttered” (Searle 1978, p. 207).

The distinction between literal and contextual meaning is clear for Beyer. Literal meaning is not usage. It is a subject of the semantics but not pragmatics. One can grasp the literal meaning of the sentence “The snow is white”, adding to it that this sentence is true only if the snow is white. But when a speaker utters the sentence “The snow is white”, the hearer needs not only to understand the literal meaning, because otherwise he could simply ask “So what?” The hearer needs also to interpret the statement, inferring what kind of linguistic function this sentence fulfils. The hearer needs to understand why (or for what purpose) this statement has been uttered by the speaker. In other words, to grasp the proper meaning he needs to establish what pragmatic and epistemic consequences it has. Thus, the pragmatic consequence is investigated by checking what else the utterance communicates, and what the sentence pragmatically implies. But meaning as usage is not only a matter of implicatures or presuppositions. The epistemic consequences concern the setting of conditions in which the sentence can be truly uttered—that is, the background. To understand an utterance expressing some kind of intentional state, both speaker and hearer have to dispose the background, i.e., knowledge-how. In fact, this is a passive form of knowledge, which depends on physical and social determinants, on which a subject has a little influence and in which she is deeply rooted. Such utterances are evidence of propositional attitudes with certain representational content. In other words, a subject uttering a sentence also expresses (using the terms of folk psychology) his attitude toward its content. However, according to Searle, propositional attitudes are not intentional states, understood as a relation of being directed (or of taking an attitude, i.e., belief) toward a judgment in a logical sense, expressed in the form of a sentence (utterance). “There is indeed a relation ascribed when one ascribes an Intentional to a person, but is not a relation between

a person and a proposition, rather it is a relation of representation between the Intentional state and the thing represented by it. In other words, proposition is rather a content of a statement than its object” (Searle 1983, p. 19).

Searle’s standpoint does not convince Beyer, who claims that to express or correctly ascribe a meaning intention and, consequently, to grasp the literal truth (the conditional meaning of an assertive utterance) one does not need to meet the requirements of Searle’s Background Hypothesis—according to which a subject needs to dispose a set of nonrepresentational capacities to correctly interpret the meaning of utterances. These requirements must be fulfilled only by sentences-producers, who can be regarded as “experts”—however, not necessarily in a scientific sense.

4 Meaning and intentionality

As Beyer claims, if the hearer does not recognize an intention accompanying an utterance, she does not fail to grasp the literal truth-conditional meaning of an utterance. Arguing for this thesis, Beyer gives examples of sentences that do not have an established use or that share the same general meaning function but have different respective meanings. But here are some objections:

The first question concerns indexicals: could we really grasp the literal meaning of the indexical “I” if we could not dispose a background of self-identification? In other words, what would be the distinctive features of context that allow the right ascription of beliefs, if subjects A and B utter the same content, and in the same context? It might be, for example, a capacity to identify themselves as subjects of a certain state, which is a capacity belonging to the unintentional background. If we do not dispose a concept of an individual subject, but only of collectivity, self-identification would be disturbed. In that case, could we still grasp the literal meaning of a sentence like “I do x”? Such self-identification depends on many factors—physical, like a completely unintentional sense of proprioception or homeostasis, and social, based on norms and rules. The case of physical

factors determining the ability to self-identify shows that the Background Hypothesis cannot be reformulated such that the Background must contain intentional elements. As [Searle](#) writes:

On the conception I am presenting, the Background is rather the set of practices, skills, habits, and stances that enable Intentional contents to work in the various ways that they do, and it is in that sense that the Background functions causally by providing a set of enabling conditions for the operation of Intentional states. (1983, p. 158)

Intentional elements would not help our grasping of the meaning if they referred to subjective intentions, which, as Beyer admits, are fully accessible only from first-person perspective. Beyer also doubts whether it is possible to make a comprehensive list of assumptions about a hidden object. But Searle's Background Hypothesis was created precisely to avoid such a regress.

The second question concerns the distinction between literal and contextual meaning. Namely we can raise the doubt: if a hearer does not grasp the contextual meaning, i.e., the truth-conditional meaning, then might she only grasp the sense of the utterance, and not its meaning? If we change terminology, and call general meaning function "sense" or "concept", then we could use Frege's theory of sense and meaning (intension and extension) and say that a subject who grasps only conventional linguistic meaning but not respective meaning grasps *de facto* not the meaning of a sentence but its sense. According to Frege's theory of intension/extension of a sentence, one cannot know a sentence's meaning if one does not know its truth-conditions, because the meaning of a sentence is its truth-value ([Frege 1948](#)). Further, if we turned to were Frege as interpreted by Michael Dummett, we could say that a subject who does not know the truth-conditions of some sentence does not understand this sentence, because, according to [Dummett](#), a theory of meaning should be a theory of understanding ([1993](#)).

The third objection can be formulated as follows: if, according to Beyer, only a producer carries the burden of the requirements of the Background Hypothesis, and if she was a false expert, is there a method (also accessible to a hearer who does not have to know the background) for the identification of false experts by a non-expert? This is a version of Putnam's externalism, which says that external factors, which determine the content of our beliefs could be experts, who for example tell us how to properly use the names "elm" and "beech" (cf. [Putnam 1975](#), p. 145). But what if these experts just pretend to be professionals, or simply have a gap in their education?

If only producers should carry the burden of the requirements of the Background Hypothesis, consumers would have limited access to methods enabling the identification of the satisfaction conditions of an uttered sentence. Hence consumers, grasping only literal meaning, would have to believe everything they heard. As was said, intentionality should not be regarded as a feature of an individual mind. Intentionality is a relation between minds and the world. It is a social phenomenon, developed and practiced through interactions with other minds (cf. [Tommasello & Rakoczy 2003](#)). Hence there must be a theory that can explain how both speaker and hearer have a potentially equal chance of understanding a sentence (of grasping its truth-conditional content). Such a model of understanding has been proposed by Christopher Peacocke. Peacocke claims that the thinker can only judge the content that she recognizes (cf. [Peacocke 1992](#), p. 51). Recognition is possible only if the person knows the truth-conditions of the grasped content. According to Peacocke, the basic concepts are individuated by the fact that, in certain circumstances, our beliefs containing these concepts will be true. These beliefs constitute the knowledge of the subject. Peacocke builds his theory on the assumption that components of the propositional content are concepts individuated by their possession conditions, which fix the semantic value of concepts.

The determination theory for a given concept (together with the world in empir-

ical cases) assigns semantic values in such a way that the belief-forming practices mentioned in the concept's possession condition are correct. That is, in the case of belief formation, the practices result in true beliefs, and in the case of principles of inference, they result in truth-preserving inferences, when semantic values are assigned in accordance with the determination theory. (Peacocke 1992, p. 19)

In fact, in such an account, Peacocke's theory of knowledge is a theory of social solidarity, where knowledge is not a privilege and subjects are considered not as monads or individual minds but as creating a new interpersonal subjectivity—i.e., a social sphere. On the basis of Peacocke's model of gaining knowledge, which contains the triadic relation: concepts, the possession condition of concepts, (conditions in which the use of concept is valid), and through semantic value (fixed on the basis of determination theory), this solidarity is possible, because according to this model everyone can verify or falsify judgments of others. I support this account. The so-called "theory of social solidarity" assumes that both speaker and hearer must share the Background in order to have an access to conditions of justification of utterances.

From the third objection follows the next question: if only a producer needs to dispose a background, then what would be an indicator of the proper usage of a sentence? How could a consumer conclude that a producer understands the uttered sentence (that is, is a competent language user)?

As I have suggested, the consumer also has to utilise certain methods to conclude whether the producer understands the uttered sentence. This tool of verification should be the world, as in Donald Davidson's model of epistemic triangulation. In Davidson's theory, meaning is dispositional. He claims that asymmetry, which happens between a speaker and interpreter's knowledge about a word's meaning, is the same kind of asymmetry between the first- second-person perspectives. This means that knowledge about meaning has to be inferential—hence it is to be identified by an interpreter on the basis of

the speaker's behaviour. To understand the behaviour of an agent, the interpreter has to have a hypothesis about her intention, and then check this hypothesis with respect to the external conditions of the world. In this way, he can verify or falsify his interpretation. If it is wrong, then he must change it and form another hypothesis. Interpretation should be undertaken according to a principle of charity, which means that if the hypothesis fails, then it is the probably the interpreter who is wrong and not the sender—here is the place for experts—the interpreter has to assume that the sender acts rationally, but he has tools to prove it (Davidson 1980).

But in the context of the Background Hypothesis we do not even need to refer to Davidson's theory to show the necessity of an external validation indicator. Searle's original account is good enough:

If my beliefs turn out to be wrong, it is my beliefs and not the world which is at fault, as is shown by the fact that I can correct the situation simply by changing my beliefs. It is the responsibility of the belief, so to speak, to match the world, and where the match fails I repair the situation by changing the belief. But if I fail to carry out my intentions or if my desires are unfulfilled I cannot in that way correct the situation by simply changing the intention or desire. In these cases it is, so to speak, the fault of the world if it fails to match the intention or the desire, and I cannot fix things up by saying it was a mistaken intention or desire in a way that I can fix things up by saying it was a mistaken belief. Beliefs like statements can be true or false, and we might say they have the 'mind-to-world' direction of fit. Desires and intentions, on the other hand, cannot be true or false, but can be complied with, fulfilled, or carried out, and we might say that they have the 'world-to-mind' direction of fit. (Searle 1983, p. 8)

As I have emphasized, since Background and Intentionality are strongly connected it is im-

possible to weaken the Background or add intentional elements to it, because then the mechanism of intentional directedness preserving the external and relational character of propositional attitudes will fall. Nevertheless, Beyer rightly begins his considerations with a comparison of the conception of intentionality from Husserl and Searle. What they have common is the anti-psychological thesis that intentionality can be expressed in language. Their idea was to separate intentionality from psychological explanations, which is possible when we consider propositional attitudes as reported in sentences containing the I-clause and the that-clause, thus expressing a relation between an attitude and a judgement in a logical sense. In general, anti-psychologists claim that intentionality is a binary relation between mental acts and the world: the contents of mental acts refer to objects, which exist outside of these acts, while the relation of intentionality is represented in sentences. The relational approach to intentionality affects how we think of mental functions and products, such as judging, believing, doubting, and so on, which are themselves relational.

As Beyer underlines, the problem of meaning intention (termed thus by Husserl) concerns the partly subjective nature of experienced content—a factor that creates the content of the proposition associated with the modality of the state and allows the subject to grasp the content of the experienced state. He refers to Franz Brentano, according to whom every conscious mental act is intentional. In other words, consciousness is intentional because it is always a consciousness of something. Consciousness cannot exist without an intentional act of directedness toward itself. This means that characteristic of mental phenomena is their intentionality or the “mental inexistence of an object [and that] every mental phenomenon includes something as object within itself” (Brentano 1973). So, for example, if I hear a sound, I also grasp the phenomenon of hearing. On the other hand, the content of a mental state is characterized as that which can be expressed in an objectively-verifiable judgment, due to the specific nature of the content which allows the subject to move from first-order beliefs to second-order beliefs

that arise when she ascribes to herself a propositional attitude. This switch can be seen as a change in the form of language: from object language referring to the external world to—and here are two possibilities—either metalanguage, in which the subject reports that she has a belief about having a belief, or to subjective language, in which the subject reports having an attitude with a certain content. In the case of metalanguage, this has to do with issues of semantic externalism, like inheriting truthfulness by second-order beliefs.

Meaning exists only where there is a distinction between intentional content and the form of its externalization, and to ask for the meaning is to ask for an Intentional content that goes with the form of externalization. (Searle 1983, p. 28)

Since propositional attitudes are mental states with propositional content, to interpret them correctly one has to dispose a background of physical and social determinants of the content of the sentences expressing the propositional attitude. This is why a proper theory of intentional directedness should treat both speaker and hearer equally. Speaker and hearer cannot be separated. They are so strongly connected that they should be considered holistically as a single intentional structure or one structure of intentional directedness. Only then arises social intersubjectivity, which does not consist only of individual minds but also of interactions between minds and world as in Davidson’s model of triangulation. This relation works for both sides. And the constitution of an individual self is an effect of switching between individual and social minds and between the beliefs of these two kinds: social and individual. It happens for example when an individual mind joins a group and meets regularities different to her own (cf. Tomasello et al. 2005). This means that sometimes, for some reason, it is useful for her to change her beliefs or even her belief-system. She must do this on the basis of her own inferences, so she has to have a reason to do it. Done in any other way she would have problems with understanding this new beliefs.

Hence the triadic model of intentional reference contains a structure that simulates relations of understanding between sender, interpreter, and the world. Subjects never live a solitary life, as is claimed by Husserl. That is why the case of intentionality does not concern a solitary mind. This standpoint gives a straightforward route to contemporary theories of enactive cognition, where a subject is embedded in an environment and, to gain knowledge, has to act and interact with the world of objects and other subjects. This point of view, however, leaves little room for epistemological internalism and thus for the Cartesian mind. Followers of theories of enactivism would say that the content of a subject's mental states is deeply rooted in the body's interactions with the environment—because the whole of cognition is.

That is why when one investigates the content of mental states one needs to refer to both the situation and the situated cognizer taken together as a single, unified system (Wilson 2002). Such enactive theories will be a kind of new version of active externalism, which assumes that “the content-fixing properties in the environment are active properties within a sensorimotor loop realized in the very present” (Metzinger 2004, p. 115). This standpoint, however controversial in the light of classic externalism, has much in common with proponents of this view. So, for example, diachronic externalism holds that the causal story, namely all facts in the past that have had an influence on the thinker, together with an environment, are important determinants of the content of a thinker's propositional attitudes. In contrast to this, synchronic externalism holds also that the content of propositional attitudes is determined by the current environment of the thinker and his disposition to respond to it. On the other hand, social externalism holds that the content of thoughts is determined in part by the social environment of a thinker, and especially by how others in our linguistic communities use words. These “others” could be experts, who establish the scientific names of objects, such as, for example, trees. This version of social externalism could prove fruitful when we consider Searle's Background Theory, but it creates trouble for

Beyer. As I have argued above, in the third objection, externalism is the right approach but it is possible only under the condition of the equal treatment of both participants of the communication process, namely the speaker and hearer, and only when they have access to the background.

5 Conclusion

To conclude, the idea of neo-Husserlian approach to meaning combined with Searle's Background Hypothesis seems to be promising. However, there are several questions that need to be answered. The main problem seems to be the postulated restriction of the hypothesis by adding intentional elements and an abolition of its requirements for a hearer. It would be then a new hypothesis, and rather more Husserlian than Searlian. These requirements may impair the triadic relation of intentional reference, which has to remain triadic if we do not want to come back to idea of a Cartesian mind.

I have raised four objections to Beyer's claim about the restriction of the Hypothesis, concerning the problem of indexicals, the distinction between literal and contextual meaning, semantic and social externalism, and understanding as an epistemic triangle. In the first objection about the use of indexical “I” we have asked whether we could really grasp the literal meaning of the indexical “I” if we didn't have a background of self-identification. I have argued that in the proper use of the pronoun “I” we need a special, non-intentional background. The second objection concerned the problem of whether a hearer, who does not grasp the contextual meaning, grasps only the sense of utterance but not its literal meaning. Answering this question, I claimed that in some approaches—such as, for example, the Dummettian version of Frege's sense and meaning—a subject who does not know the truth-conditions of some sentence does not understand the sentence. The third and fourth objection concerned the restricted role of the hearer in the act of communication. I raised a doubt about whether it is possible to identify false experts and to recognize incompetent language users if the hearer (interpreter)

lacks a non-intentional background. I claimed that to do this, the relation of intentionality must contain three elements: speaker, hearer, and world, where both hearer and speaker have equal access to the background. The relation of intentionality has been considered to be strongly connected with the model of understanding, where speaker and hearer make one unified structure of intentional directness. In such an account, the requirements of the Background Hypothesis cannot be restricted solely to producers, as Beyer would have it.

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Self-identification, Intersubjectivity, and the Background of Intentionality

A Reply to Anita Pacholik-Żuromska

Christian Beyer

Two suggestions by Pacholik-Żuromska, concerning the background of “I”-references and the intersubjective dimension of intentionality, respectively, are taken up and related to Husserl’s theory of intentionality. Moreover, a number of misunderstandings of my view are corrected, Searle’s “regress argument” for the Background Hypothesis is criticized, and a distinction between two functions of the background of intentionality is drawn in order to clarify my view.

Keywords

Background hypothesis | Consciousness | Enactivism | Environment | Intentionality | Interactionism | Interpretation | Intersubjectivity | Meaning | Self-identification | Solicitation

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1 Introduction

Pacholik-Żuromska takes issue with both my proposal to tone down Searle’s Background Hypothesis in terms of the distinction between producers and mere consumers and my claim that part of the background of intentionality is itself intentional (albeit in a derived sense). In her introduction she kindly raises the question “who has made the mistake—the speaker (producer, author) or the hearer (consumer, reader),” provided that “the interpreter of the

article [...] was to misunderstand the article” ([Pacholik-Żuromska this collection](#), pp. 2–6). I answer that in case of doubt it is the author of the target article, of course, who has made the mistake. As the formulation of her question shows, Pacholik-Żuromska has indeed misunderstood a central distinction, i.e., that between producer and mere consumer. However, before I take the opportunity to correct this and other misunderstandings, I would like to comment on

two ideas and suggestions by Pacholik-Żuromska that I find interesting and well worth pursuing further.

2 The background of self-identification

The first suggestion concerns our ability to “grasp the literal meaning of the indexical ‘I’” (Pacholik-Żuromska [this collection](#), p. 4) Pacholik-Żuromska contends that this may require, on the part of both speaker and hearer, “a capacity to identify themselves as subjects of a certain state, which is a capacity belonging to the unintentional background.” (Pacholik-Żuromska [this collection](#), p. 4) I agree that (1) the same sort of capacity is in play with both speaker and hearer, and that (2) this capacity belongs to the background. I reject the claim, though, that this capacity is non-intentional. Let me explain.

Ad (1): In *The Thought* Gottlob Frege contends that only the speaker herself can grasp the proposition expressed by the sentence “I have been wounded,” as used in a soliloquy, and that the hearer therefore has to grasp a different proposition, provided by the utterance context, in order to understand a corresponding sentential utterance, such as the proposition expressed by “She who is speaking to you at this moment has been wounded” (Frege 1956, p. 298). This flies in the face of the Husserlian conception of linguistic communication from which I start out in my article, which requires that the hearer ascribes the right meaning-bestowing act to the speaker in a case of successful communication; which means, in the case at hand, that he ascribes to the speaker what Pacholik-Żuromska aptly calls a self-identification (rather than an act of speaking to the hearer, as Frege has it). In fact, this is precisely the way Husserl himself describes what happens in the case of the correct interpretation of “I”-utterances:

Es ist klar: Wer ‘ich’ sagt, nennt sich nicht nur selbst, sondern er ist sich dieser Selbstnennung auch als solcher bewußt, und dieses Bewußtsein gehört wesentlich mit zum Bedeutungskonstituierenden des Wor-

tes ‘ich’. Das aktuelle Sich-selbst-Meinen fungiert [...] so, daß darin sein Gegenstand als Gegenstand eines Selbstmeinens gemeint [...] ist. [...] Der Hörende versteht es, sofern es ihm Anzeige für dieses ganze Bewußtseinsgebilde ist, also der Redende für ihn als jemand dasteht, der sich selbst, und zwar als ‘ich’ nennt, d.i. sich als Gegenstand seiner als Selbsterfassung erkannten Selbsterfassung nennt.¹ (Husserl 1984, p. 813)

Thus, if the speaker asserts “I have been wounded,” she presents herself as someone who refers to herself *as* referring to herself (or as meaning herself/having herself in mind/thinking of herself), in order to state about herself that she has been wounded; and the hearer understands this assertion if he takes the speaker to refer to herself as referring to herself and to assert about herself that she has been wounded. I regard this metarepresentational view of the meaning-bestowing acts underlying the assertive use of “I”-sentences as quite plausible. After all, if someone claims, say, “I have a broken leg,” then she *eo ipso* knows that she *refers to herself* by “I;” she could instantly add: “I am speaking of *myself*.” (Contrast this to a case in which a speaker unknowingly looks at herself in a mirror and exclaims “She has a broken leg.” See Beyer 2006, pp. 33 ff.) Incidentally, this view fits in well with a dispositionalist higher-order judgment theory of consciousness, which implies that (thanks to an underlying, “pre-reflective” structure of inner time-consciousness) “I”-awareness disposes its subject to judge that she herself is thinking of herself (see Beyer 2006, pp. 33 ff.).² If a mental disposition such as this is actualized (which is not re-

1 The English translation is as follows: “Clearly, if someone says ‘I’, he does not only refer to himself, but he is also aware of this referring to himself as such, and this awareness builds an essential part of what constitutes the meaning of the word ‘I’. The current act of meaning oneself is functioning [...] in such a way that in the course of it its [intentional] object is [...] being meant *as* the object of an act of meaning oneself. [...] The hearer understands it, if he takes it as an indication for the whole structure of consciousness just described, that is to say, if the speaker is regarded by him as someone who refers to himself precisely as ‘I’, i.e., as someone who refers to himself as the object of his recognition of himself recognized as a recognition of himself.” (My translation.)

quired for self-identification), then the resulting (“reflective”) “I”-judgment is based upon, and epistemically motivated by, a (“pre-predicative”) act of referring to oneself *as* referring to oneself.

Ad (2): In order for the hearer to ascribe such a meaning-bestowing act of self-identification to the speaker, he does not, of course, have to actualize his own capacity for self-identification, in the sense of actually thinking of himself as thinking of himself. But in the absence of this *capacity* he would be unable to ascribe such an act to the speaker, at least if we follow Husserl and Edith Stein and conceive of third-person act ascriptions as based on empathy, where the ascriber mentally simulates the cognitive situation of the target person (see [Beyer 2006](#), ch. 3). So I agree with Pacholik-Żuromska that an element of the background (notably, the capacity for self-identification) is required for the ability to understand “I”-utterances. However, I deny that this capacity is completely non-intentional. It is precisely a mental disposition that is actualized (if it gets actualized) in *intentional* consciousness, namely in pre-predicative acts of referring to oneself *as* oneself—acts which may, but need not, give rise to corresponding “self-reflective” higher-order judgments.

3 The intersubjective dimension of intentionality

Another interesting suggestion made by Pacholik-Żuromska concerns the relationship between intentionality and intersubjectivity. She claims that “[i]ntentionality is a relation between minds and the world” ([Pacholik-Żuromska this collection](#), p. 5), thus subscribing to an externalist conception of intentionality (which I share), and goes on to characterize it as “a social phenomenon, developed and practiced through interactions with other minds” ([Pacholik-Żuromska this collection](#), p. 5). [Pacholik-Żuromska](#) refers to Tomasello, Rakoczy, and Davidson in this connection, but (her ascription to Husserl of the thesis that

subjects can “live a solitary life” notwithstanding, which I regard as a misreading; [this collection](#), p. 8) she could also have referred to Husserl here. In the second volume of his *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy (Ideas II)*, Husserl presents a detailed analysis of the intersubjective, reciprocal constitution of intentional objects that belong to a “communicative environment” and are thus immediately perceivable as valuable heating material, for example:

Kohle z.B. sehe ich als Heizmaterial; ich erkenne es und erkenne es als dienlich und dienend zum Heizen, als dazu geeignet und dazu bestimmt Wärme zu erzeugen. [...] Ich kann [den brennbaren Gegenstand] als Brennmaterial benutzen, [...] er ist mir wert mit Beziehung darauf, daß ich Erwärmung eines Raumes und dadurch angenehme Wärmeempfindungen für mich und andere erzeugen kann. [...] [A]uch andere fassen ihn so auf, und er erhält einen intersubjektiven Nutzwert, ist im sozialen Verbande geschätzt und schätzenswert als so Dienliches, als den Menschen Nützlichendes usw. So wird er nun unmittelbar ‘angesehen’ [...].³ ([Husserl 1952](#), p. 187)

Notice that near the end of this passage from § 50 of *Ideas II* Husserl observes how intersubjective agreement in the form of reciprocally shared emotional valuations, and accordingly motivated evaluations (evaluative judgments), add a social dimension to the constitution of the environment. In this way, the personal environment of an individual subject acquires the significance of a social environment equipped with

3 The English translation is as follows: “I see coal as heating material; I recognize it and recognize it as useful and as used for heating, as appropriate for and as destined to produce warmth. [...] I can use [a combustible object] as fuel; it has value for me as a possible source of heat. That is, it has value for me with respect to the fact that with it I can produce the heating of a room and thereby pleasant sensations of warmth for myself and others. [...] Others also apprehend it in the same way, and it acquires an intersubjective use-value and in a social context is appreciated and is valuable as serving such and such a purpose, as useful to man, etc. That is how it is first ‘looked upon’ in its immediacy.” ([Husserl 1989](#), pp. 196f.)

² This may also fit in with the Brentanian conception of consciousness that Pacholik-Żuromska alludes to in section 4.

common objects possessing intersubjectively shared values—in the case at hand: shared use-values, to be perceived immediately (e.g., as a piece of heating material). In the following section, §51, entitled “The person in personal associations,” Husserl generalizes these observations. He claims that the social environment is relative to persons who are able to “communicate” with one another, i.e., to “determine one another” by performing actions with the intention of motivating the other to display “certain personal modes of behavior” on his grasping that very communicative intention (Husserl 1989, p. 202). If an attempted piece of communication such as this, also called a “social act” (Husserl 1989, p. 204), is successful, then certain “relations of mutual understanding (Beziehungen des Einverständnisses)” are formed (Husserl 1989, p. 202):

[A]uf die Rede folgt Antwort, auf die theoretische, wertende, praktische Zumutung, die der Eine dem Anderen macht, folgt die gleichsam antwortende Rückwendung, die Zustimmung (das Einverstanden) oder Ablehnung (das Nicht-einverstanden), ev. ein Gegenvorschlag usw. In diesen Beziehungen des Einverständnisses ist [...] eine einheitliche Beziehung derselben zur gemeinsamen Umwelt hergestellt.⁴ (Husserl 1952, pp. 192-193)

A few lines later, Husserl even claims that relations of mutual understanding help determine the common surrounding *world* for a group of persons; the world as constituted this way is called a “communicative environment.” On his view, the world of experience is partly structured by the outcomes of communicative acts. If it is structured this way, then there will be meaningful environmental “stimuli,” or solicitations (to use a more recent terminology), which motivate a given subject to display personal behaviour that consists in his reacting upon such environmental stimuli;

where the notion of motivation is to be understood as follows:

[W]ie komme ich darauf, was hat mich dazu gebracht? Daß man so fragen kann, charakterisiert alle Motivation überhaupt.⁵ (Husserl 1952, p. 222)

I regard this Husserlian conception of the structures underlying our being-in-the-world as highly plausible. So Pacholik-Żuromska kicks at an open door when she stresses the importance of (what is nowadays called) embedded cognition and dynamic mind-world interaction for an adequate conception of intentionality.⁶

4 Some corrections and clarifications

Finally, some corrections. I begin with two misunderstandings that I find easily comprehensible.

First, my use of the term “producer” may be misleading, as it differs from the ordinary use of the term. Not every producer of an utterance, in the ordinary sense, is a producer in the technical sense that Evans and I associate with the term. To take up the example that Evans gives in the long quotation cited at the beginning of section 5 of my article, if someone uses the name “Livingston” today to refer to (say) an 18th century politician, then she will be a mere consumer of that name, because she could not “have been introduced to the [name-using] practice via [her] acquaintance with” Livingston, to put it in Evans’ terms (1982, pp. 376–393). This holds true even if she is the *speaker* of an utterance in which the name “Livingston” is used this way. I do not think that the producer/consumer distinction leads to a problematic

⁵ The English translation is as follows: “How did I hit upon that, what brought me to it? That questions like these can be raised characterizes all motivation in general.” (Husserl 1989, p. 234; in part my translation)

⁶ Pacholik-Żuromska also refers to Davidson’s notion of triangulation in this connection. For a Husserl- and Føllesdal-inspired critique of Davidson’s recourse to causal concepts in this context, see Beyer 2006, pp. 88–99. In the last paragraph of section 4 she draws a distinction between diachronic externalism—a position she ascribes to Davidson—, synchronic and social externalism, claiming that the latter “creates trouble for Beyer” (Pacholik-Żuromska this collection, p. 8). In the light of both the foregoing considerations and her misreading of my view on Searle’s Background Hypothesis (see section 4), I regard this claim as false.

⁴ The English translation is as follows: “[S]peaking elicits response; the theoretical, valuing, or practical appeal, addressed by one to the other, elicits, as it were, a response coming back, assent (agreement) or refusal (disagreement) and perhaps a counterproposal, etc. In these relations of mutual understanding, there is produced [...] a unitary relation of [persons] to a common surrounding world.” (Husserl 1989, pp. 203-204)

two-tier society of linguistic insiders and outsiders, as Pacholik-Żuromska seems to believe. It merely reflects the way proper names and other expressions acquire a particular usage, as a matter of fact. Actually, Pacholik-Żuromska herself draws upon a very similar distinction (but see footnote 16 in the target article, [Beyer this collection](#)) when she talks about experts. Of course, in principle anyone may become an expert regarding the application of any term—although it is difficult, to say the least, to become a producer regarding a proper name whose bearer has passed away a long time ago (see above). If this latter remark is correct (as I think it is), then it is not the case that in general “everyone can verify or falsify judgments of others,” as [Pacholik-Żuromska \(this collection, p. 6\)](#) wants to claim following Peacocke. In some cases (such as the case of proper names whose bearers have passed away) some people—the mere consumers—are in an epistemically underprivileged position.

Since Pacholik-Żuromska mistakenly equates what I call producers with speakers and mere consumers with hearers, she misreads my proposal to tone down Searle’s Background Hypothesis in such a way that only the producers with regard to a given set of sentences need “background know-how regarding the application of those sentences” (as I put it in section 5 in the target article, [Beyer this collection](#)), and her relevant arguments are besides the point—even if they contain interesting ideas (see sections 1 and 2 above). I do not claim that the Background Hypothesis “should be restricted only to the speaker,” as [Pacholik-Żuromska \(this collection, p. 1\)](#) puts it in her abstract. I contend that it should be restricted to the producers.

This brings me to a second misunderstanding that also concerns my view on the Background Hypothesis. In some places (like the last paragraph of section 4 in the target article; [Beyer this collection](#)) I carelessly put my view in such a way that it invites the following interpretation, which Pacholik-Żuromska takes for granted: only the producers need any background know-how. However, this is, again, a misreading, as becomes clear when one looks at

more careful formulations of my view, such as the one quoted in the preceding paragraph or the following formulations from section 5: “Meaning-intentions [...] do not generally require a non-intentional background *relative to which their (truth-conditional) content and satisfaction conditions are determined;*” ([Beyer this collection, p. 15](#); emphasis added) “the applicability of the Background Hypothesis [...] needs to be restricted, *as far as the part of the background (co-)determining truth-conditional content is concerned, to what I have called the producers.*” ([Beyer this collection, p. 17](#); emphasis added) What Pacholik-Żuromska does not notice, and what I should have made clearer, is that I distinguish between two different functions of the background:

- On the one hand, some of its elements (such as personal acquaintance with a name-bearer, or with a practice like opening a can) help to determine a particular truth-condition for a sentence-use and its underlying meaning-bestowing act—here I claim that only the producers need a corresponding background.
- On the other hand, the existence of what Searle calls the Network is an enabling condition for intentional consciousness.

Regarding the latter, I argue near the end of my article that it is misleading to characterize the part of the Network that constitutes “the set of anticipations determining” ([Beyer this collection, p. 16](#)) what Husserl refers to as the “intentional horizon” of a conscious intentional state as completely non-intentional, because they are mental dispositions to form occurrent higher-order beliefs. In order to save Husserl’s notion of intentional yet unconscious horizon anticipations, which I regard as an indispensable contribution to the theory of intentionality, I propose that we (re)formulate Searle’s background conception in such a way that “the background may indeed contain intentional elements, albeit in a derived sense” ([Beyer this collection, p. 17](#)), notably in the sense of mental dispositions to form higher-order beliefs. The only argument I find in Pacholik-Żuromska’s commentary that may at

first sight be taken to speak against the admission of such intentional background-elements is the regress argument she refers to in section 4 of her commentary. She points out that the Background Hypothesis is supposed to avoid a regress of assumptions such as the one I describe in section 3 in the target article (under the heading “Background assumptions”) in order to motivate Searle’s radical contextualism. But, quite apart from the fact that I do not claim that *all* elements of the background are intentional in the relevant sense, I find Searle’s corresponding argument for the Background Hypothesis confused. He claims that “[t]he actual content is insufficient to determine the conditions of satisfaction,” and that “[e]ven if you spell out all the contents of the mind as a set of conscious rules, thoughts, beliefs, etc., you still need a set of Background capacities for their interpretation.” (Searle 1992, pp. 189–190) To repeat a point I make in section 5 of my article, this is an absurd view (cf. Beyer 1997, p. 346). Neither intentional content (“actual content”) nor respective meaning can be interpreted (or “applied”) at all—only (utterances of) linguistic *expressions*, including *formulations* of rules, can be interpreted, and the result of this interpretation will be (the ascription of) a meaning-bestowing act which displays an intentional content that uniquely determines the conditions of satisfaction.

Here are some further corrections and clarifications.

I do not take the case of indexicals like “I,” “here” and “now” to show that “literal truth-conditional meaning” can be grasped even in the absence of “the correct background.” Unlike “sentences without established use” (as Pacholik-Żuromska aptly calls them; [this collection](#), pp. 2–3), these examples have no bearing on the truth of the version of the Background Hypothesis for which I argue. They can be captured by any standard semantics that distinguishes between general meaning-function (character) and respective meaning (content).

I do not give any example in which “the speaker utters a sentence that the hearer re-

peats, while referring to another object” (Pacholik-Żuromska [this collection](#), p. 3) than the one the speaker refers to. In the example about the yellow apple and the red ball in the box, the speaker refers to the apple in order to (wrongly) state that it is red, and the hearer may figure this out by applying a suitably modified version of Williamson’s principle of knowledge maximization (rather than Davidson’s principle of truth maximization). Nor do I claim that any “false judgment in certain circumstances can count as knowledgeable.” (Pacholik-Żuromska [this collection](#), p. 3) Rather, the unmodified version of Williamson’s principle is not applicable in the case at hand.

Furthermore, epistemic contextualism does not only (often) purport to answer sceptical challenges to *justified-true-belief* accounts of knowledge, but also to other accounts such as reliabilist theories of knowledge that make recourse to the notion of the ability to exclude relevant alternatives. I do not distinguish between “literal truth-conditional meaning” and “contextual respective meaning,” as Pacholik-Żuromska claims in section 3. In the case of indexicals, literal meaning is not to be confused with linguistic meaning in the sense of general meaning-function (character). The relevant distinction is that between literal and figurative meaning; unlike “meaning as usage,” figurative (or non-literal) meaning is a case of (what is expressed by) implicature.

It is misleading to assert that “according to Searle, propositional attitudes are not intentional states” (Pacholik-Żuromska [this collection](#), p. 4). It is true, however, that (like Husserl) Searle does not conceive of them “as a relation of being directed [...] towards a judgment in a logical sense” (Pacholik-Żuromska [this collection](#), p. 4), i.e., towards a proposition. Propositional contents are to be distinguished from the satisfaction conditions they determine (which Husserl refers to as states of affairs).

I do not claim that “if the hearer does not recognize an intention accompanying an utterance, she does not fail to grasp the literal truth-conditional meaning.” (Pacholik-Żuromska [this collection](#), p. 4) Grasping that mean-

ing requires, on the part of the hearer, to ascribe the intention to express a meaning-bestowing act to the speaker.

I distinguish (following Borg) between knowing a sentence's truth-condition, on the one hand, and being able to decide whether this truth-condition is satisfied, on the other. Mere consumers *do* know the truth-condition of a sentence when they understand it, but they are unable to decide (in an epistemically responsible way) whether it is met. *Pace Pacholik-Żuromska*, this does not mean that they "have to believe everything they [hear]." ([this collection](#), p. 5) Nothing in the notion of a mere consumer implies that he must regard a given speaker as infallible (and sincere), even if this speaker is in fact a producer; and nothing in the notion of a producer implies that producers are infallible (and always truthful). Nor does this mean that producers grasp truth-conditional content more "fully" than mere consumers (see footnote 16 of my target article; [Beyer this collection](#)).

On my conception of a producer, there can be no producer who is "a false expert." It is possible, though, on my view, to be a producer without being a scientific expert on whatever it is that constitutes the extension, reference, or truth-condition of the relevant expression (again, see footnote 16 of my target article; [Beyer this collection](#)).

Pacholik-Żuromska raises an excellent question when she asks what, on my view, "would be an indicator of the proper usage of a sentence." ([this collection](#), p. 6) However, it does not speak against a particular approach to meaning that this problem arises in its framework. It arises in any framework.

Husserl took over the idea of intentionality from Brentano, but he does not share Brentano's view that consciousness is always intentional. According to Husserl, there is also non-intentional consciousness, such as pain. Without intentionality, there would be no stream of consciousness, and hence no consciousness. But not every single element of the stream of consciousness is itself intentional. As usual, I find myself in agreement with Husserl here.

5 Conclusion

Despite some serious misunderstandings, for which I am prepared to take responsibility at least in part, *Pacholik-Żuromska* presents some promising ideas. In particular, she highlights the significance of the background of self-identification and the intersubjective dimension of intentionality. In addition, her commentary has helped me to see the need to explicitly distinguish between two functions of the background: its reference-determining role on the one hand, and its enabling role in connection with the functioning of the intentional horizon on the other.

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