Grasping Meaning

A Commentary on Christian Beyer

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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.

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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 entitlement[1] 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

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 contextual respective 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

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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.

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. Tomasello & 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), andthrough 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 antipsychological 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, antipsychologists 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 joints 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 Dummetian 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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