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No-content explanations

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The primacy of content

Typically, explanations of semantic and cognitive phenomena are given by appeal to content. For instance, the fact that two utterances of a sentence have different truth conditions is accounted for by assigning a different content to each. Philosophers inspired by Frege's approach explain differences in the cognitive value of sentences in terms of differences in content. Even philosophers opposed to traditional Fregeanism share with Fregeans the view that differences in cognitive value respond to differences in contents. For instance, proponents of mental files, such as François Recanati (2012), appeal to the contents of mental files entertained by the agent to explain cognitive phenomena. And John Perry has also appealed to contents, or propositions *created* by utterances of sentences. (1988) Belief and action are usually explicated in terms of relations of agents to contents.

There have been, from the very origins of philosophical semantics, important disagreements as regards how contents or propositions should be characterized. For Frege and his followers they are constituted by conceptualizations of the things utterances are about. For Russell and his followers, on the other hand, Mont Blanc with all its snowfields is part of the content an agent expresses and entertains when she thinks or says that Mont Blanc is 4,000 meters high. But in either case, content is at center stage in Fregean and Russellian accounts of language and thought.

Martí, G. (2025). No-content explanations. In A. Laitinen, M. Keinänen, J. Reinikainen & A. Honkasalo (eds.). *Language, Truth, and Reality*. Tampere University Press. (pp. 104–112). https://doi.org/10.61201/h5fbdk64

The primacy of the role of propositional content in semantic and cognitive explanations may be motivated by the conviction that intentionality, or aboutness, is the distinctive mark of the human mind: "As indicated by the meaning of the Latin word *tendere*, which is the etymology of 'intentionality,' the relevant idea behind intentionality is that of mental directedness towards (or attending to) objects, as if the mind were construed as a mental bow whose arrows could be properly aimed at different targets." (Jacob 2023)

Our thoughts and our words have targets: the things and states of affairs we think about and talk about. This much is uncontroversial. But the recognition of the aboutness or directedness of thought and speech has given rise to the presumption that there is a privileged form of explanation of thinking, believing or saying, a form of explanation that is also target-oriented, for it is given essentially in terms of relations to the content expressed by our words and *grasped* by our minds. This is in part due to the assumption that mind and language, thought and speech, go hand in hand, that thinking about something and referring to something are essentially the same phenomenon that requires just one form of explanation.[1] Having established content as the privileged tool with explanatory power in the realm of cognition and semantics, content is appealed to as the answer to fundamental questions about what is believed, what is known, what is said.

The idea that all cognitive and semantic phenomena have to be explained in terms of a *what-is-grasped* or a *what-is-expressed* is simply taken for granted and, as a consequence, the assumption that the explanation of any semantic or cognitive phenomenon is not satisfactory unless some propositional content or other plays the fundamental explanatory role is deeply ingrained.

I think that the assumption is questionable. In fact, I will argue, we can find in the philosophical literature some good explanations of semantic and cognitive phenomena that are not content-oriented. And the only reason to not accept their satisfactoriness is the insistence in clinging to the assumption of the primacy of content. I will argue, however, that if propositional content is conceived heuristically, as a convenient tool, it may have a useful theoretical role and contribute to clarify the phenomena here discussed.

A few no-content explanations

(i) Wettstein on cognitive value: dissolving the puzzle.

Wettstein's (1989) explanation (or dissolution) of Frege's puzzle of cognitive value makes no appeal to propositional content. Where Frege, both in the *Begriffsschrift* and in 'On Sense and Reference', feels compelled to produce two different contents for our minds to grasp, two propositions associated respectively with 'Hesperus

[1] An assumption I do not share, although it will not be my target in this paper.

is Hesperus' and 'Hesperus is Phosphorus', Wettstein sees no need to explain the difference in cognitive value in terms of a what-is-grasped.

Wettstein simply points out that one needs so little information to be competent with the use of proper names, that typically none of the information that a speaker grasps will give her a clue that the two names are co-referential. It is no wonder, then, that the speaker can doubt whether Hesperus is Phosphorus, even after she accepts that Hesperus is Hesperus.

Of course, this kind of explanation is a non-starter from the content-oriented point of view: what is it then, the content devotee asks, that the agent understands when she comes to accept 'Hesperus is Phosphorus' that she didn't understand when she accepted 'Hesperus is Hesperus'? It appears that nothing short of pointing to a content, something that the agent grasps now and didn't grasp before, can satisfy such a demand.

The content devotee's question is, certainly, legitimate. The presumption that only a content answer can satisfy the demand, I think, is not. I'll come back to this issue later, but for the moment I want to think a bit more about the form of Wettstein's explanation.

The puzzle of cognitive value, or informative identity, is often presented as follows: how can a competent speaker who accepts 'Hesperus is Hesperus' as trivial reject, be surprised at, or express doubt about 'Hesperus is Phosphorus'? Wettstein's account gives an answer to this question. It is not an answer that appeals to propositions grasped, to contents targeted by the mind, nor to the different entertained contents of mental files. It is not an answer inspired by the intentional "directed to goals" stance. It doesn't tell us what the agent's mind is directed towards. It is rather an explanation that looks back: it appeals to how the agent came to be in the situation she is in as regards her use of 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus'; it appeals to the obvious possibility that the agent came to acquire those names through separate channels that didn't obviously take her back to the same object. And that she, in consequence, associates with those names memories, images, perhaps also pieces of accurate or inaccurate information, happy, unhappy or neutral connotations, . . . that do not carry in their sleeves the condition that they apply to one and the same thing.[2]

(ii) Donnellan on empty names: the importance of the source.

Perhaps the first contemporary explanation of a non-cognitive, purely semantic, problem in terms that are free of an appeal to content targeted, or grasped, by a speaker's mind, is due to Keith Donnellan (1974). Donnellan addresses what is taken to be a serious problem for new theories of reference: the problem of true negative existentials such as 'Santa Claus does not exist'. If the statement is to be significant, according to new theories of reference, it appears that the name should refer; but then, how could we refer to something to say, truly, of it that it doesn't exist?

[2] Wettstein's account applies also to Paderewski-style cases. If the cognitive requirements to be competent with the use of names are in general so poor, it can definitely happen that an agent adds to her vocabulary, twice, the name 'Paderewski', or the name 'Hesperus', under conditions that make it quite possible for her to be surprised when she learns that Paderewski is Paderewski, or that Hesperus is Hesperus.

Donnellan observes that empty names have a history of use and are passed from speaker to speaker much like referring names do. The difference is that, in the case of an empty name, the chain of communication does not lead back to a referent: it ends in a block. This observation forms the basis of Donnellan's explanation of negative existentials. Obviously statements such as 'Santa Claus does not exist' (but also 'Santa Claus is coming tonight') are not just noises, for the name 'Santa Claus' like the referential 'Cicero' has a history of use and it is that history that accounts for its linguistic significance. Thus, significance, for Donnellan, is not to be equated with having a content, or expressing a proposition. The significance of our words depends on their having a stable and consolidated history of use.

'Santa Claus' does not refer, but that does not entail (contra Russell and contra the Fregeans that criticize Millianism) that 'Santa Claus' is a meaningless noise. As for 'Santa Claus does not exist' the alleged problem dissipates: the sentence is true, as most of us think, and it is true because the history of 'Santa Claus' ends in a block.

This explanation will not count as an explanation for the die-hard content devotee. For, as Donnellan himself points out the explanation "does not provide an analysis of such statements; it does not tell us what such statements mean or what proposition they express." (1974, 25).[3]

The question, though, is: what would the assignment of a proposition expressed help explain that Donnellan's explanation doesn't? Of course, assigning a proposition would tell us what 'Santa Claus does not exist' says, i.e., what proposition it expresses; but as the basis for a criterion of adequate explanation, this is a bit circular. There may be, nevertheless, theoretical reasons to insist in assigning a content to 'Santa Claus does not exist', and I will come to them later but, again, for the moment I just want to reflect a bit more on the form of Donnellan's explanation.

Donnellan's account is a paradigmatic historical explanation. Instead of expecting to find an explanation by appeal to what is expressed by an utterance of 'Santa Claus does not exist' (the content that constitutes the target of the agent's utterance and the agent's thought, so to speak), Donnellan invites us to find the explanation looking at the history of how names are bestowed and how they arrive to us. Once we realize that 'Cicero' and 'Santa Claus' arrive to us in pretty much the same way, the presumption that the referring one should have a standard linguistic usage whereas the non-referring one should sound like a meaningless noise falls to pieces. And from there it is a small step to realize that it is precisely the peculiar history of 'Santa Claus' that makes 'Santa Claus does not exist' true.

Donnellan's approach hints also at an explanation that applies to belief and knowledge. It is tempting to say that Mary's belief, which she expresses as 'Aristotle

[3] The content devotee will be tempted to convert that explanation into a content and therefore, in the case of Donnellan, will come up with the result that 'Santa Claus does not exist' actually expresses the content that the history of the name 'Santa Claus' ends in a block; as for Wettstein, the content devotee tells us that his explanation of the difference in informativeness between 'Hesperus is Phosphorus' and 'Hesperus is Hesperus', "... at best . . . suggests a meta- linguistic account of that difference, namely that the former but not the latter sentence implicitly yet informatively declares two different names to have the same bearer." (Glock 2005).

was a philosopher', and Ana's belief, which she expresses as 'Aristóteles era filósofo', are the same belief, because they both believe the same proposition about the same individual. But this account does not tell us why we are so inclined to say that in saying 'Santa Claus is coming tonight' and 'Père Noël arrive ce soir' Tim and Cléo express, or have, the same belief. Here's how Donnellan points to a possible explanation:

> The child who has become disillusioned expresses his new-found knowledge by saying "Santa Claus doesn't exist." A French-speaking child . . . might express his discovery by saying, "Père Noël n'existe pas." Although the names are different, I believe we should want to say that the two children have learned the same fact and, on that account, that they have expressed the same proposition.
>
> What we would like . . . is a reason for saying that both children express the same proposition . . . I want to suggest that we may find such a reason once more by using the idea of a historical connection, that, in our example, it is the blocks in the historical explanation of the use respectively of the names "Santa Claus" and "Père Noël" that are themselves historically connected. (1974, 27, 29)

Of course, we are all part of a tradition in which *the proposition expressed* is at the core of proper semantic explanations. So, Donnellan knows that we would like to have a reason to be able to say that both children express the same proposition. But instead of succumbing to the temptation of providing a proposition, Donnellan encourages us to look elsewhere, and he suggests that it is *the source* of the terms, of the mental states, of the beliefs and of the utterances, not their alleged targets, that plays a crucial role in the explanation.

(iii) Perry's first papers on indexicals: whats and ways.[4]

In his early papers on the semantics of demonstratives and indexicals John Perry (1977) makes a distinction between what an agent says, thinks or believes, and the agent's mental state. The former is roughly what is traditionally known as the content expressed by an utterance of a sentence, something that accounts for what is traditionally thought of as the truth conditions of the utterance.

The latter, on the other hand, can be characterized, he suggests, by the sentences the agent (ideally) would accept in the particular situation at stake (some time afterwards he moved to a characterization of mental states in terms of his more technical notion of *roles*). Those embody the way in which the agent believes (or expresses) the content in question.

When I sincerely utter 'I am about to be attacked by a tiger' and you utter 'she is about to be attacked by a tiger' we both say or believe the same thing, but we believe it in different ways—our mental states are different. The difference in mental states,

[4] See also my (2007) for discussion of Perry's approach.

in ways of believing, according to Perry, accounts in part for our different actions—I try to climb a tree, you go get help. And when we both utter 'I am hungry', we say different things, but we say them in the same way, our mental state is the same (which explains why we do similar things).

Thoughts are not states, and *objects* of sayings and believings are not *ways* of saying and believing. They are not, because the variation of ways/states is orthogonal to the variation of thoughts/objects. To entertain the same thought *P* we may need different ways at different times and places, for different agents, in different contexts.

Perry's idea goes against tradition: it entails that there are some cognitive and semantic phenomena that can be explained without appealing to some content that constitutes the mind's target.

The three explanations mentioned here are no-content accounts of some phenomenon or other. As accounts, they do not stem from some independent or theoretical reason to dislike or to reject the idea, or the metaphor, of content. They simply are not constrained by the assumption that an explanation is not complete until a relevant content has been assigned to an utterance, to a belief or to a thought, so they are free to look at other aspects that help explain how the situation or the phenomenon in question has emerged. They are historical explanations, they look at how the phenomena arise, or how the agent comes to be in the position she is.

Content as a convenient tool

By breaking away from the desideratum that only the assignment of content can provide an adequate explanation of semantic and cognitive phenomena we open the door to different forms of explanation. When we learn not to expect the assignment of a content to answer all relevant questions about thought and speech, we may also be able to let content play a partially helpful role.

Let us return to the legitimate questions that the content devotee keeps asking. Once we realize that the assignment of a specific content is not the one and only explanatory tool, the traditional question about cognitive significance–what does an agent learn when she comes to accept 'Hesperus is Phosphorus' that she didn't know when she accepted 'Hesperus is Hesperus'? – is less theoretically critical.

There is no dangerous commitment to this or that theory if we then say that agents, typically, come to know or understand a variety of things, that different people may learn different things, and that the importance of each one of them may be different depending on the agent and the occasion. For instance, what may be important for some speaker may be captured by saying that she understands that 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' are names for the same thing. For some other speaker it may be crucial to realize that certain bits and pieces of information that she kept separate (as if they were in different files) apply in fact to one and the same thing (and so that the files can be consolidated). Surely, it might be argued that each one of those things that agents learn or may learn are, after all, contents. True, but in none of these cases we

need to say that we have discovered *the specific* privileged content that is going to provide the unique satisfactory account.[5]

Similarly, once we accept the no-content explanation of the presence of empty names in language, the apparently contrived assignment of gappy propositions to sentences containing empty names may have a theoretical *raison d'être*. For if we think of content as a representation of a fragment of the world depicted by an utterance, there is a sense in which there is a representational gap corresponding to 'Santa Claus' in 'Santa Claus wears a red coat'; it even makes good sense to assign the same gappy proposition to 'Pegasus flies' and 'Superman flies', for these two sentences fail to depict fragments of the world for exactly the same reason.[6]

Surely, assigning gappy propositions to sentences containing empty names does not explain what Donnellan's account does explain: how the fact that there is a history of use makes 'Santa Claus' not be a meaningless noise (that explanation does not appeal to any content). But again, if we don't expect the gappy proposition to have a privileged explanatory role, that should not be a problem.

Finally, my sincere utterances of 'I am hungry' can also be characterized as utterances that are true just in case I am speaking and I am hungry, something that competent speakers of the language understand when they understand the utterance. So, the content *the speaker is hungry* can also be assigned to that utterance, even if one accepts the criticisms that direct reference theorists raised against descriptivism. John Perry (2001), and subsequently Kepa Korta and John Perry (2011), have defended a *content-pluralistic* approach to semantics and pragmatics, an approach that simply acknowledges that different propositions with different explanatory roles can be used to classify the different ways in which we can describe what makes an utterance true.[7]

The only problem with this strategy is that it is easy to forget that tools are just tools. Let us remind ourselves of the unfortunate confusions surrounding the notion and the apparatus of possible worlds. The moment one forgets that possible worlds are convenient metaphors for the basic idea that the world might have been different from the way it is, pseudo-problems may start looking like real problems. How can Cicero be in two different worlds? And if he is, how could we know it is him given that he is going to have different properties?

So, it is important to be vigilant and not fall into the content trap. It is important to keep in mind that many different contents may contribute to illuminating and explaining different aspects of a semantic or cognitive phenomenon. And it is also

[5] Observe also that a content such as the one expressed by 'the names "Hesperus" and "Phosphorus" co-name' is meta-linguistic. But as long as we keep in mind that that content is not the explanation of the speaker's reluctance to accept the sentence 'Hesperus is Phosphorus', it is difficult to see what harm there could possibly be in accepting the obvious: that one of the things that finally dawn on us when we accept 'Hesperus is Phosphorus' is that the two names name the same thing.

[6] See (Braun 1993) for a defense of gappy propositions (I very much suspect he would not accept any of the considerations I put forward here).

[7] And, of course, the proposal to appeal to a variety of explanations of what the agent accepts when she accepts 'Hesperus is Phosphorus' can also be read as a move towards liberal content pluralism.

important to keep in mind that in some cases (such as in Wettstein's account of what makes 'Hesperus is Phosphorus' informative, or in the Donnellanian explanation of what makes 'Santa Claus' significant, or in Perry's appeal to ways of saying and believing), assigning content is entirely irrelevant.

If content is relieved from its position as the unique tool with explanatory power, content may have, after all, a legitimate theoretical role in contributing, partially, to *some* explanations.[8]

[8] I thank the participants in the meetings of The Zoom Group, especially John Perry, María de Ponte, Kepa Korta, Shannon Bain, Eros Corazza, Andy Egan, Beñat Esnaola and Carlo Penco for their comments. Work on this publication has been supported by the AGAUR of the Generalitat de Catalunya (2021-SGR-00276) and by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Universities through grant CEX2021-001169-M (funded by MICIU/AEI/10.13039/501100011033) and grant PID2023-150066NB-I00 (MICIU/EU). I am extremely happy to have the opportunity to thank Panu for the many fruitful philosophical conversations we have had throughout the years, and for the many things I have learnt from him.

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