

What do you understand by Michael Dummett's idea of an 'antirealist Theory of meaning'? Give an example illustrating how such a Theory of meaning would be applied to one particular class of Statements.

Michael Dummett's antirealist theory of meaning

What is it that makes us human? Or how can we define a human being? In the ancient Greece there is a story that in Plato's academy a human being was defined as featherless biped, which was taken by Diogenes the cynic to make a joke by taken out the feathers of a chicken, and showing it in the academy saying "Here is your man". I don't know if there is, or there could be a definition of a human being, but what I consider essential is the observation that we are the only known being which speaks a language, well, at least while there isn't another Diogenes who comes claiming, I am showing your man.

The answer to the question, what is to speak a language? More precisely what does someone know when he knows to speak a language? Is then of a fundamental importance. We can say that a language is a collection of signs, and rules to combine them. To form what we could graphically describe as strings of signs or messages. Which essentially convey information. A Message in a spoken language could be described in this way, but also the code to program a computer to make some tasks, using certain programming language. So, in some way we can say that a computer in appearance "understands" a language, but what a computer only does with the string of signs are arithmetical and logical calculations. In difference with a computer we can not only make logical, and arithmetical calculations

with signs, but what is more important, the signs and, string of signs have meaning for us. Computers are not semantic machines, and what characterize us as humans is that language essentially conveys meaning. In what consists then, that a word or sentence has meaning? What is meaning in language? Maybe knowing the answer to these question, we can present ourselves as Diogenes with a machine that actually speaks. Knowing what meaning is the main task of the theory of meaning, which once it has stated what meaning is, could have as a practical application, the determination and explanation of the meaning of all the words in a language. This seems as a huge enterprise, and the question is where to begin? What could be the first step? For Michael Dummet the first step in developing such a theory would be to choose a central notion over which to build a theory of meaning¹. Traditionally this would be the concept of truth, but for various reasons which he goes onto to explain in detail he considers building a theory of meaning based in the concept of truth problematic. He instead, suggests without going into present an actual theory of meaning, that a better choice for a central notion is the concept of verification; and even better than this, he considers more viable the idea of falsification. For this reason, basically not taking truth as the central notion, we could take the theory of meaning as suggested by Dummett as antirealist.

Before explaining what reasons gives Dummett on not taking Truth as the central notion, and why this could be called an “antirealist” move, we could ask what the appeal is for a theory of meaning in Metaphysics. This is: what is the connection between examining the facts of our language, or

¹ Michael Dummett The Seas of Language
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knowing what meaning is, and the quest for knowing the ultimate nature of reality?

The history metaphysics could be seen as the evolution through time of thoughts about the constitution of reality. So there are mainly two parts reality, and thoughts about reality. Descartes, for example begins his metaphysical meditations by the “I think therefore I exist”, and he takes this proposition as self-evident, or not in need of verification. At first sight it seems that the reason for the self-evidence of this propositions is just grammatical, there could not be a verb without a subject. Who is doing the thinking? So it seems that the structure of language effectuate a considerable influence over our thinking. Descartes considers the cogito ergo sum as self-evident, but he presupposes that we know the meaning of the words think and exist, which are actually very hard if not impossible to define precisely. If a Metaphysical discourse is to have precision, it demands that we know precisely the meaning of the terms we are using in the discourse. Before knowing if a statement is true, we need to know its meaning, if this meaning is independent of our knowledge, or if it has meaning at all. For the logical positivists for example, metaphysical propositions do not have meaning because they are not empirically verifiable. But we can apply the same criterion, and ask if this is in itself (that metaphysical propositions are not verifiable by experience) empirically verifiable. The precedence of meaning in relation to truth, shows that philosophy is in demand of method, or theory to state, what is the meaning of a statement, or if the statement have any precise meaning at all.

For Michael Dummett this one of the objectives of what he calls theory of meaning, He considered it as form of first philosophy² because if we are going to be doing Metaphysics, it presupposes that we first know clearly the meaning of the terms involved in the discourse. So for him one of the main tasks of the theory of meaning is to explain the meaning of words and sentences of a spoken language. Also explain in what consists the knowledge of this meaning; and as consequence of this: what does a speaker know when he knows a language.

We could say that Metaphysics is composed of thoughts about reality. If we want to study their structure, the only way is when they are expressed through a spoken language; for this reason the theory of meaning seems as the only objective way to study thinking. To give a hint about when, and when not, thoughts are well formed and grounded.

Even though Dummett does not offer a specific theory of meaning, he delineates some principles for a proposed theory of meaning that we can call “antirealist”. First he asks, what is the central notion over which we are going to construct a theory of meaning? For Dummett, based in Frege’s distinction of reference, sense and force in meaning, the theory of meaning would be composed of three parts, the main part, or core theory would be the theory of reference, it would explain, for example, what is the referent for an expression, that is; to what object the expression is applied. The theory of sense which explains how the object is presented through the expression, and the theory of force which would describe its actual modes of use in communication³. The central theory would be the theory of reference, which

² Dummett TRUTH 457-58

³ DUMMETT The seas of language What is a theory of meaning II ? page 40

traditionally is explained, or developed in base the concept of truth, or true conditions. For example if we are to examine the meaning of the sentence: “dogs are animals” an interpretation based in the concept of truth is what is the condition for the sentence to be true, and this is, that there are things that we call dogs, and these have property of being animals. An interpretation like this is realist if the existence of the thing and its property is independent of our knowledge, that is, is independent of the fact that we know it or not. If a sentence is really true at certain moment, it can't be false at that moment later. So if something is true at certain moment, is true forever at that moment. The moment we know the truth, we have reached the absolute end of the investigation.

Contrary to truth, a statement which is verified can be later falsified, so verification is not the same as truth. Verification implies that there is a subject and means to do it, and one of this could fail. If a statement is verified then it was done by a subject and used certain means. For example the Newtonian physics was verified in its time, and now we know it is only approximate. Verification is not independent of our knowledge, and then goes against the realist principle of independence. The moment that we choose verification as the central notion we have an “antirealist” theory of meaning. We can call then, Dummet's theory of meaning antirealist, because of his suggestion to substitute verification, or falsification instead of truth as the core of the theory of meaning. One consequence of this would be the rejection of bivalence; this is that a statement is either true, or false, for a great portion of classes of sentences in a spoken language. It is natural that if we are going to choose truth to understand, or to know the meaning of a statement, the statement is true, or not true, which in this case is false; choosing truth to explain meaning leads then to bivalence.

Why then Dummett considers verification as a better option for the core of a theory of meaning than truth? The reason for this lies in one of the main objectives of the theory of meaning, which is to explain what does a speaker know, when he knows the meaning of an expression, and as a consequence, what does he know, when he knows a language. But here we should take knowledge in strict sense, not only as being informed about something, but as Dummett says, this knowledge needs to be fully manifested. The way a language is learned for the first time by a child, when he apprehends words one by one starting from zero, suggests that not always meaning can be manifested by saying something, but in some cases by doing something. The knowledge of meaning needs then to be fully manifested in something that the speaker says, or does. Here Dummett apparently, is being inspired by Wittgenstein's consideration of "meaning is use". If meaning is manifested by something that the speaker says, then, is called explicit knowledge, and implicit when its manifestation is done through something he does. Implicit, or explicit, Meaning then must be explained in terms of actual human capacities, Verification, which is done in function of human capabilities, would serve better to explain meaning than truth, which as we have seen, is evidence recognition transcendent. The metaphysical concept of truth is such, that we cannot make an statement true at will, rather it is some component of reality that makes it true, then If an statement is true, at certain moment, it is true forever at that moment even if we can't recognize it is true. The fact that sometimes we can't recognize the true conditions of a statement is for Dummett the main problem that a theory of meaning using truth faces. There are many classes of statements for which we are not in position, or it is impossible to recognize if they are true or not. For example statements about inaccessible regions of time and space, statements that

involve quantification over infinite domains, counterfactual conditionals, statements that refer about human qualities, or capacities etc. If I say “there is one polar bear in Chicago zoo at this moment” it is easy to recognize the statement as true or false, just call the director of the zoo, or go to the zoo. So it is possible for a speaker to fully manifest the understanding of the meaning of this statement, in base of true conditions, as in terms of verification; which would consist in the recognition of a procedure to probe the statement. The status of the statement: “there is one polar bear in Chicago zoo at this moment” would be true, or false in terms in true conditions, verified or not verified, in terms of verification, or falsified or not falsified in base of falsification. But if we were to analyze a statement like “there are exactly 1568 polar bears in Alaska” we can’t say that the statement is true or false, because there is no way to recognize it, there is no way to go and count them. But we can say that the statement is not verified, and the understanding of its meaning would be the recognition of a way to probe it, if we ever find one. When the statements are not decidable, this is, there is no way to recognize them as true or false, we can’t say that they are true, or not true, but we can say that they are not verified, or not falsified.

Dummett has shown then that for certain classes of statements it is better an antirealist interpretation of its meaning, and if the objective is to explain language as a practical ability, not only as cognitive tool, but above all as mean of communication, there is a portion of the knowledge of meaning which is implicit, which can only be manifested in use. If we only had a dictionary as source to know the meaning of all the words, and keywords of a language it is obvious that we would end up having circular definitions. A word defined by other words which also use the word we are looking to define. So the meaning ultimately must be looked up in

somewhere else. What Dummett theory has in its favor is that, at least, that is the way we learn a language: by using it. When we start learning a language as infants we begin from zero words to build our vocabulary. We needed to know, in what context we can make a use of a certain expression or word. This idea was expressed before by Wittgenstein with his phrase: “meaning is use” from which Dummett probably took his inspiration for the theory that meaning must be fully manifested in use.

The main obstacles opposed to building a successful antirealist theory of meaning are for one part, the ambiguity, or fluidity of the meaning, of terms and words in language, and the other, that in examining the “facts” of our language we could be taking a realist stance from the outset of the theory.

If a theory of meaning aims to explain the meaning of all the words in a language it needs to face the problem that it is not always possible to fix the meaning of all the words in every context, and that the meaning of words is always changing. This could be the root cause of our problems of partial communication. At least the theory of meaning must give an explanation of the dynamic of change and ambiguity in meaning.

Also if we are trying to build a theory of meaning we need to recognize that we are never in position to analyze language, without having already a language, and it is possible that in the act of building a global antirealist theory, we are already introducing a realist outlook.

Even the phrase “antirealist theory of meaning” sounds like a paradox because the word theory implies that we are looking at something with certain amount of objectivity, and for this in some form of realist manner. If it is possible to build an antirealist theory of meaning at all, I think it must have some form of realism as a residuum.

In order to draw general consequences, for example global antirealism, from Dummett's general principles and suggestions, we need to have an actual antirealist theory of meaning. Even though Dummett's ideas are worth of consideration, to my knowledge he never presented an actual antirealist theory of meaning.

An actual theory of meaning exclusively based in the central notion of verification, or falsification, would lead to global antirealism. In order to know the true conditions of a statement, we need to know its meaning, which, if it is obtained through verification, it is not independent of our knowledge, and goes against the independence principle of realism.

In order to know what conclusions can we obtain, if we have a theory of meaning based totally or partially in Truth, we need to answer first the question, what is Truth? If such a theory leads to global realism, would depend if we have a unified, single and independent of our knowledge concept of Truth.