

**MAKING "IMPLICIT" EXPLICIT:**  
Toward an Account of Implicit Linguistic Knowledge

by

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Submitted to the Department of  
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### ABSTRACT

Speakers, qua speakers, are ripe for epistemic characterization. However, the idea that speakers have genuine linguistic knowledge is a proposal apparently fraught with difficulties. My thesis is primarily concerned with making good an account of linguistic knowledge that avoids these alleged difficulties.

In chapter one I consider two arguments - one a priori, the other more empirical- for the claim that we ought to attribute linguistic knowledge to speakers of a natural language. The a priori argument, familiar from Dummett, has it that insofar as the point of a theory of meaning for a natural language is to explain what makes a language a language, such a theory must be, or at least yield, a theory of understanding. Crucially, a theory of understanding reveals what it is that speakers of a language know about their language. The second argument takes the form of an inference to the best explanation. Here the emphasis is on the idea that speaking and understanding a language is a rational activity carried on by agents with intention and purpose. Linguistic knowledge is attributed to speakers as a way of making such a practice intelligible.

With this motivation in hand, I proceed, in chapter two, to examine the several sceptical worries and substantive objections that have been raised to the idea of linguistic knowledge. I argue that none of these objections is fatal; rather they direct our attention to the need to specify what kind of knowledge linguistic knowledge is. A speaker's linguistic knowledge is not, and cannot be, explicit propositional knowledge; neither is it merely practical knowledge. It is concluded that linguistic knowledge must be implicit, or tacit.

I argue that we do best to think of the notion of implicit linguistic knowledge as a "place-holder". Since it is invoked to play a particular explanatory role, I suggest that a substantive account of it will only be forthcoming from a consideration of the constraints it must meet in

order to do the explicatory job we require of it. A specification of these constraints emerges from an examination of a set of objections that have been made to the very idea of implicit linguistic knowledge. This is the topic of chapter three.

In order to clarify what it means for an intentional state to be implicit, in chapter four, I turn to a discussion of implicit belief. I draw a distinction between the way in which the content of a belief might be represented in an agent's brain and the kind of access she has to that content. And with this distinction in hand, I argue against an account of implicit belief that is motivated by concerns about representation, and for one that focuses on the kind of access an agent has to her (putative) implicit beliefs. I recommend that we adopt a broadly dispositional account of belief, and argue that we can best explain our intuitions about implicit belief if we shift our attention from the properties of beliefs to the properties of believers.

It is in chapter five that I attempt to sketch an account of implicit linguistic knowledge that fulfills its explanatory agenda while avoiding the objections discussed in earlier chapters. Central to my account is that we think of a speaker's language mastery as consisting in a set of "full-blooded" dispositions. We characterize a creature's dispositions full-bloodedly if we specify the state, or states, of the creature that ground those dispositions. A full-blooded dispositional account of a creature's abilities, in contrast to a "bare" (Rylean) dispositional account, does not merely report regularities in the creature's behavior, but helps explain those regularities. I argue that a speaker's implicit linguistic knowledge, understood as a set of articulated psychological states, grounds her full-blooded linguistic dispositions. I claim that this analysis of implicit linguistic knowledge is not subject to standard objections to that notion, (e.g., Quine's challenge about extensionally equivalent theories). Furthermore, it provides a "non-reductive" explanation of a speaker's language mastery, since it holds a middle ground between strictly biological, or neurophysiological accounts (e.g., Chomsky) and purely behavioristic accounts (e.g., Quine) of what makes an agent a speaker of a language.

Finally, I take up the question of whether Dummett, whose arguments motivate the discussion of linguistic knowledge in chapter one, can accept my account of implicit linguistic knowledge. I suggest that insofar as this account is consistent with Dummett's emphasis on the manifestation of linguistic knowledge, he can adopt it.

Thesis Supervisor: Dr. James Higginbotham  
Title: Professor of Philosophy

**DEDICATION**

In loving memory of  
my Dad

PAUL PIETROSKI, SNR.

1917 - 1990

and

à mon ange du Mont-Royal,  
qui veille sur moi  
en ton absence.



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One morning toward the end of 1983, I decided philosophy was what I wanted to do, and in August 1986 I came half way around the world to MIT and Building 20. In the past five years, I have learned a lot about many things, and my life has been enriched by my teachers, my colleagues and my friends. I welcome the opportunity to thank them here.

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## Chapter 1

### Knowledge and Meaning

"If we are limning the true and ultimate structure of reality, the canonical scheme for us is the austere scheme that knows...no propositional attitudes but only the physical constitution and behavior of organisms."

---Quine [1960], p.221.

The idea that speakers of a natural language have genuine linguistic knowledge, or more particularly, that they know the theory of meaning for that language, is a proposal apparently fraught with difficulties. My aim in this thesis is to make good an account of linguistic knowledge that avoids these supposed difficulties. But to begin, I want to focus on the antecedent question of what reason we have to seek an account of linguistic knowledge at all.

Speakers, qua speakers, are ripe for epistemic characterization. A speaker of a natural language has manifold abilities. She is able to understand her fellow native speakers and is able to make them understand her. She can converse successfully and impart information. She can lie, deceive, tell the truth, make distinctions, ask questions and answer them. Typically, a speaker is able to tell when two

sentences are incompatible, when two sentences mean the same, and when one sentence follows from another. She is also able to make judgments of truth and falsity, revealing an ability to ascertain relations between her language and the world. Thus she can be characterized as knowing how to judge the truth or falsity of sentences, as knowing how to converse and communicate, in fact, as knowing a host of things associated with her language.

In doing all these things a speaker exploits the meaningfulness of expressions in her language and, correspondingly, her and her interlocutors' understanding of those expressions. When a speaker judges that one sentence follows from another, she does so partly (perhaps largely) on the basis of what those sentences mean. Her ability to give an appropriate response to a question also depends on her knowing what the question means, and so on. At the very least, to understand a sentence is to know what that sentence means, and so we might say, a speaker's various linguistic capacities (know-hows) are to be characterized, at base, as knowledge of meaning, or semantic knowledge.<sup>1</sup> But precisely what role does the attribution to a speaker of linguistic knowledge play in the characterization and explanation of her linguistic abilities?

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1. See Dummett [1991], pp.101-102; Larson [1990].

The epistemic characterization of a speaker's linguistic abilities (or language mastery)<sup>2</sup> can be offered with more or less conviction. On the one hand, it can be offered as part of a description (or more accurately, part of a redescription) of a speaker's language mastery; call this the "modest" characterization. On the other hand, it can be offered as part of an explanation of that mastery; call this the "full-blooded" characterization.<sup>3</sup> These two degrees of conviction reflect two different perspectives on the question of what makes someone a speaker of a language.

The modest characterization fits naturally with the view that what makes an agent a speaker of a language is that she behaves in certain ways. In particular, the idea is that an agent is a speaker of a language if she behaves in ways consistent with the possession of explicit semantic knowledge of that language, though no claim is made that she actually has such knowledge. From this perspective, the attribution of linguistic knowledge to the agent is, as we might say, instrumental. It offers a perfectly fine description of the speaker's ability; but, of course, it is just that - a description.

Alternatively, if one thinks that what makes an agent a speaker of a language is some state of her, one may be more inclined to the full-

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2. Throughout, I will use the terms "linguistic ability", "linguistic capacity", "language mastery" and "linguistic competence" synonymously.

3. My use of the modest/full-blooded contrast here must not be confused with Dummett's use of it in e.g., Dummett [1975b].

blooded epistemic characterization; for a plausible candidate for the relevant state is the (psychological) state of having semantic knowledge of the language. This stronger appeal to a speaker's knowledge is made with the intention of providing an explanation of what she can do linguistically. From this perspective, the epistemic characterization of the speaker is not meant to merely redescribe her behavior; it is supposed to help explain it.

To reinforce this distinction, it is worth pointing out that the very same item, or items, of knowledge might feature in either account. So for example, suppose we had in our possession a completed semantic theory, T, for some language, L. The instrumentalist claims that an agent is a speaker of L insofar as his behavior is consistent with his knowing T. The proponent of the stronger (non-instrumentalist) view claims that what makes someone a speaker of L is that he actually knows T, and that that knowledge is available to the agent in a way that allows it to guide his linguistic behavior. The essential difference, then, lies in whether or not speakers are credited with genuine knowledge of the theory.<sup>4,5</sup>

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4. It might be argued, quite persuasively I think, that were we to have a "completed" semantic theory, we would have settled this epistemic business; but allow me the example to mark the difference.
  5. As to the content of the linguistic knowledge that is more or less enthusiastically attributed to speakers, that is a question that I do not wish to settle here, were I capable of doing so. In what follows, I will take the content of linguistic knowledge to be either or both of: (a) a Davidsonian theory of meaning, or (b) a set of rules and principles constituting a grammar for the language. Hence,

I choose to begin with a brief description of Davidson's semantic project. It provides a clear background against which to see the different epistemic characterizations that can be offered of speakers' competence. Some philosophers, apparently the early Davidson amongst them, do not think of the theory of meaning as an object of a speaker's actual knowledge; speakers merely act as if they knew the theory. Other philosophers, notably Dummett, insist that the theory be genuinely known by speakers if it is to be a theory of meaning at all.

### 1.1 A Theory of Meaning

In a series of highly influential papers,<sup>6</sup> Donald Davidson introduced philosophers to the idea of a "theory of meaning" for a natural language. One of Davidson's insightful suggestions was that it might be possible to give an account of meaning by focusing on the phenomenon of understanding a language. It is a reasonable assumption that since speakers use language to communicate, they understand the meanings of the expressions in that language. So, Davidson suggested, progress might be made in semantics by investigating what knowledge, explicit

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I will sometimes talk about knowledge of meaning and sometimes of knowledge of rules. There is no confusion here since there is some reason to think that a marriage of sorts can be effected between Davidsonian semantics and linguistic theory. See e.g., Higginbotham [1986].

6. Davidson [1965], [1967].

possession of which by an agent, would allow that agent to understand utterances of the language in question.

Davidson also articulated the ways in which the linguistic capacities of a speaker are "open-ended". In the first place, it is a striking fact that a speaker of a natural language has the ability to produce and understand a potential infinity of expressions in her language; including expressions she has never encountered before. For instance, if a speaker understands the expressions "Politicians are fascinating" and "Plumbers are overpaid", she will also understand, on first hearing, "Politicians are overpaid" and "Plumbers are fascinating". It is an interesting question how it is possible for finite creatures like us to have such an unbounded capacity. Secondly, it is clear that language learning does not occur sentence by sentence; learning the meaning of a relatively small number of simple expressions appears to be all that a speaker need do, in order to understand and produce many more complex expressions with those simple expressions as components. These observations suggest that meaning is a recursive property of sentences, and that natural languages have a well-defined structure that enables the meaning of a complex sentence to be derived in a systematic way from the meaning of its simpler constituents.

These considerations underlie Davidson's project of constructing a theory of meaning for a natural language along the lines of a Tarski-style truth theory. The axioms and rules of the theory deliver a theorem for each well-formed expression in the language of the form

T: S is true iff p

where S ranges over well-formed expressions (sentences) in the object language (i.e., the language for which we are constructing a theory of meaning) and p expresses a state of affairs that must obtain if S is true. T itself is couched in the metalanguage (i.e., the language in we construct the theory of meaning). Davidson suggests that a theory of truth will only do service as a theory of meaning if it satisfies two constraints:

"(i) it is finitely axiomatizable and

(ii) it delivers a T-theorem for each declarative sentence [S] of the object language in a manner that reflects the semantic structure discerned in that sentence."

A theory of meaning of this type will give an account of the meaning of individual sentences in a way that is sensitive to the twin features of semantic structure and open-endedness.

Earlier, I adverted to the "naturalness" of epistemically characterizing a speaker's linguistic abilities. In particular, I drew attention to the fact that speakers of a natural language appear to have semantic knowledge. It is relevant to inquire, then, whether a theory of meaning of the sort just outlined has any role in such a characterization. Do speakers bear any relation, epistemic or otherwise to a theory of meaning?

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7. Wright [1986], p.205. See Davidson [1973], pp.127-8. It is worth pointing out that Wright challenges the necessity of (i) and (ii).

While Davidson's project was certainly in part motivated by facts about human language use, he himself was, in Baker and Hacker's term, "artfully reticent"<sup>8</sup> about the relation, if any, in which speakers stand to such a theory. To be sure, Davidson suggests that knowledge of the theory of meaning for a language would suffice for a hearer to interpret a speaker's utterances, but he makes no explicit claim to the effect that speakers do know any such a theory, or that it is in virtue of knowing the theory that an agent is a speaker of a natural language. Davidson's theory of meaning offers us primarily an account of the structure of a language. His proposal also shows how our observations about language and language use can be systematically described in a manner that reflects how it might be possible for finite creatures to have unbounded linguistic capacities. As Dummett says,

[Davidson's query is] to ask, for any given language, what body of knowledge would be required for someone to be able, in virtue of his explicit possession of that knowledge, to speak and understand the language. Here it is not maintained that any actual speaker really has such a body of knowledge, however tacitly or implicitly.

Davidson's interest devolves on the formal properties of the theory, and not on any actual epistemological and/or psychological states of speakers. As Evans says,

...a semanticist aims to uncover a structure in the language that mirrors the competence speakers of the language have actually acquired. This does not mean that he aims to uncover a theory that he supposes his subjects know, in any

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8. Baker & Hacker [1984], p.324.

9. Dummett [1981b], p.5.



acceptable sense of that word. It means merely this: if (but only if) speakers of the language can understand certain sentences they have not previously encountered, as a result of acquaintance with their parts, the semanticist must state how the meaning of these sentences is a function of the meaning of those parts. He must assign semantical properties to the parts and state the general significance of the construction in such a way that a statement of what those sentences mean is deductively entailed.<sup>10</sup>

However, it remains an open question the extent to which a theory of meaning might offer genuine explanations of a speaker's ability. For without the further claim that a speaker really does have knowledge of the theory of meaning for her language, nothing has been offered by way of an explanation of language and language use.

On the issue of whether speakers have knowledge of the theory of meaning, Davidson has moved from agnosticism to outright denial.<sup>11</sup> The thrust of his recent reluctance to attribute genuine knowledge of the theory to speakers concerns the presumption which underlies such attribution, viz., the stability of a theory of meaning (or, of interpretation) for a given language. Davidson's current view, so far as I can tell, is that there is no such thing. Interpretation begins anew with each occasion of utterance.<sup>12</sup>

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10. Evans [1975], pp.343-344. See also Ramberg [1989], p.52.

11. Compare Davidson [1965] and [1967] with Davidson [1986].

12. In the light of Davidson's early emphasis on the learnability of natural languages, one might wonder about this epistemic agnosticism. For clarification on this see George [1986], pp.111-112; McDowell [1977], p.148.

But irrespective of Davidson's intentions, it is open to us to pursue the idea that speakers know the theory of meaning for their language. A useful way of seeing what is at stake here is to reflect on the possible ambitions of the meaning-theorist. To exploit a distinction I mentioned earlier, with respect to actual speakers of the language, the construction of a theory of meaning can play (at least) two different roles. On the one hand it can serve as a systematic redescription of speakers' linguistic abilities. On the other, it can feature in an explanation of those abilities (precisely what kind of explanation we leave open for the moment)<sup>13</sup>. It is not so much that only one of these strategies involves the attribution of knowledge of the theory of meaning to speakers. Indeed, on both accounts it can be said that speakers know the theory. What distinguishes the two is what

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13. It is not obvious that a theory of meaning will, by itself, be able to provide an explanation of a speaker's language mastery, but it certainly presents itself as a useful tool in that endeavor. The question is how a theory of meaning is to feature in an explanation of linguistic competence. Two issues arise if we push the theory of meaning into service in this way. A Davidsonian-style theory of meaning arguably provides an account of the compositionality of meaning and the open-endedness of speakers' linguistic abilities. But this is not yet to say (a) in terms of which concept meaning is to be defined (e.g., truth or assertibility), nor (b) what connection holds between the theory of meaning and the speakers of the language. It has been argued that these two questions are not independent: what one proposes with respect to (b) might well constrain the set of admissible candidates for (a). It is this thought that ultimately underlies Dummett's criticisms of realist semantics. Dummett contends that speakers must know the theory of meaning for their language, and hence, that the central concept of the theory, the property in terms of which meaning is defined, cannot be a realist (i.e., epistemically unconstrained) notion of truth.

such attribution amounts to. On the first (descriptive) account, linguistic knowledge is attributed instrumentally; a speaker merely behaves as if she knew the theory. On the second (explanatory) account, such attribution is clearly non-instrumentalist. The claim is that a speaker has genuine linguistic knowledge, (knowledge of the theory of meaning for her language), possession of which features crucially in the explanation of her linguistic abilities.

As I have emphasized, it is characteristic of competent speakers that they (1) understand expressions in their language; i.e., they are able to grasp the meaning of such expressions, and (2) are able to successfully communicate with other members of their speech community; i.e., they are able to construct and produce meaningful expressions in their language. So, we might say, what is definitive of speakers is that they know the meaning of expressions in their language. If a theory of meaning for a given language delivers the meaning of each well-formed expression in that language, a natural first pass explanation of a speaker's linguistic abilities is to say that she knows such a theory. So much by way of observation. I want now to turn to two arguments to the effect that speakers have genuine linguistic knowledge.

## 1.2 Two Arguments for Linguistic Knowledge

The two arguments I want to consider are evident in the work of Michael Dummett. The first is uniquely "Dummettian"; it is an a priori (or methodological) argument that, to the extent that a theory of meaning is (or at least yields) a theory of understanding, a speaker must know the theory. The second, is an a posteriori (or empirical) argument and takes the form of an inference to the best explanation. By way of introducing them it will be helpful to make some comparative remarks about Dummett and Davidson.

### 1.2.1 Dummett and Davidson

Dummett and Davidson have their differences.<sup>14</sup> However, they are in broad agreement on at least the following: (a) that the route into saying what language is lies through a consideration of speakers' linguistic competence;<sup>15</sup> (b) that a theory of meaning ought to deliver a meaning-specification for every well-formed expression in the language in a way that reflects its semantic structure, and (c) that such meaning-specifications be given in terms of some species of correctness-

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14. See e.g., Dummett [1975b], [1976].

15. See Ramberg [1989], p.106; Wright [1986], p.208.

condition, e.g., truth-conditions or assertibility conditions.<sup>16</sup> The central disagreement between Dummett and Davidson concerns the connection between the theory of meaning for a language and the speakers of that language. In particular, they disagree about whether speakers know the theory. As I have already reported, Davidson rejects this idea, but Dummett has consistently insisted on an affirmative answer.<sup>17</sup>

A way of expressing the difference between Dummett and Davidson on this issue is to say that the latter is motivated by descriptive concerns while the former is motivated by explanatory ones.<sup>18</sup> This is half right, but the disagreement goes a bit deeper than that. It is more accurately characterized as a dispute not so much about what a theory of meaning can do, but rather about what it ought to do. One's view about what connection holds between a speaker and the theory of meaning for her language will be informed by what one takes the point of a theory of meaning to be. That is, by one's answer to the question: What do we require of a theory of meaning? And Dummett and Davidson have very different views about this.

As we have noted, for Davidson, the construction of a theory of meaning allows us to systematize various semantic aspects of language.

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16. See note 13.

17. See e.g., Dummett [1973c], p.378; [1979], p.134; [1991], chap.4.

18. Though it is important to note that this does not necessarily involve the notion of causal explanation.

It shows how the meaning of a complex sentence is related to the meanings of the simple expressions that compose it and the way in which they are put together. But for all his talk about how a language might be learnable and about what knowledge would suffice for interpretation, Davidson never suggests that he is giving an account of what speakers actually know at all.

Dummett shares Davidson's desire to give an account of meaning in general. He says,

I am in agreement with Davidson that the correct methodology for the theory of meaning is to inquire into the general principles upon which a meaning-theory is to be constructed.<sup>19</sup>

But he has a very different view about how that is to be achieved. Dummett's guiding question is "What makes a language a language?"<sup>20</sup>

Dummett actually has two lines of response to this question which are not, I think, properly distinguished either by him or his commentators. Both responses appeal to the notion of a speaker's linguistic knowledge. Indeed, they represent two different arguments for the same conclusion, viz., that a speaker knows the theory of meaning for her language. To reiterate: The first is an a priori argument to the effect that a theory of meaning must be a theory of understanding, and hence that a speaker must know the theory of meaning

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19. Dummett [1991], p.22; see also Dummett [1975b], p.97.

20. Dummett [1978b], p.4.

for her language.<sup>21</sup> The second argument takes the form of an inference to the best explanation. Emphasizing the essentially rational nature of human language use, Dummett suggests that its explanation requires appeal to speakers' knowledge. The idea is that linguistic behavior is rendered intelligible only on the assumption that speakers really have linguistic knowledge. Let us begin with the a priori argument.

### 1.2.2 The A Priori Argument - What Makes a Language a Language?

There are, very broadly, two ways to conceive of a language. On the one hand, a language is an abstract object; a set of signs and symbols systematically related in particular ways and open to any number of interpretations. Alternatively, a language might be thought of more naturalistically as a practice. A natural language, we might say, is constituted by the linguistic behavior of its speakers; in fact, it is a complex, structured and highly systematic subset of human behavior. Of course, both these characterizations are much too crude. The first fails to mention anything of the connection between a language and the speakers who employ it. And the second, as it stands, seems plain wrong. For if a language is just a set of behaviors, what sense can we

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21. As we shall see, this argument must be understood in the context of Dummett's particular view about the philosophical enterprise and the place of the philosophy of language in that enterprise. See p.40 below.

give to the expression "speak a language?" How can one speak a set of behaviors?

Dummett's work in the philosophy of language charts a course between these two extremes. He expressly rejects a purely behavioristic approach to language and meaning,<sup>22</sup> and at the same time he is critical of a wholly formal or theoretical conception which fails to connect with speakers' actual linguistic behavior.<sup>23</sup> Dummett does not underestimate the value of constructing a theory of meaning for a language, but he urges that we not lose sight of the fact that any account of natural language must give due attention to the speakers of that language and what they succeed in effecting with it.

The job of the philosopher of language, Dummett says, is to explain what makes a language a language, to "give an account of how...language works, that is, how...speakers communicate by means of it."<sup>24</sup> And,

The task of the theory of meaning is to give an account of how language functions: in other words, explain what, in general, is effected by the utterance of a sentence in the presence of hearers who know the language to which it belongs -- an act which is, even in the simplest cases, by far the most complicated of all the things we do.<sup>25</sup>

And the

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22. Dummett [1976], [1978b], [1979].

23. Dummett [1975b], [1978b], [1981b].

24. Dummett [1975b], p.99.

25. Dummett [1991], p.21.



success of [a theory of meaning] is to be estimated according as the theory does or does not provide a workable account of a practice that agrees with what we in fact observe.<sup>26</sup>

Dummett invites us to think about the question

(1) How does language function?

in terms of the further question,

(2) What is it to know a language?

And that question, he suggests, is fruitfully addressed by considering

(3) What is it to know the meaning of individual sentences in the language?<sup>27</sup>

What is the rationale behind this approach?

Paraphrasing Quine, we might ask, "Whence this torrent of sound?" But we do more than just make sounds when we speak our native tongue.<sup>28</sup> We ask and answer questions, issue and heed warnings, make and appreciate jokes, receive and transmit information. The question before us is: What makes our verbal behavior the speaking of a language and more than just a torrent of sound? Dummett's preliminary answer to this question is:

what makes the difference is the fact that...speakers understand or know the language. Each has, so to speak, the same piece of internal (mental) equipment, which enables

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26. Dummett [1991], pp.13-14.

27. This is the general strategy outlined in Dummett [1975b], [1976], [1978a].

28. See e.g., Davidson [1973], p.126; Dummett [1989], p.210.

each to interpret the utterances of the other as an expression of thought, and to convert his own thoughts into sentences that the other can likewise understand.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, the suggestion is made that an answer to (1), How does language function?, lies in investigating (2), What is it to know a language?

There is a term of art in the literature for the "piece of internal equipment" to which Dummett alludes. Speakers of a natural language are said to have mastery of that language, or to possess a certain linguistic competence or linguistic abilities. And knowing a language consists in having this mastery. Hence we will be on the way to saying how language functions, what makes a language a language, when we have an account of this mastery.<sup>30</sup> Question (2) above can then be rephrased as:

(2a) In what does a speaker's linguistic ability

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29. Dummett [1978b], p.4.

30. It is important to be clear about what is meant by the term "mastery" in this context. Often when we say that someone has mastered a task, we mean that she is particularly good at it; hence the expressions "master chef" and "chess master". But at other times, we simply mean that the person is able to do the task. Hence, we say of a child that she has mastered the art of tying her shoelaces, or of an adult, that she has mastered the use of a particular word-processing program. In these latter cases, we are merely attributing to those persons the ability to  $\theta$ , where  $\theta$  is some activity or other, (e.g., reading, speaking French, swimming, making an omelet etc.). As I shall be using the word "mastery", I intend it to be understood in the latter sense. So, when I speak of an individual speaker's mastery of her language, I am referring to a particular ability that she has, namely, the ability to speak her language. In this sense, you and I, and the average seven-year old American child are all masters of the English language.

consist?

A speaker's linguistic mastery is neither just undifferentiated verbal behavior, nor is it a disjoint set of independent verbal skills. Her linguistic competence is rather a structured thing. It is natural to suggest that central to a speaker's linguistic ability is her understanding of individual sentences in her language; that is, her knowledge of the meaning of such sentences. Putting the matter this way allows us to see why Dummett suggests that an answer to (2)/(2a) above will be forthcoming from an investigation into (3). Dummett thinks that if we can give an account of what it is for a speaker to know the meaning of individual sentences in her language, we will thereby have given such an account of her linguistic ability sufficient to answer (1). Hence the project of saying what it is to know the meaning of a sentence assumes crucial importance in Dummett's program. In Dummett's own words:

There appears to be a connection between meaning and knowledge, expressible by saying that the meaning of an expression is the content of that knowledge possessed by the speakers which constitutes their understanding of it; it is what someone has to know about the expression if he is to be a competent speaker of the language, that is, in the common phraseology, to know the language.<sup>31</sup>

If the task of the philosopher of language is to say what it is for a speaker to know the meaning of the sentences of her language, we might expect him to avail himself of Davidson's theory. In general, a theory

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31. Dummett [1991], p.83.

of any kind will contain a number of axioms and some set of rules for deriving theorems from those axioms. The axioms of the theory of meaning specify the meaning of each atomic/simple/unstructured (primitive) expression in the language. And the meanings of complete/complex/structured expressions (sentences) are derivable from the axioms together with the rules of the theory. We might then plausibly construe the claim that a speaker knows the meaning of sentences in her language as the claim that she knows the deductive consequences of the theory of meaning for her language.

As we noted earlier (p.19), a Davidsonian theory will deliver a theorem (or, meaning-specification) for each well-formed sentence in the language of the form

T: S is true iff p

But it is not a sufficient account of a speaker's understanding of a particular sentence that she knows just the corresponding T-sentence, i.e., just the output of the theory. In the first place, suppose that the theory of meaning does issue in direct ascriptions of meaning of the following sort:

(4) "Snow is white" means that snow is white.

It is surely the case that someone could know that the sentence "'Snow is white' means that snow is white" is true without knowing what that sentence itself means. What is required for an account of understanding is an account of knowledge of meaning, and attributing to a speaker knowledge of the truth of sentences like (4) gets us nowhere in that

task.<sup>32</sup> What we ought to say is that the speaker knows the proposition expressed by (4), and that involves attributing to her knowledge of the axioms governing the constituent words of the sentence (4) and of the rules of sentence formation licenced by the theory.

Secondly, to harp on a familiar point, a competent speaker knows the meaning of more than just a finite list of sentences. She is able to understand and produce any number of novel sentences in her language. A speaker who has never before encountered the expression "black dog" will be able to understand a sentence containing that expression if she has previously understood sentences containing the expression "white dog" and sentences containing the expression "black cat". Thus, if one wants to attribute linguistic knowledge to a speaker, it is better to say that she knows the axioms and rules of the theory of meaning for her language. Since such knowledge would enable her to ascertain (derive) the meaning of any well-formed sentence in her language with which she is confronted.

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32. See also Wright [1981], p.112.

### 1.2.2.1 Some Qualifications

So much for the general outline of Dummett's suggested methodology. I want now to make a couple of qualificatory remarks. It is instructive to see how the questions (2)/(2a) and (3) are related.<sup>33</sup>

First, it is not at all clear that a speaker's linguistic ability consists solely in her knowledge of the meaning of individual sentences in the language; even in the sense just described (i.e., being able to derive the meaning of such sentences). For it is not sufficient for knowing a language that one simply know the meanings of some number (no matter how large) of sentences in that language. One also has to know how to use those expressions. For example, a speaker can know that "There's a fire in the kitchen" means that there is a fire in the kitchen, but she needs to know more than that in order to be able to utter those words as a warning to her spouse. A speaker knows a language if, amongst other things, she knows how to use it. Hence, a certain sort of answer to (3) (viz., the answer that has it that what it is to know the meaning of an individual sentence in a language is to be

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33. These are, recall:

- (2) What is it to know a language?
- (2a) In what does a speaker's linguistic ability consist?
- (3) What is it to know the meaning of individual sentences in the language?

able to derive the relevant T-theorem) will not supply a complete response to (2)/(2a).<sup>34</sup>

Secondly, we cannot ignore the apparent social dimension of meaning. Putnam's [1975] case for the division of linguistic labor suggests that there are words (and hence sentences) whose meanings are only fully known to some small number of experts (e.g., "gold"). But despite having only partial understanding of some words, speakers are, in general, able to use them successfully. While I do not fully understand the expression "2 mega-bytes of RAM", I can confidently employ it in communicating to you a fact about my new computer. I know that the expression has a meaning, and that you and I can discover it easily enough by asking the relevant expert(s). All that I want to draw from Putnam's observation is this: in speaking her native language, a speaker exploits the fact that words have an established use in her speech community. The point then is that a speaker's knowledge of her language, understood in terms of her communicative use of it, extends beyond knowledge of just the axioms and rules of the theory of meaning for the language.

Finally, let me recognize that the term "knowledge" has been bandied around in the discussion without proper explanation. For we can, and ought to, ask just what sort of knowledge is knowledge of

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34. I take it that this is what lies behind Dummett's insistence [1975b] that an adequate theory of meaning will encompass both a theory of sense and a theory of force.

meaning. Surely, it cannot be the case that knowledge of meaning is explicit theoretical knowledge. We cannot say that a speaker knows the meaning of some sentence only when she can explicitly state that meaning. The reason why this is wrong becomes obvious when we recall the context of our inquiry.

Suppose we were to try to explain a speaker's understanding of some expression,  $E_1$ , in terms of her explicit knowledge of the meaning of  $E_1$ , where part of that knowledge consists in the speaker being able to explicitly state the meaning of  $E_1$ . Hence, if she understands  $E_1$ , she will be able to utter  $E_2$  (" $E_1$  means that p.") Notice, she uses language in order to manifest her knowledge of  $E_1$ . But then we surely want to know how she understands  $E_2$ . On the view under consideration, she understands an expression when she can explicitly state its meaning. Hence we would be driven to say that she knows the meaning of  $E_2$  if she can state  $E_3$  (" $E_2$  means that q.") And so on, and so forth.

We are trying to ascertain the very nature of meaning and understanding and we cannot appeal to those self-same notions in providing explanations of them. We cannot explain a speaker's understanding of some sentence in terms of her ability to explicitly state what that sentence means, for then we want to know in what her understanding of the sentence she uses to state that knowledge



consists.<sup>35</sup> This account risks, if not vicious circularity, then certainly an unpalatable regress.<sup>36</sup>

All these considerations lead Dummett to suggest that it is never enough to merely say what a speaker knows, e.g., that "Snow is white" means that snow is white. We must also give an account of what having that knowledge consists in.<sup>37</sup> As Dummett says,

[A] semantic theory is not a complete meaning theory, but only a preliminary sketch of one; and it cannot be judged correct or incorrect until it has been expanded into a meaning-theory which displays the connection between the meanings of the sentences, as represented by the theory, and the practice of using the language.<sup>38</sup>

Considerations of knowledge and use are intimately connected and provision of answers to (2)/(2a) and (3) is a simultaneous exercise. This ought to strike the reader as mysterious and confusing. If knowledge of meaning and linguistic behavior are as intimately connected as this, then there is little hope that the methodology suggested by Dummett will be at all successful. For, while it has been suggested that an answer to (2)/(2a) will be (at least in part) forthcoming from an answer to (3), providing the account that (3) demands, requires appeal to concepts involved in the response to (2)/(2a). But the air of

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35. See Dummett [1976], p.70; [1978b], p.10.

36. For more on this see 2.2.2 below.

37. Dummett [1975b], p.121; [1976], p.70, 128; [1978b], p.10; [1979], p.134.

38. Dummett [1991], p.18.

question-begging is an illusion. Dummett addresses this issue in advancing his thesis that linguistic knowledge is implicit knowledge. I will return to this in chapter three.

This, then, is the essence of Dummett's a priori argument for the claim that a speaker knows the theory of meaning for her language. His main contention is that, construed in the Davidsonian way, a theory of meaning will not do what it was intended to do. That is, it will not provide an account of what meaning is. Dummett thinks the latter task requires attention to how language works, and hence to speakers' understanding. And that is to be cashed out in terms of what speakers know when they know a language. (See (1) through (3) above.)

Dummett claims that a theory of meaning will only be a genuine theory of meaning if it also is, or at least yields, a theory of understanding. He says,

...a theory of meaning is a theory of understanding; that is, what a theory of meaning has to give an account of is what it is that someone knows when he knows the language, that is, when he knows the meanings of the expressions and sentences of the language.<sup>39</sup>

Understood in this context, it will not be sufficient that a theory of meaning merely yield a specification of the meaning of each sentence in the language. It must also feature in an account of how speakers use those sentences to communicate with one another. And a plausible way

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39. Dummett [1975b], p.99. See also Dummett [1987b], p.282.

for a theory of meaning to play this explanatory role is for it to be an object of a speaker's knowledge. As Dummett says,

unless the ability to speak a language actually does involve having such knowledge [such a theory won't tell us] how the speaker is able to understand the language...it at most provides a somewhat oblique characterisation of his linguistic ability.<sup>40</sup>

A theory of meaning must be something speakers know, because a significant part of saying what makes a language a language is the provision of an explanation of a speaker's linguistic abilities. And any such explanation will make ineliminable appeal to linguistic knowledge.

Putting the matter another way: According to Dummett, there are two distinct but intimately related demands on a theory of meaning. First, there is the demand that a theory of meaning be explanatory; second, there is the matter of what it is to be explanatory of. As we have seen, Dummett's answer to this second question is that a theory of meaning ought to explain not only the meanings of complete sentences in the language, but also the practice of speaking of the language as we observe it. That is, the theory must explain how it is that speakers communicate by means of the language. The bare demand that the theory be explanatory rather than merely descriptive is what prompts the further claim that the theory is an object of knowledge for speakers. And the idea that it must be explanatory of the actual practice of

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40. Dummett [1981b], p.5.

speaking the language is what leads to the direct concern with communicative use.<sup>41</sup>

Returning to an earlier point, it is not so much that Dummett's interest in a theory of meaning is motivated by explanatory concerns, while Davidson is interested in merely describing linguistic behavior. The explanatory demand on a theory of meaning is rather the result of the contention that the theory will tell us nothing interesting about meaning unless it is also a theory of understanding. That is, unless it tells us something about the relation between speakers and their language. This is what leads Dummett to insist that speakers must know the theory if the theory is going to be an account of meaning at all.

Dummett's a priori argument for the claim that speakers must have genuine linguistic knowledge is underpinned in large part by his particular vision of the philosophical enterprise and the place of the philosophy of language in that enterprise.<sup>42</sup> As Dummett sees it, philosophy's job is to illuminate the way in which we apprehend reality, that is, to make clear the nature of our thought. To this end, then, the investigation of thought is basic, but it can only be undertaken by

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41. Dummett's insistence on the ineliminable appeal to behavior in a account of meaning has lead numerous commentators to label him a behaviorist; see, e.g., Burgess [1984]; Currie & Eggenberger [1983]; Devitt & Sterelny [1987], pp.194-5; Weir [1986]. I address this issue in chapter five.

42. See Dummett [1975a] and [1981b] for further clarification on this.

an investigation of language. For language is, as Dummett is fond of repeating, the vehicle for thought. He says,

There can be no account of what thought is, independently of its means of expression; but the purpose of the philosophy of thought can be achieved by an explanation of what it is for the words and sentences of a language to have the meanings they bear, an explanation making no appeal to an antecedent conception of the thought those sentences express.<sup>43</sup>

Many people do not share in this vision, and it is important to see that the appeal to speakers' knowledge of the theory of meaning can be made independently of any particular meta-philosophical view. There are at least three features of Dummett's a priori argument for the claim that speakers know the theory of meaning for their language with which one might take issue, or which might dissuade one from accepting its conclusion. One is, of course, its background commitment to the particular meta-philosophical view just sketched. A second is that it appears to entail a form of behaviorism about understanding that many would want to reject. And third, it is after all an a priori argument, and some folk think there is something fishy about those. As I said, I will address the worry about behaviorism in a subsequent chapter. For now, I want to examine an a posteriori argument for the claim that

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43. Dummett [1991], p.3. It is worth pointing out in passing that if insight into language is going to be used for insight into thought, then we cannot employ concepts and terms from the area of thought in giving our account of language. It is in this sense that, for Dummett, the philosophy of language precedes the philosophy of mind. I take it to be a very interesting question whether this is the right way around. Cf. "reductive Griceans" (e.g., Loar [1981]; Schiffer [1982]).

speakers have linguistic knowledge which does not presuppose any view about the relative priority of thought over language.

### 1.2.3 The Inference to the Best Explanation Argument - Language as Rational Activity

It is one thing to claim that a theory of meaning can play a role in explaining linguistic abilities; it is quite another to say that it must. And one can perfectly well invoke the usefulness of a theory of meaning in explaining linguistic abilities and behavior without also claiming that a theory of meaning must feature in such explanations if it is to remain a theory of meaning. In the last section, I discussed Dummett's a priori argument for the claim that speakers know the theory of meaning for their language. However, Dummett offers another argument to the same conclusion. Unlike his a priori argument, which depends on considerations of what it is for something to be a theory of meaning, this second argument trades on the idea that language use is a rational activity. Linguistic behavior in general, and a speaker's mastery of her language in particular, are phenomena awaiting explanation; phenomena of a very special sort. As philosophers, we ought to be concerned with what sort of explanation is required for such phenomena. Dummett claims that the use of language is the hallmark of our nature qua rational beings. He says,

Any adequate philosophical account of language must describe it as a rational activity on the part of creatures to whom

can be ascribed intention and purpose. The use of language is, indeed, the primary manifestation of our rationality...it is the rational activity par excellence.<sup>44</sup>

We must be careful not to misinterpret Dummett's appeal to rationality in this context. I hope this will become clearer in the course of the discussion, but for the moment let me just say this about where rationality is, by Dummett's lights, thought to enter the picture. The general idea is that when a speaker utters a string of words, e.g., "My dog likes granola", she does so (by and large) with the intentions (i) of using those words, and the whole sentence, correctly, i.e., in accordance with the established use of them and it in her speech community, and (ii) of thereby successfully communicating some piece of information to her interlocutor. The idea is not, I take it, that when an agent hears the expression "My dog likes granola" as meaning that the speaker's dog like granola, that she does this for a reason.<sup>45</sup>

The essential rationality of human linguistic behavior is usefully illustrated in the following way. Imagine that a scientist from Alpha Centauri observes two humans playing chess, without making the assumption that they are rational agents. That is, suppose he looks on the behavior of these players much as we look on the behavior of the

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44. Dummett [1978b], p.14. See also Dummett [1991], pp.88-92.

45. Putting aside trivial cases of hearing sentences as meaning such-and-such for a reason. E.g., hearing all of a particular speaker's utterances as sexist or racist despite the literal meaning of those utterances.

planets. Further imagine that this alien, being a good scientist, constructs a theory of chess-playing behavior of sufficient complexity to allow him to predict, on the basis of previous moves and the relative positions of the objects on the board, how the players will move their pieces. Here is the crucial question: Were the alien to know this theory, would he know how to play chess? It is likely that, theory in hand, he would be able to "pass" as a chess-player - perhaps, even as a good chess-player. But notice that it would be (almost) completely by accident that the Alpha Centaurian played well. He necessarily lacks the concept of winning and this concept is in part constitutive knowing how to play chess. One moves pieces for a reason (e.g., to defend one's Queen, to place one's opponent in check and so on). But for the alien, what the human players do is just so much part of the natural order.

Moreover, while the Alpha Centaurian observes many regularities in the activity of the chess-players, he does not interpret these behaviors as rule-governed. If he were to "play" chess, he would merely mimick these regularities. His "chess-playing" behavior would lack the etiology necessary for genuine chess-playing behavior, since he would not apply the rules of chess with the intention of winning. Purposive behavior does not consist merely in the manifestation of regularities, but crucially involves knowledge and application of the relevant rules.

An analogous case can be made out with respect to language. Even if after observing human linguistic behavior, the alien were to construct a predictive theory of what utterance will follow what



utterance, he would not thereby be able to speak the language.

Something of the same is missing as is absent in the chess-playing example, viz., the alien does not construe language use as purposive behavior on the part of rational agents. As Dummett says,

I have many times remarked that a theory of meaning is not to be assessed as a scientific systematisation of regularities in complex phenomena; it is to be judged by whether it gives an intelligible description of a practice engaged in by rational agents. We are not looking for a theory with predictive power, but for a description that makes sense of the activity as one carried out by rational beings.<sup>46</sup>

The point of this is to introduce the consideration of what goes on in the ordinary exercise of skills. Much of adult skilled activity goes on without the agent's conscious attention to what he has learned in acquiring the skill. Such instructions can, of course, become conscious and often it is useful for us to make them so. But with respect to our use of language it is hard to see whether coherent linguistic communication could take place in the absence of consciousness. And I do not mean just that the speaker and hearer are awake. What I mean is, they are conscious of what they are saying. Dummett argues that we need to know what the connection is between the sounds that are made to us and the content of those sounds; else we are not properly speaking language.<sup>47</sup> Let me try to make this clearer.

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46. Dummett [1987a], p.260.

47. See Dummett [1991], p.90.

Utterances have a point as well as a meaning. That is, agents usually intend to do something with them. For Dummett, an expression has the meaning it does in virtue of how it is used in the language. A speaker, it is supposed, relies on that fact in using the sentences she does to convey what she does. Hence, we can only ask after the point of an utterance once we know its meaning. We ask, "Why did she say that?", "Was she intending to be sarcastic?" and so on. As Dummett says,

A speaker must know what he is saying; if he does not, he is not truly saying anything. For someone to have a reason or motive for his utterance, an intention or purpose in making it, he must know what it, and other things that he might have said, mean; his knowledge of the language provides the basis for his decision what, and what not, to say. It is for this reason that the notion of knowledge appears to be an inescapable part.<sup>48</sup>

And again,

...we can estimate someone's purpose, motive or intention only against the background of what we presume him to know. Only by assuming him to understand, or, occasionally, to misunderstand, the words he uses can we give any substance to attributing to him one or another intention in using them: if someone has no idea what he is doing, he can have no purpose in doing it rather than something else. This becomes vivid when we are trying to understand the utterances of a foreigner with an imperfect grasp of the language: we assign quite different intentions to him from those we should assign to a native speaker who used the same words.<sup>49</sup>

The relevant contrast here is between different types of explanation of human linguistic behavior. We might attempt to advance a

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48. Dummett [1987a], p.262.

49. Dummett [1991], p.92.

purely physical account of linguistic utterances. That is, we might view human beings the way our alien friend does; as parts of the natural world making and reacting to vocal sounds in accordance with natural laws. This way of proceeding obviously will not have as a consequence the attribution to speakers of linguistic knowledge. Alternatively, one could advance a Rylean account and claim that one learns how to speak a language simply by observing the practice and trying to make one's own behavior conform to it. On this view, no knowledge of rules, qua rules is implicated.<sup>50</sup> Or finally, we can advance an explanation of linguistic behavior that takes into consideration the rationality of the speakers of the language. Unlike the alien's strategy, from this perspective, we do think that there is something psychological going on between linguistic input and linguistic output. And it is here that the attribution of linguistic knowledge enters the picture.

Dummett is surely right to emphasize the rationality and consciousness involved in our linguistic practice. And in giving an explanation of the use of language qua rational and purposive behavior, it appears that we cannot avoid appeal to what speakers know about the meanings of sentences in their language and about what can be effected with those sentences. On this basis, he sees the ambition of a theory

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50. See Ryle [1949]: "We learn how by practice, schooled indeed by criticism and example, but often quite unaided by lessons in the theory (p.4)." See Davidson [1986], p.446 for a strikingly similar view.

of meaning more broadly than Davidson and many others. What we ought to do when we construct a theory of meaning for a language is

...describe the practice and institutions that surround the practice, and then it becomes intelligible as an activity of rational agents. And that is all the understanding that we seek of language. What we implicitly grasp when we understand activities of this kind in which we do participate is precisely an account of this sort, and not any inchoate causal theory; indeed, if a casual theory were possible, it would not provide the sort of understanding that we seek.<sup>51</sup>

While it is tempting, we must not conclude from this that Dummett sees the explanation of linguistic behavior as a species of intentional explanation. Dummett's view is not that we must appeal to belief/desire psychology in order to explain linguistic utterances. That suggestion is forthcoming from the reductive Gricean. But as we noted earlier, given Dummett's overall philosophical picture, this would be to get things exactly the wrong way around.

Human linguistic behavior is much more than just the mindless exchange of noises. It is highly systematic, complex and apparently rule-governed. Not unlike human action in general, the exercise of linguistic abilities and, those abilities themselves, demand explanations that appeal to the "interiors" of the systems whose abilities they are.<sup>52</sup> Hence, one can motivate the appeal to a speaker's

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51. Dummett [1991], p.92.

52. See also Forbes [1983], p.236; Higginbotham [1990].

linguistic knowledge independently of whether a theory of meaning must be a theory of understanding, as Dummett would have it.

There is an important consequence of seeing that the appeal to speakers' linguistic knowledge in the explanation of linguistic competence can be made independently of controversial conditions on what makes something a bona fide theory of meaning. This is that the Davidsonian-style theory of meaning loses its apparent monopoly as the candidate for the content of that knowledge. There is cause to think that the explanation of a speaker's language mastery will advert to her linguistic knowledge, but there is no a priori reason to suggest that the content of this knowledge is limited to a Davidsonian style theory of meaning.

An argument for linguistic knowledge of the second type discussed can be given a more or less empirical slant. Proceeding from the essential rationality of language use, Dummett's particular version of the inference to best explanation argument falls somewhere at the less empirical end of things. However, theoretical linguists employ inference to the best explanation all the time in advancing claims about speakers' linguistic knowledge and about the content of that knowledge. Let us look briefly at two examples.

There are many things about English that native speakers of English know without ever having been taught them. Amongst these is how to form

plurals of hitherto unmet common nouns. There appear to be only three plural suffixes in English. Consider the nouns in (5):

- (5)     a. bus, bush, batch, buzz, garage, badge  
          b. lip, pit, pick, cough, sixth  
          c. cab, lid, rogue, cove, can, car, tie, tray, sea

and try saying the plural form of each of them. You will notice that in forming the plural of the nouns in (5a) we add an extra syllable /ɪz/; in forming the plural for the nouns in (5b) we add /s/ and in forming the plural for the words in (5c) we add /z/. So far, so good. Now think about how you would say the plural of the probably unfamiliar words in (6):

- (6)     a. flitch  
          b. plast  
          c. thole

You will agree that the plural of "flitch" is "flitches" (like (5a)); that the plural of "plast" is "plasts" (like (5b)) and that the plural of "thole" is "tholes" (like (5c)). This phenomenon of being able to give the correct plurals for words one has never encountered before is a quite general skill of competent speakers of English. And it is an interesting question how it is that we are able to do this. It cannot be that we memorize the ways the plurals sound, since we are able to form plurals of words we have never heard before. A better explanation is provided by saying that speakers of English know a rule for plural formation.<sup>53</sup>

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53. This example is taken from Halle [1978].

A second example: Consider

(7) John expects to feed himself.

(8) I wonder who John expects to feed himself.

In (7) it is clear to all native speakers of English that "feed himself" is predicated of John and that therefore, "himself" and "John" must be coreferential. In (8), however, the speaker is wondering who it is that John expects to feed himself, i.e., that very person, not John. Hence in (8), "John" and "himself" cannot be coreferential. Speakers of English who know nothing of binding theory, which provides an account of these differences, know these facts about their language.

The examples are illustrative of more than just some interesting skills of competent English speakers. In the first case we see that it is plausible to attribute to speakers knowledge of the rule(s) of plural formation in English. But what we do in the case of plurals looks like simple projection from what we have already learned to do. In other words, it looks more like a habit than the application of some implicitly known rule. However, the second example is more telling. Here what we see is that speakers actually possess and employ concepts which they are unaware that they have. Here it seems clearer that the relevant piece of linguistic behavior (in this case, what the hearer or reader understands) can only be explained by attributing to speakers grasp of the relevant concepts. And this looks more like a case of genuine knowledge.

This is an important distinction to make, since many of the examples used in arguing for the idea that speakers have implicit knowledge of compositionality, for example, appear to be more like the first (phonological) example than the other. Projection seems to be a trivial fact about syntax and semantics. Hence it is useful not to rest one's entire case for the attribution of genuine linguistic knowledge to speakers on just this set of data. It is still very much an open question precisely what the content of linguistic knowledge is. And given the overwhelming evidence emerging from linguistic research for the existence of perfectly general rules and principles, we would be well-advised to keep the matter open.

### 1.3 Conclusion

It is clear that a large part of what makes an agent a competent speaker of a language is that she understands her language. And it is plausible to claim that this understanding consists in her knowing the meaning of sentences in her language. Certain other facts about the creativity of language production and the open-endedness of language comprehension lead us to posit that what a speaker actually knows is a theory of meaning of the Davidsonian type.<sup>54</sup>

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54. This is an interesting result for, as Wright points out, "One reason why Davidson's idea has occasioned interest...is because it aspires to cast philosophical light on the concept of meaning without overt recourse to any intensional notions...([1981], p.111)."



In this chapter we have examined two different arguments to the effect that speakers have genuine linguistic knowledge. At base both arguments concern the explanatory scope of the theory of meaning for a natural language, though from two different directions. The first argument advances the view that it is a condition on something being a theory of meaning at all that it is able to provide an explanation not only of the meaning of individual sentences in the language, but also of the practice engaged in by speakers of that language. The second argument takes as its point of departure the observation that language use is a rational activity and concludes that speakers' linguistic behavior is inexplicable without the attribution to them of linguistic knowledge.

As Dummett suggests, we want to be able to give an account of language use that makes it intelligible as the activity of rational agents. One way to make sense of this is to claim that a speaker knows the theory of meaning for her language and that that knowledge actually guides her linguistic behavior. Hence, one can motivate the appeal to a speaker's linguistic knowledge independently of whether a theory of meaning must be a theory of understanding, as Dummett would have it. Indeed, Dummett has said recently,

Whether or not it can be said of a theory of meaning that it is a theory of understanding, it must certainly give an account of a speaker's understanding of his language. This

is because speech and writing are conscious activities on the part of rational agents...<sup>55</sup>

There are a number of appealing aspects to Dummett's analysis, but it raises many more questions than it answers. On the positive side, Dummett shows how we can adopt what is surely right about Davidson's program (the compositionality of meaning, the relation between meaning and some species of correctness-conditions) while showing how that theory can feature in explanations of linguistic behavior. His remarks on the essential rationality of language use, place human linguistic abilities firmly in the arena of other intentional phenomena.<sup>56</sup>

Dummett, then, opens the way for us to talk about how speakers are actually guided by the theory of meaning, rather than rest content with claiming that they merely behave in ways consistent with explicit knowledge of it. In particular, Dummett suggests that speakers bear an epistemic relation to the theory of meaning for their language, viz., they know it.

However, for all the emphasis on knowledge and explanation several matters remain unclear. Precisely what sort of explanation does the attribution to speakers of linguistic knowledge provide? Is it merely a rationalizing explanation, as Dummett's second argument suggests? Is it

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55. Dummett [1991], p.88, my emphasis

56. Though it is far from clear exactly what Dummett's position is on intentional explanation, a certain sort of commitment to it can be found in his criticisms of Quine. See Dummett [1976], [1979].

intentional explanation, causal explanation, or what?. Secondly, while it has been mentioned in passing that linguistic knowledge is not explicit knowledge, nothing much has yet been said about what kind of knowledge linguistic knowledge is. Obviously these two matters are related. In general, the explanatory demands on a particular notion constrain the substance of that notion. Hence, once we have a better idea of the kind of explanation the attribution to speakers of linguistic knowledge is thought to provide, we will have a better sense of what kind of knowledge such knowledge is. These will be topics of subsequent chapters.

## Chapter 2

### Linguistic Knowledge?

"...speakers, qua speakers, know nothing..."

---Stich [1971], p.496.

In the last chapter, I explained how epistemological issues arise with respect to language, focusing on two arguments to the effect that the explanation of a speaker's linguistic mastery, or competence, requires the attribution to her of genuine linguistic knowledge. It has been mentioned several times that a speaker's knowledge of the theory of meaning for her native tongue cannot be explicit knowledge, but little else has been said about how, precisely, linguistic knowledge is to be characterized. We have a sense that a speaker's linguistic knowledge is different from her other non-linguistic knowledge, but it has not been made clear in what way, or ways, it does differ. In this chapter, I will try to say something about the kind of knowledge linguistic knowledge is.<sup>1</sup>

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1. As I said at the end of the last chapter, I will not specify the object, or objects of linguistic knowledge. I will assume throughout that both (a) a theory of meaning for a natural language, and (b) a

It is instructive to approach the question of the nature of linguistic knowledge by examining some sceptical worries about the very idea of invoking the notion of knowledge in this context. I have been assuming both the naturalness and plausibility of the attribution to speakers of genuine linguistic knowledge, however this is far from unproblematic. Several objections have been made to the claim, but as I will argue none of them is fatal. Rather what these worries and objections do is serve to direct our attention to the kind of knowledge linguistic knowledge is.<sup>2</sup>

## 2.1 Scepticism about Linguistic Knowledge

It has been argued that a speaker's linguistic abilities are best explained by attributing to her genuine linguistic knowledge. Implicit in this claim, of course, is the idea that the speaker actually deploys

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grammar (i.e., a set of syntactic and semantic rules and principles) for a language are possible objects of a speaker's linguistic knowledge. There is no a priori reason to rule either one out as a candidate for the content of a speaker's knowledge; and it is hard to articulate a principle that would serve to differentiate them as plausible candidates (e.g., both are sufficiently complex and abstract).

2. Even the strongest proponents of linguistic knowledge are well aware of the problematic nature of the thesis that speakers have knowledge of the theory of meaning for their language. George has written, "The question which continually exercises Dummett is how attributions of knowledge can enter into an explanatory account of our use of language. His concern is that such attributions may doom the account to vacuity or circularity ([1984], p.519)."

such knowledge in speaking her language. However, others have argued otherwise; claiming that the attribution of linguistic knowledge is unjustified, and that the idea that a speaker actually uses this knowledge in speaking and understanding her language (i.e., that the knowledge is action-guiding) is highly problematic.<sup>3</sup> In this chapter, I first examine two sceptical worries about the attribution of linguistic knowledge to speakers as part of the explanation of their linguistic behavior, and then investigate in some detail three substantive objections that have been made to the thesis that speakers have genuine linguistic knowledge. These worries and objections are usefully categorized in the following way: It is argued that the attribution of linguistic knowledge to a speaker is:

1. conceptually confused, since behavior is not<sup>4</sup> to be explained (causally) in psychological terms;
2. redundant, since we can understand all we need about linguistic behavior without appealing to speakers' knowledge;<sup>5</sup>
3. false, since it is manifestly obvious that speakers do not have knowledge of a theory of meaning, or of the rules and principles of a Universal Grammar

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3. See e.g., Baker & Hacker [1984], pp.239-240; Devitt [1984]; Devitt & Sterelny [1987], chap.8; Harman [1967]; Kirkham [1989]; Platts [1979], p.232; Stich [1971].

4. This objection is distinctively Rylean (see Ryle [1949]), though Ryle himself did not raise the worry specifically against attributions of linguistic knowledge.

5. Platts [1979], ch.9; Quine [1960].

for their language;<sup>6</sup>

4. circular, since in order to know a theory of meaning, an agent must know the language in which that theory is couched; (but then in virtue of what does the agent know that language?);<sup>7</sup>
5. vacuous, since it amounts to no more than saying that a speaker knows how to do what she knows how to do.

Let us look at each of these in turn.

### 2.1.1 The Worry of Conceptual Confusion

At pains to avoid dualism, Ryle [1949] advances a particular account of psychological (mental) states which account precludes them from featuring in causal explanations of an agent's behavior. On Ryle's

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6. Devitt & Sterelny [1987], p.138; Kirkham [1989], pp.211-2; Platts [1979], p.232; Stich [1971].
7. Devitt & Sterelny [1987], pp.139-40; Harman [1967], p.75, p.79.
8. There is one very recent objection to the notion of linguistic knowledge about which I will have nothing much to say. Davidson [1986] can be read as making the claim that the attribution of linguistic knowledge (where this is understood to be knowledge of a theory of meaning) to speakers is incoherent, since there is no such theory to be known. Davidson argues that linguistic communication does not depend on speakers' shared knowledge of a theory of meaning, but rather on the overlap of speakers' interpretative strategies. A speaker-hearer's interpretative theory will differ from occasion of utterance to occasion of utterance, hence there is nothing stable, like a theory of meaning, for speakers to know. As Ramberg puts it, "What enables us to communicate is the mastery of something like an art, namely, the art of theory construction, in the form of interpretation ([1989], p.106)."

view, for an agent to "have" the mental state M is just for that agent to have a disposition to behave in a particular way; where for an agent A to have the disposition D is just for some counterfactual statement to be true of A. So, for example, Sam's having the belief that Ottawa is the capital of Canada is just for Sam to be disposed to utter "Ottawa" were he to be asked "What is the capital of Canada?" Understood in this way, psychological states are related to behavioral events logically or conceptually; they have no metaphysical status independent of the very behavior they are invoked to (apparently) explain. And so, of course, we will be hard-pressed to say how the attribution of mental states to an agent can enter into an explanation of her behavior. As Ryle says,

when we describe people as exercising qualities of mind, we are not referring to occult episodes of which their overt acts and utterances are effects; we are referring to those overt acts and utterances themselves.<sup>9</sup>

If mental states just are dispositions to behave, then, Ryle says, we need not appeal to "inner" or "hidden" states or episodes in the explanation of an agent's behavior. Indeed, such appeals make manifest our conceptual confusion; we have not grasped the true nature of mental states.

It should be obvious how the Rylean thesis can be thought to count against the claim that the explanation of a speaker's linguistic abilities requires the attribution to her of genuine linguistic knowledge. The Rylean would certainly agree that a speaker knows how to

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9. Ryle [1949], p.25.



speaking her language, but knowing how to  $\Phi$ , (i.e., being able to  $\Phi$ ) for the Rylean, amounts to no more than being disposed to behave in a particular way, viz., to  $\Phi$ . Hence to say that a speaker knows how to speak her language, i.e., that she has linguistic abilities, just is to say that she is disposed to behave linguistically the way she does. And, if the only substance that can be given to the claim that a speaker is in a psychological state of knowing the theory of meaning for her language, say, is that she exhibits a certain sort of behavior (i.e., manifests certain dispositions), then it is a mistake to think that her possession of such knowledge is causally responsible for her behavior. A speaker's linguistic knowledge is conceptually, but not causally, related to her linguistic behavior. What linguistic knowledge the speaker undoubtedly has, her knowledge-how to speak the language, is, as it were, exhausted in her behavior. There is nothing more to linguistic knowledge than dispositions to speak.

The Rylean would also agree that linguistic behavior is highly systematic and apparently rule-governed; that speakers hold themselves responsible to objective standards of correct use, and are able to recognize error and correct for it. What he would deny is that this peculiarly systematic behavior requires for its explanation that speakers have propositional knowledge of the relevant rules of the language. The Rylean view is that the rules which govern a practice, or the theory that systematizes such rules, post-dates the practice itself. Ryle writes,

We learn how by practice, schooled indeed by criticism and example, but often quite unaided by any lessons in the theory.<sup>10</sup>

The idea is that knowledge of the theory of meaning for a language is acquired (if it is acquired at all) only after one has learned how to engage in the practice of speaking the language in question. The possession of such knowledge is not, contrary to what was argued in the previous chapter, required for a speaker to speak a language. To paraphrase Ryle: it is not necessary that we preach to ourselves before we practice.<sup>11</sup>

There is obviously much that can be said in response to this Rylean worry. Fodor<sup>12</sup> has, I think, provided a definitive defense of the appeal to psychological states in the explanation of behavior. He argues that the fact of there being a conceptual connection between psychological and physical states does not preclude the existence of causal (and hence explanatory) relations between them too.<sup>13</sup> I will not presume to improve on Fodor's arguments here, rather what I want to focus on is the role of dispositions in Ryle's arguments. Ryle's claim that mental states are just dispositions to behave is crucial to his overall agenda, and it might be thought that in order to avoid Rylean

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10. Ryle [1949], p.41.

11. Ryle [1949], p.29.

12. See Fodor [1968], [1975].

13. See especially Fodor [1975], pp.8-9.

scepticism regarding linguistic knowledge one would be required to deny the truth of a dispositional account of linguistic abilities. I think this is mistaken. I want to argue that the proper response to the Rylean, is not that linguistic abilities ought not be construed dispositionally, but rather that he offers the wrong account of dispositions.

Abilities are typically characterized by whatever they are the ability to do. In the first instance they are identified by the behavior they are the abilities to perform, and so the ability to  $\theta$  and actual  $\theta$ -ing behavior are intimately connected. The problem for the theorist attempting to give an account of a creature's abilities is to tell a story that will (or at least can) explain how these dispositions issue in the behavior they do.

Ryle's account of abilities qua dispositions is what we might call a "bare" dispositional account. He claims that determining whether or not some alleged ability is manifested in a piece of behavior involves

the truth or falsehood of certain "could" and "would" propositions and certain other particular applications of them.<sup>14</sup>

On this account, dispositions are counterfactual facts of the following form:

BD: Given conditions C, if the creature were to receive input  $I_1$ , then the creature would

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14. Ryle [1949], p.46.

produce output  $O_1$

The view is neatly expressed by the claim that

there are dispositions but...they are <sup>15</sup> nothing over and above the holding of certain conditionals.

In particular, this account of dispositions fails to countenance the existence of properties which are in some way responsible for the presence and manifestation of the relevant dispositions.

It is clear that on their Rylean construal, abilities will fail to be explanatory of the behavior they are the abilities to produce. The bare dispositionalist account certainly pays proper attention to the very intimate connection between a particular ability and a piece of behavior, but it merely serves to redescribe that piece of behavior. It certainly points to regularities in a creature's behavior, however it is silent on the basis or cause of those regularities. Furthermore, such an account is unable to explain why a creature with a particular ability, say the ability to  $B$ , may fail to manifest that ability even in favorable conditions.<sup>16</sup> Put in terms of the schema above, the bare

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15. Prior [1985], p.29. See also Armstrong, [1968], [1969].

16. Of course, on the bare dispositionalist account as it has been outlined above, it is possible to say that a thing has the disposition  $D$  even though it has never manifested that disposition. This possibility is however excluded on the strict Rylean account of dispositions. This is so because Ryle imposes a further condition on something being being a bona fide disposition. For example, and assuming Ryle is right to say that being-a-cigarette-smoker is a disposition, the attribution of that disposition to a person will only be legitimate if "He is smoking a cigarette now" is sometimes true of that agent. (See Ryle [1949], p.117).

dispositionalist account cannot say why it is that given conditions C and input  $I_1$ , the creature does not produce output  $O_1$ . Since, on this view, dispositions are simply counterfactual facts, the theorist is again able only to report that the expected behavior did not occur. (Or he may say, counterintuitively, that the disposition was not "present" on that occasion.)

If we are interested in giving an explanation of the creature's  $\beta$ -ing behavior, in terms of its ability to  $\beta$ , it is tempting to hypothesize that there is something about the creature, some state of it, that contributes to it having the ability it does. Perhaps some state of the creature is part of its ability to  $\beta$ . We can still think of abilities dispositionally (indeed, how can we not?), but we can characterize abilities or dispositions in a way that allows them to play an explanatory role. In other words, we can reject a "bare" dispositionalist account in favor of a "full-blooded" one.<sup>17</sup> A full-blooded characterization of a disposition has the following form:

FBD: There is some state of the creature,  $S_1$ , such that, given conditions C and input  $I_1$ ,  $S_1$  together with  $I_1$  serves to produce output,  $O_1$ .

Complete explanations of a creature's  $\beta$ -ing's and failings-to- $\beta$  (in the appropriate conditions) will then make ineliminable appeal to something "inside" the creature.

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17. The term is Evans'. See Evans [1981], p.329.

Linguistic behavior exhibits extraordinary regularity; what we want to explain is how this is so. We also want to know how it is that a speaker who is truly credited with the ability to speak a language nonetheless makes mistakes. Adopting a full-blooded analysis of dispositions, we ask: What is it about us (i.e., speakers of a natural language) that gives rise to and makes possible this highly systematic behavior? What state, or states, of a speaker contribute to her having the linguistic abilities she does? It is in attempting to provide answers to these questions that the notion of linguistic knowledge enters the picture. The suggestion is: the relevant states of the speaker which form part of her linguistic abilities, and explain how those abilities are manifested when they are, and why they are not manifested when they are not, are those states which constitute her linguistic knowledge.

It is important to see just how this account of dispositions is supposed to provide a response to the Rylean worry that it is conceptually confused to attribute linguistic knowledge to a speaker as part of the causal explanation of her linguistic abilities and behavior. For I can imagine the Rylean arguing that the full-blooded dispositionalist has shown nothing of the kind. Indeed, to ask for anything more than a bare characterization of dispositions, to insist that dispositions be understood in a way that allows them to feature in explanations of an agent's behavior, is just to beg the very question at hand.

But exactly which question is being begged here? To say that we require more than a bare account of dispositions is not to insist, contrary to Ryle's immediate question, that mental states are causally responsible for behavior. To say that would be to beg the question. All that is being insisted upon here is that abilities are analyzed in such a way that the possession of them can be seen to feature in explanations, and not merely in redescriptions of behavior. Clearly, the relevant dispositional bases that the full-blooded dispositionalist wants to countenance could be physical (e.g., neurophysiological) in nature, and Ryle could hardly quarrel with that. Nothing in the full-blooded account of dispositions commits one to mental causes of physical events. If it happens that the full-blooded analysis of dispositions (and hence of abilities) is compatible with the idea that psychological states can constitute the bases of dispositions, then so be it. But nothing in that account of abilities entails that this is so.

Moreover, even if it is said that it is a speaker's linguistic knowledge that constitutes the relevant bases of her linguistic dispositions (understood full-bloodedly), this by itself is not to say that such states are psychological. Indeed, Quine [1960] who also favors a dispositional account of linguistic behavior insists that the "subtle structural condition"<sup>18</sup> that constitutes a disposition is physical in nature. And Chomsky, (who, independently, is very critical

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18. Quine [1960], p.34.

of dispositional analyses of knowledge and knowledge of language<sup>19</sup>, argues that speakers have linguistic knowledge; that such knowledge explains their linguistic abilities; and that to know a language just is to be in a particular brain state.<sup>20</sup> We do not have to say that the state of having linguistic knowledge, of knowing a language, is irreducibly psychological. Hence, no question is being begged against the Rylean.<sup>21</sup>

### 2.1.2 The Redundancy Worry

As I have just mentioned, Quine [1960] favors a dispositional account of linguistic behavior. He says human language use is no more than the totality of speech dispositions, where these are understood as verbal responses to verbal and non-verbal stimuli. In speaking her language, an agent exploits the meaningfulness of sentences in the language. But according to Quine the meaning of a sentence is just its "stimulus meaning"; that is, "the class of all the stimulations...that would prompt his [the speaker's] assent."<sup>22</sup> In the last chapter I said that an agent is a speaker of a language if she can produce and understand

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19. See, e.g., Chomsky [1980], pp.48ff.

20. See e.g., Chomsky [1988a], p.4; [1988b], p.3.

21. Though, of course, to say that a agent's knowledge is some physical state of her is a very misleading use of the term "knowledge".

22. Quine [1960], p.32.



sentences in that language. And I said that to understand a sentence was to know its meaning. This picture can be given a Quinean gloss: to be a speaker of language is to have a set of verbal dispositions; viz., dispositions to assent to various verbal and non-verbal stimulations.<sup>23</sup> At first blush, it appears that Quine is committed to a dispositional account of a speaker's linguistic abilities that is as devoid of explanatory power as that provided by the Rylean. However, Quine is not content with the bare dispositionalist account.

Quine does not deny that the attribution to some thing of a disposition D commits us to some story about what is going on inside that thing. Indeed, Quine seems to think that dispositions are only "respectable" if we do make reference in their analyses to some steady or enduring state of the disposition's possessor. He writes,

To say that an object a is (water-) soluble at time t is to say that if a were dropped in water at t, a would dissolve at t. To say that a is fragile at t is to say that if a were struck smartly at t, a would break at t. The ordinary conditional would not suffice here, for it loses its point when the truth value of the antecedent is known. We want to speak of a as soluble or fragile at t though knowing that it is not immersed or struck at t....a stabilizing factor is intruded: a theory of invisible structure.<sup>24</sup>

And again:

Dispositions are...a better-behaved lot than the general run of subjunctive conditionals; and the reason is that they are conceived as built-in, enduring structural traits...[The disposition to assent that plays a role in explaining

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23. See also Quine [1975], passim.

24. Quine [1960], p.223.

linguistic behavior is to be thought of in terms of] some subtle neural condition, induced by language-learning, that disposes the subject to assent or dissent from a certain sentence in response to certain supporting stimulations.<sup>25</sup>

Hence Quine adopts a kind of full-blooded dispositional account of linguistic abilities that is decidedly not psychological. What Quine envisages is rather a physiological account. It is in this way, the Quinean might argue that the appeal to linguistic knowledge, where this is understood as a psychological or intentional state is redundant. We can give an adequate account of a speaker's linguistic dispositions (linguistic abilities) sufficient to explain her linguistic behavior without the appeal to psychology; neurophysiology (indeed, the mere promise of neurophysiology) is all we need.<sup>26</sup>

A couple of remarks are in order here. First, I must own up to having somewhat mis-represented Quine's appeal to interior states of the speaker as playing a role in the explanation of her linguistic behavior. Quine certainly does think that some neural states or other are causally responsible for how the speaker behaves, but he thinks that these states are pretty coarse-grained, explanatorily-speaking. Some of an agent's

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25. Quine [1960], p.223.

26. See especially Quine [1975]. Here Quine distinguishes three levels of investigation into language; the mental, the behavioral and the neurophysiological. He dismisses the first as "superficial" (p.87), and claims that the neurophysiological level offers the deepest explanations. However, in the absence of a completed science of neurophysiology, Quine says we ought to focus on the behavioral, since that is more amenable to reduction (p.95).

brain states are "noisemakers"; they generate noises in response to certain irritations (stimulations) at the creature's sensory periphery. So the best we can say of them is that they are the states that issue in the behavior they issue in. If this is right, then it is hard to see how appeal to them can provide interesting explanations of behavior.<sup>27</sup>

Secondly, I do not think that the only content we can give to a full-blooded characterization of linguistic dispositions is to say that the states that ground those dispositions are physical states. Given (a) the obvious variety and complexity of linguistic behavior, and (b) the fact that a speaker uses her language intentionally (see 1.2.3), I think it perfectly reasonable to understand these states as articulated, or structured, psychological states. This thought is just reinforced by the rather unsatisfactory nature of the explanations of linguistic behavior forthcoming from taking them to be physical (i.e., neurophysiological) states. Of course, I am assuming something which I will not defend here, viz., that even assuming the truth of physicalism, there is a philosophically robust and respectable type of explanation:

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27. See also Davidson [1974] who writes about the explanatory usefulness of the notion of a speaker's knowledge of the theory of meaning for her language: "The theory may be used to describe an aspect of the interpreter's competence at understanding what is said. We may, if we please, also maintain that there is a mechanism in the interpreter that corresponds to the theory. If this means only that there is some mechanism or other that performs that task, it is hard to see how the claim can fail to be true (p.114)." See also Davidson [1986], p.438.

available at the intentional level.<sup>28</sup> Hence it is not at all clear that the attribution to speakers of linguistic knowledge, where this is understood to involve more than just the ascription of particular brain states, is explanatorily redundant; indeed, I am inclined to think that it is required.

But the Quinean, too, might suggest that I am begging the question against him. He will correctly point out that looking for an explanation of linguistic behavior at the intentional level presupposes an intentional characterization of language use. But, he will say, this is unjustified. The data have been misdescribed; there are just noises and the causes of those noises (i.e., neurons). If what is required is a scientific explanation we ought to stop there. It must, of course, be conceded that we can get some generalizations at the neuronal level, but this does not rule out the possibility of further robust generalizations at the intentional level. Until the Quinean can show us why explanations at this more abstract level are not good explanations, then he cannot complain that we have begged the question.

I will take up this discussion of dispositions again in chapter five and there will explain more fully what a full-blooded dispositional account of linguistic abilities might look like. The main point for the moment is that it is wrong to think that a dispositional account of linguistic abilities ipso facto precludes, or makes redundant, the

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28. For the roots of this idea see Sellars [1963], chap.1.

appeal to linguistic knowledge. To be sure, an adequate account of linguistic abilities will be dispositional, but it will need to be a dispositional account of a very special sort, viz., one that appeals to psychological states of the speaker. And this opens the door to the consideration of linguistic knowledge.<sup>29</sup>

## 2.2 Objections to Linguistic Knowledge

In the last chapter, I said that an agent has mastery of her language is she knows the language. This appeal to linguistic knowledge is prompted by the ideas (a) that linguistic mastery implies linguistic understanding, and (b) that linguistic understanding consists in knowing the meaning of sentences in the language. There are several other prima facie plausible reasons to think that knowledge is implicated in

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29. There is a problem looming here that I will take up later (see 3.2 and chapter five). Abilities can be thought of as "straddling" the cognitive-behavioral divide. But since they are characterized by the behavior in which they issue, the theorist's problem is, to paraphrase: How to break out of the behavioral circle? How can accounts of abilities avoid appealing to the very behavior they are invoked to explain? The answer is that they cannot. This is a problem for intentional explanation generally. Just as abilities are individuated by the behaviors they are the ability to perform, beliefs are individuated by their contents. The contents of beliefs cannot be said to be "inside" the believer's head, yet crucially, we do think that beliefs are inside the believer's head. We must locate them here if appeal to them is going to provide us with the robust explanations of the believer's behavior we seek. Similarly, though abilities are picked out by some factor we cannot locate inside the creature, viz., some piece of behavior, this does not mean that some part of the relevant ability (some component of it?) is not inside the creature.

language mastery. First, we naturally characterize linguistic mastery epistemically, we say that an agent knows English, or knows how to speak Japanese. Second, the development of linguistic mastery suggests a process similar to knowledge acquisition. And, finally, as we saw in chapter one, something like linguistic knowledge is required in order to explain our intentions to use utterances the way we do. The question before us is: despite these similarities and motivations, is linguistic knowledge genuine knowledge? Several people have argued that it is a mistake to think that it is. There are broadly three types of objection: the objection from falsity, the objection from circularity, and the objection from vacuity.

### 2.2.1 The Objection from Falsity

The thesis that a speaker has genuine knowledge of the theory of meaning for her language can seem obviously false. In general, when we say that an agent knows some thing, we mean, inter alia, that the agent can tell us what she knows; that she is conscious, or can be brought to be conscious of having the knowledge in question; that she can understand sentences expressing that knowledge; and, perhaps, that she is able to utilize it in planning courses of action, in decision-making, in reasoning and so on. We also require that if something is to count as a piece of knowledge for an agent that it be justified in a particular way (you may fill in your favorite details).

Now it is clear that an ordinary speaker of a natural language does not know the theory of meaning for that language - in this sense of "know."<sup>30</sup> She cannot tell us what the theory of meaning for her language is, and it is not obvious that she would recognize a formulation of it were one to be presented to her. Given this, it is doubly problematic to claim further that a speaker utilizes her linguistic knowledge in speaking and understanding her language.

I think it is important to note here precisely what is being denied. At issue is whether a speaker has genuine knowledge of the "inner workings" of her language, not whether she has any knowledge at all vis-a-vis the language. The objection is misleadingly put by one critic who writes,

...obviously many competent speakers of English do not have any propositional knowledge of its semantical structure.<sup>31</sup>

But advanced in this fashion, the objection carries no weight. For it is clear that a speaker does have some knowledge of the semantic structure of her language. For example, if Judy knows that "Snow is white" is true and that "Grass is green" is true, she also knows that "Snow is white or grass is green" is true, and hence she knows one fact about the semantic structure of English. It is apparent too that

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30. See e.g., Dummett [1978b], p.10; Foster [1976], pp.1-2; Kirkham [1989]; Wright [1981], p.109; and with respect to putative knowledge of grammatical theory see Stich [1971], pp.485-6.

31. Kirkham [1989], pp.211-2.

speakers have some knowledge of the syntactic structure of their language. Consider the following:

(1) The students might disgrace themselves

\* (2) The students' behavior might disgrace themselves.

Competent speakers of English will judge (1), but not (2), grammatical.

As Chomsky argues,

...knowledge of grammar does involve propositional knowledge and belief. A person who know English knows that "The candidates want me to vote for each other" is not a well-formed sentence meaning that each wants me to vote for the other, and also believes this.<sup>32</sup>

The objection, then, is that a speaker has no further knowledge which, as might say, underlies this explicit knowledge she has of her language.

It is along such lines that Stich [1971] argues that "Competent speakers, qua speakers, know nothing."<sup>33</sup> Stich's target is not the thesis that speakers know the theory of meaning for their language. What he takes issue with is rather the following cluster of claims regarding speakers' putative syntactic knowledge:

1. that speakers "know [innately] that p, where 'p' may be replaced by some statement belonging to linguistic theory (p.480)"; i.e., that speakers know propositions expressing linguistic universals;
2. "that speakers know that the particular rules of the grammar of their language are the rules of the grammar of their language, or that they know the definitions which, along with the rules, constitute the grammar of their language (p.480)";

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32. Chomsky [1980], p.93.

33. Stich [1971], p.496.



3. "that speakers have propositional knowledge of the consequences of the rules and definitions of their grammar (p.481)."<sup>34</sup>

Be that as it may, the arguments Stich advances against the view that speakers have syntactic knowledge hold mutatis mutandis for the thesis that they have semantic knowledge. Stich says,

...the concept of knowledge has no place in an account of the relations between the speaker and the several facts that the linguist uncovers.<sup>35</sup>

We can imagine the parallel claim: the concept of knowledge has no place in an account of the relation between a speaker and the theory of meaning for her language the philosophical semanticist proposes. Anyway, as I have said, for the purposes of the present study, I wish to keep open the specification of the object of speakers' putative linguistic knowledge; and semantic claims analogous to (2) and (3) have also been advanced.

Stich rightly notes that, in general, there is a distinction to be made between

...a theory correctly describing some disposition or characteristic of a person or object and the person or object knowing the theory<sup>36</sup>

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34. These claims, Stich reports have been advanced by Chomsky [1965], p.27 (1); Nagel [1969], p.175 (2); and Harman [1967], p.81; Nagel [1969], p.174; Schwartz [1969], p.185 (3).

35. Stich [1971], p.477.

36. Stich [1971], pp.485-6.

Presumably, the physiologist's theory of digestion correctly describes what goes on inside me after I have eaten, but I do not know that theory. Similarly the physicist's theory of projectile motion correctly describes the path of the ball I throw, but the ball knows nothing of that theory. Furthermore, it is clear that neither I nor the ball need to know the relevant theory in order to digest food or move in the direction of my friend's hands, respectively.

All this can be conceded, if the claim is just that in general this distinction holds. However, there may be cases, in which the relation which holds between the theory of  $\theta$ -ing and the objects (or, persons) which  $\theta$ , is more than merely descriptive. I take it this is precisely the point of Dummett's a priori argument as expounded in chapter one. The central thesis there is that meaning cannot outrun understanding, and hence that the theory of meaning must be a theory of understanding. It follows that if a theory of meaning T correctly describes the linguistic abilities of a speaker then that speaker knows T (see 1.2.2). However, it is unlikely that Stich would be swayed by Dummett's a priori argument, so we cannot leave the matter there.

Stich launches a two-stage attack on the attribution of peculiarly linguistic knowledge to speakers. First, he questions the appropriateness of the concept of knowledge in this context; pointing out various dissimilarities between attributions of putative linguistic knowledge and attributions of ordinary (i.e., non-linguistic) knowledge. Second, he attempts to show that nothing of explanatory value is lost if

we do away with the concept of linguistic knowledge.<sup>37</sup> Given the radically different nature of putative linguistic knowledge, he says that the only way in which attribution of it can be justified is if such attribution is indispensable for some explanatory task or other.

It cannot be denied that there are several dissimilarities between linguistic knowledge and non-linguistic knowledge. As Stich says,

Commonly when a person knows that p he has occasionally reflected that p or has been aware that p; he will, if inclined to be truthful and otherwise psychologically normal, assert that p if asked. More basic still, he is capable of understanding some statement which expresses what he knows. Yet for the propositions of linguistic theory [read here without distortion: "of a theory of meaning"] none of this need be true. People - exempting a few linguists - have never been aware of the facts of linguistic theory; they are incapable of recognizing them when presented. Many would be incapable of understanding them. And some, though competent speakers, are intellectually incapable of ever coming to understand them.<sup>38</sup>

Stich is careful to avoid saying that the manifestation of these behaviors commonly associated with the possession of knowledge are  criterial  for the attribution of knowledge. Yet he says that it would be a queer sort of knowledge indeed that did not involve some of these things. With that we cannot quibble. Stich goes on to say, however, that given the absence of these behaviors in the linguistic case, we are

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37. See Stich [1971], p.485. The same point is put slightly differently by Platts [1979], pp.231ff., who argues that while linguistic knowledge might be sufficient for understanding a language, it is not necessary.

38. Stich [1971], pp.485-6.

not justified in attributing knowledge to a speaker unless a explanation of her linguistic behavior and capacities requires it.

So, for example, taking the putative objects of knowledge to be specific grammatical rules rather than linguistic universals, Stich argues, the fact that a speaker and a theorist can agree that the speaker's behavior (grammaticality judgments) is in conformity with such rules, does not show the speaker knows those rules, knew them prior to contact with the theorist, and knows (knew) them to be the rules of her language.<sup>39</sup> Stich seems to be claiming that something more than the speaker's linguistic behavior is required in order to legitimately ascribe knowledge of the rules of her language to her. An example of what he has in mind is revealed in his discussion of the appeal to unconscious intentional states in psychoanalysis.

Reflecting on the psychoanalytic practice of attributing unconscious beliefs and desires to agents, Stich insists that such attributions are legitimate only if the agent recognizes "from within" that she has those beliefs and desires. The analyst and the client can agree that the client's behavior is illuminatingly described as being in conformity with some set of unconscious beliefs (and presumably, with pieces of unconscious knowledge), but it is the client's revelatory

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39. This is the same idea that is expressed in Quine's distinction between the behavior of a creature fitting some set of rules and the creature actually being guided by those rules. See Quine [1972], p.442.

recognition of these doxastic and epistemic states as hers that licences calling them genuine beliefs and genuine pieces of knowledge. It is these "aha experiences" which are somehow above and beyond the client's normal behavior, that require explanation. And that explanation involves the attribution of genuine intentional states to her.

Likewise, Stich argues, since a speaker lacks conscious knowledge of linguistic rules, the legitimacy of the attribution of linguistic knowledge to her depends on her being prone to similar "aha experiences", on being informed of these rules (or, of the axioms or rules of the theory of meaning for her language). Unless a speaker does have such experiences, i.e., does recognize these rules as the rules she has been following in speaking her language, no explanatory purpose is served in attributing knowledge of them to her. Typically, speakers do not recognize the rather esoterically-expressed linguistic rules to which their speech conforms (see p.135 below). Hence, Stich concludes, there is nothing for the attribution of linguistic knowledge to explain. But it seems to me that we do lose considerable explanatory power if we do away with the attribution of linguistic knowledge to speakers. Stich is right enough to insist that such attribution be sufficiently motivated. And it can be, irrespective of whether a speaker has "aha experiences" when introduced to the axioms and rules of a theory of meaning for her language. We need not look to some mysterious phenomenology, outside the speaker's ordinary use of her language, to justify the attribution of linguistic knowledge to her.

Consider just the following: (a) speakers have extensive intuitions about ambiguity, synonymy and so on (which Stich admits); (b) speakers' understanding and production capacities are apparently unbounded - competent speakers of English can both produce novel expressions in English and understand English expressions they have never heard before, and (c) speakers often "correct" both their own speech and the speech of others. Most important is the fact that speakers understand sentences in their language; they are able to participate in successful communication with their fellow speakers. On any plausible account, communication involves intention. And the concept of understanding ineliminably involves the concept of knowledge. If these aspects of a competent speaker's linguistic behavior are not suggestive of the possession of considerable linguistic knowledge, I fail to see what could be. As we saw in the last chapter, it is specifically in order to account for the apparently unbounded linguistic capacities of finite creatures, that knowledge of a finite set of rules or axioms is posited. And making sense of meaningful linguistic interchange appears to require that we appeal to a speaker's intentional states. Contrary to Stich, there is much in a speaker's ordinary use of her language that is only explained by attributing to her linguistic knowledge.

It is agreed if speakers have knowledge of this sort, it lacks many of the properties commonly associated with non-linguistic knowledge. If Stich wants to quibble about the extension of the concept knowledge, and on this basis refuse to admit linguistic knowledge in as genuine

knowledge, let him. The proponent of linguistic knowledge can call it something else, anything else, "Elmer" for the moment. The point is - and by his own lights, Stich ought to accept this - there are aspects of a speaker's linguistic ability whose best explanation will take the form of positing some relation or other as holding between the speaker and a theory of meaning (or grammar) for the language.

The proponent of linguistic knowledge can happily agree with Stich regarding the several dissimilarities between alleged instances of linguistic knowledge and instances non-linguistic knowledge, but she will be inclined to dig in her heels with respect to the second of Stich's claims. She argues that the explanation of language use, of speakers' linguistic abilities requires that we posit that some relation holds between speakers and the theory of the language they speak, and that this relation is epistemic.

### 2.2.2 The Objection From Circularity

The worry here, expressed, amongst others, by Harman [1967], is that the attribution to a speaker of knowledge of the theory of meaning for her language is necessarily circular. The reasoning proceeds thus: a theory, qua list of axioms and rules, must be couched in some language or other. To know a theory of meaning, a speaker must understand the language in which that theory is expressed. But in virtue of what does she understand that language? If understanding a language requires

knowledge of the relevant theory of meaning, then the speaker must know the theory of meaning for this "second" language. Obviously, the proponent of linguistic knowledge cannot claim, without gross circularity, that this "second" language is English for Anglophones, French for Francophones and so on. But if he does not say this, then he will have embarked on vicious regress.<sup>40</sup>

The attribution of linguistic knowledge is made as part of an explanation of a speaker's linguistic ability, so it cannot be that the justification of that attribution depends upon the speaker's linguistic abilities themselves. As I pointed out earlier, there are some things I explicitly know about my language, but these are not the things that are constitutive of my ability. Indeed, I already need to know my language in order to be able to have this explicit knowledge.<sup>41</sup>

It is illuminating to see that Dummett himself addresses just this complaint. Dummett recognizes the twin problems of potential circularity and regress, but he draws a different conclusion. Rather than taking these to show that speakers lack linguistic knowledge tout court, Dummett argues we ought to conclude that linguistic knowledge cannot be of this kind. He says,

Explicit theoretical knowledge consists in the capacity to formulate the relevant propositions, to present them in a

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40. See also Campbell [1982], pp.26ff; Devitt & Sterelny [1987], pp.139-140; Fisher [1974], p.241; Platts [1979], p.232.

41. See chapter one, (1.2.2.1). Cf. Platts [1979], p.236.



connected manner when there are connections between them, and to answer questions concerning them. Such knowledge presupposes mastery of some language within which to frame those propositions; hence knowledge of that language, or at least of one's mother-tongue, cannot be of that kind.<sup>42</sup>

Both the objection from falsity and the objection from circularity have some bite. They are fatal objections to an account of linguistic knowledge that takes such knowledge to consist in explicit, verbalizable knowledge of the axioms and rules of a theory of meaning (or of a grammar) for a language. Now one could argue that the thesis that speakers have genuine linguistic knowledge has thereby been refuted. But this presupposes a substantive view about what knowledge consists in that is yet un-argued for. It is completely unclear why all knowledge must be explicit to, and verbalizable by, the knower. We have good reason to think linguistic knowledge cannot be of this kind. And this is the very extent of the above two objections; they do not establish that speakers lack linguistic knowledge.

Let me just summarize where we are. We considered two sceptical worries about the attribution to speakers of genuine linguistic knowledge. It was shown, pace the Rylean, that the appeal to an agent's psychological states for the purposes of explaining her behavior is not conceptually confused; and, pace the Quinean, that a dispositional account grounded solely in neurophysiology is not the only adequate

42. Dummett [1991], p.94. See also Dummett [1973b], p.217; [1976], p.70, p.80; [1977], p.373; and Prawitz [1987], p.123.

explanation of linguistic abilities. The objections from falsity and from circularity stand or fall together. The charge of circularity depends on taking linguistic knowledge to be explicit knowledge, but the proponent of linguistic knowledge can agree that speakers lack explicit knowledge of the theory of meaning for their language. It has not yet been shown that speakers lack linguistic knowledge. Rather we are clearer about the kind of knowledge it will have to be, viz., non-explicit. Before saying any more about that, there is one last objection to face; the objection from vacuity. It is to that that I know turn.

### 2.2.3 The Objection from Vacuity

We have seen that whatever linguistic knowledge is involved in a speaker's abilities to speak and understand her language, it is not, and could not be explicit knowledge of the theory of meaning for that language. However, when this observation is coupled with the further (plausible) idea that speaking a language is a practical ability,<sup>43</sup>

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43. The "practical" here may strike the reader as redundant. What precisely is the difference between a practical ability and an ability simpliciter? One might think the addition of "practical" indicates that the ability in question is actually put into practice. But this set of abilities would not be a very interesting object of inquiry. Indeed, what is most challenging about giving an account of abilities is to take note of the fact that the actual exercise of them is not essential to their analysis or to the attribution of them to agents. My continued use of the term should

doubt is cast on the very use of the concept knowledge to characterize the relation that holds between a speaker and the theory of meaning for her language. Prima facie, the expressions

A is able to  $\theta$ , and

A knows how to  $\theta$ ,

where  $\theta$  stands for some practical ability, are equivalent. In everyday discourse we use the expressions synonymously. In general, when we talk of an agent's abilities we describe them in terms of the agent's knowing something or other. But the attribution of knowledge to an agent vis-a-vis some ability she has often amounts to no more than the claim that she knows how to do such-and-such. Although reference to what the agent knows would appear to be part of any description of her abilities, in this context, the verb to know is used purely idiomatically. To say of an agent that she knows how to juggle is just to say that she is able to juggle; no genuine knowledge of the rules and principles of juggling are thereby attributed to her. So too with language. If speaking and understanding a language are practical abilities, to say a speaker knows the language is to say no more than that she is able to speak it. Hence the attribution to speakers of linguistic knowledge is vacuous.

The objection from vacuity does not depend solely on contingent facts about the everyday use of the expressions "knows how to" and "is

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not then be interpreted as making any such claim. It is rather practical (!); this is the term that is used in the literature.

able to". Underlying the objection is a substantive argument of roughly the following form:

1. Speaking and understanding a language are practical abilities.
2. There is a genuine distinction between practical and theoretical knowledge, i.e., between knowledge-how and knowledge-that.
3. Only knowledge-how is involved in practical abilities.
4. Knowledge-how is completely exhausted in the manifestation of whatever practical ability it is associated with.

Hence,

5. The attribution of knowledge-how to an agent provides no explanation, merely a redescription of the behavior of which it is knowledge how to do.

Therefore,

6. The attribution to a speaker of linguistic knowledge cannot be explanatory of her linguistic behavior; such attribution is vacuous.<sup>44,45</sup>

Dummett puts the question thus:

...does the knowledge - the practical knowledge - involved in these cases explain the practical ability, or is it

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44. The argument is distinctly Rylean in nature; see Ryle [1946/7], [1949]. It has more recently been advanced by Kirkham [1989].
45. Notice, the claim is not that practical abilities fail to admit of explanations. Of course, there is something going on inside the agent; that is, there is some causally explanatory story to be told about how she is able to do what she is able to do. The claim is only that the attribution of knowledge does not contribute to that causal explanation. Saying that a speaker knows the theory of meaning for her language amounts to no more than saying she able to speak her language. And that is manifestly no explanation at all.

rather that the practical ability is all there is to the practical knowledge?<sup>46</sup>

The argument is "cute" for it shows how we may talk of knowledge in the characterization of an agent's abilities, while avoiding any commitment to the attribution to her of genuine knowledge. Hence it captures the "naturalness" of invoking the term "knowledge" in giving an account of an agent's linguistic abilities without the implication that she knows anything particular about the language at all, in any ordinary sense of the term.

How can the proponent of linguistic knowledge respond? There are several places he might put his foot in the door. He could deny that mastery of a language is a practical ability; he could question the legitimacy of the knowledge-how/knowledge-that distinction, or he could accept the distinction but maintain that practical knowledge does not exhaust the knowledge implicated in practical abilities. In fact, an adequate response requires attention to each of these. In what immediately follows I flesh out the argument and then go on to explain how I think the thesis that speakers have genuine linguistic knowledge can be defended. I want to show that the proponent of linguistic knowledge need not deny that language is a practical ability, only that it is merely a practical ability. Furthermore, a close examination of the alleged knowledge-how/knowledge-that distinction reveals that while

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46. Dummett [1978b], p.1, his emphasis.

it is a distinction we can make sense of, it does not have the consequences for the analysis of abilities some have claimed for it. I will argue that on a correct construal of the distinction, the proponent of linguistic knowledge can happily accept it.

### **2.2.3.1 Language Mastery as a Practical Ability**

It is relatively unproblematic to claim that linguistic mastery is, at the very least, a practical ability. Speaking a language is something we can do, just as playing chess and making souffles are things we can do. The question at stake here is: When we say of an agent that she knows how to speak French, or how to play chess, or how to make a souffle, are we attributing a special sort of knowledge to her? It is tempting to answer in the affirmative. Drawing on a distinction between knowledge-how (practical knowledge) and knowledge-that (theoretical knowledge), one might be inclined to say that only the former is involved in the exercise and possession practical abilities. To investigate the idea, then, we need to get clearer on the status of the purported distinction between these two "types" of knowledge.

### **2.2.3.2 The Knowledge-How/Knowledge-That Distinction**

That there is a difference between knowing that such-and-such is the case and knowing how to do so-and-so cannot be denied. The question is

what kind of difference this amounts to.<sup>47</sup> An obvious dissimilarity concerns what count as an appropriate substitutions for the variables  $p$  and  $\theta$  in the locutions

A knows that  $p$ , and

A knows how to  $\theta$ .<sup>48</sup>

If Sally knows that Boston is the capital of Massachusetts, then she knows certain facts about a city called Boston and a state called Massachusetts. More generally, she knows something about capitals and states. But content is not crucial here. What is important is the idea that what Sally knows is a particular proposition, viz., that Boston is the capital of Massachusetts. And, on most accounts, in virtue of knowing this proposition, she also knows many others, e.g., that Boston is a capital city, that Boston is in Massachusetts, and that Massachusetts is not in Boston. Hence, Sally has some theoretical, or propositional knowledge about Boston, Massachusetts, cities, states, and so on. What does Harry know if he knows how to make a souffle? That is,

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47. The knowledge-how/knowledge-that distinction has its roots in Ryle [1946/7] and arises in several different guises in the artificial intelligence, cognitive science and philosophical psychology literature. See e.g., Cummins [1986], p.121ff; Dennett [1987], pp.213-225; and Stillings et.al., [1989], chapter 8 for useful discussion.

48. There is another way in which we can distinguish between knowledge-how and knowledge-that. One cannot have partial knowledge of a truth, i.e, partial knowledge-that. But it is possible to have partial knowledge-how, or as Ryle puts it, "[have] a particular capacity in a limited degree ([1949], p.59)." I will have nothing to say about this difference and only mention it for thoroughness.

what does he know if he is able to make a souffle? One is inclined to answer that he just knows how to do it, and that's all there is to it!

Knowing how to ride a bicycle just is being able to, unless there is something to it over and above being able to.<sup>49</sup>

But what might this "more" be? Perhaps the slack can be taken up by the fact that typically we have to learn how to ride a bicycle. That is, while knowing how to ride a bicycle certainly entails (all things being equal) that one is able to, knowing how to also presupposes that one has acquired some "extra" knowledge through instruction. However, as Brown [1970] points out, this will not do. There are plenty of skills, e.g., drawing a circle free-hand, for whose exercise we require instruction. But knowing how to draw a circle free-hand is just being able to do so.

Perhaps what Harry knows if he knows how to make a souffle is a procedure. Though precisely what counts as knowing a procedure is not clear. Does it mean that Harry knows a recipe, or a list of instructions, that enables him to make souffles? Or does it mean something else? If the question, "What does Harry know if he knows how to make a souffle?" is asked in the hope of getting an explanation of this particular culinary skill, it is tempting to appeal to his having knowledge of the relevant recipe. But notice that were Harry to know the relevant list of propositions about the preparation of eggs this would not be sufficient for his knowing how to make a souffle. It is entirely possible for Harry to have this theoretical knowledge (i.e.,

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49. Brown [1970], p.218.



know the recipe), and yet lack the requisite practical knowledge (i.e., not be able to make a souffle). To be sure an agent requires some propositional knowledge in order to successfully manifest the ability to make a souffle (e.g., he'll need to know that those oval things in the fridge are eggs). But such knowledge only provides a partial formulation of what is known by someone who is able to make a souffle. As Ryle remarks,

...the learning of all but a few knacks requires some intellectual capacity. The ability to do things in accordance with instructions necessitates understanding those instructions. So some propositional competence is a condition of acquiring any of these competences. But it does not follow that exercises of these competences require to be accompanied by exercises of propositional competence.<sup>50</sup>

By the same token, it is clear that an agent could have some particular practical knowledge (say the knowledge how to  $\theta$ ) and yet fail to manifest the corresponding theoretical knowledge (i.e., be unable to say how she  $\theta$ 's). So, for example, I could know how to execute a nifty two-step, but not be able to give a propositional account of how I do that of the form: "First, put your left foot here...."

### 2.2.3.3 Only Knowledge-How is Involved in Practical Abilities

A proponent of the argument we are considering wants to claim that the attribution of linguistic knowledge is explanatorily vacuous. Given the

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50. Ryle [1949], pp.48-9.

knowledge-how/knowledge-that distinction, he could attempt to draw this conclusion in a number of ways. One strategy is to argue that only practical knowledge is implicated in practical abilities. Speakers have linguistic knowledge, all right, but what they have is knowledge-how. And since, as we have seen, the attribution of practical linguistic knowledge is tantamount to saying that a speaker is able to speak her language, such an attribution is obviously explanatorily vacuous. However, a more sophisticated strategy is available.

Agents have many abilities for which they cannot articulate a list of instructions, and there are, it appears, skills which it is impossible to teach or acquire by learning such a list of instructions. This does not entail that no-one could articulate the relevant list. Indeed, for any practical ability, e.g., the ability to  $\theta$ , it is possible to adumbrate a theory of, or list of instructions about, how to  $\theta$ . This is what some philosophers have in mind when they speak of a theory of  $\theta$ -ing being a "theoretical representation" of a practical ability.<sup>51</sup> Kirkham [1989] has explicitly advanced a view like this. With respect to the ability to touch-type Kirkham writes,

I know how to touch-type, that is, type accurately without looking at the keyboard; but, like most touch-typists, when confronted with a blank sheet of paper and asked to draw a map of the keyboard labelling all the keys, and to do so without looking at the keyboard, I cannot do it accurately....I have algorithmic knowledge of the relative positions of the keys, but I do not have propositional knowledge of it. But notice that it would be possible for

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51. See e.g., Devitt & Sterelny [1987], pp.134-138; Kirkham [1989].

one to represent, or model, my knowledge as a series of propositions describing the relative positions of the keys. I do not actually have such propositional knowledge, but my digital behavior at the keyboard is such that it is as though I did have such knowledge and as though I inferred from such propositions where to move my fingers. Someone else could memorize these propositions and, provided that he could make very fast inferences, he would exhibit the same typing ability I do.<sup>52</sup>

Kirkham's view is this: If Mary has a practical ability, say the ability to  $\theta$ , then, (i) she knows how to  $\theta$ ; (ii) she knows that she can  $\theta$ , but (iii) she is unable to say how she  $\theta$ -s. However, it is possible for a clever psychologist (perhaps even Mary herself) to construct a theory that models or represents how Mary  $\theta$ -s. What relation does Mary bear to this theory? It is not that she knows the theory, in the sense of explicitly knowing the content of the theory; she merely behaves as if she does. Although her practical ability can be represented by the propositions of the theory, it is mistaken to think that Mary has knowledge of them that is causally involved in her actual  $\theta$ -ing. This will be so even if Mary is the clever psychologist. In this case, she will have explicit propositional knowledge of the theory. But it is not that knowledge that underpins her practical ability. For, ex hypothesi, prior to constructing the theory, Mary was unable to articulate how she  $\theta$ -ed. It must be admitted that any ability can be so represented; indeed any one ability will admit of many extensionally equivalent

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52. Kirkham [1989], p.212, his emphasis.

theoretical characterizations.<sup>53</sup> But since it is clear that in the exercise of a practical ability an agent typically does not explicitly know the theory that models that ability, the best we can say of the relation between the agent and the theory is that she behaves as if she knew it.

For any agent, A, and any ability,  $\theta$ , we can attribute practical knowledge concerning  $\theta$ -ing to A. We can also, if we like appeal to theoretical knowledge in characterizing A's ability to  $\theta$ ; but only if this is understood instrumentally. On both counts, the appeal to knowledge will be explanatorily vacuous. That an agent has practical knowledge, i.e., knows how to  $\theta$  means just that she is able to  $\theta$ . And the attribution of theoretical knowledge concerning how to  $\theta$  can only be attributed instrumentally.

So much for the general form of the argument. With respect to the ability to speak and understand a language Kirkham writes,

Knowing a language is a knowing-how not a knowing-that. It is ability knowledge not propositional knowledge....<sup>54</sup> But ability knowledge can be represented by propositions

Speaking a language is at least a practical ability; a speaker of English certainly has practical knowledge, knowledge how to speak English. But as we have noted, most competent speakers are unable to

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53. This raises a very hard problem for any account of linguistic knowledge. I will return to it in 3.1.5.1.

54. Kirkham [1989], p.212; his emphasis.

articulate the theory of meaning for their language. To be sure, we can construct a theory of meaning or grammar for the language; but the best we can say is that speakers behave as if they know the theory. Hence the attribution of linguistic knowledge, where this is thought of as something other than mere know-how, can be made only instrumentally. And to that extent it will be explanatorily vacuous.

That is the objection from vacuity. To determine whether it is successful we will need to take a closer look at the argument. I turn first to the claim that language mastery is a practical ability, and then to a consideration of the knowledge-how/knowledge-that distinction.

## 2.3 Responding to the Objection From Vacuity

### 2.3.1 Language Mastery as a Practical Ability

The first premise of the argument which underlies the objection from vacuity is that speaking a language is a practical ability. What can we say about this? Of course, insofar as speaking a language is something we are able to do, then speaking a language, or language mastery, is a practical ability. But is it merely a practical ability?

Some people have suggested that understanding a word, i.e., knowing what it means is just a practical ability, and that mastery of a language, i.e., knowing that language is just a complex of such

abilities. A view like this can be discerned in Wittgenstein [1958]<sup>55</sup>, and is explicitly advanced by Devitt and Sterelny. They say,

We think that competence in a language does not consist in the speaker's semantic propositional knowledge. It is a set of skills or abilities, some of them grounded in the external world. It consists in the speaker being able to do things with a language, not in his having thoughts about it. Understanding a language no more involves having propositional knowledge of a semantic sort about the language than being able to ride a bicycle involves having<sup>56</sup> propositional knowledge of a mechanical sort about riding.

However, there are good reasons to think that speaking a language is not merely a practical ability.

#### 2.3.1.1 Chomsky's Objection to Language Mastery as an Ability

In several places Chomsky takes issue with the idea that speaking a language is a practical ability. He says,

Knowledge of language<sup>57</sup> is not a skill, a set of habits, or anything of the sort.

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55. See e.g., §§152-4, §269. But it is always unclear what Wittgenstein himself, rather than his interlocutor, is committed to.

56. Devitt & Sterelny [1987], p.148.

57. Chomsky [1969], p.87. See also Chomsky [1980], p.48; [1988a], p.5; [1988b], pp.11-12. Chomsky sees the claim that language mastery is a practical ability as intimately connected to another thesis he rejects, viz., that language is a social practice. As he says ([1988a], p.4), it is the latter idea that encourages talk of language-learning as learning the ability to participate in a certain practice.

Chomsky's objection to thinking of language mastery as an ability, stems from a general worry about construing knowledge dispositionally. He says that understanding an agent's knowledge as a set of dispositions is apt to mislead us into taking the agent's actual behavior as criteriological for the attribution to her of such knowledge. But, as he points out, surely there are cases in which an agent fails to behave in the relevant way and yet in which it is true to say that she still has the knowledge in question.

Chomsky asks us to imagine a speaker of a natural language (say, English) who suffers from temporary aphasia: Up to and including time  $t_5$ , she can speak perfectly well, between  $t_5$  and  $t_7$  she is aphasic, and at  $t_8$  she is fully recovered. If behavior were criteriological for the possession of an ability, then we would say the imagined speaker had the ability to speak English before time  $t_5$  and after time  $t_8$ , but not between times  $t_5$  and  $t_7$ . Hence, on this account, we would be committed to the idea that she lacked the relevant linguistic knowledge between times  $t_5$  and  $t_7$ . But, since she recovers fully at  $t_8$ , this is absurd. Doesn't her recovery show that she maintained her knowledge of English through the aphasic period? All that she lacked then was the ability to apply that knowledge. Chomsky's point is: knowledge of language and the ability to speak come apart. A speaker can know a language without manifesting that ability.

Chomsky's objection is successful against the view that behavior is criteriological for the attribution of knowledge. But one can construe

language mastery as a practical ability and hence the possession of linguistic knowledge dispositionally, without this qualification.

Abilities are not behaviors. The ability to swim is not actual swimming. The ability to speak English is not the actual uttering of English sentences. In general, the ability to  $\theta$  is not actual  $\theta$ -ing. The exercise of the ability to  $\theta$  will almost always be an instance of actual  $\theta$ -ing,<sup>58</sup> but we must distinguish between an ability and its exercise. I say "almost" always because we can imagine cases in which an agent exercises his ability to  $\theta$  only to find that some external factor(s) interferes with the exercise of it. For example, someone might attempt to exercise his ability to lift a chair, but find that it is has been nailed to the floor. In any case, the exercise of an ability will always be a piece of behavior.<sup>59</sup> What is often overlooked is that any one ability may be manifested in any number of ways. So, for example, a speaker's linguistic ability is manifested by her speaking the language, by her understanding others speaking the language, by her obeying a command issued in the language, and so on.

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58. See Kenny [1984], p.138.

59. I think this is right but I am worried about things like the ability to take square roots in one's head. Is the exercise of this ability a piece of behavior? It seems that we if we countenance this as a piece of behavior, then the concept of behavior gets very broad. Anyway, it seems clear enough that even if it is false to say every exercise of every ability is a piece of behavior that this doesn't undermine the distinction between an ability and its exercise.



There is no one way, no single piece of behavior, that manifests a speaker's ability.

Speaking a language can be understood as an ability in the sense above. At stake is what role, if any, linguistic knowledge plays in the explanation of language mastery. The argument we are considering involves the claim that the only type of knowledge implicated in abilities is knowledge-how, where to say that someone knows how to  $\varnothing$  is to say no more than that he is able to  $\varnothing$ . Dummett addresses this issue by distinguishing between types of practical abilities.<sup>60</sup> It might be the case that the attribution of knowledge is vacuous only for some abilities.

#### 2.3.1.2 Types of Practical Abilities

Dummett makes a distinction between language mastery and other practical abilities on the basis of a particular asymmetry. Consider the question:

"Can you  $\varnothing$ ?"

with various substitutions for  $\varnothing$  of the following sort: "swim", "shoot a goal", "dance the rumba", "speak Spanish", etc. That is, where substitutions for  $\varnothing$  are all practical abilities. The asymmetry arises when we consider the appropriateness of the response

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60. The earliest presentation of this argument is in [1978b], and it appears again in Dummett's most recent work; [1991], chap.4.

"I don't know, I've never tried."

Dummett claims this response only makes sense for some substitutions for  $\emptyset$ . One exception is if the practical ability in question is the ability to speak a language. He argues it would be absurd for someone to answer "Can you speak Spanish?" with "I don't know, I've never tried." The absurdity arises not because we cannot conceive of someone actually making this reply; of course, anyone can answer in this way. Rather the problem lies in what someone could possibly mean by this response.

Is this putative asymmetry genuine? One could argue that it is not in the following way. Both swimming and speaking Spanish require instruction. Since, (i) we recognize this fact, and (ii) we can usually tell whether or not we have been taught something, it would be as ludicrous to reply to the question "Can you swim?" with "I don't know, I've never tried" as it is to respond that way to the question "Can you speak Spanish?" Of course, an admissible response would be "I don't know. I learned once, but I think I've forgotten most of it."<sup>61</sup>

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61. It is worth noting in passing that the apparent absurdity of the "I don't know" response depends to a large extent on how the practical abilities are described. The abilities under discussion have been very generally described, viz., the ability to swim and the ability to speak Spanish. Abilities can be more or less complex than these. For example, the ability to swim in the butterfly style, the ability to swim underwater, the ability to swim the English Channel. And there does seem to be room for genuine doubt about one's more specific abilities. For instance, I can truthfully assert that I am able to swim, but I really don't know whether I am able to swim across Walden Pond; I've never tried. I can truthfully say that I can get by in Paris, but I don't whether I could give a lecture at the Sorbonne.

However, is it true that learning is essential to the possession of all practical abilities? Surely, as Dummett says, "it is only an empirical fact that we cannot swim unless we have been taught."<sup>62</sup> It would be surprising if someone who had not been taught how to swim were to start making the appropriate motions when thrown in water, but it would not be beyond the bounds of possibility. Contrast this with the case of a monolingual Anglophone spontaneously bursting into meaningful Spanish upon arrival in Madrid. Dummett writes:

...it seems natural to think that it would be magic if someone who had not been brought up to speak Spanish and had never learned it since were suddenly to start speaking it.<sup>63</sup>

Unlike an instance of spontaneous swimming, an instance of spontaneous Spanish speaking would be miraculous. I do not think Dummett's claim is that an agent must be taught a language in the same way that an agent is taught to swim. Minimal reflection on language acquisition suggests that this is patently false. Rather, the idea is that one cannot help but know (ahead of inquiry) whether one can speak any given language. On these grounds, then, Dummett maintains that the asymmetry of appropriate responses stands, and that this is warrant to draw a distinction between practical abilities.

Before proceeding I want to make a couple of remarks about the idea that an instance of "spontaneous" Spanish speaking would be magic or

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62. Dummett [1978b], p.1.

63. Dummett [1978b], p.2.

miraculous. What is usually meant by describing some phenomenon as miraculous, or magic, is that no natural explanation can be given of it. So Dummett's point might be that while a natural explanation of spontaneous swimming could be given, no such explanation of spontaneous Spanish speaking would be possible. But is this right?

Suppose that each of us is constructed in such a way that, though we don't know that we can speak several languages, we actually can. Perhaps all that is required to elicit a manifestation of our ability to speak a particular language is a suitable (small) number of "triggers". For example, the amount of linguistic input a person would receive in a day in Madrid. I am not suggesting that this is how things are, but rather that this fact, if it were a fact, would provide a natural explanation of spontaneous Spanish (French, German,...) speaking. Since such a natural explanation is possible, we cannot say that a case of spontaneous Spanish speaking would be miraculous (in this sense of "miraculous"). And so it might be perfectly appropriate to respond to the question "Can you speak Spanish?" with "I don't know, I've never tried"; meaning, of course, that one had not, to the best of one's knowledge, been exposed to the relevant triggers.<sup>64</sup>

Alternatively, describing the possible occurrence of some event as "magic" might mean only that that its occurrence would be

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64. I recognize, but will ignore, the sceptical worry that is looming here; how could I know I had been exposed to but unaffected by the relevant triggers for a particular language?

extraordinarily surprising. In this sense, the alleged asymmetry rests on the degree of "surprising-ness" of spontaneous swimming versus spontaneous Spanish speaking; the latter, perhaps, being more surprising than the former. But on this reading of "magic", why would it not be magic that upon being thrown into deep water, a person in some doubt about their ability to swim, were actually to swim?

Suppose Mark is such a person. To be sure, it would not be magic if, upon finding himself in deep water, Mark merely moved his arms and legs around a bit, and as a result managed not only to stay afloat but also to propel himself through the water. It would be more surprising, perhaps extraordinarily surprising, (i.e., magic), if instead he took off in a perfect Australian Crawl; kicking in time with his breathing, face under the water. Similarly, consider the case of speaking Spanish. Suppose Jane is a monolingual English speaker. Would it be miraculous if, after a day in Madrid, she was able to "get by", as it were. That is, would it be magic if she were able to perform the linguistic analog of Mark's merely moving his arms and legs around? It is not obvious that it would be. Many travellers manage to pick up, in a relatively short time, a sufficient amount of the local argot to "get by". What would be miraculous would be Jane's spontaneously engaging in a fluent and complex conversation with a native Spanish speaker.

My point is this: Just as it would not be magic for someone who did not know how to swim to begin moving his arms and legs around in water, so it would not be magic for someone to begin to speak rudimentary

Spanish in a very short time and without prior instruction in a suitable environment (i.e., a Spanish speaking community). Dummett cannot reply that in the former case the person is really not swimming. For on any more detailed account of what it is to swim, what does count as swimming will be so complex as to make spontaneous instances of it as surprising, i.e., as magic as spontaneous Spanish speaking.<sup>65</sup> Hence, either spontaneous swimming and spontaneous Spanish speaking are both magic, or else neither is.<sup>66</sup> A natural explanation of spontaneous Spanish speaking is not incoherent, and the unlikeliness of spontaneous Spanish speaking is only set off from that of spontaneous swimming by a matter of degree. Hence it would appear that we cannot appeal to the miraculousness of a spontaneous (unlearned) display of  $\emptyset$ -ing in order to differentiate between practical abilities.

However, the asymmetry argument can yet be used to show that there are different practical abilities. As we have noted the reply "I don't know, I've never tried" makes sense if the question is "Can you swim?"

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65. See note 61.

66. This is not to deny that an occurrence of spontaneous Spanish speaking would be more surprising than an occurrence of spontaneous swimming. But this difference is easily explained. It is a matter of contingent fact that it takes us longer to learn how to exercise our ability to speak a language than it does to learn how to exercise our ability to swim. But this does not indicate a principled distinction in kind between the ability to swim and the ability to speak a language. Of course, I have been assuming all along that our swimmer has two arms and two legs and is not paralyzed. I have also been assuming that Jane, is a speaker of some humanly possible language or other.

but not if it is "Can you speak French?" We have rejected the relative role of instruction as an explanation of the difference. Where else might it lie?

Dummett often answers this question in the following way:

The difference lies in the fact that speaking a language is a conscious process.<sup>67</sup>

We must be careful not to misunderstand Dummett's reference to consciousness here. As I said in the last chapter (p.45), the idea that linguistic communication cannot take place in the absence of consciousness does not mean that speaker and hearer have to be awake. Neither does it mean that they are consciously accessing and applying the rules of their language. Speech production and comprehension happen much too fast to be conscious processes. As one writer says,

A speaker doesn't have to ponder the issue of whether to make the recipient of GIVE an indirect object (as in "John gave Mary the book") or an oblique object (as in "John gave the book to Mary"). Neither will much attention be spent on retrieving the word "horse" when one wants to refer to the big live object that is conventionally named in that way. These things come automatically without any awareness. They also come with very high speed. Speech is normally produced at a rate of about two to three words per second. These words are selected from the many thousands of words in the mental lexicon. There is just no time to consciously weigh the alternatives before deciding on a word. Articulation runs at a speed of fifteen phonemes per second. One should be grateful that no attention need be spent on the selection of each and every individual speech sound.<sup>68</sup>

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67. Dummett [1978b], p.2. See also Dummett [1981b], p.6.

68. Levelt [1989], pp.21-2.

The thought is rather that a speaker must be conscious of what she is saying. That is, she must be aware that she is saying this rather than that. Unless this is the case, there is no point in her saying one thing rather than another. And then, as Dummett says, it becomes unclear whether she is truly speaking a language as opposed to merely making noises. Another way of putting the matter is this: in the case of most practical abilities there is a "gap" between knowing what it is to  $\phi$  and knowing how to  $\phi$ . One can know what it is to swim without thereby knowing how to swim. But one cannot know what it is to speak Spanish unless one actually is able to speak Spanish. Of course, this claim has to be made with some caution. For in a sense, although I do not know how to speak Spanish, I do know what it is to speak Spanish. It is to be able to converse with native Spanish speakers, to be able to read the Madrid dailies, and so on.<sup>69</sup> Dummett's point is, that whereas I could tell whether someone were swimming without being able to swim myself, I could not tell for sure whether someone was speaking Spanish unless I also knew how to speak that language.<sup>70</sup>

Things are different with other practical abilities. For example, I may know what it is to dance the tango (even know the instruction manual back to front) and yet not be able (know how) to dance it.

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69. It is telling that all these involve attributing to a speaker of Spanish the knowledge how, or the ability to speak and understand the language.

70. See Dummett [1978b]; [1981b], p.6; [1991], p.94.



However, what Dummett wants to argue is that in knowing the rules of my language, in knowing what it is to speak the language, I ipso facto know how to speak it. If I understand a word, then necessarily I will be able to use it correctly. If I do not use it correctly, then I cannot properly be said to understand it.<sup>71</sup> In the case of knowledge of what a word means, there can be no gap between knowing what a word means and using the word correctly. To know the meaning of the word, to understand it, is to know how to use it correctly. Hence, there is no gap between knowing what it is to speak English and knowing how to.

If we think of pure practical abilities as those that admit of a gap between knowing what it is to  $\phi$  and knowing how to  $\phi$ , then linguistic abilities cannot be thought of as pure practical abilities. As Dummett says,

To regard the understanding of a word or an expression purely as a practical ability is to render mysterious our capacity to know whether we understand. This capacity is not inerrant:...[e.g.,] No one...is an authority on whether the sense he attaches to a word is really that which it has in the common language....[But] we can usually say, without error, whether a word or sentence conveys a sense to us. Someone asks me, 'Do you understand the word "anaphora"?' If understanding were simply a practical ability, it would make sense for me to reply, 'I have no idea: try me out'. Unless, I meant, 'I am not sure whether I understand it correctly', such a reply would be senseless.<sup>72</sup>

And again:

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71. See Dummett [1991], p.93.

72. Dummett [1991], p.93.

Someone may be in doubt about whether he has interpreted a sentence correctly, but he can seldom be unsure whether he has put any interpretation on it at all; yet if understanding were simply a practical ability - say, to respond appropriately - there would be no reason why he should be in a position to say whether or not he has understood.<sup>73</sup>

This way of explaining the asymmetry is deeper than the appeal to the necessity of instruction. The point is this: In the case of swimming, say, one might have to await one's immersion in water in order to discover whether one had the ability to swim. But the ability to understand a language is not like that. The analog we would have to imagine is a speaker of English having to await her immersion in a Spanish speaking community in order to discover whether she had the ability to speak Spanish. Dummett's claim is that a speaker can tell antecedently whether or not she can speak a particular language, because that ability already involves considerable propositional knowledge.

Earlier, I mentioned the possibility of explaining the occurrence of spontaneous Spanish speaking along the lines of a speaker having a previously un-triggered propensity or ability to speak Spanish. I said just as we can imagine a man moving his arms and legs around in water, we can imagine a speaker uttering Spanish words and phrases after suitable prompting. How can this be reconciled with Dummett's claim that there is a difference in kind between the practical ability to swim and the practical ability to speak a language?

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73. Dummett [1981b], p.6.

In the case of spontaneous swimming it is not required that the agent knows that he is swimming. Of course, he knows that he is doing something. But he need not be aware that what he is doing is swimming, in order to be correctly described as swimming. However, in the case of spontaneous Spanish speaking, the speaker must know that he is speaking Spanish in order to be truly described as speaking Spanish. It will not be sufficient that Spanish words and phrases emanate from his mouth unaccompanied by comprehension of them on his part. To be truly said to be speaking Spanish he must understand what those words and phrases mean.

Concerning swimming or juggling, I can know what it is to swim or to juggle without knowing how to do either of those things. And knowing what it is to juggle, I can at least try to juggle. But in the case of speaking a language, I cannot know what it is to speak a particular language without being able to speak it too. In general, when one acquires a practical ability, one merely learns how to do what one knew what it was to do before. But acquiring the ability to speak and understand a language does not consist in learning how to do what one already knew what it was to do. And, as Dummett says,

Learning what to do is acquiring knowledge as substantial as any explicit theoretical knowledge.<sup>74</sup>

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74. Dummett [1991], p.95.

The proponent of linguistic knowledge need not deny that speaking and understanding a language are practical abilities. But he can point out the ways in which they differ from pure practical abilities. With respect to the argument at hand, then, this will throw open the question as to the kind of knowledge that is implicated in linguistic abilities.

The conventional dichotomy between theoretical and practical knowledge appears to me to break down at precisely this point. Mere practical knowledge, such as knowing how to swim, is simply a practical capacity, which is called knowledge only because we can acquire it only by being taught; acquiring it enables one to do something one could not, indeed, do before, but something of which one already knew what it was to do it. Fully explicit theoretical knowledge, at least on the part of a language-speaker, requires the ability to formulate the content of the knowledge. The knowledge of one's mother-tongue is of neither kind: it consists in only fairly small part of explicit theoretical knowledge, and obviously could not in principle consist wholly in that. But the knowledge of that or of any other language is not an ordinary practical capacity, either, because it is only by learning to speak and understand a language that one comes to know what it is to speak it.<sup>75</sup>

I must confess to not finding Dummett's argument totally convincing. It began, recall, by considering the appropriateness of the response "I don't know, I've never tried" to the questions "Can you swim?" and "Can you speak Spanish?" The idea is that this response makes sense in reply to the first question, but not to the second. And the discussion has been concerned with identifying the reason for this difference. But whether or not one accepts Dummett's diagnosis, something seems to be going on here.

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75. Dummett [1987b], p.262.

The attempt to show that not all practical abilities are of the same kind is a way of responding to the argument advanced by the objector we are considering. Even if this attempt is not for the moment wholly successful, it certainly does suggest that we had better take a close look at the alleged distinction between knowledge-how and knowledge-that.

### 2.3.2 The Knowledge-How/Knowledge-That Distinction Revisited

The claim that there is a genuine distinction between knowledge-how and knowledge-that plays an important part in the argument that the attribution of linguistic knowledge is explanatorily vacuous. So, as I said, the proponent of linguistic knowledge might respond by denying that the distinction is genuine. He might agree the distinction is heuristically useful, but argue that all knowledge-how ultimately reduces to knowledge-that. Stich [1971] examines this suggestion:

...consider a Bedouin who knows how to go from the oasis to the village. Further, suppose that the route requires him to turn 30° north by northwest on reaching the wadi. He may never reflect on this turn, but make it quite unthinkingly when he arrives at the wadi. Perhaps he has never raised to himself the question of what direction to turn on reaching the wadi. Nonetheless, under certain circumstances, it would seem natural to say the Bedouin knows that to get from the oasis to the village one must turn 30° NNW.<sup>76</sup>

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76. Stich [1971], p.491, my emphasis.

In many instances it is possible to elicit a statement of explicit propositional knowledge concerning some task from an agent who can perform that task. But this is not always the case, as Stich notes. For suppose that the Bedouin lacks the concepts of trigonometry or of the points of the compass. If so, then we might be more inclined to deny that the Bedouin knows that he must turn 30° NNW to get to the village.

Similarly, if Harry knows how to make a souffle, it does not follow trivially that he knows the proposition that Harry can make a souffle is true. For Harry could know how to cook eggs in a particular way without knowing that the result of such preparation is called an souffle and without having the concept souffle. That Harry can make a souffle does not entail that he knows that he can make a souffle. Knowledge-how is not reducible to knowledge-that; the distinction still stands.

As it happens, I think that the proponent of linguistic knowledge need not deny that there is a distinction between knowledge-how and knowledge-that. It is not the distinction itself that does the work in the objector's argument. Rather it is what the objector thinks follows from the distinction. Let me try to make this clearer.

### 2.3.2.1 The Independence Thesis

It is often extremely difficult to articulate what it is we do, when we do what we do. As Fodor [1968] makes clear, an agent's knowing how to  $\emptyset$  and her ability to explain how to  $\emptyset$  are logically and psychologically independent. They are logically independent, since I can explain to you how to do something I am able to do, e.g., type "Bulgaria", without exploiting the abilities (my know-how) that are involved in my typing "Bulgaria". That they are psychologically independent is borne out by the fact that someone can be a first-rate tennis player, or joke-teller, and yet be unable to even begin explaining to another how to do these things.

Fisher [1974] advances something akin to the independence thesis when he points out the difference between statements like (1) and (2) below.

- (1) Sally knows the rule for converting celsius to fahrenheit.
- (2) Sally knows that the rule for converting celsius to fahrenheit is:  $C = 5/9(F-32)$ .

As Fisher puts it, locutions like (1) need not always be analyzed as (2).

Thus if Jones does not understand the term "the rule of en passant", it cannot be true that he knows that the rule of

en passant is that a pawn may capture...etc., but it can be true that he knows the rule of en passant.<sup>77</sup>

Hence one need not be able to state a theory of  $\emptyset$ -ing in order to be said to have knowledge of it.

The independence thesis garners more support from the observation that there are skills which are impossible to impart, and so to acquire, via verbal instruction - even if one could formulate a set of instructions. What I have in mind here are cases like teaching a new driver how to change gears in a car that does not have a tachometer. One cannot say, "Starting in first gear, change to second when the needle moves past 1800 rpm", and so on. One says, rather, "Change gear when the engine sounds like this." The general moral is that we can do many things (have considerable know-how) without having the concepts (knowledge-that) required to explain how to do them. For example, pre-verbal, or minimally verbal children know how to do all sorts of things they are unable to explain how to do.

The proponent of linguistic knowledge can grant the objector that there is a distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge, if this is understood as no more than the "independence thesis".<sup>78</sup> He can

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77. Fisher [1974], p.253.

78. Notice that in accepting the distinction, we are not committed to it being exhaustive or exclusive. Absent an account of what knowledge is, whether the distinction is exhaustive is definitely an open question. And it seems unlikely that it is exclusive. A lot of the time, we use both kinds of knowledge to get about the world; my



agree that there are skills which cannot be taught or acquired by verbal instruction, and that an agent with the ability to  $\theta$  can lack explicit knowledge of any theory of  $\theta$ -ing. But does it follow from these facts that an agent does not require propositional knowledge in order to have and exercise the abilities she has?

It strikes me that these observations simply reflect several interesting features of the psychology of human learning. There are many skills which we acquire in ways other than by exposure to an explicit formulation of rules; e.g., by having the the phenomenology that accompanies their correct exercise described to us. But this does not show that a recognition or knowledge of those rules plays no part in our acquiring the relevant ability. It may be that the way we actually acquire abilities in the normal course of events is very different from how they are most effectively taught. How we teach someone to  $\theta$  need not be at all like how one naturally learns to  $\theta$ .

### 2.3.2.2 Implications of the Independence Thesis

What does follow for the legitimacy of the attribution of linguistic knowledge from the distinction between knowing-how and knowing-that when it is understood as the independence thesis? Underlying the discussion, of course, is the assumption that there is a story to be told about how

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ability to get from Montreal to Boston obviously involves both practical and theoretical knowledge.

one  $\theta$ -s, i.e., that there is a theory of  $\theta$ -ing to be had; in the linguistic case, that a theory of meaning or a grammar are possible. This is surely unproblematic; even the instrumentalist must agree that every ability admits of at least one theoretical representation. The pressing question is: what relation holds between an agent who is able to  $\theta$  and a theory of  $\theta$ -ing? The objection from vacuity has it that at best the relation is representational. The theory models, or represents what the agent can do, and the agent behaves as if she knows the theory. When the ability in question is the ability to speak and understand a language, the proponent of linguistic knowledge wants to say something stronger. He wants to claim that speakers actually have genuine linguistic knowledge, and that their having this knowledge explains their linguistic abilities. How can this stronger thesis be defended?

The first point to be made is that an agent's inability to say how it is that she  $\theta$ -s is no indication that she lacks knowledge of some theory of  $\theta$ -ing. One can only draw this conclusion if one insists that all propositional knowledge must be explicit to, and verbalizable by, the knower. But I fail to see how this argument can be made. The mistake here is of a piece with that of taking only one type of behavior as criteriological for the attribution of a particular type of knowledge. To be sure, that a speaker can articulate a proposition is some evidence that she knows that proposition. But why say that unless she can do so she necessarily lacks the requisite knowledge? Why think that this is the only way in which she can manifest her knowledge?

This point is particularly salient for the issue at hand. Some folks (e.g., Stich [1971]) argue that because a speaker is unable to formulate the rules and principles of the grammar for her language, she does not know those rules and principles.<sup>79</sup> However, it is unclear that a statement of these rules would be definitive evidence that she does know them anyway. In the first place, the mere fact that a speaker is able to articulate a list of propositions does not indicate that she knows them; for she may not understand the words that feature in a statement of them.<sup>80</sup> In the second place, and as I have mentioned before, abilities and knowledge can be manifested in all sorts of ways. Moreover, if one could motivate limiting the manifestation of propositional knowledge to the explicit statement of that knowledge, this would be a wholly misguided strategy in the case of the explanation of language mastery.

To see why, we need only reflect on (a) the fact that language use is apparently a rule-guided activity, and on (b) the reasons we appeal to knowledge of rules in general. Surely we ascribe knowledge of the rules of chess to a man because he plays chess, because he reads and understands the chess column, and so on. It is this whole complex of behaviors, and not just his ability to state the rules, that drives us to say that he knows those rules. As Fisher [1974] points out, we do

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79. Cf. Campbell [1982], p.30 for useful discussion of this point.

80. A similar point is made in chapter one; see p.32 above.

not usually attribute knowledge of a rule to an agent in order to explain why he states that rule. So, for example, when Harry states the rule for en passant, our first pass explanation of his behavior will not typically advert to his knowing that rule, but to other things like his desire to teach his daughter chess.

If the only behavior relevant to some rule, R, was the ability to state R, then the condition of verbalizability would be important. But in the case of language, the insistence on the verbalizability of putative knowledge of rules is completely antithetical to the whole point of appealing to them in the first place. Precisely what we do not need to explain is a speaker's ability to state the rules of her language! It is agreed on all sides that a speaker is unable to formulate either a theory of meaning or a grammar for her language. Rather what we want to explain is how she uses and understands her language. And these abilities are manifested in all number of ways. As Fisher says,

obviously rules essentially refer to behavior and actions,  
and the interest in rules and knowledge of rules is based on  
trying to understand and explain behavior and action.<sup>81</sup>

Once we do' away with the requirement that an agent must be able to explicitly state the theory of how she  $\beta$ -s in order to be attributed with knowledge of that theory, it is open to us to consider all manner of behaviors as evidence that she knows the theory. Absolutely central

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81. Fisher [1974], p.246.

here is the emphasis on explanation and on the role of the attribution of intentional states in providing explanations of human behavior. We attribute knowledge to agents as part of the explanation of their behavior. And if we do not demand by fiat that an agent can only be credited with knowledge of a proposition if she can state that proposition, then we are not precluded from attributing to her knowledge which she is unaware that she has, or which she is unable to articulate.<sup>82</sup> Hence, despite the fact that an agent cannot formulate the theory of meaning for her language, we can attempt to explain her linguistic behavior in terms of her knowing that theory.

However, the instrumentalist might still object that we ought not attribute genuine knowledge to speakers. He will grant that if the speaker knew the theory of meaning for her language, she would indeed behave the way she does. But he is more cautious. He is happy to say that the theory offers a useful and systematic description of a speaker's linguistic abilities, but that is the best we can hope for. However, once we have given up on the (bogus) requirement that an agent be able to explicitly express all that she is said to know, why resist the move to realism?

Of course, it does not follow from the fact that an ability admits of a theoretical representation that the agent with that ability knows

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82. Similarly, when we attribute beliefs to an agent in order to explain his behavior, we do not need to assume that these are beliefs of which he is aware. This issue will be discussed in chapter four.

that theory. But if we are trying to explain the agent's ability, this is as good a place to start as any. And when we combine our interest in the explanation, rather than in the mere description, of linguistic behavior with the full-blooded characterization of linguistic abilities I recommended earlier, I think we are forced to take very seriously the idea that speakers have genuine linguistic knowledge. The full-blooded characterization, recall, commits us to positing some state(s) of the speaker which ground her linguistic dispositions. Linguistic knowledge looks like the best candidate for these states.

The preference for realism over instrumentalism with respect to the attribution of non-explicit knowledge is usefully reinforced by an argument of Fodor's. Fodor says,

Although an organism can know how to X without knowing the answer to the question "How does one X?", it cannot know how to X unless there is an answer to the question "How does one X?"<sup>83</sup>

Answering the question "How does one X?" is tantamount to providing a psychological theory of X-ing. And like most theories, it will take the form of a set of axioms and rules (or instructions) such that if they are followed, X-ing will result. Now suppose we were to program a machine to run the theory of X-ing and that the machine dutifully X-ed. We would then have good reason to think that it was in virtue of having the theory of X-ing, and of following the instructions contained therein, that the machine was able to X. In constructing a machine that

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83. Fodor [1968], p.637.

X-s what we have in effect done is provide a plausible etiology of X-ing behavior. In the same way, we are to imagine that if we construct a semantic or grammatical theory of a language of a kind such that if someone explicitly knew that theory he would speak the language, then we have good reason to think that it is in virtue of actually (albeit non-explicitly) knowing this theory that speakers of the language speak and understand it.

And so we find Fodor saying:

...if X is something an organism knows how to do but is unable to explain how to do, and if S is some sequence of operations, the specification of which would constitute an answer to the question "How do you X?", and if an optimal simulation of the behavior of the organism X-s by running through the sequence of operations specified by S, then the organism tacitly knows the answer to the question "How do you X?", and S is a formulation of the organism's tacit knowledge.<sup>84,85</sup>

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84. Fodor [1968], p.638. There is a crucial assumption at work in Fodor's argument to which I shall return later (see 3.1.5.1). In the example, Fodor assumes that there is only one answer to the question "How does one X?". But this seems false. For any one ability we can construct any number of extensionally equivalent theoretical representations, and so the question arises: which one does the creature know. Fodor skirts around the problem by focusing on what would be required for the optimal simulation of the given ability. But when it comes to the behavior of natural creatures, like speakers, it is not at all clear (without a slew of Panglossian assumptions) that they execute their abilities in the the optimal way. And given that a speaker cannot articulate the theory of meaning for her language, it is indeed a wide open question which of the extensionally equivalent theories she actually knows and uses.

85. A deeper problem may be lurking. It would appear that Fodor is committed to the possibility of ascribing tacit knowledge to a creature with sawdust in its head. I suspect the correct response here is to say that while it is logically possible that such a

The idea is then that while speakers clearly lack explicit linguistic knowledge, they nonetheless have tacit or implicit linguistic knowledge. Now, I admit this can look very spurious. It is as though the proponent of linguistic knowledge is saying that such knowledge is just like non-linguistic knowledge only lacking many of the properties usually associated with such knowledge. This scepticism is certainly warranted. What I suggest, therefore, is that we think of the notion of implicit knowledge as a "place-holder". It is invoked to play a particular explanatory role in our analysis of language and language mastery. We will only be able to say what implicit linguistic knowledge is when we are clear about the conditions it must meet in order to do the job we require of it.

## 2.4 Conclusions

In chapter one, it was argued that besides the properties of compositionality and creativity, natural languages have (at least) one other feature worthy of attention, viz., they are possible objects for human understanding. Natural languages have the very interesting

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creature have intentional states, it ain't psychologically or even physically possible. One could argue that a certain level of physical complexity is required to support psychological states. But just how much complexity is necessary? Couldn't we build a sufficiently complex robot, couldn't there be an awful lot of sawdust? If attributions of tacit knowledge to robots and humans are logically on a par, how can we attribute such knowledge to the latter while withholding it from the former. I'm afraid I do not know the answers to these questions.



property of being spoken and understood by human beings. Hence in giving an account of language, we cannot ignore language-speakers. In particular, when we construct a theory of the structure of a language (e.g., a theory of meaning or grammar for the language), we must ask in what way speakers of the language are related to it. The suggestion was that speakers bear an epistemic relation to such a theory, and that it is in virtue of standing in this relation to it, that they are competent speakers of the language in question. As Wright remarks,

In order for a theory of meaning to be explanatory of the linguistic capacities of actual speakers, there has to be a sense in which the axioms are true of them; or, at least, there have to be properties of the speakers for whose description the axioms are needed.<sup>86</sup>

There is good reason to argue that a speaker knows the theory of meaning for her language. An agent is a speaker of a language if she can understand and produce sentences in that language. Understanding a sentence amounts to knowing what it means. To know the meaning of a sentence requires knowing the meaning of its parts and the rules governing how those parts may be put together. And, clearly uttering a sentence with the intention of communicating depends on this understanding. As Dummett says,

...our intuitive conviction [is] that a speaker derives his understanding of a sentence from his understanding of the words composing it and the way in which they are put together....What plays the role, within a theory of meaning

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86. Wright [1986], p.217.

of Davidson's kind, of a grasp of the meanings<sup>87</sup> of words is a knowledge of the axioms governing these words.

...It is one of the merits of a theory of meaning which represents mastery of a language as the knowledge not of isolated, but of deductively interconnected propositions, that it makes due acknowledgement of the undoubted fact that a process of derivation of some kind is involved in the understanding of a sentence.<sup>88</sup>

Clearly, what this discussion has done is direct our attention to the kind of knowledge linguistic knowledge is. In this chapter we examined two sceptical worries about, and three substantive objections to, the thesis that speakers have genuine linguistic knowledge. Rylean and Quinean scepticism is unwarranted with respect to a full-blooded dispositional analysis of linguistic abilities. And it is clear that a host of largely un-argued-for assumptions lie behind the objections from falsity, circularity and vacuity. These objections are fatal only for an account of linguistic knowledge that has it that such knowledge is explicit knowledge, where explicit knowledge is always reflectively discoverable by the knower. But this assumption is illegitimate. Knowledge of a theory of meaning (or, of the rules and principles of the grammar) for one's language is not, and could not, be dependent on the ability to state that theory or those rules.

That linguistic knowledge is not explicit knowledge is reflected in the way that I suggested we understand the knowledge-how/knowledge-that

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87. Dummett [1975b], p.109. See also Wright [1986], p.208.

88. Dummett [1975b], p.112. Cf. Heal [1978].

distinction, viz., as the independence thesis. Nothing conclusive follows from the fact that we are unable to say how we do something we are able to do. Indeed, it is only when the distinction between knowledge-how and knowledge-that is construed in a rather flat-footed way that we are led to the following false dichotomy: Since knowledge of language is not explicit it is thought to be non-propositional. Assuming that the distinction is exhaustive, it is inferred (by default) that knowledge of language must be mere practical knowledge and, hence, that attributions of it are explanatorily vacuous.

To be sure, linguistic knowledge, if there is such a thing, is very different from non-linguistic knowledge. Linguistic knowledge is not coherently thought of as body of justified true linguistic beliefs; we are typically not in a position to give reasons for our semantic intuitions.<sup>89</sup> Unlike the objects of non-linguistic knowledge, which are typically propositions, the objects of linguistic knowledge (typically, rules) do not admit of truth values. States of linguistic knowledge are not typically open to modification in the way that ordinary states of knowledge are; it is not as if we can revise our linguistic "beliefs".<sup>90</sup> However knowledge of language cannot be mere practical knowledge, or know-how either, because, pace Ryle, it is not just any old skill that can be picked up after the requisite training.

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89. See e.g., Chomsky [1980], p.93

90. For an examination of these issues see Fisher [1974], p.252ff.

Speakers lack explicit knowledge of the theory of meaning for their language and the suggestion before us is that linguistic knowledge is tacit, or implicit.<sup>91</sup> I said that an account of what implicit knowledge is would emerge from a consideration of the constraints such a notion would have to meet in order to do the explanatory job we require of it. These constraints are the topic of the next chapter.

## 2.5 Addenda

### 2.5.1 Hidden Agenda

We have considered several direct objections to the thesis that speakers have genuine linguistic knowledge. Before leaving the topic, I want to briefly mention one further objection whose motivation is somewhat different. Devitt [1983], [1984] and Devitt & Sterelny [1987] correctly identify the thesis that speakers have genuine knowledge of the theory of meaning for their language as an essential plank in Dummett's anti-realist argument, and they argue against the thesis in an attempt to block that argument.

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91. In what follows, I shall use the terms "tacit" and "implicit" synonymously. One warning is in order here: Often "tacit" is reserved for information-bearing states of a creature that are "hard-wired". See e.g., Cummins [1986]; Dennett [1987]. But I do not intend anything of the kind by my use of "tacit".

To be sure, Dummett's insistence that competent speakers of a language have linguistic knowledge plays a crucial role in his argument for anti-realism.<sup>92</sup> But it is important to see how it enters the picture. In the last chapter, we saw that Dummett is driven to the conclusion that speakers know the theory of meaning for their language on the grounds that if such a theory were not known by speakers of the language then it would fail to be a theory of meaning for that language. What Dummett claims is that a theory of meaning must be an object of speakers' knowledge if it is to provide an account of speakers' understanding. So the attribution to speakers of linguistic knowledge is made with the sole intention of ensuring that whatever we say meaning is, it cannot outrun the understanding manifested by speakers of the language in question. This is a plausible view, but it does not by itself lead to anti-realism - Dummett does not have it so easy! To make that move, one needs to argue for a particular account of what understanding consists in, viz., that it consists in the ability recognize whether the correctness-conditions of a sentence obtain.<sup>93</sup> Hence the claim that meaning cannot outrun understanding, that speakers have genuine linguistic knowledge, is necessary, but hardly sufficient, for anti-realism. So Devitt's and Sterelny's worry is misplaced.<sup>94</sup>

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92. See e.g., Wright [1986], p.209 for a clear statement of this.

93. And Dummett does go on to make this further argument. See e.g., Dummett [1973b], [1976], pp.80ff; [1977], chap.7.

94. Kirkham [1989] also attacks the view that linguistic knowledge is propositional knowledge; though, interestingly, he denies what

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Devitt and Sterenly assert, viz., that Dummett thinks it is.  
Kirkham attempts to show that even when attributions of linguistic  
knowledge are made instrumentally that the argument for anti-realism  
does not go through.

## Chapter 3

### Implicit Linguistic Knowledge

"Postulation of implicit knowledge...sheds not scientific light but philosophical darkness."

---McDowell [1977], p.148.

The thesis that speakers have genuine linguistic knowledge has been defended from a number of sceptical worries and substantive objections. We saw in the last chapter that these worries and objections are not fatal for the thesis, but rather direct our attention to the kind of knowledge linguistic knowledge is. It has been obvious from the start that linguistic knowledge is not, as a matter of fact, explicit knowledge, and it became clear that it could not be such. The suggestion with which we ended was that linguistic knowledge must be implicit, or tacit. As Crispin Wright puts it, if linguistic understanding can be thought of as a species of knowledge,

...it cannot everywhere consist in explicit knowledge. The ability to paraphrase a sentence is a (defeasible) ground for crediting somebody with understanding it, but it is not an ability which we have for a large class of sentences which we think we understand....Accordingly, if

understanding is knowledge at all, the kind of knowledge it essentially is, must, it seems, be implicit.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, the motivation for an account of implicit linguistic knowledge issues from both descriptive and modal concerns.

I said that the most fruitful strategy in giving an account of implicit linguistic knowledge is to think of that notion as a placeholder. The idea of implicit linguistic knowledge is born of particular explanatory demands and we will only arrive at a substantial account by keeping in mind the role we want it to play in these explanations. In short, the reasons why we want an account of implicit linguistic knowledge will constrain what such an account will look like.

This may seem a rather roundabout way of proceeding. Why, it might be asked, do we not simply define implicit knowledge in terms of explicit knowledge? There are at least two reasons why this is to be avoided. In the first place, it is not at all clear that we have a definitive account of explicit non-linguistic knowledge against which we could define the notion of implicit linguistic knowledge. Of course, we do agree on some features of the relation between agents and the objects of their putative knowledge, whose presence indicates that that knowledge is genuine. But, and this is the second point, the relation a speaker bears to the objects of her linguistic knowledge appears to lack all of these features. Hence it will be downright spurious (and not

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1. Wright [1986], p.209.



very helpful) to say that implicit linguistic knowledge is just like explicit non-linguistic knowledge only lacking the properties typically associated with such knowledge.<sup>2,3</sup>

Having said all that, however, I think there is a useful difference to mark between a speaker's linguistic knowledge and his non-linguistic knowledge. Irrespective of what the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge attribution are, we can surely distinguish between what we might call the kinds of access an agent has to his knowledge. The canonical way to test for the possession of a piece of non-linguistic knowledge (familiar to all students!) consists in quizzing the agent. If, in response to the relevant question, Frank answers that Ottawa is the capital city of Canada, we will be inclined to say that he knows this fact explicitly. That he is able to answer pretty much spontaneously suggests that he has almost immediate access to it. Put a

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2. I suspect (though won't explore it here) that an interesting consequence of this "independent" characterization of implicit knowledge will be to cause us to rethink our traditional construal of (non-linguistic) knowledge. It may turn out that the difference between ostensible cases of explicit knowledge and those of implicit knowledge is more a matter of degree than of kind. See chapter four on the distinction between implicit and explicit belief, where I argue that this is indeed the position we ought to adopt - at least with respect to belief.
3. Defining "implicit" in terms of "explicit" leads to another mistake, viz., to identify explicit intentional states with conscious states and implicit ones with unconscious states. But as I argue in chapter in four, implicit beliefs and unconscious beliefs are not coextensive sets. I see no reason to doubt that the same is true in the epistemic case.

different way: he can bring it, qua piece of knowledge, to consciousness.

Frank's supposed linguistic knowledge, on the other hand, is not so readily available to him.<sup>4</sup> So, for instance, while he is able to tell that someone has mis-spoken, or that some expression is not well-formed, he is unable to explain (i) why that it so, and (ii) how he judges it to be so. An example will help here. When Frank hears the following expressions:

(1) John expects to feed himself

(2) I wonder who John expects to feed himself

he knows that in (1) "John" and "himself" must refer to the same person, viz., John, whereas in (2) they cannot be coreferential. Frank can recognize these facts without difficulty, but it is highly unlikely that he will be able to explain how he does this.

Linguists explain the same facts in terms of the following rule:

C: C-command Condition on Anaphors

An anaphor must have an appropriate  
c-commanding antecedent.

But it is clear that if competent speakers of English know this rule, they do not know it in the same way that they know their names. In general, ordinary speakers of English are unable to state it, and when

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4. Note that what I have in mind here is Frank's knowledge of the "inner workings" of his language. See p.75f., above for the relevant contrast.

it is presented as C they are unable recognize it as something that informs their linguistic behavior. So, as matter of fact, it does look like a speaker's linguistic knowledge differs from his other knowledge, insofar as he does not have the same kind of access to his linguistic knowledge as he does to his knowledge of other domains. And this may be all there is to the claim that linguistic knowledge is implicit knowledge. But several comments are in order.

First, we must bear in mind that Frank's linguistic behavior, his understanding of his language, antecedes any explicit knowledge of the rules of English he may come to acquire. If C is a rule of English, then it is implicated in Frank's verbal behavior whether or not he can tell us that. And not much would be changed if he were to be able to tell us about C. For it is not the case that exposure to linguistic theory, and the concomitant recognition of things like C as rules, would result in Frank behaving (i.e., speaking) any differently. It is certainly true that an ordinary speaker can be brought to recognize that his linguistic behavior (e.g., his utterances and grammaticality judgments) is consistent with a rule like C; that such a rule correctly describes his linguistic behavior; accounts for his grammaticality judgments, and so on. And it is not uncommon for novice linguists to have genuine "aha experiences" when they are shown some rule or other. But this does not indicate that they have knowledge, in the ordinary sense of that term, of the rules in question. For these rules, as should be obvious, require a great deal of theoretical machinery to

articulate, and it is not as if speakers say "Oh, yes, that was what I was doing all along." Patently, speakers do not consciously employ such rules in the routine production and comprehension of their language.

A speaker cannot transform the (implicit) linguistic knowledge that underlies his actual language mastery into explicit knowledge. Imagine that Frank were to take a class in transformational syntax. He might well explain the permissible referential dependencies in (1) and (2) more thoroughly, but his ability to provide an explanation of these things shows only that he now knows explicitly that C is a rule of his language. Familiarity with linguistic theory results in the increased salience of some features of one's language, but linguists do not speak their native language significantly differently from their non-expert compatriots. Presumably Frank knew the rule all along, in the sense that it guided the relevant bit of his linguistic behavior. It is not that once Frank acquires explicit knowledge of a grammatical rule he employs this knowledge when he interprets the sentences in question. His understanding predates conscious application of the rule. We understand each other first. When we appeal to rules in explaining our grammaticality judgments, for example, we do so only after we know what has been said.

In the second place, if implicit linguistic knowledge were to be construed in this way, i.e., as something that could be made explicit and then consciously guide a speaker, the attribution to speakers of implicit knowledge would not settle the explanatory question. The point

has been labored in the last two chapters: if knowledge of language is to be explanatory of linguistic behavior, it cannot be explicit knowledge.

So, while it is clear that a speaker has a different kind of access to his putative linguistic knowledge than he has to his other non-linguistic knowledge, much more than this needs to be said about what implicit linguistic knowledge is.

In this chapter, then, I want to investigate the conditions any account of implicit linguistic knowledge must meet. Again, I will adopt the strategy of examining various objections that have been made to the idea, since this permits us to see most clearly the coherence conditions on any account of it. Not surprisingly, several of these objections parallel those made against the idea of linguistic knowledge simpliciter.

### 3.1 Objections to Implicit Linguistic Knowledge

I want to examine four objections to the notion of implicit linguistic knowledge: (i) the objection from incoherence; (ii) the objection from circularity; (iii) the objection of vacuity, and (iv) the objection from incommunicability. As is the case with several of the objections levelled at the idea of linguistic knowledge simpliciter, the first two worries here conceal a number of arguable assumptions, viz., about the nature of intentional states and about the nature of theoretical

knowledge. Examination of the last two objections leads us to consider a particular type of constraint on the notion of implicit knowledge, viz., a manifestation constraint.<sup>5</sup> The whole point of introducing the notion is to provide explanations of linguistic mastery, so we will need to see whether an account can be developed that is not vulnerable to these objections. I begin with the objection from incoherence.

### 3.1.1 The Objection from Incoherence

Pulling no punches, John McDowell writes,

There is no merit in a conception of the mind which permits us to speculate about its states, conceived as states of a hypothesized mechanism, with a breezy lack of concern for facts about explicit awareness. Postulation of implicit knowledge for such explanatory purposes sheds not scientific light but philosophical darkness.<sup>6</sup>

And Foster [1976], in a similar vein, asks

Is it not unnatural, even incoherent, to ascribe states of knowledge to which the subject himself has no conscious access?<sup>7</sup>

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5. I say a manifestation constraint rather than the manifestation constraint since, for the moment, I wish to remain neutral on just what degree of manifestation is required in order to meet the objections. My use of the concept of manifestation ought not be confused with Dummett's manifestation argument. I discuss this in 5.3.2 below.

6. McDowell [1977], p.148.

7. Foster [1976], pp.1-2.

I have advertised my suspicion (see p.133, note3) that "implicit" and "unconscious" are not in fact coextensive, but for the moment, just let us grant what seems unproblematic, viz., that speakers do lack conscious access to the content of their linguistic knowledge.

Now why might someone think that the notion of implicit linguistic knowledge, understood in this way, is incoherent? Two sorts of worries can be discerned. One has to do with the fact that the putative knowledge is linguistic knowledge, the other is directed against the very idea that there can be any intentional (i.e., contentful psychological) states that are inaccessible to consciousness. Take the latter first.

Searle [1990] launches an ontological argument against unconscious, or implicit intentional states. His argument is ontological as opposed to epistemological, since he is not so much concerned with the problem of telling which implicit intentional states an agent has, but rather with the thought that there can be such states. The argument has been a long time in the making. It is foreshadowed in the following:

What I actually believe to be the case, though I do not know how to demonstrate it, is something like the following: only beings capable of conscious states are capable of Intentional states. And though any given Intentional state, such as a belief, or fear, may never be brought to consciousness, it is always possible for the agent to bring his Intentional states to consciousness. The agent's consciousness is like a scanning device that is capable of scanning his Intentional states. Without this proviso, that is, without the assumption that an Intentional state is capable of being brought to consciousness, the ascription of

Intentionality to beings as part of the explanation of their behavior, would lose most of its explanatory force.<sup>8</sup>

Searle's latest argument is embodied in what he calls the "Connection Principle". He writes,

...we have no notion of an unconscious mental state except in terms of its accessibility to consciousness.<sup>9</sup>

Searle is not merely making the descriptive point that our understanding of the unconscious is derivative on our understanding of consciousness. That must be agreed by everyone. His point is rather that if an unconscious state is to be an unconscious mental or intentional state, then it must be metaphysically connected to a conscious mental state.

The argument for the Connection Principle proceeds in roughly the following way. Genuinely intentional states, states with what Searle calls "intrinsic intentionality", have "aspectual shape". So far as I can tell, the term "aspectual shape" refers to features of the conscious phenomenology of an agent's thoughts. According to Searle, aspectual shape is what identifies an intentional state as the state it is. Now, ex hypothesi, unconscious states issue in no conscious phenomenology themselves. Hence they have no aspectual shape and can only be identified in neurophysiological terms. As such, they lack genuine intentionality. The only sense we can make of an unconscious state with content, then, is if that state is metaphysically connected to a

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8. Searle [1979], 92.

9. Searle [1990], p.3.



genuinely intentional state, e.g., if it causes further subjective conscious states of the agent. Or, as Searle puts it: an unconscious state is an unconscious intentional state only insofar as it is "in principle" accessible to consciousness.

Searle's argument is unsuccessful on several levels. I do not want to engage in a full scale attack on it here,<sup>10</sup> but suffice it to say that Searle seems to beg all the relevant questions. To say that genuine intentional states are all and only those states which either have, or can issue in other states with, aspectual shape is just to insist without argument that only conscious (or potentially conscious) states are intentional. But that is the very question! Moreover, Searle's Connection Principle assumes the plausibility of a one-to-one correlation between neurophysiological states and the conscious states in which they presumably issue. But no credible account of neurophysiology supports this assumption.

On to the second worry about specifically linguistic implicit knowledge. Foster and McDowell do not, to the best of my knowledge, advance arguments of the Searlian kind, but I am inclined to think that nonetheless a single motivation underpins and unites their squeamishness about implicit (i.e., for the moment, unconscious) intentional states. The proposal under attack is that speakers have implicit knowledge of the theory of meaning for their language and/or of the rules and

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10. See the peer commentary following Searle's [1990], pp.596-642.

principles of a universal grammar. The possession of such knowledge is said to be explanatory of their linguistic competence, and this implies that speakers make use of the rules embodied in these putative objects of knowledge. Or, as we might say, the claim is that speakers' behavior is guided by these rules. But, the worry continues, what sense can we make of a speaker being guided by rules to which she has no conscious access? If a speaker is unable to say which rules she is following, if she is unable to articulate the theory of meaning for her language, with what warrant do we ascribe such knowledge to her?

But now we must ask why is a speaker's recognition of a particular set of rules as guiding her linguistic behavior necessary for the truth of the claim that those rules do in fact guide her behavior? To be sure, which rules a speaker recognizes as consistent with her grammaticality judgments is some evidence that she knows those rules. But in general, introspection is a notoriously bad evidential base for such matters. Moreover, if cognitive science has taught us anything at all, pace Searle, the involvement of consciousness (whatever consciousness turns out to be) is not particularly relevant to most of our interesting cognitive functioning. I want to point out too that Foster's and McDowell's concern is strikingly similar to an idea we considered in the previous chapter, viz., that there is only one way in which we can justifiably attribute knowledge of a rule to a speaker, i.e., just in case she can state the rule. But as we noted there (p.118), this is an untenable requirement. Most importantly, since we

are trying to explain linguistic understanding it is this very demand (that speakers be able to explicitly state the rules of their language) that is incoherent.<sup>11</sup>

But suppose we grant the objection. We must now we must ask the likes of Foster and McDowell, "With what do you intend to replace the notion of genuine (albeit implicit) linguistic knowledge?"

### 3.1.2 Avoiding Incoherence

#### 3.1.2.1 A Theory of Meaning as a Theoretical Representation

Some philosophers, persuaded by the sort of incoherence objection just examined, seek safety in the arms of the idea that a theory of meaning is at best a "theoretical representation" of a speaker's linguistic abilities.<sup>12</sup> Foster is a case in point. He suggests,

Rather than ask for a statement of the knowledge implicit in linguistic competence, let us ask for a statement of a theory whose knowledge would suffice for such competence. Instead of demanding a statement of those metalinguistic

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11. To be fair, there is another reading of the insistence that speakers must be able to recognize the rules, implicit knowledge of which is attributed to them. The idea, to which I shall return below (3.1.5.1) is that something like speaker-recognition is required to imbue the attribution of implicit linguistic knowledge with empirical sense.

12. The term is, I think, originally Dummett's; see his [1976]. But it is my view that it has been sorely misappropriated.

facts which the mastery of a language implicitly recognizes, let us demand a statement of those facts explicit recognition of which gives mastery. What we are then demanding is still a theory of meaning, but without the questionable assumption that one who has mastered the language has, at some deep level, absorbed the information which it supplies. The theory reveals the semantic machinery with which competence works, but leaves undetermined the psychological form in which competence exists.<sup>13</sup>

McDowell [1977] advances a similar line. He argues that the undisputed psychological allusions of Davidsonian semantics are not to be construed as positing actual psychological mechanisms that underpin linguistic mastery. Rather they serve as tests of the descriptive adequacy of such a theory. That is, we are testing the idea: if a speaker were to have explicit knowledge of the theory, would that attribution make intelligible her language use as the actions of an intentional, rational agent? McDowell is arguing that the theory is only supposed to show how such behavior might be possible. The task of the meaning-theorist is not to specify an object of a speaker's knowledge which underlies her linguistic competence. Rather his job is to say what knowledge would be sufficient for those capacities.<sup>14</sup>

To be sure, the construction of a theory of meaning motivated in this way will be illuminating of language in a way, but it is hard to see to what extent it can contribute to an explanation of speakers'

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13. Foster [1976], p.2.

14. Foster's and McDowell's views here are very similar to that which I attributed to Davidson in chapter one (p.19). This is Alexander George's reading of Davidson also; see George [1986], pp.111-112.

understanding. As we noted in chapter one, if a theory of meaning is going to say anything at all about what makes the sounds we utter a language, it will have to be informative about what our linguistic understanding consists in. To contend that a theory of meaning is always only a theoretical representation of a speaker's ability and never an object of her knowledge is, as Wright [1986] points out,<sup>15</sup> to force a "gap" between meaning and understanding. As such, on Foster's account the theory of meaning will not be connected with the behavior we are seeking to explain.<sup>16</sup> In short, if language, qua language, crucially involves understanding, and if understanding is in part constituted by knowledge of meaning, then a theory of meaning cannot be uncoupled from an account of understanding. As Wright says,

...truths about meaning have to be, ultimately, constituted by facts about understanding, so to aspire to a theory which aims to describe 'semantic machinery' independently of any assumption about what speakers of the language know is to aspire to a theory with no proper subject matter.

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15. Wright [1986], p.210.

16. For more on this particular requirement on a theory of meaning see: Dummett [1973a], p.467; [1976], p.71; [1989], pp.202-3.

17. Wright [1986], p.210. Wright's reply to Foster, and his insistence that a theory of meaning be connected with speakers' understanding must not be read as an endorsement of the kind of theory of implicit linguistic knowledge I am advancing. Wright takes this requirement seriously, but he construes the appeal to implicit knowledge in the context of a purely philosophical project about language. He says, "There is a recognizably philosophical project...to which constructing a formal of theory of meaning would be a contribution. This project has no immediate connections with the quest to explain the capacities of actual speakers of natural languages; the task to which a completed, adequate theory of meaning would contribute would rather be that of explaining how a complete knowledge of a

### 3.1.2.2 Instrumentalism to the Rescue

There may yet be a way in which the likes of Foster and McDowell could be comfortable with attributions of implicit linguistic knowledge. What I have in mind is the idea that such attributions be made only instrumentally. We can maintain that there is a connection between a speaker and the theory of meaning for her language, and we can if we wish call that relation "implicit knowledge", but this is respectable only if it means no more than that the speaker's behavior is consistent with her explicitly knowing the theory. As Hamlyn remarks, the notion of implicit knowledge

has been taken over...by several people...to deal with those cases where it seems explanatorily useful to appeal to knowledge without it being implied that the person in question can spell out the content of the knowledge in question. Put that way, the appeal to the notion seems to have an instrumentalist bias.<sup>18</sup>

To implicitly know a theory, then, is to act as if one had explicit knowledge of the theory. We encountered this suggestion in 2.2.3.3, and there I argued that instrumental attributions of knowledge will fail to be explanatory. Let me reiterate.

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particular natural language could be a rational achievement ([1986], pp.215-6)."

18. Hamlyn [1990], p.115.

Kirkham [1989] explicitly advances the view that to attribute implicit knowledge of a theory of meaning to a speaker is to do no more than provide a model of her linguistic competence. He argues: once we have a set of propositions that represent some practical ability (e.g., the ability to  $\theta$ ), it is in principle possible for someone previously unable to  $\theta$  to memorize these propositions, and supposing him to be able to make fast inferences, to actually manifest the practical ability of  $\theta$ -ing. Let us imagine such a case. Here is Jones the "natural" touch-typist, competent in touch-typing but unable to state the rules that he "follows"<sup>19</sup> in typing. A clever psychologist constructs a theory that models Jones' typing ability and makes it available to Smith. Smith, a rapid-fire inference-maker, memorizes the propositions, and lo and behold, manifests the practical ability of touch-typing.

According to Kirkham, we are justified in attributing implicit knowledge of the touch-typing theory to both Smith and Jones, since they both manifest an ability that is represented by that theory. But while Jones just knows how to type and lacks propositional knowledge of the typing theory, Smith knows both how to type and actually has propositional knowledge of the theory. Now let us ask what role these two types of knowledge play in explaining the typing behavior of Smith and Jones.

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19. It's very hard to set this up in a non-question begging way.

On this view, to attribute implicit knowledge of the typing theory to both Smith and Jones, is to do no more than say that they behave in ways characterizable by the same theory. But we already know that they behave similarly; they evince the same practical ability, the same know-how. Smith's and Jones' typing skills are indistinguishable. But on Kirkham's view, very different things are going inside them. What underpins Smith's typing ability is his knowledge of the typing theory (together with his inference capabilities). But what explains Jones' ability? If two pieces of behavior, one underpinned by knowledge of a theory and one not, are indistinguishable, then it is hard to see that the attribution of either explicit knowledge of the theory, or of implicit knowledge (of Kirkham's type) can play any explanatory role at all. Kirkham must say either, (1) we have no<sup>20</sup> explanation of Jones' typing ability; he just behaves as if he knew the relevant theory, or (2) that both Jones' and Smith's abilities are to be explained in terms of them knowing the theory; with Smith being able to articulate it and Jones not.

On a view like Kirkham's, the attribution of implicit knowledge leaves everything same. But we want the presence of implicit knowledge

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20. Kirkham, could I suppose, say that there is an explanation to be had, viz., at the neurophysiological level. But then perhaps both Jones' and Smith's behavior admit of the same type-explanation at that level.



to matter,<sup>21</sup> since it is the raison d'être of implicit linguistic knowledge to provide explanations of speakers' language mastery. Thus, it will do no good to rest content with instrumentalism. As Wright puts it, to attribute implicit knowledge to speakers in this sense

is to do no more than obliquely describe their behavior; it is to say that they behave in just the way in which someone would behave who successfully tried to suit his behavior to such an explicit statement.<sup>22</sup>

### 3.1.2.3 Residual Worries

Let me mention just briefly a couple of further difficulties for this account. Instrumentalism with respect to intentional states gives intentionality a bad name. It makes it easier to extend attributions of knowledge, beliefs and the like to anything at all. If the attribution of intentional states is just an exercise in redescribing the already observable behavior of a creature then, if anything has intentionality, everything has it. Creatures with sawdust in their heads could then be said to implicitly know the theory of meaning of English; the planets to implicitly know the laws of celestial motion, and so on.<sup>23</sup> I agree that this is a serious problem even for intentional realists, and I want to

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21. It will be obvious that this demand pushes us in the direction of causal account of implicit knowledge. However, it does not direct us toward any particular causal account. I return to this in chapter five.

22. Wright [1981], p.110.

23. See p.123, note 85 above.

insist that it is a perfectly general problem, not one peculiar to the linguistic case.<sup>24</sup> Finally, on this way of understanding the attribution of implicit linguistic knowledge, it would appear that a speaker can be legitimately credited with having implicit knowledge of any number of theories of meaning.<sup>25</sup> If there is no way to justify the attribution of implicit knowledge of one theory over that of another, then explanatory vacuity threatens the notion of implicit knowledge again.<sup>26</sup>

It might be asked at this stage why the "place-holder" notion of implicit knowledge is itself not instrumental. Since on this way of proceeding, anything that avoids the objections we consider will do as an account of implicit linguistic knowledge. In response let me point out that the adoption of the place-holder strategy is a purely methodological decision.<sup>27</sup>

It is not at all clear that the objection from incoherence is sound. Moreover, the two most plausible ways of proceeding if we do

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24. See also p.163 below.

25. This is the problem of extensional equivalence raised by Quine [1972]. I discuss it in 3.1.5.1.

26. See also Evans [1981], p.323.

27. It has been suggested to me by Paul Pietroski that we might think of the place-holder strategy as way of "Ramseyfying" the theoretical concept of implicit linguistic knowledge. I like this idea.

take this worry mildly seriously, fail to satisfy any explanatory requirements at all. Let us turn to the next objection.

### 3.1.3 The Objection from Circularity

A reason we got interested in thinking of linguistic knowledge as implicit knowledge emerged from considering the objection from circularity in 2.2.2. There I argued that the objection only counted against an account of linguistic knowledge that took such knowledge to be explicit knowledge. However, it would appear that the problem can also be made out with respect to implicit knowledge.

The general form of the difficulty is this. If we say that a speaker knows, albeit implicitly, the theory of meaning for her language, the question arises as to which language that theory is couched in. Presumably, theories must be expressed in some language or other, and if we want to ascribe knowledge of the theory of meaning for L to speakers of L as part of an explanation of their language mastery, that theory cannot itself be expressed in L on pain of vicious circularity or explanatory vacuity. But neither can it be expressed in some other language, L', also known to the speaker, without entering on to an infinite regress.<sup>28</sup>

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28. See Harman [1967], [1975]. See also Lycan [1984], p.237; McDowell [1977], p.159.

### 3.1.4 Avoiding Circularity

The first thing to notice is that this objection only gets off the ground on the assumption that a theory of meaning must be expressed in a language.<sup>29</sup> But is this right? Davidson says,

Perhaps we should insist that a theory is a sentence or set of sentences of some language. But to know a theory it is neither necessary nor sufficient to know that these sentences are true. Not sufficient since this could be known by someone who had no idea what the sentences meant, and not necessary since it is enough to know the truths the sentences of the theory express, and this<sup>30</sup> does not require knowledge of the language of the theory.

But let us grant, for the sake of argument, that a theory of meaning will be couched in a language. It is clear from everything that has been said so far that if a speaker's linguistic knowledge is explicit, then this theoretical language cannot be the language the theory of meaning is a theory of. But what if the speaker's knowledge of the theory is implicit? Don't we then have a particularly acute form the circularity problem?

Considering just Anglophones, there are two possibilities to explore: either the theory of meaning is expressed in English, or it is

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29. Dummett raises the same sort of worry in his criticisms of ideational theories of meaning (see e.g., Dummett [1978b], p.5; [1989]). If language is a code for thought, then we must assume that speakers have "inner" languages into which they translate utterance in the "public" language.

30. Davidson [1976], p.175.

expressed in some other language , e.g., the language of thought. Suppose Sally is an English speaker, and suppose that she implicitly knows the theory of meaning for English which happens to be expressed in "inner-English". Why must we say that Sally knows this language in the same way that she knows English? It seems to me that the possibility that Sally just "has" inner-English, that it is just a fact about the way in which she is put together, is not ruled out. Perhaps the knowledge Sally has of this inner-English is pure, brute know-how.<sup>31</sup>

What, then, of the idea that the theory of meaning is expressed in the language of thought. This is a compelling suggestion in its own right, for it might be said, implicit linguistic knowledge requires representations.<sup>32</sup> The notion of linguistic knowledge is motivated in part by the fact that speakers appear to be able to derive the meanings of complex expressions in their language. Once we begin talking of derivations, we are committed to computations; and as Fodor has emphasized - "No computation without representation!" The objection from circularity might then be transformed into an objection from regress.

However, I think that on a proper understanding of the language of thought hypothesis, at least as it was proposed by Fodor [1975], the

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31. See also Lycan [1984], p.237.

32. But cf. Chomsky [1980], p.5.

objection fails.<sup>33</sup> There is a tendency to get carried away with the rhetoric surrounding the notion of the language of thought and to take literally the idea that there is a "natural" language, Mentalese, in which we think. But Fodor's point in calling the language of thought a language was just to draw our attention to the fact that any account of mental representation will have to be compatible with the fact that thought must be at least as systematic and productive as natural language.

On a not too conservative reading, all the language of thought hypothesis amounts to is the following. For an agent to know or believe something, say, that dogs are friendly, is for her to bear a certain relation, K, to a representation, R, which means that dogs are friendly. That R means what it does is the result of the agent having a certain causal history in the world, and of her being put together in a particular way. Now with respect to meaning, if a speaker knows that "Dogs are friendly" means that dogs are friendly, then on this account, there is a relation K that she bears to a representation that has the content (means) "Dogs are friendly" means that dogs are friendly, and that's all there is to it. Now as Higginbotham [1990b] points out,

There is, on the one hand, the knowledge we might have about x, that x's representations have certain meanings, and on the other hand the knowledge that x has about the meanings of his representations. That we only have the first sort of knowledge does not imply that x lacks the second. But if x does not lack the second sort of knowledge, then x has

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33. See also Fodor [1987], pp.134-154; [1989].

knowledge of meaning in the sense in which it is invoked in the theory of meaning.<sup>34</sup>

So it is not clear that if implicit linguistic knowledge requires a language of thought we are faced with a regress.<sup>35</sup>

Another response to the circularity objection is to remain resolutely neutral about the form(s) in which implicit linguistic knowledge might exist. This is surely open to us at this early stage of theorizing. To be sure, we have been proceeding as though linguistic knowledge is quasi-propositional and this directly invites the criticism we are considering. But one can think of understanding, and hence of knowledge of meaning, in a different way.

Moravcsik [1979] recommends a distinction between understanding simpliciter and more specific types of understanding (e.g., understanding-how, understanding-what etc.). With respect to her more specific understandings an agent will, in general, be able to provide explicit formulations of what it is that she understands; indeed this ability might be thought to be in part constitutive of such understanding. But understanding can be construed more broadly; in what we might call a more "hermeneutic" sense. Moravcsik suggests that this

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34. Higginbotham [1990b], pp.34-35.

35. Of course, some folk get very upset about representations, punkt. They worry that computations over representations commit us to homunculi and other undesirables. I will not respond to this concern here, but simply note that if it is a problem, it is a problem for any computational psychology and not just for the thesis of implicit linguistic knowledge.

type of understanding is a "representational conception" of which our explicit formulations purport to give an analysis. For example, an agent may understand a particular proof, in terms of being able to identify the premises, the conclusion, and the rules used to get from one premise to another, and yet he may still fail to see the point of the proof. And hence, on another reading of "understand", not understand it all. To really understand the proof the agent must be able to extrapolate the rules it exploits to other contexts and to generalize its conclusions. As Moravcsik says, understanding is

insight that unites our knowledge of the relevant rules  
[and] our abilities of application.<sup>36</sup>

There is something telling in Moravcsik's analysis but it is worth noting that it has the result of converting the problem about circularity into a more general worry about the use or, application of our linguistic knowledge.<sup>37</sup> I will return to this matter in chapter five.

We have seen that it is not obvious that the attribution of implicit linguistic knowledge to speakers involves us in circularity or regress. What now of the third objection?

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36. Moravcsik [1979], p.207.

37. See Chomsky [1988], p.9; Dummett [1991], p.97



### 3.1.5 The Objection from Vacuity

#### 3.1.5.1 Quine's Challenge

The objection from vacuity finds its clearest expression in Quine [1972]. Quine's challenge is to ask what empirical sense can be made of the notion of implicit linguistic knowledge, since, he claims, we are unable to determine which particular theory of meaning (or grammar) a speaker implicitly knows. Quine's case rests on a number of interrelated points.

In the first place, Quine marks a distinction between a piece of an agent's behavior fitting a rule and that agent's behavior being guided by a rule (see p.80, note 39 above).

Fitting is a matter of true description; guiding is a matter of cause and effect. Behavior fits a rule whenever it conforms to it; whenever the rule truly describes the behavior. But the behavior is not guided by the rule unless the behavior knows the rule and can state it.<sup>38</sup>

Quine's second move is to point out that there may be any number of theories which are extensionally equivalent. Any two theories of meaning, or systems of grammar (of English), are extensionally equivalent if "they determine, recursively, the same infinite set of

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38. Quine [1972], p.442. Note the similarity to the Foster/McDowell objection; see p.143f. above.

well-formed English sentences."<sup>39</sup> The proposal under consideration is that speakers implicitly know a theory of meaning for their language, and it is agreed that speakers lack conscious access to their putative linguistic knowledge. Hence we cannot say that speakers' linguistic behavior is guided by this knowledge; it merely fits it. Now, since any number of extensionally equivalent theories will correctly describe the behavior of speakers; that is, since speakers' behavior will fit any number of extensionally equivalent theories, what explanatory light can the attribution of knowledge of one theory over another provide? According to Quine, a system of rules is correct if it accurately describes the behavior in question. That is, if it fits the behavior, and the behavior fits it. But because any number of theories of meaning (or grammars) are correct by this standard, it makes no sense, Quine argues, to ask which particular theory a speaker knows.

The relevance of Quine's demarcation to the issue of implicit linguistic knowledge should be obvious. The whole idea of such knowledge is predicated on the idea that it will inform our explanations of speakers' behavior, and the practice of theoretical linguistics has as its very aim the discovery and articulation of the set of rules that guides speakers' behavior. It is also part of this conception that speakers cannot state the relevant rules; that is part of the import of

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39. Quine [1972], p.442. See also p.448 where Quine identifies "two extensionally equivalent systems of grammar" with "two extensionally equivalent recursive definitions of [a] well-formed string."

such knowledge being implicit. If Quine is right, speakers' behavior is not guided by any such rules, since they are unable to state them. To confer empirical respectability on the notion of the attribution of implicit linguistic knowledge we will need to be able say how we might yet be able to distinguish which of two extensionally equivalent theories a speaker knows.

Quine does not reject the notion of implicit linguistic knowledge outright. He concedes to what he takes to be an "uncontroversial" sense of implicit knowledge. He says,

We have all known that the native speaker must have acquired some recursive habit of mind, however unconscious, for building sentences in an essentially tree-like way; this is evident from the infinitude of his repertoire.<sup>40</sup>

But by this he admits to no more than the rather weak and trivial:

that there are linguistic rules is simply the claim that individuals know their language and have not learned each of its sentences separately.<sup>41</sup>

Quine parodies the attribution of implicit linguistic knowledge to speakers by claiming that it

...imputes to the natives an unconscious preference for one system of rules over another, equally unconscious, which is extensionally equivalent to it.<sup>42</sup>

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40. Quine [1972], p.443.

41. Postal [1966], p.88; quoted in Quine [1972], p.443.

42. Quine [1972], p.443.

Quine consistently characterizes the putative relation between a speaker and the theory of meaning or grammar for her language in terms of it being a "preference,"<sup>43</sup> or "bias."<sup>44</sup> But, of course, this way of talking is nonsense. No-one claims that speakers select, albeit unconsciously, between extensionally equivalent theories.<sup>45</sup>

### 3.1.5.2 A Question of Evidence

In the background of the Quinean challenge is a concern about the availability of evidence for the attribution of implicit linguistic knowledge. As George puts it, the

explanatoriness of ascribing tacit knowledge of a theory of meaning to a speaker depends crucially on being able to articulate what would count as evidence for such ascriptions. Unless this is done, one will have no independent check for the possession of this knowledge with the consequence that accounts appealing to it will be vacuous.<sup>46</sup>

But it would appear that,

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43. See Quine [1972], p.443, p.445, and p.447.

44. See Quine [1972], p.446, p.447, and p.448.

45. Quine's false idea is not to be confused with the more plausible thesis that the child forms and tests hypotheses about meaning and structure in learning her language. Even Quine agrees that "it is...instructive to intellectualize the child's behavior ([1990], p.291)."

46. George [1986], pp.23-24. George is here describing the view, not endorsing it.

The only reason we have for adopting the proffered cognitive claims, the only route we have to their truth, is their utility in providing the required explanation. The postulated cognitive states have no other consequences than the restricted range of facts they purport to explain - except, perhaps, a bogus psychologism and a false optimism about the ease of assessing a semantic proposal. Such an explanation is no explanation at all.<sup>47</sup>

It is important to see precisely what is being demanded here. The worry is not there is no evidence for the attribution of implicit linguistic knowledge, but rather that what evidence there is, is of a dubious kind. We justify the attribution of implicit linguistic knowledge on the grounds of the ways in which speakers employ their language. The objection is that we cannot appeal to this behavior as evidence for the possession of such knowledge, since that behavior is exactly what we want to explain. The demand, then, is for independent evidence.

To put the point more sharply: Quine argues

Implicit guidance is a moot enough idea to demand some explicit methodology. If it is to make sense to say that a native was implicitly guided by one set of rules rather than another, extensionally equivalent one, this sense must link up somehow with the native's dispositions to behave in observable ways in observable circumstances.<sup>48</sup>

But these dispositions cannot just consist in the speaker's semantic or grammaticality judgments, for these will, ex hypothesi, fail to

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47. Platts [1979], p.234.

48. Quine [1972], p.444.

distinguish which of any number of extensionally equivalent theories a speaker supposedly knows.

A certain force must be conceded to Quine's objection and to the demand that we must be sensitive to the status of our evidence. However, I do not understand what "independent evidence" for some phenomenon might be. The project of explanation, particularly of intentional explanation, is dialectical. We observe that agents have some ability (e.g., the ability to  $\beta$ ) and we attribute various intentional states to them in an effort to explain that ability. Of course, we will refer to exercises of the very ability in question in seeking confirmation of our ascriptions of knowledge and belief. What else, pray tell, are we to do?

The objection under discussion is that the attribution of implicit linguistic knowledge is doomed to explanatory vacuity, since the only evidence we have for such attributions are instances of the very behavior we are seeking to explain. But while there is a grain of truth here, why conclude that the whole notion of implicit knowledge is bankrupt? Is it not more rational to simply cast our evidential net more widely? Of course, we cannot rely exclusively on speakers' verbally expressed grammatical and semantic intuitions, nor as we have seen, can we place special weight on their willingness to acknowledge a particular set of rules as consistent with their behavior. Finally, we ought not try to effect some one-to-one mapping between the alleged items of knowledge and particular pieces of behavior, since this has the

undesirable consequence of making such pieces of behavior criteriological for the possession of that knowledge. What we are after, I take it, is as much evidence as we can get. And, keeping in mind the obvious fact that human language use straddles the cognitive-behavioral divide, we can expect such evidence to be forthcoming from many quarters.<sup>49</sup>

The demand for independent evidence for the ascription of implicit linguistic knowledge is motivated, I think, in part by a desire to avoid what is seen as slippery slope into attributing implicit intentional states to anything at all. Platts [1979] argues that if we are willing to attribute implicit knowledge of a theory of meaning to a speaker, then we will be equally justified in attributing implicit knowledge of Peano axioms to her (providing, of course, that she can perform certain arithmetical calculations.)<sup>50</sup> But why stop here? Why not go on to attribute implicit knowledge of the theory of drag to Canada geese, of the theory of celestial motion to the planets, and so on and so forth? Attributions of implicit knowledge will be legitimate everywhere if they are legitimate anywhere.

As I have mentioned several times before, this is not a problem that exclusively besets an account of implicit linguistic knowledge. It

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49. A similar catholicism is expressed by Chomsky. See Chomsky [1980], pp.103-104; [1986], chapter four; [1988a], p.9.

50. Platts [1979], pp.234-235.

is a problem for intentional explanation generally. My response for now is this. There are clear cases of things that have intentional states, viz., people; clear cases of things that don't, viz., planets; and many intermediate cases, e.g., bees. How one wants to distinguish between these cases will be informed by one's philosophy of psychology, one's view about what counts as a good explanation, and so on. But I am happy to say, that that is not my project right now and I will leave the matter there.<sup>51</sup>

### 3.1.6 The Objection from Incommunicability

The final objection that I want to consider concerns whether the thesis of implicit linguistic knowledge throws doubt on our ability to actually communicate with one another. The idea is this. If the meanings which a speaker attaches to sentences in her language are the result of unconscious derivations from her implicitly known theory of meaning, the question arises as to how two speakers could tell if they meant the same thing by a particular sentence. If meanings are private in this sense, then Harry can only form hypotheses about what Sally means by her utterances. Harry cannot hope to establish the truth of any such hypotheses by simply asking Sally for further verbal clarification of

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51. Two recent discussions of the demarcation between genuine and methodological intentionality that bear scrutiny are Searle [1990] and Dennett [1991].



what she means, for then he will be back where he started. In short, on this view of what it is to know the meaning of sentences in one's language, how is communication possible?<sup>52</sup>

One suggestion as to how communication might succeed would be to say that language is merely a code for thought. The idea here is that when Sally communicates something to Harry, she encodes her thought into a particular utterance, which Harry then proceeds to decode. But this is a hopelessly flawed model of language understanding. For not only does it posit a radical independence of thought and talk, it makes communication depend on speakers knowing yet another language, the translation, or decoding language.<sup>53</sup> But the whole point of appealing to a speaker's knowledge of meaning was to give an account of her understanding of her language, where "her language" has scope over the language of her speech community. If the attribution of implicit knowledge has the consequence of rendering meaning incommunicable, the entire project looks like an exercise in futility. As Dummett says,

To suppose that there is an ingredient of meaning which transcends the use that is made of that which carries the meaning is to suppose that someone might have learned all that is directly taught when the language...is taught to

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52. Let me note that this apparent problem also infects the question of knowledge of meaning might be acquired (able) by the language-learner. Speakers do not have conscious access to the theory of meaning, or grammar for their language and they do not acquire it by taking a syntax class. How then, could implicit knowledge be acquired? This matter requires considerable thought, but I do not pursue it in any depth here.

53. See e.g., Dummett [1978b], pp.6-7; [1989], pp.192-196.

him, and might then behave in every way like someone who understood that language, and yet not actually understand it, or understand it only incorrectly. But to suppose this is to make meaning ineffable, that is, in principle incommunicable. If this is possible, then no one individual ever has a guarantee that he is understood by any other individual; for all he knows, or ever can know, everyone else may attach to his words...which he employs a meaning quite different from that which he attaches to them.<sup>54</sup>

I mentioned above that Harry cannot confirm that he has interpreted Sally correctly by asking her to repeat herself, irrespectively of how elaborately and painstakingly she may do this. What other avenue is open if communciation is not to rest on faith? One alternative is surely that Harry can observe the use Sally makes of the same words in other contexts. For example, he can check if she applies a particular predicate to objects to which he would apply the same predicate, and so on. What seems to be required, then, is an account of understanding that renders it open to view.

### 3.2 Conclusion

We have examined several objections to the notion of implicit linguistic knowledge. The point was to identify the sort of constraints that such a notion must meet if it is to do the explanatory work we require of it. I argued that the objection from incoherence was inconclusive. However, the objection from circularity makes it clear that the theory that is implicitly known by a speaker cannot be couched in the language for

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54. Dummett [1973b], pp.217-8. See also [1978b], p.11; [1976], p.135; [1989], p.202, p.205.

which it is a theory of meaning. The remaining two objections (from vacuity and from incommunicability) serve to direct our attention to the connection between implicit linguistic knowledge and speakers' actual behavior. Considerations about the correctness of attributing to a speaker implicit knowledge of a particular theory of meaning rather than another and the threat of psychologism indicate that we must be able to say in what having implicit linguistic knowledge consists. As Dummett says so clearly,

the theory of meaning must specify not merely what it is that the speaker must know, but in what having that knowledge consists, i.e., what counts as a manifestation of that knowledge. Without this, not only are we left in the dark about the content of ascribing such knowledge to a speaker, but the theory is left unconnected with the practical ability of which it was supposed to be a theoretical representation.<sup>55</sup>

A central question here is, of course, whether this demand can be met without the account becoming wholly behavioristic, which result would throw doubt on the very appeal to knowledge in the project of explaining language mastery. I take up this topic in chapter five.

The appeal to implicit linguistic knowledge is motivated almost entirely by explanatory concerns. It is crucial, then, that any account we propose succeed in being explanatory. The attribution of implicit linguistic knowledge to speakers cannot impute to speakers abilities

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55. Dummett [1976], pp.70-71. See also [1973a], p.467; [1976], p.121; [1989], pp.202-203.

they plainly lack.<sup>56</sup> Hence we must take Platts seriously when he writes,

No veridical account of an ordinary speaker's understanding of his natural language could imply that the commonplace usage of that language which manifests that understanding is reflective, non-habitual or ratiocinative. And that matters for any attempt to account for ordinary speakers' linguistic competence through attribution to such speakers of explicit propositional knowledge of any of the theory of linguistic behaviour which we, as reflective interpreters, construct: any such attribution must be compatible with the fact<sup>57</sup> of the unreflective nature of ordinary linguistic behaviour.

But neither must the account prove too little. In particular, it must be such that it render intelligible the actual linguistic capacities had by ordinary speakers.

### 3.3 Addenda

Crispin Wright discusses two further worries concerning what he calls a "substantive" account of implicit linguistic knowledge.<sup>58</sup> The first is that any such account is going to run afoul of Wittgensteinian rule-following considerations, and the second consists in a general anti-realist challenge concerning the inaccessibility of implicit linguistic

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56. Dummett makes an analogous argument against taking a realist notion of truth as the central concept in a theory of meaning. It serves no explanatory purpose to attribute to speakers an ability they do not possess, viz., the ability to grasp recognition-transcendent truth conditions. See e.g., Dummett [1976], p.135.

57. Platts [1988], p.52. See also Platts [1979], chapter 9. While Platts is taking issue with the idea of explicit linguistic knowledge, it is clear that the point holds against implicit linguistic knowledge too.

58. See Wright [1981], [1986], pp.204-238.

knowledge. Each of these requires considerable coverage to do them justice, coverage I cannot give them; however I do want to say something, albeit briefly, about them both.

### 3.3.1 The Rule-Following Problem

Wright's target is the thesis that speakers know a finitely axiomatized theory of meaning for their language. As we saw in chapter one, the attractiveness of imputing knowledge of such a thing to a speaker is thought to consist in it being able to explain the open-endedness, or unbounded character of a speaker's linguistic abilities. But Wright worries that this proposal has the further consequence of ensuring that the meaning of every well-formed expression in a given language is fixed ahead of time; the meaning of each such expression is already decided.<sup>59</sup>

Now Wittgenstein had it that the use of an expression determined its meaning; (to paraphrase) the meaning of a sentence depends on which move in the language-game that sentence is. Couple this idea with the supposition that the thesis of implicit knowledge of the theory of meaning has the effect of fixing the meaning of every expression in the language, and it would appear that a speaker's use of each expression is determined too. Insofar as a speaker knows the meanings of expressions in her language, she also has privileged access to her own understanding

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59. Wright [1981], p.112.

of the language, i.e., to the nature of her past, present and future intentions to use the relevant corpus of sentences.<sup>60</sup> But the purported lesson of the rule-following objections is that no sense is to be made of the idea of a speaker trying to conform his present use of an expression with either his own past use of it, or with that of his speech community. There is no eternal fact of the meaning of any one expression in the language, and hence there are no facts about a speaker's intentions concerning the use of the language.

Wright suggests that the proponent of a substantive theory of implicit linguistic knowledge has only two options in the face of the Wittgensteinian challenge. Either she must explain why the rule-following considerations are not compelling, or she must show why an account of implicit linguistic knowledge is not in fact threatened by, or at odds with, them.

But these options do not exhaust the logical space of possible responses. Surely it is open to the implicit knowledge proponent to ask whether such scepticism tells against all meaning, or whether it only affects a particular class of claims about meaning. That is, it might be argued that Wittgensteinian scepticism is justified only with respect to a particular class of expressions; that is, the set of expressions whose meaning is indeterminate. But this is far from accepting that the meaning of all expressions is similarly indeterminate.

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60. Wright [1981], p.101.

In particular, the friend of implicit knowledge can dig her heels in and claim that the meaning of those expressions derivable from the axioms of the theory of meaning are precisely those expressions whose meaning is determinate. This response is not simply unmotivated dogmatism on the part of the implicit knowledge theorist. For once we reflect on what got her project started, we observe that the fact to be explained is how it is that speakers do understand novel utterances. This fact about competent speakers is not merely prima facie evidence for the determinacy of the meaning of a large number of expressions, it is the manifestation of that very fact. And it is a fact waiting to be explained.

If we agree that speakers do have this capacity to understand previously un-encountered expressions in their language, we are fairly committed to the view that such expressions have a determinate meaning prior to their absorption into the language game. Far from being particularly threatened by the Wittgensteinian challenge, the implicit knowledge theorist can throw the onus back on the Wittgensteinian to explain how he accounts for the manifest abilities of competent speakers, while bound to the purported implications of the private language argument.

Several other responses are also available; these I'll just mention. First, it is unclear to me that the rule-following considerations do not just raise a general problem about inductive evidence. If so, they do not pose a special problem for the thesis that

speakers have implicit linguistic knowledge. But, second, suppose that they are peculiarly threatening to such a thesis. I think they will only be fatal if we make the assumption that the theory of meaning (implicit knowledge of which we attribute to speakers) is itself couched in a language. For then we can imagine the rule-following considerations pose a problem for the meaning of expressions in this obviously private language. But as I explained above (p.151), we have no reason to make this assumption. Finally, Evans [1981] suggests the following ad hominem argument.<sup>61</sup> Wright happily concedes that the rule following considerations

do not...impugn the legitimacy of at least the most basic purpose with which such a theory might be devised; that of securing a description of the use of...the object language of such a kind that to be apprised of that description would be to know how to participate in the use of...the language.<sup>62</sup>

But now what is wrong with the idea, that in virtue of knowing the theory of meaning for her language, a speaker knows the meanings of unconsidered expressions? Need we mean more than the simple claim that she will be able to use and understand those expressions when the occasion arises?

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61. See Evans [1981], pp.324-325.

62. Wright[1981], pp.115-116.



### 3.3.2 The Anti-Realist Challenge

Wright points out<sup>63</sup> that the attribution of implicit linguistic knowledge will only be explanatory if we can say which particular theory of meaning a speaker knows. We have noted repeatedly that the theorist can at best make hypotheses about the content of a speaker's knowledge, and that the speaker cannot offer much by way of assistance here, for she is unable to state the theory herself, and could no more recognize a particular candidate theory as the one she follows than the theorist could. Hence, the insistence that there is nonetheless a fact of the matter concerning which theory a speaker knows, involves a commitment to a realm of evidence-transcendent truths.

The proponent of implicit knowledge need not be moved by this anti-realist challenge. For a start, she can reject the idea that there is anything at all problematic about verification-transcendence. Secondly, she can argue that to the extent that the problem of verification is one that affects all interesting scientific inquiries - we are no more unable to directly verify the existence of gluons either - the thesis of implicit linguistic knowledge is not particularly suspect.

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63. Wright [1986], p.113.

## Chapter 4

### Implicit Belief

"...the notion of tacit belief presents unanticipated and nasty difficulties."

---Lycan [1988], p.15.

We have just examined the constraints imposed on any account of implicit linguistic knowledge which claims to be explanatory of speakers' linguistic capacities. To date, however, I have said little about the features of implicit linguistic knowledge which incline us to call it implicit. In the last chapter I proceeded (though with some qualification) on the assumption that an intentional state's "implicitness" is a function of the kind of access its possessor has or lacks to it. For the sake of exposition, I went along with the intuitively plausible idea that an intentional state is implicit if the agent whose state it is lacks conscious access to, or awareness of, its content. It is now time to cash out that qualification.

In this chapter, I want to examine some features which have been thought to be definitive of an intentional state's being implicit. I focus on the notion of implicit belief for several reasons. There is,

first, a methodological motive; I think that our intuitions about beliefs are clearer than our intuitions about linguistic knowledge; though they are by no means perspicuous! In the second place, the rich literature on implicit belief helps sharpen our idea about the very concept of "implicitness". I will argue that there is a right and a wrong way to think about implicit belief. I want to show that, properly undertaken, an analysis of the notion of implicit belief strengthens the case for thinking of intentional states, in general, dispositionally. And most importantly, it demonstrates that implicitness is not so much a property of beliefs (and other intentional states) but rather of the relation between such states and believers, knowers, and so on.

#### 4.1 Why Implicit Belief?

There are broadly two types of motivation for an account of implicit belief. In the first place, there seem to be compelling pre-theoretic (or commonsense) intuitions that some of our beliefs have peculiar properties which mark them off from rest of our "ordinary" beliefs. Second, when these commonsense intuitions are coupled with a widely-accepted theory of the propositional attitudes, it appears that a distinction between types of beliefs is forced upon us. These two types of motivation need not be independent, for as Stich [1978] notes, there is some reason to expect that the properties and distinctions that feature in our pre-theoretic picture of the mental actually reflect psychologically interesting properties. Let us then look at some examples to see how the appeal to implicit belief emerges.

#### 4.1.1 The Data

I believe that you believe that armduarks don't wear raincoats in the desert. I believe that you believe that Dan Quayle has an IQ less than 200. And I believe that you believe that were this paper to burst into flames your hands would be burned. I am also willing to wager that none of these things has occurred to you before, and had I not mentioned them, they might never have occurred to you. But I suggest that they are things you believe nonetheless. Surely you don't disbelieve that armduarks don't wear raincoats in the desert. And I doubt that you are prepared to withhold judgment about whether the vice-president's IQ is in the very superior range.

Several things would seem to follow from these observations. First, is the suggestion that there are beliefs you have that you do not know that you have; things, as it were, that you can discover that you believe. There seems to be something importantly different about your belief concerning the sartorial dispositions of armduarks that sets it apart from your beliefs about where you live, or about what you are wearing at the moment. The proposition, that armduarks don't wear raincoats in the desert, has probably never occurred to you before, whereas the proposition, I live on such-and-such street, no doubt has occurred to you at one time or other. It is tempting, therefore, to think that some of our beliefs have a property (or properties) which

serve to distinguish them from our ordinary beliefs. Call this the Special Property Thesis.

Secondly, the observations above suggest that agents have a very large number of beliefs. This is a very common theme in the literature on implicit belief, and it appears in two guises. Most often it is presented as the "infinity thesis" (henceforth IT); the idea being that agents have an infinity of beliefs. But it is sometimes presented more modestly as the idea that agents have a very large number of beliefs; call this the "very large number thesis" (henceforth VLNT). Here are illustrations of each of the IT and the VLNT.

The Infinity Thesis.<sup>1</sup>

I am currently entertaining the belief that I am 5'4" tall. Yesterday, though not a single thought about my height crossed my mind, I had the belief that my height was 5'4". Similarly, I am willing to bet that next week (bizarre accidents withstanding) I will have the belief that I am 5'4" tall. I also believe that I am less than 10' tall. I believe that now, I believed it yesterday (though I didn't think of it) and I will believe it next week (whether or not I think of it). Indeed, for every number (n) of feet, greater than 5.34, I believe that I am less than n feet tall. Hence, I have infinitely many beliefs about my height.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Statements of the infinity thesis can be found in Dennett [1978], p.45, [1987], p.55; and Harman [1986], p.12. See also Audi [1982], p.116; Foley [1978], pp.311-2; and Goldman [1986], pp.200-1.
2. The infinity thesis is also cast in terms of beliefs involving negative existentials. E.g., suppose I believe that the room is empty, then I also believe that there is no hacksaw in the room, that there is no stethoscope in the room, and so on. See Audi [1982].

### The Very Large Number Thesis.<sup>3</sup>

Suppose we ask Jose to write down all his beliefs.<sup>4</sup> High on Jose's list, we might imagine, will be things like, "I believe that I'm alive", "I believe that my name is Jose", "I believe that today is Friday" and so on. Further down on the list, we might expect Jose's various factual/historical/theoretical beliefs to appear; e.g., "I believe that the Earth has one moon", "I believe that Lee commanded the Confederacy", "I believe that electrons have  $\frac{1}{2}$  up spin and  $\frac{1}{2}$  down spin", and so on. No matter how long this list gets, there are beliefs (plausibly) had by Jose (i) that he will not write down, (e.g., that this experimenter is a jerk), (ii) that he may not know or even be dimly aware that he has, (e.g., that the Earth does not have three moons, and finally, (iii) that have never and might never occur to him, (e.g., that aardvarks don't wear raincoats in the desert). Of course, if we were to ask Jose whether he believed any of these things he would answer in the affirmative. Our intuition is to say, if he has any beliefs at all, Jose has indefinitely many beliefs.

A point of clarification: My suspicion is that whatever plausibility the IT has is due entirely to the triviality of the examples. Many people who do not share the intuition that agents have infinitely many beliefs, do find plausible the idea that agents have a very large number of beliefs. And for my present purposes, it is enough to note that philosophers who are inclined to appeal to implicit belief (or to draw an implicit/explicit distinction over beliefs) on the grounds that agents have infinitely many beliefs, would be equally so inclined if it were true that agents have (only) indefinitely many.

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3. A clear account of the VLNT can be found in Lycan [1986], p.61; [1988], chapter 3.

4. That this would take a very long time does not effect the present point.

Hence, in what follows I will only talk about the VLNT. Any points concerning this weaker thesis will hold mutatis mutandis for the stronger IT.

The Special Property Thesis directly motivates the notion of implicit belief. Beliefs like Jose's beliefs about the number of the Earth's moons and your belief about aardvarks, if there are such things, are unusual in the sense that they appear to be beliefs that an agent has but of which he is generally unaware. The term "implicit" is thus invoked to capture this peculiarity. The suggestion would be that your belief about aardvarks is one of your implicit beliefs, whereas your belief about where you live, for example, is one of your explicit beliefs. This is what I have in mind when I speak of the pre-theoretic, or commonsense motivation for implicit beliefs.

The VLNT, on the other hand, provides part of a distinctly theoretical argument for implicit beliefs. There is a widely-held theory of belief that has it that beliefs are contentful inner states of an agent which play a particular role in explaining her behavior. Crucially, these inner states are taken to involve representations. Call this the representationalist theory. The VLNT presents the representationalist with a particularly acute storage problem. For if each of an agent's beliefs involves a representation in his mind/brain, and if it is true that each agent has indefinitely many beliefs, then the question arises as to where all these representations are. It is a sad fact that humans are finite creatures and our brains are just not

big enough to house this vast number of representations. The suggestion is thus made that we solve the storage problem by distinguishing between two types of belief: implicit (or tacit) beliefs and explicit beliefs. We are to imagine that only explicit beliefs "take up room"; that is, they are explicitly represented. Implicit beliefs, on the other hand, aren't "anywhere" but are connected (in ways to be explained later) to explicit beliefs.

The appeal to implicit belief, then, has a mixed motivation which takes as its point of departure a particular type of example (e.g., those above). Reflection on those examples gives rise to (1) the commonsense intuition that some of an agent's beliefs have rather special features, and to (2) the idea that an agent has indefinitely many beliefs. Now while the story about what constitutes "implicitness" will vary according as one adopts (1) or (2), both ideas stem from a particular understanding of the data.

A crucial assumption underlies the intuition that some of an agent's beliefs are special; and that very same assumption is required to derive the conclusion that agents have indefinitely many beliefs. It is that an agent's unhesitating assent to a proposition that he has not previously entertained indicates that he believed that proposition all along. We are asked to notice that among an agent's doxastic states are (i) beliefs he does not know or is only dimly aware that he has, and (ii) beliefs that have never and might not ever occur to him. So, it is suggested, it is legitimate to attribute to agents beliefs of which they



are (and might remain) completely unaware. And this notion in turn leads to the claim that agents have indefinitely many beliefs. Because, for example, if it is correct to say that Jose believed that aardvarks don't wear raincoats in the desert all along, there seems to be no principled way of limiting the number of beliefs we can legitimately attribute to him.

However the data are ambiguous. One can surely accept the fact that after suitable prompting (e.g., by being asked whether it is the case that aardvarks wear raincoats in the desert) Jose will assent to the relevant proposition, without also thinking that he has thereby revealed a belief he had (albeit unawares) all along. The data, it seems, is equally compatible with the idea that Jose merely came to form that belief when prompted. That is, Jose's unhesitating assent is equally strong evidence for the claim that he acquired the relevant belief when queried. This is not at all the same as saying that he had the belief all along, and yet arguably it provides an equally satisfactory explanation of the data.

We can express the two interpretations in terms of the following question:

Does

An agent's (A's) assent, when queried at time  
t, to the previously unconsidered proposition  
p

show

(a) that A believed p prior to being

queried at t, or only

(b) that A formed the belief that p  
when queried at t?

Very different theories of implicit belief are forthcoming from these two interpretations. As I just pointed out, it is only if we assume the truth of (a) that we are tempted to search for some property that is distinctive of these kinds of beliefs, or to conclude that agents have indefinitely many beliefs. Nothing of that sort follows directly from the truth of (b). I will argue that the failure to recognize this ambiguity results in a distorted picture of the notion of doxastic capacity. Interpreting the data according to (a) inclines theorists to think of an agent's doxastic capacity in terms of the sheer number of beliefs she "has". And this in turn leads them to analyze the concept of implicitness as a property of the beliefs themselves. On the other hand, if one opts for interpretation (b) over interpretation (a), one is more inclined to construe an agent's doxastic capacity in terms of an ability she has. For interpretation (b) invites the question: in virtue of what it is that an agent can form beliefs in this way? Hence the analysis of the concept of implicitness will proceed in terms of properties of the believer.

In what follows, I discuss two accounts of implicit belief which assume the truth of interpretation (a). That is, accounts that take the data to show that agents have beliefs that they have never before entertained and which they might not ever entertain. But before proceeding it is necessary to forestall a general sceptical challenge to

the idea that the data show anything of the sort about an agent's beliefs. The data, recall, make much of the agent's unhesitating assent to certain propositions. But there is reason to doubt that this assent indicates anything at all about what he believes vis-a-vis those propositions.

#### 4.1.2 A Sceptical Challenge

The suggestion before us is that there are beliefs correctly ascribable to an agent that she has never entertained, and indeed, might never entertain.<sup>5</sup> Let us for the moment call such putative beliefs "prior" beliefs. We can imagine an objector who denies that there are any such things. A view like this is suggested in Mayo [1967] who says,

It is...clearly necessary that any proposition which someone is to believe should be, at least at some time and in some guise, present to his consciousness: it must be, as the jargon had it, be entertained.<sup>6</sup>

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5. It is important to note that while I am presently only concerned with what follows if we adopt interpretation (a), the sceptical challenge I discuss in this section is also a challenge to those who opt for interpretation (b). For what is being called into question here is the very nature of the relation between belief and assent.

6. Mayo [1967], p.147; quoted in Lycan [1986], p.74. See also Goldman [1986], p.232. Actually, Goldman argues for a position that adopts something like interpretation (b). I will return to this below in (4.4.2.2). Finally see Dummett [1973a]: "I can hardly be said to believe some proposition which has never occurred to me (p.286)." But Dummett is careful to distinguish this claim from the false one that one need be currently entertaining a belief to be correctly ascribed it.

But Mayo's objection just begs the question. For he simply stipulates that nothing counts as a belief unless its content is consciously entertained by the agent. This cannot be right. Even if one has reservations about prior beliefs, one cannot deny that there are unconscious beliefs, i.e., beliefs whose content the agent is unaware of. I take it that psychoanalysis provides us with quite potent examples of such beliefs. However, the objection that the data do not show that there are prior beliefs can be made more forcefully in the following way.

What reason do we have for claiming that agents have prior beliefs? The interpretation of the data we are presently considering presupposes that a sufficient and (possibly) necessary condition for the correct ascription of a particular belief to an agent is whether that agent would assent to the proposition that is its content. Consider again Jose's alleged belief that armadillos don't wear raincoats in the desert. Suitably prompted, Jose assents to that proposition, and on this basis it is claimed, we are justified in ascribing this belief to him.<sup>7</sup> The

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7. This line of thought has an ancient precedent. As Audi [1982] notes, we can read the Meno as an argument for prior belief. The boy's assent to various geometrical propositions is supposed to convince us that he knew the corresponding geometrical truths all along, despite having received no prior instruction in geometry. Socrates' claim is that the boy merely "recollects" knowledge he already possesses. On the plausible assumption that knowledge entails belief, if it is true that boy knew certain geometrical truths all along, then it is also true that he had certain beliefs with geometrical content. Hence the argument of the Meno depends on the claim that if an agent assents to the proposition p, then she believes p.

proponent of prior belief assumes that Jose's assent to that proposition is definitive evidence for the claim that despite never having entertained it before, Jose nonetheless believed that armduarks don't wear raincoats in the desert all along (i.e., he believed it prior to being asked.) The assumption is that if an agent will unhesitatingly assent to the proposition p, then the agent believes p. Or, in other words, that he believes everything he says or will assent to.

It is a rejection of this latter claim that underpins the stronger sceptical objection. If Jose's assent to propositions he has never previously entertained is not sufficient to show that he believed these propositions all along, then we have no reason to think that Jose has all these weird beliefs about armduarks and the like. And, more generally, we have no reason to accept the claim that agents have indefinitely many beliefs. If this is right, then a major motivation for implicit belief, or anything like a distinction between implicit and explicit beliefs, will have been removed. Thus, the sceptic's objection bears attention.

Just what does a speaker's assent to a proposition licence us to ascribe to her? For example, does Maria's assent to the proposition that zebras don't wear codpieces in the wild justify the ascription to her of the belief that zebras don't wear codpieces in the wild? Putting the matter more generally: Is the following principle (the "assertion principle") true?

**AP:** A believes (has the belief) p just  
in case A will assent to p.

The sceptic about prior belief claims that it is not. And we must agree, for the assertion principle (henceforth AP) faces serious difficulties. It is both too strong and too weak.

The AP is too weak an account of what it is to have a belief for it licences the attribution of all sorts of beliefs to an agent that she might in fact not have. Suppose you ask me whether it is the case that John Silber would make a fine governor. I may answer affirmatively, assent to that proposition, and even assert it, unprompted, subsequent to your initial inquiry. But none of this would be sufficient to attribute to me the belief that John Silber would make a fine governor. I may be a compulsive liar, I may want to mislead you into doing me a favor, or I may want to impress someone. The mere fact that I am willing to assent to a proposition is no guarantee that I believe it.

The friend of the AP might respond in the following way. He may concede that not just any old assent will do. Rather, what is required to rule out these cases of deception and the like is sincere assent. So the AP can be modified to the "sincere assertion principle" (SAP). Schematically,

**SAP:** A believes (has the belief) p just  
in case, A will sincerely assent to p.

However, this won't do either. To begin, it should be obvious there is a technical worry associated with SAP. Though it is hard to say exactly

what sincerity amounts to,<sup>8</sup> the concept of sincerity ineliminably involves the concept of belief. To be sincere is to intend to convey the truth. And an agent can only intend to convey the truth if she has some beliefs about what is and what is not the case. Consequently, no analysis of belief can, without circularity, invoke the concept of sincerity.

But putting this technical worry to one side, we can see that the addition of sincerity does nothing to solve the original objection to the AP. Suppose it is the case that I believe that tomatoes are poisonous. You say to me: "Tomatoes are great to eat, aren't they?" I sincerely assent because I mishear you; I hear "potatoes" not "tomatoes" and I love potatoes! Hence SAP delivers the wrong result. It licences the erroneous attribution to me of the belief that tomatoes are good to eat. Moreover, there may be situations in which I am deluded. I sincerely assent to the proposition that John Silber would make a fine governor. I even feel sure in my conviction about Silber's gubernatorial potential when I utter the sentence "John Silber would make a fine governor." But, unbeknownst to me (and most everyone else) certain members of the Democratic party have brainwashed me; I have been deluded into believing that John Silber would make a fine governor." What I say, quite sincerely, is contrary to what I really believe. No

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8. Is it best thought of as an epistemic notion, e.g., some sort of pro-attitude? or as a sort of moral notion, e.g., always be true to yourself?

amount of sincerity (whatever sincerity might be) will be sufficient to demarcate correct attributions of belief to an agent from erroneous ones.<sup>9</sup>

The AP is also too strong for it rules out what appear to be unproblematic attributions of belief. It says, recall, that an agent can only be attributed with the belief that p if she assents to p. Hence the AP fails to allow for beliefs that an agent has that she is for some reason unable to articulate. Further, it rules out of consideration other evidence (possibly at odds with her verbal behavior) that an agent has a particular belief. Surely there are many other ways in which I manifest my beliefs. What I say is only a very small part of my behavioral repertoire. The friends I keep, the profession I pursue, the situations I avoid, the activities I engage in on weekends, the charities I give to, and so on and so forth are all indicators of my beliefs. And it is obvious that we regularly take them to be such.<sup>10</sup>

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9. What I have said here assumes that it is coherent to claim that people can be mistaken about what they believe. I think this is perfectly plausible; I suspect that we often are unsure of what we believe.
10. Of course, the AP automatically rules out the possibility that language-less creatures have beliefs; and this seems wrong. There are some folk who refuse to ascribe beliefs to dogs, say, but we ought not put much store by this, since there are also some folk (e.g., Churchland [1981]) who refuse to ascribe beliefs to people too! But whether or not animals have beliefs, the AP fails for plenty of other reasons.



Our actions often belie our words. Consider Professor Bloggs. He regularly and publicly declares that minorities ought to be better represented in academic philosophy; yet he consistently votes against his department's affirmative action program, and refuses to supervise the work of minority graduate students. What beliefs concerning minorities in philosophy ought we attribute to Bloggs? Despite what he says, surely we would be hard-pressed to ascribe to him the belief that minorities ought to be better represented in philosophy. What an agent says is, in general, a fairly weak indicator of what he believes. We might even think that there are beliefs he has which no amount of verbal behavior will directly and unequivocally reveal.<sup>11</sup>

The objections to the assertion principle are compelling. What they show is that an agent's assent to some proposition is not sufficient grounds to attribute to him the belief with that proposition as content. But the falsity of the assertion principle is only fatal for what we might call a reductive account of belief, and by implication, for a reductive account of prior belief. That is, for an account that holds that the contents of an agent's beliefs (prior or

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11. This example has the consequence that sometimes an agent has to reflect on his own behavior to determine what it is that he believes. But surely, this is how it should be; particularly with respect to important and complex social and ideological issues (e.g., Prof. Bloggs). See Collins [1969], p.675; but cf. Goldman [1970], p.95 for the view that an agent does not normally have to seek for clues or evidence to find out what he believes.

otherwise) are all and only those propositions to which he would unhesitatingly assent.

However, the advocate of implicit belief need not advance such a reductive thesis. She can rest content with the weaker claim that what an agent will assent to is at least prima facie evidence of what he believes. It is often the case that we believe what we spontaneously and sincerely assent to,<sup>12</sup> and receiving an affirmative reply to the question "p?" does, in general, add to one's conviction that one's interlocutor believes p. Of course, assent never decides the matter, and we can agree with the sceptic that it is never a guarantee of what an agent believes. But since an agent's beliefs are manifested in her whole behavioral repertoire, combined with observations of such behavior, assent will provide a quite reliable indication of what an agent believes.<sup>13</sup>

Assuming now, and not just for the sake of argument, that assent is at least evidential for belief ascription, let us return to the suggestion that Jose's unhesitating assent to the previously unconsidered proposition that armadillos don't wear raincoats in the desert reveals a belief that he had all along. I have said that it is

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12. See Audi [1982], p.116.

13. Note how this scepticism parallels the discussion (p.135 above) of the question whether a speaker's recognition of a set as rules as correctly describing her linguistic behavior demonstrates that she knows that set of rules and/or deploys it.

this idea that motivates the appeal to implicit belief via either (i) the Special Property Thesis, or (ii) the Very Large Number Thesis. Let us begin with the latter.

#### 4.2 Implicit Belief and The Very Large Number Thesis

We are assuming that the data is to be explained by attributing to agents beliefs whose contents they have never previously entertained. As I said earlier, if this is right, then one might legitimately conclude that agents have indefinitely many beliefs. For if it is right to say that Jose believed all along that armadillos don't wear raincoats in the desert, then we are at liberty to ascribe all manner of other esoteric beliefs to him; e.g., that George Bush doesn't eat worms for breakfast, and so on.

Now this idea, which I have called the Very Large Number Thesis (VLNT), presents no problem for our pre-theoretic account of belief. The intuitions the examples prompt are just part of that commonsense picture. However, the VLNT is genuinely problematic for any theoretical account of belief, since it appears to be a non-trivial task to provide such an account that accommodates these intuitions adequately. What is required is a way to systematize the vast number of beliefs that agents are thought to have. Several philosophers have suggested that the necessary accommodation can be effected by drawing a principled distinction between types of beliefs; viz., implicit and explicit

beliefs.<sup>14</sup> So, using the examples above, we say that some of Jose's beliefs are his explicit beliefs (e.g., the ones he would write down immediately, the ones he is aware he has), but that most of his beliefs (e.g., of the aardvark variety) are only his implicit beliefs.

The attractiveness of this strategy is obvious when we turn our attention to a particular type of theoretical account of belief - what I earlier referred to as the representationalist theory of belief. If it is assumed (i) that agents have indefinitely many beliefs; (ii) that beliefs involve representations, and (iii) that such representations take up room in the agent's mind/brain, then the VLNT poses, as we might say, an acute storage problem.<sup>15</sup> Just where are all an agent's beliefs to be represented? Harman's [1986] account of implicit belief provides a clear example of a representationalist response to this problem.

#### 4.2.1 Harman's Account

Harman is driven to an account of implicit belief by considerations having to do with certain constraints that operate on belief in general, which in turn lead to proposals about how an agent's beliefs are

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14. See Dennett [1987], pp.55-56, p.216; Harman [1986], pp.13-14; and Lycan [1986], passim.

15. One might even argue that the truth of the VLNT entails the falsity of the representationalist theory of belief. On this, see Dennett [1978], pp.39-50; and Lycan [1988], p.15.

represented. Very early in Change of View, Harman addresses the question of whether our beliefs are closed under logical implication. Harman rejects this idea and proposes what he calls the "Clutter Avoidance Principle." It is reflection on this principle, and the assumptions that underlie it, that lead him to draw a distinction between implicit and explicit beliefs.

Harman's principle, "[O]ne ought not clutter one's mind with trivialities,"<sup>16</sup> is quite plausible and certainly captures some of our normative intuitions about beliefs. For example, were we to design a system that operated with belief-like data structures, we would want to incorporate the feature that the principle embodies into that design. The Clutter Avoidance Principle seems descriptively correct too. It is surely false that our beliefs are closed under deduction.<sup>17</sup>

The plausibility and attractiveness of the Clutter Avoidance Principle impel us to examine what else it commits us to. The principle seems to be motivated by the intuition that beliefs take up space and time. For instance, it might be thought that it takes time to add

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16. Harman [1986], p.12.

17. Though someone might worry about this claim, and for the following sort of reason. It would be odd for an agent to believe  $p$  and to believe that if  $p$  then  $q$ , yet fail to believe, or come to believe  $q$ . But we need not share this intuition. There are many factors that mitigate against an agent drawing that conclusion. For example, he may have independent reasons for believing not- $q$ , or there may be certain epistemological restrictions - the inferential routes to some consequences being so complicated he could not follow them etc.

consequences to our set of beliefs; that we have a limited storage capacity for beliefs; that there are limits on retrieval from this storage box, and so on. Doxastic clutter arises because there is insufficient room in the agent's mind/brain for all his beliefs. Hence, the principle is underpinned by one very substantial assumption, viz., that some of our beliefs are explicitly represented; where for a belief to be explicitly represented is for there to be a physical token of that belief (or, more precisely, of its content) in the agent's mind/brain (e.g., a syntactic string in the language of thought).<sup>18</sup>

But are all our beliefs explicitly represented? The answer is pretty clearly no. As Harman says,

...not all one's beliefs can be explicitly represented in this way, since then one could believe only finitely many things. But one can and does believe infinitely many things.<sup>19</sup>

It is this fact, together with the plausible idea that there must be some constraints on how beliefs are stored, retrieved and made use of, that motivates Harman's distinction between implicit and explicit beliefs. (The Clutter Avoidance Principle will, of course, only apply to those beliefs whose contents are explicitly represented.)

According to Harman, explicit beliefs are those whose contents are physically tokened in the agent's mind/brain. Implicit beliefs are

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18. See Dennett [1987], p.216.

19. Harman, [1986], p.12.

those whose contents are not physically tokened, but which bear certain important relations to those beliefs whose contents are. Harman says,

...one believes something explicitly if one's belief in that thing involves an explicit mental representation whose content is the content of that belief [and]...something is believed only implicitly if it is not explicitly believed but, for example, is easily inferable from one's explicit beliefs. Given that one believes that the earth has exactly one sun, one can easily infer that the earth does not have two suns, that the earth does not have three suns, and so on. So all these propositions are things one believes implicitly....There are also cases in which one believes something that is easily inferable from one's beliefs without being strictly implied by them.<sup>20</sup>

On Harman's view, then, two conditions must be met in order that a belief be an implicit belief: (i) its content must not be explicitly, but rather implicitly, represented and (ii) its content must bear certain inferential relations to the contents of those beliefs whose contents are explicitly represented. Harman's account of implicit belief appears to be straightforward and simple but I want now to raise some difficulties for it. It is plain that the success of Harman's account of implicit belief depends on the notions of explicit and implicit representation respectively. (This should not surprise us since he is a representationalist.) I must confess, I am not as sure as many philosophers of mind seem to be about what explicit representation actually amounts to, but let us grant Harman the plausibility of the notion. Still, it remains completely obscure what it could mean for the

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20. Harman [1986], p.13.

content of a belief to be implicitly represented. Cummins [1989] raises this worry too. He writes,

"Inexplicit representation" is, I take it, a contradiction in terms. For some content to be explicit in a system is just for it to be the content of some representation - i.e., [in the "computational theory of cognition"] the content of some data structure.<sup>21</sup>

The very concept of representation appears to involve the concept of physical tokens. Yet here we seem to be committed to the existence of representations that do not involve physical tokenings. The question is: are there such things?

Perhaps there is a sense in which we can talk about implicit representation. Imagine a machine that explicitly represents the proposition  $p$  at time  $t_1$ , (perhaps by typing out a sentence with that content). Later, say at  $t_2$ , the machine explicitly represents (in the same way) the proposition  $q$ . If we adopt the "intentional stance" toward the machine and wonder why it produced the sentence with  $q$  as content, we say that it implicitly "believes" that if  $p$  then  $q$ , and the rule modus ponens. These propositions are, we might claim, implicitly represented in the machine, and that this is all there is to implicit representation.<sup>22</sup>

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21. Cummins [1989], p.158 n.10. It is dissatisfaction with this idea that leads Cummins to talk about implicit information rather than implicit representation. The details can be found in Cummins [1986], [1989].

22. Dennett [1987] addresses this question also. He writes, "[O]ne might well say that implicit representation isn't representation at all; only explicit representation is representation. But then one should



Now perhaps Harman's view about what it is for the content of a belief to be implicitly represented can be understood in similar terms. His account certainly does trade on the existence of certain inferential relations holding between the contents of an agent's putative implicit beliefs and those of his explicit beliefs. He says, for example, implicit beliefs are those that are implied by or inferable from, one's explicit beliefs, or "[a belief] may be implicit in one's believing something else."<sup>23</sup> But cashing out the notion of implicit representation in terms of inferential "connectedness" will not do, for at least two reasons. In the first place, it involves blurring the important distinction between (1) how the content of a belief is represented, and (2) the kind of access an agent has to that content. Secondly, it is unclear just how successful the appeal to inferential connectedness can be in demarcating implicit and explicit beliefs. I will return to the distinction between representation and access below (see p.200), but for the moment let me address the second point.

There is something very appealing in characterizing implicit beliefs in terms of their inferential relations to an agent's explicit

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go on to note that if this is what we are going to understand by "representation," there are ways of holding or even sending information in a system that do not involve representing it. After all, a spy can send a message from A to B indirectly by sending explicit premises from which the intended message, the information-to-be-sent follows (p.217)."

23. Harman [1986], p.13.

beliefs. But if we rely on just this feature we will actually be unable to draw an implicit/explicit distinction over beliefs. This is because the property of being inferentially connected to other beliefs is not unique to a particular subset of beliefs. In fact, inferential connectedness is a ubiquitous property of beliefs.

But even if the degree of inferential connectedness of particular beliefs could be ascertained so permitting some clear distinction to be made between implicit and explicit beliefs, in what sense could an agent be said to have such implicit beliefs? The mere fact that some proposition, p, is inferable from some other proposition I explicitly believe, say q, does not entail that I believe p. To be sure, the proposition that the Earth has less than fifty-three moons is inferable from my belief that the Earth has just one moon. But that doesn't suffice to show that I believed that the Earth has less than fifty-three moons before I entertained that proposition. The fact that these propositions are inferentially related is a fact about meaning and logic, and not a fact about me qua believer.

The point can be sharpened by the following example due to Goldman:

Suppose p is entailed by q, and S already believes q. Does it follow that S ought to believe p; or even that he may believe p? Not at all. Even if he notices that that q entails p, it is not clear that an appropriate move is to add p to his belief corpus. Perhaps what he ought to do, upon noting that q entails p, is abandon his belief in q! After all, sometimes we learn things that make it advisable to abandon our prior beliefs. We might learn that prior beliefs have a certain untenable consequence. For example, you might discover that your prior beliefs jointly entail that you don't have a head. Instead of concluding that you

don't have a head, you may be better advised to infer the falsity of some prior belief or beliefs.<sup>24</sup>

As a representationalist, Harman is driven to provide an account of implicit belief as a solution to the storage problem posed by the VLNT. Thus, his characterization trades on the alleged distinction between implicit and explicit representation. As we have just seen there is reason to doubt that this strategy will work. Consideration of the the second difficulty for Harman's view must await some discussion of the Special Property Thesis.

#### 4.3 Implicit Belief and The Special Property Thesis

What property, or properties, serves to distinguish Jose's belief about aardvarks from his other beliefs, e.g., his beliefs about his name and address? One needs to specify what one means to convey by the use of term "implicit". That is, one needs to say exactly what it is about doxastic states like Jose's (putative) belief concerning the sartorial dispositions of aardvarks that warrants the appellation "implicit". For ease of exposition, (and to avoid begging any questions), let's call beliefs like these A-beliefs, (short for "aardvark-beliefs"). What we want to know is what is special or peculiar about an agent's A-beliefs.

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24. Goldman [1970], pp.84-5; and it should be noted that Goldman is not using "prior" here to mean "implicit". See also Harman [1973], p.157; [1986], p.11.

### 4.3.1 Representation and Access

In 4.2.1 (see p.197 above), I mentioned that Harman's account of implicit representation involved blurring an important distinction. Precisely which distinction is that? Consider the following expressions:

- (1) A has the implicit belief that p and,
- (2) A implicitly believes that p.

In (1), "implicit" functions as an adjective and it is tempting, therefore, to think that expressions like (1) say something how the belief that p exists in A. Or, less problematically, about how the content of that belief is represented in A. On the other hand, in (2), "implicitly" serves to modify the verb to believe. Hence (2) seems to describe the relation in which the agent, A, stands to the proposition p.<sup>25</sup> Expressions like (1) and (2) are used synonymously in the literature, however it is not obvious that they do have the same meaning. Expressions like (1) raise an issue about the representation of the contents of some our beliefs and expressions like (2) raise an issue about the kind of access we have to those contents.

It is important to see that this distinction between representation and access is a genuine distinction. Questions about representation and

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25. I am ignoring Schifferesque objections that belief is non-relational. See Schiffer [1987].

questions about access are independent. Let us assume for the sake of argument that "access" means "conscious access", and that it is relatively uncontroversial that agents have unconscious beliefs.<sup>26</sup> Suppose Maria has the unconscious belief that her father hates her. Does her lack of access to that belief entail anything about how it might be represented? It does not. By the same token, imagine that we could examine Maria's "neural belief box" and discover an explicit representation of the proposition <my father hates me>. Could we infer from this that Maria has a particular kind of access to that proposition? Again, I think the answer is no. Notice too that Maria herself is in no better position than we are to make judgments about how the content of her beliefs are represented. Mutatis mutandis for the rest of us.<sup>27</sup>

Of course, assuming some form of representationalism to be true, it might turn out that unconscious beliefs are (or fail to be) represented in a distinctive fashion. More generally, we might discover that there is a very high correlation between different types of access and different types of representation. I do not wish to deny these possibilities. My point is only that such correlations would be contingent matters of fact. There is no a priori connection between the

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26. In fact, I will argue below that this is the wrong notion of access with respect to implicit belief. See 4.3.1.2.

27. Compare this with the point about a speaker's access to her linguistic knowledge; see p.173 above.

way in which the content of a belief is represented in an agent and the access the agent has to that content.

Once we take note of this distinction, I think we can see that the ascription of implicit belief is properly motivated by concerns about the kind of access an agent has to his A-beliefs. Recall that for the moment we are trying to account for why we are inclined to say, in the absence of any particular philosophical theory of belief, that Jose believes (and did believe all along) that aardvarks don't wear raincoats in the desert. And, it is worth bearing in mind that in making our commonsense ascriptions of belief, we do not consider how the contents of those beliefs are represented.

Two further considerations ought to encourage us to think of the "implicitness" of an agent's A-beliefs in terms of the access he has to the content of those beliefs rather than in terms of the ways those contents are represented.

First, a crucial issue in considering the data seems to be the fact that, prior to being queried, the content of an agent's A-belief has never been entertained by the agent before. We might cash this notion out in a number of ways: the proposition that aardvarks don't wear raincoats in the desert never occurred to Jose before; Jose was unconscious of the fact that he believed that aardvarks don't wear raincoats in the desert; perhaps, Jose's belief about aardvarks was not connected in certain crucial ways with others of his propositional

attitudes. Each of these ways of characterizing A-beliefs can be understood in terms of the kind of access that an agent has to the content of the relevant beliefs. For all of these things say something about the relation in which the agent stands to his A-beliefs.

Secondly, as we have seen, it is not easy to say exactly what it is for something to be implicitly represented. In our machine example above (p.196), we are best advised not to say that the conditional proposition is implicitly represented in the machine, but rather that it, and perhaps the rule modus ponens, are "contained" in the machine. But I do not think there is a coherent correlative notion of "containment" in the human case. Beliefs are ascribed to agents; they are not contained in them.

I suggest, therefore, that we think of the "implicitness" of an agent's A-beliefs in terms of the kind of access he has to the content of those beliefs.

#### **4.3.1.1 Inferential Accessibility**

In my discussion of Harman I said that perhaps he could provide an account of implicit representation (and hence, for him, of implicit belief) by exploiting the inferential connectedness of the relevant beliefs. But I want to show that this strategy actually involves giving up on the idea of characterizing implicit beliefs in terms of how they

are represented. For inferential connectedness is best thought of as a type of access that an agent has to the content of his A-beliefs. Let me explain.

Jose, let us imagine, believes (explicitly) that the Earth has one and only one moon. He has never entertained the propositions that the Earth has less than two moons, that it has less than three moons, and so on. But we are inclined to say that Jose has these beliefs too. The claim could be put by saying that it is in virtue of explicitly believing that the Earth has only one moon that Jose implicitly believes that the Earth has less than n moons for every n less than, or equal to two. The "in virtue of" here is to be cashed out in terms of what is implied by what. So, believing q in virtue of believing p could mean either (i) that q is implied by p, or (ii) that p presupposes q.<sup>28</sup> So, we might say, an agent's implicit beliefs are those that have never occurred to him but that are, nonetheless, inferentially accessible to him. That is, he can deduce (or induce) them from his explicit beliefs.

Such accessibility will be more or less direct depending on the content of the agent's implicit beliefs in question. Jose's beliefs

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28. On this see Foley [1978], p.311; and Harman [1986]: "...in explicitly believing P, it may be that one believes one is justified in believing P. The proposition that one is justified in believing P is not ordinarily implied by the proposition P and may not be inferable from one's explicit beliefs, but it may be that in believing P one is committed to and so implicitly believes the proposition that one is justified in believing P (p.13)." Harman develops this idea more fully in chapter 5 of his [1986].



about the number of the Earth's moons are quite immediately connected with his belief that the Earth has one and only one moon. But it will be more complicated to trace the inferential paths between his belief about aardvarks' raincoats and his explicit beliefs.

Harman's characterization of implicit belief trades on the dubious idea of implicit representation. I argued that we could make some sense of the notion of implicit representation if we cashed it out in terms of inferential connectedness. And that feature involves considerations about the kind of access an agent has to the contents of his putative implicit beliefs. Since the issues of representation and access are independent, the only coherent construal of Harman's proposal fails to be a representationalist account at all. However, as it turns out, I do not think that inferential accessibility is the right way of explicating the kind of agent-access that is distinctive of A-beliefs anyway.

To help underscore the point here, it is useful to say a few words about a more familiar, though less direct way of making the same claim. Several philosophers who have concerned themselves with the problem of implicit belief have addressed the question of whether an agent's beliefs are closed under logical implication.<sup>29</sup> The general consensus of opinion is that they are not. And surely this must be right. Any set of beliefs will have an infinite number of logical consequences, but

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29. See Goldman [1986], p.174; Harman [1986], p.14; Lycan [1986], p.67; and Stich [1978], p.507.

an agent cannot believe all of them. And this has nothing to do with the putative storage capacity of an agent's brain or with her mortality. Some, perhaps a great many, of the logical consequences of my beliefs are too complex for me to entertain.<sup>30</sup> Human believers (and speakers) are, as a matter of fact, cognitively constrained. Hence if one is seriously interested in formulating an account of implicit belief, it is best to avoid laying too much emphasis on this idea of the inferential connectedness of beliefs. All beliefs are radically inferentially promiscuous;<sup>31</sup> this property is not unique to implicit belief.<sup>32</sup> Hence, inferential accessibility is not the kind of agent-access that serves to distinguish an agent's A-beliefs.

More importantly, I think that whatever plausibility the notion of inferential accessibility has as an account of implicitness rests on mis-identifying an agent's doxastic capacity with the inferential promiscuity of beliefs. I will return to this idea below (see 4.5).

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30. There is an interesting linguistic parallel: There are many well-formed expressions of English that I am simply unable to "keep in my mind" at one time (e.g., sentences with multiple embeddings).
31. The term is due to Stich [1978], p.506.
32. This ought to give us pause. The idea of inferential accessibility looked like a good candidate to capture the kind of access that an agent seems to have to his A-beliefs. But since we are unable to differentiate grades of inferential accessibility, perhaps there is reason to doubt that there is a coherent distinction between A-beliefs (implicit beliefs) and other types of beliefs. As will become obvious below, it is this position to which I find myself drawn.

I have argued that a proper account of implicit belief is going to have to explicate the notion of agent-access that is at work in our intuitions about A-beliefs. We have just seen that inferential accessibility will not by itself suffice as the relevant account of access. Before moving on, it will be worthwhile to consider another way in which this notion of accessibility can be made out. What I have in mind here is "conscious accessibility". For it might be thought that implicit beliefs could be uniquely characterized by a combination of inferential and conscious access. The idea certainly carries some prima facie plausibility, but as I will show, it also fails as an account of the agent-access that is characteristic of implicit belief.

#### 4.3.1.2 Consciousness

The idea to be considered here is that the property distinctive of an agent's A-beliefs, which property makes them implicit, is the agent's lack of conscious access to their contents. In short, that implicit beliefs are unconscious beliefs. I will briefly consider two accounts of unconscious belief and show that at least some of our A-beliefs are not unconscious beliefs.

Harman [1986] suggests two conditions on a belief being unconscious, where "unconscious" simply means "inaccessible to consciousness". A belief of mine is unconscious if (a) I am not aware that I have that belief, and (b) I cannot become aware of the belief

simply by wondering whether or not I have it.<sup>33</sup> It is clear, however, that not all an agent's A-beliefs are unconscious in this sense. Suppose I consciously believe that there is a sofa in the living room. Plausibly, one of my A-beliefs is that there is a piece of furniture in the living room. But this belief can be conscious. I can be aware that I have it, and that awareness can be the result of my reflecting on whether or not I have it. If pressed (or bored) I will recognize that I believe that there is a piece of furniture in the living room. Hence, this A-belief fails to meet Harman's two conditions for being an unconscious belief. It is clear, too, that Jose's belief about aardvarks is not an unconscious belief on this test either.

Another account of unconscious belief is forthcoming from psychoanalysis. It is hypothesized that we have beliefs of which we are completely unaware yet which significantly affect our behavior and our perception of the world. The therapist's job is to uncover patterns and connections in the patient's dreams and behavior and deduce, on the basis of this evidence, the underlying unconscious beliefs that are in some way responsible for these patterns and connections. The point of psychoanalysis is to reveal to the patient beliefs she has but had previously been unaware that she has. Put this way, it would seem that an agent can become aware of the contents of her unconscious beliefs

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33. See Harman [1986], p.14.

(contrary to Harman's criterion). On this test, A-beliefs are not automatically ruled out as candidate unconscious beliefs.

But, as Collins [1969] argues, psychoanalytic practice suggests another condition on a belief being unconscious. In the case of conscious beliefs, an agent is generally able to say why she believes that so-and-so. But it is not the case that the patient in analysis can provide any justification for her unconscious beliefs, even when she comes to discover (i.e., is told) that she has them. The patient can become aware that she believes that so-and-so, but her reasons for ascribing that belief to herself, so to speak, are generally the reasons with which her therapist provides her. Putting the point slightly differently, from the patient's point of view, her awareness of, and her access to her unconscious beliefs is more like her awareness of, and her access to the beliefs of others. But of course, in our example, Jose can tell us why he believes that armadillos don't wear raincoats in the desert. We can imagine him explaining his belief on the grounds that he knows that animals do not wear clothes. Hence, we can see that A-beliefs fail even this psychoanalytic test for being unconscious beliefs.

We cannot conclude, and I do not, that no A-beliefs are unconscious, or that A-beliefs cannot be unconscious. As I noted in my earlier discussion about the independence of representation and access, if either of these things turned out to be true, that would constitute an interesting empirical discovery. The point is simply that the terms

"implicit belief" and "unconscious belief" are not coextensive. Conscious access, or more precisely, lack of conscious access, then, does not seem to be the account of agent-access we are after.

That consciousness has little or anything to do with "implicitness" should not be surprising. For, I suspect, consciousness is a red herring in discussions about belief in general. Our introspective awareness of what we believe is at best a rough and ready indicator of what we actually do believe. I do not deny that we have privileged access to some of our psychological states (e.g., pains, hopes, fears; Wittgenstein notwithstanding). But there is little reason to think that any of us have a special ability to identify the content of our own beliefs.

We are investigating what account of implicit belief is forthcoming from a particular interpretation of the data with which we began. That interpretation, recall, is that the examples show that the agent (in some sense) believes all along things that he has never before entertained. We saw how a representationalist might argue for implicit belief (viz., via the Very Large Number Thesis) and I tried to point out the ways in which this strategy is unsuccessful. We have also been considering how we might give substance to the Special Property Thesis. Neither inferential accessibility nor consciousness appeared to provide an account of implicitness that matches our intuitions about an agent's A-beliefs. Another way of cashing out the idea that Jose believed all along that aardvarks don't wear raincoats in the desert, is to say that

that belief was, in some sense, "prepared" in him. I turn, then, to the question of whether an agent's A-beliefs are prepared beliefs.

#### 4.3.2 Preparedness

In our example, Jose unhesitatingly assents to the proposition that armduarks don't wear raincoats in the desert. We are operating on the assumption that this reveals a belief about armduarks that he had all along. (For ease of exposition, I will continue to refer to this (putative) belief (and others of the same kind) as Jose's A-beliefs. In this section, I want to investigate the idea that the distinguishing feature of A-beliefs, which feature is responsible for their "implicitness", is that they are "prepared."<sup>34</sup> The suggestion is a natural one; perhaps in part prompted by the speed with which Jose responds to the query: "Do armduarks wear raincoats in the desert?". To put the proposal colorfully: Just like those dubious pieces of dehydrated vegetable one finds in packet soups, we can think of Jose's belief about armduarks lying dormant, simply awaiting the addition of the doxastic equivalent of a cup of water. The proposal, then, is that

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34. This notion of prepared belief can sound a lot like that of prior belief. But I do not want the expression to be understood in that way. First, I am not sure what real sense can be given to the notion of prior belief; just how are beliefs to be temporally indexed? And second, even if we did possess a clear idea of prior belief, I intend the term "prepared" to mean something somewhat narrower; perhaps not all prior beliefs are prepared.

the feature of A-beliefs that makes them implicit is that they are "prepared" in the agent and that his access to them must be prompted in a particular kind of way. This appears the most direct route to capture the way in which implicit beliefs are pre-theoretically described, i.e., as beliefs that "are there all along". What we need is an account of this preparedness and of how an agent accesses these prepared beliefs.

But while this is a tempting proposal, it will not do as an account of what makes A-beliefs implicit. To see why not we will have to consider the senses in which a belief might be prepared. I suggest there are three senses of doxastic preparedness, and I will argue that none of these correspond to our intuitions about what is unique about A-beliefs.

#### 4.3.2.1 Memory Beliefs

A paradigmatic example of a prepared belief is what we might call a "memory belief", i.e., a belief stored in the agent's long-term memory (LTM).<sup>35</sup> Let us take as an example my belief that my mother's maiden name is MacKinlay. Imagine that this belief does lurk in my LTM and that when asked the relevant question, I readily respond "MacKinlay!"

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35. Put to one side the worries about whether it is beliefs per se, or rather contents-plus-attitude-flag that are stored in LTM; i.e., whether it is beliefs qua beliefs, or beliefs qua information that are stored. For more on this see Dennett [1978], p.47; and Bogdan [1986], p.170ff.



Is this what we mean by saying of Jose's A-beliefs that they are implicit? I don't think so. The appeal to memory will not do the job for several reasons.

First, it seems unlikely that Jose's belief about aardvarks was stored in his LTM simply awaiting "activation".<sup>36</sup> To be sure, the fact that my mother's maiden name is MacKinlay is not something I entertain often; in fact, I rarely think about it. Nonetheless, I have had occasion to reflect on it and apparently I stored it at some point. However, it is highly counter-intuitive to think of Jose's belief that aardvarks don't wear raincoats in the desert in this way. The whole point is that Jose has never entertained a thought about what aardvarks wear. Just as none of us, I would assume, have entertained a thought about Mozart's telephone number. One doesn't remember that Mozart didn't have a phone number; and we do not remember our A-beliefs.<sup>37</sup> This is just not what we have in mind when we speak of implicit belief.

In the second place, the idea that an agent's A-beliefs are those that are stored in long term memory again assumes a commitment to a form of representationalism which does not enter into our pre-theoretic intuitions about such beliefs. It may be that this is the way that the

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36. The term, and indeed, something like this general idea is Goldman's. See his [1986] chapter 10.

37. Although, perhaps in the grip of the Meno picture, (see p.184, note 7), one might think that A-beliefs were a particularly "deep" form of memory belief.

representationalist prefers to characterize A-beliefs, but it is not a strategy that will be universally appealing. Moreover, it ought not be a wholly attractive strategy for representationalists either. For if one thinks (i) that an agent has indefinitely many A-beliefs, and (ii) that an agent's A-beliefs are stored in LTM, one will be faced with a storage problem all over again (see p.179 above). The representationalist appeals to implicit belief as a solution to the very large number problem. It will do no good, then, to say that implicit beliefs are memory beliefs.<sup>38</sup>

Memory beliefs, if there are such things, are good examples of prepared beliefs. However it is clear that an agent's A-beliefs are not just his memory beliefs. I argued above that what it is distinctive of an agent's A-beliefs is that kind of access he has to them. In the case of memory beliefs the relevant notion of access is recall. But this does not seem to be what we have in mind when we speak of implicitness.

#### 4.3.2.2 Considered Opinions

Here is another way in which a belief might be prepared. Some of our beliefs are such that we arrive at them only after considerable reflection. Philosophical beliefs are prime specimens. On central philosophical questions, (e.g., the mind/body problem, the problem of

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38. But cf. Goldman [1986] who says, "LTM is virtually unlimited in capacity (p.200)."

personal identity etc.) it is common to find philosophers advancing considered opinions on the topic: "The Burge thought-experiments? Oh, my standard response to that is...." And though one doesn't constantly focus on these issues, when suitably prompted, one can (in a sense) access a prepared belief (or set of beliefs) almost immediately. But, again these are far from what we have in mind when we talk about A-beliefs. It is not as if our friend Jose, for example, has pondered the question about the dress habits of aardvarks and after much deliberation has settled on the belief that they don't wear raincoats in the desert. Ex hypothesi, Jose has never worried about this issue before. So, again while there are prepared beliefs in this sense, A-beliefs are not among them.

#### 4.3.2.3 General Beliefs

A third type of prepared belief is suggested by Ramsey's [1931] discussion of "general propositions". What I have in mind is this. Suppose Maria sees Jose about to reach into the toaster oven which she has just turned on; she calls out to warn him. Part of our explanation of this piece of verbal behavior is that Maria believes that were Jose to put his hand in the oven he would be burned. It is highly likely that Maria has never entertained that particular proposition before, but it makes little sense to think that she implicitly believes that were Jose to put his hand in an operating toaster oven, he would be burned.

Rather what we are inclined to say is that Maria implicitly believes the following proposition:

G: If x is a person and x puts his hand in a toaster oven when it is turned on, then x's hand will be burned.

We might say that this belief is prepared in Maria, and that she merely comes to believe various substitution instances of it. As Ramsey puts it:

To believe that all men are mortal - what is it? Partly to say so, partly to believe in regard to any x that turns up that if he is a man he is mortal. The general belief consists in

(a) A general enunciation,

(b) A habit of singular belief.

These are, of course, connected, the habit resulting from the enunciation according to a psychological law which makes the meaning of 'all'.<sup>39</sup>

While I do not intend to examine Ramsey's analysis in any detail, I think there is something very right about it. I think it likely that many of our "folk physics" beliefs are like this. For example, I have the general belief that for any x, if x is a physical object, were I drop x, then x would fall to the floor. My particular belief that this piece of chalk will fall to the floor if dropped is the result, we might say, of a habit of thought.<sup>40</sup>

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39. Ramsey [1931], pp.240-1.

40. It should be emphasized that I am speaking here of folk beliefs about the properties of the physical world. The contents of such beliefs are noticeably without ceterius paribus clauses; they do not presume to be laws of physics.

General beliefs are certainly fine candidates for prepared beliefs,<sup>41</sup> but again they fail to be plausible A-beliefs. Jose's belief about aardvarks is not a general belief in this sense. If it is to be considered in this context at all, it is best thought of as a singular belief, arrived at by a habit of thought from the general belief, say, that animals don't wear clothes. I do not want to pursue this idea at this stage; suffice it to say that A-beliefs are not general beliefs.

There is one final point to be made about this idea of preparedness as the property characteristic of A-beliefs. As I have already mentioned (p.211), we might think that an agent's assent to propositions that are the contents of his prepared beliefs would be faster than his assent to those of his unprepared beliefs (whatever they might be).<sup>42</sup> Suppose a man has been catching the 10.00am train to Princeton every weekday for the past year and that that train is always late. Now imagine asking him two questions: (a) "Does the 10.00am train run on time?", and (b) "Does Saul Kripke have three heads?" The man's response to both questions will be "No" and we might expect that it will be more quickly elicited in answer to (b) than it will be to (a). Now (b) is an example

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41. Though, of course, Ramsey didn't see things this way. Indeed, Ramsey was inclined to deny that things like G above were beliefs at all. He preferred to refer to them as parts of an agent's psychological make-up.

42. This discussion of preparedness naturally prompts the question as to what it is for a belief to be unprepared. Perhaps we could say that unprepared beliefs are the ones we form in the usual ways, e.g., perceptual beliefs, beliefs we acquire from reading the newspaper etc.

of an A-belief while (a) is not. And yet surely, the man's belief that the 10.00am train is never on time is prepared in a way that his belief about Kripke's anatomy is not. So we see that the feature of an agent's beliefs that inclined us to investigate the notion of preparedness leads us astray in this instance.

#### 4.3.3 Summary

I have examined a particular strategy for arguing for implicit belief. That strategy, whether it proceeds along the lines of the Special Property Thesis, or along the lines of the Very Large Number Thesis, takes as its point of departure the idea that an agent's unhesitating assent to a previously unconsidered proposition reveals a belief that he had all along. However, as we saw, numerous difficulties attend making out an account of implicit belief along these lines.

In an effort to give substance to the Special Property Thesis, I drew attention to the distinction between the kind of access an agent has to the contents of his beliefs and the ways in which such content might be represented; and I argued that implicitness is best understood in terms of agent-access. Several accounts of agent-access were considered, but none of them seemed to correspond to our pre-theoretic sense of what makes these putative beliefs special. Does this spell disaster for an account of implicit belief? And, if so, how are our intuitions about the data to be explained?

Notice that we have been proceeding on the assumption that it is plausible to say that an agent has his A-beliefs all along. This is what makes the appeal to agent-access, in particular, to the idea of preparedness, so compelling. But perhaps it is this very assumption that has led us astray. Earlier, I noted that the data in question is ambiguous. In the next section I take up the alternative interpretation of that data.

#### 4.4 An Alternative Interpretation

In order to bring out this alternative reading it will be useful to briefly rehearse the example. An agent, Jose, has never wondered about the sartorial dispositions of little animals. Indeed, he may never have had a thought about armadillos all his life. We ask him whether armadillos wear raincoats in the desert, and without hesitation (and we might imagine, with a curious look at us), he says that of course they don't. Given that we are assuming, all things equal, what Jose says is a reliable indicator of what he believes, we attribute to him the belief that armadillos don't wear raincoats in the desert. It certainly seems right to say that he believes that proposition now. Our question is: Does Jose's assent indicate (a) that he believed that proposition all along, although he was unaware that he did, or (b) that he came to form that belief upon prompting?

It should be clear by now that a response along the lines of (a) does not look hopeful. In this section, then, I want to take up an

alternative explanation of Jose's assent, viz., that he comes to form the belief that aardvarks don't wear raincoats in the desert upon being asked. Notice, too, that if it is possible to provide such an explanation, and we are able to account for the data without invoking the questionable assumption that Jose believed all along that aardvarks don't wear raincoats in the desert, we will have no reason to think that agents have indefinitely many beliefs. Thus, the Very Large Number Thesis collapses, and at least the representationalist's motivation for drawing the distinction between implicit and explicit beliefs vanishes.

Naturally, if one wants to deny that Jose had the belief all along, one will have to say something about why or how he assents to the relevant proposition when prompted. A useful way of proceeding is to reflect on his doxastic state prior to prompting. In virtue of the way the example has been set up, we can say several things about that already. It is not the case that Jose disbelieved that aardvarks don't wear raincoats in the desert. Neither is it the case that he withheld belief about the matter. Both of these options are closed, because we are taking as given the fact that Jose never gave the question about aardvarks and raincoats any thought. The whole point at issue is that there are propositions that have never occurred to Jose, that he will nonetheless assent to believing upon prompting. But we still require an explanation of his ready assent to that proposition. We are left to consider the plausibility of the suggestion that he comes to form that belief when prompted.



Someone might feel a twinge of resistance to this proposal, on the grounds that it entails a very strange account of belief acquisition. Can it be that an agent can acquire the belief that *p* simply in virtue of being asked whether *p*? I am inclined to say that this is perfectly plausible. Of course, not all an agent's beliefs are acquired in this way; but that is not the claim. An brief example will illustrate the point. Inspector Clouseau is investigating a murder. He has questioned all the likely suspects, considered their potential guilt and is still no closer to solving the case. Then someone asks him "Have you considered the butler?" and almost spontaneously Clouseau cries, "Ah-ah! The butler did it!" The inspector had not thought about the butler previously and hence certainly did not believe the butler to be guilty (prior to being asked). What he does, is come to acquire the relevant belief upon prompting. As Audi notes,

The disposition to affirm a proposition may indicate either believing it at the time or simply a disposition to believe it at that time. Affirmation may indicate the formation of a belief, as well as a belief already formed.<sup>43</sup>

What further substance can be given to this idea that an agent's A-beliefs (i.e., his implicit beliefs) are those that he would come to form if suitably prompted?

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43. Audi [1982], p.120.

#### 4.4.1 Dispositional Beliefs

One thing to say is that Jose is disposed to form the belief that aardvarks don't wear raincoats in the desert. But before we can say what it would be agent to have such a disposition, it is important to notice the difference between the following:

- (1) A's having the dispositional belief that p, and
- (2) A's being disposed to form the belief that p.

Philosophers disagree about the exact details of what counts as a dispositional belief, but no account that is on offer entails that an agent's implicit beliefs are identical with his dispositional beliefs. Harman [1986] says a belief is a dispositional belief if it is not "currently before one's consciousness or...in some other way currently operative in guiding whatever one is thinking or doing."<sup>44</sup> He is neutral on the matter of how, in general, dispositional and occurrent beliefs are represented. In contrast, Goldman [1986] draws the occurrent/dispositional distinction within the class of explicitly represented beliefs. Goldman is inclined to insist that all genuine beliefs are explicitly represented, i.e., stored in long-term memory, and according to him, a belief is occurrent if it is in a region of the agent's long-term memory that is "lit up" or "activated"; otherwise it

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44. Harman [1986], p.14.

is dispositional.<sup>45</sup> Goldman's view is explanation-driven: he contends that only explicitly represented beliefs can feature in explanations of an agent's behavior.<sup>46</sup>

We can now identify three reasons to think that the occurrent/dispositional distinction (over beliefs) is not coextensive with the implicit/explicit distinction (over beliefs). First, not all one's explicit beliefs are always before one's consciousness; e.g., you are not always thinking of your address or of your telephone number. Secondly, we cannot think of Jose's belief about aardvarks as an "unactivated" entry in his long-term memory for which our question provides the requisite trigger. This is so because Jose has never thought about aardvarks' raincoats before; there is no explicit representation of the relevant fact in his long-term memory. (Contrast e.g., his belief about his mother's maiden name.) Finally, it is not obvious, pace Goldman, that an agent's implicit (i.e., not explicitly represented) beliefs cannot feature in explanations of her behavior. I take it that part of the (admittedly not very interesting) explanation of why I get on the step ladder to reach the top shelf of my bookcase is

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45. The details can be found in Goldman [1986], chap. 10.

46. For the beginnings of this view, minus its cognitive science trappings, see Goldman [1970]; for the recent incarnation see Goldman [1986], pp.204ff. Cf. Dennett [1987], p.15, p.29.

that I believe that I am not 8' tall, that I am not 9' tall, and so on.<sup>47</sup>

Lycan [1986] has argued persuasively, I think, that it is distinctly misleading to think of a dispositional/occurrent contrast along the lines just outlined. He correctly notes that all beliefs are dispositions, viz., dispositions to judge. What sense remains of the idea of an occurrent belief is to be cashed out in terms of beliefs stored in memory.<sup>48</sup> Beliefs, qua dispositions, are thus to be understood across the board as enduring states of the agent.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, I suggest that we abandon the investigation of dispositional beliefs and focus instead on (2) above, viz., on the dispositions of the agent to form beliefs.

#### 4.4.2 Dispositions Revisited

In chapter two (p.65), I drew attention to two distinct ways to think about dispositions. On the one hand, we have the bare dispositional account, thus: An agent, A, has the disposition to  $\phi$  if there is a true counterfactual of the form

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47. For more on this see Audi [1982], p.117; Foley [1978], p.312.

48. Cf. Goldman [1970], p.97, p.86; [1986], p.199 who argues against the claim that any of our propositional attitudes are to be understood as dispositions.

49. See also Armstrong [1973].

BD: Given conditions C, if the agent were to receive input  $I_1$ , then the agent would produce output  $O_1$ .

This is to be contrasted with the full-blooded characterization:

FBD: There is some state of the agent,  $S_1$ , such that, given conditions C and input  $I_1$ ,  $S_1$  together with  $I_1$  serves to produce output  $O_1$ .

I claimed a greater explanatory power for dispositions characterized full-bloodedly. Since such a characterization advert to states of the agent which underpin the dispositions in question, we are able to explain both the agent's  $\theta$ -ing's and his failings-to- $\theta$ .

In the present context, we are interested in explaining Jose's unhesitating assent to the proposition that armadillos don't wear raincoats in the desert in terms of his disposition to form that belief when prompted. But haven't we got ourselves into a bit of mess here. For if we agree with Lycan that all beliefs are dispositions, then what we are committed to explaining in the present case is Jose's disposition to form the disposition to judge that armadillos don't wear raincoats in the desert. However, I think that it is safe to say that being disposed to be disposed to judge that p is just the same as being disposed to judge that p. The tough question does not concern the possibility of "nested dispositions", but rather what grounds the agent's dispositions.

That is, we want to know something about the relevant state, S, of Jose that grounds his disposition to form the belief in question.<sup>50</sup>

#### 4.4.2.1 Grounding Dispositions

Let us call the state (or set of states), S, that grounds a disposition, D, is often called D's categorical basis.<sup>51</sup> It is clear that if we are to think of beliefs in general as dispositions, that the project of specifying the categorical bases of such dispositions is central. For not just any old dispositions to judge will count as beliefs. Lycan asks to consider the following case (I quote him in full):

The opinionated man. He is a Peircean, in that he abhors being agnostic on any subject, but not enough of a Peircean, in that in him the 'irritation of doubt' triggers not inquiry but a snap judgement. At least, on many occasions when he entertains a proposition for the first time, he immediately affirms or denies it, depending on what else is going on in his global psychology at the time. (Let us take 'global psychology' broadly here, to include any mental or neurophysiological condition that has psychological influence.) Thus, at a time t our subject has countless dispositions to judge - determined by his global psychology - but we would not count<sup>52</sup> these as antecedently existing beliefs, however tacit.

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50. This may or may not be a further disposition. I am going to assume in what follows that it is not. See Prior [1985], chap.5 for discussion.

51. See Prior [1985] for a very clear account.

52. Lycan [1986], p.65. Notice that the point here is not directed solely against antecedently existing beliefs. The example makes us wonder whether any of the man's pronouncements are expressions of his beliefs, punkt.

Lycan's message is clear. It is not sufficient for the attribution of beliefs that an agent is willing to make assertions.<sup>53</sup> Supposing this man to be as Lycan describes him, we would be hard-pressed to know what beliefs to attribute to him. Of course, he will have some beliefs, but since he seems to have no reason to say one thing rather another, what he says will never reliably indicate what he believes.<sup>54</sup> If he does succeed in expressing a belief he actually holds ("deep down" in his unopinionated self), it will be purely fortuitous. To be sure, his dispositions are grounded; but they are grounded in his whole psychology. And therein lies the problem. In specifying the categorical basis of a disposition we will need to be more particular.

But merely settling on one particular part of the man's psychology will not do either. Lycan imagines another case: the opinionated man makes his snap judgments not on the basis of what is going on in his global psychology, but on the basis of the results of an internal "coin-flipper". While this basis is more constrained than the first, the situation here is no better. For notice that coin-flipper grounds all the man's dispositions to judge. And since it grounds every putative belief, it grounds none at all.

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53. See my discussion of the "assertion principle" (4.1.2 above).

54. Though as I have emphasized all along, we can always appeal to an agent's non-verbal behavior to help fix the content of his beliefs.

The requirement that we specify the relevant categorical bases of dispositions is even more pressing if wish to give substance to the notion of implicit belief in distinction to that of explicit belief. How might this be done?

#### 4.4.2.2 Grounding Implicit Beliefs

Goldman [1986], who prefers to interpret the case of assent to previously unconsidered propositions in way we are now considering says,

If a person has never thought whether New York is in Venezuela, then he does not already believe that New York is in Venezuela. If he has never asked himself whether zebras wear codpieces in the wild, then he does not already believe that zebras don't wear codpieces in the wild. He may be disposed to assent to these propositions unhesitatingly, the moment they are queried. But this just shows that he has beliefs from which these conclusions would be readily inferred. It does not show that he already believes each conclusion, prior to the question being raised.<sup>55</sup>

Goldman's suggestion would be that what constitutes the relevant state of Jose is a set of beliefs (i.e., explicitly represented propositions in his long-term memory) from which he can infer the proposition that aardvarks don't wear raincoats in the desert. So for Goldman, one can be disposed to form many beliefs, but one only has a limited number of beliefs, namely the ones that are stored in long-term memory.

Goldman's suggestion can look a little like the idea of general beliefs I examined earlier (p.215). But it differs in one crucial

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55. Goldman [1986], p.202.



respect. The thought behind the notion of a general belief was that we explain an agent's assent to particular propositions she has never previously considered in terms of her filling in the variables of some general proposition of the form, e.g.:

G: If x is a person and x puts his  
hand in a toaster oven when it is turned  
on, then x's hand will be burned.

However what Goldman would have in mind for the content of the state that grounds the agent's dispositions is something more specific; e.g., in Jose's case, a set of propositions including, <animals don't wear clothes in their natural environments>, <aardvarks are animals>, and so on. In this respect Goldman's suggestion is more like an early proposal of Dennett's [1975].<sup>56</sup>

In an effort to account for the apparent infinity of beliefs, Dennett suggests that we imagine an agent equipped with a "core library" of explicitly represented beliefs. Attached to this library is an "extrapolator-deducer" mechanism which generates further beliefs which are the logical consequences of the beliefs in the core. These, Dennett calls an agent's "virtual" beliefs. Thus, he cashes out the implicit/explicit distinction thus: my explicit beliefs are those in my core library and my implicit beliefs are all those beliefs that are potentially deducible from the core. On this account, for an agent to implicitly believe p is for his extrapolator-deducer mechanism to work

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56. Similar strategies are suggested in Audi [1982], p.116; Bogdan [1986], p.172.

in a particular way. On the model of implicit belief we are considering, i.e, that an agent is disposed to form a particular belief, the core library together with the extrapolator-deducer mechanism constitutes the state, S that grounds the relevant counterfactuals.

Ingenious as these proposals are, they will not do as accounts of implicit belief. Goldman's idea suffers from a number of defects, only one of which I mention here. On his view, there is no principled way to distinguish between beliefs that get "activated" and beliefs that are inferred from stored beliefs. If you ask me "p?" and I respond affirmatively, even I am unable to tell whether I simply retrieve that belief from memory, or whether I infer p from other beliefs that I retrieve (or am currently entertaining.) I dare say that the phenomenology in either case is not all that different; for a wide range of cases, both inference to p and retrieval of p will be almost instantaneous. On any view of implicit belief that takes them to be things that an agent would infer from her stock of explicit beliefs, there is no way to tell either "from the outside" or "from the inside" which of her beliefs is implicit or explicit. This point is reinforced by remembering the earlier discussion of inferential connectedness (p.204).

Lycan [1986] and (ironically) Goldman [1986] have been critical of Dennett's proposal. Several questions arise about the operation of the extrapolator-deducer mechanism. That mechanism's "job" is to deduce the logical consequences of the beliefs held in the core library. But if

that is all it does, it is likely to generate many more beliefs than we think agents have. This is, perhaps, not the happiest way of putting the matter, since if one is not wedded to a strong form of representationalism, there is no sense to be made of saying how many belief an agent can "have". I think the better way to articulate the worry is to say that the extrapolator-deducer model explains too much (see p.167 above). The model represents an agent's beliefs as closed under implication, and we know that that is not true of any human being. Perhaps as a model of the doxastic structure of an omniscient agent the extrapolator-deducer would be more successful.<sup>57</sup>

Secondly, the extrapolator-deducer mechanism works according to the rules of deductive logic, but as Goldman [1986] points out, "these rules are not belief-formation rules. They are simply rules for writing down formulas."<sup>58</sup> Moreover, it is unlikely that beliefs generated in this way will be connected in the right sorts of way with the agent's other beliefs.

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57. There are ways in which the model could be modified to reflect more accurately the doxastic constitution of human agents. Lycan considers and rejects several ways in which we might try to constrain the operation of the extrapolator-deducer mechanism; see Lycan [1986], pp.66-72.

58. Goldman [1986], p.87.

## 4.5 Conclusion

I have argued that the most promising account of implicit belief will be a full-blooded dispositional account. Crucial to this project will be the specification of the particular states that ground the agent's various beliefs. I considered two ways in which we might try to cash out the basis of an agent's implicit beliefs and it appeared that neither will be successful. In particular, neither account allowed us to distinguish between an agent's implicit beliefs and her explicit beliefs. I think this is an interesting result, and one that, perhaps, is to be expected.

Underlying all the accounts of implicit belief discussed in the first part of this chapter is the assumption that beliefs are in some sense or other "countable". By this I do not mean just that beliefs can be individuated, but rather that they are things agents have. This assumption is clearly at work in the theories of implicit belief whose motivation lies in the Very Large Number Thesis. And it is also evident in the attempt to give substance to the Special Property Thesis. In all cases, the attempt to provide an account of implicit belief is driven primarily by considerations about beliefs rather than believers. To be sure, this emphasis shifts a little in the discussion of implicit beliefs as dispositions, but the focus there is still on a core of explicitly represented propositions and their consequences. We are no closer to saying what implicit beliefs are, or indeed to establishing whether there are any.

My suggestion is that in order to understand the issues here we need to take an even closer look at believers.

To believe p is to be disposed to judge that p. And I would argue that to have the disposition to judge that p is to have a particular ability. The fact that an agent will unhesitatingly assent to a proposition he has never previously entertained does not show that he believed ("had") that proposition all along, and so does not indicate that he has indefinitely many beliefs. Rather its explanation requires that we attribute to the agent an ability to entertain and/or generate an indefinite number of beliefs. It will be helpful to bring out what I mean here to notice the striking parallel between an agent's (putative) doxastic capacity (qua believer) and his linguistic capacity (qua speaker).

Suppose that Jose has never previously considered the proposition, that aardvarks don't wear raincoats in the desert. When we ask him whether it is the case that they don't, he replies in the affirmative and admits to believing that they don't. It was the desire to explain this unhesitating assent that got us thinking about implicit belief in the first place. But I think we should be equally struck by the fact that Jose (assuming that he is a normal speaker of English) understood the sentence in question, since presumably he had never heard or read it before.

Now we have many times commented on the open-endedness, or unboundedness of speakers' linguistic capacities. But to say that a competent speaker of a natural language has an unbounded linguistic capacity is not to say that she has somehow stored the meanings of an infinite number of sentences in her language. Rather what is meant is that she is able to produce and understand a potential infinity of well-formed expressions in her language. For example, Anglophones are able to understand most any arbitrary English sentences with which they are presented. Natural languages are literally unbounded and we explain this in terms of compositionality and the recursivity of meaning. But the infinite expressive power of a natural language must not be confused with the extent or "volume" of the cognitive states of a speaker of that language. It might be true to say that a natural language contains an infinite number of sentences. But nothing follows from this about the number of sentences any one speaker "has".

The question that remains, of course, is how it is possible for finite creatures like human beings to "interact" with infinite things like natural languages. The suggestion under consideration in this thesis is that speakers know a recursive meaning theory and/or a grammar for their language. Such knowledge is implicit, or tacit, in the sense that speakers cannot articulate it verbally and are not aware of deploying it when they routinely speak and understand their language. What we say is that a speaker's open-ended linguistic capacity is an

ability she has; an ability underpinned by her implicit linguistic knowledge.

I suggest that we think of an agent's apparently unbounded doxastic capacity in the same way. Like a natural language, belief too is literally unbounded. And that feature is best captured by the fact that beliefs are inferentially promiscuous (see p.206 above). Just as we must avoid attributing to a speaker the infinite expressive power that is properly predicated of her language, we must avoid attributing to a believer the inferential unboundedness that is properly predicated of her beliefs. A speaker does not serially store the meanings of an infinite number of sentences in her brain; neither does a believer store an infinite number of beliefs. An agent does have an open-ended doxastic capacity that requires explanation. But this ought to be understood in terms of an ability she has to entertain and/or generate a vast range of beliefs.

This is all well and good, but what are we to say about what underpins this ability? It is hard to see what a doxastic analog of a theory of meaning, or of a grammar might be - short of it being a theory of the actual and who knows how many possible worlds! An agent's beliefs, qua dispositions, cannot be grounded by something that general. But neither can we try to restrict the base to a finite list of core beliefs. For, as we saw above, many problems attend such a strategy. Having said this, a question might now be raised about my use of the expression "entertain and generate" in describing an agent's doxastic

ability. In particular, if we are to think of the generation of beliefs, are we not faced with the Very Large Number Thesis and its concomitant storage problem again; what happens to all the beliefs that an agent generates? In the second place, we have seen that it is very hard to arrive at a workable account of the generation of beliefs. I am not entirely happy with this terminology myself. I intend only that "entertain" and "generate" parallel the terms "understand" and "produce" in the linguistic case. In particular, I do not mean to suggest that any agent actually generates an infinite number of beliefs. By the same token, no individual speaker actually understands or produces an infinite number of sentences in her language.<sup>59</sup>

We are back to where we started. The demand is to provide a specification of the states of an agent that ground her various doxastic dispositions. There are several striking similarities between beliefs and the sentences of a natural language. Both have content; mean one thing rather than another. They both exhibit systematic connections within their own class, e.g., entailment relations, and so on. And taking note of this, we are able to begin an explanation of a speaker's linguistic ability by attributing to her knowledge of a theory of

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59. Even if we could make sense of this, there is no reason to think that every belief an agent generates is stored. I might generate many, many beliefs (and not just perceptual ones) when I watch a movie. But these beliefs are evanescent; they are "gone" the next morning.



meaning for her language. But nothing like that seems to be available in the doxastic case.

There are two things to say here. First, the problem might stem from a serious misunderstanding of the nature of belief. The discussion has largely assumed that belief consists in a relation that an agent bears to a particular proposition, where a proposition is taken to be a quasi-linguistic entity. This picture certainly makes the linguistic analogy appealing. But perhaps it might be argued that the difficulty in pushing the that analogy any further resides in precisely this assumption. As Stalnaker puts it:

If semantic structure is essential to the abstract object the believer is said to be related to, how must that structure be involved in the state of the believer that constitutes his having the belief in order for the attribution [of that belief] to be correct?<sup>60</sup>

Perhaps we are unable to articulate such a structure (e.g., a generative doxastic theory that agents possess), because we have misdescribed the nature of belief. I do not have the space to take this issue on now. And, besides there may be another response.

This is the second point. For all that has been said about a speaker's implicit knowledge of the theory of meaning for her language, nothing has been advanced as an account of how that knowledge is represented in the speaker. We have already seen that there is reason to doubt that a speaker just knows a list of axioms and rules in any

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60. Stalnaker [1990], pp.132-133.

ordinary sense of that idea. I suggest that there is another way to characterize a speaker's implicit linguistic knowledge; and that it is a way that is more conducive to the doxastic case. This is the topic of the final chapter.

#### 4.5.1 Back to Implicit Beliefs

I have argued that an agent's doxastic capacity be explained in terms of the ability she has to entertain and generate a vast range of beliefs. It is in making this move, from consideration of the properties of beliefs to consideration of the properties of believers, that the expectation that there is a clear distinction between implicit and explicit beliefs is diminished. However, our new account is compatible with most everything that has gone before. It is plainly at one with the idea of construing all beliefs as full-blooded dispositions; it takes account of the inferential connectedness of beliefs; it is neutral of the question of conscious access to the content of beliefs; and it captures our intuitions of the preparedness of beliefs in terms of the preparedness of the believer.

## Chapter 5

### Implicit Linguistic Knowledge: An Account

"...the notion of knowledge cannot, after all, be extruded from the philosophy of language."

---Dummett [1978b], p.14.

In this chapter, I want to return to the idea that a speaker's language mastery consists in a set of abilities whose explanation requires the postulation of genuine linguistic knowledge. My aim is to investigate the plausibility of a particular account of such knowledge. We noted earlier (chapter three) that any account of implicit linguistic knowledge must meet several constraints. In the first place, it must avoid any charge of circularity. Second, it must be empirically respectable, i.e., meet Quine's challenge. Thirdly, and quite generally, it must be genuinely explanatory of speakers' linguistic mastery; neither imputing to speakers linguistic abilities they do not have, nor failing to account for those they manifestly do.

An account of implicit linguistic knowledge must do more than merely redescribe speakers' linguistic abilities; we want it to feature

in a causal explanation of those abilities. Thus, the account I will examine construes a speaker's language mastery as consisting in a set of full-blooded dispositions. And, as I noted in the last chapter, in order for this sort of analysis (of an intentional state) to be causally explanatory, it is necessary to specify what grounds the relevant dispositions. Finally, there is the following question: If it is possible to make out an account of implicit linguistic knowledge which simultaneously serves our explanatory purposes and meets the desiderata above, can it be adopted by someone who advances either of the arguments of chapter one?

## 5.1 A Dispositional Account of Implicit Linguistic Knowledge

Evans [1981] writes,

I suggest that we construe the claim that someone tacitly knows a theory of meaning as ascribing to that person a set of dispositions - one corresponding to each of the expressions for which the theory provides a distinct axiom.<sup>1</sup>

These dispositions will be dispositions to judge the meaning of each sentence of the language as such-and-such; e.g., on one account of meaning - dispositions to specify the truth conditions for each sentence. Thus, imagine "a little elementary and finite language,"<sup>2</sup> L, which contains ten names, a, b, c...; ten monadic predicates, F, G,

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1. Evans [1981], p.328.

2. The example is from Evans [1981].

H,..., and hence, just one hundred sentences, viz., Fa, Gb, Hc, and so on.

An agent will be a speaker of L just in case she understands (i.e., knows the meanings of) the sentences of L. Taking her language mastery to be a set of abilities, we may say that her understanding consists in her dispositions to judge the meanings of the sentences of L to be such-and-such and so-and-so. The suggestion under consideration is that the speaker's facility with L is to be explained by attributing to her implicit knowledge of a theory of meaning for L.

Suppose T1 is such a theory. T1 has 100 axioms of the form:

Fa is true iff John is bald

Fb is true iff Harry is bald

·  
·  
·

Ga is true iff John is happy

Gb is true iff Harry is happy

i.e., an axiom for each sentence in the language. A speaker who is credited with implicit knowledge of T1 will then have 100 distinct dispositions. For example, she will be disposed to judge that Fa is true iff (means that) John is bald; that Gb is true iff (means that) Harry is happy, and so on. But, notice that a different theory of meaning for L will specify the same meanings for sentences in L.

Consider T2: T2 has only 21 axioms: ten of the form:

a denotes John

b denotes Harry,

and ten of the form:

An object satisfies F iff it is bald

An object satisfies G iff it is happy.

Its twenty-first axiom is, crucially, a "compositional" axiom:

A: A sentence coupling a name with a predicate is true iff the object denoted by the name satisfies the predicate.

To say that a speaker implicitly knows T2 is to say that she is disposed to judge that Fa is true iff (means that) John is bald; that Gb is true iff (means that) Harry is happy, and so on. A speaker who implicitly knows T2 will not have 100 distinct dispositions, but rather each judgment of truth conditions she makes will be the manifestation of at least two "interacting" dispositions; one corresponding to the axiom that governs the name, and one corresponding to the axiom that governs the predicate. As Evans puts it:

"...a speaker U tacitly knows that the denotation of a is John iff he has a disposition such that:

(II $\emptyset$ ) (II $\forall$ ) if  
(i) U tacitly knows that an object satisfies  $\emptyset$  iff it is  $\forall$   
(ii) U hears an utterance having the form  $\emptyset^{\wedge}a$ ,  
then U will judge that the utterance is true iff John is  $\forall$ .

Connectedly, we say that a speaker U tacitly knows that an object satisfies F iff it is bald iff he has a disposition such that:

(IIx) (II $\wedge$ ) if  
(i) U tacitly knows that if the denotation of  $\wedge$  is x,  
(ii) U hears an utterance having the form

$F_{\alpha}^2$ ,  
then U will judge that the utterance  
is true iff x is bald."<sup>3</sup>

It should be obvious that T1 and T2 are extensionally equivalent, in the sense that they specify the same meanings to each of the one hundred sentences of L.

As we have seen, in order to even begin to be explanatory of a speaker's linguistic abilities, the attribution of implicit knowledge of a theory of meaning must be such that we can distinguish between the speaker knowing one theory and her knowing another extensionally equivalent one. It will do no good to say that the speaker implicitly knows T1 and T2, on the grounds that her semantic judgments are correctly described by both of them. For, in the first place, this sort of instrumentalist attribution of linguistic knowledge fails to be explanatory (see p.97, pp.146ff., above), and secondly, on this account of implicit knowledge, it is possible to determine which of two extensionally equivalent theories of meaning a speaker knows.

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3. Evans [1981], p.329. "II" is a universal substitutional quantifier; the variable  $\beta$  stands for names of predicate expressions in the object language;  $\forall$  stands for names of predicate expressions in the meta-language; x stands for names of names in the object language; and  $\alpha$  stands for names of names in the meta-language.

### 5.1.1 Meeting Quine's Challenge

The dispositions of a speaker who has implicit knowledge of T2 will differ numerically from those of a speaker who has implicit knowledge of T1. But as it stands this difference is theory-internal. We have said nothing yet to indicate how one could differentiate between a speaker who has implicit knowledge of T1 and a speaker who implicitly knows T2. Ex hypothesi, they will assign the same meanings to the sentences of L, and "from the outside" each of these judgments apparently manifests only one disposition. This is certainly true if what we are concerned with are bare dispositions; or mere input-output regularities. Typically, implicit knowledge of T1 or T2 will issue in the same regularities. But if we construe a speaker's linguistic behavior as manifesting full-blooded dispositions, things are quite otherwise. As Evans says,

...it is essential that the notion of a disposition...be understood in a full-blooded sense. These statements of tacit knowledge must not be regarded as simple statements of regularity, for if they were, anyone who correctly judged the meanings of complete sentences would have a tacit knowledge of T2.<sup>4</sup>

To attribute to an agent a full-blooded disposition to  $\theta$  (in conditions C) is to claim that there is some state of that agent, which together with the relevant input, serves to produce an instance of  $\theta$ -ing (see p.65 above). In the case at hand, we can distinguish between a speaker

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4. Evans [1981], p.329.



who implicitly knows T1 and a speaker who implicitly knows T2 by noting that the states which underpin their respective dispositions are different.

Recall that T1 and T2 vary in respect of how much structure they attribute to the sentences of L. T1 treats each sentence as an unstructured whole; whereas T2 treats the sentences of L as articulated: from the perspective of T2, Fa consists of two parts; a name, a and a predicate, F. Now we can imagine that this difference between T1 and T2 is reflected in the states underlying the dispositions of speakers to whom we ascribe implicit knowledge of one or other of the theories.

Since T1 contains 100 axioms, one for each sentence of the language, when we attribute implicit knowledge of T1 to a speaker, we explain her understanding of any one sentence of L, e.g., Fa, by appeal to some state in her which represents the relevant axiom, i.e., that Fa is true iff John is bald. On the other hand, an explanation of a speaker's understanding of Fa in terms of her implicit knowledge of T2 will require appeal to (at least) two distinct states of her, one corresponding to the axiom governing the name a, and one to that governing the predicate F. The linguistic dispositions of a speaker who implicitly knows T1 will always be underpinned by distinct states, but the linguistic dispositions of a speaker who implicitly knows T2 will always be underpinned by two (or more) states, and many of these dispositions will have a state in common. Thus the explanation of the latter sort of speaker's understanding of Fa and of Ga will advert to

the same state corresponding to axiom governing the name a. As Evans puts it,

...there is a single state of the subject which figures in a causal explanation of why he reacts in this regular way to all the sentences containing the expression.<sup>5</sup>

Having said this much, we are now in a position to see how the attribution to a speaker of L of implicit knowledge of T2 rather than of T2 can be justified.

Evans outlines several sorts of empirical evidence to which we can appeal in determining which of two extensionally equivalent theories a speaker tacitly knows. Crucial here, of course, is the appeal to a common factor in the explanation of a speaker's judgments. First, we can distinguish speakers who implicitly know T1 from those who implicitly know T2 in terms of how they acquire facility with their language. Here is a speaker whose competence in L extends only to the understanding of sentences containing the names, a, b, c, d, e, and the predicates, F, G, H, I, J. Imagine that she now encounters the expressions Ff and Gf and has the meanings of them explained to her. If the speaker knows T2 we would expect that she will, on the basis of understanding these two new sentences, be able to understand the previously un-encountered sentences, Hf, If and Jf. For on this model, what she has acquired in learning the meanings of Ff and Gf is a state which corresponds to the new name f. We are claiming that that state

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5. Evans [1981], pp.329-330.

will be available to interact with any other predicate state to produce her understanding of the new sentences just mentioned.

However, no such projection could be expected from a speaker who implicitly knows T1. For, recall, knowing T1 consists in having a distinct state corresponding to each whole sentence of the language. In this case, the speaker would have acquired two new states, one for Ff and one for Gf. But we have no reason to think that she will thereby be able to understand Hf, or If or Jf. The claim is not that she could not acquire understanding of those sentences in this way, but only that her implicit knowledge of T1 would not be able to explain how she came to have that understanding.

Similarly, we could determine which of the two theories T1 and T2 a speaker implicitly knows by observing patterns of breakdown in her understanding. Suppose that a speaker "loses" her understanding of the sentence Fa. If she knows T2, we would expect her understanding of other sentences containing the name a, or those containing the predicate F, to be similarly impaired. Hence, we would predict that she would be unable to understand Ga and Fb. If the speaker knows T1, this generalization of impairment would not be expected, for the same reasons given above.

In attributing to a speaker implicit knowledge of a particular theory we are saying that she has a particular set of full-blooded dispositions, where to say that an agent has a full-blooded disposition

to  $\mathcal{B}$  is to say more than just that she  $\mathcal{B}$ 's. It crucially carries with it the specification of a state, or states, whose presence serves to bring about the manifestation of the dispositions in question. The explanation of the agent's dispositions will then advert to this state, or to these states.

We can see that on Evans' account, Quine's challenge can be met. It does make empirical sense to attribute to a speaker of L implicit knowledge of T2 rather than of T1. But how does the proposal fare with respect to the other constraints we have noted? Does this account of implicit linguistic knowledge avoid charges of circularity? And exactly what kind of explanation does it deliver of a speaker's linguistic capacities?

### 5.1.2 Meeting the Circularity Objection

In 3.1.3, we saw that a potential problem for an account which attributed speakers with implicit knowledge of the theory of meaning for their language was that it would be circular. The circularity is thought to arise, because the theory of meaning itself must be couched in a language. If this is so, then we would want to know in what the speaker's understanding of that theoretical language consists. I did argue, however, that no necessity attached to the theory of meaning being actually expressed in another language (pp.153ff., above). And it is clear that in the present case, this type of circularity does not

immediately arise. Only if we assume that the states of which we have spoken contain explicit, consciously accessible tokens of the form "Fa is true iff John is bald", does this objection threaten. But we need say nothing of the kind.

However the account might be vulnerable to another sort of circularity. When a speaker, credited with implicit knowledge of T2 (the articulated theory of meaning), understands some sentence in L, say Gb, that understanding is explained by reference to two states, or as Evans would have it to two dispositions. As we saw (p.242), on Evans' account, the dispositions that constitute such a speaker's understanding are "inter-defined". Wright [1986] claims this poses a problem for the view. For it seems that the attribution of one disposition to a speaker cannot get off the ground without the attribution of another.<sup>6</sup> The point is this: it appears that in specifying the conditions of manifestation in the characterization of one disposition, we must appeal to another disposition whose characterization in turn makes mention, in the specification of its conditions of manifestation, of the very disposition we are trying to describe. What Wright has drawn our attention to here is the need to individuate the relevant dispositions more finely. That is, rather than define them in terms of one another, we would like to be able to specify the categorical bases of each of them.

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6. See Wright [1986], p.232f.

As I read him, Evans identifies the speaker's implicit knowledge of a theory of meaning with a set of full-blooded dispositions she has, and this is what leads him to inter-define them in the way he does. I am more inclined to follow Wright's suggestion and try to specify the states that ground the speaker's dispositions. And in particular, I would argue that we ought to think of the speaker's implicit knowledge as constitutive of those very states. This is not to identify the dispositions with the states that ground them;<sup>7</sup> I think that would be mistake, for reasons that will become clearer below.

So let us now turn to the more general question that Wright's objection forces us to consider, viz., With what do we want to identify knowledge of meaning? In what does linguistic knowledge consist?

## 5.2 In What Does Implicit Linguistic Knowledge Consist?

I have argued that we ought to think of a speaker's language mastery as a set of abilities she has. And I have suggested that we properly characterize those abilities as full-blooded dispositions. Now the question remains as to where a speaker's implicit linguistic knowledge is supposed to enter the picture. What role does it play in the explanation of a speaker's linguistic behavior?

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7. This is the way Armstrong prefers to think of dispositions. See Armstrong [1973], esp., pp.11-14.

A moment ago I suggested that we think of a speaker's linguistic knowledge as constituting the bases of her linguistic dispositions. But can this be right? In general, we look to the basis of a disposition to explain its typical manifestations. And, on those occasions when the disposition fails to manifest (in favorable conditions), we again appeal to the basis of the disposition, and in particular to what might be interfering with it. So for example, we explain the solubility of salt (in water, say) by appeal to the chemical structure of salt. When a particular sample of salt fails to dissolve in water, we explain this by citing factors that have interfered with the usual physio-chemical reactions that take place when salt is placed in water.

This is all well and good, but to which states do we appeal in the case of linguistic dispositions? I have said nothing yet about the nature of the states that ground a speaker's linguistic dispositions, other than to say that they are the locus of the speaker's implicit linguistic knowledge. But this looks very spurious indeed. The explanatory advantage of the appeal to full-blooded dispositions is clear in the case of physical substances like salt, but what is its currency in the present context?

If one wants to maintain the dispositional analysis of language mastery, one might reasonably suggest that we simply posit some physical bases for the relevant dispositions. Perhaps we might think of a

speaker's implicit linguistic knowledge as states of her neurophysiology.<sup>8</sup>

### 5.2.1 A Neurophysiological Basis?

If we want to push the analogy between full-blooded linguistic dispositions and full-blooded dispositions in the physical realm, it is a plausible move to think of the bases of linguistic dispositions as neurophysiological states. Forbes [1983], who motivates a full-blooded dispositional account of understanding for slightly different reasons,<sup>9</sup> raises just this question.

The full-blooded account is useful in the discussion of physical dispositions (e.g., salt's solubility in water), because we can explain instances of dispositions failing to manifest through, e.g., the "possibility of interference with the interaction between the relevant state of salt and that of water, whatever these states might be."<sup>10</sup> But what is the analog in the case of understanding? We cannot appeal to states of some spooky mental substance, so our only recourse seems to be

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8. Notice that if this were the case, Quine's challenge could be met on the results of cranial explorations. This move is hinted at by both Evans [1981], p.331; and Wright [1986], p.231.

9. Forbes' project is to respond to Kripke's challenge to dispositional accounts of meaning.

10. Forbes [1983], p.230.



to neurophysiology. We might then say that a speaker's dispositions are to be explained in terms of a particular set of brain states. Concomitantly, we would explain his failure to manifest the relevant dispositions by appeal to something that had gone wrong with those bits of his brain.

Now while this would be arguably faithful to the analogy with the physical case, it will be singularly unsatisfactory as an account of understanding. How, precisely, can neurophysiological facts explain understanding in the same way that facts about chemical structure explain salt's solubility. As Forbes and others<sup>11</sup> have pointed out, if our aim is to explain intentional phenomena, neurophysiology is just not going to capture the right generalizations.<sup>12</sup>

This is part of the reason that I think it is mistake to identify linguistic dispositions with their categorical bases. The appeal of linguistic knowledge is intimately associated with its being an intentional state (see chapter one). And if we try to reduce linguistic knowledge to brain states, we will lose all the explanatory power we

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11. Forbes [1983], p.237. And see esp., Fodor [1981], chap.5, [1987], chap.1.

12. Let me make clear that my objection to a neurophysiological account of implicit linguistic knowledge does not stem from the observation that were such a reduction possible, implicit linguistic knowledge would be explained by being "explained away." From the beginning, I have urged that we think of implicit linguistic knowledge as a place-holder; if in a completed science we have no room for intentional states, then so be it. However, I think this is extremely doubtful.

think accrues to intentional characterization. Moreover, I suspect that there is a distinction between "simple" dispositions and "complex" dispositions. The manifestation of simple dispositions, we might say, is the result of a single underlying state, whereas the manifestation of complex dispositions requires the presence and interaction of several, perhaps many, states. What we observe as a single disposition, e.g., understanding a sentence of the form Fa, might well be the product of several interacting bases. This is, of course, pure speculation, but it has some prima facie plausibility. From the very little we do know about how the human brain works, it appears that most of our behavior is underpinned by many physical units acting in concert. But that is a whole other story, so let us leave the matter there.

There is a further (more general) difficulty associated with identifying a speaker's linguistic dispositions with the state that grounds them. I have said that we ought to think of these states as constituted by the speaker's implicit linguistic knowledge. Notice that if we take such knowledge states to be states of the speaker's brain, this has the effect of putting the disposition in question wholly inside the speaker's head. But as I pointed out earlier (p.63), dispositions are in the first instance individuated by whatever behavior they are the disposition to produce. Thus, it is mistaken to think that they reside

solely inside the agent, and hence a mistake also to think they ought to be identified with the state that physically grounds them.<sup>13</sup>

The point holds mutatis mutandis if we identify a speaker's linguistic dispositions with grounding states that are purely psychological. Two creatures could be behaviorally indistinguishable and yet have very different things going on inside them. If we say that a speaker's linguistic knowledge consists in a set of full-blooded dispositions which in turn are identified with some purely psychological (internal) state of her, then the attribution of implicit knowledge becomes explanatorily idle. Since both speakers behave in the same way, it is hard to see how their implicit linguistic knowledge makes any difference.

To be sure, if the appeal to a speaker's dispositions is going to be explanatory, we must say something about the states that ground them. That is the whole point of invoking the notion of a full-blooded disposition.<sup>14</sup> But it is clear that we cannot rest content with either just neurophysiology or narrow psychology. It is natural then to

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13. Lycan [1984], pp.235ff., considers a related argument against "locating" a speaker's linguistic knowledge wholly inside her head.

14. Chomsky, of course, has argued (see chap. 2, note 57 above) that to say that a speaker has linguistic knowledge just is to say that she is in a particular brain state. But he also rejects the idea that linguistic competence be cashed out in terms of dispositions. Chomsky contends that the ultimate explanation of language mastery will be biological; here I am investigating the plausibility of an intentional explanation of that mastery.

suggest that we turn to a consideration of the speaker's linguistic behavior in determining the role her putative linguistic knowledge plays in the explanation of that behavior.

### 5.2.2 The Push to Behavior

The motivation to reconsider the connection between a speaker's implicit knowledge and her behavior garners support from the discussion at the end of chapter three. There we noted that several factors lead us to consider the ways in which a speaker's (putative) implicit linguistic knowledge is manifested. The problem of extensional equivalence, coupled with the fact that a speaker is unable to tell us which theory guides her linguistic behavior, forces us to specify what will count as implicitly knowing one theory rather than another. It is natural to look to behavior; to say that A implicitly knows the meaning of S requires that we are able to say something about how S's behavior differs from the behavior of someone who does not have that knowledge.

Having said all this, it should be clear that the proponent of implicit linguistic knowledge is in a bind. The explanatory advantage of the full-blooded dispositionalist account of linguistic abilities, over that of the bare dispositionalist account, resides in the fact that the former appeals to states of the speaker which are thought to be causally implicated in the speaker's understanding of her language. This idea gets substance in Evans' account via the postulation of a

causal structure that underlies speakers' understanding of individual sentences. In particular, this structure is thought to mirror the semantic structure discerned in the sentences of the language themselves. Thus, the move to a full-blooded characterization of a speaker's abilities is thought to derive its explanatory bite from the fact that it appeals to more than just the speaker's actual linguistic behavior. However, the identification of a speaker's dispositions with the states that causally underpin them (such as Evans is wont to make), has the result of de-emphasizing the place of behavior in the characterization of the speaker's abilities. But we must be able to say what it is that someone who has some particular implicit knowledge can do that cannot be done by someone who lacks that knowledge. Hence we cannot locate the relevant dispositions wholly inside the speaker.

Succinctly, the dispositionalist's dilemma is this: One cannot explain a speaker's linguistic abilities just by cataloging her linguistic behavior. But neither will a solipsistic notion of implicit linguistic knowledge do either. The whole point of introducing the idea of implicit linguistic knowledge was to explain speakers' linguistic capacities; hence any account of it must specify how its possession links up with the behavior it is rung in to explain.

That we are faced with this dilemma should not surprise us. As I said in chapter one (p.27), there are broadly two ways to conceive of a language. On the one hand, a language is an abstract object; a set of signs and symbols systematically related in particular ways and open to

any number of interpretations. On the other, a language is better thought of as a practice; a peculiarly regular subset of human behavior. Of course, there is a grain of truth in both of these characterizations, but neither of them tells the whole story by itself. I think we can see the apparent difficulty with which the dispositionalist is faced as a result of trying to bring together these two conceptions of what language is.

Viewing language abstractly, the meaning-theorist and the linguist attempt to construct theories of the structure of language which explain the various semantic and syntactic properties it manifestly has. It is indisputable that there is such a thing as linguistic practice, and with this more naturalistic picture in mind, we ask: What relevance do theories of the structure of a natural language have for the explanation of the practice in which speakers of that language regularly engage? What we would like to be able to say is that the structure of the language that the theorist discerns has a "counterpart" in speakers of that language. And that this "isomorphism" helps explain what it is to be a speaker of that language. The hard task is to cash out what this counterpart relation, or isomorphism amounts to.

We have been concerned throughout with just one suggestion: that speakers know (either or both) the theory of meaning of, or the rules and principles of grammar for, their language. It is obvious that this epistemic relation is not like speakers' non-linguistic knowledge; hence the proposal that it is implicit knowledge. Emphasizing that a

speaker's use of her language is the manifestation of a set of abilities she has, I have argued that a speaker's linguistic capacities are best thought of as full-blooded dispositions. It is here that her putative linguistic knowledge enters the picture - as constitutive of the states that ground those dispositions.

Now full-blooded dispositions are funny things. They cannot be located anywhere in particular, yet they are things that agents and other bits of the universe, in some sense, "have". Neither are they short-hand for true counterfactual statements that merely report regularities in some system's behavior. For all this, they have enormous explanatory power. I think a useful way of understanding full-blooded dispositional talk is to see it as a way of appealing in one breath to both the "interior" and the "exterior" of the system to which the disposition is being ascribed. In the case of a speaker, then, I want to say that the full-blooded dispositions which constitute her language mastery bridge what I call the cognitive-behavioral divide. Dispositions are anchored at both ends, as it were. Abilities are initially picked out by whatever behavior they are the abilities to produce, but they are caused by something; and we would like to locate those "somethings" inside the system whose abilities they are. It is no surprise, then to find the dispositionalist having to appeal both to the states that grounds the relevant dispositions and to the behavior in which those states typically issue.

### 5.2.3 Isomorphism and Explanation

The pressing questions at this stage are: (i) what is the nature of this isomorphism between speakers of a language and the structure of that language, and (ii) how does this isomorphic relation figure in the explanation of speakers' linguistic capacities?

Elizabeth Fricker [1982] states the issue clearly:

...if an individual A speaks a language L, and if L may be said to have a determinate structure  $S^*$ , it follows that A stands in a relation to  $S^*$ , viz., 'speaks a language with structure  $S^*$ '. But a non-trivial relation of A to  $S^*$  would be more than this: either A stands in some cognitive relation to  $S^*$ , or that there are particular facts about A which in some way mirror  $S^*$  (or both).<sup>15</sup>

While I think this way of putting the matter is helpful, I am inclined to reject the idea that the dispositionalist is faced with the choice Fricker presents. It is not as if speaker either knows (or bears some other cognitive relation to) the structure of her language, or that there are facts about her that mirror that structure. Rather what the dispositionalist wants to say is that what it is for a speaker to bear a cognitive relation to the structure of a language is for her herself to be structured in the requisite ways.

The dispositionalist's claim is that a speaker's implicit linguistic knowledge is structured in a way that reflects the structure

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15. Fricker [1982], p.52.



of the language she speaks. This "internal" structure is to be understood in terms of both the content of, and the relation(s) between, the states that ground her linguistic dispositions. This idea can be expressed in somewhat Fodorian terms too.

Fodor's [1987] argument for a language of thought proceeds in roughly the following fashion. If the objects of intentional states (intentional objects) are complex and structured, then it must be the case that the psychological states which are constitutive of an agent to whom we ascribe the relevant intentions be similarly complex and structured. For example, if we take propositions to be the objects of belief, then for someone to be a believer, requires that her psychology is sufficiently richly articulated to support her bearing the relations she does to these propositions. Hence if we can think of a language as something that speakers know, then the states of the speaker involved in her understanding of the language must exhibit as much structure as the language itself. As Lycan says,

Human beings do in fact produce linguistic output in response to linguistic input, and striking social regularities do obtain across speech communities. Therefore, there must be some actual, psychologically real way in which these things happen. And there must be some description of this processing that yields the right predictions without descending all the way to the neuron-by-neuron level. Thus, if a semantactic theory of English should...match the processing that actually does occur, then that theory is a (if not the) correct linguistic theory qua piece of psychology, to the exclusion of other, perhaps extensionally equivalent accounts...<sup>16</sup>

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16. Lycan [1984], p.259.

So much for the isomorphism, what about the kind of explanation this is thought to provide.<sup>17</sup>

I think the short answer to this question is that the kind of explanation of speakers' linguistic capacities that the dispositionalist's account of implicit linguistic knowledge provides is of a piece with intentional explanation generally. Recall that in the last chapter I advanced an account of implicit belief that is very similar to the present account of implicit linguistic knowledge. Nothing I said there about the proper characterization of implicit beliefs rules them out as candidates for playing a role in the explanation of agents' behavior. Thus, I do not think that anything in this account of implicit linguistic knowledge rules it out as playing the same sort of role in the explanation of speaker's linguistic behavior. (The longer answer would require another thesis.)

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17. I should note that this idea that there be something in the speaker's psychology that mirrors the structure of the language is not universally endorsed. For a sustained criticism of the view see Soames [1984], [1988]. Soames claims that linguistics and semantic theory are "conceptually distinct" and "empirically divergent" from psychology. To be sure, semantic theory and psychology are defined by different leading questions, and they may often diverge in their empirical consequences. But even Soames admits that empirical convergence is not ruled out. It is the fact that we do sometimes find such convergence that motivates the dispositionalist account of implicit linguistic knowledge. The point is to explain this convergence. Soames' criticisms fail, I think, because for him such convergence must always be inexplicable. For more on these matters see also Devitt [1983], p.83; Devitt & Sterelny [1987], pp.145ff.

### 5.3 Dummett Revisited

We have presented a particular theory of implicit linguistic knowledge; one that depends on characterizing language mastery as a set of abilities, and which takes these abilities to be full-blooded dispositions. We were led to a discussion of linguistic knowledge by the considerations of chapter one. It is now incumbent on us to ask whether someone who advanced either of the arguments presented there would be happy to accept the account I have presented.

To recap: In chapter one, we considered two arguments to the effect that speakers have genuine linguistic knowledge. Both arguments concern the explanatory scope of theory of meaning for a natural language. The first, Dummett's a priori argument, advances the view that in order to be a theory of meaning at all, a theory must not only deliver a meaning-specification for each sentence of the language, it must also explain the practice engaged in by speakers of that language. Central to that question is the nature of speakers' understanding. So, Dummett argues, a theory of meaning must also be (or yield) a theory of understanding; and in order to do so, it must be the object of speakers' knowledge. The second argument we considered took the form of an inference to the best explanation. Dummett's version takes as its point of departure the observation that language use is a purposive activity engaged in by rational agents. The emphasis here is on the possibility of successful

communication, and hence, Dummett contends, its explanation requires the attribution to speakers of genuine linguistic knowledge.<sup>18</sup>

### 5.3.1 Dummett's Dilemma

In the last section, I elucidated the dilemma that appears to confront the dispositionalist. This same dilemma arises for Dummett. Dummett wants to insist that linguistic knowledge is genuine knowledge, but as we shall see, he imposes a rather stringent "manifestation condition" on the attribution of implicit linguistic knowledge. Dummett cannot make it a condition of intelligibility of the notion of implicit linguistic knowledge that that knowledge be exhausted in a speaker's behavior; for then the appeal to knowledge looks spurious, if not completely illegitimate. This is not a result that Dummett would welcome, since he contends that what is central to language is that it is a rational activity carried on by persons with intention and purpose. But it is this very same emphasis on the communicative use of language that pulls Dummett in the opposite direction, and back towards considerations of

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18. I noted in chapter one that this form of argument can be given a more empirical flavor; findings in linguistic research strongly suggest that speakers have considerable knowledge of the structure and rules of their language. However in what follows I will concentrate only Dummett's version of the argument. The more empirically-minded would be reasonably happy with the notion of tacit knowledge of language I have advanced, but Dummett's attitude towards it might be less sympathetic.

speakers' behavior. To see whether this dilemma is real or merely apparent, we will have to examine Dummett's "manifestation constraint".

### 5.3.2 The Manifestation Constraint

In writing about speakers' implicit linguistic knowledge, Dummett continually remarks on the importance of attending to speaker's linguistic behavior. He writes:

We should not seek to eliminate the term 'knowledge'; but we should also not be content with saying what is known, without saying what it is to have that knowledge, that is, how it is manifested by one who has it.<sup>19</sup>

...implicit knowledge [is] knowledge which does not reside in the capacity to state what is known. But...the ascription of implicit knowledge to someone is meaningful only if he is capable, in suitable circumstances, of fully manifesting that knowledge.<sup>20</sup>

Implicit knowledge cannot...meaningfully be ascribed to someone unless it is possible to say in what the manifestation of that knowledge consists: there must be an observable difference between the behaviour or capacities of someone who is said<sup>21</sup> to have that knowledge and someone who is said to lack it.

Now as I noted earlier (chap. 1, note 41), Dummett's insistence on the centrality of behavior in the attributions of implicit knowledge to

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19. Dummett [1991], pp.104-105. See also, Dummett [1979], p.134.

20. Dummett [1973b], p.224

21. Dummett [1973b], p.217.

speakers has led some commentators to label him a behaviorist. Currie & Eggenberger [1983] say,

[Dummett] wants to rest content with the linguistic behavior, and to block any (plausible) inference to the existence of mental capacities.<sup>22</sup>

The implication here is that Dummett is a psychological behaviorist. A similar interpretation is to be found in Chomsky's commentary. He (Chomsky) suggests that Dummett's manifestation demand assumes that there is a privileged kind of evidence for the attribution of implicit linguistic knowledge.<sup>23</sup> On Chomsky's view - "the view of any rational scientist" - such a demand just constitutes bad science. Chomsky rejects the idea that we need appeal to either particular psychological (first-person), or behavioral (observational) features in order to justify our ascriptions of linguistic knowledge. But I think that Currie and Eggenberger, and Chomsky are wrong on this score.

In the first place, it is clear that Dummett does not reject the idea of the mental tout court. Witness:

what makes the utterances of a speaker expressions of thought is a piece of internal mental equipment, namely his general understanding of the language.<sup>24</sup>

Dummett's concern lies rather with what to say about the explanatory role that mental states play in the explanation of behavior. And that

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22. Currie & Eggenberger [1983], p.276.

23. See e.g., Chomsky [1980], chapter 3, [1986], chapter 4.

24. Dummett [1978b], p.12.

is a question which concerns us all. As for Chomsky's claim that Dummett takes the manifestation of implicit linguistic knowledge to be criteriological for the attribution of such knowledge, I offer the following. Dummett's insistence that we be able to discriminate between an agent who has implicit knowledge K, say, and agent who lacks that knowledge, is no more than the completely rational demand that there be something to be explained by the attribution of K. A demand that is, I would have thought, wholly consistent with good science. Moreover, Dummett's entire philosophical career has been in the service of elucidating the nature of thought; hardly a job for a flat-footed Wittgensteinian!

The point is well-put by considering another mistaken reading of Dummett. Kirkham [1989] attributes the following view to Dummett:

...there is no explanatory power to an attribution of implicit knowledge to a person unless that person actually displays some behavior which the attribution would explain.<sup>25</sup>

He takes this to mean that Dummett would reject as meaningless the attribution of implicit knowledge to an agent if that agent were not actually manifesting that knowledge at the time of attribution. Kirkham adverts to the temporary aphasia example we considered above (p.99), and claims that taking the manifestation requirement seriously renders the attribution of linguistic knowledge to the person while he is aphasic, pointless.

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25. Kirkham [1989], p.217

Recall, the issue here concerned what we want to say about a speaker's linguistic knowledge during a period in which he is (temporarily) aphasic. The suggestion was that we still ought to ascribe linguistic knowledge to him, on pain of his recovery being totally miraculous. Now Kirkham claims,

...his preaccident and post-recovery behavior can be explained by saying that he had such knowledge before the accident and had it again after his recovery. There is no further explanatory power gained by the additional postulation that he had the knowledge in question even while he was... [aphasic]. He did not demonstrate any behaviour during his incapacity which would require this additional postulation.<sup>26</sup>

It is hard to see that Dummett would be happy to be saddled with this view. In the first place, it has the general implication that it is a mistake to ascribe an ability to an agent at a time, *t*, if that agent is not manifesting that ability at *t*. This is patently false. And secondly, given what Dummett says elsewhere about the acquisition of linguistic knowledge,<sup>27</sup> that a speaker could have failed to maintain his linguistic knowledge during his temporary aphasia would be totally incoherent. For the post-recovery man would otherwise be the linguistic analog of Davidson's swamp-man; an impossible creature by Dummett's lights.

While I have been critical, I think that there is something in Dummett's writing that prompts the sorts of objections outlined above.

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26. Kirkham [1989], p.218; my emphasis.

27. See e.g., Dummett [1991], p.95.



Dummett writes in places as if psychology is irrelevant to philosophy. Now there are two readings of this. First, there is the idea that there is a purely philosophical project in saying what makes a language a language. This is well expressed by Wright:

There is a recognizably philosophical project...to which constructing a theory of meaning would be a contribution. This project has no immediate connections with quest to explain the capacities of actual speakers of natural languages; the task to which a completed, adequate theory of meaning would contribute would rather be that of explaining how a complete knowledge of a particular natural language could be a rational achievement.<sup>28</sup>

Now while I would agree that there are passages in Dummett that suggest this is the picture he has in mind when he writes about speakers' linguistic knowledge, I think that his overall project tells against this reading.

Dummett is centrally interested in the extent of human epistemic capacities. Indeed, his entire argument for anti-realism is motivated by the fact that these capacities are limited in quite particular ways. Dummett's criticism of a theory of meaning which takes as its central concept an epistemically unconstrained notion of truth rests in part on the fact that such a theory attributes to speakers abilities they plainly lack. And as we have seen throughout (see esp. chapter one), Dummett is always concerned that a theory of meaning actually explain what it is was intended to explain. viz., human linguistic competence. As he says,

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28. Wright [1986], pp.215-216.

where we are concerned with a representation in terms of propositional knowledge of some practical ability, and, in particular, where that practical ability is the mastery of a language, it is incumbent upon us, if our account is to be explanatory, not only to specify what someone has to know for him to have that ability, but also what it is for him to have that knowledge, that is, what we are taking as constituting a manifestation of a knowledge of those propositions; if we fail to do this, then the connection will not be made between the theoretical representation and the practical ability it is intended to represent.<sup>29</sup>

A better explanation of why Dummett sometimes writes as if psychology were irrelevant for the philosophy of language can be discerned in the following. Commenting on Chomsky's program, Dummett says, we are urged to think of

the theory of meaning is an abstract description of a structure within the brain,<sup>30</sup>

and this encourages us to think of

the internalised theory of meaning, not as constitutive of the speaker's attaching the meanings he does to his words, but...as an empirical hypothesis to explain what enables him to use the language to express those meanings. It then becomes irrelevant to the philosophical task of explaining what it is so to use them, that is, what it is to attach a certain range of meanings to the words and sentences of the language.<sup>31</sup>

So Dummett is not hostile to the appeal to psychology simpliciter in the explanation of language mastery. What he rejects is the idea that appeal to a speaker's neurophysiological states will be of use to

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29. Dummett [1976], p.121.

30. Dummett [1989], p.202.

31. Dummett [1989], p.205.

anything other than the scientific project of explaining her behavior. And that project is unconnected with the task of explaining understanding.

And on this last point Dummett is surely right (see p.253, above.) I suggest therefore, that Dummett's manifestation constraint cannot be interpreted as behaviorist. What then is its force and how else can it be motivated?

### 5.3.2.1 The Argument from Acquisition

An alternative motivation for the manifestation condition may be forthcoming from reflection on what Dummett has had to say about language acquisition. Alexander George [1986] has commented on Dummett's affinity with Quine on the matter of a speaker's acquisition of her language.<sup>32</sup> Dummett says,

...when someone learns a language, what he learns is a practice; he learns to respond, verbally and non-verbally, to utterances, and to make utterances of his own.<sup>33</sup>

If it is true that we learn our language exclusively by listening to and watching others speak it, then it will be crucial that all there is to know about our language (meaning, force, and so on) be revealed in the

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32. See George [1986], esp., pp.88-92.

33. Dummett [1976], p.82. See also Dummett [1975a], p.452, [1981a], p.307, [1991], p.95.

linguistic behavior of our compatriots.<sup>34</sup> But of course, this is ridiculous.

If Chomsky has convinced us of anything, it is that each of us brings to our language-learning situations a store of innate concepts without which language-learning would not be possible. Currie & Eggenberger [1983] stress the same point: it makes little sense to say that a speaker acquires all her knowledge of her language from her environment.

There is clearly a relationship between what a person will learn on the basis of exposure to experience, and what prior machinery he has available to bring to bear on the interpretation of that experience. A being with no linguistically relevant capacities will never learn a language, no matter how many linguistic acts he is exposed to.<sup>35</sup>

It is a truism that we acquire some of our linguistic knowledge from our interaction with members of our speech community. But is plainly false that this experience is the source of all our linguistic knowledge. There is, strictly speaking, no argument from acquisition to manifestation. At best considerations about language-learning might be used as extra, but dispensible, support for an account of manifestation. We have reason, then, to doubt that considerations about acquisition constitute the source of Dummett's manifestation requirement.

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34. See e.g., Tennant [1987].

35. Currie & Eggenberger [1983], p.275, see also p.273. See also George [1986], p.120.

### 5.3.2.2 The Argument from Communicability

Perhaps the clearest way to understand Dummett's insistence on the manifestation of implicit linguistic knowledge is to recall his emphasis on the communicability of meaning. In chapter three, amongst the potential objections to the notion of implicit linguistic knowledge I discussed, was the worry that our apparent ability to communicate successfully with one another would be rendered mysterious by any account of such knowledge. If it is the case that our knowledge of meaning is wholly internal to us, how can we ever be sure that we have been understood, or that we have understood our interlocutor? As Dummett argues,

[if] meaning becomes private and hence no longer communicable...faith is required if we are to believe that we communicate with one another. The hearer must presuppose that he is interpreting the speaker as the speaker intends: but the speaker's intentions and the hearer's interpretation are, at best, constituted by inner states of each respectively, not accessible to themselves, let alone to the other.<sup>36</sup>

A hearer can not check to see if he has understood the speaker correctly by asking her to repeat herself, for his understanding of her new utterance will be vulnerable to just the same uncertainty.<sup>37</sup> A natural alternative is for the hearer to observe the use (or uses) that the

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36. Dummett [1989], p.202.

37. Dummett [1973b], p.224, [1976], pp.79ff.

speaker makes of the same words and sentences in different contexts. He will then (presumably) be in a better position to ascertain whether he has understood the speaker correctly. Thus, it might be argued that the speaker's implicit linguistic knowledge, consisting as it does of her knowledge of the meaning of sentences in her language, must be manifestable in her linguistic behavior.

So perhaps Dummett's primary worry is that psychologism threatens if we do not anchor a speaker's linguistic knowledge in her behavior. That is, if we cannot fix the meaning of what she says. How are we to understand the requirement? Notice straight away that I have just used the word "manifestable", and this gives us a clue as to how to proceed. For Dummett's claim is not that, as matter of fact, speakers' knowledge of meaning is exhaustively manifested in their behavior, but rather the broader demand that it be able to be manifested. In turn, this "-able" can be given a stronger or weaker reading.<sup>38</sup>

The strong reading of the manifestation condition has it that we must always be able to recover without uncertainty the meaning of our interlocutor's utterances. Paraphrasing Dummett: if communication is not to rest on faith, mutual understanding must be guaranteed. Hence a speaker's implicit linguistic knowledge must be fully exhausted in her

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38. See George [1986], p.99.

linguistic behavior.<sup>39,40</sup> In contrast, the weaker reading of the manifestation requirement has it that it ought to be in principle possible for two speakers to uncover when they have misunderstood each other. This carries with it no guarantee that speakers will not sometimes fail to grasp the meaning of the each others' utterances. On this way of looking at the matter, linguistic knowledge need not be fully manifested in behavior. All that is required is that we be able to discover if we have misunderstood each other.

There is some evidence to think that this weaker manifestation condition is what Dummett has in mind. He says,

If communication is not to rest on faith, it is necessary to maintain that any misunderstanding can come to light...there must be something that the speaker is liable to say or do, in virtue of the way he intends what he says to be understood, that would demonstrate to the hearer that his understanding of the speaker has up to now be incorrect...[therefore, we must] explain in detail the consequences such a theory has for what a speaker may say and do.<sup>41</sup>

Dummett's appeal to behavior then is of a piece with his (and our) general demand that the attribution of implicit linguistic knowledge be explanatory. All the manifestation condition amounts to is the requirement that we

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39. See George [1986], p.101; and Dummett [1976], p.72; [1981a], p.54.

40. There is some question whether this strong manifestation requirement does in fact protect an account of implicit linguistic knowledge from psychologism. On this see Burgess [1984], p.180; McDowell [1987], pp.66ff.

41. Dummett [1989], p.202.

exhibit the connection between the theory of meaning for a language and the actual use of that language.<sup>42</sup>

It is also worth pointing out, I think, that this weaker manifestation constraint is more in keeping with the idea that our account of implicit linguistic knowledge not explain too much. As a matter of fact, we do sometimes misunderstand each other, and we do discover that we do. Any theory of implicit linguistic knowledge that rendered misunderstanding impossible would not be a theory about human speakers.

The idea that understanding either resides wholly in the mind of the speaker (Chomsky), or else is fully revealed in her linguistic behavior (Wittgenstein) presents a false dichotomy. The former has a number of shortcomings: it fails to satisfy our desire for an explanation of understanding, and it arguably commits us to the possibility of a completely private language; a language that could not be used for communication. The second strategy errs in not taking into account the very good reasons we have for thinking that speakers have genuine linguistic knowledge.

Fortunately, there is another alternative. And it is here that we ought to locate Dummett. To be sure, Dummett is motivated in part by Wittgensteinian considerations to the effect that nothing more ought be read into someone's understanding than is manifest in his behavior, but Dummett does not completely eschew the intentional idiom. Dummett is

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42. Dummett [1989], p.203. See also Dummett [1973b], p. 210; [1978], p.11.



not averse to the idea that a speaker's understanding is underpinned by knowledge that she is unable to articulate, indeed he insists that it is. But neither does he demand that all linguistic knowledge be manifested in behavior. His claim is only that implicit linguistic knowledge, conceived of as an internal state of speakers, is not all there is to understanding. Dummett has recently summed up his position thus:

Our grasp of...[meaning] could not consist exist, however, as a mastery of a purely external practice. By the very nature of language, we could not learn its use as a means of interacting with others without simultaneously learning to use it as a vehicle for our own thoughts. It is precisely because this interior use of language as a medium of our thinking, and of our representation of reality, is from an early stage integral to our whole conscious life that we travesty the facts if we call it a "practical ability", even though it is never severed from, and remains responsible to, the use of language in conversing with others.<sup>43</sup>

### 5.3.2.3 Can Dummett Accept the Dispositionalist Account?

We return to our original question: Can someone who advanced either of the arguments of chapter one for the claim that speakers have genuine linguistic knowledge (i.e., Dummett), adopt the account of implicit linguistic knowledge I have proposed?

If Dummett's manifestation constraint is understood in the weaker way, I think that he can accept the account of implicit linguistic

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43. Dummett [1991], p.103.

knowledge I suggest. The full-blooded dispositionalist account provides a way of focussing on both the epistemic and the behavioral aspects of linguistic mastery. The further crucial issue is whether on the full-blooded dispositional account of what it is to have linguistic knowledge, misunderstandings can come to light.

We have seen that the full-blooded dispositionalist account is not subject to Quine's challenge. That a speaker knows one theory of meaning rather than another extensionally equivalent one can be empirically established. Hence even if two speakers' linguistic behavior was indistinguishable for a wide range of cases, it would be possible to discover that they actually knew different theories. Of course, Dummett's worry is not the same as Quine's. However, the example can be modified to take account of it. Suppose that two theories, T1 and T2 are equivalent up to a point. Then two speakers, one who knows T1 and the other who knows T2 will in general agree about the meanings of the sentences they employ. However, if the theories which underpin their respective linguistic capacities come apart, say with respect to the meaning of shape terms, then their semantic judgments will diverge on this topic and their misunderstanding could come to light.

#### 5.4 Conclusion

In chapter one, two arguments were advanced to the effect that we ought to attribute genuine linguistic knowledge to speakers. The first of

those arguments is an a priori argument: If a theory is to be a theory of meaning, it must also be a theory of understanding, and hence take account of speakers' knowledge of meaning. The second argument took the form of an inference to the best explanation: Taking seriously the idea that speaking a language is purposive behavior on the part of rational agents, it is suggested that speakers must have considerable linguistic knowledge in order to be able to use it to communicate.

In subsequent chapters I defended the general appeal to linguistic knowledge, and sharpened up the idea that linguistic knowledge must be implicit knowledge. In chapter three I examined the constraints that any theory of implicit linguistic knowledge must meet. We noted, in particular, that we must say something about how such knowledge is canonically manifested. An examination of implicit belief in chapter four highlighted the attractiveness of a full-blooded dispositional account of intentional states. And in this chapter, I sketched an account of implicit linguistic knowledge along the same lines. I claim for it the advantage of meeting the explanatory task for which it was proposed within the constraints we have outlined.

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