

Meaning, Communication and Knowledge by Testimony

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Why believe that the words and sentences we use to communicate with one another have the meanings they appear to have?¹ The answers seem to be two: because they just seem to have these meanings and because if they weren't meaningful our ability to communicate would be compromised. In what follows I will dispatch both responses, focusing mostly on the second. Communication and even the transmission of knowledge by testimony do not require that the sentence used means anything. This being so, if there are widely shared impressions of meaning, we have no reason to accept them as veridical; such widely shared impressions rather play a role in the establishment of uniformities among speakers that make communication simple and quick. The conclusion: unless there is some other reason to think that the words and sentences we ordinarily use to communicate are meaningful, there is no reason to think they are meaningful. Hence any reason against taking them to be meaningful is sufficient to warrant the rejection of the claim that they are meaningful.

I have provided reason against taking words and sentences to be meaningful in familiar natural languages and the idiolects of what are commonly regarded as speakers of those languages elsewhere (Patterson 2007, 2007a, 2008, 2009) and will return to the topic only briefly below. My concern here is rather to fill in the details of the account of communication introduced in those other papers, to show that the account is independently motivated, and in particular to address concerns as to whether the claim that communication is possible without meaning is compatible with the possibility of learning by testimony. I will close the paper by emphasizing the way in which my

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conclusions are incompatible with nearly everything written in the last few decades on linguistic competence.

1. The reason that I listen to people when they talk is often that I want to know something they may be able to tell me. The reason I talk to others who may listen is often a desire to pass on what I know. I will in a familiar way assume without argument in what follows that straightforward communication for the purpose of transmitting knowledge is an identifiable and central kind of communication.

It can seem to go without saying that the meanings of our words and sentences are of central importance to all of this, that if our words were not meaningful we could communicate little of what we manage to communicate with them. The importance of meaning to communication seems to be on display in what I will call “the testimonial inference”, the inference the hearer makes upon accepting the speaker’s word. Here is a straightforward construal of this inference.² One begins from a claim about what was said in what context.

(1*) The speaker said *s* in context *c*.

I assume that although the hearer must identify the context of the utterance, this does not require that she know all of its potentially relevant features; the identification of the context is demonstrative. The hearer next adds a claim about what the sentence means in context.³

(2*) *s* as uttered in *c* means that *p*.

(2*) may seem to be missing a parameter for language, but the way I represent things here speakers’ intentions are always directly a matter of truth conditions in context. Speakers may sometimes believe that their sentences have truth conditions because a certain language is being spoken—that their sentences have the truth conditions assigned

²I don’t mean here that the hearer plods through this inference explicitly.

³I don’t mean to rule out “non-sentential assertions” of the sort discussed in Elugardo and Stainton 2003, if there are any, but I won’t take care to emphasize this everywhere in the text.

by a certain language because that is the language the speaker is speaking—but in principle belief about the language spoken is an inessential accompaniment to communicative intent. Such beliefs may furthermore be false: speakers and hearers can falsely believe that the truth condition a speaker takes a sentence to have in context is the one assigned to it by the language they believe is being spoken.⁴

The determination of utterance meaning from a semantic factor associated with a sentence type plus features of context is a complex business that has been the subject of intense scrutiny in recent years, but since I will be denying the relevant aspects of the current conception of the testimonial inference we can leave the details underspecified. From here the hearer works with a principle to the effect that sincere, assertoric utterance of a sentence that means, in context, that p is sufficient, perhaps subject to further conditions, for saying that p:

(3*) So, the speaker said that p.

Here, too, the details of the principle—the “further conditions”—look important, but since I will be denying that it actually plays any role in communication and testimony, I have no need to sort this out. From here if the hearer does not think the speaker is lying or otherwise fails to believe what he says, she will move on to:

(4*) So, the speaker believes that p.

Finally, if the hearer thinks that the speaker is trustworthy on the topic of his belief, she will accept not merely that he believes, but what he believes:

(5*) So, p.

⁴“Speaking a language” here is intending or believing that the truth conditions one assigns to one’s utterances are those assigned to the utterance by a certain language; a language, in turn, is at the minimum something that assigns truth conditions to sentences in a context.

How the hearer makes this move is a central topic of current work in the epistemology of testimony (see the essays in Lackey and Sosa 2006). For the most part, this last transition will not be at issue here.⁵

Looking at things this way, without the truth of (2*) the hearer could not come to know (5*): even if (5*) were true, the hearer does not come to know it via the testimonial inference if (2*) is false, on grounds of a familiar “no false lemmas” condition on knowledge acquired by inference (cf. Heck 2006, 71). Thus on the naive conception of the testimonial inference coming to know or even to believe something on the basis of testimony saddles one with an assumption about the meaning of the sentence by means of which testimony is offered, and since this assumption must be true if we do learn from her, meaning is central to communication. Hence, the argument runs, we have good reason to think that the sentences by means of which we communicate mean what we take them to mean: if they did not, we would know nothing of what we take ourselves to know by testimony.

2. So, at least, the thought goes. I hope it seems plausible because I am going to argue that it is completely wrong. We can begin by discussing some conditions on successful communication.

To transmit knowledge we must transmit belief.⁶ In this section I will discuss conditions on each sort of transmission, consider their relationship and whether each is either necessary or sufficient for successful communication. Our attention will be guided

⁵Some conceptions of testimony (most prominently that of Burge 1993) are often taken to be incompatible with representing the hearer as committed to any kind of inference at all from claims about the speaker and what she says to what is believed if testimony is accepted. Early drafts of this paper contained a section arguing that this is a confusion (both about the topic and perhaps even about Burge), but as the paper took shape this became a distraction from the main issues. I should also mention that the account of the testimonial inference above is incompatible with the idea that somehow the proper epistemology of testimony establishes that the fact that someone *says* something gives us reason to think that it is true, without any appeal to the likely truth of their beliefs. This view is most commonly associated with the notorious argument in Coady 1992 that somehow Davidsonian considerations establish that most of what people *say* is true. I reject this claim in the strongest possible terms, though I have little to add to the criticism in Adler 1994. (I distinguish this issue from the question of whether what most of what people *believe* is true.)

⁶I am aware that on some views (e.g. Lewis 1996) one can know without believing and that on others (e.g. Williamson 2002) knowledge is not a kind of belief. I proceed on the assumption that this does not matter here.

by two basic but problematically related ideas: (1) that communication succeeds when, should the hearer believe the speaker's utterance is true, she will also believe, of the condition the speaker took to be the truth condition of her utterance, that it obtains; (2) that communication succeeds when the hearer is put into a position such that it is sufficient for her to know that the truth condition of the speaker's utterance obtains that (i) she believes that it obtains on the basis of an accurate assessment of the speaker's trustworthiness⁷ and (ii) the speaker knows that it obtains.⁸

We can express the first idea thus:

BELIEF: Given that the speaker treats her utterance of *s* in *c* as true if and only if *p*, were the hearer to treat the speaker's utterance of *s* as true in *c*, the hearer would believe that *p*.

A few comments are in order, both on why I say the speaker and hearer "treat" the uttered sentence "as" having truth conditions and as, in some cases, being true, rather than saying that they believe or know these things, and on the relation between BELIEF and Gricean accounts of meaning or "intention based semantics (IBS)" (Schiffer 1987). I will also discuss the focus on truth conditions in BELIEF when we turn to the question of whether BELIEF being true of an exchange is sufficient for successful communication.

On "treat as": communication is possible when speakers or hearers do not believe that the sentences they use have the truth conditions they treat them as having in context. Here are three of the sorts of things I have in mind, the first of which will also concern the idea that speakers might not have a concept of truth sufficient for believing that things are true. (1) It may be unreasonable to credit unsophisticated speakers (e.g. children on the way to achieving full competence with their first language) with *beliefs* that sentences are true or have truth conditions (Soames 1989, 578, Matthews 2003, 206, Longworth 2008, 62). Plausibly, young children and some other speakers might respond to utterances in ways appropriate to their having certain truth conditions, e.g. running to the

⁷Below I will explain what "on the basis of an accurate assessment of the speaker's trustworthiness" is doing.

⁸Talk about believing "that a condition obtains" should not be read here to involve commitment to "conditions" and "obtaining" as things that exist or about which speakers have beliefs; I intend the locution simply as a naturally-read substitute for littering expository prose with schematic letters.

door upon hearing “Your mommy is coming”, without grasping the concepts required to believe that “*Your Mommy is coming*” is true relative to a context c if and only if the mother of the hearer of c is arriving at the place of c . In order not to prejudge any issues about whether or not such speaker-hearers exist—whether, that is, anyone’s relation to language is correctly understood as in this way innocent of semantic beliefs but nonetheless displaying some appropriateness to semantic matters—it is better not to require *belief* about truth conditions in BELIEF. Likewise, since there might be such a thing as treating a sentence as true without having the concept of truth, BELIEF concerns “treating” a sentence as true. Of course one way of treating a sentence as true or as having truth conditions is to believe that it is or does.

The next two considerations are different and more directly relevant to my concerns here. (2) Communication doesn’t require *beliefs* about truth conditions because of familiar facts about the accommodation of linguistic deviance. For example, I might know of you that though your English is passable you haven’t yet figured out that in North America, as opposed to Europe, the “first” floor of a building is street level, not the level above street level. In a fire I might accommodate this by saying to you “The fire escape is on the first floor”, treating this as true if and only if, as I would myself put it, the fire escape is on the second floor. Here as in more standard cases we don’t communicate if the truth condition you take the sentence I utter to have isn’t the one that I treat it as having; yet in the example I don’t *believe* that the sentence I use actually has that truth condition I treat it as having for the purposes of informing you of the location of the fire escape without first giving you a lesson about the extension of “ n^{th} floor” as used by North Americans. The case raises questions about whether BELIEF being true of an exchange could be sufficient for communication, since your failure to know that I am accommodating your deviance, and the possibility that you might have been talking to someone who would not have accommodated you, seems to threaten your possession of knowledge of both the truth condition I treat my utterance as having and of the location of the fire escape. We will get to this. It may also raise the question whether what really happens in the example is that I switch from speaking American English to speaking a language much like it in which “first floor” refers to the level of a building above street level. This suggestion, too, will be addressed below.

A related case (3) is when both speaker and hearer are intentionally deviant—they might, in collusion, treat a sentence as having a meaning neither of them believes that it has. Suppose we have a colleague we do not like who, among other things, calls the fire escape a “fire asleep”, and that we regularly mock him and his usage by treating our worlds the way he treats them as we talk. Not being so easily rattled by a fire that we desist from our mockery, I might say to you “Fire! The fire asleep is on the second floor” intending you to learn that the fire escape is on the second floor, though each of us believes, and believe that the another believes, that “There is a fire asleep on the second floor” does not mean, and is not true if and only if, there is a fire escape on the second floor.⁹ Since communication survives disbelief by the speaker and the hearer that the used sentence has the truth condition it is treated as having, the BELIEF condition on successful communication is stated so as to accommodate this. What is ruled out by the belief condition is disagreement between speaker and hearer on the truth condition the speaker treats the uttered sentence as having in context. The importance of case (3) is that it raises questions about the relationship between how we treat sentences in communication and what they seem to us to mean based on our semantic competence with our native languages (cf. Heck 2006, 82ff on “opposite day”); this will be an important topic below.

Before moving on we need to enter some remarks on Gricean analyses of meaning and saying, since BELIEF is superficially similar to them and they are commonly considered to face insurmountable objections. Unlike the Gricean I am not trying to reconstruct the notion of what is said or what things mean in terms of attitudes not described as attitudes *about* meaning or truth conditions.¹⁰ Rather than attempting to explain communication on the basis of the speaker’s intention to get the hearer to believe that a certain condition obtains and the hearer’s recognition of such an intention, BELIEF

⁹It might be demanded here that we read implicit scare-quotes around “fire asleep”, but the point would still be as I have it, namely, that speaker and hearer communicate while treating a sentence as having a truth condition that neither of them believes that it has. The use of scare quotes would indicate that the speaker believes not that an expression has a certain meaning, but that the speaker believes that someone else treats it as having that meaning

¹⁰There is a parallel here to the account of meaning and understanding offered in Higginbotham 1992, though I think my use of the basic idea isn’t subject to the objections to which that account was subject.

concerns the hearer's recognition of the speaker's treatment *of the uttered sentence*.

Compare Schiffer's (1987) description of "Intention Based Semantics" (IBS):

The essence of IBS is that it takes a certain notion of communication, or speaker-meaning, to be foundational in the theory of meaning by (1) defining it, without reference to anything semantic, in terms of acting with the intention of producing a belief or action in another, and then (2) defining all other public language semantic notions—sentence and word meaning, reference, and so on—in terms of the reduced notion of speaker meaning. Thus, the IBS theorist's reductionist enterprise consists of two stages. In the first stage he seeks to identify speaker-meaning—a person's meaning that such-and-such, or that so-and-so is to do such-and-such—with a species of intentional behavior that does not itself presuppose any of the semantic concepts in question. Here one will find the theorist offering a completion of the schema

In uttering x , S means that p iff, for some A, S utters x intending in way ... to activate in A the belief that p

that not only is free of any overt presupposition of public-language semantic notions but provides as well a suitable basis for the definition in terms of it of the various concepts of expression-meaning, the meanings of marks and sounds (11-12).

The main reason my account is not subject to the usual sorts of counterexample to Gricean accounts is that BELIEF does not concern the speaker's intentions to produce particular beliefs or desires in the hearer, neither belief that the truth condition of the utterance in context obtains, nor belief that the speaker believes that it does (see Rumfitt 1995 for a good discussion of the issues here and a similar emphasis on the role of attitudes toward truth conditions, rather than toward hearers, in the account of communication).

At least as importantly, I make no attempt to avoid "reference to anything semantic", because I make free use of semantic vocabulary within, but only within, attitude ascriptions. (Perhaps, then, I do avoid "reference to anything semantic" but I make no attempt not to "presuppose any semantic concepts".¹¹) What I share with IBS is a desire to explain linguistic communication and the attitudes it involves without using semantic notions within my own account. Semantic notions play a crucial role in BELIEF, but only as corralled inside attitude ascriptions. My account is Gricean in spirit, but I work to better effect with different material from the Gricean, since my use of semantic vocabulary within the relevant attitude ascriptions means that I am not stuck

¹¹See Patterson forthcoming on truth as a primitive concept.

understanding communication itself as the attempt to produce a belief in the hearer (see here stock examples such as answering questions on an exam). Speakers may often endeavor to make BELIEF true of an exchange because they want to produce a belief in their hearers, but this should not be treated as an essential feature of communication. In a slogan: Griceans attempted to explain semantic facts in terms of non-semantic beliefs and intentions, while I try to explain non-semantic facts in terms of semantic beliefs and intentions. I have it a lot easier as a result.

3. That BELIEF states a necessary condition of successful communication is clear: surely it is a paradigm failure to communicate if you make an assertion, but I take your assertion in such a way that the condition I hold to obtain if and only if your assertion is true isn't the condition that *you* hold to obtain if and only if your assertion is true. Whether it states a sufficient condition is another matter entirely. In order to begin this discussion, let us introduce another condition:

KNOWLEDGE: Given that the speaker treats *s* as uttered in *c* as true if and only if *p*, it is sufficient for the hearer to know that *p* that (i) the hearer believes that *p* on the basis of an accurate assessment of the speaker's trustworthiness and (ii) the speaker knows that *p*.

This expresses the second idea from the beginning of section 2. On the conception of communication that motivates holding that KNOWLEDGE being true of an exchange is sufficient for successful communication, if communication is successful it is sufficient for knowledge actually to be transmitted that the hearer should believe that the truth condition the speaker treated her utterance as having obtains on the basis of an accurate assessment of the speaker's trustworthiness and that the speaker should actually have knowledge that the condition obtains to pass along.

Two additional conditions are jointly sufficient with BELIEF for KNOWLEDGE. Most of the action concerns one of these two; I will quickly discuss the other first:¹²

¹²What follows is some unabashed reliabilist epistemology. I can't justify this preference for reliabilism here, though I am confident that what I say could be recast in terms of justification and other "internalist" notions while preserving the main theses of the paper. I leave what sort of reliabilist account is packed into terms like "unless" and "reliable indicator", as well as various counterfactuals, unspecified, passing the

SINCERITY: If the speaker had not believed that p , she would not have treated her utterance of s in c as true if and only if p .

The idea here is that I cannot come to know by testimony that a condition obtains if your treating an utterance as having that truth condition is not a reliable indicator of your believing that the condition obtains. **SINCERITY** rules out accidentally true lies as supporting knowledge by testimony; this is needed since **BELIEF**, rightly, can be true of an exchange in which the speaker is lying. Though **SINCERITY** being true is required to turn an exchange of which **BELIEF** is true into one of which **KNOWLEDGE** is true, it will not receive much attention in what follows.

The more important issue here concerns the status of the hearer's belief about the speaker's treatment of the uttered sentence in context. **BELIEF** (and **SINCERITY**) being true of an exchange is not sufficient for **KNOWLEDGE** being true of it. Suppose you say something that I am accidentally disposed to treat as true under just the condition under which you treat it as true (see Pettit 2002 for extensive discussion). **BELIEF** is true of our exchange, but **KNOWLEDGE** is not: I cannot come to know what you know if I have merely guessed or otherwise blundered into the idea that it is what you are trying to convey to me. Hence:

RELIABILITY: The hearer would not have been in a state such that, were she to treat the speaker's utterance of s in c as true, she would believe that p *unless* the speaker treated s as uttered in c as true if and only if p .

BELIEF, **SINCERITY** and **RELIABILITY** being true of the hearer's exchange with the speaker is sufficient for **KNOWLEDGE** being true of the exchange. If your treating a sentence as true iff it is raining is a reliable indicator of your believing that it is raining, and if my being in a state such that were I to treat your utterance of s in c as true I would believe that it is raining is a reliable indicator of your treating it as true iff it is raining, then my being in a state such that were I to treat your utterance of s in c as true I would believe

buck to reliabilist epistemology in confidence that whatever the correct account is, it will be compatible with the views expressed here.

that it is raining is a reliable indicator of your believing that it is raining. In other words, if SINCERITY, RELIABILITY and BELIEF are true of our exchange, then (i) I am put into a state such that were I to treat your utterance of *s* in *c* as true I would believe that it is raining and (ii) I would not have been put into that state if you had not believed that it was raining. KNOWLEDGE is thus true of our exchange: if I *do* go on to believe that it is raining on the basis of an accurate assessment of your trustworthiness, then if your belief that it is raining is a reliable indicator of the weather, so is mine.¹³ Thus, if you know that it is raining, so do I.

Our question now is whether KNOWLEDGE being true of an exchange is necessary or sufficient for that exchange to be an instance of successful communication. As KNOWLEDGE and BELIEF are the strong and weak elements, respectively, of our pair of intuitive ideas about communication, just as it was clear that BELIEF being true of an exchange is necessary for successful communication, so it is clear that KNOWLEDGE being true of an exchange is sufficient. If KNOWLEDGE is true of an exchange it is sufficient for the hearer to come to know that *p* that she believes that *p* on the basis of an accurate assessment of the speakers' trustworthiness and the speaker actually has knowledge that *p* to pass along. Since we are assuming that the transfer of knowledge is the point of communication, nothing more could be required.

We now face the harder questions of whether BELIEF is sufficient or KNOWLEDGE is necessary for successful communication. The main issue here concerns RELIABILITY: is its being true of an exchange necessary for the exchange to be a case of successful communication?¹⁴ Here there are good reasons to think that things are not so, covered well in Pettit 2002. Suppose that I am stung by a bee and an effect of the toxin is that the next utterance I hear in, say, Hungarian, seems to me to mean exactly what a typical resident of Budapest would mean by it, upon which basis I conclude that she treats it as meaning that. I am in Budapest, and I encounter a typical resident, who says something to me that seems to me to be meaningful in such a way as to be true if and only if the

¹³Again, I discuss assessments of trustworthiness in §4.

¹⁴We could wonder about SINCERITY, too: suppose it is possible to know something while believing falsely that one does not know it, and that someone in this state attempts to lie but accidentally says something she knows to be true. In a fuller treatment we could consider the possibility and import of such cases.

stores are closed for a holiday. I believe that the speaker speaks truly, and BELIEF and SINCERITY are true of the exchange. Clearly, however, KNOWLEDGE is not, since it is relevantly accidental that BELIEF is true of the exchange, that is, RELIABILITY is not true: a different bee-sting might have left me with different views about the truth conditions the speaker treated her utterance as having. Do we, however, communicate successfully? The utterance seems to me to mean exactly what it would to a native speaker of Hungarian, and, taking this appearance at face value, I believe that my interlocutor treats it that way. The causal history differs in my case from that of the typical speaker of Hungarian, but the question is whether that is at all relevant to whether the Hungarian and I successfully communicate.

The choice we face here is between saying that successful communication can rest upon such accidents and that therefore KNOWLEDGE being true of an exchange is unnecessary for successful communication, and saying that KNOWLEDGE being true of an exchange is necessary for successful communication and therefore in Pettit cases people fail to communicate even though they have perfectly accurate beliefs about “what is said” in the sense we are giving that here—they are in a state such that were they to treat the speaker’s utterance as true, they would believe to obtain exactly the condition that the speaker treated as the truth condition of her utterance. Not the least of the source of the difficulties, of course, is that I have so far left “communicates successfully” in an under-specified state. For the record, my own intuition tells me that people do successfully communicate in Pettit cases and thus that KNOWLEDGE being true of an exchange is not necessary for successful communication: when we communicate, we want KNOWLEDGE to be true of our exchange, but we communicate even if it is not, as long as BELIEF is. For the purposes of this paper, however, I will avoid what threatens to devolve into a table pounding argument over who gets to have the words “successfully communicates” by splitting the notion of communication two, allowing that one kind of successful communication is such that BELIEF being true of an exchange is necessary and sufficient for it, and that in the other KNOWLEDGE being true of the exchange is necessary and sufficient.¹⁵ I will use the terms “communication” and “secure communication” for these

¹⁵One further issue might matter: if we treat BELIEF or KNOWLEDGE as sufficient, we allow cases of successful communication where the speaker has no intention of communicating with the hearer. This

two notions, though, some may hold that only “secure communication”, in my sense, is actually successful communication.

4. In this short section I enter two epistemological notes about testimony. These aren't essential to the main argument of the paper, but they clear up confusions about the account that might otherwise arise. Mostly my aim here is to note the issues and direct the reader to the relevant parts of the testimony literature.

First, the promised note about the role of “on the basis of an accurate assessment of the speaker's trustworthiness” in KNOWLEDGE. The problem it corrects is that BELIEF, SINCERITY, RELIABILITY and thus KNOWLEDGE can all be true, the hearer can believe that the speaker's utterance is true (and thus conclude that its truth condition obtains), and the speaker can know that the truth-condition of her utterance obtains, and yet the hearer's belief not amount to knowledge. Suppose Einstein sincerely says something true about physics, say “nothing can accelerate past the speed of light”, and suppose I take him, and reliably so, to treat it as being true if and only if nothing can accelerate past the speed of light. I am now in a state such that were I to treat Einstein's utterance of “nothing can accelerate past the speed of light” as true I would believe that nothing can accelerate past the speed of light, and, furthermore, I wouldn't be in that state if Einstein didn't believe that nothing can accelerate past the speed of light. So far, however, my choice is still open: I can treat Einstein's utterance as true, or not. Now, suppose I believe that it is true, but for some absurd reason—e.g., my palm reader told me that the next thing anyone said to me was going to be true and I happened to run into Einstein as I stepped out of the parlor, or because I believe that the man talking to me, who happens to be Einstein, is in fact the guru of my sect, whom I believe to be omniscient. Clearly my belief that what Einstein says is true is not reliable in these cases and hence I do not come to know that nothing can accelerate past the speed of light. Though Einstein's testimony has put me into a state such that were I to treat what Einstein has said as true I would believe that nothing can accelerate past the speed of light, my resultant belief that nothing

seems acceptable to me, though it might stretch “communicates” a bit; one could add an extra condition about speaker intention to communicate, or communicate with the hearer, if one wanted. Since I can't see that this makes any difference to the issues in the text I will ignore it.

can accelerate past the speed of light is unreliably formed. Though I had reliable testimony at my disposal, I didn't use it properly. The rider "on the basis of an accurate assessment of the speaker's trustworthiness" is added to rule out such cases: my reason for believing that the speaker's utterance is true must be based in some accurate assessment of the speaker's likelihood to believe truths about the topic about which he speaks. I leave open here how topic- or person-specific such assessment should be, as well as questions about whether testimony enjoys the sort of "default justified" status some "anti-reductionist" epistemologists of testimony claim; see the essays in Lackey and Sosa 2005 for an introduction to the relevant topics. The proper working out of the "accurate assessment" clause is a specific issue in the epistemology of testimony; I mention it here to make clearer the way in which KNOWLEDGE really is a thesis about communication.

Second, I want to emphasize the fact that even if KNOWLEDGE states a necessary condition on successful communication—that is, even if only secure communication is successful communication—this condition is that a certain further condition be *sufficient* rather than itself *necessary* for learning by testimony. KNOWLEDGE states a necessary condition on a speaker's securely communicating with a hearer, this condition being that their exchange put them in a position such that it is *sufficient* for the hearer to know that the relevant condition obtains that she believe that it does on the basis of an accurate assessment of the speaker's trustworthiness and that the speaker knows that it does. KNOWLEDGE does not say that it is a necessary condition for successful communication that speaker and hearer be put in a position such that it is *necessary* for the hearer to know that the condition obtains that the speaker knows it. Other factors in the overall communicative situation can make it the case that the hearer comes to know, upon receiving the speaker's testimony, despite the speaker's own lack of knowledge. Consider the following example devised by Sanford Goldberg:¹⁶

Frank is a writer with a strange habit. Every morning, at precisely 7:30 a.m., he wakes up and dumps out whatever is left of the pint of milk he purchased the day before, but places the empty carton back in the fridge until noon. Then, throughout the interval from 7:30 to noon, he always remains in the kitchen, as that is where he writes every morning like

¹⁶I thank Brad Cokelet and colleagues at the University of Miami for bringing this to my attention.

clockwork. Finally, at exactly noon, he takes the now-empty milk carton out of the fridge and throws it away – an act which to him symbolizes the end of his day's writing. Now Mary is unaware of Frank's milk-dumping practice. One morning, having spent the prior evening at Frank's house with Frank and her son Sonny, she awakens at 7:40 and goes to the kitchen with Sonny. Upon entering (Frank is already there) she immediately goes to the fridge for a glass of OJ, and as she reaches for the OJ she casually observes a small carton of milk. She goes on to tell Sonny (who always has cereal with milk for breakfast) that there is milk in the fridge. As luck would have it, there is indeed milk in the carton on this day (Frank failed to remember that he had bought milk yesterday). When Frank observes Mary's testimony, he realizes that he forgot to dump the milk; when Sonny observes her testimony, he forms the belief that there is milk in the fridge.

In what follows I want to argue that the following two claims hold:

(1) Mary's testimony (to the effect that there is milk in the fridge) is unreliable, insensitive, and unsafe.

(2) Sonny comes to know through Mary's testimony that there is milk in the fridge (Goldberg 2005, 302).

Goldberg is right here; as he subsequently elaborates, if there had not been milk in the fridge, Frank would have corrected Mary's claim. Sonny is thus in a position such that he wouldn't believe that there is milk in the fridge unless there was. The point is that other factors in a situation can result in a hearer knowing something the speaker doesn't know. In Goldberg's case, Mary and Sonny communicate and securely communicate—if only Mary herself had been reliable, her testimony would have been sufficient for Sonny's knowledge given that he forms the belief that there is milk in the fridge on the basis of an accurate assessment of her trustworthiness—but Mary is not reliable. Nevertheless, Sonny comes to know that there is milk in the fridge; the overall situation makes Sonny's belief that there is milk in the fridge reliably formed, even though Mary's belief that there is milk in the fridge is not. This sort of case, like the sort discussed in the previous paragraph, can arise; my point is that they concern issues in the epistemology of testimony that go beyond the role of learning by testimony that figures in the account of secure communication offered here.¹⁷

5. As was probably obvious to the reader as soon as BELIEF was introduced, on the intuitive conception of the testimonial inference sketched in §1 the hearer's acceptance of the conclusion, (5), is insensitive to whether BELIEF is true of the hearer's exchange with

¹⁷In a fuller discussion of the issues of this paragraph I would also discuss the very interesting Graham 2000.

the speaker. The reason for this is simple: granting, for the nonce, that there is something that a given sentence means in a given context of utterance, it is possible for the speaker to be wrong about this—wrong in particular about the truth condition assigned to the sentence by the language of the context. (I have left for later discussion the idea that there are languages—idiolects, say—relative to which it is impossible for a speaker to be deviant.) Given such a speaker, one would as a hearer go completely wrong in the testimonial inference in drawing conclusions from what the sentence means (by one’s own lights) rather than from what the speaker means by it, and it would be mad to insist on doing so if the speaker’s deviance were known. What we care about in gathering information from one another is what speakers are trying to convey. Deviant speakers can perfectly well have knowledge to pass along, and this knowledge can be gathered by paying attention not to what their words mean, but to what they mean by them.

Here, then, is the correct conception of the testimonial inference. One begins as before:

(1) The speaker said *s* in circumstances *c*.

Next, the crucial second premise, accounting for what the speaker *treats as* the truth condition of her utterance, rather than for any presumed “real” truth condition that it has:

(2) The speaker treats *s* as true in *c* iff *p*.

(2) now matches BELIEF in that the hearer is represented as inferring from what the speaker treats a sentence as meaning; this makes the testimonial inference, as the hearer construes it, sensitive to whether or not communication has occurred. A third assumption concerns the speaker’s sincerity:

(3) The speaker intended that her utterance of *s* be true in *c*.

Given that the speaker intended to say something true, and that she treats the sentence as true if and only if *p*, we have SINCERITY true of the exchange, as long as the speaker is

minimally rational enough to treat s in c as true iff p , intending furthermore that it be true. Assuming this minimal rationality, the hearer can move on to:

(4) So the speaker believes that p .

Next, as before, the step that the mainstream literature on the epistemology of testimony concerns; one might take the speaker to be trustworthy; if so, one finishes the inference:

(5) So, p

This is the correct conception of the testimonial inference, since on it the hearer infers, rightly, from how the speaker treats a sentence, rather than from what it (seems to her that it) means. Consideration of how one would draw conclusions from what a deviant speaker says makes clear that only in inferring in this way can one rationally come to believe both that the speaker believes something in particular, and come to believe what she believes.¹⁸ Even in cases where one, relying on the basic appearances, seems to oneself to infer directly from the truth condition of the speaker's utterance, this inference can only be reliable if one is sensitive to the speaker's treatment of the sentence as opposed to dogmatically insisting upon the "real" meaning of the sentence as uttered in context.

At this point the assumption taken on in BELIEF and KNOWLEDGE that agreement on the truth conditions a speaker treats the sentence she utters as having is the essence of communication can look questionable: what if meanings are more fine-grained than truth conditions? Would this somehow mean that successful communication requires not just agreement on the meaning assigned by the speaker, but that sentences actually have the agreed upon meanings? No. Suppose we think that for communication to happen the hearer has to be right about more than just the truth condition the speaker treats her sentence, in context, as having. The point stands that in order for the testimonial inference to work out, the hearer need only be right about the meaning the speaker treats

¹⁸Obviously, this is all completely incompatible with "social externalism", or, as I prefer to call it, "anti-individualism" of the sort famously associated with Burge 1979. Beyond noting this fact, I won't discuss my reasons for rejecting such views directly here.

her sentence as having; but hearer and speaker do not need to treat the used sentence as having a meaning that it actually has. The hearer's inference may be more complicated on such a view, since the hearer ultimately needs to extract a truth condition from a meaning in order to arrive at (5). I leave the details of this "extraction" to those who favor such accounts of meaning. What matters in communication is the transfer of belief and knowledge as to what is the case. Truth conditions are therefore what matter. If sentential meanings are more fine-grained than truth conditions, it is not because of the role of the sentence in communication, but of the role of the sentence in *further* sentences in which it can be embedded to affect *their* role in communication. This further role, as is familiar from the semantics of attitude contexts, seems not always to be a function of truth conditions. But this is just to say that there may be room, or need, for a notion of meaning on which the meaning a sentence has in *one* communicative act depends on the truth conditions of *other* sentences used in *other* communicative acts. Perhaps so, but the point stands that such a notion of sentence meaning plays no role in the basic account of successful communication.

6. The change in (2) in the correct conception of the testimonial inference means that meaning drops out as irrelevant. What matters to me as a hearer in trying to gather knowledge from speakers is not what words mean, but what speakers treat them as meaning. (2) can be true even if *s* as uttered in *c* is not true iff *p*; it can be true if *s* has some other truth condition in *c*, and it can be true even if *s* has no truth condition at all. Likewise BELIEF can be true of an exchange whether or not the speaker is right about the meaning of the sentence assigned to it by the context, and whether or not it means anything at all. It can be true even if the speaker's treatment of the sentence is deviant relative to the language of the context. Construing the testimonial inference as in the previous section, even if the speaker is "wrong" about what her sentence means in context, there is no "false lemma" in the testimonial inference as long as the hearer takes account of this. Likewise, the hearer, in attempting to learn from the speaker, takes on no assumption about meaning that needs to be true if knowledge is to be transmitted. If BELIEF being true of an exchange is necessary and sufficient for that exchange being an instance of successful communication, successful communication has nothing to do with

meaning—though it of course has a great deal to do with what speakers treat things as meaning. In order to communicate, a speaker must treat a sentence as having a truth condition, but the sentence need not have that truth condition. The hearer, in turn, need not believe that the sentence has the truth condition, and would be irrational to allow her beliefs about its truth condition to figure into the testimonial inference at the expense of beliefs about the speaker’s usage; the hearer simply needs to be right about the condition the speaker treats as necessary and sufficient for the truth of her utterance. (There is some echo here of Donnellan’s (1966) distinction between semantic reference and speaker reference, and more generally of common distinctions between speaker meaning and sentence meaning, but I won’t extend the paper with a discussion of this comparison. The main point is that I stress the difference between a speaker treating a sentence as having a meaning and its having that meaning—even if that meaning itself is, say, a “speaker’s meaning” distinguished from something more widely determined.)

Meaning, therefore, is irrelevant to communication. Might it be, however, relevant to secure communication? I have encountered arguments that, put in our terms, claim that meaning might be irrelevant to communication, and yet required for secure communication. Richard Heck (2006), discusses an example of him informing a student that Professor Parsons is teaching. At one point he comments on the example as follows:

If Janet does not *know* that “Prof. Parsons is teaching” means that Prof Parsons is teaching, but only truly believes that it does, then she will not *know* that I have said that Prof. Parsons is teaching, but only truly believe that I have done so, and so she cannot come to know that Prof. Parsons is teaching on the basis of my telling her so. Successful communication—at least insofar as it involves the potential transfer of knowledge—therefore seems to require not just that the communicants have *true beliefs* about what the uttered sentence means, in that context, but that they *know* what the uttered sentence means (Heck 2006, 71).

The foregoing gives us some reason, then, to suppose that successful communication depends on both the speaker’s and her audience’s knowing what the uttered sentence means in the context in which it is uttered. Now, knowing that the meaning of the uttered sentence is (in our example) that Prof. Parsons is teaching is, of course, more than truly believing that it means that Prof. Parsons is teaching. But one can only know if one truly believes. And if such beliefs are to be so much as capable of being true, then it would certainly appear as if there must be something the sentence really does mean: Without that, there would be nothing for speakers to be right or wrong about. And so it would seem that what Janet and I both need to know, if we are to communicate successfully, is what the sentence I uttered means in the language we both speak—in English, or in the dialect thereof spoken in Cambridge, or whatever the right ‘common language’ might turn out to be (Heck 2006, 72).

The idea here is that for the hearer's belief about the meaning of the speaker's utterance to amount to knowledge, there has to be something that the utterance means, and the thought expressed in this passage (which, for the record, Heck goes on to deny) is that somehow facts about a "common language" are bound up with there being such a meaning. A further thought, not expressed by Heck, is that in addition to meaning being required to make the hearer's belief true, it might be required to make the hearer's belief reliable so that the hearer knows (2) in the testimonial inference and hence can come to know (5) by inferring it from (2).¹⁹ So meaning-facts might look relevant not to the truth of (2) but to the reliability of the process by which the hearer comes to believe it. If something along these lines is correct, secure communication requires meaning, the idea being that somehow RELIABILITY cannot be true of an exchange unless the sentence used has a meaning.

I'll argue that this is not so by considering two mutually exhaustive cases. Either the meaning the speaker's utterance is supposed to have in context is determined by her treating it as having it, or it is not. So consider the first case. Suppose we hold—as many do—that the speaker's usage always makes it the case that the speaker is speaking *some* language (her idiolect, as it is often put, or maybe her idiolect at a time or relative to a hearer) in which the sentence she uses has the meaning that she treats it as having. The idea here is that the relevant language is entirely under the control of the speaker: her treating a sentence as having a certain meaning *makes* it mean that, and nothing else is required to make it mean that.²⁰ On this view, then, the speaker's treatment of the sentence is necessary and sufficient for its having the meaning it does. The problem with this is simply that if the speaker's own use is necessary and sufficient for the meaning of the sentence she uses (in context) then the hearer can be no more reliable about the meaning than she is about the use that creates or constitutes it: if it is entirely because of

¹⁹I owe this expansion of Heck's line of thought to an anonymous referee.

²⁰Note that the thesis, though incompatible with the anti-individualist idea that other speakers' usage makes a contribution to meaning (see the note on anti-individualism above), is compatible with the externalist idea that the subject's environments makes a difference, since, e.g., treating a term as applying to a certain substance a sample of which is demonstratively identified ties the extension of the term to what substance is actually present in the sample in ways that outstrip the speaker's knowledge.

how the speaker treats her sentence that it means what it does, I'm at most as reliable about the meaning as I am about the use. So the sentence being meaningful cannot, on this conception, have anything to do with RELIABILITY being true of the exchange.

This is why Heck is right to suggest a connection here to "common languages". For if the meaning of the sentence the speaker uses *is not* determined by the speaker's usage, then it is at least possible that the hearer might more reliably attribute that meaning to the sentence than she attributes the speaker's usage to the speaker. Perhaps, the idea is, I can have more reliably true beliefs about what sentences mean in English than I can about what you *treat* the sentences you use as meaning. Be this as it may, it is irrelevant to successful communication, for reasons already discussed. To the extent that a speaker uses a sentence with a meaning that is *not* determined by her usage, that meaning is irrelevant to me as a hearer in attempting to learn from her. Again, what matters for me as a hearer trying to gather knowledge from a speaker isn't what truth condition a sentence actually has, but what truth condition the speaker herself treats it as having. About that the hearer can be no more reliable than she is about the speaker's usage.

7. The semantic paradoxes illustrate the importance of the irrelevance of meaning to communication. Consider a standard case of contingent paradox.²¹ Suppose Fred says:

(1) John's utterance is not true.

Suppose, further, that Anne is speaking with John, Fred being out of earshot, and John says:

(2) Fred's utterance is true.

We assume for the sake of example that "John's utterance" and "Fred's utterance" unproblematically refer to the relevant displayed sentences.²² Suppose (for *reductio*) that

²¹Kripke famously stresses the importance of contingent paradox in Kripke 1975.

²²For those who already have my account of the paradoxes (2007, 2007a, 2009) in mind, the actual point here is that we need to assume that Anne treats "Fred's utterance" and "John's utterance" as referring to the relevant sentences; I ignore this in the text in order to get the basic point across.

John's and Fred's utterances have the obvious truth conditions, the ones Fred and John as ordinary, competent speakers of English will treat them as having, namely:

(3) "John's utterance is not true" is true if and only if John's utterance is not true.

(4) "Fred's utterance is true" is true if and only if Fred's utterance is true.

Now, since:

(5) "John's utterance is not true" = Fred's utterance

(6) "Fred's utterance is true" = John's utterance

We have by the substitutivity of identicals:

(7) Fred's utterance is true if and only if John's utterance is not true.

(8) John's utterance is true if and only if Fred's utterance is true

and so, from these:

(9) John's utterance is true if and only if John's utterance is not true.

John's utterance, therefore, cannot have the truth condition John treats it as having (and neither can Fred's have the one Fred treats it as having). If communication requires sentences to have truth conditions, we must either hold that John does not communicate with Anne or postulate that John's utterance has some truth condition other than the one John treats it as having.

However, we have just argued that any truth condition other than the truth condition a speaker treats her sentence as having is irrelevant to communication. This forces us to consider the suggestion that John does not communicate with Anne in this case. But here it matters that the case concerns contingent paradox. If Fred had said "snow is white", we would simply have an ordinary, obvious case of secure communication here: Fred's utterance would have been true, and John would have

securely communicated to Anne that Fred's utterance was true.²³ Hence, in saying that since Fred didn't say that, but said, instead, "John's utterance is not true", John and Anne don't communicate we commit to the claim that whether or not two people communicate can be determined by factors independent of the beliefs and intentions that structure communication. Now it isn't controversial that the truth-value of what someone says can depend on what other people have said when the first has said something about the truth-values of what these others have said. Furthermore, contingent paradox shows that whether or not the utterance of a sentence in context is paradoxical can also show such a dependence. It is, however, another thing entirely to maintain that one can turn a situation in which two people have communicated into one in which they have not merely by varying factors that are independent of what goes on between those two people, for this requires us to hold not merely that the truth-value of what someone says can show dependence on what others have said, but that whether or not the hearer *and the speaker* so much as know what the speaker is saying can likewise be dependent on the truth-values of claims that weren't involved in the communicative act at issue.²⁴

Applied to the case of John, Fred and Anne, the naive conception of the testimonial inference, or more generally the idea that it is a necessary condition of communication that the used sentence have a truth condition in context, would force us into major revisions the account of communication. If successful communication requires the sentence John uses *actually* to have a truth condition in context, this condition cannot be the one John treats his sentence as having. We would thus need to develop *both* a principled account of what truth-conditions classically paradoxical sentences actually have *and* a conception of communication on which it is possible, and sometimes even necessary, that successful communication involves a sentence having a truth condition in context other than the one the speaker treats it as having. The first

²³Many forms of deflationism about truth make it problematic how Anne could learn that Fred's utterance is true without knowing what Fred's utterance was. I explain why I reject such views in Patterson 2002, 2008a and forthcoming.

²⁴Consideration of Fred may make the point even clearer: if his utterance has to have a truth-condition in order for him to communicate with whomever he is talking to, then whether he communicates at all, or whether his utterance has the truth-condition he treats it as having can depend on what goes on between John and Anne who may be thousands of miles away and of whom he may never have heard.

would require us to wade into the literature on “orthodox” logical approaches to semantic paradox (see Patterson 2009, §1 on “orthodox approaches” and 2007 for a more extensive discussion of the issues), and the second would require us to revise BELIEF in the account of communication to allow, somehow, that a hearer can successfully understand a speaker by taking the speaker’s utterance to have a truth condition other than the one the speaker treats it as having. Both endeavors, I maintain, will be fruitless; I make the first point at length in Patterson 2007, and the second was made in the previous section: I cannot come to know what a speaker believes by taking her sentence to have a truth condition she does not treat it as having.²⁵

The other option, again, is to deny that communication happens at all when speakers treat sentences as having truth conditions they could only have if everything were the case. The cost, as mentioned, would be allowing that communication can be turned into non-communication by a change in what some third party says. Perhaps, if we were forced into it, we could learn to live with such a conception of communication. Thankfully, however, we are not forced to live with such a conception: the account of communication and secure communication given here applies immediately and without modification to the case of John, Fred and Anne. John and Anne *do* communicate in the example, since BELIEF is true of their exchange: Anne will believe that John’s utterance is true if and only if she believes that Fred’s utterance is true, and that Fred’s utterance be true is just the truth condition John treated his utterance as having. Indeed, John and Anne can securely communicate: if Anne reliably treats John’s utterance as true iff Fred’s utterance is true (and SINCERITY is true of the exchange) it is sufficient for Anne to know that Fred’s utterance is true that Anne believes that it is on the basis of an accurate assessment of John’s trustworthiness and that John have such knowledge to pass along. Of course, he does not, since if Fred’s utterance were true it would also be untrue, but the

²⁵Even if cases can be constructed in which I come to know what someone believes by taking her utterance to have some truth condition other than the one she treats it as having, the point is that in such cases I will not come to possess this knowledge merely in virtue of my reliably treating the utterance as having that truth condition plus the speaker’s sincerity.

security of communication does not depend on the speaker actually possessing knowledge.²⁶

The account of communication developed here takes paradoxical sentences in stride: BELIEF and even KNOWLEDGE can be true of an exchange in which the sentence uttered is paradoxical, though of course knowledge cannot actually be transmitted, and hearers who finish the testimonial inference in such cases saddle themselves with beliefs that cannot be true.²⁷ This preserves the attractive ideas about communication adumbrated at the outset of §2. Such an account is superior to any account that requires us to deny that John and Anne communicate—after all, the only thing required to make the case *obviously* unproblematic is a shift in what Fred, unknown to Ted and Anne, has said—or to modify either logic and semantics or the account of communication in order to handle such cases. The strength and simplicity account derive from nothing more than its demonstration that sentences used in communication and even secure communication need not have any truth conditions at all, since what matters is not the truth condition the sentence has, but what truth condition the speaker treats it as having.

²⁶Presumably here as well in the modified example where Fred says “snow is white” we don’t have leaning by testimony on Anne’s part, since it follows from the pairing of the examples that John is totally unreliable in his beliefs about the truth-values of Fred’s utterances. This is just an artifact of the chosen examples. The point is that we do have secure communication: if only John had possessed knowledge, rather than belief, about the truth-value of Fred’s utterance, Anne would have possessed it, too. I suppose there might also be some issue here as to whether Anne could accurately assess John as trustworthy, given his habit of letting the truth-values of his claims depend on the truth-values of things he hasn’t inspected for paradox-inducing features. However, we have to live with some risk of this since, as is often stressed, especially in the deflationism literature, one of the primary uses of “is true” is to commit us to claims we cannot ourselves specify. In any case, this is a question for the epistemology of testimony and not for the theory of communication.

²⁷These beliefs will be paradoxical, of course. Does this mean that the account of paradox has made no progress? No, because we can assign paradoxical *beliefs* to a “junk” category without fear of any “revenge problem” (Beall 2007). The problem with saying that some sentences of natural languages or idiolects are paradoxical is that “this sentence is either false or paradoxical” is as clearly part of such languages as are the original paradoxical sentences; this is why the inevitable “ascent to a stronger metalanguage” of orthodox approaches to paradox is never satisfying. There is no analogous phenomenon in the case of belief: if I assign one of your beliefs to the category “paradoxical”, it does *not* follow that you have another belief that declares itself either false or paradoxical, or even that you have any beliefs at all about paradoxicality: there is nothing wrong with “ascent to a stronger metalanguage” with respect to someone’s beliefs, since nobody thinks that anybody’s *beliefs* are semantically closed. I included discussions of this in draft versions of both 2007 and 2007a, but cut the discussions when something needed to go to get the papers down to publishable length. The cut material can be found on my website, where it will remain until I can put it into print.

8. Neither communication nor secure communication require meanings. This leaves the only real argument we have for countenancing meanings dismantled. What we are left with is the companion thought mentioned in the introduction that sentences just must be meaningful because they seem meaningful, and the related fact that speakers, in inferring from testimony, often seem to themselves to be reasoning from what sentences mean, rather than from what speakers treat them as meaning.

What are we to make of this? Consider two native speakers who simply believe that sentences mean what they appear, on the basis of their competence as native speakers, to mean. Communication will succeed among these interlocutors not because the sentences they use mean what they seem to them to mean, but because, both being native speakers, the meanings sentences seem to them to have are the same. As long as these speakers are, as we often are, in environments where assuming that someone treats words as meaning what they seem to one to mean is a safe assumption, doing so is a reliable way of forming a belief about a speaker's treatment of an uttered sentence. Naive native speakers in significantly uniform linguistic populations may go through many days without even noticing that what another speaker is trying to get across by the use of a sentence may diverge from the truth condition it seems to them, the hearers, unreflectively that it has. However, this unreflective speaking must be backed up by sensitivity to the possibility of deviance, or it does not, over time, constitute a reliable way of learning from others. This said, none of it requires that words do mean what they seem to native speakers to mean.

The theory of communication has empirical and conceptual branches. Communication and secure communication occur under the conditions discussed above. In principle, intelligent beings in accommodating environments—e.g. the clever Pierre of Schiffer 2003—could get by with entirely “one-off” communicative acts in which they simply discerned the truth conditions assigned to sentences by one another directly on the basis of their knowledge of one another and the context. We, however, are not such beings in such environments; something, for us, plays what Schiffer there calls “the knowledge of meaning role”. We are surrounded by beings who communicate, and we do so ourselves. We want to understand how the task is pulled off *by creatures like us*, and we need to take account of the evidence already in about all of this. This evidence,

as is familiar (e.g. Chomsky 1986) indicates that our capacity to speak and understand natural language is both significantly innately constrained (that is, innately enabled) and cognitively modular (Fodor 1983). The operation of the innate “language faculty” in the state it is left in by a linguistically normal human childhood is such as to produce conformity among speakers who encounter one another often; the interactive effects of this mechanism in the human population produce the patchwork of uniformity and distinctness we find in natural languages (Heck 2006, 87ff). Again, though, that we have such innate linguistic capacities, and that *we* couldn’t get along as we do without them does not show that things must mean what they appear to us to mean in virtue of our being so constituted, since the unreflective communicative abilities our language faculties support require *uniformity* in the treatment of sentences as having semantic properties across the population, not true beliefs or knowledge to the effect that sentences have these properties.

On what grounds, then, might one insist that nevertheless the very fact that things seem meaningful implies that they must be meaningful? The idea I most often encounter is that for a sentence to have a certain meaning *just is* for it to seem to a sufficient number of people to have that meaning;²⁸ in such a case it is meaningful in these people’s language—be it a familiarly-named language, a dialect thereof, an idiolect, or something even more finely individuated. In the previous section I argued that the semantic paradoxes show that this suggestion is mired in difficulties. In fact, I maintain that “this sentence is false”, understood as it would be by a competent speaker of English, is simply a counterexample to such views. There is no need, however to rely on that material to make the current point. The point is simply that it no more follows from the fact that something seems to someone to mean something that it in fact means that than it follows from the fact someone seems to see something—e.g. to advert to a traditional example, a bent stick, where what there actually is is a straight stick immersed in water—that there is something that *really is* bent that the person in some further sense really does “see”. In both cases, what explains what people think and do is that things seem thus-and-so to them, and what explains the truth or falsehood of these beliefs or the success or failure of

²⁸The most popular choices for “a sufficient number” I encounter in conversation are, in order of frequency, two, one, and a bunch.

these actions is how things actually are. When we have said both what the world contains and what subjects take it to contain, we have said all that needs to be said about the subject's successful or unsuccessful getting around in the world.²⁹

9. I have argued that communication and secure communication fail to require that the sentence used mean anything in the context of utterance, in particular, that they fail to require that it means what either speaker or hearer believe or treat it as meaning relative to that context. I have also argued that nothing about the human language faculty or the linguistic uniformities it supports speaks against these views. I will close by emphasizing the intended significance of what I have claimed. The view offered here is incompatible with nearly everything written on natural language semantics to date. The literature of the last decades has been dominated, in the relevant respects, by a debate between “cognitivists” (Larson and Segal 1995, 10) or “conceptualists” (Antony 1997, 180) who hold that semantic theories must somehow be “cognitively realized” in *knowledge* possessed by speakers (if tacitly), instrumentalists like Davidson (2001) who hold that semantics, though it does not state what speakers know, does state something *knowing* which would be sufficient for understanding, and opponents of the psychologization of semantics such as Soames (1992) and Devitt (2003), who hold that the study of semantics is directly about meaning and has nothing to do with what speakers know. All of these positions agree, however, that there *is* something to know about in natural language semantics—the meanings expressions of natural languages or idiolects have—and simply disagree over whether in addition to studying meaning, natural language semantics should somehow be concerned with the speaker's grasp of meaning. If my account of communication is correct, this common assumption is completely unmotivated; even proud “psychologistic semanticists” such as Antony 1997 grant too much in calling the cognitive states of speakers *knowledge* of some kind. Call the position advocated here *non-factive cognitivism*, to distinguish it from the kind that assumes that the cognitive states that underlie human language use are relevantly like true belief or even knowledge. Non-factive cognitivism is the strongest position on the epistemic status of the competent

²⁹I expand on this thought a bit in the concluding section of Patterson 2009.

speaker's relation to language justified by argument and evidence in the theory of language. The additional claim that sentences really do mean what speakers take or treat them as meaning is at the very best a useless extra and is, if my account of the paradoxes is right, simply mistaken.

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