

Incoherent Meanings

MICHAEL DEVITT
City University of New York, New York, USA

Stojnić holds the radical view that coherence relations determine the reference of context-sensitive language. I argue against this from the theoretical perspective presented in Overlooking Conventions (2021). Theoretical interest in language comes from an interest in thoughts and their communication. A language is a system of symbols, constituted by a set of governing rules, used (inter alia) to communicate the meanings (contents) of thoughts. Thought meanings, hence speaker meanings, are explanatorily prior to semantic meanings. So, we start our consideration of the theoretical place of coherence by considering the bearing of coherence on thought meanings. The paper argues that a person can have any thought at all, however incoherent. So, a thought's meaning is independent of its coherence. Any thought can be expressed in an utterance. The semantic meaning of any utterance governed by the linguistic rules will be the meaning of the thought it expresses. So, the utterance's meaning is independent of its coherence. The paper concludes that coherence has no place in the theory of meaning or reference. Nonetheless, it has a place in the theory of communication. I suspect that the error exemplifies the widespread confusion of the metaphysics of meaning with the epistemology of interpretation.

Keywords: Coherence; context sensitivity; reference; thought meaning/content; speaker meaning; semantic meaning; communication.

1. Introduction

What place does *coherence* have in theorizing about language? In her engaging book, *Context and Coherence: The Logic and Grammar of Prominence* (2021), and in several related articles coauthored with Matthew Stone and Ernie Lepore (2013, 2017, 2020), Una Stojnić takes “mechanisms of discourse coherence” (Stojnić 2021: 5) to be constitutive

of reference. She argues that the meaning of context-sensitive language is not “partially determined by non-linguistic features of utterance situation”, as traditionally thought, but rather “is determined entirely by grammar—by rules of language that have largely been missed” (Stojnić 2021: vii). The missed rules are ones of discourse coherence. Coherence plays its constitutive role because “[s]uccessive contributions to the discourse must be linked into a coherent whole by a recognizable flow of interpretive relationships” (Stojnić 2021: 61).

In “Demonstratives, Context-Sensitivity, and Coherence” (forthcoming), I argue against this radical view as it applies to demonstrations, demonstratives, and the indexical ‘I’. I find Stojnić’s theories of reference to be seriously incomplete, failing to meet the demands on any such theory. Furthermore, I argued that, so far as Stojnić’s theories of these terms go, the theories are false. My argument appeals to perception-based theories of demonstratives, a part of the tradition going back at least to Husserl that Stojnić strangely overlooks. I use my own perception-based theory as an example (Devitt 1974, 1981, 2022).

That forthcoming paper ends with some brief remarks about coherence in general. I claim that though coherence has a place in a theory of *understanding* and *communication*, it has no place in a theory of *meaning*. My aim in the present paper is to provide an argument for those brief final remarks.

My view of the theoretical place of coherence arises from the perspective on language and communication presented in *Overlooking Conventions: The Trouble with Linguistic Pragmatism* (Devitt 2021; also, 2013a), as I shall now demonstrate, drawing on that work.

2. *Human thoughts*

Why are we interested in language in the first place? Our theoretical interest in language comes from our theoretical interest in thoughts and their expression, usually in communication.

It is a piece of folk wisdom that people have thoughts, which is to say that they have beliefs, desires, and other such “propositional attitudes”, mental states with intentional contents or meanings. So, the folk are “intentional realists”. I think that we have a very good reason for supposing that we do indeed have thoughts (Devitt 2006a: 125–127). We need to ascribe them to people for at least two reasons: to explain people’s behaviors and to explain the way they use others as a guide to a largely external reality.

Consider the explanation of behavior first. We observe Mark putting on a raincoat and picking up an umbrella before leaving a room. Why is he doing that? Central to our explanation is that Mark believes that it is raining. Such “intentional” explanations of “intentional” behavior are familiar and central parts of ordinary life, of history, of economics, and of the social sciences in general. They all ascribe thoughts.

Ascribing beliefs serves another remarkably valuable purpose. If a

person believes that the world is such and such, and the person is reliable, then we have good reason to believe that the world is such and such. Thus, ascribing to Mark the belief that it is raining not only helps to explain his behavior but also gives us evidence about the weather. We have a wide range of interests in learning about the world. The direct way to serve these interests is to examine the world. The indirect way is to use reliable indicators. Sometimes these indicators are “natural” ones like tree rings. Sometimes they are artifacts like thermometers. Very often they are the beliefs of others. Some belief ascriptions serve our *theoretical* interest in explanation. Many, however, are like ascriptions of desires, hopes, and so on in serving interests that are not really theoretical at all. We have the most immediate *practical* interest in finding out quite humdrum facts about the world to satisfy our needs for food, shelter, a mate, and so on. So, it helps to know what is on sale at the supermarket, where there is a hotel, who is available, and so on. Ascribing beliefs is a very good way of finding out about anything at all.

This practice of ascribing thoughts is generally *successful* at serving these two purposes. Day in and day out we explain people’s behaviors with these ascriptions. Almost everything we know about the world—what we learn at mother’s knee, in classrooms, and from books—we get from ascribing beliefs to people and assessing them for reliability. If there really were not any thoughts, this success would be very hard to explain. We clearly have a great theoretical interest in the details of this process of explaining behavior and learning from each other.

It is a familiar piece of folk psychology that, without any involvement of language, we can sometimes use our insight into other minds and knowledge of the world to figure out what a person thinks. Thus, we came to our view that Mark believes it is raining from observing his rain-avoidance behavior. And he might deliberately communicate his belief to us, without using language, by pointing upwards meaningfully as he puts on the raincoat.

3. *Animal communication*

We have a similar theoretical interest in the inner states of other organisms and their communication. We posit these states to explain behavior and to explain how one organism can communicate “information” to another. There is much debate in cognitive ethology and comparative psychology about these matters. There is no presumption that an organism’s learning from another must involve a language. At one extreme, chemical detectors may sometimes do the job. At the other extreme, the idea is seriously entertained that this learning should sometimes be explained by attributing to an organism something like human insight into other minds.

So, we do not always have to posit languages to explain this learning. Still, scientists often do. What are they thus positing? What is a language? It is a system of representations or symbols that is consti-

tuted by a set of governing rules, and that a group of organisms use to communicate with each other. Most such languages are not very interesting because they simply communicate information about the animal's own current state; for example, that the animal is hungry, or wants a mate. The interesting ones are the ones known as "referential", ones that convey information about the environment. The honey bee provides a famous, and very surprising, example. The bee uses a "waggle dance" to communicate the direction and distance of a food source. Gunnison's prairie dogs provide another example: they have a system of "barks" that convey information about which sort of predator is threatening and about the characteristics of a particular predator of that sort. Clearly, the whereabouts of food is a pressing concern for the bee, the presence and nature of a predator, for the prairie dog. A bee that has returned from a food source has reliable information about the former, a prairie dog that has observed a predator, the latter. Their languages enable them to communicate this valuable information.¹

The rules of the bee's language are very likely entirely innate. The rules of the prairie dog's language seem to be partly learned and, perhaps we should say, "conventional": its alarm calls vary a bit from colony to colony; and when an experimenter used a plywood model to simulate a new sort of predator, the prairie dogs introduced a new call (Slobodchikoff 2002). In any case, whether a language used to communicate information is innate or conventional, we have a powerful theoretical interest in that language and its rules. Serious scientists work to discover the natures of the symbols in these representational systems, to discover their *meanings*.

Karl von Frisch is a notable example. He won a Nobel Prize for his discoveries about the bee's dance. I shall simplify by ignoring what he discovered about how the dance conveys the distance of the food source, attending only to what it conveys about direction. Von Frisch found the following remarkable rule:

To convey the direction of a food source, the bee varies the angle the wagging run makes with an imaginary line running straight up and down...If you draw a line connecting the beehive and the food source, and another line connecting the hive and the spot on the horizon just beneath the sun, the angle formed by the two lines is the same as the angle of the wagging run to the imaginary vertical line. (Frank 1997: 82)

In hypothesizing that a certain behavior in members of a species involves a symbol that represents something in their language, we are supposing that the behavior was produced *because*, in some sense, it involves that symbol representing something in their language; and it is *because* of what the symbol represents in their language that other members of the species respond to the behavior as they do. So, it is

¹ And it is worth noting that sometimes we are confident that an animal has a language because we have *taught* it one; think of some dolphins and primates that have been taught surprisingly complex languages.

because of what it represents that the symbol plays its striking role in the life of an organism.

Evidence for such hypotheses is to be found, of course, in regularities in behavior. Thus, von Frisch's hypothesis was offered as an explanation of his many painstaking observations of the bee's behavior. But is it the *best* explanation? For some time, it was not obvious that it was. A rival hypothesis was that a bee heading off in the direction of the food source was not responding to information communicated by a bee's dance but rather was following an odor trail left by other bees. But this rival did not stand up to ingenious experiments. The consensus now is that the best explanation of the bee's behavior is indeed that the bee is using the language described by von Frisch (Dyer 2002; Riley et al. 2005; Vladusich et al. 2006).²

4. *Human language*

Return to humans. It is a truism that they have languages which they use to communicate their thoughts: as the folk say, "language expresses thought". This idea seems irresistible once one has accepted intentional realism, accepted that humans have thoughts (2006a: 127–8). As Fodor, Bever, and Garrett say, "there is much to be said for the old-fashioned view that speech expresses thought, and very little to be said against it" (1974: 375). So, just as the bees and the prairie dogs have representational systems used to communicate the contents of inner states to each other, so do we.³ The evidence for this in our behavior seems overwhelming.⁴

Consider again our example of Mark and the ascription to him of the belief that it is raining. Suppose that the people present ascribe this belief on the basis of his production of the sound, /It is raining/. According to the rules of English, this sound means that it is raining at the location in question. If the people assume that Mark is being literal and straightforward, they will take that meaning to be the meaning (content) that the speaker intentionally communicates, his "speaker

² For more on this issue see Devitt (2006b: 585–6) responding to Smith (2006: 440–1).

³ Just as the non-referential languages of animals (sec. 3) have other functions that do not utilize *representational* properties, so has ours: we greet ("Hi"), cheer ("Bravo"), abuse ("Bastard"), and curse ("Shit"). My focus is on the representational properties.

⁴ Chomskians have a different view. They see a human language as an internal state not a system of external symbols that represent the world. I argued (2003, 2006a: 17–41) that this is deeply misguided. This led to some always lively and sometimes nasty exchanges: Collins 2006, Matthews 2006, Rattan 2006, Rey 2006, and Smith 2006, responded to in Devitt 2006b; Collins 2008a,b and Rey 2008, responded to in Devitt 2008a,b,c, 2013c; Antony 2008 and Pietroski 2008, responded to in Devitt 2008c; Longworth 2009 and Slezak 2009, responded to in Devitt 2009; Ludlow 2009, responded to in Devitt 2013d; Collins 2020 and Rey 2020, responded to in Devitt 2020; Rey and Collins 2023, responded to in Devitt 2023.

meaning". As a result, they have evidence of his thoughts. Taking him to be sincere in his expression, they conclude that he has a belief with that meaning (content), the belief that it is raining in that location. In this way, language is an extraordinarily effective way of making the thoughts of others accessible to us, thoughts that otherwise would be largely inaccessible; and of making our thoughts accessible to others, often in the hope of changing their thoughts and hence their behavior. Even though, as we noted, the thoughts of others are sometimes accessible to us without language, they mostly are not.

Just as we have a powerful theoretical interest in the languages of bees and prairie dogs, we have one in human languages and their rules: we need to know about the natures of the representations used to communicate in these systems.⁵

The rules of human languages arise largely from conventions. Indeed, it is a truism that symbols in a language (like English) have their meanings by convention. As David Lewis points out at the beginning of his classic, *Convention*, it is a "platitude that language is ruled by convention" (1969: 1). Still, I say only that the rules of human languages are "largely" conventional. The qualification is necessary for two reasons. First, if Chomsky is right then quite a lot of syntactic structure is innate. I think he probably is right (Devitt 2006a: Ch. 12). Second, the language of each human, her idiolect, is to some extent, mostly small, idiosyncratic (like Mrs. Malaprop's). So, the rules of her language are largely conventional but probably partly innate and partly her own work. Whatever the origin of a rule in her language that governs a certain linguistic form, it *is* a rule in virtue of her disposition to associate that form, in language production and understanding, with a certain aspect of thought content (2021: 75–77).

So, conventions should loom very large in our view of human language. On some occasions linguistic conventions are established by some influential people in a community stipulating that a certain form has a certain meaning and the community concurring. However, following Paul Grice (1989) and Stephen Schiffer (1972), I think that the conventional use of a linguistic form in a community—a sound, an inscription, etc.—typically come from the form's regular use in utterances to convey a certain part of thoughts, a certain concept or structure; it comes from the regular use of that form to "speaker mean" that content or structure. This regular use in utterances leads, somehow or other, to that form having that meaning conventionally in the language of that community. That meaning has become the literal semantic meaning of the form in the community's language. Crucially, *thought meanings, hence speaker meanings, are explanatorily prior to semantic meanings.*⁶

⁵ Some philosophers and linguists, impressed by the great difference between a human language and the representational systems used by other animals, resist calling those systems "languages". I can see no theoretical point to this resistance. In any case, the point is merely verbal.

⁶ In support of this crucial Gricean idea, see (Devitt 2021: Ch. 5).

Consider the English word ‘train’, for example. According to the OED, this word had several uses prior to the nineteenth century. Then came the railways and the word got a new conventional meaning referring to railway trains. How? We note first that this new meaning is conceptually related to old ones referring to a sequence of persons or things. The word is polysemous. It got its new conventional meaning from people using it in successful communications to speaker mean railway trains. The communications were successful, of course, because this speaker meaning traded on old conventional meanings of ‘train’. The success led to the *regular* use of ‘train’ to speaker mean railway trains. In time this regularity led to the new conventional semantic meaning.

5. Coherence and meanings

In light of the priority of thought meaning, we should start our consideration of the theoretical place of coherence by considering the bearing of coherence on thoughts.

One thought coheres with its predecessor if the two are linked in some appropriately *rational* way. Here are some truisms. (a) Coherence comes in degrees, from highly rational thinking all the way down to mere “association of ideas”. (b) People differ in the coherence of their thinking. (c) The coherence of a person’s thinking varies from time to time; it tends to get worse after a few drinks.

Now consider any thought that a person, Fiona, might have; for example, one she would express, “He likes spinach”, with John in mind. Label the meaning (content) of this thought ‘*M1*’. Would any former thought that Fiona might have make it (metaphysically) impossible for Fiona to think a thought meaning *M1*? In particular, would the failure of an *M1*-thought to *cohere* with some immediately preceding thought prevent Fiona from thinking an *M1*-thought? Suppose, for example, that Fiona has a thought that means *M2* and that she would express, “John took the train from Paris to Istanbul”. Would the failure of a thought meaning *M1* to cohere with one meaning *M2* make it (metaphysically) impossible for Fiona to follow her *M2*-thought with an *M1*-thought? I take it as obvious that the answer to all these questions is a resounding “No”. Thus, Fiona might “associate” her *M1*-thought with her *M2*-thought because the *M2*-thought reminded her immediately of a previous encounter with John in which he rhapsodized about spinach. In sum, *a person can have any thought at all, however badly its meaning coheres with its predecessor*. Indeed, its degree of coherence with its predecessor is a *function* of their meanings. So, crucially, *a thought’s meaning, and hence reference, are independent of its coherence*.

Turn now to language. Fiona may express any thoughts she has, however incoherent they are; people do crazy things. Her language will typically include rules for literally expressing any such thought (rules that may demand “saturation” in context, as the expression of Fiona’s

M1-thought does). The semantic meaning of the resulting utterance will *be* the meaning of the thought that the utterance expresses. That is a consequence of the utterance *being* the literal expression of the thought according to the rules of the language (sec. 4). (Of course, a person may express the thought non-literally, resulting in an utterance that has a speaker meaning that differs from any semantic meaning it may have.) Thus, Fiona may express her series of thoughts in the following discourse, which is one of Stojnić's examples:

- (40) John took the train from Paris to Istanbul. He likes spinach.
(2021: 62)

This discourse consists of an utterance meaning *M2* followed by one meaning *M1*, those being the meanings of the thoughts expressed. We can conclude that *since the meaning and reference of a thought are independent of its coherence, so too are the meaning and reference of the utterance expressing that thought. So, coherence has no place in a theory of meaning or reference for language as well as for thought.*

The point here is that the meaning, *M1*, of "He likes spinach" is *not* so constituted that this sentence cannot be uttered after "John took the train from Paris to Istanbul" meaning *M2*, or indeed after *any* sentence meaning *anything*. This is not to say, of course, that it would be felicitous for Fiona to utter (40), nor that an audience would find (40) easy to understand. But *utterances that are infelicitous, even incomprehensible, can nonetheless be perfectly meaningful expressions of thoughts.*

6. Coherence and understanding

This introduces the next point. Coherence is very relevant to a hearer's *process of understanding* an utterance, to *successful* communication. That understanding involves using multiple clues to figure out, given the context, which meaning of an ambiguous term is likely, what saturations are likely to have occurred, what the utterance might mean non-literally, and so on. The likelihood of any interpretation being correct depends on whether it implies an *appropriate* degree of coherence in the speaker's thinking in the context. So, a hearer should interpret David Lewis' utterances so that they come out highly coherent, even after a drink or two; and a hearer should have much lower expectations of Donald Trump's utterances. So, coherence has a place in the theory of communication.

Consider (40). Stojnić claims "that the requirement that a discourse must be coherent is strikingly evident in the interpretive effort (40) elicits. Given apparently unrelated facts about John in (40), we search for a connection" (Stojnić 2021: 62). This is right about the interpretive effort, but that effort is not evidence that discourse must be coherent. It is evidence of the role of coherence in linguistic understanding.

7. *Diagnosis?*

Where has Stojnić gone wrong? In earlier works (Devitt 2013b, 2021: Ch. 7), I have identified a widespread flaw in the work of linguistic pragmatists/contextualists, the confusion of the *metaphysics of meaning* with the *epistemology of interpretation*. I wonder if the same confusion explains Stojnić’s view that coherence relations are constitutive of meanings.⁷

Consider the “meaning-properties” of utterances in as broad a sense as you like, covering semantic meanings and speaker meanings, including conversational implicatures and the like. What *constitutes* an utterance having one of those properties is one thing, how a hearer *discovers* the property, another. The utterance’s having the property is constituted by what the *speaker* does, by the conventions she participates in, the objects she has in mind, or the thoughts she intentionally expresses.⁸ That is where we look for the “metaphysics of meaning”. And what needs emphasizing is that none of these meaning-properties is constituted *in any way at all* by what the *hearer* does in trying to *interpret* what is said or meant.⁹ The hearer’s problem is an epistemic one of understanding an utterance. Grice (1989) made very clear that something like his “Cooperative Principle” and its associated maxims must play a role in the hearer’s decision about what the speaker implicated but did not say. Later, pragmatists have demonstrated that something like that principle—perhaps the “Principle of Relevance” (Sperber and Wilson 1995)—must play a role also in the hearer’s interpretive decision about what is said. Some such principle, along with contextual clues, will guide her in figuring out what conventions the speaker is using (including what language or dialect the speaker is using), what objects the speaker has in mind, and so on. And Stojnić has demonstrated, with examples like (40), the role that coherence plays in understanding. Any of these processes that the hearer uses to interpret an utterance might indeed provide *evidence* about an utterance’s meaning-property but they do not *constitute* it. The hearer might do everything right, acting in accord with all appropriate communicative principles, and still get the wrong interpretation: she might *misunderstand*.

⁷ The common concern with “Grice’s Circle” (Devitt 2021: 125–6.) is a sure sign of the confusion. The appearance of a problem here arises from equivocation between the constitutive and epistemic senses of ‘determine’ (2021: 125–6).

⁸ But note two things. (1) All these meaning properties of utterances determined by the speaker are themselves ultimately constituted by the contents of thoughts. (2) The conventions that the speaker participates in are not of course constituted solely by her. They are constituted by the interdependent linguistic dispositions of the speech community that she is a member of (Devitt 2021: 79–80).

⁹ This speaker-centered view of meaning flies in the face of Davidsonian “interpretationism” (1984). I have argued against this interpretationism elsewhere (1981: 115–18; 1997: 186–99; see also Simchen 2017). It rests on an unacceptable behaviorism: “Meaning is entirely determined by observable behavior, even readily observable behavior” (Davidson 1990: 314).

If Stojnić was confusing the metaphysics of meaning with the epistemology of interpretation that would explain her view that coherence relations are constitutive of meanings. But there is no persuasive independent evidence that she does confuse them. There is, however, a hint. Throughout the book, in discussing the likes of demonstratives, Stojnić talks of the “resolution” of context-sensitive reference (e.g. 2021: 4–5). Yet, given our concern with what *constitutes* the reference, it would be more appropriate to talk of the “fixing” of context-sensitive reference. For, talk of “resolution” is quite likely to misdirect us to how hearers *figure out* reference. So, I wonder if Stojnić’s talk is a small sign that she has been misdirected.

Even if Stojnić has been misdirected, this is not to say that her considered opinion is that hearers’ epistemic processes constitute meanings. But, as I emphasize in discussing linguistic pragmatism (Devitt 2021: 127, 132), the problem is not the *considered opinion* of theorists but rather their *theoretical practice* of taking meanings to be constituted by those epistemic processes.

8. Conclusion

Una Stojnić holds the radical view that coherence relations determine the reference of context-sensitive language. I have argued against this from the theoretical perspective presented in *Overlooking Conventions* (2021). Theoretical interest in language comes from an interest in thoughts and their communication. A language is a system of symbols, constituted by a set of governing rules, used (*inter alia*) to communicate the meanings (contents) of thoughts. Thought meanings, hence speaker meanings, are explanatorily prior to semantic meanings.

So, we start our consideration of the theoretical place of coherence by considering the bearing of coherence on thought meanings. I have argued that a person can have any thought at all, however incoherent. So, *a thought’s meaning and reference are independent of its coherence*. Indeed, its coherence is a *function* of its meaning. Any thought can be expressed in an utterance. The semantic meaning of any utterance governed by the linguistic rules will be the meaning of the thought it expresses. So, *the utterance’s meaning and reference are independent of its coherence*. I conclude that *coherence has no place in the theory of meaning or reference*. Nonetheless, it has a place in the theory of communication. I suspect that the error exemplifies the widespread confusion of the metaphysics of meaning with the epistemology of interpretation.¹⁰

¹⁰ My thanks to Andrea Bianchi and Dunja Jutronić for comments on a draft.

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