

IS BELIEF NECESSARY FOR UNDERSTANDING LANGUAGE?

By Max Johannes Kippersund

I will argue that belief is necessary for understanding language. This means that it is a necessary requirement for understanding a bit of language L that one correctly believes that L means M . A *bit* of language means here either a sentence or a word. This way of putting it reflects Pettit's interest in word meaning and sentence meaning. Since I am responding to his claim, I find it natural to continue to work with bits of language, and not for instance with what it takes to understand an entire natural language like English. In this paper I am not investigating if there really is a precise meaning for every bit of language, that interesting discussion is left to others. Here I will allow myself to speak as if there always were a well-defined notion of "the meaning of x ", for any bit of language x .

It has been argued that understanding language necessarily involves knowledge of meaning. This is what Pettit (2002) calls *the epistemic view* and what he argues against. He claims that knowledge of word meaning is not necessary for understanding language, and supports this claim with a conceivable situation analogous to the famous Gettier-cases (Gettier 1963). Knowledge fails in Gettier-cases while language understanding does not, argues Pettit. Moreover, he continues, even belief is not necessary. This is supported with another imagined scenario. His claim being, in the end, that it suffices for understanding an utterance to have the correct meaning impression of the utterance, even when one has a belief contradicting this impression and suppressing it. I reject Pettit's minimalist view on language understanding, claiming that it is too thin. However, I do not defend the epistemic view, rather I argue for the weaker claim that belief is necessary for understanding a bit of language, not knowledge. That is, in order to understand the meaning of a word one has

to believe that it means what it actually means – I get back to this later.

First, I present what Pettit calls the epistemic view. In particular, I focus on one specific instance of this view that can be found in Michael Dummett (1993). After this, I present Pettit's general critique of the epistemic view focusing on the conceivable situations he offers. I then state Pettit's positive view that emerges from this, one where having correct meaning impressions suffice for understanding a bit of language. Then, I object to this view. I suggest, *pace* Pettit, that we should not apply the concept of understanding in cases where a subject has only correct meaning impressions and no belief. I support this last claim with a new imagined scenario, the driver case, which aims to show that there is a connection between belief and language understanding. In the end I argue that the reason why understanding requires belief is that the concept applies in those cases where people are able to use the information expressed by an utterance, that is, in cases where people are able to exchange meaningful thoughts.

The epistemic view

Pettit characterizes the epistemic view as follows:

If we let S be a speaker, t a time, and α a word, phrase or sentence that means M , then according to the epistemic view:

Epistemic view: S understands α at t iff, at t , S knows that α means M . (Pettit 2002:521)

The view, he claims, can be attributed to several influential philosophers, including Michael Dummett (1993), Martin Davies (1989) and John Campbell (1982). Dummett's view on knowledge of meaning, in particular, is an influential one and in what follows I will present it in

detail in order to explain the initial appeal of the epistemic view.

In “What Do I Know When I Know Language” (1993), Dummett investigates two main questions: Firstly, does language understanding reside in knowledge or in mere practical ability? And, secondly, is meaning to be explained by appeal to speakers’ implicit knowledge of their language? His claim is that a subject who understands language has *implicit* knowledge of a theory of meaning for the language in question (Dummett 1993:100–101). According to him, *implicit* knowledge is a kind of knowledge intermediate between *explicit* knowledge and knowledge *how*. What characterizes explicit knowledge is that one attends to it when using it and is able to formulate it when prompted. A memorized cooking recipe one attends to when preparing a dish is an instance of this sort of knowledge. Knowledge how, on the other hand, is manifested in a practical ability, for instance riding a bike, something one knows how to do, but is unable to state or explain to others. *Implicit* knowledge is a propositional-like or theory-like knowledge one possesses but does not attend to when using it. Nevertheless, when confront-

ed with a correct description of such propositional-like or theory-like knowledge, one would recognize it as correct, in contrast to cases of mere knowledge how (Dummett 1993:96). Still, we cannot usually, when prompted, produce this correct description of what we know implicitly. It often takes scientific work to produce the theory.

I think Dummett’s distinction between implicit knowledge and knowledge how is a useful one. There appears to be a clear difference between, on the one hand, being confronted with a theoretical description of what our brains can be said to “know” and compute when riding a bicycle for instance, and, on the other hand, being confronted with what we know in the case of understanding language. In the first case the theoretical description doesn’t sound familiar at all, while good semantic theories appear quite familiar once given.

A feature that Dummett’s, Pettit’s and my own view share is the idea that a theory of meaning is somehow involved in language understanding. For Dummett this is the object of implicit knowledge. And it serves among other things to explain how language understanding can be productive, how we can understand so many and newly creat-



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ed sentences. I will not go into details here, but I think it is fair to claim that any view that is not a meaning skeptic, but gives room for a theory of meaning in its explanation of language understanding can say they have a solution to the problem about language being productive. I see the difference between the three views discussed in this paper as a debate about what kind of mental states the theory of meaning should be realized as in order for someone to understand language. Dummett thinks it is the object of *knowledge*, and more specifically implicit knowledge, while Pettit thinks it suffices if the theory of meaning can be placed in some *quasi-perceptual* states (Pettit 2005:68–69). My view is that the theory of meaning employed in understanding mental states should function as *belief* states. This is anticipating what is to come, but I think it is useful to include it already here in order to highlight how in one way the three views are closely related.

Pettit's critique of the epistemic view

Pettit challenges the epistemic view in its general formulation (see p. 2) by providing three conceivable scenarios. The first one is meant to show that knowledge is not necessary for understanding language and the second one goes against epistemic warrant or justification. The third and last is meant to show that belief is not necessary for understanding language, and this is the most important one for my purposes. Here I will restrict myself to a presentation and treatment of the first and third case.

The Krankenschwester Case: Pettit asks us to imagine Maria, a moderately competent German speaker, travelling in Germany, who comes across an unfamiliar word, the word “Krankenschwester”. She is curious what it means and walks up to a kindly-looking, elderly German sitting on a bench and asks him in English about the meaning of “Krankenschwester”. “With an air of authority ...”, as Pettit puts it, he smiles and politely replies in English “it means *nurse*”, which is indeed the right meaning of “Krankenschwester”. Maria is satisfied with this answer, thanks him and goes on her way (Pettit 2002:519). At that moment, Pettit claims, Maria understands this word because she is, as he puts it, “... able to use this previously unfamiliar word correctly and correctly interpret it as used by other speakers of German” (Pettit 2002:519). She has not yet had any successful interaction

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with German speakers using this word, but she has a *disposition*, Pettit highlights, to interpret and use it correctly. Importantly, Maria *believes* that she has got the meaning of “Krankenschwester” right. This belief is central to her ability to use the word correctly. As it turns out, however,

the elderly, kindly-looking man doesn't know a word of English. He is just parroting an English phrase he once overheard whenever he is asked something in what he takes to be English. Now, in light of this we should not ascribe knowledge to Maria due to the familiar reasons from a Gettier case. Maria

ends up with a true justified belief, but it ends up being true purely by accident and, arguably, knowledge does not arise that way. If this is true, that Maria understands the word in this case and that she doesn't have knowledge of word meaning, then the epistemic view is false since Pettit successfully has provided a case with language understanding but no knowledge.

The fake aphasia case: With his second scenario Pettit aims to show that belief is not necessary for understanding language. Since this is what I in the end will reject, I spend some time clarifying what thesis Pettit is, or rather should be, targeting. It is the following:

Doxastic view: *S* understands α at t iff, at t , *S* believes that α means M . (Pettit 2002:543).

But as it stands, the above formulation seems implausible since it would make belief, *whether correct or not*, sufficient. Hence understanding would be speaker relative: if I believed “Krankenschwester” meant the gear system of bicycles I would understand the word in any situation it were used, even though it were used with other intentions and within a language where the word has a different meaning. If we want understanding to be *language relative*, we need to supplement the thesis with a correctness criterion:

The correct belief view: *S* understands α at t only if, at t , *S* believes that α means M , and α actually means M .

Pettit does explicitly endorse the idea that understanding should be language relative (Pettit 2002:533–534), so this amendment can be seen as a clarification. One could at this point be puzzled over what it means to say that something *actually* means . The notion of something having a correct meaning, or an absolute language relative meaning,

can indeed be challenged. But discussing this further falls outside the scope of my paper, I will just assume that people understand what I mean with language relative meaning (the meaning a word has in the language community as a whole) as opposed to speaker relative meaning. In its least demanding form this divide should be recognized as a real joint by most people.

A more substantial change is the move from a bi-conditional to a conditional. This formulation is clearly a live option; one does not have to think belief *suffices* for understanding even though one thinks it is a *necessary* requirement. For instance one who holds that only knowledge of meaning suffices for understanding would still take belief to be necessary even though it is not sufficient (that is at least if she takes belief to be an essential part of knowledge). I believe that the latter formulation has much more plausibility than the one that we find in Pettit's paper. Also, it does not affect Pettit's counter-example: if it is any good, it will work against the correct belief view as well.

The scenario goes as follows: Imagine that you have been kidnapped by a group of mischievous neuroscientists that drug you. When you wake up they tell you that they have altered your brain so that all the mass nouns in the language you speak will seem to have a different meaning than they actually have. So that the word "water" would still mean water but it would seem to you to mean mud, and the opposite for the word "mud". "This is what you are told", Pettit says, "But, in fact, you are perfectly normal, and an elaborate hoax is being perpetrated on you by the neuroscientists" (Pettit 2002:544). The neuroscientists manage to convince you that you actually have gone through this kind of surgery. Suppose now that by 11 a.m. you have not yet had any interaction with other speakers using any mass nouns whatsoever. Pettit now claims that (*W* being the actual meaning of water): "At 11 a.m., you do not believe that "water means *W* ... At 11 a.m., you understand 'water'" (Pettit 2002:545). It is important here to remember that, at this point, you *believe* that the meanings of mass nouns are different from the meanings they *seem* to have, for example that water means *W*. As a result you will "thoroughly behave as though it does not in fact have that meaning" (Pettit 2002:545). This is a case where something seems to you one way (correctly so), while you do not believe that this is how the world is. And Pettit's claim is that in the case of language understanding, the seeming of correct meaning is all we need.

The positive picture that emerges from Pettit's paper is a view of language understanding that takes the *correct seeming/impression of meaning* to be sufficient:

"That is, to understand a bit of language with a certain meaning, it is not necessary even to believe that it has that meaning. It is sufficient, I have argued, that it *seem* to you to have that meaning, whether you believe it or not." (Pettit 2002:548)

In the following I will work with the notions of beliefs and meaning impressions. I want to use them as uncontroversially as possible; I take an impression to be a quasi-perceptual state and belief to be a state that guides action. Importantly I do not allow for impressions to guide action, they can only do so accompanied by beliefs. Below I will argue that Pettit's claim that belief is not necessary for understanding language is false, and, therefore, that his minimalistic view on understanding is too thin.¹ For simplicity of exposition I will call this view *the minimalist impressionist view*:

The minimalist impressionist view: *S* understands α at t if, at t , *S* has the impression that α means *M*, and α actually means *M*.

Against Pettit: the driver case

I now provide a new conceivable scenario that I think demonstrates that the minimalist impressionist view is wrong and will eventually lead us to conclude that belief is necessary for understanding language. Imagine Emma who is subject to an elaborate hoax: mad neuroscientists kidnap and drug her and her friend Sally one time when they are out driving. When Emma wakes up she is told that they have altered her brain in a way resulting with the inversion of the meaning impressions she will get from "yes" and "no". What this means is that whenever she hears a word that seems to her to mean *yes*, this word actually means *no*. And vice versa for "no", when it seems to her that something means *no*, she is told that the word actually means *yes*. The neuroscientists show her what tools they used and tell some complicated made up story about how they have achieved this. Emma comes to believe that from now on "yes" and "no" will have inverted meaning impressions, but in fact nothing like that is going to happen. The scientist has done nothing to her, apart from convincing her of this lie. Her meaning impressions are as reliable as ever. When it seems to her that someone says "no", it actually means *no*. The same goes for "yes". Emma now encounters Sally who has been asleep until now. They both get into the car and drive off. Emma is so angry that she does not tell Sally anything just yet. Suddenly they approach a difficult cross-section. Emma tells Sally as usual

to watch out for cars on her side. When Emma finally sees the opportunity on the driver side she asks Sally if they are good to go. Sally answers “no”. Emma thinks Sally speaks the truth, and even though she has the correct impression of “no” meaning no, she thinks this is wrong because of what the scientists told her. Emma believes wrongly, and against her meaning impression, that Sally meant *yes*, and therefore she drives on. They crash and suffer a very painful death, very much against what Emma wanted.

Did Emma *understand* Sally’s utterance? My intuitive answer is no. There seems to be a connection between what behaviour results from hearing this utterance in this context and whether or not one understands it. In the case presented above it is clear that Emma takes Sally’s linguistic expression to be a true one, but her action is opposite to what we would expect from someone that did not want to die and both understood Sally’s utterance and thought it to be true. I think we should not say that Emma understands the utterance once assuming that she holds what Sally says to be true because her behaviour is too different from what would be *appropriate* in this case. If this is right, then there is a tighter connection between behaviour and understanding than the minimalist impressionist view allows for.

If the intuition produced by the driver case is right, that Emma does not understand the utterance, then the minimalist impressionist view is wrong. This simply follows from the fact that Emma has a correct meaning impression, but does not understand. My claim is further that the minimalist impressionist view is generally wrong and that belief is necessary for understanding in all cases. The link between the driver case and the correct belief view is not quite straightforward however. But a link to *appropriate* behaviour seems most natural and promising to begin with.

I do not think language understanding can be fully dependent on behaviour, i.e. that one has to show appropriate behaviour towards any linguistic expression to understand it. This is because it would radically change our understanding of speech in certain contexts where we do not use language in the same way as Emma and Sally did. For instance, when hearing speech from actors on a stage. The standard for what is appropriate behaviour towards someone shrieking “Fire! Run as fast as you can!” is quite different than normal once we are placed comfort-

ably in the seats at the theatre. We usually do not behave “appropriately” towards what actors utter on stage. This is because we take the actors to pretend. Hence, it is only when a subject takes an expression as true and guides her behaviour according to what she takes the expression to say about the world, that we apparently have a restriction of what kind of behaviour allows for the concept of understanding to apply. This suggests:

The principle of appropriate behaviour: If a subject hears (or sees) a linguistic utterance and both holds it to express a truth and uses it to guide behaviour, then she understands the utterance only if she displays appropriate behaviour.

The principle of appropriate behaviour, if right, would quite naturally lead us to embrace something like the correct belief view of understanding, I think. The link between these two is, I take it, a clear consequence of the folk theory for explaining behaviour, namely a belief-desire psychology (Fodor 1987: ch. 1). The idea being that “appropriate behaviour” needs “appropriate beliefs”. The desires are taken as data here, we know that the person in question takes a bit of uttered language to be true and wants to guide behaviour according to what it says about the world in accordance with other given desires the person might have. Then it is natural to say, I think, that the resulting behaviour can only be appropriate if the beliefs about what was said are appropriate, that is the beliefs are correct.

So far I have shown that the minimalist impressionist view of understanding is wrong, since we judge that Emma does not understand in the driver case. This was then suggested as a general claim, not only is the minimalist view too thin in this specific case, it is so in all cases. This claim would however have to refute the intuitions Pettit claims in his fake aphasia case. If my general claim is to have any plausibility, it would be nice to see an explanation for why Pettit’s case might seem somewhat convincing at first glance, but on further reflection is not. I think there is an explanation here. When we are told that the subject figuring in the fake aphasia case is convinced that all her mass nouns will seem to her to mean things they do not actually mean, we are not told in any detailed way how she acts and behaves as a result. We are only told very loosely that she “does not go about her linguistic business as usual”. This, I

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think, makes the case more convincing than it actually is, as the driver case is meant to highlight. Once we consider a vivid example of what false beliefs about what was said can lead to, we see, I think, that appropriate behaviour, and hence correct beliefs guiding that behaviour, are indeed required for understanding.

Objections, revisions and a final argument

One might object to the principle of appropriate behaviour that people can understand certain bits of language without displaying appropriate behaviour. For instance one could present a case where someone hears “The tornado is coming in a few hours!” someone who also importantly wants to stay safe, but for some reason fails to prepare for the coming disaster and remains passive in her house watching the tornado come closer. I take it that someone raising this case as an objection to my view has an idea of “appropriate behaviour” in this case being to batten down the hatches and seek refuge in the cellar or something close in terms of an observable physical action. They would then say that it is conceivable that someone could fail in this respect, but still understand the sentence uttered. I agree with this verdict and I think it calls for a revision of the very strong and probably too behaviouristic principle of appropriate behaviour. But I still think the correct belief view is right. I get to this soon.

I think the tornado case shows that there is no specific *behaviour* required for understanding this utterance. But that does not mean there is nothing more than meaning impressions required. I think there is. For instance we could imagine a person hearing the utterance and have no idea what to do when a tornado hits. She desperately tries to think of smart moves, but cannot come up with any good ideas. Frustrated, she remains passive in her house, watching as the tornado approaches. Put like this I think it is clear that she understands the utterance, but it is also clear that there is more involved than meaning impressions. Importantly there are lots of mental states and processes going on related to the content expressed by the utterance. If the subject in question did not even have these mental processes going on I do not think we would ascribe understanding to her in the first place. In this case, then, I think mental states and processes, like thinking about what to do, suffice for understanding. Perhaps a revision of the principle of appropriate behaviour will do: take the

principle as stated above and substitute for behaviour the notion of either behaviour or mental processes.

But again this revised principle of appropriate behaviour or mental processes is open to objections. One could argue that there are many linguistic utterances with which there is no clear notion of either appropriate behaviour or mental processes associated, e.g. “That was a boring talk”. What would be the required behaviour or mental processes one needs to display in order to qualify for understanding this utterance? I think this is a good objection, and the answer is not quite straightforward. First it should be noted that the content “That was a boring talk” expresses is, apparently, non-important in comparison to “no” in the driver case, and “the tornado is coming”. The latter ones can have deadly consequences if one believes that they mean different things than they actually do, while “that was a boring talk” apparently does not. But this is not always so, it is easy to construct cases where this sentence is all-important and where inappropriate behaviour towards it has deadly consequences.²

This serves to show that one can for all sentences always come up with a scenario such that there is a clear notion of appropriate behaviour or mental processes, and in these cases this will require belief. But why should we think this holds generally, as I claim, when there are cases where there isn't any specific behaviour or mental processes going on? The idea behind the first link between a restriction on correct behaviour and belief being necessary for understanding was that beliefs guide behaviour and is thus what explains the connection between hearing an utterance and producing appropriate behaviour. Crucially, a belief could be said to “empower” meaning impressions in the following sense: When having the impression that

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something means *M*, we can either supplement this with a belief that this is right or that it is wrong. If we believe the meaning impression is wrong we shut *M* out of our mental processing as it were; if we believe it is correct, *M* is allowed

to circulate and be used by other states. *This is what matters*. In order to understand an utterance one needs to be able to use the information expressed by it. In some cases this will be evident from restrictions on appropriate behaviour, such as the driver case and generally high stake contexts. But there will be cases with no restrictions on behaviour. Sometimes specific mental processes might be required in order to understand. But in some cases not

even this is required. What we do require however, is for the information expressed by an utterance to be usable *if need be* and able to circulate and be consumed by other mental states. When communicating with other language users we expect meaningful thoughts to be exchanged and used. And only someone believing that *M* has been uttered is able to do this. If no other effect than a correct meaning impression is produced when hearing an utterance, this will be a dead end for the information expressed by the utterance. The concept of language understanding does not apply to this, and neither should it, since what we are interested in when using this concept is the ability people have to actually interpret and use linguistic impressions correctly and be able to act on the information provided. This concept therefore denotes someone with a special ability, the ability to communicate meaningful thoughts. This is why the correct belief view is correct.

This last argument, mentioning an ability, might seem strange as Pettit supports both the Krankenschwester case and the Fake aphasia case with reference to an ability himself. On my view, only the first of these is a good case, since it is only there that belief is present. Therefore it should be expected that Pettit is not talking about the same ability as I am, this can be shown through highlighting an asymmetry in Pettit's writing: In the Krankenschwester case Pettit claims that the subject in question understands the utterance because she has the same ability as other German speakers to use the word correctly and correctly interpret its use by other speakers. This is indeed the same ability as I think is crucial for language understanding. But it is important that in the fake aphasia case Pettit claims that one has the *same* "ability to use and interpret the word 'water' in the correct way, even though you do not believe that this is the correct way" (Pettit 2002:545). But then this ability reduces to meaning impressions: you have the ability in question merely by having correct meaning impressions such that *if* you believed that your impressions were right you would communicate well with other language users. But without a belief one is very far from being a competent language user. One does not interpret and use language correctly, and one is not even disposed to use it correctly, this only happens after changing one's beliefs. The relevant ability when it comes to understanding language, as I have tried to point out, is meaning impressions *accompanied by belief* such that you actually interpret and use language correctly to communicate thoughts.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that belief is necessary for understanding language, pace Pettit (2002). I have argued that Pettit was right in attacking the epistemic view, and that his Krankenschwester case shows that this is false, but that his further claim, that belief is not necessary for understanding language was wrong. I supported my view by providing a new conceivable scenario. I linked this with the correct belief view through the idea that when someone understands an utterance they should be able to use the information expressed by it. My point was that a belief to the effect that one's meaning impressions are correct is needed.

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NOTES

¹ I do this by arguing that there are cases where correct meaning impressions don't qualify for the application of the concept language understanding, and then I claim that this should hold generally. There is however another way of targeting Pettit's conclusion, namely to question whether the fake aphasia case really is a case without belief. Maybe we should call the states responsible for the meaning impressions belief states or, perhaps better, tacit belief states, even though one has a higher order, explicit as it were, belief suppressing this other belief? This is a line taken by Gross in his 2005 response to Pettit. Gross thinks this is an empirical question to be decided by what best explains the data, theoretical simplicity, explanatory power and other criterions that usually goes with empirical theorizing. This can be

understood better by drawing an analogue to the belief acquisition theory of perception. According to this theory perception consists in the acquisition of beliefs. A much-debated problem with this theory is how visual illusions, such as the Müller-Lyer illusion, can persist even though one knows that one is subject to an illusion. In the Müller-Lyer case the lines seem visually to be different in length, but one might know, and firmly believe, that they are the same length. How can this be if perception is the acquisition of beliefs, shouldn't we then come to believe that the world is the way it visually seems? What is important for our case is that some belief acquisition theorists respond to this by saying that there are two conflicting belief states at play, and that one can be suppressed, but still be an inclination to believe the visual seeming (Fish 2010:57–58). I will however not take this line of reasoning, but rather accept Pettit's construal of the scenario and take the fake aphasia case to be without belief, but claim that this is not a case of language understanding. Hence there is a divide between the claim that having correct meaning impres-

sions doesn't qualify for language understanding and the claim that having a correct meaning impression in itself is a belief state. I have chosen the first horn of this tactical divide.

² Just as an exercise, imagine you live in a dystopian world where every week someone is forced to participate in a sadistic quiz show on television. Participants are confronted with a person, A, that says, "That was a boring talk". Then they are asked whether or not they think A liked the talk, if they answer wrongly they are badly hurt for the amusement of the masses. Now, one of the participants has the correct meaning impression of "boring" meaning boring, but due to some misguided belief thinks that when it seems to her that something means boring, it actually means exciting. This leads her to say that she thinks A liked the talk. This is of course wrong, and due to it being an obvious consequence of A saying the talk was boring, we would say that the participant didn't understand the sentence or alternatively didn't understand the word "boring".



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