SEMANTIC PARTICULARISM AND LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE

ANNA BERGQVIST

Abstract

In this paper I examine a contemporary debate about the general notion of linguistic rules and the place of context in determining meaning, which has arisen in the wake of a challenge that the conceptual framework of moral particularism has brought to the table. My aim is to show that particularism in the theory of meaning yields an attractive model of linguistic competence that stands as a genuine alternative to other use-oriented but still generalist accounts that allow room for context-sensitivity in deciding how the linguistic rules would *apply* in concrete cases. I argue that the ideas developed in relation to particularism in meta-ethics illuminate a difficulty with the modest generalist view, one that can be resolved by adopting semantic particularism instead.

1. *Introducing semantic particularism*

It is my aim in this paper to explicate and defend the view that linguistic competence is a species of practical rationality, which does not reside in knowledge of specifiable standing meanings of a natural language vocabulary. The starting point for my discussion is Jonathan Dancy's work on particularism in the theory of meaning towards the end of his latest book (2004). In this work, Dancy explores the consequences of the doctrine of holism about reasons as applied to the theory of meaning. Holism about reasons in Dancy's sense is the meta-ethical claim that "a feature that is a reason in one case may not be a reason at all, or an opposite reason in another." (p. 7). Similarly, Dancy argues that "one and the same term can make different [semantic] contributions in different contexts" to the meaning of the wider linguistic whole in which it can appropriately be found (p. 194).[1] Let

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[1] It is common practice in the contemporary debate about context-sensitivity to distinguish between two technical senses of "meaning". On the one hand, 'meaning' is sometimes used to refer to the *propositional content* of sentences ("semantics"). On the other hand, 'meaning' can also be understood as the *speech act content* of utterances ("pragmatics").

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us call this claim the doctrine of *holism about the semantic contribution of individual terms* (or *holism about meaning*, for short).

According to Dancy (2004), the phenomenon of holism about meaning (as characterised here) was recognised by Wittgenstein (1953) and Stanley Cavell (1979), and the discovery yields a radical 'particularist' challenge to many deep-rooted 'generalist' intuitions about the requirements for linguistic competence and semantic rationality (thus understood as whatever is required for using language properly).[2] In particular, the particularist rejects the widely held generalist assumption that linguistic competence and semantic rationality requires a suitable supply of rules governing the correct employment of terms in natural language. Dancy rejects this claim and maintains instead that linguistic competence with a term is a matter of having a context-sensitive practical command of an open-ended range of the *sorts of* semantic contribution it can make for the meaning of the sentence or phrase in which it may be found (p. 194). Call this family of claims *semantic particularism*.

Although I endorse the central claims about linguistic competence that Dancy's work has brought to the table, I find certain aspects of his characterisation of the particularist challenge in the theory of meaning problematic. The main reason for my dissatisfaction is that Dancy sometimes writes as if the problem with the standard 'generalist' picture of linguistic competence and semantic rationality in terms of rules is that the generalist conception neglects the role of contextual features in linguistic understanding, or that the generalist approach attempts to construe the significance of context in terms of strict rules. The danger I see with such a characterisation is that the emphasis on rules can obstruct the real source and nature of disagreement shown in the particularist challenge to the received picture, which is the claim that there just is no such thing as the invariant core meaning of a term, taken in isolation from its application in particular contexts of use.

Because I try to stay clear of this terminology I shall often use the terms "meaning", "semantic purport", "thought", "content", and "what is said" interchangeably, but make it clear where the *semantic* notion of 'what is said' comes apart from the *pragmatic* notion of 'what is meant'. Similarly, my use of the terms "linguistic expression", "sentence", "utterance", and "phrase" assumes no specific theoretic standpoint concerning the issue of primacy of (i) utterance-meaning, (ii) sentence-meaning, or (iii) word-meaning, unless explicitly stated.

[2] In addition, semantic particularism has strong affinities with Charles Travis's work on occasion-sensitivity, see e.g., (1989), (2000) and (2006). Counted among the semantic particularists could also be Moore (1997), Putnam (1999) and Pagin, & Pelletier, F.J. (2007). In this paper I will set aside the question as to what funds the particularist claim that there is such a thing as the normativity of language (and hence that people's use of language is subject to rational criticism); normative notions like 'reasonable' and 'appropriate' will be treated as primitives.

My hope is that my discussion of the particularist model of linguistic competence will allow us to appreciate Dancy's conclusion in a way that I claim is more effective as criticism of the generalist picture that we both believe is inadequate.

2. *The positive thesis*

I maintain that semantic particularism is best formulated as the denial of what I shall call the *epistemic assumption of traditional conceptions of compositional semantics*, which is sometimes known as the computational theory of linguistic understanding. This is the claim that linguistic understanding of expressions in a natural language resides in knowledge of the meanings that the semantic theory would assign to the simple expressions of the language vocabulary, together with syntactic rules for deriving the meanings of complex expressions from these postulated meanings.[3] Proponents of compositional semantics are often keen to stress that knowledge of the literal meaning of a sentence is not supposed to be either equivalent to or sufficient for understanding what particular thought gets expressed in a given linguistic act involving that sentence, if by 'thought' we mean what is said by the sentence's utterance in a given conversational context. Nonetheless, according to traditional conceptions of compositional semantics, grasp of the literal meanings that the theory would assign to the simple expressions of the language vocabulary (and inferential syntactic rules for deriving the meaning of complex expressions) is *necessary* for understanding language.

It is precisely this idea of there being a "something" of which one *must* have a grasp in order to speak and understand expressions of a natural language that I claim an adequate account of linguistic competence should reject. If I am right about this, the upshot of the particularist rejection of the computational view also cuts against many use-oriented theories of meaning in the broadly Wittgensteinian tradition. To sustain this claim we need to get clearer about the particularist picture of linguistic competence that relates to the wider issue of semantic compositionality.

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[3] The characterisation of formal semantics as driven by what I call 'the epistemic assumption' is inspired by Pettit's (2002) suggestion that a compositional theory of meaning provides the theoretical motivation for what he calls the 'epistemic view' of understanding language.

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3. *The particularist challenge to traditional conceptions of compositional semantics*

The focus of Dancy's particularist challenge in the theory of meaning is the nature of the relationship between the meaning of a complex linguistic expression and the meanings of its parts. As Dancy sets up the dialectic between semantic particularism and generalism, it is trivially true that the meaning of the whole is somehow determined by the meanings of its parts (as so situated in that context), and how they are combined.[4] Call this conception of the nature of the semantic part-whole relation *weak compositionality* (Dancy's term):

Weak compositionality: the meaning of a complex expression is determined by the meanings of its parts (as so situated in that context), and how they are combined.[5]

Given that semantic particularism accepts the claim of weak compositionality in the theory of meaning, I think it is fairly clear that advocates of this view can thereby willingly also endorse the claim that the meaning of a complex linguistic whole is partly determined by the way in which its parts are combined. There are two parts to this proposal. The first, that the particularist need not deny, is that formal considerations about the language vocabulary can serve to constrain the construction of complex expressions from combinations of simple expressions of different types. As we might put it, syntactic rules for constructing well-formed sentences in any one language *specify* the grammatically correct combinatorial powers of simple expression types to form meaningful linguistic wholes. Call this the *weak normative assumption* about proper language use. Second, one epistemological point that semantic particularism need not deny is that attention to formal elements at the syntactic level of complex expressions can play a role in understanding what it means, for example where the sentence in question is syntactically

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[4] Dancy's (2004) statement of weak compositionality reads thus: "It is, I think, agreed on all hands that the meaning of the [linguistic] whole is determined by the meanings of its parts and the way in which *they are there* combined." (p. 192). My emphasis.

[5] There are at least two possible readings of the term "context" here: (i) the wider linguistic context of the *complex linguistic expression*; (ii) the wider conversational context. Because Dancy (2004) uses 'context', 'sentence', 'utterance', and 'conversational context' interchangeably, I shall not assume any one reading in my exposition of *Dancy's* version of semantic particularism.

ambiguous.[6] Let us call this the *weak epistemic assumption* about the recovery of lexical meaning. The real disagreement, rather, between semantic particularism and traditional conceptions of compositional semantics concerns the following claim about the relation between the meaning of a complex expression and the meanings of its parts:

Strong compositionality: the meaning of a complex expression is determined by the meanings of its parts, and their mode of composition, and its parts would make the same semantic contribution to any other complex linguistic expression in any other context.

The central difference between strong compositionality and its "weaker cousin" thus resides in a disagreement about the claim that the semantic contribution of an individual term is *invariant* across cases, in a way such that the literal meaning of a complex expression can be "computed" from the standing meanings of its parts, and their mode of composition (Dancy, 2004, p. 197). Let us call this the doctrine of *atomism about semantic contribution or 'meaning' of individual terms* (or *atomism about meaning*, for short).

Atomism about meaning: every meaningful term, taken in isolation, is such that it would make the same contribution to the meaning of any complex linguistic expression of which it may be a part (in any context).

Advocates of semantic particularism deny atomism and maintain instead that questions about what semantic contribution a term can make to the semantic purport of the complex expressions in which it may figure can only be determined *in context*. Treated as a family of claims, then, semantic particularism amounts to the denial of strong compositionality and, thereby, the denial of atomism about meaning of individual terms. (A closer analysis of the particularist's positive claims about linguistic competence will be provided in due course.)

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[6] One such example is the recovery of meaning of a syntactically ambiguous sentence like 'I am scared of flying planes'. On the one hand, the semantic interpretation of the sentence may treat the term 'flying' as an *adjective* that modifies the plural noun 'planes': 'I am scared of *flying planes*.' (As uttered by the keen rambler who nonetheless refuses to come hiking in North Yorkshire, due to the proximity of *Royal Air Force* Air Training Corps in the region.) On the other hand, the semantic interpretation of the sentence may treat the term 'flying' as a *verb*: 'I am scared of *flying* planes.' (As uttered by the unfortunate *RAF* cadet, disclosing his well-kept secret to his therapist.)

So what has all this to do with holism in the theory of reasons? Recall that holism about reasons is the claim that a feature that functions as a reason *in favour of*, say, a certain type of action in one case need not have that normative polarity in every context of moral appraisal in which that feature features. One implication of this claim in the case of meta-ethics, if Dancy's (2004) overall argument is sound, is that it would be reasonable to accept that there is no such thing as a *pro tanto* moral reason, where a *pro tanto* reason in ethics would be a consideration that has an intrinsic moral valency such that it always counts, and counts in the same way, in every context of moral appraisal, but which could be overridden or undermined by other reasons.[7] That is to say, according to holism about reasons as applied in meta-ethics, there is no essential connection between a feature being a moral reason and it having an intrinsic moral valency. Similarly, Dancy argues that there is no essential connection between the trivially true claim of weak compositionality and "any claim that each linguistic item must make the same contribution in every context." (2004, p. 194)

It is important to note that holism about meaning as employed within the semantic particularist framework is not just the claim that the meaning of a linguistic expression can vary from case to case, depending on what other terms you combine it with, as well as the nature of the speech-situation itself. As we shall see below there are versions of atomism about meaning (or 'strong compositionality') that can agree with *this* sort of context-sensitivity in the theory of meaning. Rather, what is distinctive about the particularist approach to compositionality is the insistence on the *contextualist* claim that there just is no invariant core meaning of the sort that advocates of strong compositionality assume:

Contextualism about meaning: no individual linguistic expression is such that it possesses an invariant core meaning, taken in isolation from the wider linguistic contexts in which it may appropriately be found.[8]

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[7] It is agreed across the board in the contemporary debate over moral particularism that it would be unwise to insist on the claim that holism about reasons *necessarily entails* the denial of moral generalism. Hence the denial remains an implication. For further discussion, see McKeever, & Ridge (2005), (2006); Dancy (2004), (2007); Hooker (2008).

[8] Those familiar with Frege's (1950) work will have noticed some parallels between this aspect of the particularist challenge to strong compositionality and Frege's statement of the context-principle: *never ask for the meaning of a word in isolation, but only in the context of a proposition* (*Satzzusammenhang*). This is not an essay in Frege scholarship but let me just make it clear that, in characterising Dancy's position in terms of contextualism about meaning, I certainly make no claim that *Frege* is a closet semantic particularist.

We are now in a better position to explain how the contrast between atomism and holism outlined at the beginning of this section relates to the intermediary generalist position between semantic particularism and traditional conceptions of compositional semantics that can be found in the normativist or conventionalist reading of Wittgenstein's (1953) remark that "the meaning of a word is its use" (*PI* §43).[9] Granted that 'semantic contribution' can be thought of as a term's standard meaning, and the standard meaning of a term is determined by specifiable linguistic rules that govern its correct employment, conventionalism about meaning is clearly atomistic in Dancy's sense. And the reason for this is that the linguistic rules for correct language use that the conventionalist claims determine meaning are themselves invariant (even though there may be contextual variations in deciding how the invariant meaning rules *apply* in a given case).

Having introduced so much new terminology, it is worth pausing for a moment to consider the wider significance of Dancy's account of linguistic competence. We also need to get clearer as to how the holism/atomism contrast relates to that drawn between particularism and generalism (as characterised above).

4. *The argument against semantic generalism from holism*

So semantic particularism claims that questions about what semantic contribution the presence of a word can make to the meaning of the sentence, utterance or phrase of which it is a part — what the relevant sentence or utterance *says* — can only be answered in context. In Adrian Moore's memorable phrase, "The meaning of a word, as used in a specific context, has no life outside that context" (1997, p. 96). So that is the claim. But what reasons do we have for accepting it?

The main argument for the particularist model of linguistic competence in Dancy's discussion of strong compositionality effectively amounts to the denial of what we might call the methodological assumption of conventionalism: it is not true that the kind of understanding that a competent speaker has in knowing the meaning of a term (as manifested in the way she employs it) can be captured in a specifiable linguistic rule for correct use. There are two distinct claims that Dancy makes, which are worth distinguishing:

(1) Linguistic competence with a term is a matter of grasping an open-ended range of the sorts of contributions that term can make to the

[9] This position is commonly associated with Baker & Hacker (1980), (1985). Other advocates include Glock (1999) and Schroeder (2006), for example.

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meaning of the wider linguistic whole of which it may appropriately be a part. *Because that range itself is open-ended, the meaning of a term cannot be articulated in a specifiable rule.*

Call (1) *the argument from open-endedness.*

(2) What a competent speaker knows in knowing the meaning of a term is essentially inarticulable, *because there is nothing of propositional form that we grasp in knowing the meaning of a term.* (Dancy, 2004: 196)

Call (2) *the argument from non-propositionality.*

Granted that advocates of other use-oriented theories of meaning such as conventionalism would agree that linguistic competence is a practice-based *skill* of some sort, it would seem that the argument from non-propositionality (2) does not cut much ice in the debate with which we are concerned in the present discussion. At any rate I shall set that argument aside in my discussion here and concentrate on (1) instead.

5. *The objection from under-specification*

The central claim behind the argument from open-endedness is that there is no limit to the unanticipated circumstances in which a competent speaker might *project* a term in a new direction. And because one cannot simply invent a new term for every non-standard context without limit, the particularist concludes that the conventionalist assumption that competence with a term *consists* in having a command of a specifiable rule for correct use is mistaken.

One prominent conventionalist line of response attempts to rebut the argument from holism about meaning by showing that what might initially look like a clear case of fluidity and open-endedness in the particularist's sense is really just a case of *under-specification*, which a more precise rule could make fully explicit.[10] A related thought in this connection, defended by writers such as Hacker (1996), Whiting (2007) and Mulhall (2003), is that if the proposed notion of a 'rule' is fluid and flexible enough, there is little hope of finding conclusive *counterexamples* to normative conventionalism about

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[10] The point about under-specification is also a familiar argumentative strategy against particularism in the moral domain. See, for example, Hooker (2008).

meaning, that is, to the claim that linguistic competence with a term consists in following or otherwise respecting the meaning-constitutive rules that govern its correct employment (and thus its meaning).

While I agree that this diagnosis is probably correct as far as it goes, I do not accept Whiting's (2007) conclusion that what might initially look like a clear case of fluidity and open-endedness in a term's correct application is really just a case of under-specification, which a more precise rule could spell out. As far as I can tell, the argument from under-specification does nothing to show that ascriptions of linguistic competence entail ascriptions of knowledge of some specifiable criteria for correct language use. In particular, the generalist's appeal to under-specification does not address the alternative positive suggestion that the mark of linguistic competence is simply *displayed* in the way a competent speaker is prepared to project a given term in new directions on future occasions.

The deeper problem here, which I shall come back to in Section 8 below, is that even if we grant the conventionalist's meta-philosophical assumption that it is a proper aim of philosophical inquiry to seek to *explain* what a given term means, such explanations can take a variety of forms other than specifying a set of necessary conditions for a term's correct standard employment. Because considerations about under-specification do not really address the idea that competence with a term involves having a practical command of *semantic possibilities* of expressions in novel contexts of use, I conclude that further arguments are required to establish the conclusion that ascriptions of linguistic competence entail ascriptions of knowledge of a specifiable meaning-rule.

Moreover, no matter how carefully a putative meaning-rule is formulated, room is always left open for contextual variation in determining what counts as satisfying the necessary conditions for correct use that the rule would lay down. Settling such questions is itself a contextual matter, which requires sound judgement and appreciation of the nature of the speech-situation itself, or so I claim.

6. *Projective understanding and the language of defaults*

So how should we understand the positive claim about linguistic competence in the argument from open-endedness that the mark of semantic rationality is simply displayed in the linguistic behaviour of a competent speaker? Well, the *argument from open-endedness* runs thus:

(1) An open-ended range has no boundary, and therefore no limits (alternatively: an unbounded range is itself not bound by something else). (Assumption);
(2) An unlimited range has an indeterminate number of members. (Assumption);
(3) That which has an indeterminate number of members cannot be fully specified (in a finite list of terms). (Assumption);

Conclusion: Therefore, competence with an open-ended range of the sorts of semantic contribution a term makes for the meaning of the utterance or sentence of which it may properly be a part is not fully specifiable.

Clarification is immediately called for. First of all, it is not my view that nothing can be said about what a competent speaker knows, in knowing the meaning of a term. The claim, rather, is that such a grasp cannot be *exhaustively specified* in a finite list of terms. Though *ex hypothesi* there is no such thing as 'the content' of a competent speaker's grasp of language (from the argument from non-propositionality), bits of linguistic information about what a competent speaker of English understands in knowing the meaning of a linguistic expression can nonetheless be put down on paper. There are such things as dictionaries, after all. Let us say that the kind of linguistic information a good dictionary can provide is illumination of "the standard meaning" of a given word or term in common usage in a natural language, its *lexical meaning*, if you like. But this information is not sufficient for linguistic competence. Rather, what is needed is what I will call 'projective understanding':

Projective understanding: The ability of a competent speaker *to recognise* (*qua* competent speaker) the sorts of possible contributions that a term can make to the meaning of the utterance, sentence, or phrase in which it may be found, and what counts as a reasonable projection of the term in question in novel contexts of use.

So the idea is that linguistic *understanding* of a given expression (as opposed to what that term actually means in the case at hand) is something that is shaped by the past and projected forward, with the important addition that the common usage of a term among competent speakers in the past will also

shape the linguistic expectations of such speakers as to what counts as a reasonable projection of that term in novel contexts of use.[11]

There are two distinct positive claims about the nature of linguistic competence here. First, in characterising a term's lexical meaning in terms of its 'common usage' among competent speakers, the point is that lexical meaning is *descriptive*: it reports how the expression in question has actually been used in the past, in a way that shapes one's linguistic expectations for the future (if one is competent with the term in question). Secondly, the *normativity* of language is explained by reference to the *practical rationality* of speakers of a natural language: what it would be reasonable for competent speakers to recognise, without any special contextual explanation, as falling within the range of possible contributions that a term can make. Let us call the corresponding 'sorts of semantic contribution' that a competent speaker would be prepared to recognise as reasonable, without any special contextual explanation, the *default meaning of a term*.[12]

This is not to say that the default meaning of a term is the meaning it has in a particular context, if by that idea we mean that this is what it means on every occasion. Rather, the particularist notion of a default should be thought of as a *relational concept*, which is defined in terms of dependence on the absence of further features of the context that may function to annul or reverse the significance it wears on its sleeve (in a sense that shall soon be explained).[13] The point is that the status of a default meaning as such will depend in all sorts of ways on how features are elsewhere in the particular context at hand. Similarly, the appropriateness or inappropriateness of projecting a term in a given direction are in part dependent on the presence or absence of a whole range of considerations that are somehow relevant for the extension in question. As we might put it, it is part and parcel of mastering a

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[11] As the term 'projective' suggests, the idea is that the character of the un-situated or general linguistic information a good dictionary contains can provide traces of what Travis (1989) describes as an expression's "actual history in its language" (pp. 110–11). A similar idea can be found in Travis's (2002) discussion about what he calls "productive agreement" among human speakers in how to *treat* things (p. 328).

[12] Dancy's (2004) describes the notion of default meaning thus: "The meaning of [a] term, understood in general, is the range of differences it can make; its meaning in a given context is to be found within that range (though of course some contexts force an extension or other adaptation of that range)." (p. 194). I find this characterization potentially confusing, as talk about defaults in terms of *the range* of possible contributions that a term can make is all too easily assimilated with the modest generalist idea of a fixed cluster of the *sort* of invariant contributions that terms possess all on their own. I will return to this issue in Section 7 below.

[13] For discussion and defence of this view in the theory of aesthetic evaluation, see Bergqvist, A. (Advance Access 2009).

language that one is also able to see the *point and force* of combining terms in certain ways.[14]

So how does this conception of semantic rationality in terms of reasonableness on the part of speakers relate to other normativist use-based proposals such as conventionalism? The worry that immediately arises is that the *range* of reasonable sorts of contributions of a given term is itself fixed by a specifiable *rule* governing the correct employment of the term in question, in which case the particularist objection to the traditional conceptions of compositional semantics from holism about meaning is not genuinely opposed to *moderate* versions of semantic generalism.

7. *Rules and contextual standards: the challenge from moderate generalism*

The focus of the remainder of this essay is to defend the semantic particularist view against rival use-oriented theories of meaning that emphasise that the meaning of a term *need not* be seen as determined by fixed rules of a formal calculus, but rather by reference to paradigmatic examples, which serve as *standards* for a term's correct application. In light of this positive suggestion from the moderate semantic generalist, the onus is now on the particularist to provide compelling positive reasons for resisting the intuitively plausible conclusion that there is no real difference between the concept of the 'default meaning' of a term and that of a 'specifiable exemplary standard' governing its correct employment. Daniel Whiting formulates the general line of objection as follows:

> One should no doubt concede that a rule does not itself determine *just* what contribution a term makes on a particular occasion of use, but one might insist nonetheless that it does determine the kind of contribution it can make (presumably by determining the kind of way in which it is to be used). Indeed, one can think it is precisely the job of rules to provide general guidelines which prepare us for,

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[14] This formulation of the particularist model of linguistic competence and semantic rationality may strike some readers as suggestive of Donald Davidson's (1986) remark that understanding what is said by the utterances of others requires "wit, luck, and wisdom" (p. 446); and also his caution in (1997) that "We forget there is no such thing as a language apart from the sounds and marks people make and the habits and expectations that go with them." (p. 18). It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the interesting question of how the particularist view relates to the extreme form of context-dependence that Davidson expresses in his (1986). My own view is that semantic particularism is at least in tension with the views expressed in Davidson's later papers due to considerations about the relationship between linguistic competence and knowledge of a semantic theory, but I cannot defend this claim here. I thank an anonymous referee for raising this issue.

and that can subsequently be tailored to, particular occasions. It is not yet clear, then, to what extent contextualists genuinely *oppose* [semantic generalism].

<div align="right">(Whiting, D., forthcoming 2009, p. 11)</div>

The point I want to concentrate on is Whiting's characterisation of the putative relationship between rules and guidance in this passage. I claim that the portrayal of the particularist notion of default meanings in the above quotation runs together two distinct sets of questions for philosophical inquiry that we should want to keep apart. On the one hand, there is the notion of default meanings in terms of guidance (or "general guidelines"), which I take concerns the epistemological aspect of linguistic understanding and how semantic judgements are formed. On the other hand, there is the notion of context-independent meanings of individual expressions as determined by general rules for correct language use, which I understand as a metaphysical point about the nature of semantic properties in the theory of meaning.

Of course, if one does not *already understand* the default meaning of a given expression (e.g., if, like the present author, one had in the past conflated the term 'garish' with its antonym,) consulting a dictionary will no doubt help one understand sentences, utterances and phrases in which the relevant term can be found. What the semantic particularist does not accept is that the sort of linguistic information that can be found in good dictionaries of the English language provide a guide for semantic evaluations on future occasions, if by 'guide' we have in mind the output of some inductive process of understanding what is said in a context (that is, understanding what particular thought or truth-evaluable content gets expressed in the speaker's use of language). It is precisely this sort of reduction of semantics to pragmatics that the semantic particularist thinks is wrong with the attempt to domesticate the phenomenon of context-sensitivity by invoking a set of contextual parameters (which can no doubt also be found in good English dictionaries). As Travis (2008) expresses the particularist conception of the proper division of labour between semantics and pragmatics, "semantics is emphatically not in the business of predicting what proposition would be expressed in some given utterance of a sentence. Nor do [semantic particularists] think such things *are* predictable (as a function of some set of parameters)" (p. 152).[15]

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[15] I note that MacFarlarne's (2009) non-indexical contextualism does *not* understand the notion of 'parameter' in terms of a clearly defined list-like set of contextual features. Instead MacFarlarne invokes just one highly abstract contextual parameter, namely that of 'counting as', which is so called because it serves to fix a contextually salient way of an object's 'counting as' having the property talked about at a given circumstance of evaluation. (p. 246). Space here does not permit further development of the issue as to what could show that the semantic particularist's approach was correct, and MacFarlarne's non-indexical contextualism wrong.

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Even so, there is a sense in which I agree with Dancy's (2004) claim that the resulting account of linguistic competence need not deny that "there must be central or paradigm cases, if there are to be peripheral or non-standard ones" (2004, p. 195). So how should we understand this claim?

8. *Default meanings as exemplary standards*

On a particularist model of explanation, to explain what it means for a feature to be a reason (for belief or action) requires more than simply asserting that the fact in question obtains. This follows immediately from the commitment to the meta-ethical claim that there is nothing intrinsic about the consideration in question that makes it a reason in the particular case. Hence, if the particularist is correct, the feature may well obtain and yet not function as a reason in the particular case at hand. Transposed to the present context, perhaps we can put the idea like this: if a given simple expression (with a certain default meaning) makes a certain sort of contribution to the semantic purport of a sentence, utterance, or phrase in which it may feature, then this is a particular (contingent) truth about what content gets expressed, which one can understand if one is suitably sensitive to the nature of the specific context of use in question.

Now, according to the semantic particularist, the truth of one's judgement that the term in question has the semantic significance it does for the meaning of the whole in that context should not be conflated with the fact that a term with a certain default meaning is present (again, granted that no expression in a natural language is such that it has an invariant truth-determining meaning *in vacuo*). Rather, the semantic judgement is merited in light of how the linguistic expression ought reasonably be taken in the particular semantic appraisal at stake: this is the normative fact of the matter. Moreover, it would *retain* that status even in the event of its default standard meaning being annulled or reversed by further features of the context, e.g., by the fact that we are dealing with a case of irony. By contrast, if a term's semantic contribution to the meaning of a complex expression is dependent upon the presence of some contextual *enabling conditions* for the expression to have that semantic significance in that context, then its meaning in that context counts as a non-default. To illustrate, consider Wittgenstein's use of 'substance' ('*Substanz*') in the *Tractatus*:

> Objects form the substance (*Substanz*) of the world. Therefore they cannot be compounded.
> If the world had no substance, then whether a proposition had sense would depend on whether another proposition was true.
>
> (Wittgenstein, 1922, 2.021–2.0211)

In this passage, the term '*Substanz*' is first introduced by Wittgenstein, and yet, as Roger White (2008) notes, "on any intelligible understanding of the word "meaning", Wittgenstein is using the word with a significant different meaning from *any* previous writer, [even though] there are clear connections between his use of the word here and its use by other writers such as Kant" (p. 39). Wittgenstein's use of 'substance' in the above quotation is a clear example of a non-default in the sense that we are concerned with here. For although Wittgenstein's employment of 'substance' is surely non-standard (or 'non-default'), the wider context of the *Tractatus* as a whole *enables* the term to have a certain semantic significance for what Wittgenstein is trying to convey in the text as a whole (whatever that may be). A similar idea is expressed in the analysis of Wittgenstein's employment of 'substance' that White provides. He writes,

> ... to understand what we are being told here we have to adapt our understanding of the meaning of the word so as to fit the total context of what Wittgenstein is saying. If we want to understand what the word "*Substanz*" means *here* [i.e., as used in the wider context of the *Tractatus*], previous usage by other speakers is at best the starting point of our interpretation.
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> (White, 2008, p. 39)

I maintain that the role played by defaults in the particularist model in the theory of meaning (thus understood as a *family* of doctrines that incorporates the claim of holism and contextualism about meaning) has a clear advantage over the moderate generalist suggestion, which *could* be read into White's analysis above. On the moderate generalist analysis, granted that Wittgenstein is not using 'substance' *incorrectly* (nor applies a different, though presumably closely related) term, the only option left is to say that Wittgenstein is tacitly *revising* the specifiable standards for the correct application of 'substance' that determines its invariant core meaning.[16] I think this sounds wrong. At any rate, I claim that the conceptual framework of the language of defaults in the theory of meaning is preferable because it allows us to hold on to the idea that the peculiar linguistic context of the *Tractatus* does not change the *default* meaning of 'substance' as such. The notion of default meaning gives the semantic landscape shape because it provides a way of preserving the intuitive distinction between the "standard" meaning of a term like 'substance' and the special meaning that the term has in the

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[16] For discussion and defence of this conception of context-sensitivity in connection to Wittgenstein's (1953) remark that 'the meaning of a word is its use' (*PI* §43), see Whiting, D. (forthcoming 2009).

wider context of the *Tractatus*. And the reason for this is that the default
meaning of 'substance' can be cited as an *explanatory* notion in semantic in-
terpretation, in a way that calls for no further contextual justification; unlike
that which merely figures as an enabling condition of the relevant context
— like the case of providing a semantic interpretation of what content gets
expressed in the above quotation from the *Tractatus*.[17]

In my view, the fact that certain senses of 'substance' are more commonly
cited as explanations in semantic interpretation than others does not mean
that such default meanings determine how to use 'substance' correctly, if by
'correctly' we mean to refer to some bound set of exemplary uses of the term
that lays down what Whiting (forthcoming 2009) calls a '*precedent* for fu-
ture use' (p. 17). If we continue with the present example, the implications
of the moderate generalist idea of an exemplar as something that lays down
a precedent for a term's correct future employment are as follows. Granted
that Wittgenstein is applying the term 'substance' in the first place, the only
way to justify the *prima facie* plausible claim that Wittgenstein is not using
'substance' incorrectly (though his novelty with that term is certainly *pecu-
liar*), the employment of 'substance' as it features in the *Tractatus* is itself
an expansion of the meaning-constitutive exemplary uses that are already in
play. That is to say, to justify the claim that Wittgenstein's new employment
of 'substance' in the *Tractatus* is at least not violating the norms of language
(regardless of the further issue as to whether the picture of linguistic repre-
sentation that the *Tractatus* conveys is itself plausible) one would need to
show that the novel use in some sense "fits" the range of correct uses that are
already in play. Otherwise Wittgenstein's novelty is ruled out *a priori* as an
improper use of language.

Which way one goes here will depend upon what meta-philosophical as-
sumptions one adopts. I see no principled way of resolving the issue as
to where the burden of proof lies in defending one's preferred position as
to how the notion of an 'exemplary standard' should best be understood.
What I have tried to do in this paper instead is to illuminate a difficulty with
the generalist claim that linguistic competence and semantic rationality can
only be explained by reference to a set of necessary conditions for a term's
correct application. In so doing I have also sought to reveal certain com-
monalities between the *a priori requirement* for the possibility of linguistic

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[17] Another interesting observation (albeit one that is not essential to the main thrust of
this paper) to make about the role of non-defaults in the particularist model of linguistic
competence is that semantic particularism places no *a priori* restrictions on the possibility
that non-standard uses of language can nevertheless be meaningful. And the reason for this,
so the story would go, is that what at one level constitute grammatically improper uses of
expressions can nonetheless function to express genuine contents that are evaluable for truth
and falsity in actual linguistic practice.

representation inherent in the Tractarian view of language that there *must exist* a fully determinate logical structure beneath the messy surface grammar of ordinary language, and the meta-philosophical assumption inherent in the conventionalist reading of the *Philosophical Investigations* that a suitable supply of meaning-constitutive rules *must exist* for the very possibility of semantic rationality and normativity of language.

9. *Conclusion*

In this paper I have made use of a theoretical framework that is prompted by recent work on moral particularism to challenge the received conventionalist idea that linguistic competence and semantic rationality is best explained by reference to a set of necessary conditions for a term's correct application, whether explicitly or implicitly, and no matter how sensitively done. The alternative that I have here promoted — holism and contextualism about meaning — has a difficulty of its own in explaining the role of exemplary standards for linguistic competence and normativity, but possesses the resources to overcome that problem, namely the division between default and non-default reasons. But does this mean that we should reject the moderate generalist account of linguistic competence (in favour of a particularist one, which incorporates the notion of default meanings), or try to assimilate the two? Well, in one respect this is academic — it doesn't matter what label we give to the resulting theory, just so long as it provides a better understanding of the role of exemplary standards for linguistic competence and semantic rationality. Having said this, it is nonetheless illuminating to see how different the two theories are when it comes to accounting for those cases in which our linguistic expectations about the default standard meanings of expressions in a natural language are frustrated. The resulting options I envisage are either to conclude that a suitable supply of meaning-constitutive rules must indeed exist, for otherwise the very idea of normativity of language is itself a myth, or to develop something akin to the particularism that I have here commenced.[18]

University of Reading
E-mail: a.d.r.bergqvist@reading.ac.uk

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