

## PhD Thesis: Matej Drobnák

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This thesis is an admirably concise defence of inferentialism as a theory of natural language.

It begins by problematizing the natural belief that language is 'public', or at least that language is something shareable, by considering in detail Quine's view on the matter. Despite Quine's initial view that language is 'socially inculcated and controlled', in the end Quine's view is that not only is non-observational meaning indeterminate, even the meanings of observation sentences are private; only evolution and the demands of communication ensure that people's observation sentences line-up. In Drobnak's words, the notion of shared language must give way to the notion of idiolects.

If Quine's conclusion about non-observation sentences is taken seriously, then more modern accounts of language—ones that assume Chomsky-like or Fodorian view that a mental encapsulated module is devoted to semantic processing—seem to make a gigantic assumption. Borg is considered as a representative. She thinks of communication as a two-step process. "First, we semantically process a sentence and so we understand its linguistic (literal) meaning. Second, pragmatic influence operates and modifies the meaning of a sentence to the final content of an utterance. Interestingly, the first part – semantic processing – is considered to be congruent for all speakers and so it opens a way for delimiting the shared language of a community. Simply put, we all share a language with regard to semantic processing." But if "it is not possible to determine whether two speakers ascribe the same meanings to the same expressions, then how can we decide whether they share the same language or not?". Also, he raises and endorses the objection (backed by empirical data) that the first step must often await the outcome of the second, thus making non-sense of the neat two-step model.

Drobnak concludes that a "solution to avoiding Quine's challenge lies in changing the requirements for external stimuli that must be singled out as the stimulus meaning. ... . If a hearer wants to learn a sentence beyond observation sentences, her aim must be to find a correlation between the occurrence of a sentence and the occurrence of other sentences. Co-occurring sentences, or rather the stimuli caused by their being uttered, can then be understood as external stimuli that must be singled out as the meaning of a sentence."

This signals a shift to inferentialism. He disposes with the standard objection to inferentialism raised by Lepore that it presupposes analyticity; since analyticity is supposed to be truth-by-meaning, the circle is vicious: But to violate a 'meaning-constitutive' inference is be subject to correctness inducing behaviour on the part of the community; so a naturalistic notion of normativity can undergird meaning. He then sketches an inferentialist model which explains ambiguity, free pragmatic enrichment, and conversational implicature. The resulting notion of meaning will not be a precise one, but that is feature, not a bug. Striking aspects include Drobnak's treatment of homonyms as actually the same word, with the language-user in context choosing one rather than another 'path'. The same mechanism invoked to explain the usual aspects of contextual meaning including pragmatic enrichment and conversational implicature.

I think the thesis as whole passes with flying colours, and I do not request any changes etc. (with one or two trivial exceptions which I do not need to see).

(For the candidate to consider).

I do have some questions—primarily about the sheer complexity of the meaning of a typical sentence; it is some complex of sentences in inferential relations to the sentence in question; how is that supposed to be realised in a language user? How is it to be tested? A complex of dispositions? And is such a thing to be understood holistically or atomically? If the former, what do you make of Fodor and Lepore's objection to holism?

That is the most general area. More specific queries/comments are as follows.

17 However, I believe that the reason that led Quine to his rejection of the notion of shared language, namely the indeterminate nature of meaning, poses a serious challenge for any proponent of the notion of shared language and I do not see how minimal semantics can avoid it.

----- what if Quine is wrong? In later writing, he characterised it as 'only a conjecture'.

19: ----- but most relevant sentences have never been uttered.

37 But it is explicitly discussed in Quine (1969d: 157) and he suggested an answer by taking one step back from neural configurations to sets of stimuli in Quine (1974) and later on in Quine (1995). In other words, he decided to specify meanings by relying on the notion of perceptual similarity.

----- stimuli? Light waves? Retinal impingements? No – it's finding out whether you and I share standard of perceptual similarity

42 I believe that Quine was aware that the lack of determinate content problematizes the intuitive notion of shared language because if non-observation sentences lack determinate content then there is no easy explanation of what sharing a language might amount to. Unfortunately, **he did not discuss this consequence explicitly** and for some reason he turned his attention to the indeterminacy of translation at this point. However, even if he continued discussing the indeterminacy of translation, what is important is the reason why translation is indeterminate according to him – the publicly available language lacks determinate content and so it does not offer enough evidence to settle one correct manual of translation.

----- But he discusses analytical hypotheses in W&O and compositionality; Roots of Reference has an account observation categoricals and the advent of referential language.

44 Quine (1970a) distinguishes between fitting and guiding the linguistic behaviour of speakers. The fact that a theory fits the behaviour of speakers does not mean that those speakers are consciously or unconsciously guided by the theory in their linguistic practice. In fact, as his approach to proxy-functions indicates, we can easily create many candidate semantic theories which fit linguistic dispositions of speakers equally well and Quine seems to endorse this view since his early writings.

----- no, proxy-functionss have no effect on grammar, which is what 'fitting and guiding' are about.

59 As Davidson (1986: 439) demonstrates on Donnellan's (1968) use of the sentence 'There's glory for you', even this sentence can be understood as 'There's a nice knockdown argument for you' if

the conditions are right. Because of these conversational shifts in meaning, the linguistic production of speakers exhibits variability.

----- very weak example! (it's a metaphor etc)

59 then the variability in data indicates that expressions do not have determinate and context-invariant meanings and so it problematizes the possibility of demarcating shared languages.

----- do not **always** have ...?

60 I agree that the argument is valid,

----- too strong. 'Persuasive', or 'compelling', or 'forceful'.

61 One strategy how to avoid the challenge is to buy the bullet

-----**bite** the bullet

70 I believe that the indeterminate nature of meaning in natural languages is much more widespread. First of all, it concerns all expressions in natural languages. For any expression of a natural language we can find circumstances in which an application of a criterion of categorization is unclear or undecided. If this is so, then it opens a possibility that different speakers use different criteria of categorization, i.e. that they assign different (though probably similar) concepts with one expression. Notice, that this is not vagueness as it is standardly understood. The problem I discuss here is that we do not know whether some criteria of categorization are relevant, while in the case of vagueness we know what relevant criteria are (we know the scale) but we do not know the exact thresholds.

----- sometimes it's referred to as 'conceptual vagueness'; need to distinguish sharply from ambiguity.

71-72 ----- don't like the 'actor' example as an easy thing to say is that Rin Tin Tin is definitely not an actor for he doesn't act.

73 The idea that expressions of natural languages are indeterminate is not new. Waismann's (1945) idea of open-texture goes in the same direction and Gauker (2017), as a current proponent of the idea of open-texture, overtly argues that it is problematic to simply assume that we all share the same fully determinate concepts (even though, for most of the cases our criteria of categorization deliver overlapping results). Wilson (1982) proposes a thought experiment which aim to demonstrate that our criteria of categorization are often influenced by accidental features of situations in which decisions are made. Ludlow (2014) argues that our criteria of categorization are dynamic, i.e. they can change from conversation to conversation.

----- this is very helpful to you; expand? I would say also: the area of indeterminacy with respect to given word may be highly variable, both from context to context within a given speaker's use of the word and across speakers. It may be random, and depend on factors which ought to be irrelevant; see Wittgenstein PI §79.

76 Differences in neurological activity varying in accordance with different contexts indicate that pragmatic processing takes place even before semantic processing of a sentence is finished and so it undermines the two-step model of understanding and communication. But if the two-step model of communication is undermined, then the idea of a shared language based on minimal shared standards is problematized as well. There seems to be no special realm of semantic processing on the level of particular expressions which would be shared by all speakers.

----- But only if the 2-step model requires the modules-as-neurologically-realized theory. Why can't a two-stepper just admit that typically it works as they say, and that nevertheless the subject of semantics is sharply distinct from pragmatics, but that sometimes it behaves anomalously.

----- also you really should refer to Sperber and Wilson, who are biggest figures proposing that pragmatics/semantics divide is illusory, in precisely the way you discuss.

84 etc ----- I thought that for Jarda, the set of 'meaning constitutive inferences' is vague round the edges; and Jarda also accepts holism, meaning that there are different ways of construing a given language inferentially.

95f ----- ad hoc vs binding modulations; isn't this distinction a matter of degree as well?

101 ----- I would have liked more basic discussion of simple corrective practices, as in children learning colour words etc.

105 ----- an infinite web? – There might potential objection here. Fodor and Lepore, *Holism: A Shopper's Guide*.

110 One of the biggest advantages of the inferential specification of meaning is that it includes context, as understood by contextualists, from the outset. The inferential potential of a sentence, as a specification of its meaning, includes collateral premises and sentences which can be inferred from the sentence and those premises. Depending on what we count as collateral premises, i.e., how we understand the inference relation, sentences included in inferential potentials could be understood as an explicit representation of context in the contextualists' sense.

----- don't quite understand this. If as contextualists think, there is no end of potential collateral information, then how is all that to be incorporated into Peregrin's model?

112 Simply put, normative inferentialists hold to the principle that the context-dependent content of an utterance has primacy over the context-invariant meaning of a sentence.... Peregrin: But this should not be read as claiming that potentials are prior to significances; a sentence has an inferential potential to the extent to which the employment of A becomes invariant across contexts, i.e., to which there emerge context-independent rules (which we explicate in terms of the function). (Peregrin 2014b: 51)

----- ok... I think.

124 ----- this example is one of deviance, no?

130 Interestingly, there is nothing special about the specification of the meaning of ambiguous sentences if compared to the specification of the meaning of nonambiguous sentences.

----- interesting indeed!

136f ----- is the story really different from an orthodox Gricean's?

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Despite my reservations and critical comments, I recommend the submitted dissertation with the tentative grade of pass. I recommend that the title "Ph.D." is granted to Matej Drobňák on the basis of this Ph.D. submission, which is a valuable contribution to the fields of meta-semantics, philosophy of language and philosophy of linguistics.

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