

Intentionality and Representation

Lecture 4: Conceptual Role Semantics

1. “Meaning as use”

Harman (1982) characterises Conceptual Role Semantics (CRS) with the following two claims:

1. The meanings of linguistic expressions are determined by the contents of the concepts and thoughts they can be used to express.
2. The contents of concepts and thoughts are determined by their functional role in a person’s psychology.

CRS is a version of the meaning-is-use theory (cf. Wittgenstein). However, not just any use is relevant for CRS. Harman distinguishes two uses of symbols: “their use in calculation, as in adding a column of figures, and their use in communication, as in telling someone the result” (242) CRS exploits the former.

2. What are functional roles?

CRS focuses on the role of (mental) symbols in “thinking, problem solving, deliberation and the like—and, in general, in mediating between sensory inputs and behavioural outputs.” (Block 1987: 160) Typical focus: functional roles of *concepts*, and on their role in *inferences*.

A mental state has a specific content if and only if it plays a particular role in cognition. For a thinker to possess the concepts that constitute the content is for them to be prepared to make certain inferential transitions. Naturalistic theories of content aim to capture these transitions in non-intentional (non-normative) terms.

3. A simple example of a conceptual content

Peacocke 1992 (p. 6): To possess a concept of conjunction, C, a thinker must find transitions that are instances of the following forms primitively compelling (and must do so *because* they are of these forms):

$$\frac{p}{\frac{q}{p \text{ C } q}} \quad \frac{p \text{ C } q}{p} \quad \frac{p \text{ C } q}{q}$$

Figure 1: Peacocke’s (1992) definition of *conjunction*

Note, Peacocke does not aim to offer a naturalistic theory of content; he is interested in the nature and identity conditions of concepts.

What individuates symbols (as types), so understood?

4. Externalist Scenarios

Putnam-style scenarios (e.g. Twin Earth) seem to pose a problem for CRS. Someone who grew up on Twin Earth thinks about XYZ when they think ‘water’-thoughts, whereas we think about H₂O with those thoughts. This is a difference in content, and yet there need not be any difference in functional role.

Short-arm CRS: Block responds by identifying two aspects (determinates) of meaning: on this “two-factor” view, meaning consists of a “narrow” aspect, determined by functional roles within the mind of the thinker, and an external aspect, determined in some other way (e.g. causal theory). According to this version of CRS, Twin-earthlings only have the former in common with us.

Long-arm CRS: Harman maintains that the content of mental states or symbols is determined by any part of their role or use in thought, and this includes perception in an environment. On this version, causal theories of content count as special versions of CRS. Twin-earthlings have mental states that play roles that are merely similar to ours—they are not exactly alike.

5. Holism

Another problem, Fodor and Lepore bring out that, if a symbol’s intentional content is (or is determined by) its conceptual or inferential role in a thinker’s psychology, then its role in *all* of the thinker’s psychology matters, not just in some arbitrary region of it. This results in a holism about mental content. The problem, they think, is:

that no two people ever share a belief; that there is no such relation as translation; that no two people ever mean the same thing by what they say; that no two time slices of the same person ever mean the same thing by what they say; that no one can ever change his [sic] mind; that no statements, or beliefs, can ever be contradicted . . . ; and so forth. (F&L p. 331.)

Is this diagnosis correct? Let’s consider these points in turn:

- No two people ever share a belief
- There is no such relation as translation
- No two people ever mean the same thing by what they say
- No two time slices of S ever mean the same thing by what they say
- No one can ever change their mind
- No statements or beliefs can ever be contradicted

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