



## Spreading the Word.

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*The Philosophical Review*, Volume 96, Issue 1 (Jan., 1987), 120-123.

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## BOOK REVIEWS

*The Philosophical Review*, XCVI, No. 1 (January 1987)

*SPREADING THE WORD*. By SIMON BLACKBURN. New York, Oxford University Press, 1984. Pp. ix, 368. \$32.00.

Although Blackburn seeks "to introduce the problems, and methods, and some of the results" of modern philosophy of language to the "ordinary student" (p. v), he appears to have the grander aim of assembling his many fertile thoughts on the subject in one integrated package. The level of exposition is much more suited for colleagues than for students, who may find the book too forbidding in both content and style. Still, it could well serve a class of advanced students, so long as the instructor is sufficiently alert, patient, and well-informed to clarify the many complex issues and arguments and to direct the student to appropriate sources. Blackburn skillfully guides the student through most of the field's many thickets, but not always around the thorns.

*Spreading the Word* does not cover all the major issues in the philosophy of language. Little attention is paid to the theory of speech acts, linguistic theory, the analytic/synthetic distinction, or the notion of logical form. Blackburn is more concerned to connect the topics he does cover to other areas of philosophy, notably metaphysics and epistemology. Philosophy of mind is central to Part I ("Our Language and Ourselves"), which investigates the very possibility of meaning. Because his examination of various approaches leaves meaning problematic, Blackburn proceeds in Part II ("Language and the World"), after considering realism and its alternatives, to take up truth theory as a surrogate for the theory of meaning, à la Davidson. I cannot, in this space, give a detailed summary of the book but will merely make a few comments on several of its most important topics. Though somewhat critical these (sketchy) comments are meant to suggest ways an instructor might expand upon the book.

The main target of Part I is the family of theories which attempt to explain linguistic meaning by way of psychological content. Blackburn's main complaint with such theories (including Fodor's language of thought hypothesis and Grice's approach), and his reason for calling them "dog-legged," is that they lack explanatory power. He thinks the theories do not explain how meaning is possible but instead merely shift the problem from one domain to another (or else lead to a vicious regress—p. 43). But Blackburn needs to show that the problem is not being shifted precisely to where it belongs. When he says that in a dog-legged theory "words are thought of as reinterpreted into another medium" (p. 40), say mentalese, he seems to assume that we must understand mentalese in turn. But surely that is not required. The language of thought hypothesis does not imply or

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suggest that in order to think in mentalese, we must even think of, much less understand, the tokens we think with. A similar reply can be given to Blackburn's worry about the view that psychological states are "essentially representative" (p. 44). Searle, for example, holds that they are "intrinsically" Intentional, whereas linguistic items are but "derivatively" so, but this does not mean that psychological states are *inexplicably* Intentional. It means only that their Intentionality does not derive from the Intentionality of anything else.

Later Blackburn does consider the possibility that some non-Intentional kind of fact provides the explanation, but he is content to wonder, "why shouldn't the missing kind of fact which endows [an "internal structure"] with its representative powers directly infuse ordinary straightforward language with its significance?" (p. 54). This is no way to dispose of the possibility of psychosemantics, the embryonic but not yet stillborn theory of mental representation (in this regard, Blackburn should have paid more attention to current philosophy of psychology). And if it is his suggestion that we think in ordinary language, consider that most of the sentences we use do not express our thoughts literally and explicitly, and most of the thoughts we express can be expressed in various ways equally well and equally naturally. It is hard to deny that linguistic meaning is psychologically grounded.

Blackburn also considers Grice's explanation of linguistic meaning by way of speaker meaning. Unfortunately, in describing (p. 111) intending to induce belief (rather than to be understood) as the intention behind an act of meaning something, he is overlooking the difference between perlocutionary and merely illocutionary (or communicative) intentions. True, in his 1957 paper Grice himself overlooked it and left himself vulnerable to certain objections, but it has since become central to modern speech act theory. Regrettably, its neglect compromises Blackburn's otherwise subtle exposition and examination of Gricean approaches to meaning.

The most penetrating portion of Part I is the exposition and examination of Kripkenstein's semantic skepticism, as directed against the traditional view that the extension of a predicate is determined somehow by its meaning, as represented psychologically. Wittgenstein used the analogy of a sequence of numbers, whose successive members seem to be determined by the repeated application of a rule, and asked what makes a certain rule the determining one. After all, any finite sequence can be extended in a variety (in fact, an infinite variety) of ways, each consistent with some rule. Kripke has nicely interpreted Wittgenstein's analogy of sequences and rules with extensions and meaning on the model of Hume's skepticism about regularities and necessary connections. In all three cases, the problem is to give a principled basis for regarding an item as an instance of one

regularity rather than another, that is, to explain why a certain regularity is *the* regularity under which the items fall (in some objective sense).<sup>1</sup>

I have two worries about Blackburn's very formulation of semantic skepticism. They suggest either that this skepticism doesn't go anywhere or that it goes much deeper than it appears to go. First, Blackburn describes 'green' as a normal predicate and 'grue' as a "bent" one. But just to label them as such either presupposes a real difference between them and thereby undermines the skepticism or else is arbitrary (why isn't 'green' the bent predicate?) and begs the question in favor of the skepticism. Second, in asking what makes it the case that 'green' is not a bent predicate, Blackburn implicitly assumes that there is no problem in identifying tokens of this predicate. In fact, the same question arises for the predicate "'green'": what makes it the case that *it* isn't a bent predicate and that what we regard as different tokens of it do belong to the same linguistic type? (It isn't easy to formulate a limited form of skepticism that doesn't lapse into wholesale skepticism.)

Blackburn ventures into metaphysics and epistemology in Part II, where he surveys issues regarding realism. He is a helpful guide, as when he describes the "considerable tension between the disappearance of the problem and the equation of meaning" (p. 154), but much of the rough terrain covered here could have been smoothed out with the help of certain important distinctions, for example, between ontological and theoretical reduction and between metaphysical and semantic realism.<sup>2</sup> Blackburn's main concern in Part II is with the theory of truth as a surrogate for the theory of meaning. He does an admirable job, but doesn't acknowledge the difficulty, I think inevitable in such an approach, of dealing with sentences (most) that are not absolutely true or false. Such sentences are said to be true (or false) "in a context," but saying this places too great a theoretical burden on the notion of context. As speech act theory makes clear, the notion of speaker intention, though overlooked by truth theo-

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<sup>1</sup>These problems are skeptical in nature because, in each case, the more one looks the less there appears to be any objective sense in which a certain regularity is the legitimate one; there seems to be no fact of the matter to make this the case. With the problem of meaning, there seems to be no fact of the *mind* to make it the case that a certain rule is the one being followed; there does not seem to be any fact making it true that we mean one thing and not another by a term (p. 77). As Hume/Kripkenstein explains, a skeptical solution to such a problem accounts, in subjective/intersubjective terms, only for our *acceptance* of one regularity as the necessary/governing one.

<sup>2</sup>Note here that semantic realism is often confused with another view which, thanks to the Dummett-Putnam debate, currently goes by the same name. This is the view, slightly simplified, that truth is truth and not something else.

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rists, is indispensable to characterizing context-sensitive utterances. Also, it is unclear how a truth-theoretical approach can even formulate the distinction between literal and nonliteral utterances, unless it uses notions to which it is not entitled, such as meaning.

The final chapter, on reference, is my favorite. Blackburn carefully separates questions about language from those about thought. For example, he notes the importance of not confusing the *de re/de dicto* distinction as applied to belief ascriptions and as applied to ascribed beliefs. Similarly, he resists the common temptation of trying to impose too tight a fit between the semantics of different types of singular terms and the expression of different types of singular thoughts. He is especially subtle in his account of the connections between the questions of how singular thoughts are individuated and of whether they are irreducibly singular (“identity-dependent”). In this chapter Blackburn delineates the problems of singular reference and singular thought (and the analogous ones regarding natural kinds) with great clarity and care.

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*The Philosophical Review*, XCVI, No. 1 (January 1987)

*PERSONAL IDENTITY (GREAT DEBATES IN PHILOSOPHY)*. By SYDNEY SHOEMAKER AND RICHARD SWINBURNE. New York and London, Basil Blackwell, Ltd., 1984. Pp. 158. \$24.95.

It has been characteristic of analytic philosophy that many of its internal disputes take the following form: one disputant offers to analyze a common notion while the other resists the analysis by claiming that the notion serves to characterize a *sui generis* entity, state, process or activity. Not that this style of dispute has passed without challenge. There is a familiar reading of the *Investigations* according to which part of Wittgenstein’s purpose there is to caricature the oscillation between reductive analysis and the invocation of *sui generis* or “superlative” entities. The caricature, if it is one, has not been widely effective. Yet something seems wrong with a situation in which philosophy largely occupies itself with maintaining the dialectic of analysis versus resort to the *sui generis* by having the one live off the difficulties with the other.

There can be moments when the history of such a dispute on a particular topic is made accessible in a way that shows the lineaments and limita-