

PHIL 4233: Philosophy of Language
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Putnam, "Meaning and Reference"

- Putnam will argue against two assumptions about meaning:

1. "Knowing a meaning" is a psychological event.

Putnam first discusses Frege's anti-psychologism. Frege argued that meanings are not psychological entities in a speaker's head. Rather, they are public (abstract) entities that can be shared by many speakers. Still, Frege thought that *grasping* a meaning is a psychological event.

2. Meaning (intension) determines reference (extension).

Are Meanings in the Head?

- The Twin Earth Example: their word 'water' refers to XYZ, not H₂O. Putnam claims that the Twin Earth word 'water' differs in meaning from our word 'water'.

- Now go back to 1750 (for both Earth and Twin Earth). No one on these planets knew the chemical make-up of what they called 'water'. In fact, they had the very same beliefs about the "watery" stuff in their worlds. There was no psychological difference between them with regard to their uses of 'water'. Nevertheless, "English" speakers in these different worlds "understood the term 'water' differently"!

- So, the extension of a term is not (completely) determined by what is in the head.

- The success of this example hinges on the assumptions about the relation *same_L*.

- The aluminum/molybdenum and elm/beech examples make the same points.

A Sociolinguistic Hypothesis

- Putnam claims that there is a “division of linguistic labor”. Not everyone who uses and understands a general name, like ‘gold’, needs to possess the method for recognizing whether something is gold (i.e., needs to know the necessary and sufficient conditions for being gold). This knowledge must simply be found in the community as a whole, and may reside only with certain metal experts. This division of linguistic labor is like the division of non-linguistic labor that we are very familiar with.
- Putnam goes further to make his “Hypothesis of the Universality of the Division of Linguistic Labor”.
- The existence of these linguistic experts (i.e., meaning-experts for terms in their field of study) shows why the 2 assumptions of the beginning of the paper are false.
- Metaphor: words are social, not individual, tools.

Indexicality and Rigidity

- There are two theories of meaning for general kind terms. These correspond to the different judgments that can be given, for example, as to whether the Earth and Twin Earth word(s) ‘water’ have different meanings. (Of course, we already know that Putnam thinks that they do have different meanings.)
- Putnam claims that our natural kind terms are rigid (in Kripke’s sense) and that natural kinds have a scientific essence. Natural kind terms then refer only to things with some particular scientific essence, across all possible worlds.
- The scientific essence, and extension of the natural kind term across all worlds, is fixed by the facts of the *actual* world.
- Note Putnam’s distinction between the operational definition of ‘water’ and the micro-structural essence of water.
- We can imagine something meeting the operational definition of ‘water’, but lacking its micro-structural essence. This is, in some sense, to conceive of water not being H₂O. But this is not possible!

In that sense, it is conceivable that water isn’t H₂O. It is conceivable but isn’t possible! Conceivability is no proof of possibility.
- Natural kind terms have an indexical component:

‘water’ is stuff that bears a certain similarity relation to the water
around here.

◦ Putnam equates this indexicality point with Kripke’s claim that natural kind terms are rigid designators. Is Putnam correct in doing this?

• In this paper Putnam emphasizes two points about meaning — its hitherto unrecognized, or at least under-appreciated, social and indexical components.

We have now seen that the extension of a term is not fixed by a concept that the individual speaker has in his head, and this is true both because extension is, in general, determined *socially* — there is a division of linguistic labor as much as of “real” labor — and because extension is, in part, determined *indexically*. The extension of our terms depends upon the actual nature of the particular things that serve as paradigms, and this actual nature is not, in general, fully known to the speaker.