SEMANTIC KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE

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ABSTRACT The central claim is that the semantic knowledge exercised by people when they speak is practical knowledge. The relevant idea of practical knowledge is explicated, applied to the case of speaking, and connected with an idea of agents’ knowledge. Some defence of the claim is provided.

When epistemological questions have been discussed in philosophy of language, the focus has often been on hearers. My focus here will be with language users in their role as speakers—as agents. So I shall be taken up with some general questions about the relations between knowledge and agency as well as with questions about specifically linguistic knowledge. My idea is to bring some considerations different from those that are usually introduced to bear on the question of what it is to know a language—or, more specifically, since this is what philosophers have mostly attended to, on the nature of knowledge of meaning, of so-called semantic knowledge. (I say ‘so-called’, because I doubt that semantic knowledge corresponds to any intuitive category of knowledge. I speak of semantic knowledge in order to take a stand in a debate in epistemology that arises when philosophers turn their attention to questions about meaning.)

I claim that semantic knowledge is a sort of practical knowledge. Here I want to explicate the claim, and to say a little in its defence. I start with something about speakers and hearers and the sorts of thing that they are sometimes supposed to know (Section I). Then I elicit the relevant idea of practical knowledge (Section II), relate it to semantic knowledge (Section III), and connect it with an idea of agent’s knowledge (Section IV). I try to place the claim in a positive light (Section V).
I

There are (at least) two possible explanations of why, when it comes to the epistemology, philosophers’ focus should often, and sometimes exclusively, have been on hearing speech.1

One explanation is that in attempting to determine the nature of linguistic meaning, it has seemed appropriate to adopt the stance of an observer of linguistic behaviour. So we find the figure of the radical translator (Quine 1960) or interpreter (Davidson 1973) whose task is to construct a theory about the speech of others. Neither Quine nor Davidson says that ordinary speakers have the knowledge which translators or interpreters come by. But it could be that their influence, or simply the thought that we must respect the public aspect of meaning, can lead to neglecting the perspective of a speaker. Perhaps when it comes to the epistemological questions, the agenda have been set in the light of certain metaphysical concerns. Not that there has to be anything wrong with this; it is obviously a good question what it is for the noises language users make to have the significance that they do.

A different explanation of why language users’ knowledge is often thought about from the perspective of a hearer is that a certain notion of meaning and a certain notion of understanding are readily connected. A connection can be made between the standing knowledge of meaning which is brought to bear on the occasions when speech is heard and the understanding of utterances on such occasions.2 When this episodic notion of understanding is introduced, a question about the knowledge of L-users becomes a question about the knowledge of those who hear speech in L.

Many have answered this question by claiming that the best explanation of someone’s being in a position to understand

1. It’s another question why philosophers’ tendency to focus on hearers should often go unnoticed. There’s one rather trivial explanation: ‘speaker of L’ denotes someone who speaks and is spoken to in L, so that language users are referred to as speakers and thus as if they spoke, even when they are actually thought about only in their role as hearers.

2. Pettit 2002 puts the usually assumed connexion into doubt. I rely here on the idea that understanding is usually based in semantic knowledge, so that I neither dispute nor face up to Pettit’s examples, although I think that conceiving of semantic knowledge as I do will help in accommodating them.
what another says on occasion is that their standing knowledge includes knowledge of a compositional semantic theory for their language.3 Such a theory—for English, or for Farsi, or for German, or . . .—treats sentences of the language as composed from bits of vocabulary which combine with one another in semantically relevant modes. Within such a theory, for any sentence, a statement of the potential content of any of its utterances is derivable.4 Thus the theory effects pairings between sentences and the potential contents of utterances of them, where these pairings are derived from assignments of semantic properties to the individual pieces of the language’s vocabulary along with axioms or rules treating their modes of combination. The claim then is sometimes that users of a language know such a theory for their language, sometimes that they know only certain theorems of such a theory. Whatever its exact content, the claim is that ordinary users of a language have knowledge, deployed in understanding, of propositions that semantic theorists articulate. Now an objection to the claim is that in order for someone to know the theorists’ propositions, they would need intellectual resources which are simply not needed for using their language.5 It is because this objection seems to me devastating that I think we need a different view of semantic knowledge.

But there is no need to raise objections to notice that so far the claim relates only to the task of hearers. To say that certain knowledge should be imputed to someone in order to account for how she manages to understand another’s utterance would appear to say nothing about how she might manage to find sentences whose utterances have meanings suited to her own thoughts.6 Well, the response to this might be that a speaker

3. This claim, or some variant, is found e.g. in Higginbotham 1988, 1995, Larson and Segal 1995, Matthews 2003.
4. I say ‘potential content’ in order to allow that the context and the circumstances of an utterance are determinants of what is actually said by a speaker who produces a sentence on some occasion. Insofar as acknowledgement of this creates difficulties (as I think it does) for thinking that there can be a codification of what is understood when an arbitrary utterance is made, the difficulties will surely encroach upon a conception of understanding as something yielded by knowledge of a theory. I shan’t go into the matter of ‘context and circumstances’, then, thinking that accommodating them must be more problematic for my opponents than for me.
5. See e.g. Soames 1987.
6. Compare Chomsky’s response to Fodor’s (1983) treatment of language perception as a modular input system. Chomsky said ‘We might consider supplementing
doesn’t need knowledge beyond what serves for understanding someone else’s speech, because knowledge of biconditionals (whether these be axioms or theorems) is exercised in speaking and hearing alike. But consider the two conditionals which compose a certain familiar biconditional belonging to a theory that may be supposed to serve as a semantic theory for English: (A) ‘Snow is white’ is true if snow is white; (B) Snow is white if ‘snow is white’ is true. (A) might be supposed to help answer the question *What is to be understood by an utterance of the sentence ‘Snow is white’?*; (B) might be supposed to help answer the question *What sentence is such that an utterance of it will be understood to say that snow is white?*. So if language users really did need to know things like these, then it would seem to be (A) which served a hearer and (B) which served a speaker. It then seems as if speakers needed semantic knowledge additional to that which hearers use. At any rate, if theoretical knowledge is introduced in order to explain how someone can understand someone else, then something needs to be said about the knowledge a person has in the role of speaker. Very obviously there is no speech to be heard unless a language is spoken. And it is evident that we need to think about speakers as well as hearers if we are to account for communicative exchange.

Davidson pointed out that a sort of communication is possible between people who do not share a language: between, say, an Italian speaker who understands spoken Spanish, and a Spanish speaker who understands spoken Italian. *Prima facie* such examples might be thought to show that speaking in a language and understanding in that language required different knowledge. This first reaction would surely be wrong, however.

[Fodor’s] picture by adding an ‘output system’, but plainly this must be linked to the input system; we do not expect a person to speak only English and understand only Japanese.’ Chomsky, 1987, n. 10 at p. 14 in Ch. 1.

7. I’m not clear how my opponents actually think about this. But the fact that speaking is not yet accommodated shows up when knowing a semantic theory is equated (as it is e.g. in Matthews 2003) with possession of the ability to compute a function—a function such as a semantic theory could be used to define, which pairs utterances of sentences with things said. No doubt there is another computable function—an inverse one—which pairs things to be said with sentences to be uttered; and no doubt this function could also be defined, and a speaker’s knowledge might be supposed to go hand in hand with an ability to compute this other function. But an ability to compute the one function is plainly not an ability to compute the other. See Pagin, 2003.
Certainly one can distinguish between productive and receptive abilities in a language. (In the example, the two people have, as it were, reciprocally mismatched productive and receptive abilities in Spanish and Italian.) But if someone can speak intelligibly in some language, then the language is one which, in some sense, she comprehends. Given that such comprehension—of what one says oneself—is integral to normal speech, something would seem to provide both for making intelligible utterances and for finding utterances intelligible. And it is this which can be labeled 'semantic knowledge': in the case of any language, it is an aspect of knowing the language (of knowing English, or Farsi, or whatever). Obviously quite different abilities and faculties are needed for speaking and for hearing speech, and obviously quite different things sorts of thing must go on in speakers’ brains and hearers’ brains. But these considerations have no tendency to show that we should not think of knowledge of meaning as something shared by speaker and hearer in the normal case. They show only (a) that linguistic communication requires much more of people than semantic knowledge, and (b) that there is plenty which goes on when there is a linguistic exchange of which the parties need know nothing at all.

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Those who would impute theoretical semantic knowledge to language users are not alone in tending to confine attention to the receiver of speech. Those (like me) who take a different view often advert to the phenomenology. Thus: when you hear utterances in a language you know—in a language that serves you as a mother tongue ordinarily serves a person8—you hear them simply as meaning what they do: you hear the meaning in the words. This can suggest that there is no call to think that you know about properties of utterances such as a semantic theory might articulate, upon which your knowledge of what the utterances mean is based. And so it may be said that in

8. I mean a home language in the sense of Fricker 2003. In addition to confining myself to home languages, I confine attention to cases where the idiosyncrasies of particular speakers don’t interfere with communication. I think that these restrictions don’t force any departure from what has to be central in the communicative use of language, and Fricker gives reasons to think this. I should need to say more than I can here, however, if Davidson’s different idea of what is central were introduced.
hearing language one exercises a perceptual capacity, and therein hears, directly, what is said. With talk of a perceptual capacity, it become evident that speaking has been left out of account.

Still, the phenomenology of hearing has a counterpart for speaking. Just as it seems that you directly hear utterances as the meaningful things that they are, so it seems that when you speak you directly produce meaningful things: it seems (as I shall put it) that you directly voice your thoughts.

I think that we can discover the import of the idea that speakers voice their thoughts directly by thinking about speaking as a case of intentional activity. I shall take it for granted that it does seem to us that we are able to voice our thoughts directly. The first task is to see what in general a claim to the effect that something is directly done amounts to. That will put us in a position to determine what it would be for this seeming to be veridical, so that there will be a little more about the phenomenology in due course.

II

When someone does something for a reason, they do it intentionally. And an explanation of someone’s intentionally doing something which uncovers their motivation may advert to their desires and to beliefs they have about ways to bring about things in line with their desires. Hence the popularity of the standard story, told by many philosophers, in which actions are said to be ‘bodily movements caused and rationalized by desires and beliefs’. Belief need not come into the account that I want to offer, however, because it will be enough to think about

9. See e.g. McDowell 1981, McDowell 1997, Hunter 1998, Fricker 2003. Hunter and Fricker cast doubt on the connexion which is usually assumed between understanding and coming to knowledge of what is said. And Pettit 2002 casts doubt on the connexion which is usually assumed between putative standing knowledge and understanding.

10. Campbell 1994 argues that when understanding is treated as a perceptual capacity, a capacity to perform speech acts is dissociated from a capacity to comprehend them.

11. Here and throughout, I rely on an ordinary understanding of this ‘something’, according to which the things people do are, as it were, as fine-grained as the things that they think or know.
some central sorts of case of successful action. In such cases an agent who does things for reasons typically draws on knowledge of how to do them.

A person draws on knowledge how to do something when, for instance, she takes a bus. Perhaps she has a reason to get to Trafalgar Square. In knowing the route of the 24 bus, she may know how to get there. Such knowledge may be thought of as procedural. Expressions of procedural knowledge can take the form: One can φ by ψ-ing. There are certainly plenty of things we know, upon which our ability to do what we are able to do intentionally relies, which we should not formulate first off in an instance of this schema. (We’re more likely to say that she knows which bus, where to go to get it, etc.) Again, when it actually comes to action, knowledge of a more specific sort than this schema conveys is evidently needed: ψ-ing is how I shall now φ; and there are evidently differences between knowing how φ-ing can be done and knowing how to φ oneself. Still, the ‘one can φ by ψ-ing’ form is used here only roughly to circumscribe a kind of knowledge which is pressed into service in action. The fact that it can be so used shows, incidentally, that some knowledge quite obviously falls under the heads both of knowledge-how (including knowledge-how-to) and knowledge-that. A claim endorsed by many influenced by Gilbert Ryle—that knowledge-that and knowledge-how are disjoint—is clearly false.

Often an agent needs to invoke several pieces of procedural knowledge. For one thing, even a limited goal usually takes a more than one-step procedure to achieve: if you are not already at the right bus stop, then in order to get to Trafalgar Square by bus, you have to know where the bus stop is and how to get there, as well as knowing which bus to take. Even where only a one-step procedure is called for, more than one piece of procedural knowledge may be required. Thus, to take a well-worn example, someone may know how to illuminate the room—by pressing

12. There is some diagnosis of the standard story’s errors in Stout 2004. Here I can simply set the story to one side.
13. The mistake that Ryle (1949, Ch. 2) is blamed for fostering is highlighted recently both in Stanley and Williamson 2001 and in Snowdon 2004. On knowledge-wh? (knowledge where or when the bus goes, knowledge which bus goes to the Square, etc.), and knowledge-inf., see also e.g. Franklin 1981 and Moore 1997.
that light switch; and know how to press that light switch—by using their finger appropriately. Here one can $\phi$ by $\psi$-ing and one can $\psi$ by $\gamma$-ing; and $\psi$-ing and $\gamma$-ing will both be things an agent does intentionally if she exercises such knowledge of how to $\phi$. Sometimes a whole series of procedural facts needs to be known to get something done: One can $\phi$ by $\psi$-ing and $\gamma$-ing and One can $\psi$ by $\zeta$-ing and One can $\gamma$ by $\omega$-ing, and... (whatever). There are potential regresses here. But it must be possible to halt them. For we surely do not require indefinitely much procedural knowledge in order to get anything done. Thus some things—at the end of these ‘by’-chains, as it were—must be done without possession of knowledge of procedures. These are things the agent does ‘directly’. They are basic things, in one sense of that action-theoretic notion. They are things which we are inclined to say the agent is able to simply do.

Now some take the view that the basic thing a person does is always to move their body, or some part of it, in some way or other. This view can result from undertaking to locate recognizably ‘physical’ ingredients in action. But the notion of basicness I have introduced need be no part of such an undertaking. And whatever the origin of this view, it cannot be right. Speaking provides an immediate counterexample; and there is no need to attend to the semantic dimension of speech in order to see this. Most of us have next to no idea of how we move the various bits of our vocal apparatus when we produce the linguistic sounds we do. We can learn something out about this: we discover an extremely rough account by concentrating attention on our own mouths and tongues, and a more detailed one by learning some relevant anatomy and phonetics. But if we go in for such discoveries, then we acquire knowledge whose lack had been no barrier to our speaking. Other examples in which the final link in the ‘by’-chains linking things intentionally done...
by the agent do not reach back to the body are found in cases where practice equips one with a skill: touch-typing, juggling with balls or clubs, and playing musical instruments are cases in point. And notice that even when the agent’s knowledge does extend back to their body, the ‘by’-chain that records it may not stop with bodily movements, but with a bodily activity. Walking is an example: one walks by making certain specific movements alternately of one’s left leg and foot and of one’s right leg and foot; but one does not exercise knowledge of this procedure for walking when one walks. Learning how to walk—as children do, at around thirteen months—is surely not a matter of learning facts about how exactly walking is done.

We now have a way of thinking about practical knowledge. Someone whose knowledge how to \( \varphi \) is practical is able to simply \( \varphi \) (at least so long as it is actually possible for her to \( \varphi \)\(^{15} \)). Our practical knowledge provides for our doing all of the things and engaging in all of the activities which we do or engage in as agents. We can do, and may have reason to do, a very great deal more than we are able to simply do: but our doing these other things requires procedural knowledge that we can put into practice. Practical knowledge, when it has been learned and not forgotten, is what enables an agent to get started, as it were.

So much for the idea of practical knowledge as it informs my claim about knowledge of language. I don’t say that practical knowledge, so understood, corresponds to any prior intuitive idea. We may have a conception of the knowledge ‘involved in action’; and if we do, then most likely it will subsume both procedural and practical knowledge in my sense, and also include knowledge of reasons for doing things—of why this or that should be done. I doubt that grammatical criteria alone can serve to mark out any recognizable prior category of practical knowledge: some of our knowledge can be ascribed in more than one grammatical way, and just about any knowledge,

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15. The qualification is needed because even when \( x \) knows how to \( \varphi \), conditions required for \( x \) to be able to \( \varphi \) may be absent. Someone may know how to say things, for instance, even when her lips are literally sealed. See Snowdon 2004 for examples in which knowledge how to do something comes apart from ability in this way. Snowdon also gives examples of an opposite sort—in which ability is present, and knowledge how is absent; these include examples in which (in my terms) the agent lacks relevant procedural knowledge.
however ascribed, might be put into practice. That is why my own characterization of procedural knowledge had to be rough, and why it was addressed to a question about what explains people’s doing things that actually they do. The special idea of practical knowledge, meanwhile, was introduced by reference to the thought that procedural knowledge comes to an end.

It seems to me quite likely that when Ryle made much of the idea of knowing-how, he wanted to draw attention to the fact of our having practical knowledge in my sense. This may seem surprising in view of Ryle’s encouragement of the erroneous claim that knowledge-how and knowledge-that are disjoint. Well, Ryle was interested in a sort of knowledge which he took his opponents wrongly to assimilate to regular propositional knowledge. Ryle’s opponents worked with ‘a mythical bifurcation of unwitnessable mental causes and their witnessable physical effects’; and Ryle would certainly not have subscribed to any programme of locating recognizably ‘physical’ ingredients in action, nor thought of bodily movements as always basic. I suggest that Ryle gave the label ‘knowing how’ to a sort of knowledge that interested him—knowledge which disposes its possessors to intelligent performances, but is not knowledge of procedural facts. He spoke of such knowledge under the heads of ‘intelligent capacities’, ‘skills’, ‘competences’ and ‘aptitudes’.16 If ‘knowing how’ is taken to circumscribe knowledge attributed in a particular linguistic mode, then it does not pick out what interested Ryle. Ryle’s use of the label has certainly been unfortunate. But my suggestion is that there was something that Ryle was driving at despite the unfortunate way of putting it.17

16. Ryle did not bring abilities under the head of knowing how. Rosenfeldt 2004, defending Ryle, claims that ‘something which can appropriately be ascribed as an ability’ is ascribed by ‘sentences of the form “a knows how to F” [on one of their two readings]. This fails to record that Ryle’s concern was with aspects of our being knowledgeable, and also seems wrong (see previous note). My own claim—that we should understand practical knowledge in terms of an idea of what someone is able to simply do—does not assimilate practical knowledge to abilities.

17. I take Rumfitt 2003, which is a response to Stanley and Williamson 2001, to be sympathetic to my suggestion about Ryle, as well as to show that these authors did not demonstrate their central claim.

Stanley and Williamson claim that all knowledge-how (including knowledge-how-to) is knowledge-that. If that were right, then in order to mark out practical knowledge in my sense, we should need to mark out a class of distinctively practical
Ryle concentrated on activities. He included among things that we may know how to do: play an instrument, prune trees, tie a reef-knot, cook a meal, fish, swim, and talk grammatically. Someone’s knowing how to engage in activities such as these would seem to ensure that (all being well) the person has an ability to simply do various things. But it is notable about many of these examples, that engaging in the activity in question would also always require procedural knowledge—both standing knowledge and knowledge got by, and responsive to, perception in the circumstances in which they act. For instance, when one cooks a meal, knowledge of where to locate the equipment and ingredients, though obviously needed to cook the meal, is not provided by any culinary skill. Again, if, when pruning a tree, one realizes that one has started to cut a branch one didn’t mean to, seeing what one has mistakenly done will inform one of what to do next. These examples show that an everyday ascription of knowledge of how to engage in some activity typically presupposes (or perhaps imputes), as well as practical knowledge, both procedural knowledge and a capacity for acquiring relevant perceptual knowledge. It is hard to think of activities engagement in which by human beings requires only practical knowledge, although swimming in open water might be an example.

Those activities which Ryle mentioned in illustrating his conception of knowing-how appear to be ones the normal participation in which makes essential use of practical knowledge. If knowing how to engage in Rylean activities propositions, not encompassed by the ‘procedural’ in my conception of that. Well, Stanley and Williamson say that knowing how to F is knowing, of some way w, that w is a way to F, and entertaining the proposition that w is a way to F under a practical mode of presentation. So the suggestion might be that the propositions knowledge of which is distinctively practical are some or all of those into whose content practical modes of presentation enter. But I doubt that this will work. (Even if there were some proposition into whose content practical modes of presentation entered which was exercised whenever there was an action, knowledge of it would result from possession of practical know-how rather than constituting it, I think.) For present purposes, however, it need not matter whether Stanley and Williamson’s account is accepted. My opponents here think that knowledge of meaning is knowledge of theoretical propositions—those, or some of those, that comprise a semantic theory. Thus they attribute to language users propositional knowledge whose contents are quite different from those which practical knowledge (in my sense) would amount to if Stanley and Williamson were right.

exhausted practical knowledge, then it might be possible to define practical knowledge using Ryle’s ideas. But in fact the things that people are able to simply do extend beyond those activities which we think of them as knowing how to engage in. (Ryle’s own concern was ‘intelligent practice’, so that his category of knowing-how does not include, for instance, capacities for bodily movement.) It seems plausible, nevertheless, that someone who is able to simply do something with respect to which she has know-how of a kind to which Ryle sought to draw attention.

III

We saw that, when it comes to speaking, ‘by’-chains recording agents’ procedural knowledge do not reach back to the body. What the claim that knowledge of meaning is practical comes down to now is that such ‘by’-chains need reach no further back than the voicing of thoughts. Speakers can rely on the fact that producing meaningful things is something that they are able to simply do. When a speaker says that \( p \), there need be nothing such that she intentionally does it and says that \( p \) by doing it.

This elicits the force of the idea that we voice our thoughts directly. Two points may help to clarify it.

Those who think that speakers know semantic theories will say that something speakers intentionally do is produce utterances of sentences. (We thought of a semantic theory as effecting pairings between utterances of sentences and things said.) The advocate of knowledge of meaning as practical denies this. Now of course no-one will deny that, in some sense, producing sentences—certain words in a certain order—is something that a speaker intentionally does. The conception of words which is drawn on when this appears undeniable is that which is in play when it is said, about language users in the role of hearers now, that they hear the meaning in the words, or that they hear words as meaningful. Words and sentences are then conceived as laden with meaning, so that producing them can simply be a matter of saying something. A different conception of words and sentences is brought into play by those who tell us that a speaker’s knowledge of the propositions of semantic theories explains what the speaker does. These people would employ bits
of the relevant semantic theory, cast in the meta-language in which such a theory is cast, in a statement of what a speaker intentionally does. Such a statement then would mention the words, and not talk of them simply as used—not talk of their meaning as simply exploited, as it were. An advocate of practical semantic knowledge by contrast, thinks that speakers are able to simply exploit words’ meanings in a setting in which others share their knowledge.19 Where semantic knowledge taken to be practical, a distinction between mention and use such as that which features in a semantic theory does not show up in the content of speakers’ states of mind.

The second point relates to what it is for something not to be done intentionally. Usually the purpose in asking whether someone did something intentionally is to discover whether it was something she did unintentionally. But there can be things which aren’t done intentionally and aren’t done unintentionally. When someone is doing something for a reason, there are typically plenty of things they are therein doing which they don’t do in consequence of knowing a reason to do them. Consider one variant of Anscombe’s example of a man operating a pump: he clicks out a particular rhythm with the pump handle, although producing that rhythm was not something he meant to do.20 Here his clicking out the rhythm can be explained by pointing out that he is pumping water and has a reason to do pump the water. When his clicking out the rhythm is so explained, it is brought within the purview of explanations that mention reasons for doing things, but it is not seen as something he knows a reason to do. It might be that the most efficient way to pump the water was to click out that rhythm, so that then there is actually a reason for him to click it out. But this still would not mean that his clicking out the rhythm was to be explained by his knowing a reason to do it. Now producing utterances of sentences can similarly be brought within the purview of explanations that mention reasons for doing things. And of course there is a reason to utter a particular sentence when doing so will serve to communicate something one wants to. But that is not to say that uttering the sentence (in the sense of producing those, mentioned, words)

19. On mention and use, and the distinction’s slipperiness, see Moore 1986.
20. Cf. Anscombe 1957, at p. 28 where she introduces the ‘pre-intentional’.
is something that is intentionally done. And nor is it to say that it is something unintentionally done.

IV

The account of practical knowledge and these remarks about its application to speech have been meant to lend definiteness to the idea that we directly voice our thoughts when we speak. Voicing our thoughts is something that we are able to simply do (if not impeded). I take it for granted that this idea corresponds to our experience as speakers. What cannot be taken for granted, however, is that our experience of speaking informs us of what knowledge we exercise as speakers. So there is more to be said. I believe that further reflection on the phenomenology of speaking can help to show why we should think of knowledge of meaning as practical.

The reason why experience falls short of showing whether procedural knowledge is used in doing something is that an agent may invoke knowledge *unconsciously*. We do many things intentionally but automatically—without any contemplation of the propositions knowledge of which we use in doing them, and with no awareness of the reasoning involved. Consider an example. As you open a door, no thought about where the door handle is crosses your mind, but you are not able to open the door unless you know where the handle is and know how to use it.21 Now the fact that we cannot demonstrate the absence of a piece of knowledge simply by pointing out that its content was not a content of consciousness may suggest that nothing much could be demonstrated by pointing out that we seem to simply voice our thoughts when we speak. This only shows how little *conscious* knowledge we need in order to speak, it might be said. And someone might maintain that he discovers that if he reflects as he speaks, he finds himself aware that he is coming out with an utterance of a certain sentence, and tell us that he is therein aware of doing just that.

21. The example, mentioned in Stanley and Williamson 2000, is from Ginet 1975, at p. 7, where it is used to subvert an argument in Ryle. Ryle wrongly assumes that wherever knowledge of propositions explains action, contemplation of the propositions known precedes the action. My own argument that we shall be led into regresses unless we recognize practical knowledge is different from Ryle’s, but an evident parallel between the arguments helps to show why I treat Ryle as an ally.
It is in response to this that more needs to be said about the perspective of someone who does something intentionally. And this is where a notion of *agents’ knowledge* comes in. If someone is doing something intentionally, then it is no accident that she knows that she is doing it. As an agent intentionally doing something, she can know ‘without observation’ that that is what she is doing. She already knew how to φ, and now, while she is φ-ing, she knows that she is φ-ing. So, at least, it has been argued, and so I shall assume. This assumption—that a person knows that she is φ-ing in virtue of the fact that she is intentionally φ-ing as a result of knowing a reason to φ—does not require that a person should be aware that she is φ-ing if she is φ-ing intentionally. Someone who is opening the door using the handle need no more be aware that she is using the handle than she need consciously have thought about the handle when she proceeded to open the door. Nonetheless, in possessing agents’ knowledge, she is especially well placed to become aware of it: if she were to attend to, or to reflect upon, what she is doing, then it is something she could find herself doing, and in finding herself doing it, she would not need to make observations of the sort that a spectator might make.

How does this apply to the case of speaking? If the speaker did exercise procedural knowledge of how to voice her thoughts, then, even if the procedure were something of which she was not explicitly aware, she should be in a position to know of it ‘without observation’ as she spoke. Does the phenomenology support this? We need to consider the case more closely. There can be more to its seeming to us as if we were able to simply voice our thoughts than its not seeming to us that we exercise

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22. I use ‘agents’ knowledge’ for a sort of knowledge that concerned Anscombe (Anscombe 1957), which, along with other sorts of knowledge, she herself called practical, and which, along with proprioceptive bodily knowledge, she called non-observational.

23. A stronger claim—that one knows that one is φ-ing if one is φ-ing intentionally—is wrong in a way that need not be a distraction here. It is wrong because in cases where one’s capacities are tested beyond limits previously known, one may be attempting to do something without knowing whether one is actually doing the thing (which one will have done intentionally if one succeeds); cp. Hornsby 1995.

24. The arguments upon which I rely are in Moran 2004 and Falvey 2001, which both develop themes in Anscombe.

25. For the role of perception in agency, see ‘Observation and the Will’, Ch. 8 of O’Shaughnessy 1980.
knowledge of how to voice our thoughts when we speak. When you speak, you do not need to hear yourself speak in order to know what thought you are voicing as you speak. (And if there are cases about which you can correctly say ‘I know what I think when I hear what I say’, then they are cases in which you become acquainted simultaneously with what you think and what you are saying.) Although it certainly impedes your speaking if you cannot hear yourself speak, and it may even be that you need to hear yourself if you are to speak, still the explanation of your possessing knowledge of what you are saying is not that you hear yourself. Insofar as you are intentionally voicing the thought that \( p \), then, your knowing that this is what you are doing is not a consequence of listening to yourself, and your knowledge is an example of the ‘non observational’. It appears to be different if you learn that you are producing an utterance of a particular sentence such as a theorist describes: you do not then seem to become conscious of something that was part of your aim. The fact that you have no need to hear yourself say something in order to have knowledge that you are saying it seems to be a fact about the thought you are voicing but not about the sentence you come out with. (It is important here to distinguish the question ‘How do you know what you are saying?’ as it asks specifically about your entitlement to knowledge and as it asks about conditions required for knowledge.26 With speaking, as with other activities, perception is evidently relied on in keeping track, and in correcting mistakes.)

There is a failure of parallel, then, between someone who finds that it is by pressing on the handle that he is opening the door and someone who learns that it is by coming out with a particular sentence that she is voicing her thought. In noticing that he is pressing on the handle, the person opening the door has his attention drawn to a piece of agents’ knowledge—to something that is available to him in his perspective as agent. By contrast, a person who becomes conscious of features of her utterance which belong in a description of it that mentions

26. Such distinctions are something whose importance Tyler Burge has emphasized in various connections. See Burge 1993 which argues that a question about whether a piece of knowledge is \textit{a priori} is not a question about conditions necessary for its acquisition. And see Burge 2000 for an argument that one \textit{is a priori pro tanto} entitled to rely upon comprehension of one’s own thought and language.
the words she uses does not learn something available to her in her perspective as agent. So, I suggest, it seems. And if it does seem so, then considerations about the experience of speaking suggest the explanation of why it should seem to us that we voice our thoughts directly. The explanation is not that we are unconscious of something that we do more directly, but that voicing our thoughts is something that we are able to simply do.

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Many philosophers won’t be impressed by considerations about what we are conscious of as speakers. Believing that theoretical semantic knowledge belongs in one or another category of tacit knowledge, they say that we should not expect ourselves to be aware of its contents. But perhaps the introduction of some general considerations about the springs of rational action will have helped to create a doubt about whether the states they posit, relating language users to the propositions of semantic theories, can rightly be labeled states of knowledge.27 However that may be, I hope that by bringing speaking into an account of agency I’ll seem well placed to appreciate a view of language use as—as Michael Dummett has said—‘conscious and rational activity’. My final task is to suggest that I am indeed well placed. I want to show that treating semantic knowledge as practical is fully compatible with such a view. In order for speech action to be seen as rational, there is no need to credit speakers with meta-linguistic beliefs, or knowledge such as semantic theorists uncover, about words’ and sentences’

27. ‘Tacit knowledge’ is sometimes a name for what Michael Dummett calls implicit knowledge—which can be brought to consciousness, if not very readily—and sometimes a name for unconscious knowledge. I take the objection I mentioned in Section 1 (where n.5 is flagged) to count against the claim that ordinary speakers have implicit knowledge of semantic theories. And I believe that a tendency to think of the states the philosophers posit as states of unconscious knowledge should go away if the thought that language users unconsciously know a theory adds nothing to the thought that the theory belongs in a correct account of their ability: see Anthony 1997 and Weiss 2004 for arguments to this effect.

The projects of Chomskyan linguistics have nearly always been presented as intended to answer a question about what is tacitly known by language users. For arguments that Chomsky has never really been concerned with that question, and that philosophers have never got any mileage out of it, see Collins 2004.
meaning. The role of compositional semantic theories in an epistemological story about language is quite different from that attributed to them by my opponents in Section 1. (Compositional semantic theories play a role in answering the metaphysical question noted in Section 1—what is it for the noises language users make to have the significance that they do? But my concern here is with the place of such theories in an account of language users’ knowledge.)

V

Dummett said that knowledge of a language is not a ‘merely’ or ‘purely’ practical ability. Something that I want to bring out in closing is that, in one dimension at least, semantic knowledge is at the opposite end of the spectrum from capacities deserving the description ‘merely practical’. A merely practical capacity might be thought of as one that is minimally involved with cognitive states of mind. Semantic knowledge—like other kinds

28. Among my opponents here are Rumfitt 1995, Higginbotham 1995, and Heck 2005[a]. In the present context I have to try to make a case against them without attending to their detailed claims.

29. I might seem to have begged a crucial question in Section 1 by setting things up on the assumption that the idea of a compositional semantic theory can be in place without any settled view of the character of speakers’ knowledge. For it has been held that ‘the explanatory ambitions of a theory of meaning [are] entirely dependent upon the permissibility of thinking of speakers of its object language as knowing the propositions which its axioms codify’ (Wright 1986, p. 207, at which point Wright was recording how matters seemed to him to stand according to a view of Dummett, and according to a view which he argued Davidson was committed to). But there is plenty of evidence that an interest in compositional semantic theories is not dependent upon thinking of speakers as knowing their propositions. One sees this, for instance, by looking at responses to the trivial semantic theories that Paul Horwich first proposed in Horwich 1999. Horwich assimilates facts about ‘our understanding of a sentence’ to facts about how ‘a sentence .. gets its meaning from [its component words]’, so that his modest view of what is involved in understanding dictates a deflationary view about the semantic composition of sentences. Replies to Horwich (e.g. Higginbotham 2000, Pietroski 2000, Collins 2003 and Heck 2005[b]) argue that the phenomenon of meaning-compositionality must have an explanation of a kind that goes missing from Horwich’s trivial theories; and many of the arguments appeal simply to facts about languages which semanticists want to explain.


31. Dummett himself characterizes a capacity which is merely practical as something that a person can possess without knowing whether they possess it and/or without knowing in any detail what it is a capacity to do. Some people find it less obvious than Dummett does that knowing a language must automatically bring with it the knowledge that Dummett thinks it does. The conception of a merely practical
of practical knowledge, only more so, as it were—is much involved with other states of reasonable minds: it is maximally so involved.

When Dummett denied that knowledge of language is a merely practical capacity, his point was not that knowledge of a language is required for understanding others as well as for the practice of speaking oneself. For Dummett, like me, takes it that something common to speaker and to hearer is at issue when linguistic knowledge is in question. And it is characteristic of much practical knowledge that it can serve a person both as practitioner and observer. As Ryle said 'the knowledge required for understanding intelligent performances of a specific kind is some degree of competence in performances of that kind'.32

Inasmuch as semantic knowledge of L serves L-speakers both for making their own intelligible utterances and for finding other L-speakers’ utterances intelligible, we can think of it as an aspect of her knowing how to use L in communication—knowing how to engage in that activity.33

In connection with Ryle’s examples, we noticed that practical knowledge is exercised in concert with other knowledge and abilities. This is obviously true of semantic knowledge: a whole edifice of practical possibilities surrounds its exercise. In saying almost anything, a speaker draws on knowledge of the context and the circumstances, and she relies on perception in keeping track. Ordinarily there is much more that a speaker intentionally does than say that \( p \), and thus much more than this which is subject to rational explanation. For one thing, a speaker does things for which saying that \( p \) is, in the circumstances, a procedure—remind someone that \( q \), or convey to someone that \( r \), or whatever. For another, she may intentionally say that \( p \) loudly, for example, or with a Swedish accent. Some of the knowledge which cannot be brought under the semantic head but capacity I have introduced is intended to be in the spirit of Dummett’s but compatible with doubt on this score. My aim is only to acknowledge a constraint on an account of knowledge of language which Dummett has emphasized.

32. See discussion in Ryle 1949, pp. 53–55.

33. A fully effective response to the argument in Campbell mentioned at n.9 above would need to say more than I can here about the epistemic status of conscious states of understanding. In attempting to deal with a question in epistemology about the specifically semantic dimension of speech, I have had to set aside a range of questions both about speaking and about hearing speech.
which is exercised in speaking is itself practical. (Knowing how to affect the volume of one’s voice, and knowing how to imitate the English speech of a Swedish speaker would hardly be examples that Ryle would have singled out as disposing possessors to intelligent performances. Still, someone’s knowing how to do these things would seem not to be exhausted by their having knowledge of procedural facts.) Now if one thought of semantic knowledge as practical knowledge but forgot that it was exercised along with everything else required for speaking, then one might get the impression that explanations of a speaker’s actions had to be confined to explanations of their saying whatever they do. And one might get the impression that a person’s voicing her thought was a matter of her blurring something out: speaking might seem to be something over which we lacked control. The truth of course is that it can be a matter for choice and reflection what to say and how to say it, and that a speaker’s attention may be occupied both in deciding what to say and in actually saying it. To appreciate this, one has to take into account everything that a speaker relies upon in speaking. One must not confuse the idea that we are able to simply voice our thoughts with the idea that voicing our thoughts is something that we simply do.

Nor—and this is now a different point—should the idea that we are able to simply voice our thoughts be confused with the idea that an ability to voice our thoughts is a simple ability. Very evidently the ability is not a simple one. The ability which semantic knowledge equips a person with is seen as complex as soon as it is allowed that a particular speaker’s semantic knowledge is not marked out until at least her vocabulary is specified. Speakers, as we say, know the meanings of individual words. They also know the ways in which their words can be combined in phrases and sentences of the language. Their knowledge is productive.

If this were the whole story about the complexity of those abilities of a language user which we bring under the head of ‘semantic’, then semantic knowledge might be assimilated to, for instance, knowing how to play trills on the piano. A person who knows how to do this knows which notes to play and how to structure them. And thinking of their knowledge as comprising practical knowledge is compatible with recognizing that it has a
productive character of sorts: the piano player is able to suit the speed and duration of trills and the manner of their beginning and ending to what new musical situations require. The analogy may help to show that treating knowledge of a language as involving practical knowledge is not an obstacle to recognizing its productive character.

But of course there is more to language users' abilities' complexity than is revealed simply in recognizing the productivity of linguistic knowledge. And it is here that a compositional semantic theory for a language can come into its own: it articulates facts about the language’s words and sentence which can be used to provide an explanation of how the users of the language are able to do all of the things that their semantic knowledge equips them to do.

Such a theory can also be used to convey knowledge of semantic facts. Suppose that you are a monolingual speaker of English who knows just a smattering of a language X. Then you may have procedural knowledge which equips you to inform a speaker of X of the colour of snow: you may know that you can say that snow is white by uttering the X-sentence ‘gobble dyg ook’. Such knowledge could be got from a theory which (as I put it in Section 1) effects pairings between sentences and the potential contents of utterances of them. Given plenty of procedural knowledge of this sort, you could say many other things to a speaker of X. And if you had enough such procedural knowledge, then you would be in a position to use X to say anything that a speaker of X might say using X. The knowledge that would put you in such a position might be given to you by way of a complete compositional semantic theory for X (which, like anything else from which you can learn, would, by hypothesis, need to be stated in English).34

Now so long as you had to resort to a theory to determine which sentences of X you had reason to produce, you would

34. Here I’ve attempted to convey the counterpart for speech of what I take Davidson to have intended in saying that a semantic theory for a language is something ‘knowledge of which would suffice for understanding’ the language. A difficulty, as it seems to me, with Davidson’s formulation, is that if ‘understanding’ is taken to be a sort of standing knowledge, then it is arguably best thought of as a disposition to be in the sort of conscious state which someone is in when she hears an utterance in her own language, and if ‘understanding’ is taken to be that sort of conscious state itself, then knowledge of a semantic theory evidently does not suffice for it.
surely not be able to simply voice your thoughts using those sentences. But if you have practical semantic knowledge in a language—the knowledge I claim a person has with respect to their mother tongue—then your ability to speak will not derive from knowledge of procedural facts. Not that you are ignorant of procedural semantic facts: you know, for instance, that one can say that snow is white by uttering the sentence ‘Snow is white’. You know this, because your knowledge of English equips you to recognize the truth of ‘One can say that snow is white by uttering the sentence “Snow is white”’, just as it equips you to understand utterances of ‘Snow is white’. Indeed whatever disposes someone to understand some sentence $s$ will dispose them equally to recognize the truth of a statement which uses their language to record what $s$ can be used to say (provided only that they know what it is for a sentence to be usable to say something). Thus you can be shown to have procedural knowledge, of a kind a semantic theory may be supposed to yield, in respect of any sentence you understand. The fact that we have such knowledge may be an obstacle to our appreciating that we ordinarily make no use of it.

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The foregoing remarks are meant to show how practical semantic knowledge is situated in the domain of knowledge and reason. But they do not yet display the deep connections there are between the fact that human beings are rational animals and the fact that they are language users. The indispensability of semantic knowledge to the lives of rational beings shows up in two ways. First, a child, in gaining the knowledge in which the acquisition of a language consists, comes to be able to think things for reasons and do things for reasons. Secondly, someone who has semantic knowledge is able to transmit and to gain knowledge. Equipped with semantic knowledge in L, one can use L to say things that one knows, and one can know from occasion to occasion what those who use L are saying—not merely in the sense that one can know that they are saying that $p$ rather than that $q$, but in the sense that, in suitable circumstances, one can learn from them that $p$. I suggested that we might think of practical knowledge as what enables us ‘to get started’. The practical knowledge that is semantic knowledge might be thought
of as what enables human beings to get started as thinkers, and as communicators of knowledge.\textsuperscript{35}

\section*{REFERENCES}


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