

Putnam: Meaning Ain't in the Head

1. Hilary Putnam (1926-2016): Philosopher, logician, mathematician.

Putnam is famous for important and seminal work in just about every sub-field in philosophy.

2. Putnam's Target:

... two unchallenged assumptions:

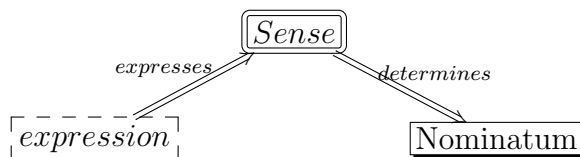
- (1) That knowing the meaning of a term is just a matter of being in a certain psychological state. ...
 - (2) That the meaning of a term determines its extension.
- (700)

DEFINITION: The *extension* of a term is its nominatum:

- *for names, definite descriptions:* a certain person, place, or thing. **EX.:** 'Biden', 'The president of the U.S.'
- *for predicates:* the set of things of which the predicate is true. **EX.:** 'is a student', 'is a person'.

Putnam's Target is the Fregean theory of intentionality:

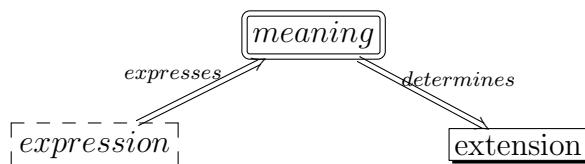
The Fregean Triangle (yet again!):



Putnam (following Carnap) uses different terminology for the same ideas:

Frege says...	Putnam says...
<i>sense</i>	<i>meaning, intension</i>
<i>nominatum</i>	<i>extension</i>

The Fregean Triangle (Putnam's terms):



Putnam adds the speaker to the picture [**BLACKBOARD:** draw the speaker with a speech balloon around the expression].

In this situation, Putnam (following Frege), says that the speaker *grasps* the sense. [BLACKBOARD: draw the *grasping* relation between the speaker and the sense].

Putnam’s target:

- (a) grasping a meaning is a psychological state; and
- (b) meaning determines extension, (*i.e.* if *A* and *B* grasp the same meaning, their expressions have the same extension.)

3. Putnam’s Thesis:

I shall argue that these two assumptions are not jointly satisfied by *any* notion, let alone any notion of meaning. The traditional concept of meaning is a concept which rests on a false theory. (700)

Cut the pie any way you like, “meanings” just ain’t in the *head*! (704)

Two theses:

Weaker Putnam no psychological state determines the extension of one’s words.

Stronger Putnam [Weaker Putnam] + If there is such a thing as meaning, it determines extension.

NOTE: The (Stronger Putnam) thesis implies that the meanings of one’s words are not determined by one’s total psychological state.

4. The Twin-Earth Thought experiment:

Earth	Twin-Earth
People speak English	Corresponding people speak an almost indistinguishable language
People use the word ‘water’ to refer to the liquid that falls from the sky as rain, fills lakes and rivers, <i>etc.</i>	People use a word they pronounce “wah-dur” to refer to the liquid that falls from the sky as rain, fills lakes and rivers, <i>etc.</i>
H_2O is the liquid that falls from the sky as rain, <i>etc.</i>	$XYZ (\neq H_2O)$ is the liquid that falls from the sky, <i>etc.</i>
Oscar is a normal, chemically unsophisticated speaker	Twin-Oscar is a normal, chemically unsophisticated speaker.

ALSO: *Oscar and Twin-Oscar are twins*: they are (otherwise) as psychologically and physically alike as can be: they are molecule-for-molecule duplicates, and they are the same with respect to appearance, feelings, thoughts, interior monologue, *etc.*

BLACKBOARD: Draw the twin-Earth cartoon, with the Earthian and the Twin-Earthian both saying “wah-dur”.

Putnam’s Claims:

- The word that Oscar pronounces “wah-dur” has H_2O (not XYZ) in its extension;
- The word that Twin-Oscar pronounces “wah-dur” has XYZ (not H_2O) in its extension;
- Oscar and Twin-Oscar are in the *same psychological state*.

Putnam’s claims imply (Weaker Putnam): psychological state does not determine extension.

5. The Beech-Elm case:

Suppose you are like me and cannot tell an elm from a beech tree. We still say that the extension of ‘elm’ in my idiolect is the same as the extension of ‘elm’ in anyone else’s, viz., the set of all elm trees, and that the set of all beech trees is the extension of ‘beech’ in *both* of our idiolects. Thus, ‘elm’ in my idiolect has a different extension from ‘beech’ in your idiolect (as it should). Is it really credible that this difference in extension is brought about by some difference in our *concepts*? My *concept* of an elm tree is exactly the same as my concept of a beech tree (I blush to confess).

NOTE: an *idiolect* is a language peculiar to a particular speaker. **FOR EXAMPLE:**

- Words I don’t use that many others do: “indeed”, “shizznit”, “alas”.
- Words and expressions I use that many others don’t: “desideratum”, “non-standard brain chemistry”, “Pi”.

Putnam’s Claims:

- Putnam’s word “beech” has the set of all beech trees as its extension;
- Putnam’s word “elm” has the set of all elm trees as its extension;
- Putnam’s concept *beech tree* = Putnam’s concept *elm tree*.

Putnam’s claims imply

Middle Putnam the concept associated with a word does not determine extension.

To get from (Weaker Putnam) (or (Middle Putnam)) to (Stronger Putnam), you need to hold fixed that meaning, if there is any such thing, determines extension.

Cut the pie any way you like, [what determines reference]
just ain't in the *head*! (704)

6. Semantic Externalism

Semantic Externalism The meaning of a speaker's words is determined in part by how matters stand outside the speaker's skin.

NOTE: The causal-historical theory of reference is naturally interpreted as a version of semantic externalism: what determines reference is the course of history leading up to the speaker's acquisition of the word.

Semantic Externalism vs. Humpty-Dumpty-ism:

[Humpty Dumpty:] 'There's glory for you!'
'I don't know what you mean by "glory",' Alice said.
Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. 'Of course you don't – till I tell you. I meant "there's a nice knock-down argument for you!"'
'But "glory" doesn't mean "a nice knock-down argument",' Alice objected.
'When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.'
'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you can make words mean so many different things.'
'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master – that's all.' (Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, Chapter VI)

7. Objections to Putnam I: Are Oscar and Twin-Oscar in the same psychological state?

[Discussion cribbed from Tyler Burge, "Individualism and the Mental".]

Consider:

- (1) Oscar believes that water is wet.
- (2) Twin-Oscar believes that water is wet.

It seems that (1) is true and (2) is false.

QUIZ: Can you say why one might think so?

If that's right, then Oscar and Twin-Oscar are not in the same psychological state.

But they are the same from the skin in. Thus, this objection suggests a further version of externalism:

Mental State Externalism A thinker’s mental state is determined in part by how matters stand outside the thinker’s skin; in particular, which concepts she deploys in beliefs, intentions, etc., is determined by how matters stand outside her skin.

8. **Objections to Putnam II:** Deference.

[Ripped from Frank Jackson, “Reference and Descriptions Revisited”]

Hilary Putnam claims that he does not know what separates beeches from elms but insists that he succeeds in referring to beeches when he says, say, that he does not know how beeches differ from elms. I agree that he does refer to beeches, but point out that he does know how they differ from elms: only they are called ‘beeches’ by the experts in his language community. Putnam responds that, because the word in French for beech is different from our word, this reply would commit description theorists to holding that a not very knowledgeable, monolingual English speaker’s concept of a beech will be different from that of a not very knowledgeable, monolingual French speaker. But how is this a problem? Peoples’ concepts of one and the same thing can and do differ, and it is hard to see why this should not count as a case. (Jackson, “Reference and Descriptions Revisited”, p. 209)

Jackson’s suggestion: ‘beech’ in Putnam’s idiolect expresses the concept, *the kind of tree called ‘beech’ by experts in my language community*.

NOTE: We can do a “Twin-Earth” thought experiment on this suggestion as well: just make sure that the experts on Twin-Earth call elm trees ‘beeches’.

BLACKBOARD: Draw the beech-elm twin earth cartoon. Elm trees: sawtooth leaves; beech trees: smooth, waxy leaves.

Boring vs. Non-Boring Twin-Earth Cases:

Consider the extension of ‘I’

Earth	Twin-Earth
People speak English	Corresponding people speak an almost indistinguishable language
People use the expression ‘I’ to refer to themselves	People use the expression ‘I’ to refer to themselves
Oscar is a normal speaker	Twin-Oscar is a normal speaker.

ALSO: *Oscar and Twin-Oscar are twins*: they are (otherwise) as psychologically and physically alike as can be: they are molecule-for-molecule duplicates, and they are the same with respect to appearance, feelings, thoughts, interior monologue, *etc.*

Obvious Claims:

- The expression that Oscar pronounces “I” has Oscar (not Twin-Oscar) in its extension;
- The expression that Twin-Oscar pronounces “I” has Twin-Oscar (not Oscar) in its extension;
- Oscar and Twin-Oscar are in the *same psychological state*.

This is a boring Twin-Earth case: Nothing interesting about semantic externalism follows. It’s obvious that Oscar and Twin-Oscar could mean exactly the same thing by ‘I’, and yet its extension differs in the two cases.

What’s going on in boring Twin-Earth Cases:

- **(Weaker Putnam) is true:** The psychological state of the speaker does not determine the extension of ‘I’; but (Weaker Putnam) was always implausible for expressions which are *obviously context-sensitive*.
- **(Stronger Putnam) is not justified:** *Obviously context sensitive* expressions have linguistic meanings that do not determine extension. That’s why they are *obviously context-sensitive*.

An *indexical* is an expression governed by rules (“linguistic conventions”) that say that the referent (extension) is determined by features of context.

EXAMPLES:

- Pure: “I”, “here”, “now”, “tomorrow”.
- Mixed: “my house”, “Yesterday’s NYT headline”.
- Demonstratives (?): “this”, “that”, “thus”.

An Upshot: Fregean senses for indexicals do not both determine extension and serve as the linguistic meanings of expressions – nothing does. [Frege knew about this. See Frege, “The Thought”; Perry, “Frege on Demonstratives.”]

An *interesting Twin-Earth case* is one in which the corresponding expressions *do not have the same meaning* (and, arguably, in which the twins *do not have the same beliefs*). Semantic externalism (and interesting versions of Mental State externalism) require interesting Twin-Earth cases.