

## **Sainsbury's Programme: Comment on *Departing from Frege***

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This selection of essays brings to prominence an approach to semantics that has so far been little publicized and accessible only with special effort. Even though the essays have all been published previously, many of them were scattered in out of the way places such as conference proceedings. Bringing them together between two covers encourages reading them as contributing to one goal: the development of Sainsbury's programme of a "pared down Fregeanism". The excellent introduction, which can be read as the manifesto of this programme, shows how the various essays are systematically related. The editors of the International Library of Philosophy should be congratulated for having persuaded Sainsbury to reprint these essays in this form.

According to Mark Sainsbury, there is a role for sense in semantics. The familiar objections to Frege are either misdirected or concern features of Frege's senses that Sainsbury reforms away. Senses are not modes of presentation or ways of thinking of an object. They cannot be reduced to anything non-semantic. In fact they aren't even entities. There can be sense without reference. The semantic theories in which sense figures are homophonic truth theories.

In general there is a stronger and a weaker type of objection to a notion of sense. An objection of the stronger type claims that there *cannot* be anything that has all the features that senses are supposed to have. In other words, the notion is incoherent. An objection of the weaker type claims that even though there could be something that fits the bill, in fact there isn't. In other words, even though the notion is coherent it is contingently uninstantiated. Sainsbury's programme is built on the assumption that all the pared down Fregean needs to take care of are objections of the stronger type. Once we have a coherent semantic theory in which senses figure we have successfully reformed Fregeanism. For senses are purely theoretical. They have no role outside semantic theorizing.

In this comment, I want to examine the theoretical role Sainsbury carves out for senses and raise a number of questions about it. In particular I am interested in Sainsbury's views about the interaction between the theories in which senses figure and other theories, especially psychology.

### **Senses as purely theoretical non-entities possessed by tokens**

According to Sainsbury the semantic description of a language should employ a notion of sense. It is wrong, however, to characterize senses as modes of presentation of a

referent or perhaps as ways of thinking of a referent. For doing so has at least three bad consequences. First, it is in conflict with the Fregean claim that knowledge of *the* sense of an expression is required for understanding, because there is no unique way of thinking of, or presenting, the referent of an expression knowledge of which is necessary for understanding. (This much was already recognized by Frege in his famous Aristotle footnote and was later argued in detail in Kripke's *Naming and Necessity*.) Secondly, characterizing senses as modes of presentation might suggest falsely that senses are entities that can somehow be identified independently of their role in semantic theorizing, which might then lead to an unhealthy ambition to provide a reductive analysis of senses in terms of, perhaps, psychological states. Thirdly, thinking of the sense of a word as a way of presenting or determining its referent seems to preclude one from admitting sense in the absence of a referent. But there seem to be many expressions in natural language that lack a referent yet can be understood and be used successfully in communication. Thus if sense is to be a key notion in natural language semantics, sense without reference needs to be a possibility.

If they cannot be reduced to anything psychological, what then *are* senses? They are whatever they need to be to play the role they do in a semantic description of a language. In effect, senses are defined implicitly by the theories in which they figure. First of all, the best way to specify the sense of an expression *e* is simply to refer to it as “the sense of *e*” (in this Sainsbury follows McDowell 1977 and a remark by Frege himself, see pp. 4–5). But what exactly is the theoretical role of senses? One aspect of their theoretical role is familiar from Frege: it is *because* “Hesperus” and “Phosphorus” differ in sense that knowledge that Hesperus is Phosphorus is different from knowledge that Hesperus is Hesperus, i.e. that one could know the one without knowing the other. But we have to be careful with that “because”, for the explanatory value of sense, being a purely theoretical notion, is limited:

the explanatory value of sense lies in its putative subsumption of a number of apparently distinct phenomena. But if we take any one phenomenon, ..., to invoke difference of sense is simply to redescribe the phenomenon in the theorist's preferred vocabulary. (p. 127, see also p. 136).

The other phenomena Sainsbury wants to subsume in this way are subtly different from traditional Fregean fare. They require senses to operate at the level of utterances rather than at the level of expression types. This enables Sainsbury to say that even utterances of non-synonymous expression types can be equal in sense, and conversely that utterances of the same expression type might differ in sense. Frege's link between sense and understanding is also resurrected at utterance level: understanding an utterance amounts to grasping its sense. Understanding an expression type is then

recast as the ability to understand tokens of the type (p. 125). Sainsbury doesn't mention the phenomena of understanding tokens when he lists the phenomena that can be redescribed in terms of sense, i.e. the target phenomena to be explained (in the above-cited weak sense) by his notion of sense. Thus perhaps we do, after all, have a substantial explanatory hypothesis that connects the psychology of language users with the notion of sense: the hypothesis that grasping the sense of a token equals understanding the token. It is substantial in so far as we have pre-theoretical access to the idea of understanding an utterance and the hypothesis relates this pretheoretical notion to the theoretical notion of sense (which in turn is used to redescribe other phenomena).

Before I discuss the target phenomena, it will be helpful to discuss another central feature of Sainsbury's theoretical notion of sense. Sainsbury does not want to commit himself to senses as abstract entities. He believes that all the theoretical work is done by the relation of sameness of sense. Refraining from speaking of senses as entities, he believes, "helps curb excessive explanatory or reductive pretensions" (p. 126), for example misguided attempts to reduce senses to psychological states. But what exactly is involved in Sainsbury's rejection of senses as entities? One problem that might be associated with senses as entities is Russell's problem of the unity of the proposition. However, Sainsbury explicitly argues that meanings as entities would be no obstacle to his solution to this problem (p. 108). Another surprise is that despite his rejection of senses as entities, Sainsbury goes on freely to refer to the senses of tokens in the manner introduced above, i.e. using the construction "the sense of ...". Finally, understanding a token is explicitly analysed as grasping that token's sense. The reader gets the impression that there is nothing wrong with talking about senses as if they were there, using a definite description to refer to them. My sense is therefore that the main point of denying senses the status of entities is not to deny their existence or even to deny that they are entities of sorts (namely theoretical entities, but see pp. 190–1). Rather the point is (i) to deny that senses have any existence *independently* of semantic theorizing, and (ii) that senses as entities are dispensable because within semantic theorizing use of the sameness of sense relation is all we *need* to commit ourselves to (see pp. 8, 126, but compare also the related remarks on meanings as entities on pp. 188–91).

The second of these points, however, raises a question about the link to understanding I mentioned in the paragraph before the last: if understanding a token involves grasping the token's sense, how do we understand grasping a token's sense in terms of the relation of sense-identity? There are several options here: grasping the token's sense may come down to an ability to recognize some or all facts of sense-identity involving that token. I shall return to this issue shortly.

What then are the target phenomena? Sainsbury mentions three in addition to the one already mentioned: our judgements concerning (i) manifest contradictoriness, (ii) concerning the accurateness of speech reports and (iii) about valid inference. I shall briefly expound the latter two and raise a few questions.

### Judgements of validity

One phenomenon is given by our judgements concerning what is usually called “formally” valid inference. Consider an utterance of “Barnes is a Frege specialist.” and an utterance of “Barnes = Kavanagh.”. A further utterance of “Therefore Kavanagh is a Frege specialist.” is a logically valid conclusion only if the two utterances of “Barnes” have the same referent. The same goes for the two tokens of “Kavanagh”. Sainsbury claims that when confronted with this series of utterances and understanding each of them, we can know (be justified in believing) that the inference is valid, in part because we can know (be justified in believing) that both tokens of “Barnes” (and of “Kavanagh”) do have the same referent. How?—They might have the same sense, and sameness of sense “makes sameness of reference ... recognizable” (p. 134). Because of the previously mentioned link between understanding and sense, presumably understanding the utterances in this case involves recognition that the two tokens of the name are related by the same-sense relation. This opens up a route for explaining how our knowledge of the validity of an inference can be a priori (i.e. how it can be guaranteed by mere understanding): someone’s mere understanding the utterances may involve recognition of sameness of sense of the tokens of “Barnes”, and sameness of sense is what makes sameness of reference recognizable. The same-sense relation is taylor-made for its role here: it guarantees sameness of referent, plus grasp of sense is somehow involved understanding (see pp. 18, 134).

One might wonder, however, how anyone could possibly have a priori knowledge that the two tokens of “Barnes” in my example coincide in reference. After all, the Barnes who is identical to Kavanagh (Julian Barnes) is not the Barnes who is a Frege specialist (Jonathan Barnes). Presumably Sainsbury would look at it this way: either the two tokens coincide in sense or they don’t. If they do, then the audience will only fully understand the *series* of utterances if he or she grasps this sameness of sense. In this case they have the opportunity to know, and know a priori, that the Barnes of the first premiss is the Barnes of the second. Of course this also means that one of the premisses is false. If the two tokens don’t coincide in sense, then the audience cannot know that the argument is valid in this way. Usually this would be because the two tokens of “Barnes” refer to different people and the argument is invalid.

This, however raises the question I postponed earlier: What exactly is involved in grasping one individual token’s sense (i.e. in understanding it)? For example, is the

relationship of sameness of sense transparent to graspers of sense? In other words: if one grasps the sense of token  $t_1$  and also grasps the sense of token  $t_2$ , is one thereby guaranteed to recognize if  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  are same-sense related? Let's call an affirmative answer to this question "transparency". The current example suggests that transparency is mistaken. For transparency would entail that in a case where an audience fails to recognize that the two tokens of "Barnes" are equal in sense (where in fact they are), they cannot understand the utterances of the individual premisses either. Similarly, transparency would entail that I do not understand the two utterances "Sainsbury wrote *Logical Forms*." and "Sainsbury founded a supermarket." unless I realize that talk is of two different people. But that seems counterintuitive and not at all in line with Sainsbury's general outlook. However, if we deny transparency, then our knowledge of sameness or difference of sense among tokens seems occasionally to be quite independent of our grasp of the sense of those very tokens. And this, at first sight, seems in conflict with Sainsbury's insistence that the relation of sameness of sense is sufficient to do all the theoretical work.

There are ways of disarming this dilemma. All depends on how exactly grasping a sense is cashed out in terms of the same-sense relation. Suppose transparency is false. Suppose further that I understand both utterances involving "Sainsbury", yet do not realize that the two tokens differ in sense. What, then, makes it the case that I grasp the sense of each of the two tokens? Clearly I am ignorant of at least one fact involving the sameness of sense relation and involving the tokens whose sense I grasp. But presumably there are many other facts of sense-identity concerning the two tokens. My grasping their sense might therefore consist in my knowledge of some of those other facts of sense-identity. One simple way of eliminating talk of grasping senses would be the following definition:

For all persons  $P$ , and tokens  $t$ ,  $P$  grasps  $t$ 's sense iff there is a token  $t^*$ , distinct from  $t$ , such that  $P$  knows that  $t$  has the same sense as  $t^*$ .

But perhaps this is still too demanding for this requires that there actually be such a token  $t^*$ . So perhaps we need something along the following lines:

For all persons  $P$ , and tokens  $t$ ,  $S$  grasps  $t$ 's sense iff  $P$  could produce a token  $t^*$ , distinct from  $t$ , such that he or she knows that  $t^*$  has the same sense as  $t$ , or  $P$  would recognize of potential tokens of kind  $k$  that they have the same sense as  $t$ .

Knowledge or recognition that tokens are same-sense related can of course be implicit. It becomes manifest, for example, in acceptance of (token) arguments as valid. These are only some first suggestions. However I believe that Sainsbury needs to offer some

viable reduction of grasping sense to sameness of sense in order to make good his claim that all we need to use is a relation of sameness of sense ((ii) above).<sup>1</sup>

### Kripkean chains of transmission

Sainsbury's account of understanding tokens might be illuminated further by looking at the account he offers of name-using practices (essay XII). He essentially adopts Kripke's model (Kripke 1980). Once a proper name has been introduced by a name-introducing act of some sort (a baptism), subsequent uses of the same name stand in a certain transmission relation with the original baptism. The crucial difference between this account and Kripke's is that for Kripke there needs to be an object that is baptized, while for Sainsbury it is possible that a name-introducing act may fail to secure a referent for the name. A baptism may be a baptism of nothing, thus empty names are possible. Presumably any ordinary use of a name will be part of a name-using practice, and being part of such a practice is a matter of standing in an appropriate transmission relation with the act of name-introduction.

Now, all utterances of a name that are part of the same name-using practice are guaranteed to have the same referent, if any at all. This suggests that such utterances also have the same sense, though I can't find an explicit statement of this in the book. Suppose I am right about this. Then we have an explanation, in the case of proper names, of why someone understanding a token might nevertheless fail to recognize tokens that stand in the same-sense relation to it. For it may not be obvious that two name tokens are part of the same name-using practice. It is, for example, not obvious that two tokens of "Sainsbury" stand in the transmission relation (whatever it may be) to the same name-introducing event.

If name tokens within the same name-using practice have the same sense, we potentially have a further substantial constraint on the sameness of sense relation. But the theoretical value of this constraint will have to await further explication of the transmission relation. However, it seems already clear that a suitable transmission relation will have *some* psychological element. Kripke, for example, seems to think that an intention to refer to the same object as one's source is involved in a chain of transmission (see Kripke 1980, p. 96). It would seem, then, that not only do we have a further constraint on sameness of sense, but that constraint involves yet another link between senses and the psychologies of users. Despite Sainsbury's wariness of any

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<sup>1</sup> Sainsbury's explanation of how we can have a priori knowledge of some tokens of identity sentences may require a strengthening of, for example, the first proposed definition, namely moving the existential quantifier:

For all tokens  $t$ , there is a token  $t^*$ , such that for all persons  $P$ ,  $P$  grasps  $t$ 's sense iff  $P$  knows that  $t$  has the same sense as  $t^*$ .

Or else the property of a priori knowability will have to be relativized to thinkers and times.

hint of psychological reduction, I am inclined to think that this would be a good thing. In other words, if we can find a suitable psychology-involving explication of the transmission relation this would be good news for the theory of sense, as it would add explanatory power to it.

### Speech reports

Sainsbury has a lot to say about another range of phenomena, namely our ways of reporting speech. Indirect discourse, is, of course, familiar from Frege as one of the key areas where the notion of sense does its work. But Sainsbury's range of phenomena is much narrower, and his employment of the notion of sense is quite different. His guiding hypothesis is roughly that a strict, literal and fully explicit report of speech stands—if possible—in the same-sense relation to the utterance reported.

Sainsbury is quite selective in choosing his phenomena. He is not, for example, recommending attitude reports in general as a guide to sameness of sense. On the contrary, he uses an argument by Benson Mates (1950) to show that sameness of sense cannot be a good guide to belief reports (p. 7). One reason why the focus on speech reports is understandable is Sainsbury's commitment to a version of the Davidson's project, the project of shedding light on meaning in general by specifying the form a theory of meaning for a particular language would take (see Davidson 1984). On Sainsbury's version, which is in many ways similar to the version of Davidsonianism developed by McDowell in the late 1970s, a theory of meaning for a language can be empirically tested by examining the general psychological usefulness of the speech reports such a theory delivers (p. 40). In McDowell's terms: a meaning theory allows a redescription of utterances as propositional acts (McDowell 1976). The interaction between these redescriptions and general psychological assumptions can be better or worse. I shall come back to this issue in a moment.

While Frege claimed that in indirect discourse expressions refer to their customary sense, Sainsbury employs the much simpler hypothesis that when I report someone's speech by uttering something of the form "So-and-so (strictly, literally and fully explicitly) said that *p*", then my utterance of the sentential phrase that takes the place of *p* (let's call it the content clause) has the same sense as the utterance I am reporting. Reports of indexical speech are particularly interesting here. Maximally explicit reports of indexical speech will often use content phrases that are not synonymous with the expressions an utterance of which they report. For example, when you utter, addressing me: "You are a fool.", then my later utterance of "He said (to my face) that I was a fool." will be an appropriate report. Another interesting observation is that reports of indexical speech will often require use of anaphora, and that in these cases

the content phrase will not be detachable (because the anaphor's head is part of the scene-setting outside the content-phrase).

Even though in my view Sainsbury here made some important discoveries concerning the ways in which speech can be reported, I do still feel there is some room for doubt whether there can be hard and fast rules for fully explicit same-sense reporting of speech. Suppose Peter utters the words: "Paul said you were a fool." addressing me. In my view there are a number of different utterances that could maximally explicitly be reported by this utterance, for example an utterance of "MK is a fool" as well as an utterance of "That guy is a fool" when pointing at me from afar. Clearly we don't want to say that these two utterances have the same sense. Thus we can't say that both would be strictly, literally and fully explicitly reported by Peter's report—if that means they have the same sense. There could be two kinds of answer to this type of case. Either at least one of the two possible utterances reported is less than fully explicitly reported by Peter's report (we can't achieve full identity of sense, merely an approximation). Or different relations of sameness of sense are required in different reports.

What Sainsbury says in the book suggests that he would take the former route (p. 139). However, there is one remark that might suggest that he thinks there are several notions of sameness of sense:

If there were a single relation of synonymy, and if it were an equivalence relation, there could be no more objection to meanings as entities than to directions as entities (whatever objections there might be to meanings in an account of understanding). I do not accept the antecedents of the conditional, though that is a topic for another occasion. (p. 184, note 4)

Together with Sainsbury's earlier-mentioned insistence that senses aren't entities, this remark might suggest that Sainsbury would deny at least one of the antecedents when applied to the relationship of sense identity. Thus my question: is there a single relationship of sense-identity and is it an equivalence relation?

### Theories of meaning

Another central theme of Sainsbury's project is his view about the *form* a semantic description of a language ought to take. According to Sainsbury, a "homophonic" truth theory can deliver the goods (p. 6). Such a theory's axioms might tell us, for instance, that "is a writer" is satisfied by all and only writers, or that "Dan Kavanagh" refers to Dan Kavanagh. An axiom that says that "Dan Kavanagh" refers to Julian Barnes may be true, but it doesn't appropriately display the name's sense. One canonical theorem of such a theory will then say that "Dan Kavanagh is a writer." is true iff Dan

Kavanagh is a writer. In so doing, the theorem displays the sentence's sense, even though it doesn't state that this is its sense. (Strictly speaking, the axioms for names have a different form. Sainsbury follows Burge (1974) in proposing axioms like the following: 'For all  $x$ , "Dan Kavanagh" refers to  $x$  iff  $x = \text{Dan Kavanagh}$ '.) Some remarks are in order on how such theorems "display" sense.

Sainsbury follows McDowell (1976) in recognizing that the only substantial contribution of a truth-theory to the semantic description of a language is the pairings it provides of object-language sentences with meta-language sentences that interpret them. (Sainsbury goes further than McDowell: not only does the "filling" not matter, the truth of the interpretive T-theorems doesn't matter either. See pp. 21, 39–40) The said pairings of object language sentences with meta-language interpretations must feed into another part of the semantic theory, one which generates a re-description of object language utterances as propositional acts—or in other words, one which generates speech-reports, namely reports of what a potential utterer would be saying with the utterance. (It is tempting to look for lessons from Sainsbury's theory of reports of indexical speech here. I shall come back to that shortly.) It is clear that the empirical adequacy of a semantic theory, taken as the overall theory which delivers these speech reports, can be assessed by examining whether they square with general psychological hypotheses. To give a rough example, we might want to report someone's utterance as an assertion that  $p$  only if we can find motives why the utterer should have wanted to assert that  $p$ . Presumably our theory of assertion will provide some handle by which we can judge whether someone had a motive to assert that  $p$  in the light of the psychological states of that person. General psychology will then provide a handle for checking whether some suitable psychological states were present. This may be oversimplified, but surely *some* interaction with psychology is required for testing semantic theories.

Here we have, therefore, a further psychological constraint on Sainsbury's notion of sense. Senses have a theoretical role in semantic theories, but these theories deliver psychologically testable predictions. I believe that this is, again, good news for Sainsbury's overall scheme. The explanatory power of the notion of sense is, in the end, greater than some of Sainsbury's remarks suggest. Even though we may look in vain for simple reductions of senses to psychological states, there are nevertheless substantial psychological hypotheses involved in a theory of sense.

How exactly, then, does sense figure in a semantic theory? Dogmatic Davidsonians have a preference for extensional theories. They therefore say that the canonical theorems of a theory of truth that "serves as" a theory of meaning *show* what a sentence means without saying so. Sainsbury shows (in essay I) that no cogent reasons have been given for this preference for extensionality. He also argues that if

the Davidsonian project can be made to work at all (i.e. through the idea of a canonical theorem) then a non-extensional theory will work just as well (pp. 38–40). It is to be lamented that essay I, originally published in 1979, has not had the impact it should have had on Dogmatic Davidsonianism.

In the context of *Departing from Frege*, this result shows that there would be no obstacle to a semantic theory that states the senses or meanings of expressions. However, since Sainsbury's senses operate at the level of utterances, and because strictly speaking we are only talking about sameness or difference of sense, senses will not be directly ascribed to expressions in a semantic theory understood as a theory that describes a whole of expression *types*. Such a theory may, however, predict which potential utterances have the same sense as which other potential utterances. More centrally, it will predict what a speaker would say, were he or she to utter a given sentence of the language in question. In making this prediction, the theory makes a statement of sameness of sense (or, given the limits of same-sense reporting commented upon above, a statement of *approximate* sameness of sense).

What then is the form of the target theorems that a Sainsburian semantic theory for *L* entails for every sentence *s* of *L*? I presume something along the following lines:

If a speaker utters *s*, he or she thereby □-s that *p*.

Where □-ing is some speech-act such as asserting or asking or commanding (“□-s” might be replaced by “asserts”, “asks whether it is the case” or “commands”).

From essay VIII we learn that if *s* is indexical, *p* may not be detachable because it contains an expression anaphorically dependent upon something outside it. For example, the target theorem for “I am hungry.” might be:

If a speaker utters “I am hungry.” he or she thereby asserts that he or she is hungry at that time.

Other indexicals may require additional scene-setting. Thus it seems that Sainsbury's theory of reporting indexical speech can be successfully applied to the *generalized* speech reports entailed by a semantic theory.

I have tried to explore some of the issues that arise from the overall programme to which the 12 essays contribute. Personally, I regard Sainsbury's approach as the best approach to explaining the phenomena to which Frege first drew attention, and which still represent some of the main concerns in the philosophy of language. However even those who are less optimistic about Sainsbury's overall programme will be able to learn from the clarity and careful argumentation of each of the essays.

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