Two Epistemological Arguments against Two Semantic Dispositionalisms

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Abstract   Even though he is not very explicit about it, in *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* Kripke discusses two different, albeit related, skeptical theses – the first one in the philosophy of mind, the second one in the metaphysics of language. Usually, what Kripke says about one thesis can be easily applied to the other one, too; however, things are not always that simple. In this paper, I discuss the case of the so-called "Normativity Argument" against semantic dispositionalism (which I take to be epistemological in nature) and argue that it is much stronger as an argument in the philosophy of mind than when it is construed as an argument in the metaphysics of language.

Keywords   Psychology of meaning. Metaphysics of meaning. Rule-following paradox. Kripkenstein's paradox. Semantic dispositionalism. Normativity argument.

Summary   1 Introduction. – 2 Semantic Dispositionalism in the Philosophy of Mind. – 3 The Normativity Argument in the Philosophy of Mind. – 4 Semantic Dispositionalism in the Metaphysics of Language. – 5 The Normativity Argument in the Metaphysics of Language. – 6 Conclusion.

1   Introduction

In *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (1981), Saul Kripke puts forward three arguments against dispositional analyses of meaning. One has to do with the fact that speakers are disposed to make mistakes in their use of language. Another has to do with the fact that speakers' dispositions do not cover all the possible occasions of use. And then there is what has come to be known as 'the Normativity Argument', which Kripke ([1981] 1982, 37) thus summarizes:

> Suppose I do mean addition by "+". What is the relation of this supposition to the question how I will respond to the problem "68 + 57"? The dispositionalist gives a *descriptive* account of this relation: if "+" meant addition, then I will answer "125". But this is not the proper account of the relation, which is *normative*, not descriptive. The point is *not* that, if I meant addition by "+", I *will* answer "125", but that, if I intend to accord with my past meaning of "+", I *should* answer "125". [...] The relation of meaning and intention to future action is *normative*, not *descriptive*.

The first two arguments I discussed elsewhere (see, e.g., Guardo 2012a, 2012b). In this paper I want to focus on the third.

In the literature, there is a lot of debate not just about the strength of the Normativity Argument, but also about its content – different commentators have given very different readings of Kripke's remarks concerning the normativity of meaning and intention. Here I will set aside the exegetical issue, embracing without argument what may be called 'the epistemological reading' of Kripke's remarks,[1] and focus on the task of assessing its strength. In this connection, I will argue for two theses. The first one is that in his book Kripke discusses, even though he is not very explicit about it, two different, albeit related, problems – one in the philosophy of mind and the other in the metaphysics of language (or, more precisely, in metasemantics) – and so his whole discussion of semantic dispositionalism, Normativity Argument included, should be seen as twofold in the very same way: there is a normativity argument against semantic dispo-

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1   The epistemological reading is defended in Guardo 2014 and Zalabardo 1997. For a different reading see, e.g., Boghossian 2003, 2005; Gibbard 2012; Glüer, Wikforss 2009; Hattiangadi 2006, 2007; Miller 2010; Whiting 2007, 2009; Wikforss 2001. Note that – as I explain in Guardo 2014, 755 fn. 7 – the epistemological reading is perfectly consistent with the fact that the problem Kripke discusses in his book is metaphysical, not epistemological, in nature. Note also that the epistemological argument I ascribe to Kripke has been independently put forward by Wright ([1989] 2001) and that, in any case, it is interesting in its own right and deserves, I think, to be discussed independently of who its proponents are.

sitionalism in the philosophy of mind and there is another normativity argument against semantic dispositionalism in the metaphysics of language. My second, and most important, claim will then be that the Normativity Argument is much stronger when viewed as an argument in the philosophy of mind.

The paper is structured as follows. In section 2, I sketch the first of the two problems Kripke discusses, the one in the philosophy of mind, and I describe the corresponding form of semantic dispositionalism. In section 3, I discuss the normativity argument against this semantic dispositionalism and argue that it is quite a strong argument. In section 4, I turn to the problem in the metaphysics of language. Finally, in section 5, I discuss the normativity argument against semantic dispositionalism in the metaphysics of language and show that it is much weaker than its companion in the philosophy of mind.

2 Semantic Dispositionalism in the Philosophy of Mind

When, talking about game theory, I utter the name 'Schelling', I refer to Thomas Crombie Schelling, the American economist – not to Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, the German idealist. When I use the word 'red', I refer to a certain class of shades. And when I say that 68 + 57 = 125, by '+' I mean the addition function. But what does this referring, this meaning amount to? The nature of this *prima facie* unproblematic mental state is actually quite elusive and much of *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* is devoted to a discussion of the, no doubt somewhat incredible, idea that there is no such thing.

Take the case of '+'. We all think that by this symbol we mean the addition function; but what does this meaning addition – rather than some quaddition function which diverges from addition only when at least one of its arguments is authentically huge – consist in? The difference cannot be a matter of the way I answer particular '+' problems, for the '+' problems I am presented with never involve really huge numbers, and addition and quaddition diverge only when we get to such numbers. Nor can we answer the challenge by trying to argue that at some point I must have entertained thoughts that fit addition but not quaddition, for such thoughts would no doubt involve language, and so the challenge would have just been moved from the case of '+' to that of the other words occurring in the thought in question – the recursive definition of addition fits addition but not quaddition, but only if by 'S' I mean the successor function, and what does this meaning the successor function (rather than some other function which diverges from it only for huge arguments) consist in?

Such questions need to be answered. Saying that there is no difference between meaning addition and meaning quaddition is tantamount to admitting that there is no such thing as meaning addition.

And if there is no difference between meaning addition and meaning quaddition, then there is no difference between meaning green and meaning grue (where past objects were grue if and only if they were green while present objects are grue if and only if they are blue), and so on. Therefore, saying that there is no difference between meaning addition and meaning quaddition is saying that there is no such thing as meaning, period.

Dispositions seem to many to provide the most natural answer to this kind of question. The reason why I mean addition and not quaddition is that my dispositions track the former, not the latter.

Let us say, for concreteness' sake, that quaddition starts to diverge from addition when at least one of its arguments is greater than or equal to 1,000,000; when that is the case, the result of a quaddition is always 5. And let us also assume that I have never been presented with '+' problems involving arguments greater than 999,999. That does not mean that I do not have the disposition to answer '1,000,002' if asked about '1,000,001 + 1'.[2]

Here is how Kripke ([1981] 1982, 22-3) introduces semantic dispositionalism:

> To mean addition by "+" is to be disposed, when asked for any sum "$x + y$", to give the sum of x and y as the answer [...]; to mean quus is to be disposed, when queried about any arguments, to respond with their *quum* [...]. True, my actual thoughts and responses in the past do not differentiate between the plus and the quus hypotheses; but, even in the past, there were dispositional facts about me that did make such a differentiation.

And here is a more careful characterization of the view:

> [...] the simple dispositional analysis [...] gives a criterion that will tell me what number theoretic function φ I mean by a binary function symbol "f", namely: the referent φ of "f" is that unique binary function φ such that I am disposed, if queried about "$f(m, n)$", where "m" and "n" are numerals denoting particular numbers m and n, to reply "p", where "p" is a numeral denoting φ(m, n). (Kripke [1981] 1982, 26)

So much for the introductory remarks. Let us now turn to the normativity argument that Kripke puts forward against this first form of semantic dispositionalism.

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2 One could, of course, question the notion that, in the case of '+' problems with *really huge* arguments, I have the disposition to answer with their sum. This is the point of the second of Kripke's three arguments. For a promising attempt to deal with it see Warren 2020.

3   The Normativity Argument in the Philosophy of Mind

Kripke's normativity argument against the semantic dispositionalism of the previous section is concisely stated in the following passage:

> "'125' is the response you are disposed to give, and [...] it would also have been your response in the past". Well and good, I know that "125" is the response I am disposed to give [...], and maybe it is helpful to be told [...] that I would have given the same response in the past. How does any of this indicate that [...] "125" was an answer *justified* [...], rather than a mere jack-in-the-box unjustified and arbitrary response? Am I supposed to justify my present belief that I meant addition [...], and hence should answer "125", in terms of a *hypothesis* about my *past* dispositions? (Do I record and investigate the past physiology of my brain?) (Kripke [1981] 1982, 23)

Let me unpack the passage a little bit.

From a logical point of view, the argument starts with the assumption that it is a conceptual truth about meaning that one's meaning a certain thing by a certain word can be used to justify their use of that word – and that when one justifies their use of a given word in terms of what they meant, the process takes a certain characteristic form; for lack of a better term, I will say that the justifications in question are 'non-hypothetical'.[3]

Here is an example of what Kripke has in mind. Let us suppose that, during a conversation, I say that analytic philosophers have a great deal of respect for Schelling's work and that, taking me to be speaking of the German idealist, you comment that you have never had that impression. I realize that there has been a misunderstanding, and I clarify that I was not referring to the German idealist, but to the American economist. My meaning the American economist can be used to justify my claim that analytic philosophers have a great deal of respect for Schelling's work. And the justification process is especially straightforward; it does not rely on hypotheses but, rather, on what seems to be a form of *non-inferential* knowledge of my mental states: when I say something, I non-inferentially know what I mean, and I can use this non-inferential knowledge to justify my utterances.

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[3] In Guardo 2014 I construed this first part of Kripke's argument in a slightly different way. According to the reading defended in that article, that when one justifies their use of a given word in terms of what they meant, the justifications in question are non-hypothetical is deduced from the 'unhesitating' character of our linguistic behavior, while here that is just assumed, without argument. I take the reconstruction I focus on in this paper to be preferable both from an exegetical and a philosophical point of view. That being said, none of this matters that much, since (as I note below and explain a bit more in detail in Guardo 2014) Kripke's emphasis on the notion of justification is somewhat of a red herring.

But if it is a conceptual truth about meaning that one can justify their use of a certain word by means of their non-inferential knowledge of what they meant, then it is clear that a dispositional analysis of meaning can work only if it can account for such non-inferential knowledge, i.e. only if speakers have non-inferential knowledge of their linguistic dispositions. But, as a matter of fact, speakers do not have such knowledge. And so semantic dispositionalism is bound to fail.

I take this to be an extremely strong argument against the very notion that the mental state of meaning can be made sense of in terms of dispositions. The first, conceptual, step of the argument is virtually impossible to deny, especially when one realizes that it is even more straightforward than Kripke makes it out to be. After all, here the point is that semantic dispositionalists must make sense of the fact that we all have non-inferential access to what we mean; Kripke introduces this idea by focusing on the role that this access plays in our justificatory practices, but one does not have to go about it that way: that we non-inferentially know what we mean is quite clear in itself, even independently of this knowledge's role in our justificatory practices.

The argument's second step is quite solid, too. If dispositionalism were true, my non-inferentially knowing that I mean addition would require me to non-inferentially know, for any pair of huge numbers 'M and 'N', that I am disposed to answer with their sum if asked about 'M + N'. And that is a knowledge which I most definitely do not have.

Note that what I am taking to be clear is not that it is not the case that I *know*, for any pair of huge numbers 'M' and 'N', that I am disposed to answer with their sum if asked about 'M + N'. This I may well know – let us say I can deduce it, with reasonable confidence, from the answers I do give to more manageable '+' problems. What I believe is clear is only that, if I do have such knowledge, it is *inferential* in nature.

Nor am I assuming that it is *impossible* for me to have the non-inferential knowledge in question. No doubt there are possible worlds in which I do have non-inferential access, down to the tiniest detail, to my current brain states, and hence to my linguistic dispositions. What I am assuming is just that, *as a matter of fact*, I do not have such knowledge. This is all that needs to be assumed in order for the argument to go through, since its point is that semantic dispositionalism cannot make sense of the fact that I *have* non-inferential access to what I mean, *in this world*.[4]

The Normativity Argument, viewed as an argument in the philosophy of mind, is, indeed, quite straightforward. In a certain sense, it

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[4] For a more in-depth discussion of this second part of Kripke's argument see Guardo 2014.

comes down to the claim that semantic dispositionalism "[...] threatens [...] to make a total mystery of the phenomenon of non-inferential, first-personal knowledge of past and present meanings [...]" (Wright [1989] 2001, 175). In order to resist it, one should show either that this is not a real phenomenon or that, contrary appearances notwithstanding, a dispositional analysis can account for it. The first strategy looks utterly desperate,[5] while the second is inconsistent with what seem to be rather uncontroversial facts about our knowledge of our dispositions.

4 Semantic Dispositionalism in the Metaphysics of Language

In this section I turn to the first of the two theses I want to argue for, namely that in his book Kripke discusses two different problems, one in the philosophy of mind and the other in the metaphysics of language, and so all he says about semantic dispositionalism, Normativity Argument included, should be seen as twofold in the very same way.[6]

Let us start by coming back to the way I introduced the problem of meaning in the philosophy of mind. Following Kripke, I tried to show that the notion of meaning something by a sign is problematic by calling attention to the fact that it is not clear how to make sense of the difference between meaning addition and meaning quaddition, where quaddition was assumed to be a function which diverges from addition only when at least one of its arguments is authentically huge. Kripke defines quaddition in a slightly different way: he stipulates quaddition to diverge from addition as soon as at least one of its arguments is greater than or equal to 57. However, Kripke also assumes that we have never been presented with '+' problems involving arguments greater than 56, so the difference between his definition and mine is superficial; in both cases, quaddition is defined in such a way that the answers we gave to the '+' problems we have been presented with were consistent with both addition and quaddition. Now let me ask a question: why is this important? Why does it matter that our answers to the '+' problems we have been presented with are compatible with both functions?

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[5] Of course, a meaning skeptic can deny the reality of "the phenomenon of non-inferential, first-personal knowledge of past and present meanings" (Wright [1989] 2001, 175) on the basis of the fact that, in their view, there is no such thing as meaning. However, such a move is clearly unavailable to the dispositionalist, whose goal is to *vindicate* our intuitions concerning this mental state.

[6] Of course, the problem in the metaphysics of language I am about to sketch is interesting and deserving of discussion in its own right, independently of whether Kripke really had it in mind or not.

The answer to this question is rather obvious: Kripke wants to build a case in which it is clear that the difference between meaning addition and meaning quaddition cannot be made sense of in terms of overt behavior, i.e. in terms of the answers we give to the '+' problems we are actually presented with. But, as clear as it is that this is what he has in mind, a little reflection is more than enough to see that Kripke's worry here does not make much sense. Overt behavior is just not the kind of thing a mental state can be identified with. Saying that my meaning addition by '+' consists in my giving (as opposed to my being disposed to give) certain answers to certain problems is not explaining what that mental state amounts to; it is saying that there is no such thing as meaning something by a sign, and then trying to substitute that concept with something else.

So now the question is: how is it that Kripke did not realize that? The answer is, I think, that while Kripke was working on *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* he had in mind, besides the problem I described earlier, another one, too. The two problems are related, and most of the time what holds with regard to the first problem holds in the case of the second one, too (and *vice versa*). Therefore, Kripke does not take the trouble to explicitly distinguish between them. But the two problems are distinct nonetheless, and sometimes what makes sense with regard to one does not make sense with regard to the other. And so not distinguishing between them may lead one to worry about things that need not be worried about. What I described in the previous two paragraphs is just one such case.

But what is this other problem that Kripke had in mind? As I have already hinted, it is a problem in the metaphysics of language. More precisely, it is the problem of explaining what determines the reference of a word.[7] What makes it the case that the name 'Ludwig Wittgenstein' denotes a certain Austrian philosopher? What makes it the case that the predicate 'being a philosopher' refers to the class of individuals which, as a matter of fact, it does refer to? And what makes it the case that '+' refers to the addition function, and not to quaddition?[8]

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[7] In Guardo 2018 I described this second problem in a slightly different way. I now think that that formulation is less than optimal and, therefore, in this paper I decided to drop it and substitute it with the one just given.

[8] One may wonder how Kripke could fail to clearly distinguish this problem from the one described in section 2. The answer is, I think, that both problems can be rephrased in terms of correctness, and when phrased that way it is indeed quite easy to mistake one for the other. That the concept of reference has a normative dimension (and so the problem of explaining what determines the reference of a word can be rephrased in terms of correctness) is rather obvious: saying that 'being a philosopher' refers to a certain class of individuals is saying that that predicate is applied correctly if and only if it is applied to a member of that class. The availability of a formulation in terms of correctness is somewhat less apparent in the case of the problem of the nature of the mental

Kripke's two problems are, of course, related (their relationship will look especially close if one believes that the reference of a word depends on what people usually mean by it). But they are two distinct problems nonetheless. One has to do with the nature of a certain mental state, the other has to do with the relationship between linguistic expressions and entities in the world.

It is because they are distinct problems that, sometimes, what does not make sense in the case of one does make at least some sense in that of the other. In the case of the problem of explaining the nature of the mental state of meaning something by a sign, any reference to overt behavior can be discarded out of hand as clearly irrelevant. But in the case of the problem of explaining what makes it the case that a word refers to what it refers to, overt behavior seems to be at least part of the solution: granted, taken by itself, past usage does not show that '+' does not refer to quaddition; but at least it rules out other functions, which diverge from addition also with regard to pairs of smaller arguments, or at least so it seems.[9]

Just as the problem Kripke is interested in is actually two problems, it is important to recognize that there are two semantic dispositionalisms, one in the philosophy of mind and one in the metaphysics of language. In the philosophy of mind, semantic dispositionalism is the thesis that what makes it the case that I mean, say, addition by '+' is that I have certain dispositions, and not others: I have addition-tracking, not *qu*addition-tracking, dispositions. In the metaphysics of language, on the other hand, to be a semantic dispositionalist is to have a certain view of what makes it the case that *a word refers to what it refers to*: '+' denotes the addition function because it is that function which is tracked by the speakers' dispositions concerning the use of that symbol.

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state of meaning something by a sign, for such a formulation involves the semi-technical notion of metalinguistic correctness. That being said, the idea is rather easy to get. If by '+' I have always meant quaddition, there is a sense – what Kripke calls the "metalinguistic" sense – in which for me it is correct to answer '5' if asked about '1,000,001 + 1': '5' is the correct answer in the sense that '+', as I intended to use that symbol in the past, denoted a function which, when applied to the numbers I called '1,000,001' and '1', yields the value 5. And so the problem of explaining what makes it the case that by '+' I mean addition (and not quaddition) can be seen as the problem of explaining what makes it the case that I should answer '1,000,002' (and not '5') if asked for '1,000,001 + 1'.

9   As a matter of fact, in this case appearances are misleading, for reasons I explain in Guardo 2012b and elsewhere. That being said, nothing of importance hinges on this point here.

Some may take the upshot of the foregoing to be not that Kripke was interested in two distinct (and yet related) problems, but that the problem Kripke was really interested in is not the one he seems to be interested in but, rather, the one in the metaphysics of language I have just sketched. I believe that such a conclusion would be too strong. Kripke is quite clearly interested in the nature of the mental state of meaning, too. In fact, one of the things that makes it clear is his use of the Normativity Argument, which is very strong when viewed as an argument in the philosophy of mind but, as I am about to argue, rather weak as an argument in the metaphysics of language.

And just as there are two semantic dispositionalisms, one can try to put forward a normativity argument both in the philosophy of mind and in the metaphysics of language. In section 3, I argued that, in the philosophy of mind, normativity considerations are extremely effective. In the next section, I will try to show that in the metaphysics of language the situation is completely different.

5 The Normativity Argument in the Metaphysics of Language

According to the epistemological reading I am assuming here, the Normativity Argument is epistemological in nature. The argument gets called '*Normativity* Argument' because it makes use of the notion of justification, which is normative, but its focus on our justificatory practices is just a means to call attention to an epistemological point, and in fact the argument can be rephrased without making any mention of justifications, so that 'Normativity Argument' is really something of a misnomer.

In the philosophy of mind, focusing on the epistemological core of the argument – setting aside all talk of justifications – gets us something like this: it is a fact that we have direct access to (non-inferential knowledge of) what we mean by our words; we do not have, however, any such access to our linguistic dispositions; therefore, dispositional analyses of meaning cannot account for the epistemology of this mental state, and so they can be discarded out of hand.

To me, this looks like a very strong argument. But can such considerations be generalized to the case of semantic dispositionalism in the metaphysics of language? Well, in the metaphysics of language, semantic dispositionalism is the view that what makes it the case that a word refers to what it refers to are the speakers' dispositions. Therefore, here, in order to get off the ground, the Normativity Argument would need to call attention to some feature of our epistemic relationship with facts about reference – and, relatedly, of our knowledge of a word's reference – that semantic dispositionalism cannot make sense of. What we need is an asymmetry between our knowledge of a word's reference, our semantic competence, and our knowledge of the speakers' dispositions. Hence, the issue of the effectiveness of 'normative' considerations against semantic dispositionalism in the metaphysics of language comes down to a very simple question: is such an asymmetry anywhere to be found?

To the extent that I can make sense of the notion of reference, it seems to me that the character of our epistemic relationship to the relevant facts is perfectly consistent with the idea that those facts are facts about the speakers' dispositions. The mental state of meaning a certain thing by a certain word is clearly a conscious state (a

state with a phenomenal component), to which we have *direct*, *non-inferential* access. Facts about the reference of linguistic expressions, though, are not like that. Granted, that '+' refers to addition is something I am *extremely confident* about. It may even be said that that is something I am *certain* of. But the very same degree of confidence I have in the fact that my own and my fellow speakers' dispositions concerning '+' track addition, and not some other quaddition-like function. Therefore, it seems that nothing about the nature of our epistemic access to facts about reference tells against the idea that these facts are really facts concerning how we are disposed to use the words of our language.

One might try to salvage the argument by building on the fact that, in its original version, the Normativity Argument made use of the concept of justification. Of course, we have seen that, in the case of the version of the argument Kripke runs in the philosophy of mind, any mention of justifications can be removed without in any way weakening the argument. But maybe things are different when we turn to the metaphysics of language; maybe here the reference to our justificatory practices is essential.

Prima facie, this is an interesting suggestion. When one realizes that the point of the Normativity Argument is epistemological, Kripke's emphasis on the notion of justification starts to look rather strange. But if it were to turn out that in the case of the metaphysics of language the argument requires that concept, then the way Kripke builds it would make much more sense. That being said, I do not see how a focus on our justificatory practices could provide the kind of asymmetry we are after. And so my conclusion is that the Normativity Argument is not a serious threat to semantic dispositionalism in the metaphysics of language.

6   Conclusion

Kripke took the Normativity Argument to show not just that semantic dispositionalism is false, but that it is *clearly* false, that nobody in their right mind could *take seriously* such a blatantly inadequate account of meaning. The standard interpretation of the Normativity Argument – according to which the point of the argument is that while meaning a certain thing by a certain word entails categorical oughts, having certain dispositions does not – makes Kripke's assessment of the strength of his argument look overly optimistic.[10] After all, that meaning a certain thing by a certain word entails cate-

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[10]   For this reading see the works cited in note 1.

gorical oughts is far from uncontroversial.[11] On the other hand, the epistemological reading I sketched in section 3 makes, I think, perfect sense of Kripke's view of the dialectic, since the argument described in that section is indeed a very strong one. But by vindicating Kripke's assessment of the merits of the Normativity Argument the epistemological reading raises a worry: if it is true that nobody in their right mind could take seriously such a blatantly inadequate account of meaning as semantic dispositionalism, how is it that among the ranks of semantic dispositionalists we find philosophers such as (to name just a few) Simon Blackburn (1984), Charlie Martin and John Heil (1998), Fred Dretske (1981) and Jerry Fodor (1990)?

The two theses I have argued for in the previous two sections can, I think, help answer such worries. As shown in section 4, the label 'semantic dispositionalism' is ambiguous. It may refer to the view in the philosophy of mind which is the primary target of Kripke's normativity considerations, but it may also refer to a thesis in the metaphysics of language. And, as I have argued in section 5, when viewed as an argument against the latter thesis the Normativity Argument is quite weak. Hence, it may be that the reason why Blackburn, Dretske, Fodor, etc. found semantic dispositionalism attractive is that what they had in mind was, at least to some extent, not the view in the philosophy of mind, which is indeed blatantly inadequate, but that in the metaphysics of language.[12]

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11　See, e.g., Boghossian 2003, 2005; Glüer, Wikforss 2009; Hattiangadi 2006, 2007; Wikforss 2001.

12　Of course, the two semantic dispositionalisms are, as I have already noted, related and most philosophers (Kripke in primis) do not distinguish clearly between them. Therefore, it does not make much sense to pretend that there is a clear-cut distinction between having in mind the view in the metaphysics of language and having in mind that in the philosophy of mind.

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