Semantics, Metaphysics and Linguistic Competence: the Case of Incompleteness Arguments

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Abstract

Throughout his philosophical career Dummett held firmly two theses: (i) the theory of meaning has a central position in philosophy and all other forms of philosophical inquiry rest upon semantic presuppositions, in particular semantic issues replace traditional metaphysical issues; (ii) the theory of meaning is a theory of understanding. I will defend neither of them. However, I will argue that there is an important lesson we ought to learn from a reflection on the link between linguistic competence and semantics, which I take to be part of Dummett's legacy in philosophy of language. I discuss the point in respect of Cappelen and Lepore's criticism of Incompleteness Arguments.

1 Dummett's Legacy: Semantics and Metaphysics

Throughout his philosophical career Michael Dummett never gave up two theses:

> (i) The theory of meaning has a central and foundational place in philosophy.

> (ii) The theory of meaning is a theory of understanding.

Thesis (i) is the climax of the linguistic turn started by Frege and adopted by logical positivists. It is the view that metaphysical issues must be resolved or dissolved by recourse to the theory of meaning. Contrary to positivists, who dismissed metaphysical issues either as nonsense or as issues concerning no matter of fact and reducible to pragmatic choices between different languages, Dummett never dismissed metaphysical issues as non substantive questions. Rather, he reinterpreted metaphysical disputes in any region of discourse as disputes concerning the truth-conditions of the sentences in that area.[1] Whether one is justified to be realist in

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[1] See Dummett [8, p. xl]: "The whole point of my approach to these problems [the disputes concerning realism] has been to show that the theory of meaning underlies metaphysics. If I have made any worthwhile contribution to philosophy, I think it must lie in having raised this issue in these terms".

some area of discourse depends on whether one is justified to assign realist truth conditions to the sentences in that area of discourse, i.e. bivalent, epistemically transcendent truth conditions. Linguistic categories are also the starting point for the analysis of formal ontological notions. For example the formal notion of *object* must be understood as the referent of a singular term – with the notion of singular term to be explained on the basis of characteristic behaviour in syntactic and logical operations on sentences containing singular terms.[2] Dummett regarded the philosophy of language as having a foundational role. If metaphysical issues are reformulated as questions about the structure and content of language, only the philosophy of language can provide the basis for such an analysis.

Nowadays, many, perhaps most, philosophers reject the foundational role of the philosophy of language and claim a substantive and autonomous role for metaphysics. They regard metaphysics as that part of philosophical inquiry that is engaged to discover objective characteristics of reality and not certain fundamentally necessary features of our thought about reality.

Thesis (ii) is also central in Dummett's philosophy and struggle against semantic realism. According to Dummett, the theory of meaning must be tripartite in a theory of reference, a theory of sense and a theory of force.[3] The theory of reference determines recursively the conditions for the application to each sentence of that notion which is taken as the central notion in the explanation of meaning. The theory of sense specifies what is involved in ascribing the knowledge of the theory of reference to speakers. In other words, the theory of sense is a theory of understanding that specifies that in which the knowledge of the theory of reference consists.[4] As the knowledge of the theory of reference is an implicit knowledge, the theory of sense must correlate the knowledge of each theorem of the theory of reference with a practical linguistic ability.[5] Dummett's criticism of semantic realism is that the classical notion of truth cannot serve as the central notion in the explanation of meaning since it makes it impossible to construct a proper theory of sense. This is to say that one cannot specify what is involved in ascribing to speakers the implicit knowledge of the theorems of a classical two-valued semantics that assigns epistemically transcendent truth-conditions to sentences.

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[2]See Dummett [9, Ch. 4]. For a discussion of the point see Wright [16, pp. 53-64].

[3]See Dummett [6, p. 127]: "Any theory of meaning was early seen as falling into three parts: the first, the core theory, the theory of reference; secondly, its shell, the theory of sense; and thirdly, the supplementary part of the theory of meaning, the theory of force... The theory of reference determines recursively the application to each sentence of that notion which is taken as central in the given theory of meaning... The theory of sense specifies what is involved in attributing to a speaker a knowledge of the theory of reference".

[4]See Dummett [5, p. 99]: "A theory of meaning is a theory of understanding".

[5]See Dummett [6, p. 72]: "We may therefore require that the implicit knowledge which he [the speaker] has of the theorems of the theory of meaning which relate to whole sentences be explained in terms of his ability to employ those sentences in particular ways... The ascription to him of a grasp of the axioms governing the words is a means of representing his derivation of the meaning of each sentence from the meanings of its component words, but his knowledge of the axioms need not be manifested in anything but the employment of the sentence".

Dummett's argument against semantic realism is known as *The Manifestation Argument* and is a *reductio*:[6]

1. Knowledge of meaning is knowledge of classical truth-conditions.

2. Knowledge of meaning consists in the capacity to recognize, if appropriately placed, whether or not the truth-conditions obtain.

3. Classical truth-conditions are such that, if actualized, they need not be recognizably so.

4. Knowledge of meaning is not knowledge of classical truth-conditions.

According to 2., every speaker who knows the meaning of a sentence S must be able to recognize that its truth-condition obtains whenever it obtains. But S's truth-condition might obtain without being possible to know that this is so. Therefore we are not guaranteed that the knowledge of S's meaning consists in a capacity that can be ever exercised. This is an absurd consequence since to have a capacity is to be able to do something that can be done. Nobody possesses a capacity to do what cannot be done. The conclusion 4. Dummett draws is the negation of 1.

The argument rests on premise 2., which is a consequence of thesis (ii). Thesis (ii) is the manifestation constraint and is Dummett's explication of Wittgensteins slogan that meaning is use. It expresses the view that the theory of meaning must include the theory of sense, which specifies that in which the knowledge of meaning *consists*.[7] Dummett says that a theory that meets the manifestation constraint specifies not only what speakers know when they know the meanings of the expressions of the language they speak but also what such knowledge consists in, in such a way that one would acquire the meanings of the expressions of the language under study, were he taught the practical abilities that the theory of sense describes. The manifestation constraint has a constitutive import. It regards linguistic behaviour as something in need of analysis. Linguistic behaviour is analysed in order to determine the complex of linguistic abilities that *constitute* the mastery of the language. To know that a certain expression has a certain meaning *is* to be able to make a certain use of that expression and it must be the aim of the theory of meaning to describe such patterns of use.

Some philosophers have rejected Dummett's Manifestation Argument by rejecting thesis (ii), in its constitutive significance. They hold that the ascription of the implicit knowledge of the theory, which for each sentence specifies its classical

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[6]I borrow this presentation of the manifestation argument from [14].

[7]See, for example, Dummett [7, p. 376]: "An argument of this kind is based upon a fundamental principle, which may be stated briefly, in Wittgensteinian terms, as the principle that a grasp of the meaning of an expression must be exhaustively manifested by the use of that expression and hence must constitute implicit knowledge of its contribution to determining the condition for the truth of a sentence in which it occurs; and an ascription of implicit knowledge must always be explainable in terms of what counts as a manifestation of that knowledge, namely the possession of some practical capacity".

truth condition, amounts to the ascription of internal states and allows for making testable predictions about speakers' behaviour. They reject Dummett's manifestation constraint that semantics – the core part of the theory of meaning – must be associated with a theory of understanding – the theory of sense – that provides an analysis of linguistic behaviour that specifies the patterns of linguistic abilities that *constitute* the implicit knowledge of the semantic theory.[8]

I will not defend Demmett's theses (i) and (ii). I agree that there is a division in philosophical labour between metaphysicians and philosophers of language, and that the philosophy of language does not have a foundational role in respect to other philosophical fields. I also agree that the Manifestation Argument can be blocked by rejecting the constitutive constraint. However, I will argue that there is a constraint that makes the link between linguistic competence and semantics more intimate than some philosophers believe. I take this constraint to be part of Dummett's legacy in philosophy of language. I will address the point by discussing Cappelen and Lepore's ciriticism of Incomplerteness Argument. I will claim that despite the fact that they rightly recognize a division in philosophical labour between metaphysicians and philosophers of language, their criticism is mistakenly grounded on an underestimation of the connection between linguistic competence and semantics.

2   Incompleteness Arguments

Contextualists employ Incompleteness Arguments to prove that certain expressions are context sensitive. Consider the sentence (1):

> (1) Bradley is tall.

An Incompleteness Argument triggers the intuition that if one takes (1) in isolation from the information available in the context of utterance, then one is unable to truth evaluate (1). It is only if ones takes account of contextual information that utterances of (1) are truth evaluable. For example, in the course of a conversation about the physical characteristics of presidential candidates the utterance of (1) is true if and only if Bradley is 180 cm tall or over, i.e. tall in respect of the average height of the presidential candidates. Whereas in the course of a conversation about great NBA centers the utterance of (1) is true if and only if Bradley is 205 cm tall or over, i.e. tall in respect of the average height of great NBA centers. This line of reasoning leads to the conclusion that there is no invariant proposition, i.e. the proposition that Bradley is tall *simpliciter*, which utterances of (1) express in all contexts. On the other hand, there are the proposition that Bradley is tall as compared with the class of the candidates to the presidency and the proposition that

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[8]Dummett goes on to argue that classical semantics is not adequate because there are no linguistic abilities that constitute implicit knowledge of epistemically transcendent truth conditions. See Dummett [10, p. 303]: "A semantic theory may be criticised on the ground that it cannot be extended to a coherent or workable meaning-theory at all; and since, by definition, a semantic theory can be so extended, this criticism amounts to saying that it is not, after all, a genuine semantic theory".

Bradley is tall as compared with the class of great NBA centers, which are propositions expressed by utterances of (1) with the help of the information available in the context of utterance. In general, a successful Incompleteness Argument gives evidence that there is no invariant proposition that a sentence S expresses in all contexts of utterance. If, in addition, this conclusion is accompanied by the intuition that in each context of utterance S expresses a truth evaluable content relative to the contextual information, then a viable explanation of that intuition is that S (some expressions occurring in it) is context sensitive. For example, the intuition that the truth conditions of (1) vary when the context of utterance varies is explained within a theory according to which 'tall' is a context sensitive expression.

3   Cappelen and Lepore's Rejection of Incompleteness Arguments

Cappelen and Lepore [1] reject Incompleteness Arguments because in their view arguments of that kind aim at establishing a metaphysical conclusion about the existence of entities that might figure as constituents of propositions, like the property of being tall *simpliciter*, on the basis of psychological data. Psychological data, however, have no bearing on metaphysical issues. Cappelen and Lepore say that typically an incomplete argument amounts to the following claim:

> Consider the alleged proposition that P that some sentence S semantically expresses. Intuitively, the world can't just be P *simpliciter*. The world is neither P nor not P. There's no such thing as P's being the case *simpliciter*. And so, there is no such proposition. [1, p. 11]

Their presentation of incompleteness claims has unequivocally a metaphysical flavor. Cappelen and Lepore argue that those philosophers who resort to Incompleteness Arguments to support Contextualism are guilty of conflating metaphysical issues with linguistic ones. The data about speakers' dispositions to truth evaluate sentences in contexts might be revelatory about psychological facts and facts about communication but have no weight for metaphysical inquiries on what entities exist.

I claim that Cappelen and Lepore's criticism of Incompleteness Arguments reveals their misunderstanding of the nature of Incompleteness Arguments and consequently their underestimation of the real force of arguments of that kind. Consider Taylor's illustration of an incompleteness argument. Discussing the structure of the semantic content of utterances of (2):

> (2) It is raining.

Taylor says:

> [(2)] is missing no syntactic sentential constituent, nonetheless, it is semantically incomplete. The semantic incompleteness is manifest

to us as a felt inability to evaluate the truth value of an utterance of [(2)] in the absence of a contextually provided location (or range of locations). This felt need for a contextually provided location has its source, I claim, in our tacit cognition of the syntactically unexpressed argument place of the verb 'to rain'. [13, p. 61]

Leaving aside Taylor's own view about the semantics of the verb 'to rain', which goes along the lines of the Hidden Indexical Theory, Taylor's idea about incompleteness is that if a sentence gives rise to a *felt inability* to truth evaluate its utterances independently of contextual information then the sentence contains some context sensitive expressions. As said above, Cappelen and Lepore's criticism is that an argument such as Taylor's is to be rejected because psychological facts about how speakers feel about the truth evaluation of sentences have no bearing whatsoever on metaphysical questions about what entities exist.

4   The Gist of Incompleteness Arguments

I will not question the truth of Cappelen and Lepore's claim that psychological facts have no bearing on metaphysical questions. I hold instead that the truth of this claim is besides the point because an incompleteness claim is not a metaphysical claim on the existence of certain entities. Incompleteness Arguments do not provide evidence against the existence of certain entities that might figure as constituents of propositions but against the idea that such entities, if any, can be semantically associated with words as their semantic contents. An incompleteness claim is a significant claim for linguistic competence and theoretical considerations about linguistic competence do have consequences for semantics. For example, the conclusion of an incompleteness argument concerning the adjective 'tall' is not that the property of being tall *simpliciter* does not exist because speakers are unable to truth evaluate (1) independently of contextual information. We might agree with Cappelen and Lepore that the existence and possibly the account of the property of being tall *simpliciter* is a matter for metaphysicians not for philosophers of language. The conclusion of the incompleteness argument is that a semantic theory that assigns the property of being tall *simpliciter* to the adjective 'tall' as its semantic value is incompatible with any account of linguistic competence according to which to learn the meaning of an expression and to be competent in its use is to be able to use that expression as governed by a semantic norm. Such a semantic theory could hardly have any theoretical interest for an overall theory of language use and linguistic behaviour. I shall elaborate on this point.

Cappelen and Lepore argue that the felt inability to truth evaluate a simple sentence like 'Bradley is tall' constitutes no positive argument against the view that the property of being tall *simpliciter* exists and is the semantic content of the adjective 'tall'. On the one hand, Cappelen and Lepore acknowledge that the question of giving an analysis of the property of being tall *simpliciter* or an account of what makes something tall *simpliciter* is a difficult problem, but one for metaphysicians.

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On the other hand, Cappelen and Lepore [1, p. 164] hold that semanticists have no difficulty at all saying which proposition the simple sentence 'Bradley is tall' expresses: it is the proposition *that Bradley is tall*. Nor have semanticists any difficulty in specifying the truth conditions of the simple sentence 'Bradley is tall': *'Bradley is tall' is true if and only if Bradley is tall*.

I claim that Cappelen and Lepore's confidence in disquotational truth conditions betrays their underestimation of Incompleteness Arguments. A semantic theory for a language L aims to capture the semantic properties of the expressions of L. The relevant point is that a semantic theory is related to linguistic competence. This is so not only for those philosophers who hold that a semantic theory is a theoretical representation of the implicit knowledge of the language that competent speakers possess. It is so also for those philosophers who reject the view that a semantic theory is a theoretical representation of what competent speakers implicitly know.[9] Indeed, a semantic theory for L cannot be fully assessed in isolation from questions related to how L-expressions are bestowed with their semantic properties (or to how L-speakers acquire the implicit knowledge of such properties) and to what L-speakers typically do whenever they are regarded as competent in the use of L, i.e. whether the linguistic abilities they manifest count as governed by semantic norms. Suppose a semantic theory for, say, English contains a disquotational axiom like the following, which arguably captures what Cappelen and Lepore have in mind when they say that the semantic content of 'tall' is the property of being tall *simpliciter*:

> (A) For any object o, 'tall' applies in English to (is satisfied in English by) o if and only if o is tall.

It is theoretically significant for that semantic theory that an account of how the linguistic abilities of competent speakers count as governed by axiom (A) be available. It is also theoretically significant that an account of how it comes that the word 'tall' has the semantic property of applying to all and only tall objects be available. If no such account is available, then there is evidence that the semantic theory is on a wrong track. As Michael Devitt [3, p. 52] says, semantic contents are not 'God given', but as conventions need to be established and sustained by regular uses. Words cannot have the semantic contents they have independently of the linguistic behavior of competent speakers. Otherwise, it remains a mystery

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[9]See, for example, Devitt [2, p. 93]: "What need explaining, basically, are the verbal parts of human behaviour. In explaining these, we must attribute certain properties (for example, *being true* and *referring to Socrates*) to the sounds and inscriptions produced, and certain other properties (for example, *understanding 'Socrates'*) to the people who produce those sounds and inscriptions". See also Devitt [4, p. 169]: "Linguistic competence is a mental state of a person, posited to explain his linguistic behaviour; it plays a key role – although not, of course, the only role – in *the production of* that behaviour. Linguistic symbols are the result of that behaviour; they are *the products of* the competence, its *outputs*...A theory of a part of the production of linguistic symbols is not a theory of the products, the symbols themselves. Of course, given the causal relation between competence and symbols we can expect a theory of the one to bear on a theory of the other. But that does not make the two theories identical".

to account for how words get associated with their semantic properties and how such associations are learned (or transmitted) by being exposed to linguistic practice. Conversely, a semantic theory that does not enable us to describe linguistic behaviour as subject to semantic norms is scarcely of any interest for an overall account of language use.

I claim that the gist of Incompleteness Arguments is not that certain entities do not exist, rather that such entities, if any, cannot be the semantic contents of words, because a semantic theory that assigns such entities to words as their semantic contents is incompatible with any plausible account of language learning and language understanding according to which by learning and understanding a language we learn and understand expressions as governed by semantic norms.

Consider one of Travis' [15] favorite examples. A speaker utters the sentence (3):

(3) The leaves are green.

speaking of a Japanese maple whose leaves are naturally russet but have been re-painted green. In a context of utterance in which the speaker talks with a photographer who looks for a green subject, the speaker is taken to tell the truth. In another context of utterance in which the speaker talks with a botanist who is interested in the natural color of the plant, the speaker is not taken to tell the truth. The point that an incompleteness argument brings out is that competent speakers feel unable to truth evaluate (3) independently of the information available in the context of utterance. This result means that the linguistic abilities that are required for the mastery of the word 'green' cannot be construed as governed by the semantic norm expressed by a disquotational axiom like:

(B) For any object o, 'green' applies in English to (is satisfied in English by) o if and only if o is green.

The reason why linguistic competence cannot be so construed is that the linguistic practice is never guided by such axiom. As a matter of fact, axiom (B) states conditions of application for 'green' that competent speakers are never able to track as testified by their felt inability to truth evaluate sentences like (3) independently of contextual information. To put it another way, axiom (B) specifies the semantic content of the word 'green'. Hence, axiom (B) states a norm about the use of 'green': it is correct to apply 'green' to all and only green objects. Incompleteness Arguments show that the norm that axiom (B) states is not applicable, because nobody in the linguistic community is able to tell when it applies and when it does not. Since norms must be applicable, the conclusion follows that axiom (B) states no norms at all, and therefore cannot be a semantic axiom. Axiom (B) does not play the normative role that is constitutive of semantic axioms.

The consequence of Cappelen and Lepore's view is more radical and damaging than the view held by externalists like Putnam [12]. Externalists hold that semantic properties are objective in the sense that words have their semantic properties

independently of explicit knowledge and discriminating abilities that speakers and the linguistic community as a whole possess. In 1750, 'water' in Twin Earthian English referred to XYZ even though nobody knew the chemical composition of the liquid stuff on Twin Earth and nobody could discriminate XYZ from H_2O. Externalism has the consequence that semantic norms might elude even the most expert speakers of the community. In 1750, nobody could have been in a position to correct an application of Twin Earthian 'water' to H_2O. Had a Twin Earthian speaker talked to an Earthian speaker, they would have misunderstood each other, one speaking of XYZ and the other of H_2O. As Marconi [11, p. 88] remarks, that would be a misunderstanding of a peculiar kind since nobody in the linguistic community could have pointed it out.

It is not my interest to take side with externalists and defend their view from Marconi's objections. Rather, my interest is to highlight the difference between externalism and the radical position that issues from Cappelen and Lepore's view.

Externalists hold that semantic properties are unaffected by explicit knowledge and discriminating abilities. Semantic properties are determined by certain factual, causal connections to the world. Externalists, however, do have an account of how words are bestowed with their semantic properties, which basically rests on baptismal ceremonies and, above all, multiple groundings. A word has the reference it has because most significant referential practices, as a fact of the matter, are related to that reference. This means that there are favorable – contextually favorable, not epistemically favorable – circumstances in which Twin Earthian competent speakers believe, and believe it correctly, that the conditions for the application of words are satisfied. This confers an axiom like, say,

(C) 'water' refers in Twin Earthian English to XYZ.

its normative role, although it might elude even the most expert speakers in the whole community, when they are not in a contextual favorable position (say a Twin Earthian has been transported to Earth). Therefore, there are favorable circumstances in which Twin Earthian competent speakers are disposed to truly assert to 'that is water' and to correctly truth evaluate other sentences containing the word 'water'.

Incompleteness Argument show that competent speakers are never disposed to truth evaluate sentences containing certain words independently of contextual information. For example, there are no circumstances in which competent speakers are disposed to truth evaluate 'Bradley in tall' independently of contextual information. This means that competent speakers are never able to track instances of the property of being tall *simpliciter*. This fact prevents any semantic theory from ascribing the property of being tall *simpliciter* to the adjective 'tall" as its semantic content by means of an axiom like (A). Such a semantics is not compatible with any account of how the adjective 'tall' is bestowed with its semantic property and of how such semantic property exerts a normative role on the linguistic practice.

5 Against Cappelen and Lepore's Final Rejoinder

Cappelen and Lepore [1, pp. 164-5] take into consideration this form of resistance to their rejection of Incompleteness Arguments. They respond that semantics is not in the business of telling what the world is like. Therefore semantics is not in the business of telling whether, say, the utterance of the sentence 'Uma Thurman has red eyes' is true or not. The fact that a semantic theory for a language L does not instruct L-speakers to ascertain the truth value of L-sentences is not a defect of the semantic theory. Cappelen and Lepore argue that it is trivial that a proposition with a determinate truth value is expressed by a felicitous utterance of the sentence '100,000 years ago an insect moved over this spot' although we have no idea whether it is true or not and no idea how to find out whether it is true or not. Thinking otherwise, they say, would be to indulge in verificationism.

I find Cappelen and Lepore's response mistaken. The accusation of verificationism misses the target. I agree that theorists, who do not adhere to verificationism, do not identify the knowledge of the proposition expressed by the utterance of a sentence with the knowledge of a method for its verification. Theorists, who are not verificationists, agree that competent speakers fully understand the proposition expressed by the utterance of the sentence '100,000 years ago an insect moved over this spot' without being in a position to verify whether it is true or not. On the other hand, also theorists who are not verificationists cannot ignore questions as to how that sentence got the content it has and what linguistic abilities distinguish people who understand it from people who do not. Notice that I am not claiming that it is a task for semantics to find out answers to those questions. My claim is that a semantic theory must be compatible with an account that provides such answers.

A theorist, who is not a verificationist nor a semantic antirealist and takes the sentence '100,000 years ago an insect moved over this spot' to depict an epistemically inaccessible state of affairs, will not hold that the understanding of such sentence is manifested by the capacity to tell whether its truth conditions are satisfied or not. Nor can the understanding of the sentence '100,000 years ago an insect moved over this spot' be traced back to the ability to explicitly formulate the disquotational truth condition *'100,000 years ago an insect moved over this spot' is true if and only if 100,000 years ago an insect moved over this spot (over the demonstrated spot)*, for the simple reason that many competent speakers are not able to do so. One option left is to say that a criterion for understanding is that a speaker understands the sentence '100,000 years ago an insect moved over this spot' only if he understands the single expressions that form the sentence and the syntactic structure of the sentence. The question arises as to how the understanding of the single expressions is manifested.

It has been argued[10] that linguistic competence has two components, an inferential one and a referential one. The inferential component consists in the ability to manage a network of connections among words. For example, we recognize

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[10]See Marconi [11].

as competent speakers those people who manifest the disposition to make an inference like that from 'A is an insect' to 'A is an animal', or are able to give a definition of 'insect', or are able to find a synonym for 'insect', or are able to retrieve the word 'insect' from its definition etc. The referential component consists in the ability to map words to the world. For example, the disposition to give the assent to 'that is an insect' in presence of an insect or the ability to obey an order like 'point at an insect'. This account of linguistic competence together with the arguably shared assumption that competence in the use of the expression 'insect' requires both referential and inferential abilities demands that an axiom like (D)

> (D) For any object o, 'insect' applies in English to (is satisfied in English by) o if and only if o is an insect.

assign the expression 'insect' a kind as its semantic content such that there must be cases, at least in favorable contextual conditions, in which competent speakers believe – and believe it correctly – that it is instantiated. Otherwise, whatever the linguistic competence in the use of 'insect' turn out to be, it is detached from the normative role of axiom (D). The result is that we get a semantics that is useless for an overall theory of language use as it prevents us from accounting for linguistic practice as governed by semantic norms.

This is the constraint that a theory of linguistic competence poses on semantics: the linguistic practice in the use of a language L needs to be taken as manifestation of the understanding of L-expressions as governed by semantic norms. The point raised by Incompleteness Arguments is that a semantic theory which employs axioms like (A) and (B) violates such constraint. The Incompleteness Arguments trigger the intuition that speakers are never able to believe that the property of being tall *simpliciter* or the property of being green *simpliciter* are instantiated, i.e. that the conditions for the correct application of 'tall' and 'green' as captured by (A) and (B) are satisfied, because competent speakers have never beliefs about the truth value of simple sentences like 'Bradley is tall' or 'the leaves are green' independently of contextual information. The linguistic practice of competent speakers shows that their understanding of 'tall' and 'green' is not governed by axioms like (A) and (B).

Analogous considerations show that learning the mastery of 'tall' and 'green' cannot amount to learning the meaning of words as governed by axioms like (A) and (B). Arguably, we pick up the meaning of expressions like 'tall' and 'green' by being exposed to assertions of simple sentences like 'Bradley is tall' and 'the leaves are green'. Incompleteness Arguments show that assertions of simple sentences like 'Bradley is tall' and 'the leaves are green' cannot be expression of the belief that Bradley is tall *simpliciter* and the leaves are green *simpliciter*, i.e. the belief that the conditions for the application of 'tall' and 'green' as captured by axioms (A) and (B) to Bradley and to the leaves are satisfied, because competent speakers have never beliefs about the truth value of those sentences independently of contextual information. If the assertions of simple sentences like 'Bradley is tall' and 'the leaves are green' are not expression of the belief that the conditions for the

application of 'tall' and 'green', as captured by axioms (A) and (B), to Bradley and to the leaves are satisfied, whatever one learns through the exposure to assertions of that kind is not mastery of words as governed by semantic norms expressed by axioms (A) and (B).

6   Conclusions

I argued that the conclusions of Incompleteness Arguments are not that certain entities do not exist. That is a metaphysical question that metaphysicians are called to answer. Contrary to Cappelen and Lepore' view, and no matter what metaphysicians are willing to say, Incompleteness Arguments show that even if one acknowledges the existence of certain entities, like the properties of being tall *simpliciter* and being green *simpliciter*, such entities cannot be the contents that a semantic theory associates with words because a semantic theory so construed is incompatible with theoretical considerations about language learning and language understanding.

One can agree with Cappelen and Lepore to keep issues in metaphysics apart from issues in philosophy of language and reject Dummett's thesis (i). One can also agree with Cappelen and Lepore to reject Dummett's thesis (ii) and its constitutive constraint that linguistic competence must *constitute* implicit knowledge of semantics, which leads to semantic antirealism. However, one cannot go too far, as Cappelen and Lepore do, in detaching linguistic competence from semantics. There is a constraint that a theory of linguistic competence poses on semantics: the linguistic practice needs to be taken as manifestation of the understanding of words and as the basis for the learning of their meaning insofar as they are words governed by semantic norms. If semantic norms are not suitable for such an account of linguistic competence, then the semantic theory that specifies them is on the wrong track. I take this result, which points at an intimate connection between linguistic competence and semantics, to be part of Dummett's legacy in philosophy of language.

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