

Handout #8: Fodor's Language of Thought

1. Propositional Attitudes

We spent some time discussing the qualitative or experiential aspects of the mind (i.e. **qualia**) and Jackson's argument that we cannot explain facts about qualia or "what it is like" to have certain experiences without a new theory (unlike biology or computer science) which treats qualia as epiphenomenal. We then returned to Descartes' preoccupation with belief, doubt and thought when addressing Davidson's model of how our beliefs and desires affect our actions in the absence of strict psychophysical laws.

Davidson's article raised the question of how folk psychology is best integrated with neuroscience and with the cognitive sciences more generally. Those, like Davidson, who think that folk psychology cannot be effectively integrated with neuroscience focus on the more abstract, qualitatively thin mental states posited by folk psychology: beliefs, intentions, plans and so on. But Fodor has a proposal for how beliefs and desires might be regarded as empirical posits justified by scientists motivated by real explanatory needs that cannot be met by biology, chemistry and physics alone.

Note that thoughts (and related states) have what is often called "aboutness." We can think *about* things, hold beliefs *about* things, and form intentions *about* certain prospective actions (even when these things do not exist and our plans have not yet been realized). Thoughts and beliefs in particular have a related property: they can be true or false. The conditions under which a given belief would be true are called that belief's *truth conditions*. (For example, the truth conditions for your belief that snow is white are those conditions under which snow would be white. The truth conditions for the ancients' belief that the Earth is flat are those conditions under which the Earth would be flat.)

There are interesting questions about the relation between the two puzzling aspects of the mind described above: (a) Do all thoughts have qualia? (b) Are thoughts individuated by their qualitative aspects? (c) Are qualitative states **representational** states in the way that thoughts are? A belief can be true or false; can a sensation or an experience?

2. Propositional Attitudes

Beliefs, thoughts, desires, wants, intentions and fears are often called "propositional attitudes." This reflects a certain theoretical view of them; e.g. the claim that believing that grass is green consists in adopting **the attitude of belief** toward **the proposition that grass is green**.

Questions: (1) What is the evidence for this claim? (2) Can you give a similar analysis for intending to write home? (That is, when you intend to write home what is your attitude and toward which proposition is this attitude directed?)

3. Fodor's Conditions

Fodor claims that the following five conditions must be met by any successful account of the propositional attitudes:

(1) They are relations. ‘John believes that grass is green’ is true iff the entity denoted by ‘John’ stands in the *believes* relation to the entity denoted by ‘that grass is green’.

Evidence for (1): (a) it looks right; (b) we can existentially generalize by replacing ‘that grass is green’ with a bound pronoun as in ‘There is something that John believes’; (c) alternative theories are implausible (e.g. the “fusion theory” makes language non-compositional and impossible to learn).

(2) We can say what we believe. More precisely, our account should validate:

- a. John said that grass is green.
 - b. Mary believes the thing that John said.
- Therefore,
- c. Mary believes that grass is green.

(3) Substitution Failure

- (1) Lois believes that Superman is brave.
 - (2) Superman is Clark Kent.
- But, (3) It is not the case that Lois believes that Clark Kent is brave.

(4) Content Matters for Causation of Action

John writes home **because** he wants his mom to be happy and he believes that she will be happy if he writes home. On Fodor’s causal model of ordinary (or “folk”) psychological explanation of this sort, John’s belief and desire **cause** his action and they do so because of the relation between the two **propositions** or **contents** in question: (a) the proposition that John’s mom is happy, and (b) the proposition that John’s mom is happy if John writes home. A very different action would have resulted if the content of John’s desire were that he have some ice cream and the content of his belief were the proposition that there is ice cream in the refrigerator.

(5) Beliefs have the truth conditions and logical form of the sentences we use to express them:

- (a) ‘Grass is green’ is true under exactly those conditions (or in those possible worlds) under which John’s belief that grass is green is true.
- (b) ‘Grass is green’ is true iff the kind of stuff picked out by our non-deviant use of ‘grass’ has the property expressed or indicated by standard use of ‘is green’. John’s belief that grass is green is true iff the kind of stuff picked out by ‘grass’ has the property expressed by ‘is green’.

Thus, insofar as: (i) beliefs share truth conditions with certain sentences, and (ii) sentences have the truth conditions they do because of the meanings of their constituents, and the way that these constituents are assembled, we have reason to believe (iii) that beliefs are built up out of parts in the way that their “corresponding” sentences are.

(6) Any theory of propositional attitudes must be “empirically plausible.”

4. Arguments for the Language of Thought Theory

A. Carnap's Theory: (Where S is a subject and 'x' is replaceable by any declarative sentence) **S believes that x iff S is disposed to assert 'x'**. (Here quotes are used as corner quotes.)

An instance: John believes that grass is green iff John is disposed to assert 'grass is green'.

Question: Does Carnap's theory meet Fodor's conditions (1)-(6)? (On (5) see Fodor's discussion of the relation between the complexity of language and thought.)

Problems for Carnap's Theory

(a) The account is overly behavioristic; it fails to account for the holism of the mental.

A fix: keep Carnap's theory of the object of belief (i.e. sentences) but drop his behavioristic account of the attitude of belief (i.e. as a disposition to assert sentences).

(b) The account individuates beliefs too finely; e.g. it says that when John believes that Mary bit Bill and Sally believes that Bill was bitten by Mary, Sally and John have different beliefs. (Intuitively, they don't.)

(c) It entails that speakers of different languages cannot have the same beliefs, desires etc.

(d) It entails that non-human animals cannot have beliefs or any other propositional attitudes.

(e) It doesn't allow for inexpressible beliefs.

(f) How can this view account for language learning? Don't we already need beliefs about, say, the correspondence of vocalizations of the word 'dog' and the presence of dogs if we're to come to believe that 'dog' is properly applied to all and only dogs? But how could we already have beliefs about the correlation of dogs and 'dog' if believing that dogs exist is a matter of being related by belief to 'dogs exist'?

5. Fodor's LOT

Fodor's Solution: We can satisfy conditions (1)-(6) and avoid problems (a)-(f) by making the sentences internal or mental. They are structures in an Internal Representation System where this system is composed of innate elements.

Questions: (A) Does Fodor's theory actually satisfy (1)-(6)? (B) Does it avoid problems (a)-(f)? (C) Does Fodor's theory face any new problems? (For example, how plausible are his innateness claims?)