

## Fodor on Concepts and Modes of Presentation<sup>1</sup>

While Jerry Fodor is well known for his criticisms of non-atomistic theories of concepts and intentional content, it has recently been argued that Fodor's theory of concepts is ultimately subject to precisely the same objection that he finds fatal to holistic theories.<sup>2</sup> I'll argue here that while there is a way for Fodor to avoid this charge, the same strategy can be employed by defenders of some, if not most, of the holistic theories that he attacks.

### 1. Fodor's attack on holism

Holistic theories of meaning, most prominently inferential role semantics, have frequently been criticized for violating what Fodor calls the "publicity constraint", namely, the idea that "concepts are *public*; they're the sorts of things lots of people can, and do, *share*."<sup>3</sup> Concepts seem as if they have to be public for intentional explanation to work, since, for instance, "If everybody else's concept WATER is different from mine, then it is literally true that only I have ever wanted a drink of water, and the intentional generalization 'Thirsty people seek water' applies only to me."<sup>4</sup> Holistic theories of content violate this constraint because, if what we mean by a term is determined by *all* of the beliefs/inferences we associate with it, then it is widely taken to follow that no two people will mean the same thing by any of their terms, indeed, no single person will mean the same thing by any of their terms over time.<sup>5</sup>

To see why, consider my wife and I, along with our various beliefs about dogs:

	My wife		Me
1a.	"Lassie is a dog"	1b.	"Lassie is a dog"
2a.	"Dogs are good pets"	2b.	"Dogs are <i>not</i> good pets"
3a.	"Dogs are animals"	3b.	"Dogs are animals"
4a.	"Poodles are dogs"	4b.	"Poodles are dogs"
5a.	"Dogs eat filth"	5b.	"Dogs eat filth"

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<sup>2</sup> In particular, the version of this objection found in Aydede 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Fodor 1998, p. 28.

<sup>4</sup> Fodor 1998, p. 29.

<sup>5</sup> But see Jackman 1999, 2003, 2005.

According to inferential role semantics, in virtue of our disagreeing about #2, my wife and I mean different things by "dog". Indeed, in virtue of this we mean something different by *all* our terms. For instance, since I will infer that something is an 'animal' from the assumption that it is a 'dog'<sub>Me</sub>, while she will infer that something is an 'animal' from the assumption that it is a 'dog'<sub>My\_wife</sub>, we ultimately mean different things by "animal", and so on, until no two terms in our languages mean quite the same thing.

Inferential Role theorists who accept some robust analytic/synthetic distinction can avoid this charge (claiming the meaning of "dog" is reflected in beliefs like 3 & 4, but not 2 or 5). Fodor takes such an appeal to the analytic/synthetic distinction to be independently implausible, and in any case, it isn't one that is available to the anyone who still styles himself or herself as a *holist*. Consequently, the most popular response for holists to this worry is to suggest that while inferential role semantics can't underwrite any notion of content *identity*, it can still work with a notion of content *similarity* that does all the work that identity was meant to do.<sup>6</sup> For instance, while my wife and I may not mean *exactly* the same thing by "dog" what we mean is very close, and this similarity is enough for us to communicate effectively and for me to explain her behavior around dogs in terms of her 'dog'-beliefs. We may disagree about #2, but our agreement about the rest is enough to allow us to communicate, and it is against this general agreement that our disagreement about #2 becomes intelligible to us.

Fodor takes such appeals to similarity to be misguided, and he insists that, on closer examination, they are not really available to the inferential role theorist because "it's quite unclear ... how the notion of similarity that such a semantics would require might be unquestionbeggingly developed."<sup>7</sup> For instance, inferential role theorists can't say that my 'dog' concept and my wife's 'dog' concept are similar, in virtue of us each endorsing inferences/sharing beliefs 3, 4 & 5, since (given that we don't

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<sup>6</sup> Fodor characterizes this position as representing a "widespread consensus" held by about a "zillion" cognitive scientists and half that many philosophers (Fodor 1998, pp. 30, 34). To take a typical example from Harman:

Sameness of meaning from one symbol system to another is a similarity relation rather than an identity relation in the respect that sameness of meaning is not transitive ... I am inclined to extend the point to concepts, thoughts, and beliefs ... The account of sameness of content appeals to the best way of translating between two systems, where goodness of translation has to do with preserving certain aspects of usage, with no appeal to any more 'robust' notion of content or meaning identity ... [There's no reason why] the resulting notion of sameness of content should fail to satisfy the purposes of intentional explanation. (Harman 1993, pp, 169-79, as quoted in Fodor 1998 p. 30.)

<sup>7</sup> Fodor 1998, p.30.

mean the same thing by either "dog" and "animal") they aren't in a position to claim that, say, 3a is the *same* inference as 3b. As Fodor puts it:

The trouble, in a nutshell, is that all the obvious construals of *similarity of beliefs* (in fact, all the construals that I've heard of) take it to involve *partial overlap* of beliefs. But this treatment breaks down if the beliefs that are in the overlap are themselves construed as similar but not identical. It looks as though a robust notion of content similarity *can't but* presuppose a correspondingly robust notion of content identity. (Fodor 1998, p. 32.)

In short, "all the theories of content that offer a robust construal of conceptual similarity do so by presupposing a correspondingly robust notion of concept identity."<sup>8</sup>

## 2. Atomism and Modes of Presentation

Since he takes the objection above to be fatal to holistic inferential role theories, Fodor proposes that "the theory of concepts ought to be atomistic"<sup>9</sup> and that the content of a term be identified with that object or set of object to which it bears a naturalistically specifiable causal/nomological relation. As he puts it "Meaning is information (more or less)" and "A representation R expresses the property P in virtue of its being a law that things that are P cause tokenings of R (in some still to be specified circumstances C)."<sup>10</sup>

Of course, informational accounts of content of this sort treat content as "constituted, exclusively, by symbol-world relations"<sup>11</sup> so that any two terms that have the same extension will have the same meaning ("if meaning is information, then coreferential representations must be synonyms").<sup>12</sup> If two terms, say "water" and "H<sub>2</sub>O" are related in the relevant lawlike way to the same substance, then the two terms have the same meaning. Consequently, like anyone hoping to give an account of psychological explanation using an extensional theory of content, Fodor must give an account of those 'Frege-cases' in which what seems like two different concepts have the same extension. Fodor think that this is possible once we recognize that concepts are not exhausted by their contents.

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<sup>8</sup> Fodor 1998, p.34. See also Fodor and LePore 1992, p.22: "all the robust notions of content similarity ... *presuppose* a robust notion of belief identity and hence are themselves incompatible with holism if robust belief identity is".

<sup>9</sup> Fodor 1998, p.vii.

<sup>10</sup> Fodor 1998, p. 12. For the details of Fodor's version of the informational approach, see Fodor 1987, 1990.

<sup>11</sup> Fodor 1998, p. 14.

<sup>12</sup> Fodor 1998, p.12.

Given my view that content is information, I can't ... afford to agree that the content of the concept H<sub>2</sub>O is different from the content of the concept WATER. *But I am entirely prepared to agree that they are different concepts.* In effect, I'm assuming that coreferential concepts are *ipso facto* synonyms and conceding that, since they are, *content* individuation can't be all that there is to *concept* individuation. (Fodor 1998, p.15.)

Fodor's solution to this problem is in some respects like Frege's. In addition to its extension, each term has a 'mode of presentation' by which we have cognitive access to that extension. However, Fodor argues that "Frege's theoretical architecture needs to be explicitly psychologized",<sup>13</sup> so that rather than objective senses that exist independently of anyone's brain states, "Whatever distinguishes coextensive concepts is *ipso facto* 'in the head' ... available to be a proximal cause (/effect) of mental processes."<sup>14</sup> Consequently, Fodor individuates concepts in terms of both (1) their nomologically determined *content* and (2) the particular *vehicle* in one's head that bears that content (in his case, a mentalese term in one's 'language of thought'). As he puts it:

The Frege program needs something that is both in the head and of the right [causal] kind to distinguish coreferential concepts, and the Mates cases suggest that whatever is able to distinguish coreferential concepts is apt for syntactic individuation. Put all this together and it does rather suggest that modes of presentations are syntactically structured mental particulars. (Fodor, 1998, p. 39)

On such an account of concepts, both elements in their individuation are explained naturalistically, and the syntactic finess of grain gives them the ability to deal with (some of) the Frege intuitions, in spite of the extensional account of content itself.

### 3. Are 'Modes of Presentation' public?<sup>15</sup>

Still, it's far from obvious that Fodor's account of concepts as a <content, vehicle> ordered pair satisfies his own requirement that concepts be *public*. To share a concept, we must not only have concepts with the same content, but those contents must be attached to vehicles of the same *type*, and Fodor seems to propose that these types be individuated *functionally*. As he puts it: "If ... MOPs [Modes of Presentation] are in the head, then they can be proximal mental causes and are, to that extent, apt for functional individuation. If MOPs are both in the head and functionally individuated, *then a MOP's identity can be constituted by what happens when you entertain it*" (1988, p. 20). However, it is just such an appeal to functional individuation that raises worries

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<sup>13</sup> Fodor 1998, p. 38.

<sup>14</sup> Fodor 1998, p. 15, emphasis removed.

<sup>15</sup> The criticisms of Fodor in this section can be found in Aydede 1998 & Rennard 2004.

about how publicity is to be accounted for. The potential for such problems with Fodor's approach has been stressed by Murat Aydede who argues:

Fodor seems to opt for a functional individuation of vehicle tokens ... In other words, the interpersonal type-identity of the second element in 2-tuples is determined functionally. But if this is really his intention ... how could *he* be thinking that vehicle tokens can be functionally typed across different heads given that it was actually the unavailability of this method that had led him to conclude that there was no non-holistic type-individuation of functional/computational roles. It was precisely this consequence that made concepts/contents not public on [Functional Role Semantics], according to Fodor ... If, as Fodor believes, there is no robust interpersonally shareable functional/computational roles, then there is no non-semantic interpersonal type-individuation of vehicle tokens on the basis of vehicles' functional roles. (Aydede 1998, p. 291)

In short, "If Fodor opts for functional typing of vehicle tokens across heads ... then contrary to his advertisement, his own account of concepts fails to satisfy [the publicity constraint]."<sup>16</sup> While Fodor is happy to apply the publicity constraint against others, it seems that, ultimately, he violates it himself.

One might, in light of this, suggest that Fodor misspoke himself when he claimed that *concepts* had to be public. Perhaps he meant only that their *contents* had to be public and that there was no corresponding publicity requirement for concepts themselves. However, this approach is really only plausible if what motivates the publicity constraint, the requirements of psychological explanation, only applies at the level of contents rather than concepts; that is to say, it is only plausible if all psychological explanation is 'broad'.<sup>17</sup> Aydede finds this sort of response unacceptable because it entails that "concepts, strictly speaking, turn out *not* to be the kind of things we attribute to people in the explanation and prediction of their behavior, including verbal behavior."<sup>18</sup> Not only is this "anathema to contemporary cognitive psychology"<sup>19</sup> but it also

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<sup>16</sup> Aydede 1998, p. 292.

<sup>17</sup> As Aydede puts it:

[Fodor] can consistently maintain that concepts are, *strictly speaking*, not public, but since psychological explanations are given in terms of broad content properties ... making concepts not interpersonally shareable does not pose any threat to a scientific intentional psychology. In other words, to the extent to which vehicles of content exhibit variations in different heads, to that extent concepts will exhibit variation, but this hardly matters as long as intentional psychological explanations are all broad." (Aydede 1998, p. 292)

<sup>18</sup> Aydede 1998, p. 292. Though see Schneider 2007 for an argument that the Publicity Constraint seems motivated both by wanting concepts to serve in communication and needing them for psychological explanation, but (1) communication can be explained in terms of *content* identity even if concepts are not shared, and (2) psychological explanation (at least in cognitive science) may not require that concepts themselves be shared, since the laws may be "MOP-neutral" in that they have a general form such as "If X wants Y and thinks that doing Z will achieve Y, then, all else being equal, X will do Z" which may quantify over MOPs, but not over MOP-types in a way that a generalization that would apply to me would not apply to my wife.

<sup>19</sup> Aydede 1998, p. 292.

requires that our understanding of beliefs involved in Frege cases ultimately be non-semantic, referring implicitly to how agents beliefs are implemented rather than to the contents of the beliefs themselves, so that "you don't get content explanations of cases where the character of a creatures behavior depends on specifics of its MOP."<sup>20</sup> Aydede points out, however, that if one wants one's account of concepts play a role in a account of ordinary psychological explanation, this is a substantial bullet to bite.

If Fodor is right about the Frege cases, it is a mystery how the folk could be so at ease and successful in their explanation. Certainly, there seem to be robust generalizations involving interpersonal Frege cases. For instance, people feel safer when they believe that Superman is present and act accordingly. State this generalization with 'Clark Kent', it becomes false. How do the folk manage to get this if Fodor is right? The puzzle is that if such generalizations make essential reference to people's vehicles, then on Fodor's framework, this should be a mystery, since there is no method of typing vehicle tokens across people: a broad semantic account is out in Frege cases, but so are the physical and functional accounts on Fodor's view. (Aydede 1998, p. 293)

It might seem then, that Fodor's initial intuition that concepts should be public was, after all, justified, and that it is a real problem for Fodor's theory of concepts if he can't allow concepts (and not just contents), to figure in psychological explanations.

#### 4. Similarity and modes of presentation

Fortunately for Fodor, there is a fairly straightforward response to this criticism that, on his account, concepts are not public. Namely, while it may be true that none of us have precisely the same dog-concepts, our concepts are still *similar*, and this similarity is enough to satisfy the requirements of psychological explanation that originally motivated the publicity constraint. As Fodor himself admits, "for all I know ... it may be that every powerful intentional generalization is of the form 'If  $x$  has a belief similar to  $P$ , then ...' rather than the form 'If  $x$  believes that  $P$ , then ...'."<sup>21</sup> Because of this, Fodor can argue that I can explain my wife's and other peoples' dog-related behavior in terms of their 'dog'-concepts because these concepts are very similar to mine. For instance, my wife and I have similar 'dog' concepts because we both endorse the inferences /beliefs embodied in 3, 4 & 5 and only disagree about 2, resulting in our 'dog'-MOPs being very similar.

However, such a response might seem more than a little disingenuous on Fodor's part given that he made it very clear that such a response was inadequate, if not ultimately incoherent, when the

<sup>20</sup> Fodor, personal communication quoted in Aydede 1998, p. 293.

<sup>21</sup> Fodor 1998, p. 34. His problem with similarity is not that it can't serve in psychological explanations, but rather that it can't take the place of content identity because it presupposes it.

inferential role theorist tried to make it in the face of Fodor's own criticisms. If appeals to similarity make Fodor "grind his teeth" when other people make them,<sup>22</sup> why should one think that Fodor would be willing to make one himself? Nevertheless, this tension within the position I'm suggesting that Fodor adopt is only apparent, since Fodor has available to him resources to explain concept similarity that were not available to the pure inferential role theorist.

In particular, for Fodor, in spite of the difference in their modes of presentation, 3a & 3b are still inferences/beliefs that have the *same* content. Our 'dog' concepts are different, but their *contents* are still identical. Because of this, Fodor can hold on to his assumption that similarity presupposed identity, but since he is talking only about *concept* similarity, and still has a robust notion of *content* identity, his objections to the inferential role theorist do not apply to his own account. Typing concepts functionally while preserving some notion of publicity is difficult if functional roles are *all* that one has to work with, but the informational contents in terms of which contents are individuated provide fixed points against which one can say that particular MOPs have similar functional roles.

## 5. Sharing the Response

Nevertheless, while this sort of response is available to Fodor in a way that it is not to the theorist who thinks of concepts *purely* in terms of their inferential roles, one should note that it is available to any holist who allows that, as a matter of fact, our words have extensions and our sentences have truth conditions. Once these are in place, similarity of concepts can be explained in terms of the overlap in beliefs with the same truth conditions even if the contents are not individuated in terms of such truth conditions.

For instance, suppose that one has say, a theory of content where each term had a 'narrow' content was identical with its inferential role, and an extension (whether or not such extension counted as a 'wide' content) which was determined either by that inferential role (as with 'descriptivist' accounts of reference and their successors)<sup>23</sup> or some other way (the term's causal history, social convention,

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<sup>22</sup> Fodor 1998, p. 34.

<sup>23</sup> Such accounts avoid "the nasty question: *What keeps the two notions of content stuck together?*" (Fodor and LePore 1992, p. 170.) For instance, a Davidsonian meaning theory can be understood as taking a term's truth conditional content to be determined (through the principle of charity) by the 'wide' conceptual roles of the terms involved. Davidson's semantics (i.e.: his account of the content of particular terms) is atomistic and extensional, while his metasemantics (i.e.: his account of how these terms get the particular contents they have) is holistic. (For a more

etc.). On such an account, one could explain the similarity two terms' *narrow* contents in terms of the overlap of the associated beliefs identified in terms of their *truth conditions* (whether or not such truth conditions were counted as *wide* contents).

## 6. Conclusion

It seems, then, that Fodor can avoid being subject to his own master argument, but this is largely because his master argument turns out to be much easier to avoid than he had originally thought. It still may be telling against some extreme versions of inferential role semantics,<sup>24</sup> but other holistic theories against which the argument was originally applied, are able to avoid it in just the way that Fodor can.

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extended discussion of this, see Jackman 2005.) Even if a concept is identified as an ordered pair consisting of the term's extension and inferential role (one given by the theory of truth for the speaker's language, the other by the theory of belief for the speaker.), the Davidsonian can explain concept similarity in much the way Fodor does (i.e.: my wife and I have similar dog concepts because we endorse 'dog'-inferences/have dog-beliefs that have the *same* truth conditions).

Of course, Davidson wouldn't consider these beliefs to make up a separate "narrow" content, but the way that the theory of belief is connected to the theory of truth in his account can still be used by someone who wants their to be a role for "narrow" contents. With both Davidson and Fodor, you can have content *identity* available to explain communication, and something like concept *similarity* for explanation. By contrast, someone who takes there to be narrow contents will (on the assumption that content is what is communicated) need to explain communication in terms of something like similarity as well.

<sup>24</sup> Such as, for instance, Churchland 1986.

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