

## *Linguistic Understanding and Knowledge*

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Is linguistic understanding a form of knowledge? I clarify the question and then consider two natural forms a positive answer might take. I argue that, although some recent arguments fail to decide the issue, neither positive answer should be accepted. The aim is not yet to foreclose on the view that linguistic understanding is a form of knowledge, but to develop desiderata on a satisfactory successor to the two natural views rejected here.

### **1. Three Sorts of Understanding**

Consider attending to an utterance of a sentence in a language one knows. Perhaps one attends to the utterance with the aim of understanding it; or perhaps one's attention is simply drawn by the sound or gesture involved in its production.<sup>2</sup> Either way, one's attention will typically be repaid not only by one's perceiving the utterance, but also by one's becoming aware of a meaning that it expresses.

That commonplace description provokes questions. I've said that an aim of attending to an utterance can be to understand it. But I made no explicit mention of linguistic understanding in characterising the upshots of attending. Questions arise, then, as to the place of linguistic understanding in the sort of situation so characterised.<sup>3</sup> If we restrict ourselves to materials made available in the commonplace description, there are at least three options for so locating understanding.

( $\alpha$ ) Understanding an utterance = (a) being the subject of an episode of coming to understand the utterance—perhaps an episode in which one becomes aware of, or comes to know, the meaning of the utterance.

( $\beta$ ) Understanding an utterance = (b) being the subject of a state of understanding the utterance—perhaps a state of knowing that the utterance means *p*/the meaning of the utterance/what the utterance means.

( $\chi$ ) Understanding an utterance = (c) being the subject of a state of understanding utterances of that type, a state that is the (perhaps partial) source of (a) or (b)—perhaps a disposition to (a) or (b), an ability to (a) or (b), or a state of knowledge underwriting such a disposition or ability.

It's important to see that these options are not exclusive. Of course, nothing could be all of (a), (b), and (c). But the word 'understanding' might be polysemous, having uses corresponding to each of the options.<sup>4</sup> For purposes of this paper, I'll assume that that's true, that there are (at least) these three basic forms of understanding: (a) achievement-understanding—an episode in which one enters a state of understanding; (b) state-understanding—the outputs of episodes of achievement-understanding; and (c) ability-understanding—the source (or, more minimally, the habitual or dispositional) of episodes of achievement-understanding.<sup>5</sup>

Working backwards, then, one may ability-understand a sentence, say 'snow is white', and thereby be disposed, or able, to achieve understanding of utterances of that sentence—perhaps on the basis also of collateral knowledge or abilities. Sometimes one may be confronted with an utterance of a sentence one is disposed to understand without exercising one's disposition, perhaps because the sentence is difficult for one to parse. While one ability-understands the utterance, one has failed to achievement-understand an utterance of the sentence. Finally, when the utterance's meaning dawns on one—when one achieves understanding of it—one enters a state of understanding the utterance—a state of being aware of, or perhaps of knowing, the utterance's meaning. Occupancy of that state typically will be ephemeral, lasting only so long as one is presented with the utterance. But it plays a crucial role in underwriting any longer term replacement in memory.

I shall assume that the role of ability-understanding is best characterised, at least initially, in terms of its characteristic outputs: episodes of achievement-understanding. I shall also assume that the nature of those episodes, similarly with other achievements, is determined by their state outputs. The question I shall address concerns the nature of those state outputs: Are they states of knowledge of utterance meaning? I shall argue for a negative answer, at least with respect to two obvious forms that might be taken by an account of understanding given in terms of knowledge.

Since my question concerns the nature of state-understanding, rather than ability-understanding, it must be answered by appeal to personal level states. Moreover, those states must be of a sort able to interact with ordinary states of belief, knowledge, etc., and to play the same sort of role as those other states in shaping the subject's consciousness. For this reason, I shall not be considering the view that linguistic understanding resides in knowledge that is tacit—not

consciously accessible to its possessor, somewhat insulated from their other psychological states, and with content that is somewhat independent of the conceptual resources otherwise available to them. Whether or not a notion of this sort has a place in theorising about linguistic competence or its underpinnings—an issue on which I take no stand here<sup>6</sup>—it cannot provide a complete account of the states one enters on understanding utterances. As Michael Dummett puts the point in framing his analogue of our question about state-understanding—the so-called ‘delivery problem’:

A body of knowledge, however explicit, is obviously not continuously before our consciousness, being a store of items available, save when our memory betrays us, for use when needed. How the storage is effected is of no concern to philosophy: what matters to it is how each item is presented when summoned for use. When we ask in what kind of knowledge our understanding of our language consists, we are asking in what form it is delivered. (Dummett, 1991: 97)

What we seek in an account of state-understanding is an account of how such states can play a role in ordinary psychology, how occupying them can impact on the rational development of one’s cognitive economy. If states of understanding were states of tacit knowledge, then they might play an essential role in mediating transitions between ordinary psychological states. But from the subject’s perspective, those transitions would appear both to require mediation—since otherwise appeal to states of understanding would be redundant—and also to lack it—since they are unconscious of the intervening states. In what follows, we will be concerned exclusively with ordinary states of knowledge, albeit a sub-class of those states directed upon meanings.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Understanding and Propositional Knowledge

The most straightforward version of the view that understanding is a form of knowledge is the view that to understand an utterance is to know what the utterance means. And a plausible treatment of what it is to know what an utterance means is that it is to know—for some appropriate fact specified thus: the utterance means *p*—that the utterance means *p*.<sup>8</sup> Aside from the naturalness of the move from talk of understanding an utterance to talk of knowing what the utterance means, and thence to talk of propositional knowledge of meaning, this view has five main advantages.<sup>9</sup>

First, it is a minimal condition on a subject’s understanding an utterance that they entertain a propositional content that the utterance expresses.<sup>10</sup> But one cannot know that an utterance expresses the content that *p* without entertaining the content *p*. At least, that is so if one cannot entertain a content at second order—as when one entertains the proposition that someone believes that snow is white—without thereby entertaining that content at first order—so that one entertains the proposition that snow is white. So the first

advantage of the propositional account is that it ensures that that minimal condition on understanding is met.

Second, the propositional view of understanding guarantees that the subject appropriately connects the content they entertain on the basis of understanding with an utterance that expresses it. Someone who knows that an utterance means *p*, not only entertains the proposition *p*, but also—in taking the utterance to express that proposition—associates the entertaining with the utterance.<sup>11</sup>

Third, and related, the propositional view guarantees that the understood utterance and the content that it expresses are associated in fact as they are associated for the subject. Since propositional knowledge is factive, it is impossible to know that an utterance means *p* without the utterance meaning *p*. The view therefore follows ordinary judgement in refusing to allow that one who associates a wrong content with an utterance has thereby understood it.

Fourth, it should be agreed on all sides that understanding an utterance typically puts one in a position to know what it means. Related is the thought that understanding an utterance that means that *p* typically puts one in a position to acquire knowledge that *p* through inference based upon knowledge that the utterance is true.<sup>12</sup> Such facts about the epistemic power of typical cases of understanding should be explicable on the basis of a satisfactory account of understanding. The view that understanding is propositional knowledge of meaning underwrites such an explanation in a straightforward way. And it is not obvious that alternative views can underwrite such an explanation. For instance, the view that understanding supplies only tacit or unconscious knowledge of a premise intervening between knowledge, of an utterance which means that *p*, that it is true and knowledge that *p* would, at best, render the inference incomprehensible to those making it. It is anyway plausible that any view able to support such an explanation will share at least the second and third advantages of the propositional view.

The fifth advantage of the propositional knowledge view is relative to a particular view of propositional knowledge. Suppose that we follow Timothy Williamson, John McDowell, and others, in taking propositional knowledge to be a psychological attitude. That is, suppose we take it that one who knows *p* is thereby in a different psychological state from one who does not know *p*—but, say, merely believes *p*—and that that psychological difference has explanatory impact.<sup>13</sup> Then the view that understanding an utterance amounts to possession of propositional knowledge of what the utterance means might serve to bring utterance meaning within the purview of psychological explanation. It thus stands in contrast with a view according to which understanding amounts only to belief, or to any other world-independent state. Since a subject might believe that an utterance means *p* whether or not it does mean *p*, psychological explanations exhausted by appeal to such a notion would be insensitive to whether or not there are any facts about utterance meaning.<sup>14</sup> Appeal to meaning might retain explanatory power elsewhere, but not in

the sphere of speakers' psychology. The fifth advantage of the propositional knowledge view of understanding, then, is that it sponsors a role for meaning in psychological explanation.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the five advantages mentioned above, the propositional knowledge view faces serious challenges. It has been argued, for instance, that propositional knowledge of utterance meaning is insufficient for understanding. Merely being told what an utterance means by a trusted and knowledgeable informant might put one in a position to know what the utterance means. Yet it would appear not to put one in a position to understand the utterance (Peacocke, (1975); Fricker, (2003)).<sup>16</sup> However, even a successful argument to that effect would only show that understanding is not simply to be identified with propositional knowledge of utterance meaning. A natural successor hypothesis would be that understanding is but one particular form of propositional knowledge. On this view, understanding—perhaps in the company of seeing-that, remembering-that, etc.—is a determinate of the determinable: propositional knowledge.<sup>17</sup> A challenge facing the successor's defender is to explain the features of understanding that mark it out from other forms of propositional knowledge. But there is little reason to suppose that that challenge cannot be met.<sup>18</sup> Hence, this first form of argument may undermine the most primitive form of propositional knowledge view, but leaves more sophisticated versions intact.

More immediately threatening are arguments that propositional knowledge is not necessary for understanding. Three main forms of argument for this claim may be found in the literature.<sup>19</sup> First, it has been argued that understanding an utterance is compatible with the rational withholding of belief in the semantic appearances (Hunter, (1998); Pettit, (2002; 2005); Fricker, (2003)). Some sentences appear at first pass to be ungrammatical and devoid of content. So, for example, consider (1)–(3):

- (1) The horse raced past the barn fell.
- (2) Sheep sheep butt back butt.
- (3) John is too clever to expect us to catch.<sup>20</sup>

Utterances of each of (1)–(3) would present an initial appearance of uninterpretability. But further reflection can reveal to us that the sentences uttered are well formed and what utterances of them in fact mean. So, for example, (3) is properly construed as paraphrased by (4).

- (4) John is too clever (for an unspecified person) to expect us to catch (him, John).

(Notice that being told by someone whom you trust that (4) gives the meaning of (3) does not suffice for understanding an utterance of (3), so this

case provides some support for the claim that knowledge is insufficient for understanding. More generally, mere belief, or judgement, is insufficient for comprehension.)

Another sort of case is the so-called depth charge sentence in (5):

(5) No eye injury is too trivial to ignore.

This presents the illusion that it means that one should not ignore any eye injury, however trivial. Comparison with (6), however, reveals its true meaning.

(6) No bomb is too small to ban.

Just as (6) means that all bombs should be banned, however small, (5) means that eye injuries should always be ignored (at least on grounds of triviality).<sup>21</sup> Again, merely being told this by a trusted interlocutor need not induce comprehension, though it can help to initiate it. Finally, consider (7)-(9):

(7) The shopkeepers were unsatisfied by midnight.

(8) More people have been to France than I have.

(9) That's the first time that anyone sang to me like that before.<sup>22</sup>

Each of these strings presents the initial appearance of carrying a particular meaning. In fact, as further reflection can reveal, none of them is properly interpretable.

For present purposes, the importance of these and other such cases is that, having been exposed to them, it will in certain circumstances be rational to attempt to withhold belief in, or to disbelieve, the semantic appearances. So, for example, in a situation where such sentence façades are expected to be rife—a psycholinguistics lab, for example—it might be rational for you to disbelieve the initial semantic appearance of an utterance of (10):

(10) John is too clever to expect us to run

And such disbelief—or refusal to judge in favour of the semantic appearances—is perfectly compatible with retention of the appearances. Disbelief in such cases has little more tendency to dislodge the appearances here than it does in visual cases like the Müller-Lyer. In fact, in this case, you would likely be wrong: (10) can mean what it seems to. But as with the deliverance of paradigmatic perceptual faculties, seeking to withhold belief or judgement in even the veridical deliverance of the faculties responsible for comprehension can be rational.

Such cases have been taken to rule out a belief-based model of understanding.<sup>23</sup> Since a veridical take on meaning can be retained through disbelief,

a belief-based model of that take would imply simultaneous belief and disbelief in the same content. And that seems incompatible with the fact that attempted withholding of belief might in some circumstances be rational. If a veridical take on meaning of the sort permitted in such cases suffices for understanding, then such cases would appear to show that understanding is independent of belief.

If propositional knowledge depended upon belief, a successful argument to that effect would undermine the propositional view. However, it is unclear why the defender of the propositional view cannot resist the antecedent of that conditional. As Williamson points out, it is no more obvious that propositional knowledge requires belief than that apparently belief-independent states—for instance, states of epistemic seeing—require propositional knowledge (2000: 38). Moreover, it is not clear that the argument is successful even in showing understanding to be independent from belief. For it is not clear that we should accept that the exemplified sort of veridical take on meaning suffices for understanding. As stated, the argument leaves open that access to veridical semantic appearances can, in the right circumstances, put one in a position to understand but does not, in the absence of belief or knowledge amount to understanding. Just as one might argue that seeing in the absence of belief or knowledge does not amount to seeing *that* such-and-such, so one might argue that veridical parsing in the absence of belief or knowledge does not amount to understanding. So at least two large gaps in the first form of argument would need to be closed before it could be taken to undermine the propositional knowledge view.

Second, then, it has been argued that understanding, unlike propositional knowledge, is Gettier-immune (Pettit, 2002). Consider being told by a trusted informant that an unfamiliar sentence, like (11), means the same as a familiar sentence, like (12):

(11) The jargonelle is ripe.

(12) The pear is ripe.

On the basis of trusting your informant, you come to take utterances of (12) to mean that the pear is ripe. And your so taking them is veridical: your informant spoke truly. Some intuit that that suffices for your understanding utterances of (11). But your informant is quite mad, and would have told you that any presented sentence is synonymous with (12). So your take on (11) is correct only accidentally, and so does not amount to knowledge.

Extant versions of the second form of argument have been directed against the view that ability-understanding is a form of propositional knowledge, and it may not be obvious that such cases can be supplied with respect to state-understanding. One problem here is that it is not clear that the belief you acquire from your informant stands in the right relation to your take

on utterances of (11) to undermine their counting as knowledgeable. As we have seen, it is plausible that merely believing what your informant tells you and forming semantic beliefs on that basis will not suffice for understanding. Plausibly, what is required is that, on the basis of what your informant tells you, you form a capacity to have the sort of immediate take on utterance meaning that elsewhere sub-serves understanding. Perhaps, then, your informant plays a role in your acquiring an epistemic ability akin to the role played by spectacles in your acquiring a perceptual ability. And, plausibly, your spectacles could put you in a position to know by seeing even if the optician would have delivered that pair whether or not they matched your prescription.

However, other Gettier cases are available. Consider again the sort of case considered above in support of belief-independence. Suppose that, in the midst of being presented with a barrage of utterances of sentence façades—again in a psycholinguistics lab—one is presented with an utterance that one parses veridically. Plausibly, a case of that sort can be constructed that corresponds with standard barn façade cases, so that one's unreliability—or lack of safety—in the environment of the lab precludes one's knowing what the utterance means on the basis of the veridical parse. If one would nonetheless count as understanding the utterance, then the case would stand as a counterexample to the propositional knowledge view.<sup>24</sup>

Even if initially plausible cases can be supplied, the issue swiftly becomes a matter for theory to decide. In particular, it might be argued that explanatory differences between the states of Gettier subjects and those of the genuinely knowledgeable can serve to defeat our initial intuitive responses to cases. For example, one who believes by accident—unreliably, unsafely, etc.—will often be in a less stable cognitive position than one who knows. Similarly, it might be argued that one whose take on meaning is only accidentally veridical—is unreliable, unsafe, etc.—will often be in a less stable cognitive position than one who knows. The subject of such a case might easily have their take on meaning undermined, and their take might easily have been non-veridical. Reflection on considerations of that sort might reasonably be taken to undermine an initial judgement that the two sorts of subject should be counted as on a par psychologically.<sup>25</sup> And it is unclear why their psychological difference shouldn't be localised through our concept of understanding. So, again, large gaps would need to be filled before the second form of argument could be taken to undermine the propositional knowledge view.<sup>26</sup>

Both forms of objection to the propositional knowledge view deserve more discussion than I can afford them here. But a third form of objection seems to me more promising. Assume, first, that the fact that *S* knows that *p* entails that *S* possesses each concept in *p*. So, for instance, the fact that Jo knows that snow is white entails that Jo possesses a concept of snow and of being white. Assume, second, that any statement of the semantic properties of an utterance will have to express a relation between the utterance and a bit of



the world (perhaps a meaning or expressed content). Thus, any statement of the semantic properties of an utterance will have to use an expression for a concept that may be—and, except in special cases, will be—additional to the concepts expressed in the target expression. So, a statement of the semantic properties of an utterance of (13) might take the form of (14), (15), or (16).

- (13) Snow is white.
- (14) That (utterance) is true iff snow is white.
- (15) That (utterance) means that snow is white.
- (16) That (utterance) was made in order to say that snow is white.

Given our second assumption, it would seem that in order for *S* to have propositional knowledge of the meaning of an utterance of (13), something like (17), (18), or (19) would have to be true.

- (17) *S* knows that that (utterance) is true iff snow is white.
- (18) *S* knows that that (utterance) means that snow is white.
- (19) *S* knows that that (utterance) was made in order to say that snow is white.

But by our first assumption, the truth of (17), (18), or (19) will entail that *S* possesses a concept expressed by ‘is true’, ‘means’, or ‘says’. Now consider the following case.<sup>27</sup>

Jo is an intelligent, articulate two-year old. She asks Kim, in English, what, other than a Polar Bear, is white. Kim utters the sentence ‘Snow is white’. Jo appears to possess the concepts expressed by Kim’s use of ‘snow’, ‘is’, and ‘white’; she appears, by all ordinary tests, to understand Kim’s utterance. But Jo shows no evidence—aside from seeming to understand utterances not involving those expressions—of a grasp of concepts expressed by ‘is true’, ‘means’, or ‘says’. So, Jo’s understanding Kim’s utterance seems not to entail her having propositional knowledge of what is expressed by a theoretical representation of the meaning of that utterance. Since the relevant features of the theoretical representation appear not to be optional, if we are to give sentential expression to semantic facts, there seems to be no way of giving adequate expression to propositional knowledge Jo acquires on auditing Kim’s utterance. Plausibly, this is because, despite understanding Kim’s utterance, Jo fails to acquire propositional knowledge of meaning.<sup>28</sup>

Since there need be no direct evidence that Jo possesses concepts of truth, meaning, or saying, a response to the argument would have to demonstrate an intrinsic connection between understanding and possession of those concepts.<sup>29</sup> In effect, what is wanted is some sort of transcendental deduction, or at least a compelling inference to the best explanation, from the evidence we have from Jo’s behaviour, to the conclusion that she must possess such concepts. I shall briefly consider three arguments for the existence of such a connection with respect to a concept of truth.

First, it might be argued that in order to understand Kim's assertion, Jo must grasp its assertive force and that that grasp is dependent upon a facility with the concept of truth. Scott Soames' response to that line of argument is worth quoting at length:

Perhaps it will be suggested that a person who lacked [a metalinguistic concept of truth] couldn't be a language user, since to use language one must realize that assertive utterances aim at truth and seek to avoid falsity. But this suggestion is confused. The child will get along fine so long as he knows that 'Momma is working' is to be assertively uttered only if Momma is working; 'Daddy is asleep' is to be assertively uttered only if Daddy is asleep; and so on. The child doesn't have to say or think to himself, "There is a general (but defeasible) expectation that for all x, if x is a sentence, then one is to assertively utter x only if x is true." It is enough if he says or thinks to himself, "There is a general (but defeasible) expectation that one should assertively utter 'Mommy is working' only if Mommy is working; assertively utter 'Daddy is asleep' only if Daddy is asleep; and so on for every other sentence." For this, no notion of truth is needed. (Soames, 1989: 578–9)

Soames' discussion continues in a footnote:

I am not here suggesting that the child really must repeat or represent the latter (truthless) instruction to himself. Thus, I am not claiming that the child must have the notion assertive utterance in order to learn a language. My point is a negative one. If there is anything to the suggestion that language learners must realize that assertive utterances aim at truth, that realization need not involve possession of a concept of truth. It may be that the child ultimately comes to realize something like the following: One is to say that Mommy is working only if Mommy is working, that Daddy is asleep only if Daddy is asleep; and so on. A truth predicate comes in handy in stating such a rule, for it allows one to eliminate the 'and so on' in favor of quantification over assertion plus predications of truth. But handy or not, this logical technology is not necessary for learning. (1989: 594, fn.3)

As far as I can see, Soames' response is unimpeachable. His basic point, as I understand it, is that understanding assertions does not depend upon facility with the very general concepts employed in general semantic theorising. The child, by contrast with the theorist, need not recognise any commonality amongst the various cases in which she understands what others say. There is therefore no need for her to conceive of these cases in terms of truth, meaning, or saying. It should also be emphasised that Soames does not propose to replace a requirement for propositional knowledge of truth-conditions with a requirement for propositional knowledge of appropriate saying- or use-conditions for particular utterances. Absent further argument, what he requires is only that the child's behaviour and cognition be (safely or

reliably) governed by sensitivity to conditions that a theorist might capture in such general terms.

Second, it might be argued that the sort of sensitivity to the connection between assertive utterance and expressed content required for understanding requires possession of a concept of truth or meaning. In particular, it might reasonably be held that understanding an assertive utterance requires being disposed to endorse it only if one accepts a content it expresses. And that might be held to depend upon acceptance of a bi-conditional—or bi-conditional guaranteeing relation like that expressed by ‘means’—linking the truth of the utterance with what would be accepted in endorsing its content. However, this second argument appears to be susceptible to a version of Soames’ response. What is required of the child is just that, on the basis of understanding the utterance, she is willing, rationally, to endorse it only when she is willing to accept a content it expresses. Knowledge, or acceptance, of a bi-conditional—or some guarantor thereof—would suffice for rational parity of treatment, but does not appear to be necessary. Given only that the child meets the minimal condition on understanding an utterance—namely, that she entertains a content the utterance expresses—her pattern of endorsement and denial with respect to the utterance will, it seems, track her acceptance or rejection of its content. Perhaps it will be felt that mere tracking of that sort fails to sustain genuine transfer of acceptance or rejection of the content to endorsement or denial of the utterance. I have some sympathy with that concern. But absent further argument, all that needs to be explained is parity of treatment by the child of utterance and content. And that appears to be explicable through the minimal condition on understanding.<sup>30</sup>

Third, it might be argued that possession of a concept of truth or meaning is required for entertaining propositional content.<sup>31</sup> Here the issues are somewhat delicate, in part depending upon exactly what is meant by possession of a concept. One line of argument sometimes offered for thinking that, in some minimal sense, the entertaining of content requires facility with a concept of truth begins from the claim that an adequate theoretical account of propositional content will make play with that concept.<sup>32</sup> Although the claim that an account of content must go via truth is controversial—it is denied, in particular, by many deflationists about truth<sup>33</sup>—I am sympathetic to it. But as far as I can see, one cannot reach the required conclusion from that meagre beginning. It no more follows that entertaining propositional content requires an ability to entertain propositional contents including a concept of truth, than it follows from the dependence on mention of hydrogen of an adequate account of water that entertaining water thoughts requires an ability to entertain hydrogen thoughts. Tyler Burge characterises a more plausible requirement as follows:

All assertions and judgements presuppose a commitment to truth. But the commitment is not explicit in simple judgements. In order to make assertions or

harbor beliefs, individuals need not have the capacity to make the commitment explicit. (Burge, 2005: 25)

Burge's claim is that, in whatever sense one must evince a commitment to truth—or possess a concept of truth—in order to entertain propositional contents, one need not be able to entertain contents involving the concept.

A second line of argument that may be offered at this point is, in effect, an attempt to derive facility with truth from a requirement that one who can entertain the content that  $p$  must also be in a position to entertain the content that it is not the case that  $p$ .<sup>34</sup> For being able to entertain the latter content would put one in a position to entertain the content that it *is* the case that  $p$  and, hence, the content that it is true that  $p$ . It's not wholly transparent how an argument for the necessity claim might be developed. But there is some plausibility to the idea that grasp of a thought that determines a bipolar truth condition requires knowing, not only what it would be for the condition to be met, but also what it would be for the condition to be failed.<sup>35</sup> And even in the absence of detailed argument, it might be pointed out that small children seem perfectly able to deny assertions with which they are presented, where that goes beyond a simple failure to endorse them. So the onus would appear to be on one who denies that such children have a concept of truth to explain away their apparent competence with wide scope content internal negation.

It should be agreed, I think, that entertaining propositional content requires—or at least hangs together with—facility with denial or rejection of that content. What needs to be shown, however, is that the latter facility is, or suffices for, a facility with wide scope negation. And it is not clear that that can be shown. On the basis of Frege's pioneering work on the topic, many theorists have come to believe that denial or rejection may be reduced to the assertion or acceptance of a wide scope negation.<sup>36</sup> But Frege's argument fails to sustain the reduction. At most, his argument shows that negation should not be identified with a force operator like denial. Since one therefore needs a content internal negation, Frege also claims that the work of denial can be done through acceptance of an external negation so that denial is redundant. But that claim is questionable.<sup>37</sup> Of course, it is plausible that anyone who has facility with both denial and negation will, in ordinary cases, recognise an equivalence between denying that  $p$  and accepting that it is not the case that  $p$ .<sup>38</sup> But that fails to show that a facility with denial just is a facility with acceptance and negation. And absent argument for that claim, it remains open that competence with denial is ontogenetically prior to competence with wide scope negation. It is therefore open to hold that, by virtue of their facility with acceptance and rejection, small children can entertain content in the absence of an ability to entertain content of the form: it is (not) the case that  $p$ . Put another way, it is open to hold that children can entertain content without being able to think about that content—without

that content forming part of the subject matter of their thinking. As Greg Restall puts it,

At face value, it seems that the ability to assert and to deny, to say *yes* and *no* to simple questions, arrives earlier than any ability the child has to form sentences featuring negation as an operator. It is one thing to consider whether or not *A* is the case, and it is another to take the *negation*  $\neg A$  as a further item for consideration and reflection, to be combined with others, or to be supposed, questioned, addressed or refuted in its own right (Restall, 2005: 190).<sup>39</sup>

More generally, it is difficult to discern a general cognitive deficiency for which lack of a concept of truth—specifically, an ability to entertain thoughts whose content embeds *true*—is both necessary and sufficient. For if a child is not yet in a position to entertain contents, it is hard to see how adding to her repertoire of partial thinking abilities a partial ability to entertain truth-embedding contents would help. What would seem to be required is addition of a different sort of ability altogether—though, perhaps, one that involves a sensitivity to truth's demands. As Peter Sullivan puts it,

This picture of judgement has only to be formulated to be recognized as incoherent. On the one hand, ascription of the truth-predicate is itself portrayed as a species of judgement; on the other, it is held to be what *any* judgement needs to get so far as being true or false; yet if that general requirement really held, it would apply as much to the species of judgement proposed to meet it as to any other (Sullivan, 2005: 101).<sup>40</sup>

I conclude, then, that there is no straightforward connection between state-understanding and propositional knowledge of semantic facts. The onus is on the defender of such a view either to provide grounds for rejecting the assumption that knowing that *p* entails possession of the concepts in *p*, or to provide (independent) grounds for accepting that small children, not only possess concepts of truth, meaning, or saying, but also exercise those concepts in state-understanding. I shall not pursue the issue further here, but turn instead to an alternative construal of a knowledge-based account.

### 3. Understanding and Objectual Knowledge

Thus far, we have been working on the assumption that the hypothesis that understanding is (a form of) knowledge is to be construed in terms of propositional knowledge. Why think that? One reason, scouted above, is that the claim that someone understands an utterance is often interchangeable with the claim that they know what the utterance means. Since the latter claim is an indirect specification of propositional knowledge, it seems plausible to treat ascriptions of understanding in the same way. However, since even those

who deny that understanding is a form of propositional knowledge of meaning should allow that understanding typically underwrites such knowledge, that line of reasoning is unpersuasive.

In the case of some other attitudes that have been argued to be forms of knowledge, the idea that they are forms of propositional knowledge is motivated, in part, by formal similarities between ascriptions of the target attitude and ascriptions of propositional knowledge. Consider, for instance, the attitude of seeing that such-and-such. Since ascriptions of that attitude embed clausal complements, it is to be expected that the ascription of any more general determinate of that attitude will also take such complements. Moreover, the formal analogy between determinate and determinable, according to that hypothesis, renders the hypothesis comparatively easy to test. Thus consider the ascription of seeing-that in (20):

(20) Jo (can) see(s) that Kim is smoking.

In this case, we can simply replace the perceptual verb, and its attendants, in (20) with 'knows' in order to frame the target hypothesis that (that instance of) seeing-that is a form of knowing-that. We are then well placed to test the hypothesis—or, at least, the entailment claim it embeds—by seeking to determine whether the claim about seeing entails the formally analogous claim about knowing—whether, that is, (20) entails (21).

(21) Jo knows that Kim is smoking.

But things are not so straightforward in the case of ascriptions of understanding. This is not because one cannot carry through the replacement procedure. That is easily done, as the move from (22) to (21) attests:

(22) Jo understands that Kim is smoking.

The problem is that the purported entailment from (22) to (21) seems obviously to fail. As R. L. Franklin (1981) points out, a natural paraphrase of (22) would be (23):

(23) Jo believes, on the basis of being told, that Kim is smoking.

And, since believing obviously fails to entail knowing, so (22) obviously fails to entail (21). Put simply, understanding-that, unlike knowing-that, is non-factive: it is possible to understand that  $p$  while it is false that  $p$ . The difficulty this presents is that, while the hypothesis that understanding is a form of knowing may be false, it would be difficult to understand why anyone

has taken it at all seriously if it were *obviously* false. Of course, it might be that those who have taken the view seriously have missed the equivalence between (22) and (23). And in cases where explicit use is made of propositional forms like that in (22), perhaps that is the optimal—albeit unsatisfying—explanation.<sup>41</sup> Another explanation for why the view has been taken seriously despite its obvious inadequacy would be that the formulations of the view that have been offered have served to disguise the problem obviously attending a formulation incorporating (22). David Hunter (1998), for example, makes appeal to ascriptions of understanding like (24):

- (24) Jo understands (that utterance of) ‘snow is white’ to mean that snow is white.

The first thing to note here is that (24) is pretty much synonymous with (25)—indeed obviously so.

- (25) Jo understands that (that utterance of) ‘snow is white’ means that snow is white.

If there is a semantic difference between (24) and (25), it turns only upon the relative transparency of their complement subject positions. Second, note that, although the precise form of paraphrase used above is unnatural here, there is a natural generalisation of that treatment. The natural generalisation is embodied in the treatment of (25) in (26):

- (26) On the basis of an exercise of her disposition to understand, Jo believes that (that utterance of) ‘snow is white’ means that snow is white.<sup>42</sup>

So the formulation in (24) will not sustain a satisfactory statement of our target hypothesis. But perhaps formulations like (24) have blinded some to the failure of propositional understanding to entail propositional knowing.

An alternative explanation is that those who have found such a hypothesis plausible did not take it to be that *propositional* understanding—understanding-*that*—is a form of knowing.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, our earlier discussion of the propositional knowledge view was framed exclusively in terms of understanding *utterances*. But if that’s right, then there is no immediate pressure from the form of understanding ascriptions to take their correlative knowledge ascriptions to have propositional form. Perhaps understanding is, rather, a form of acquaintance, or *objectual*-knowledge.

We must now face the challenge of providing a clear statement of the target hypothesis. In particular, an account is required of the derivation of knowledge-ascriptions, either directly from understanding-ascriptions, or

indirectly via appeal to features, or constituents, of the semantic facts. It might be hoped that one or another form of objectual view would trivialise that task. The suggestion would be that understanding takes objectual (grammatical) objects and is a form of knowing directed upon exactly the same objects. But it appears that no such simple view can work. So, consider one natural form of objectual understanding-ascription, as in (27):

- (27a) Kim understands Chirac's utterance.
- (27b) Kim understood that utterance of 'snow is white'.

And compare the objectual knowledge analogues in (28):

- (28a) Kim knows Chirac's utterance.
- (28b) Kim knew that utterance of 'snow is white'.

While the sentences in (28) are less natural than those in (27)—in part, presumably, because knowing an object typically goes beyond the sort of ephemeral acquaintance one has with utterances—they are, I think, parseable. And it is at least plausible that the sentences in (27) entail their respective analogues in (28). But insofar as understanding an utterance can be viewed as a form of acquaintance with anything, it must surely be with something over and above the utterance itself. That is, the truth of the ascription in (27) requires an object of acquaintance additional to those involved in (28)—namely, the meaning of the utterance. So an account is still required of the relation between (27) and their appropriate knowledge-correlates.

The same sort of effect is exhibited by another attempt to finesse the challenge, through the forms in (29) and (30):

- (29a) Kim understands what Chirac said.
- (29b) Kim understood what Chirac uttered.
- (30a) Kim knows what Chirac said.
- (30b) Kim knew what Chirac uttered.

Here, the most natural—if not the only—construal of the sentences in (30) would appear to involve (quantification over) propositions.<sup>44</sup> By contrast, the sentences in (29) appear to involve (quantification over) ordinary objects: a thing Chirac said—i.e., an utterance, rather than a meaning or proposition that it expresses—and Chirac's utterance, respectively.<sup>45</sup> And even if the sentences in (29) can take a reading, analogous to (30), involving (quantification over) propositions, such a reading would deliver a version of the problem from which we are presently trying to escape, since understanding-that is non-factive. So although the sentences in (30) are derivable from those in



(29) by a simple substitutional operation, an account is still required of the relation between what is expressed by the sentences related by that operation.

Neither (27) nor (29) make explicit reference to an object able to play the required role in our target hypothesis. No form of knowledge of the objects explicitly mentioned in objectual understanding ascriptions can sustain the truth of the latter ascriptions. An obvious way past the difficulty would make use of the semantic facts, and their constituents, implicitly determined by ascriptions of linguistic understanding, in order to determine the required objects of knowledge. One implementation of this proposal would be as follows. First, the implicit—or entailed—quantification over semantic facts in (27) and (29) would be made explicit in something like the following way, with initial existential quantification suppressed, ‘*S*’ a variable over subjects and ‘*u*’ over utterances:

- (31) ‘*S* understands *u*’ entails that there is some *m*, such that *u* means *m*, and some *p*, such that *p* = (the proposition or fact) that *u* means *m*.

Second, the variables in the consequent of (31) would be deployed to supply grammatical objects of knowledge. This may involve attempting to treat the relevant form of knowledge as propositional, as in (32).<sup>46</sup>

- (32) ‘*S* understands *u*’ entails that there some *m*, such that *u* means *m*, and some *p*, such that *p* = that *u* means *m*, and *S* knows *p*.

Alternatively, given the difficulties that face the propositional view, we might consider a view according to which the knowledge is objectual—a form of acquaintance with content. One implementation of the latter suggestion would be (33).

- (33) ‘*S* understands *u*’ entails that there is some *m*, such that *u* means *m*, and, for some *n* appropriately related to *m*, *S* knows *n*.

A first shot at specifying an object denoted by ‘*n*’ would exploit the complement clauses in meaning ascriptions like (34).

- (34) That utterance means that snow is white.

The first shot would have it that ‘*m*’ shares its denotation with the complement clause in (34)—‘that snow is white’—and that ‘*n*’ does too. On that view, knowledge of the meaning of the utterance might be ascribed by (35).

- (35) Kim knows that snow is white.

The view that understanding an utterance of ‘snow is white’ might amount, in general, to knowing that snow is white is, of course, unacceptable. A more plausible second shot would involve taking ‘know’ to be polysemous, denoting different forms of knowledge in different sentential contexts, depending on the form of the complement.<sup>47</sup> Thus, in (35), ‘know’ would be taken to denote one form of epistemic relation to the proposition expressed by ‘that snow is white’. By contrast, a Noun Phrase complement, as in (36), would be held to trigger selection of a form of ‘know’ denoting a different epistemic relation to the same proposition, akin to ordinary forms of acquaintance with objects.

(36) Kim knows the proposition that snow is white.

The interpretation of ‘knows’ in (36) would be akin to that in (37).

(37) Kim knows the proposition that mathematics is consistent.

The truth of either sentence appears to require that Kim is, as we might say, acquainted with the designated proposition—that snow is white and that mathematics is consistent, respectively—without implying that Kim knows whether snow is white or that Kim knows whether mathematics is consistent.

The relevant sense of acquaintance appears to be akin to that involved in ordinary cases of objectual-knowledge, as in (38).

(38) Kim knows Jo.

Just as (38) requires that Kim has had some form of psychological contact with Jo, perhaps through perception, (37) requires that Kim has had some form of psychological contact with the proposition that mathematics is consistent. The main difference appears to be that psychological contact with propositions is not mediated perceptually, but rather involves entertaining them.<sup>48</sup>

Without yet exploring the details, we can note four *prima facie* advantages of an objectual knowledge view. First, as noted above, it is plausible that possession of such knowledge would suffice for the entertaining of expressed content. If that’s right, then the objectual view can share the first advantage of a propositional knowledge view in sustaining a minimal condition on utterance understanding.

Second, the objectual view would appear to be immune to the main objection to a propositional view presented above. As we have seen, the propositional view sustains the entertaining of expressed content indirectly, through the entertaining of a more articulated content that embeds it. According to the propositional view, one comes to entertain the content

expressed by an utterance—for instance, that snow is white—only through a piece of cognition typically involving more extensive conceptual resources—for instance, through entertaining the content that the utterance *means* that snow is white. By contrast, the objectual view would appear able to sustain the minimal condition on understanding more directly, through acquaintance with content, and thereby avoid imposing conceptual demands on the subject over and above those required for entertaining expressed content.

Third, the objectual view appears partially to share an advantage of the propositional view, in ensuring that understanding is meaning-dependent. We noted above that, because propositional knowledge is factive, a propositional knowledge view of understanding would make understanding dependent upon the existence of a suitable range of semantic facts. Since objectual knowledge is object-dependent, such knowledge of utterance meaning guarantees the existence of expressed content.

A fourth apparent advantage of the objectual view is that it seems to provide a neat route past a challenge accruing to its propositional rival due to the failure of propositional knowledge to suffice for understanding. It might be argued that what one lacks when one only knows what an utterance means—for instance, at second hand—is acquaintance with the meaning of the utterance. If that's right, then the objectual view might avoid the need to provide an account of the distinctive form of knowledge involved in understanding, by exploiting only features possessed by objectual knowledge quite generally.

Despite the *prima facie* attractions, a number of difficulties become apparent when the details are examined.

The least serious of the difficulties is that it is not obvious that the meaning of an utterance is an object. It would at least require argument to show that utterance meanings are best thought of in that way. Unlike some Quineans, I wouldn't take the conclusion of such an argument to serve as a basis for rejecting at least one of its premises. But it would be a source of concern if it turned out that the view that understanding is a form of knowing rested upon such a controversial claim.<sup>49</sup>

In fact, however, it's not clear that the objectual view need involve a commitment to meanings being genuine objects. The objectual view is committed to the availability of a form of knowledge of meanings distinct from ordinary propositional knowledge and akin in its behaviour to forms of knowledge that are genuinely objectual. It therefore requires that the putatively objectual complements of ascriptions of the required form of knowledge behave similarly, in at least some respects, to expressions that make genuine reference to objects. But the similarities in behaviour need not be perfect. Unless the special nature of ordinary cases of objectual knowledge is dependent upon its being directed onto genuine objects, imperfection in that respect need not preclude the existence of a distinctive form of quasi-objectual knowledge of meaning.

A more serious difficulty is that objectual knowledge of the meaning of an utterance would appear not to suffice for understanding the utterance. I might, for example, be acquainted with the meaning of an utterance of ‘schnee ist weiss’ through being acquainted with the meaning of an utterance of ‘snow is white’, without thereby understanding the former utterance. Indeed, an analogous case can be constructed by appeal to two utterances of the same sentence, say ‘snow is white’: one might be acquainted with the meaning of both utterances simply through being acquainted with either. One might even have objectual knowledge of the meaning of an utterance and know, through being told, that it is the meaning of that use, without thereby understanding the utterance.<sup>50</sup>

A natural proposal at this point would be that understanding involves a sort of joint acquaintance with utterance and meaning. But mere joint acquaintance with utterance and meaning would appear to leave open, from the subject’s perspective, whether the utterance and meaning are related in the right way. It would appear to be possible to be jointly acquainted with meaning and utterance even though they are *not* related in the right way, for example by happening, for whatever reason, to entertain the proposition that snow is white whilst perceiving an utterance of ‘grass is green’. Mere joint acquaintance with meaning and utterance, then, does not suffice for understanding. If that’s right, then it would appear to be possible to entertain the proposition that snow is white whilst perceiving an utterance of ‘snow is white’—i.e., an utterance that in fact expresses that proposition—without one’s overall epistemic state guaranteeing the association of meaning and utterance. There appears to be no reason, on the current view, why occupancy of the latter sort of epistemic state, involving an utterance and its meaning, should put the subject in a better epistemic position with respect to the association of meaning and utterance than would occupancy of the former state, involving an utterance and an arbitrary meaning. In short, the fact that one might be jointly acquainted with an utterance and an arbitrary meaning shows that mere joint acquaintance with utterance and meaning does not suffice for understanding.<sup>51</sup>

Two remaining options for characterising the objects of acquaintance are propositions, as in (39), and facts, as in (40):

- (39) Jo knows the proposition that that utterance (of ‘snow is white’) means that snow is white.
- (40) Jo knows the fact that that utterance (of ‘snow is white’) means that snow is white.

One problem with the first hypothesis is that one can be acquainted with a proposition, including the proposition designated by the complement of (39), whilst remaining wholly non-committal as to its truth. For example, I

might get a monolingual French speaker to entertain that proposition, and so to be acquainted with it, by telling them, in French, that it would evince a common form of error amongst non-native English speakers to hold that that utterance of ‘snow is white’ means that snow is white. Yet understanding arguably involves some form of positive commitment to things being as they are presented to one in understanding—or, at least, some inclination towards a positive commitment. A second and more pressing objection is that acquaintance with a proposition is compatible with the proposition’s falsehood: it is possible to be acquainted with the proposition denoted by the complement of (39) in worlds where the proposition is false. But understanding appears to be fact—or, at least, object—guaranteeing. One cannot be in a state of understanding an utterance if one’s occupancy of that state has no bearing on whether or not the utterances meaning is as it is presented to one.

As far as I can see, the second hypothesis is immune to the objections presented above. It fails, however, to provide a genuine alternative to a propositional knowledge view. For (40) is equivalent to (41):

- (41) Kim knows that that utterance (of ‘snow is white’) means that snow is white.<sup>52</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

There is a seemingly powerful objection to the propositional knowledge view. And the obvious forms of objectual alternative are untenable. Should we then reject a knowledge-based account? In my view, we are not yet in that position. For one thing, the problems we have been considering centre upon the nature of the objects of the attitudes underwriting understanding. To that extent, appealing instead to other attitudes wouldn’t help. Even those of us who would otherwise be willing to take states of understanding as primitive may find uncomfortable our present inability to specify the objects of those states in a psychologically revealing way—that is, to go beyond conjunctions of the form: the utterance meant that *p* and the subject understood it. For another thing, the advantages that would accrue to a successful knowledge-based account suggest at least familial resemblance between knowledge and understanding. Perhaps there is no deeper explanation of the resemblance; but nature abhors coincidence.

Despite our failure thus far, we should pursue further the connections between knowledge and understanding. At the very least, doing so may afford us a clearer view of how meaning is presented to us through the latter. The major options are these: reconsider the main objection to the propositional view; or elaborate and assess additional forms of objectual view. I favour the latter course. Indeed, I believe that an objectual view able to avoid the

objections presented above is readily available. But I shall not pursue the matter further here.<sup>53</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Gareth Fitzgerald, Jennifer Hornsby, Keith Hossack, Nils Kurbis, Jessica Leech, Fraser McBride, Christian Nimtz, David Papineau, Josef Perner, Richard Samuels, Gabriel Segal, Barry C. Smith, and Mark Textor for discussion. Early versions were presented at the University of Stirling; thanks to Adrian Haddock, Kent Hurtig, Mari Mikkola, Alan Millar, Duncan Pritchard, Michael Wheeler, and especially Peter Sullivan; the University of Edinburgh: thanks to Jeffrey Ketland, David Levy, Peter Milne, Matthew Nudds, Michael Ridge, Josefa Toribio; the University of York: thanks to Barry Lee, Marie McGinn, Howard Robinson, Tom Stoneham. Thanks also to an anonymous referee for this journal whose insightful comments led to definite improvements.

<sup>2</sup> I shall use ‘utterance’ as a label for the products of speaking or writing.

<sup>3</sup> I shall be assuming that we have some initial, intuitive purchase on linguistic understanding—e.g., what is normally involved when one hears an utterance in a familiar language—as opposed to other forms of understanding linguistic items—e.g., what a training in syntactic theory might afford. I shall use ‘understanding’ as a label for linguistic understanding so understood, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>4</sup> Vendler (1967) notes that ‘understand’ appears to be  $(\alpha)/(\beta)$  polysemous. Dummett (1993) argues that ‘understand’ is  $(\alpha)$ ,  $(\beta)/(\chi)$  polysemous.

<sup>5</sup> Here I appeal to what are essentially Vendler’s and Kenny’s aspectual distinctions between types of predication, in particular their distinction between states and achievements (Vendler (1967); Kenny (1963)). For solid recent discussion, see Rothstein (2004). For present purposes, I need not commit to any categorial distinction amongst psychological or epistemic states between abilities/dispositions and others. All that is required is that the states underlying general competence with a language are distinct from the states delivered through exercise of that competence. So I shall not be engaging with the dispute between Dummett (1993), who argues that (b) is not a form of ability, and Rundle (2001) and Baker and Hacker (2005), who argue that it is.

<sup>6</sup> For a well worked out proposal, see Larson and Segal (1995). When the notion of tacit knowledge is understood in a sufficiently liberal way—as it is, for example, by Evans (1985)—the claim that competence resides in tacit knowledge should be comparatively uncontroversial. For it is beyond serious doubt that competence involves some form of structured sensitivity to what is stated in an adequate semantic theory. Grounds for doubt arise when such structured sensitivity is construed on the model of ordinary propositional attitude psychology. For critical discussion see Wright (1993), who focuses on appeal to tacit knowledge in accounts of semantic competence, and Collins (2004), who focuses on accounts of grammatical competence.

<sup>7</sup> Thanks to Keith Hossack, Barry Lee, and Matthew Nudds for discussion.

<sup>8</sup> Dean Pettit (2002: 521) presents this natural account of the transition from talk of understanding to talk of propositional knowledge, though he presents it as applying to (what I am calling) ability-understanding.

<sup>9</sup> As Keith Hossack reminded me, another advantage worth mentioning here is that the propositional knowledge view can enable a truth-theoretic semantics to cope with Frege cases: knowing that ‘Hesperus’ refers to Hesperus is (on orthodox views) different from knowing that ‘Hesperus’ refers to Phosphorus. See, e.g., McDowell (1977), Sainsbury (1979: 78–9).

<sup>10</sup> Here, and in the remainder, I use ‘entertain’ as the most general determinable of determinate propositional attitude states. So, knowing  $p$ , believing  $p$ , supposing  $p$ , hoping  $p$ , etc., are each particular ways of entertaining  $p$ .

<sup>11</sup> In order to provide a reasonably neutral statement of the semantic facts, I shall be using the not entirely happy construction:  $u$  means that  $p$ . Those who think the construction inappropriate should feel free to replace it with their favoured form.

<sup>12</sup> This point is pressed in Campbell (1982). The bearing of understanding on general epistemology is also emphasised by Evans (1982: 305–40), McDowell (1998a), and Heck (1995).

<sup>13</sup> For discussion, see Gibbons (2001), Williamson (1995; 2000), McDowell (1998b; 1998c).

<sup>14</sup> At least, that will follow unless appeal to object-dependence can be used to have belief guarantee aspects of the semantic facts.

<sup>15</sup> For related discussion, though detached from the view that propositional knowing is a state of mind, see Schiffer (2003: 300–351).

<sup>16</sup> A plausible rationale for the difference is that states of understanding differ from (other) states of knowledge in the types of consideration that would defeat, or undermine, them. For example, knowledge of what was said acquired through testimony might be defeated, or undermined, by (seeming) information to the effect that one's interlocutor was unreliable while typical cases of understanding would not be so defeated, or undermined.

<sup>17</sup> For the view of seeing-that, remembering-that, etc., see Williamson (2000: 33–39).

<sup>18</sup> Fricker (2003) provides a useful discussion of the distinctiveness of understanding that is independent of a commitment to a propositional knowledge account. For useful discussion of the distinctiveness of understanding more generally, see Franklin (1981; 1983). Franklin suggests, quite plausibly, that understanding in general—he doesn't commit explicitly to linguistic understanding being a member of the species—involves some form of structural discernment with respect to its objects, and that this distinguishes it from (other forms of) knowing. His idea, crudely, is that understanding *x* involves either articulation of *x* into sub-components or location of *x* within a range of super-components. The proposal is, of course, quite plausible in the case of linguistic understanding. But the proposal appears to require supplementation if it is to help explain the distinctive features of linguistic understanding. One might understand an utterance along a variety of dimensions, all involving structural discernment in Franklin's sense. Thus, when theorising in phonetics, syntax, etymology, or even theoretical semantics, one might *understand* an utterance without having linguistic understanding of the utterance in the sense employed here.

<sup>19</sup> An additional form of argument, presented in unpublished work by Douglas Patterson, exploits the factiveness of propositional knowledge to divorce it from understanding. According to Patterson, the semantical paradoxes suggest that no empirically adequate truth-theoretical semantics for a typical natural language could be true. Hence, by the factiveness of propositional knowledge, no such theory could be known. Since he holds understanding a language to be underwritten by some form of cognition of a truth theory for that language, he takes this to show that understanding cannot reside in propositional knowledge. Patterson's argument deserves more discussion than I can give it here. For now, I shall simply note three reasons for not pursuing it further. First, the proposal, as presented, concerns ability-understanding and not state-understanding. Second, if I understand him, Patterson presents his proposal as revisionary, at least to the extent that we would ordinarily judge an incorrect take on utterance meaning to entail some failure of understanding. Third, Patterson's argument depends upon our favouring a truth-theoretical account of meaning over a propositional knowledge account of understanding. It does nothing to preclude those whose preferences distribute differently from rejecting the former in favour of the latter.

<sup>20</sup> The last example is borrowed from Chomsky (1986: 7).

<sup>21</sup> The use of (6) to initiate comprehension of (5) is taken from Wason and Reich (1979).

<sup>22</sup> These examples are borrowed from Townsend and Bever (2001: 183–4).

<sup>23</sup> See Hunter (1998). Pettit (2002), (2005) makes an analogous claim with respect to ability-understanding and propositional knowledge, and uses it as part of an argument in favour of accounting for ability-understanding via a distinctive form of propositional attitude. Gross (2005) argues that appeal to tacit knowledge may neutralise that aspect of Pettit's argument. One oddity of this dispute is that the only special feature required of tacit knowledge for it to serve Gross's purposes is that it be insulated from rational interaction with ordinary attitudes; yet

that is consistent with Pettit's distinctive attitudes counting as instances of tacit knowledge. A second, more general, oddity is that a central philosophical concern about tacit knowledge has been that the explanatory power of ordinary propositional knowledge might depend upon all its features—including, e.g., conscious accessibility by the subject and rational interactions with other attitudes—so that in seeking to derive a surrogate by effacing some of those features one may be left with something unable to do explanatory duty. Since neither Pettit's distinctive propositional attitudes, nor Gross's states of tacit knowledge, impose rational constraint upon their possessors' other attitudes, there is significant risk that they are unfit to serve as the basis of extensions to ordinary rationalistic explanation of those attitudes. While the issue deserves extended discussion, I cannot pursue it here.

<sup>24</sup> Similar cases may be found in Pettit (2002).

<sup>25</sup> For detailed discussion, see Gibbons (2001) and Williamson (2000: 60–92).

<sup>26</sup> I emphasise that I do not take the foregoing to amount to a decisive response to the first two forms of argument. I do think that the second form of argument is ultimately unsuccessful, but my reasons for that are bound up with the view that knowing is a state of mind, and so require extended discussion. I think that the first form of argument is successful, but for reasons brought out more clearly in the third form of argument considered next in the text. But for the present, those claims should be taken as expressions of opinion.

<sup>27</sup> This case derives from considerations presented by Scott Soames (1989: 578–9), who seeks to undermine the view that ability-understanding involves knowledge of the theorems of a semantic theory. It's not clear to me that Soames would take it to undermine the view that understanding an utterance requires knowing that the utterance *means* or, is used to *say*, what it does; his discussion at 579 suggests that he would not. Similar considerations are pressed by Crispin Wright against the view that ability-understanding resides in knowledge of the axioms of a semantic theory (1993). Jennifer Hornsby (2005) seems to agree that such considerations show that state-understanding does not require exercise of semantic concepts.

<sup>28</sup> Three features of the case are worth mentioning. First, as presented it relies upon an empirical result: that children, and others seemingly lacking meta-representational abilities or an ability to think explicitly about truth, can understand some utterances (give or take some blindness to extra-semantic, or pragmatic, features). I take the result to be fairly well supported by recent work in psychology. The literature is now extensive. A good introduction may be found in Perner (1993). For insightful philosophical discussion of the related case of (some) people with Autism, with useful references, see Glüer and Pagin (2003). Second, even if it could be shown that understanding relied, at some level, on a capacity to entertain thoughts involving truth, it would not follow that state-understanding requires competent exercise of that capacity. The propositional knowledge view requires, not only that those who understand have an ability to think in terms of truth, meaning, or saying, but also that, in order to understand an utterance, they reliably keep track of the utterance's particular truth condition, meaning, or thing said. Although there is room for skirmish concerning whether small children or some people with Autism lack the required concepts, there can be little doubt that they are unable reliably to keep track of the proper applications of those concepts. Third, although I think we have good grounds for believing such cases actual, my argument needs only their metaphysical possibility. This is important, because it might turn out that, for architectural reasons—say, because the language faculty co-occupies brain space with systems responsible for meta-representation—that dissociation between linguistic understanding and meta-representation is neither actual nor biologically possible. We shouldn't conclude on the basis of that sort of dependence that understanding depends *constitutively* upon competent exercise of meta-representational abilities. I'm grateful to an anonymous referee for this journal for raising some of the issues to which this footnote responds and to Josef Perner for very helpful discussion.

<sup>29</sup> An anonymous referee for this journal suggested, quite plausibly, that young children might be able to classify sounds as meaningful or meaningless. But mere classificatory ability of that sort would not, I think, suffice for an ability to think of things as meaningful or



meaningless. Moreover, in order to underwrite an ability to think of things as meaning that such-and-such, the classificatory ability would have to be far richer. The child would at least have to be able to classify sounds as meaning that snow is white, that grass is green, etc. That seems far less plausible and, as before, would anyway not yet suffice for mastery of a concept of meaning.

<sup>30</sup> An anonymous referee for this journal suggested that genuine endorsement of an utterance might require taking the utterance to be meaningful. Since the account suggested in the text would make endorsing an utterance parasitic upon endorsing a content it expresses, I agree that genuine endorsement of an utterance would require that the endorser understood the utterance and that understanding an utterance requires associating it with its content. However, I do not think that an account of understanding according to which it meets that condition must be framed in terms of attitudes to propositions.

<sup>31</sup> In the next four paragraphs, I am indebted to Barry Lee, Marie McGinn, Howard Robinson, Peter Sullivan, and Mark Textor.

<sup>32</sup> Dummett (1959) is a *locus classicus* for the claim about accounts of propositional content.

<sup>33</sup> See, e.g., Horwich (1998).

<sup>34</sup> The conditional required by the objector should be restricted to instantiations for ‘*p*’ free of external negations, in order to avoid both concerns about regress and (some) objections arising from limitations on human ability to entertain complex propositions—specifically, those arising from instantiations for ‘*p*’ involving the greatest number of external negations the subject is able to entertain. Similar constraints should be understood as imposed in order to avoid related objections for instantiations for ‘*p*’ at the upper limits of complexity accessible to any thinker. Probably the argument is best understood as applying to simple—logical constant free—instantiations for ‘*p*’.

<sup>35</sup> One way of pressing this line would be as follows. Understanding an assertion that *p* is, in part, a matter of preparedness to take it as evidence that *p*. So, in the absence of defeating considerations, one can be entitled, on the basis of understanding an assertion that *p*, and perhaps collateral information regarding the trustworthiness of the asserter, to believe that *p*. But a simple disposition to form a belief that *p* on the basis of witnessing such an assertion would evince a misconstrual of the bearing of the assertion on whether the fact that *p* obtains. In effect, it would involve taking the assertion as a way for the fact that *p* to obtain, rather than a way for it to be *asserted* to obtain. Defeating considerations could then only be taken as grounds for treating the apparent assertion as only apparent—a way of its merely seeming to one that *p*. Proper sensitivity to the nature of an assertion, then, requires a capacity to withhold belief whilst retaining awareness of the assertion as such. And that requires a capacity to reject the asserted content. Thanks to Keith Hossack, Michael Ridge, and Mark Textor for discussion of this issue.

<sup>36</sup> Frege (1918–19/1984).

<sup>37</sup> For discussion, see Smiley (1996). In addition to the considerations Smiley adduces against Frege’s redundancy argument, it should be noted that Frege’s argument is initially directed towards the claim that, since one needs content internal negation, one does not also need both denial and assertion. But even if that argument were successful, it would show only that either denial or assertion is redundant and not, absent further argument, that denial is redundant. For discussion, see Dummett (1973: 317ff.).

<sup>38</sup> The qualifier ‘ordinary’ here restricts consideration to instances of *p* taken by the subject to be truth-apt. A committed expressivist about value, for instance, may seek to deny that abortion is wrong without meaning to assert that it is not the case—false—that abortion is wrong. Indeed, one reason for Frege’s view that truth is involved in every scientific judgement may be that this is a way of ensuring truth-aptness. If a thought fails of reference, due for instance to a ‘part’ failing of reference, the thought that that thought is true (or, indeed, either true or false) is itself false. Thus, a cheap way of avoiding truth-valueless judgements in Frege’s system is to require that judgement of simple thoughts proceeds via judgement of the thought

that the simple thought is true. I have been unable to find a clear articulation of this line of thought in Frege's work, though it may explain elements of his (1915/1979).

<sup>39</sup> For further discussion of denial/rejection and negation, see especially Dummett (2002), Humberstone (2000), Priest (2005), Restall (2005), Rumfitt (2000, 2002), Smiley (1996).

<sup>40</sup> This is not to deny the pedagogical value of explaining judgement through appeal to judging-true, or even judging that-it-is-true-that. But since judging already takes in the required connection with truth, the formulations are strictly misleading.

<sup>41</sup> As Moltmann points out, it is often obvious what constructions would mean if they meant what philosophers have supposed them to mean, so that readings not available to a construction in its home language can come to seem to be available (Moltmann, 2003: 792). Hence, it is possible that prior theoretical commitments should make it seem that, e.g., a factive reading of understand-that constructions is available. Of course, the post-theoretical availability of a lexical item that exhibits the relevant range of behaviour does nothing to sustain the view that understanding is a form of knowing. Simply treating the form 'understand' uniformly as if it were synonymous with English 'know' would produce such an item. The question would then be whether anything of explanatory importance had been lost through the excision of a distinctive use of 'understands'.

<sup>42</sup> Or, '...it seems to Jo that the utterance means', or '...the utterance seems to Jo to mean...?'

<sup>43</sup> Since some theorists have explicitly claimed that forms like (19) entail 'know-that' analogues, this cannot serve as a general explanation. Here, the optimal explanation appears to be that the non-factiveness of the understanding-that construction has not been noticed. See, for example, Weatherson and Sennett (ms).

<sup>44</sup> For (30a), crudely: 'For some correct (and, perhaps, appropriate) answer, *p*, to the question 'What did Chirac say?', Kim knows that *p*'.

<sup>45</sup> As with the first attempt at finessing the difficulty, then, the fundamental problem is, not only that the relevant form for 'understanding' is objectual, but that it entails an additional objectual or propositional relation of some sort—perhaps to a meaning, or to a semantic fact. This may be one reason why it is not natural—outside Philosophy—to speak of understanding a proposition. In ordinary parlance, this would appear to require an epistemic relation of some sort to an object (or fact) over and above the proposition said to be understood, and that is not something philosophers have typically intended in talking of propositions as being understood. Since it is unclear what the additional object (or fact) might be—because propositions do not have meanings in the way expressions do—it would be unclear how to understand such usage even if it were intended. For an early use of 'understand' for the most general psychological attitude one might take to propositions—or the determinable of all determinate attitudes—see Russell (1913/1984). I find 'entertain' better for Russell's purpose.

<sup>46</sup> In some of what follows, I will be allowing for a treatment of propositions as objects. I retain the propositional/objectual disjunction for ease of exposition, with propositional knowledge taken to be the form of objectual relation to propositions specified through that-clause complements and objectual knowledge the form of relation to propositions specified through NP complements, on which more below.

<sup>47</sup> This view is developed with respect to a range of clausal complement taking verbs, including 'knows', by King (2002), to whose work I am here indebted. On this view, 'know' in (32) and (33) would have to be furnished with the obvious disambiguation. Alternative approaches to the differences between objectual and propositional attitudes are presented by Bach (1997), Pietroski (2000, 2005), and Moltmann (2003). The fundamental differences amongst the four accounts turn on their respective treatments of that-clause constructions. King treats these constructions as involving an additional form of objectual relation to that-clause specified (designated) propositions. Bach treats them as involving a relation to propositions that are not specified by the that-clause. Pietroski treats them as involving a non-objectual relation to something other than propositions—crudely, a relation to the import of the clausal complement. Moltmann presents

a neo-Russellian multiple-relation account, according to which that-clause constructions involve various sorts of relation to the semantic values of constituents of the that-clause complement. The subtle differences amongst these accounts, though worthy of discussion, will not play a role here.

<sup>48</sup> Moltmann and King both note these features of acquaintance with propositions (King (2002); Moltmann, (2003)). Both forms of objectual knowledge also appear to require the acquisition, through initial psychological contact, and thence retention, of a capacity to re-establish psychological contact. Thus, one ceases to know a person when one is no longer in a position to establish contact—e.g., through extended lack of contact, memory failure, or the person's death. Similarly, memory failure can end objectual knowledge of a proposition—that is, can end one's capacity to re-establish contact—to entertain—the proposition. More generally, objectual knowledge requires the existence of its object, so that, for instance, objectual knowledge of an utterance would last only as long as the utterance. Hence, such acquaintance must quickly be replaced by a memorial analogue. For insightful discussion of objectual acquaintance and its retention through memory see Martin (2001a).

<sup>49</sup> For important recent discussions see King (2002), Soames (1999), Schiffer (2003).

<sup>50</sup> Although it seems obvious that merely being acquainted with an utterance's meaning fails to suffice for understanding, it is not entirely clear why that should be. One view, mentioned earlier in discussion of the propositional knowledge account, is that understanding an utterance depends, not only upon entertaining a meaning it expresses, but also upon associating that meaning with the utterance. On that view, understanding an utterance requires registering its role in expressing entertained meaning. An alternative view would be that the registration of the utterance is required, not for its own sake in underwriting grasp of the connection between utterance and meaning, but in order to *particularise* the object of knowledge. Content *simpliciter* is abstract, in at least the sense that the same content can be expressed, and grasped, on different occasions or by different subjects. By contrast, utterance understanding arguably requires acquaintance with particular instances of that abstract content. If that's correct, then the role of registration of an utterance may be to provide a particular—spatiotemporally located—object for particular acts of understanding. For present purposes, we can leave the issue undecided.

<sup>51</sup> This is a sort of analogue of standard presentations of Gettier cases, in which the problem case is derived by the following method. One begins by constructing a case in which the subject does not know because what they believe is false. Then one constructs an analogous case, in which the subject's belief is true, but their evidence, or other features of their perspective on the facts, is the same. Here, I began by constructing a case in which the subject does not understand because what they are acquainted with fails to include an utterance and its meaning. Then I constructed an analogous case, in which the latter failure is rectified, without changing any other feature of the subject's perspective on those objects. From the subject's perspective, the second sort of case might as well be a case of the first sort. Martin (2001b) presses a related objection against Brewer's (1999) attempt to construct fact-guaranteeing perception out of perceptual acquaintance with objects and properties. The analogous problem for that view is that one might, for instance, be perceptually acquainted with a cube and (an instance of) the property of being red without that guaranteeing, for one, that the cube is red, since one might be perceptually acquainted with a blue cube and a red sphere.

<sup>52</sup> There is room for skirmish at this point. Someone who holds that a fact is just a true proposition—so holds to one form of an identity theory of truth—might take (40) to be equivalent to the conjunction of (39) with: it is true that that utterance means that snow is white. In that case, they would have a genuine alternative to the propositional knowledge view, but one subject to the difficulties presented in the main text. For further discussion of putative distinctions between facts and propositions, see Fine (1982), Parsons (1993), and Vendler (1972). Thanks to Gabriel Segal for discussion.

<sup>53</sup> I should emphasise that my aim here is solely to issue a challenge. Those who seek an account of understanding should either answer my objections to one of the knowledge-based

accounts considered here, or propose an alternative knowledge-based account, or propose an alternative account not based upon knowledge. While presently I favour an alternative form of objectual knowledge view—more precisely, an alternative view of the objects of the knowledge that underwrites understanding—it may be that an alternative course is ultimately to be preferred. Perhaps, for instance, some form of non-epistemic, use-based account is optimal. But only if no viable alternative to the propositional knowledge view is forthcoming should we take seriously the idea that there must be something wrong with arguments against that view. Thanks to an anonymous referee for this journal for suggesting that I clarify the dialectic.

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