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Meaning, Expression, and Thought

This philosophical treatise on the foundations of semantics is a systematic effort to clarify, deepen, and defend the classical doctrine that words are conventional signs of mental states, principally thoughts and ideas, and that meaning consists in their expression. This expression theory of meaning is developed by carrying out the Gricean program, explaining what it is for words to have meaning in terms of speaker meaning, and what it is for a speaker to mean something in terms of intention. But Grice's own formulations are rejected, and alternatives are developed. The foundations of the expression theory are explored at length, and the author develops the theory of thought as a fundamental cognitive phenomenon distinct from belief and desire and argues for the thesis that thoughts have parts, identifying ideas or concepts with parts of thoughts.

This book will appeal to students and professionals interested in the philosophy of language.

Wayne A. Davis is a professor of philosophy at Georgetown University.

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PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2003

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Bembo 10.5/13 pt. *System* L^AT_EX 2_ε [TB]

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data available

ISBN 0 521 55513 2 hardback

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*Dedicated to David K. Lewis, model philosopher,
with deep gratitude.*

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Preface

I began work on thought, belief, and desire shortly after I graduated from the University of Michigan in 1973, inspired by Alvin Goldman and his *A Theory of Human Action*, along with Stephen Stich, Arthur Burks, John Perry, and Jaegwon Kim. That work grew into my doctoral dissertation (Princeton University, 1977), directed by David Lewis, Gilbert Harman, and Richard Jeffrey. I remain indebted to these outstanding philosophers not only for key ideas but also for instilling a love of philosophy. The dissertation became a book-length manuscript entitled “Elements of Psychology: Belief, Desire, and Thought.” When a chapter on meaning took on the proportions of a book all by itself, I decided to first complete the present volume, *Meaning, Expression, and Thought*. Many of the ideas on thought presented in Part III were first developed in my dissertation and elaborated in “Belief, Desire, and Thought.” I use them here to provide the psychological foundations for the theory of meaning developed in the rest of this work. This book was delayed by my recent *Implicature* (1998), which explains why Grice’s great “synthetic” project gets so much less attention here than his “analytic” project. I wrote *Meaning, Expression, and Thought*, furthermore, in tandem with my forthcoming *Nondescriptive Meaning and Reference*, which applies the expression theory of meaning to names, indexicals, and other special cases, develops the expression theory of reference in greater depth, and shows how referential semantics can be treated in the expression theory.

While revised and reorganized here, most of the material in Chapters 1–4 has appeared in the following publications: “Expression of Emotion,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 25 (1988): 279–291; “Speaker Meaning,” *Linguistics and Philosophy* 15 (1992): 223–253; “Cogitative and Cognitive Speaker Meaning,” *Philosophical Studies* 67 (1992): 71–88; and

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“Communicating, Telling, and Informing,” *Philosophical Inquiry* 21 (1999): 21–43. A summary of Chapter 9, “Conventions,” appeared in my *Implicature* (Cambridge University Press, 1998). The rest is new. I am grateful for the editors of these journals for permission to reprint.

In the interest of readability, I adopt a casual approach to the use-mention distinction. I use either italics or quotation marks when using words to refer to themselves or to give meanings. I also use them as corner quotes around variables to form placeholders for quoted or italicized words. And, of course, I use quotation marks for direct quotation and scare quotes, and italics for emphasis. I will ensure that context makes my meaning clear (to the charitable reader). Thus in “*vixen* means ‘female fox,’” the meaning of the word *means* dictates that the italicized word to its left refers to a word, and that the quoted words to its right give the meaning of the word referred to.

In footnotes, I use “cf.” when citing authors who defend views similar to the one under discussion, and “contrast” when citing authors who reject such views.

My treasured colleagues and graduate students at Georgetown University deserve many thanks, especially Mark Lance, Linda Wetzel, Joseph Rahill, and Matt Burstein. I cannot thank Steven Kuhn enough for going over early drafts of the entire manuscript with a fine-toothed comb, and providing pages and pages of useful and incisive criticism. I am also grateful to Georg Meggle, Mark Siebel, Christian Plunze, Christoph Jäger, Thomas Bartelborth, and Oliver Scholz at the University of Leipzig for the hospitality they showed both me and my ideas. John Hawthorne, Mark Heller, Dan Sperber, Michael Slote, Georges Rey, Adrienne Lehrer, Andrew Milne, Stephen Rieber, and Christoph Doerge, along with Ernie Sosa, Francis J. Pelletier, and numerous reviewers, provided many helpful comments. Russell Hahn did a wonderful job as copyeditor and production editor. I am especially grateful to Robert Audi, William Lycan, Robert and Marilyn Adams, Daniel Robinson, Terry Pinkard, and Tom Beauchamp for their support and friendship over the years. Georgetown University provided the resources that enabled me to do the bulk of my research. Jack Bender gets credit not only for comments and friendship but also for helping to form my psycho-philosophical mind at Michigan. Alan Spiro has provided friendship and support since our Princeton days. Most of all, I am indebted to my wife, Kathy Olesko, for more than twenty-seven years of intellectual stimulation and love.

Terry Moore at Cambridge University Press showed the patience of a saint in waiting for the final manuscript, as did Ernie Sosa, the series

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editor. In addition to the vast literature on meaning, expression, and thought that existed before I began work on this book, new literature has been published faster than this human being, at least, could keep up with. It seems that every time I completed a draft, Jerry Fodor published another book. I apologize to the authors as well as to the reader for the many omissions I have found to be inevitable.

As a consequence of their long gestation, many of my ideas have been anticipated in print. Research showed that others were not new at all. While I may have lost the right to claim priority, I have benefited immeasurably from the work of others on “my” ideas. I hope I repay the authors I cite here by taking their ideas further.

Washington, D.C.
July 2001