

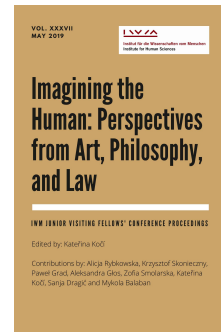
# Post-Empiricist Foundation of Semantics for Religious Language

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## Introduction

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Jürgen Habermas in his discussion with Charles Taylor in 2011 claimed that all you need to understand a meaning of basic religious vocabulary is to participate in the religious practice (i.e. ritual). This claim, repeated by Habermas at the Berkeley Centre lecture in the same year, is in fact not only the main thesis of his early theory of religion (from *Theory of Communicative Action*), but also the core of common antirealist stance of the mainstream post secular thinkers (Caputo, Vattimo, Derrida). Antirealism, according to Michael Dummett, can be expressed in semantical terms: antirealists deny that truth is the core concept of a theory of meaning, and in consequence claim that meaning is not the 'function' between bit of language (expression) and an object in the world. For the antirealists the meaning has only to do with rules and relations which are internal to linguistic practice (usage, grammar, inference, form of life like ritual and so on), and not with relations with the so-called 'objective' reality. In fact, the post secular semantics of religious language shares this core thesis with other antirealist theories of religious language, most notably of Kant, Wittgenstein and the wittgensteinian school of philosophy of religion (Rhees, Winch, Phillips). Indeed, semantic antirealism is one of the most important modern theories of religious language.

In my paper, I will argue against antirealism and for semantic realism. First, I will expose and make explicit these two rival theories. Next, I will sketch an argument for realism. In conclusion, I will present two remarks concerning theoretical implications of realism. My paper is not an attempt to provide a full argumentation, but just to link a few well-known theoretical claims, which are not usually linked, and in this way cast new light on the philosophy of religious language.

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## Exposition of rival theories

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We can distinguish at least two rival theoretical approaches to the religious language. The first approach is entitled the realistic theory. According to this theory, the so called 'religious language' is simply a part of natural language, which is used in the 'religious' context. The realistic theorists do not deny that this religious language has other illocutionary functions (like expressing emotional attitude, praying, commanding, motivating) beside the function of assertion, but they deny that there are not genuine assertions in religious language. Face-value theorists claim that if we find some sentence of the form of assertion in the religious language, we should analyse it as an assertion and treat it as an expression of belief. The realistic theory is a face value theory, which means that it accepts superficial grammar forms of religious expressions. According to the face-value theory, we should analyse the meaning of religious assertions in terms of truth-conditions, which point to some facts external to the language practice. In other words: religious assertions should be analysed in Tarski-like style, in the same way as assertions of natural language. For example: standard analysis for simple empirical assertion in natural language 'Snow is white' runs as follows:

*Example 1* 'Snow is white' is true, if and only if [snow is white].

'Snow is white' in quotation marks stands for token of language expression and [snow is white] in brackets refer to the 'reality', namely to the white snow. Semantical operator *true* is put in italics. According to the truth-conditions theory of meaning, we know the meaning of an expression when we know that it is true. Thus, the above mentioned example could be transformed into the following example:

*Example 2* 'Snow is white' means [snow is white].

Semantical operator *means* is used in translation handbooks, so the analysis can be described as an operation of translation from object-language on the left side (empirical part of natural language) to the metalanguage of theory on the right (in this case theory of 'facts').

The realistic theory for assertions is conservative. The 'metalanguage' side of equation of translation maintains the 'object-language' side (compare 'snow is white' in quotation marks and in brackets – they are identical). It follows from the fact that assertions in natural language are basic speech acts, which *refer* to an external reality, pointed directly in metalanguage.

The face value theory for assertions in religious language runs exactly the same way, with the same consequences:

*Example 3* 'God is omnipotent' means [God is omnipotent].

The [omnipotence of God] is a fact (however not 'empirical') to which – according to the intention of the speaker – he or she refers by using the sentence 'God is omnipotent'.

In opposition to the realist theory stays the 'antirealist theory'. According to the antirealist theory there are no genuine assertions of religious language. Of course, antirealists do not deny that religious speakers use the sentences of the superficial grammar-form of

assertion. But antirealists deny that these sentences are *in fact* assertions. In consequence, the semantical antirealists's analysis of the 'religious assertions' runs in a quite different way. The exact direction of this way of analysis depends on the antirealists's presuppositions about which illocutionary acts are *in fact* expressed by apparent religious assertions. For example, for religious emotivist the possible analysis of the sentence above runs as follows:

*Example 4* 'God is omnipotent' *means* [User of the sentence 'God is omnipotent' is expressing by this sentence his admiration for unpredictability of his or her life]

Of course, this is not so elegant as the previous analysis. Moreover, the semantical operator *means* in this case cannot be so easily substituted for *is true, if and only if*. When assertion is true, it is *true of* something, namely the object of predication in the object-language – this feature is conserved on the metalanguage side. If the sentence 'Snow is white' is true, it is expressed also in the metalanguage sentence [snow is white]. We cannot do the same for the antirealist analysis of 'God is omnipotent'. If in this case '*means*' means '*is true, if and only if*', objects of the two sentences (in object language and metalanguage) are different. If 'God is omnipotent' is true, it is true about God, but if [User of the sentence 'God is omnipotent' is expressing his admiration for unpredictability of his or her life] is true, is true about language-speaker, or his or her language practice. We can see that *truth* is not a basic concept of antirealist theory. Instead, for antirealist the basic concept is *truth-in-certain-circumstances*, or *context* or *justification* – all of them explain the meaning in terms of rules internal to language practice and not in terms of relation between language practice and reality by the concept of *truth*.

## Argument against semantic antirealism

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My argument against antirealism in semantics for religious language follows from the observation that both historically and systematically this kind of antirealism is a consequence of empiricism in epistemology. It is probably true for all semantic theories of natural language that they presuppose some kind of epistemology. This is what I call 'the foundation of semantics' in the title of my paper. Empiricism in the mainstream epistemology is no longer a plausible or unproblematic stance. It is striking that it is still so powerful in the philosophy of religion.

Antirealism in the philosophy of religious language restricts 'normal' or 'conservative' analysis of meaning of assertions to the *empirical statements*. This is exactly the claim of empiricism: there is a class of privileged sentences, privileged part of language with 'direct' access to reality, namely the empirical sentences (most notably in the systematic form of empirical science). We can speak about 'expressing a belief about reality' only in cases of empirical statements. The crucial aim of antirealism in philosophy of religious language is to distinguish religious assertions from the proper assertions, namely the empirical one. So it is a kind of a "local" antirealism because it proposes antirealist analysis of assertion in one region of language, namely in the religious context. A presupposition of this local antirealism is realism in the case of empirical assertions. Only in these cases – according to empiricism – can we analyse the meaning of assertions in

terms of truth. What is more striking is that this empirical approach is present also in works of philosophers, who are global antirealists (it means also antiempiricists), like Wittgenstein and his followers. By “global” antirealists I mean philosophers, who normally deny that there is a need and possibility of ‘realist’ analysis in any region of language. They make an exception and abandon antiempiricist views in the case of religion. For sure, if empiricism is true, it is impossible to make genuine true assertions about non-empirical objects, like God.

In the mainstream contemporary philosophy of language and epistemology as such (not only in epistemology of religion or philosophy of religious language) there is a massive trend against empiricism. Kant’s notion of empirical intuition has been criticized by Jaakko Hintikka, logical-positivist notion of ‘sense-data’ and ‘observational reports’ has been criticized by Sellars, Quine, McDowell and many others. Empiricism in semantic theory for natural language has been rejected by Wittgenstein himself in *Philosophical Investigations*. All of these well-known attacks show that it is impossible to specify empirical vocabulary as a ‘central’ part of language with direct access to the reality. All of our ‘empirical observations’ are from the very beginning deeply mediated in our conceptual frameworks, global theories and language-practices. Moreover, it is a common practice in everyday life that we use the statements (or predictions, expectations) *about* physical object without direct ‘empirical’ experience of it. Contemporary advanced physical theories are a striking example of this usage of conceptual speculation in the investigation of reality.

Of course, the majority of contemporary antiempiricists suffer from the constant temptation to global antirealism: they deny the privileged status of empirical vocabulary *because* there is no way to ‘access’ to the reality at all. Wittgenstein, Sellars, Quine (with some reservations) but even more explicitly Davidson, Rorty and Brandom are the best known examples of this global antirealism *and* antiempiricism. They are not simply *local* antirealists in questions concerning some part of natural language (for example religious language) but global antirealists: they deny that any part of natural language is privileged in terms of ‘access’ to reality. Antirealist theory analysed above is always a local antirealism and presupposes semantic realism in theory of empirical assertions. Global antirealism is also an important challenge for global realistic semantics, which is a minor but still present trend in post Wittgensteinian philosophy of language (key figures in this ‘resistance movement’ are Geach, Anscombe, MacIntyre and McDowell). The most important argument against global antirealism is that it is at odds with everyday practice of *referring to* some objects and cannot explain this practice, but only *explain it away* (by reducing to other practices or ignoring it).

## Conclusion

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I would like to end my paper with two concluding remarks. First, the realistic semantics is a better, simpler and more powerful theory of assertions in natural language. We should always – as far as it is possible – prefer ‘conservative’ face-value analysis which respects apparent grammar form of the expression. We should not propose non-conservative, reductive semantic analysis without any special reason. The reductionist explanation

requires stronger presuppositions and is more complicated. The face-value explanation leaves “everything as it is”[1] – this is a reason why face-value theory is always better (if is plausible). The *onus probandi* in the discussion about the ‘semantic peculiarity’ of religious language is on the side of antirealists. However, their main argument so far – the empiricist one – failed.

Second, the truly ‘post secular’ approach to religion requires a uniform semantic theory for religious language as a part of natural language. The semantic exclusion of religion from the truth-conditional semantics is a relict of a secular empiricist philosophy. If we really want to do justice to religious communities, we should respect their intention to have *true beliefs about...* Meanwhile post secular thinkers and Wittgenstein deny that religious people have genuine religious *beliefs-about*. Ironically, this antirealist argumentation is an attempt to defend religion against attacks of radical empiricists and rationalists in Vienna Circle style. However, this defence, in fact, takes for granted empiricist’s presupposition about truth-validity of assertions. If this post secular antirealism is a fideistic ‘defence’ of religion, then ‘the implications of this defence of belief are more fatal to it than any attack could be.’[2]

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[1] L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G.E.M. Anscombe, Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1986, p. 49.

[2] A. MacIntyre, *Is Understanding Religion Compatible with Believing?* In: Hick J. (eds.) *Faith and the Philosophers*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1964, p 133.

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