

SITUATING LANGUAGE AND CONSCIOUSNESS

by

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Abstract

Language and consciousness enrich our lives. But they are rare commodities; most creatures are languageless and unconscious. This dissertation is about the conditions that distinguish the haves from the have-nots.

The semantic properties of a natural language expression are determined by conventions governing the way speakers use the expression to communicate information. The capacity to speak a language involves highly specialized (perhaps even modular) cognition. Some authors think that one cannot consistently accept both views. In Chapter 1 ('Content and Competence') I explain why one can.

According to the convention-based theory of content determination, propositions are fit to be the contents of both thought and speech. Recently, this view has been challenged. The challenge exploits a series of observations about what it takes to understand semantically incomplete sentences. In Chapter 2 ('Speaker Meaning in Context'), I explain how the challenge can be met.

Physicalists seem to owe an explanatory debt. Why should psychophysical relations appear contingent? In Chapter 3 ('There Couldn't Have Been Zombies, but it's a Lucky Coincidence That There Aren't') I pay the debt on their behalf. My explanation proceeds in three steps. First, I observe that there are necessary coincidences, or accidents. Second, I show that traditional epistemological arguments for dualism merely establish that phenomenal states and corresponding physical states are accidentally, or coincidentally, related. Finally, I suggest that inattention to the distinction between coincidence/accidentality and contingency results in frequent equivocation. Thus the disposition to (correctly) judge that psychophysical relations are coincidences

manifests itself as a disposition to (incorrectly) judge that psychophysical relations are contingent.

In Chapter 4 ('Zombies are Inconceivable') I deny that psychophysical relations appear contingent. The chapter begins with an argument to the effect that zombies cannot be coherently conceived. I then consider and reject various ways of resisting the argument.

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