

The Meaning of “Water”: An Unsolved Problem

William G. Lycan

University of North Carolina and EastCarolinaUniversity

WATER ...I. The liquid of which seas, lakes, and rivers are composed, and which falls as rain and issues from springs. When pure, it is transparent, colourless (except as seen in large quantity, when it has a blue tint), tasteless, and inodorous.

—*Oxford English Dictionary*

...the fact that an English speaker in 1750 might have called XYZ “water,” whereas he or his successors would not have called XYZ water in 1800 or 1850 does not mean that the “meaning” of “water” changed for the average speaker in the interval. In 1750 or in 1850 or in 1950 one might have pointed to, say, the liquid in Lake Michigan as an example of “water.” What changed was that in 1750 we would have mistakenly thought that XYZ bore the relation *same_L* to the liquid in Lake Michigan, whereas in 1800 or 1850 we would have known that it did not.

—Hilary Putnam^[1]

I Over thirty years ago, we all learned from Kripke and Putnam that the extension of a natural-kind term such as “water” is determined by the relevant natural kind—in “water”’s case, the chemical kind, H₂O. And, if less obviously, so is that term’s intension determined by that kind: “Water” designates H₂O in every possible world in which water exists. (Hence, necessarily, if molecular duplicates, water = H₂O.)

Putnamian natural-kind externalists refer us to the planet Twin Earth, a molecular duplicate of Earth except for the watery stuff there being a different chemical substance, XYZ. The externalists hold that the word “water” as used on Twin Earth does not designate what our word “water” does: H₂O and XYZ are simply different substances. The sentence “Water is usually liquid” is true in English iff H₂O is usually liquid, while the same(-spelled) sentence is true in Twin English iff XYZ is usually liquid, a quite different state of affairs. And our word “water” and the Twin English word “water” generate different functions from possible worlds to extensions.

Moreover, consider a single possible world containing both H₂O and XYZ. Our “water” applies at that world just to the H₂O and not to the XYZ, while Twin “water” applies to the XYZ but not to the H₂O, so the two words can hardly have the same meaning.

2 But what does the English word “water” mean? It is important to see that H₂O is not the answer, even though “water” rigidly designates H₂O and H₂O is the word’s intension (in the sense that “water” specifies a function that spits out H₂O at every world). For many English speakers know the word’s meaning perfectly well even though they have never heard of H₂O and have no chemical concepts at all. And as Putnam seems to concede in the passage quoted above, “water” meant what it means in English long before Watt and Lavoisier, and we do not suppose that the word’s meaning changed by their discoveries. So we cannot say that the meaning of “water” is its intension.

So, a puzzle: “Water” must mean something different as between Earth and Twin Earth, because the same-spelled words designate different natural kinds in those speech communities. The natural kind H₂O is the intension of the (Earth) English word. Yet that intension is not the English word’s meaning. So the fact that the words name different natural kinds does not after all show that “water” means something different as between Earth and Twin Earth—but it was our only reason for believing in such a difference in the first place.

Now, Putnam said in the second epigraph to this paper that “water” did not change its meaning between 1750 and 1850. But we cannot maintain both that meaning determines reference and that linguistic meaning is “in the head,” for the Twin-Earth example shows that what is in the head does not determine reference. We must choose, and for his part Putnam would rather preserve the Fregean idea that meaning determines reference than hold on to the commonsensical notion that meaning is in the head (op. cit., p. 704). He argues as before that English “water” and Twin-English “water” differ in meaning. It follows that they always did differ in meaning, from the day they were both coined.

Our reasons for rejecting the first option—to say that “water” has the same meaning on Earth and on Twin Earth...? ... may be illustrated thus: Suppose “water” has the same meaning on Earth and on Twin Earth. Now, let the word “water” become phonemically different on Twin Earth—say, it becomes “quaxel.” Presumably, this is not a change in meaning per se, on any view. So “water” and “quaxel” have the same meaning (although they refer to different liquids). But this is highly counterintuitive. Why not say, then, that “elm” in my idiolect has the same meaning as “beech” in your idiolect, although they refer to different trees? (p. 710n)

3 I do not accept the “quaxel” argument.^[2] It comes close to begging the question. Of course we grant the referential difference, and the stipulated merely phonemic difference. But everything else on Twin Earth is the same as here, as regards anything any ever thought was pertinent to meaning: everyday verification condition, inferential role, “use” of various sorts. Putnam has in effect just asserted that referential difference entails meaning difference no matter what.^[3]

In fact, turning Putnam on his head and simultaneously borrowing his own idea as expressed in the second epigraph, there is an argument to show that “water” on Twin Earth does mean what our “water” means.

1. In 1750 on either planet, there was nothing to make a difference in meaning between English “water” and Twin English “water” but the chemical distinctness of the substances referred to.
 2. In 1750 on each planet, the chemical natures and hence the chemical distinctness were entirely unknown, and had no effect on linguistic competence or linguistic practice.
 3. If X has no effect on linguistic competence or linguistic practice, then X cannot make a meaning difference.
- ∴ 4. In 1750 on either planet, there was no difference in meaning between English “water” and Twin English “water.” [1,2,3]
5. The meaning of English “water” did not change between 1750 and the present.
 6. The meaning of Twin English “water” did not change between 1750 and the present.
- ∴ 7. There is no present difference in meaning between English “water” and Twin English “water.” [4,5,6, transitivity]

4 These considerations could be taken to show that Putnam’s externalism was wrong from the beginning. That suspicion is supported by the intuitions of many uninitiates. Circa 1973, some professional philosophers were at first quite unconvinced that XYZ is not water; they held that XYZ and H₂O are just two different kinds of water, even as (Putnam himself admits) jadeite and nephrite are two different kinds of jade. That intuition soon dwindled to tiny-minority status, though it has not disappeared.^[4] Perhaps, as Rob Cummins would say, those who voiced it were just invited to any more conferences—and the preeminence of the externalist intuition is a sociological artifact of Putnam’s (then) scientists backed up by his charisma and professional stature.

In further support of that suggestion, there is the reaction of neophyte undergraduates to being taught Putnam. In my experience at least, they put up considerable resistance. I can get them to admit that *there is a sense in which XYZ is not water*, but few go any further with Putnam. So it may be that Putnam’s externalism is just mistaken, and the English word (as opposed to the philosophers’ word) does mean roughly what the *OED* says it does.

But remember Putnam’s previous negative case.^[5] Dictionary definitions such as the *OED*’s do not give meanings, in the sense of the entries’ being correct in virtue of meaning. For the features mentioned in them are not analytically implied by the term defined.^[6] Let us look back at the *OED*’s definition of “waters” (first epigraph to this paper): “The liquid of which seas, lakes, and rivers are composed...”. It is an entirely contingent fact that there are seas, lakes, and rivers; water could exist perfectly well without them... “[A]nd which falls as rain and issues from springs”: Likewise: “When pure, it is transparent, colourless (except as seen in large quantity, when it has a blue tint), tasteless, and inodorous...”. These properties depend on the contingent structure of human sensory systems; had we a different sort of taste buds, for example, water might taste in some way to us. Nothing whatever in the *OED* entry is analytically implied by “water.”

Likewise, remember examples such as “cat.” If anything were analytically true of cats, it would be that they are animals. But as Putnam pointed out,^[7] it is not analytic that cats are animals; they could have turned out to be robots originally planted on Earth by Martians.

And here for your delectation are some of the *OED*’s definitions for other natural-kind terms highlighted by Putnam:

TIGER ...1. A large carnivorous feline quadruped, *Felis tigris*, one of the two largest living felines, a catlike mammalian animal, in colour tawny yellow with blackish transverse stripes and white belly; widely distributed in Asia, and proverbial for its ferocity and cunning; ...

gold ...1.1. The most precious metal: characterized by a beautiful yellow colour, non-liability to rust, high specific gravity, and great malleability and ductility. Chemical symbol Au. ...

elm ...1. The name of various trees belonging to the genus *Ulmus*, esp., in England, the Common or Small-leaved Elm (*Ulmus campestris*), a tree having rough, doubly serrated leaves, flowers nearly sessile, the fruit oblong, deeply cloven and glabrous; in Scotland, the Wych elm (*Ulmus Montana*) or the Cork-barked Elm (*Ulmus subserna*), in U.S. the White Elm (*Ulmus americana*). ...

beech ...1. a. A well-known forest tree indigenous to Europe and Western Asia, having fine thin smooth bark, and glossy oval leaves; its buds and foliage form a dense mass, and it bears triquetrous nuts (called *mast*) placed in pairs in a row or prickly involucre. It has several ornamental varieties distinguished by the colour or shape of the leaves, as the purple, copper, and Fern-leaved Beech. ...

aluminium [Al] A metal, white, sonorous, ductile, and malleable, very light, not oxidized in the air, used for instruments, ornaments, and as an alloy. It has chemical symbol Al, is tetraatomic, has *aluminium* as its oxide, and the *alums* as its chief salts.

molybdenum ... A metallic element (symbol Mo) occurring in combination, as in molybdenite, wulfenite, etc. ...

lemons ...1.1. A fabulous and legendary animal usually regarded as having the body of a horse with a single horn projecting from its forehead...; the *monoceros* of the ancients.

unicorn ...1. An ovate fruit with a pale yellow rind, and an acid juice. Largely used for making a beverage and for flavouring. The juice yields citric acid; the rind yields oil or essence of lemons, used in cookery and perfumery; ...

red ...1. Having, or characterized by, the colour which appears at the lower or least refracted end of the visible spectrum, and is familiar in nature as that of blood, fire, various flowers (as the poppy and rose) and ripe fruits (whence the frequent similes *red as blood, fire, a rose, cherry*, etc.) ... [This entry goes for *seven* and a *half* more huge *OED* pages. Read them and find out for sure what “red” means.]

Thus, Quine was right in his famous quip about dictionaries and encyclopedias: The *OED* itself may be part dictionary, but it is mostly encyclopedia. Hardly anything—if anything—in an entry for a natural-kind term is analytically implied by that term.

By the same token, David Lewis’ method of platitudes will not work.^[8] “Water” cannot mean *substance that satisfies most of the commonsense beliefs about water*, because there are countless possible worlds in which water satisfies few if any of the platitudes. (Also, some natural-kind terms have no associated platitudes whatever. There are no commonsense beliefs about proscodonyum, or about *upupa epops*, the Eurasian hoopoe. Of course those words may be considered theoretical terms, and then Lewis would say that they are implicitly defined by their containing theories, but even if so, ordinary speakers do not know the theoretical definitions.)

What, then, is the pre-chemistry meaning of “water”? This paper’s main contention is that this is a very tough question, and should receive much more attention than it has from philosophers of language.

5 An obvious cue comes from David Kaplan, (during the same period and without either coincidentally) pointed out that we have two types of linguistic meaning, which correspond rather nicely to his technical notions of “character” and “content.”^[9] Content is a proposition introduced by truth-condition, a function from possible worlds to truth-values. Character is a function from contexts of utterance to contents. Kaplan invokes character to accommodate deixis, especially in English long before Frege, the character of the sentence “I need sleep now” incorporates the rules that “I” refers to the speaker and that “now” refers to the time of utterance,^[10] so that in a particular context the sentence expresses the proposition, that that very person (who spoke) needs sleep at that time.

Kaplan argues that character is a more appropriate bearer of the title of “meaning” than is content. An English speaker who comes into a room and sees a token of the sentence “I have not slept since Thursday” written on a piece of paper obviously knows that the sentence means, even if s/he does not know what singular proposition has been expressed in the context. So perhaps “water”’s meaning is its character.

On this model, the leading candidate would be something indexical, something like “whatever real stuff-kind shares the nature of *that there*,” where the speaker is pointing at a sample of water (= H₂O) to define the term ostensively (p. 702). And Putnam endorses that suggestion. Actually he offers several alternate indexical formulations: “Water” means, “stuff that bears...[the same-nature relation] to the water around *here*” (p. 710, italics supplied), but that definition is obviously circular. Also, “the same stuff as we call ‘water’”—but that would falsely make the kind term metalinguistic. For purposes of initial discussion I speak to the ostensive definition model.

There are daunting objections to that proposal. First, indexicals are devices of direct reference and commit speakers to the existence of their referents. If I point at the stuff in the glass and say “that,” I thereby refer to that particular sample of water, and make it part of the content of what I am saying, just as when I point at a light switch and say, “That one turns on the porch light.” But it is absurd to think that when anyone uses the word “water,” they are even tacitly referring to any particular sample of water. And since different people’s uses of the word would be grounded in different ostendings, “water” would have a different meaning for each of us. (This is not to deny that Kripkean *reference-fixers* for “water” contain just such indexical elements; of course they do. But, notoriously, to fix reference is not to fix sense.)

A move of Sellars^[11] will solve that problem. It is to replace the singular reference to a sample by deferred reference via an ostended *exemplar*. When I point at the stuff in the glass, I refer, not to it, but the kind of which it is a characteristic instance. It is as if in response to your asking what color my new car is, I were to point at a recent copy of *Philosophical Issues* and say “That color.” In so speaking, I do not refer to the particular sample I am pointing at, but only to the kind considered as a type; the sample does not enter into the truth-condition of what I have said.

But what about other natural-kind terms, like “unicorn” and “phlogiston”? No one has ever demonstrated a sample of any nonexistent kind, nor have there ever been such samples “around here.” If we assume that empty kind terms have the same type of meaning that referring ones do, the indexicality view fails. However, Putnam might reply in Sellarsian style by appealing to deferred ostension, as when we point to a picture of a unicorn, or an effluvium thought to be phlogiston. The reference to an unexemplified kind might succeed even if the alleged exemplar is unreal and the kind nonexistent.

But further objections loom.

- (1) Ordinary uses of “water” are not usually accompanied by demonstrations of any kind, much less of a sample of water. (Though this does not touch the “around here” formulation.)

- (2) Even when a use of “water” is accompanied by a demonstration, the “this” or “that there” might, on any given occasion, be demonstrating something that is thought by the speaker to be water but is not, as in Putnam’s own “gin” example.^[12] If one’s use of “water” on that occasion happened to have been grounded in such an error, the indexicality view predicts that the word would mean gin rather than water. (That does not touch the “around here” formulation either.)

- (3) Tyler Burge (op. cit., pp. 103-05) points out that the proposal suffers from being false. If “water” were indexical, an Earthing who visited Twin Earth, demonstrated some XYZ and said “There is some water” would be speaking truly, for XYZ is the stuff-kind that shares the nature of “that there,” and is also the watery stuff “around here,” i.e., on Twin Earth.^[13]

There is a further indexicality option, though I have never seen it defended as such. Instead of indicating a local sample or otherwise referring to the environment, let the indexical home on *the speaker* and/or the speaker’s original linguistic community. E.g., perhaps “water” means “the watery stuff found in *my* neighborhood of origin,” or (again) “the same stuff as we call ‘water.’” Such proposals avoid all three of our objections, because no sample is demonstrated and those particular indexicals do not shift their references when we get to Twin Earth.

But such a move has a permanent liability. (4) I had earlier complained against the second of the latter proposals that it makes the kind term metalinguistic; indeed, it makes “water” mean something about the word “water” itself, which seems intolerable. The first proposal contains a different sort of substantive characterization, “watery stuff.” If “watery stuff” means all or even some of the features cited in the *OED* entry discussed in the preceding section, then it should not appear as part of the meaning of “water,” because none of those features is analytically implied by the term.

The problem generalizes. If “water” is pegged indexically to me or to my community, it must be so pegged by way of some relational predicate. The predicate will be a substantive one, and inevitably not one that is analytically implied by “water.” (This also afflicts the earlier “around here” version.)

And finally: (5) I know of no linguistic evidence that natural-kind terms contain any indexical element. “Water” bears neither syntactic nor semantic marks of indexicality. (a) As we have seen, “water” bears no discernible semantic relation to any demonstrative or personal pronoun. (b) Nor is there the slightest evidence of syntactic lexical decomposition, such as nominalization into the term itself (cp. “Bluto vomited, but he cleaned it up promptly”). (c) Unlike “flat” or “tall,” “water” is not a comparative adjective; there is no issue of contextual standards of strictness. (And needless to say it does not take comparatives.) (d) I can think of no context in which an Earthing and a Twin Earthing visitor to Earth could respectively assert and deny the same (otherwise nonindexical and unequivocal) sentence containing “water” without one of them being in error—“Even in the Jornada del Muerto there is some water,” “People drink water every day,” etc., in contrast to “It’s raining here;” “This field is flat.”

To borrow Putnam’s own famous colloquialism:^[14] Cut the pie any way you like, the meaning of “water” just ain’t indexical.

Yet substantive predicates, and something like “waterish” in particular, may still figure in the meaning of “water” even though “water” is not indexical and those predicates are not analytically implied. That is the basis of our next attempt to specify the meaning of “water.”

6 There is a now well-known development of Kaplan’s “character” idea that dispenses with indexicals: Frank Jackson’s and David Chalmers’ notion of *A-intension* (Jackson) or “primary intension” (Chalmers).^[15] They appeal to the now familiar distinction made by Davies and Humberstone.^[16] What we ordinarily think of as the intension of a general term is the usual function from possible worlds to the term’s instances at those worlds; the intension of “water” sucks up all the water and spits out all the water, i.e., the H₂O, found in that world. But this is only the term’s “C-” (Jackson) or “secondary” (Chalmers) intension, because it is what we get when we ask ourselves “what the term applies to under various counterfactual hypotheses” (Jackson, p. 48). But in

addition, it is maintained, the term has an “A-intension,” which is what we get when “we are considering, for each world *w*, what the term applies to in *w*, given or under the supposition that *w* is the actual world, our world” (ibid.).^[17] The *A-intension* is Jackson’s candidate for the meaning of a term, and accordingly is what our “water” and the Twin Earthlings’ same-spelled word have in common despite their disparate referents.

(Incidentally, I came to this literature through Jackson’s work in philosophy of mind,^[18] and because of his retro and evil use of it in that area, followed by Chalmers’ even more pernicious version, I conceived a poisonous dislike of the whole idea. But if we return to the present purely linguistic problem, I find myself much more sympathetic. Indeed I now see why Jackson feels his view *must* be true. Surely, “water” does have a pre-scientific meaning that presupposes no empirical discoveries. I could almost join in that winking of the “surely” operator, even before I had thought of my own argument for its importance.)

The notion of “considering a world as actual” is not at all clear, and has been shown to admit of several importantly different versions.^[19] But for present purposes let us say it is this: We stipulate and hold fixed that on Twin Earth and any other relevant twin planet and possible world, “water” is a natural-kind term and works semantically much as it does here. That is, it refers to a chemical substance that is the underlying scientific essence of the familiar liquid in question, but its reference is fixed by superficial descriptions such as are found in the *OED* (“the liquid of which seas, lakes, and rivers are composed, and which falls as rain and issues from springs”). Everything else about English is held fixed also.

Then we can generate Jackson’s *A-intension* for the term “water.” At any world in which the expression “water” is used as we use it except for there being a different underlying substance, it will refer to whatever substance “plays the watery role” there (p. 50), which role is given by standard Kripkean this-worldly reference-fixers for which (p. 49). So, even for us in the actual world, “water” has a kind of nonrigid reference or meaning along with its normal, rigid referential meaning. Thus, “water”’s nonrigid meaning for us, stuff that plays the watery or watery role. And that intension is a world-independent kind of meaning, as Dorit Bar-On has put it.

Notice that this is “meaning” in a weaker sense than usual. It does not generate the usual analyticities: It is no longer analytic that water falls as rain and issues from springs, etc. (At best it is analytic that “whatever is *actually* water falls as rain and issues from springs.”) So we have the idea of a *watery task* in the explication of “water”: Not to give a synonym, that preserves the term’s analytic connections, but to point to only a lesser kind of “meaning”—though in a sense of the “m-” word which is arguably more worthy. At present it is roughly, once again, Kaplan’s idea of character, we just specify the function from utterance contexts to intensions. (Though, again, Jackson and Chalmers think this particular kind of character also yields a synonym, once we insert the rigidifier “actual”: “whatever actually ‘plays the watery role.’”)

My problem with all this is that I do not believe that English words have *A-intensions*. To generate an *A-intension*, one needs a transworld “role,” as in “plays the watery role.” Such roles are supposed to be constituted by reference-fixing descriptions, that are the same across the relevant worlds. That requires that an English word have a distinctive and stable set of reference-fixers. But the latter pretty clearly does not obtain. Reference-fixers are rarely enshrined in the public language;^[20] they are private to individual speakers at particular times.

Of course, dictionary entries contain common stereotypical information about water, and philosophers have had no trouble coming up with sets of stereotypical reference-fixers such as the ones deployed in the *OED*. There is a loose body of information about water that we 21st-century Americans share with most of our fellow English speakers. That seems to constitute a “watery role.” But there being such a body of information is a highly contingent social and environmental fact. One could introduce the word “water” even if there were neither seas nor lakes nor rivers nor rain nor springs, etc., by reference to some other mode of acquaintance with water. In fact, even the collective body of all the reference-fixers that have ever been mentioned in the Putnam literature is expendable. There would always be other reference-fixers for “water,” so long as there were (real or imaginary) water around affecting us in some way—just by making a trickling sound, or looking purple, or feeling slippery. And “water” would still mean just what it does now, in real-world English, even if its reference were fixed, in some context, by descriptions entirely different from the usual ones. (N.b., In saying that, I am not begging the question by just insisting that “water” means H₂O; we already know that “water” does not mean H₂O.)

Oddly enough, it is not a linguistic fact that “water” satisfies the descriptions that we find in dictionaries. As we have seen, when it comes to natural-kind terms, dictionaries contain mostly or entirely nonlinguistic, encyclopedic information. The difference between what information turns up in real dictionaries and what information does not is not only the difference between information that is, though entirely contingent, widely known among a particular dictionary’s intended readership, and information that is not so widely known. (But even that is not quite right. Dictionaries often *actively try* to be encyclopedias, in supplying not just obviously contingent information but technical nuggets such as chemical symbols.)

Uphshot: If “water” has no distinctive, stable set of reference-fixers, it has no associated stereotypical “watery role.” If it has no such role, it has no *A-intension*. (More recently, Jackson and Chalmers have themselves backed off the idea that *A-intensions* are public linguistic meanings or types of meaning analogous to Kaplanian characters.^[21] They kick *A-intensions* upstairs and diffusely so, into individual minds at particular times. I have different sorts of objections to the resulting account, but that is outside the purview of this paper.)

What are our remaining options? We can weaken our demands still further.

7 Putnam’s own mature theory (“The Meaning of ‘Meaning’” expresses the meaning of a natural-kind term in a “normal form”: <Syntactic markers, semantic markers, stereotype, extension> (p. 191). This manifests a still weaker conception of the task, because the normal form does not afford analyticities of any sort at all, even though the stereotype is “part of meaning” in the sense that if you do not know the stereotype, then, to the same extent, you do not know the meaning.

This is not bad, though given my argument in section 3 above, we would have to toss out “extension.” But as before, I deny that natural-kind terms have fixed stereotypes as parts of their meanings, for the same reason that they do not have *A-intensions*.

8 As an even further alternative, we might consider giving up the assumption of shared public meanings for natural-kind terms, bizarre as that sounds. We might suppose that such terms refer directly, without senses that go beyond their simple designating function, just as pronouns and (in California) proper names do. They have no meanings but the kinds that are their referents. Their references are fixed on particular occasions by casual and ephemeral ostendings or descriptions in the minds of speakers. That is not to deny that “water” has a public pre-chemistry meaning. Its pre-chemistry meaning is that it refers directly to H₂O, even though speakers do not know that. (I am not sure who defends this Proper Names view unequivocally. Scott Soames is the best candidate I know.^[22])

Like Putnam’s normal-form position, this theory is largely supported by our *OED* entries; at least, those entries seem to contain nothing but contingent reference-fixers, just as do dictionary entries for proper names of historical figures. And “water” is grammatically singular.

But the Proper Names theory faces formidable objections. First, as noted above, it implies that pre-chemistry speakers simply did not know the word’s meaning, which is pretty bad.^[23] Second, the Names view suffers from the same liabilities as do Millian or Direct Reference theories of proper names: chiefly, overabundance of meaning (there being, allegedly, no sense whatever in which co-referring names do not everywhere substitute salva veritate), Frege’s Puzzle, the fact of empty names, and the truth of negative existentials. These are horrible problems, and DR proponents tend to turn a blind eye to their horribleness, though I think the least implausible solutions have been offered by Soames in *Beyond Rigidity* (op. cit.).

Those problems can be avoided by switching to a Kinder, Gentler, attenuated version of DR, defended by me.^[24] That version reintroduces private conceptual/computational roles for names, which are a kind of meaning over and above the referent. But since they are private to individuals at particular times, they inherit the original Names view’s denial that natural-kind terms have shared public meanings.

As noted above, Jackson and Chalmers have suggested bringing *A-intensions* back into the mind; “water” will have different *A-intensions* for different people at different times. But this is less defensible than my computational-role account. For one thing, I question whether, for every English speaker and every time, there is at that time in that speaker a determinate *A-intension* for “water.” In fact, it seems obvious that there is not. If a person is probed (“What stuff do you mean by ‘water’??? Quick, now!”), that person will be able to cough up a description,^[25] but that does not show that the description existed uniquely as such in her/his mind prior to the probe.

Also, it is repugnant at best to give up publicity. A word’s meaning in a natural language is a meaning shared by at least a number of speakers of that language.

Third: the late Paul Ziff used to maintain that proper names are not lexemes of particular natural languages. I agree. True, “Lycan” is a pre-spelling version of the common Swedish word “lyckan,” and “William” is the specifically English form of a name that occurs in other languages as “Guillaume,” “Giuglielmo,” etc. But *my* name is “William Lycan” anywhere in the world, and it is to be used untranslated by a speaker of any other language. A German cannot translate the English sentence “William Lycan loves Mary Lycan” as “Wilhelm als Guillek liebt Maria Gluck.”

The same is far from true of natural-kind terms. *Of course* “water” translates into “das Wasser,” “l’ean,” “vatten” (Swedish), “waii” (Maori), etc. And “Maria hat gern wasser zu trinken” is simply ungrammatical in German, or any other existing language.^[26]

Finally, fourth, the Names view loses the distinction between same-kind terms that are synonymous and those that are not. “Coffee,” “java” and “joe” are synonymous in American English, but “coffee” is not synonymous with the botanical genus term “Coffea” (as in “coffee canephora,” “coffea liberica,” etc.); that kind identity was discovered empirically. “Gorse” and “furze” are synonymous, but neither means the same as their Linnean binominal species-essences.^[27]

9 One further suggestion has been made to me in conversation by each of several colleagues: inflexibility. The idea is that “gorse” does have a meaning over and above its reference to H₂O—it might be thought of as an abstract Fregean sense—but we have no way of expressing or describing that meaning. No law of logic says that if an English word has a meaning, that meaning can be expressed or even described in other words of English.

The first half of the latter point is importantly right. There is no reason why any one English expression should have another, distinct English expression as a synonym. (This matters, I have argued elsewhere, in certain disputes over free will and over the mind-body problem.^[28]) But I balk at “or even described.” We have seen that all terms—Putnam’s normal form—to describe “water”’s meaning without offering any sort of synonym. I have argued that that particular attempt failed. But I see no general reason why, if the word has a meaning, it not have been *described* at all.

“Water” does not mean H₂O. But “water” does not mean anything else either. Our conclusion seems to be that “water” is meaningless.^[29]

Footnotes

[1] “Meaning and Reference,” *Journal of Philosophy* 70 (1973): 702-03.

[2] Also, Putnam’s own “indexical” model (to be discussed below) predicts shared meaning? as he himself says, on the model of “I. The must have been thinking of meanings as intensions.

[3] Tyler Burge joins Putnam in denying that there is any sameness of meaning between our word “water” and the Twin Earthlings’ word (“Other Bodies,” in A. Woodfield (ed.), *Thought and Object* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982)). He does not argue explicitly for the claim, but he does observe (p. 110) that truth-value is at issue. The truth-conditions of my sentences containing “water” involve H₂O, while those of Twin Bill’s sentences involve XYZ. Were I to be transported unbeknownst to Twin Earth and to start flinging “water” sentences, I would say many false things, even though the same sentences uttered by the Twin Earthlings would be true. Does that not establish right there that “water” cannot mean the same thing as we have between English and Twin English?

No, for much the same reason Putnam’s “quaxel” argument failed. The difference in truth-conditions shows that the terms differ in the same way. But we have already seen that “water”’s meaning (whatever it may be) is not its intension.

Incidentally, even if “water”’s meaning does differ as between Earth and Twin Earth, Burge has given us no pointers to either of those meanings. Indeed, since they are not the differing intensions H₂O and XYZ, and since Burge himself has refuted the hypothesis that “water” is indexical (see below), he has made the matter even more mysterious.

[4] J.R. Searle, *Intentionality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), Ch. 8; J.F. Rosenberg, *Beyond Formalism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), Ch. 1; Gabriel Segal, *A Slim Book about Narrow Content* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).

[5] “It Ain’t Necessarily So,” *Journal of Philosophy* 59 (1962): 658-71; “The Analytic and the Synthetic,” in H. Feigl and G. Maxwell (eds.), *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science, Vol. III* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1966) Kripke endorses such arguments in “Naming and Necessity,” in D. Davidson and G. Harman (eds.), *Semantics of Natural Language* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1972), Lecture III; for his best developed view of natural-kind terms, see the second of his John Locke Lectures (“Reference and Existence,” Oxford University, 1973).

[6] That is, not even if one believes in modalities and is not a Quinean skeptic about it. Let us grant for argument that the standard examples of analytic sentences are indeed true in virtue of meaning alone.

[7] “It Ain’t Necessarily So,” p. 166.

For the same reasons, I pass over the Wittgensteinian view that natural-kind terms are “family resemblance” or “cluster” expressions, i.e., that to be in the extension of “water” one need only have “enough” of the stereotypical properties on a list. What I take Putnam to have shown is that there could be water that did not have any of the stereotypical properties. (More on this below.)

[8] “Psychophysical and Theoretical Identifications,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 50 (1972): 249-258. I hasten to say that I do not know whether Lewis would have wanted his method applied to “water.”

[9] “On the Logic of Demonstratives,” in P. French, T.E. Uehling and H. Wettstein (eds.), *Contemporary Perspectives in the Philosophy of Language* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977).

[10] It should at least be mentioned that such character rules have lots of exceptions; “I” does not always refer to the speaker, nor “now” to the time of utterance. The real rules would be very complicated.

[11] *Meaning and Reference* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967).

[12] If...I am—unknown to me—pointing to a glass of gin and not a glass of water, then I do not intend my ostensive definition to be accepted” (“Meaning and Reference,” p. 702). Yes!

[13] Burge adds a second argument (p. 105), that “water” interpreted as *it is in English* does not shift its extension with shifts of speakers...The fact that the Twin-Earthians apply “water” to XYZ is not a reflection of a shift in extension of an indexical expression with a fixed linguistic (English) meaning, but of a shift in meaning between one language, and linguistic community, and another. I agree that there is no shift that feels at all like an indexical shift, but I cannot make this argument myself, since I hold against Burge and Putnam that there is no shift of meaning either.

[14] The Meaning of “Meaning,” in K. Gunderson (ed.), *Language, Mind, and Knowledge: Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science, Vol. VII*