Reply to Fiengo and May’s De Lingua Belief

Robert Fiengo and Robert May’s intriguing and interesting 2006 book, *De Lingua Belief*, is a sequel to their 1994 book, *Indices and Identity*. Both concentrate on questions about expression identity except, whereas the first focuses primarily on these questions in the context of a theory of anaphora, the new book focuses on the beliefs that speakers have about the semantic values of linguistic expressions, “beliefs speakers have about the language they know and use” (p.1) – their de lingua beliefs. Fiengo and May (hereinafter, F&M) invoke such beliefs in order to attempt to resolve longstanding puzzles in the philosophy of language and semantics. Speakers have “extensive and complex” sorts of beliefs about their language, but F&M restrict their attention to two particular sorts: those about the semantic values of linguistic expressions and those about the syntactic identity of linguistic expressions. Our discussion here will concentrate on the second sort.

1. F&M’s Account

F&M distinguish names from linguistic expressions that ‘contain’ them. Names, for them, are much like Kaplan’s (1990) generic words—different individuals can ‘bear’ the same name—but any linguistic expression that contains the name can refer to no more than a single individual. A name like ‘Nixon’ can therefore be used to pick out different individuals on different occasions of use. When a speaker believes that ‘Nixon’ refers to Nixon, he has one individual in mind. F&M call these latter ‘occurrences of a name’ linguistic expressions.\(^1\) Sameness of linguistic expression ensures sameness of semantic value, and so, ‘[\{Obama\}]’ (their notation for a linguistic expression that contains the name ‘Obama’) must refer to the same individual on each occasion of use, if it refers at all.

Only one linguistic expression contains\(^2\) the name ‘Nixon’ and refers to the former president, while another linguistic expression contains the same name but refers to a professional baseball player. This raises the question of how F&M individuate linguistic expressions. Though sameness of name-type is a necessary condition for sameness of some linguistic expressions, they do not think it is sufficient, since distinct linguistic expressions may contain the same name. What other conditions are needed? While they never straightforwardly answer this question, they do suggest that certain beliefs are pertinent. They say, provided

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\(^1\) F&M conflate ‘occurrence’ and ‘token’ (cf., p.18). This is an unusual usage. In the sentence “’[\{John\}] loves [\{John\}]’ the linguistic expression ‘[\{John\}]’ is normally said to occur twice regardless of how many times it’s tokened. As typically used, ‘occurrence’ is true of abstract entities – e.g. words – while corresponding concrete entities are said to token these abstract entities.

\(^2\) They also use the locution ‘is a part of’ as in ‘The name is a part of the linguistic expression.’ We are not sure how to cash out this use of ‘contains’ (‘part of’). Presumably, it requires that the particular abstract shape (or shape) is a part of the abstract entity that is the linguistic expression. Though we are suspicious of this sort of talk, we’ll leave it to the side for now.
that other necessary conditions are met, \( \phi \) and \( \varphi \) are the same linguistic expression for a speaker \( S \) if, and only if, \( S \) believes they are the same expression (cf. e.g. p.53).

On this speaker-relative proposal, it makes no sense to ask, “How many ‘Obama’ expressions are there (in the lexicon for English)?” Each individual has his own lexicon, and only in the context of a speaker-relative lexicon can questions about expression identity be meaningfully pursued.

This distinction between names and linguistic expressions is crucial for F&M’s solution to Kripke’s puzzle (cf. pp. 72ff): recall Kripke’s Peter, a person who is rational and of sound logical acumen, and who, upon hearing first of a famous non-musical politician called by the name ‘Paderewski’ and then of someone also so-called but without musical talent, affirms both the sentence, “Paderewski has no musical talent” and the sentence, ”Paderewski has musical talent.” Unbeknownst to Peter, these are one and the same person. Despite this coincidence, it still seems reasonable to affirm both sentences “Peter believes Paderewski has no musical talent” and “Peter believes Paderewski has musical talent.” Does doing so, however, require attributing contradictory beliefs to him, frustrating the intuition that he is rational despite his unfortunate situation?  

According to F&M, the answer to this last question is ‘not at all’ (p. 72): in Peter’s idiolect, there are two linguistic expressions ‘\([Paderewski]\)’ and ‘\([Paderewski]\)’ containing the same name. And Peter is committed not to the self-contradictory sentence ‘\([Paderewski]\) has musical talent and \([Paderewski]\) has no musical talent’, but rather to the sentence ‘\([Paderewski]\) has no musical talent, but \([Paderewski]\) does.” There is no more inconsistency in believing true this latter sentence than there is in believing true “Brian is from New Jersey, but Brian is not” where the two occurrences of ‘Brian’ pick out different people.

2. Problems

Whatever merits the distinction may have, we will advance consideration for thinking that neither this distinction between names and the linguistic expressions that contain them nor the solution that exploits this distinction is sustainable. In this part, we will first briefly examine and evaluate F&M’s characterization of names, and then offer a longer discussion of their

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3 As Kripke is careful to emphasize, the belief in question is supposed to be read \textit{de dicto}.

4 F&M represent the distinction between names and expressions by placing expressions in brackets, so ‘\([Obama]\)’ stands for an expression of the name ‘Obama’. When there are distinct expressions containing the same name type, as we saw with the name ‘Nixon’, we place indices in the expressions to distinguish them; ‘\([Nixon]\)’ and ‘\([Nixon]\)’ stand for distinct linguistic expressions. Expressions can thus be distinguished by either containing different name types (as in ‘\([Biden]\)’ and ‘\([Pelosi]\)’) or by containing the same name-type with different indices (as in ‘\([Aristotle]\)’ and ‘\([Aristotle]\)’).
characterization of linguistic expressions. We will survey both internal and external motivations for their account. Lastly, we will look at some reasons for thinking that their account might render impossible our ordinary practices of content sharing and accuracy in indirect reporting.

2.1 Names

First, F&M say that names are lexical items “uniquely specified by certain linguistic properties. Among these are phonological, morphological, and syntactic properties” (p.14) though not semantic ones. Accordingly, ‘Cicero’ and ‘Tully’ are deemed distinct names because they are spelled and/or pronounced differently (in each speaker’s idiolect). But this manner of distinguishing names requires that they not admit of distinct spellings and pronunciations. As Kaplan acknowledges (Kaplan, pp.115-16), we say the generic name ‘John’ was pronounced differently in Shakespearean times than it is today; and that the names ‘Shawn’ and ‘Sean’ are pronounced the same today, even though we count them as distinct names. Given this flexibility in judgment about name-identity, we need an answer from F&M as to what prevents the name ‘Cicero’ from being a different spelling of the name ‘Tully’?

The performance profile of the name ‘Cicero’ might change over time; it might even admit of different pronunciations contingent on whether we are speaking with children or Latin teachers? And, regardless of how we pronounce or spell a given name, mightn’t it have turned out differently? Nothing intrinsic in its shape or form individuates all of its uses. But, then, what prevents ascribing contradictory beliefs to another on the basis of his affirming ‘Tully is great but Cicero is not’? Why prevents it from being of the form ‘A is F and A is not F’?

2.2 Linguistic Expressions

F&M’s discussion of linguistic expressions left us with similar concerns. As best we can tell, their technical notion of a linguistic expression comes closest to what linguists have called ‘lexemes’. Linguists invoke lexemes, inter alii, in distinguishing between ambiguity – as exemplified by the unrelated meanings for ‘bank’ – and polysemy – as exemplified by the family of related meanings for ‘healthy’ (as applied, e.g., to animate objects, animal excretions, and food) and ‘window’ (as applied, e.g., to both the physical object and its frame, as in “He opened the window” and “He went through the window”).

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5 There are passages in which they suggest that questions of individuation of names and linguistic expressions in general can only be asked of idiolects. This restriction, if it is in force, will render it very difficult to make judgments about share ontological commitments with respect to words. This worry is particularly worrisome in a context of one speaker reporting another. More below.
Confronted with an ambiguity, we are unsurprised to learn that an ambiguous expression maps onto distinct ones in other communities; with polysemy we normally would be (though there are many counter-examples). According to linguistic lore, with ambiguity distinct linguistic expressions are in play. But with polysemy only one linguistic expression is with a variety of connected semantic potentials. The technical term ‘lexeme’, then, is employed for posits of this linguist orthodoxy.

2.2.1 Linguistic Expressions and Lexemes

Among the considerations that induce linguists (and some philosophers\(^6\)) to say that two different lexemes are associated with the single string ‘bank’, one concerns distinct etymologies. It is a condition on ambiguity that the corresponding distinct lexemes are ‘developed’ or ‘evolved’ from formally distinct lexemes: the use of ‘bank’ that means *a raised shelf or ridge of ground* has its roots in the Old Norse word ‘banke’ and the use that means *financial institution* has its roots in the Old French word ‘banc’. Another consideration includes distinct distributional reflexes. By and large, anaphora and ellipsis work differently for ambiguity and polysemy. We say, “He opened the window and went through it” (where ‘it’ is anaphorically tied to ‘window’ even though the two occurrences exhibit slightly different meanings – physical object vs. frame); likewise, we say, “He is healthy and so is the food he prepares for his family,” but we do not say (except as a pun), “‘He put some money in a bank and then swam to one” or “After losing forty pounds, he is light and so is the color of his hair.”\(^7\)

Lexemes offer a potentially attractive explanation of these distributional data: an anaphor can be tied to the original only if the lexeme in the original is appropriate to the environment in which the anaphor appears.\(^8\) Might we invoke lexemes in vindicating F&M’s distinction between names and linguistic expressions that contain names?

We concede that there are uses of linguistic expression that point in the direction of lexemes. The relevant frame of mind here is one that Lyons (1977) invoked in his seminal discussion of lexemes, where we are willing to make such claims as:

\(^6\) “If one of the tokens [of ‘bank’] refers to a financial institution and the other to the edge of a river, it is implausible to insist that they belong to the same type” (Szabo, p.148).

\(^7\) As a heuristic, linguists sometimes appeal to counting dictionary entries. While one expects multiple distinct dictionary entries for ‘bank’, one would not for ‘red’, ‘window’ or ‘healthy’.

\(^8\) It is unclear whether the historical and distributional ideas are complementary. The string ‘right’ is standardly treated as an ambiguous one – largely for distributional reasons. But those uses of ‘right’ that mean *a direction* and those that mean *correctness* turn out to have a common etymological origin. In the end, historical evidence plays an evidential, but not a constitutive role in the thinking of most contemporary linguists on the subject: if ‘right’ has distinct ‘analyses’ flowing from distinct ‘lexical entries’, then more than one lexeme is in play even with a unity in historical origin for both.
1. ‘find’ and ‘found’ are versions of the same linguistic expression.

Claims like (1) abstract from the surface in a radical way. In that frame of mind, it is natural to say (2):

2. ‘will’ and ‘willed’ are both versions of the same linguistic expression.

Similarly, in that frame of mind, it is also natural to say (3):

3. ‘will’ and ‘would’ are both versions of the same linguistic expression.

But it is less natural to say ‘willed’ and ‘would’ are versions of the same linguistic expression.

And in this frame of mind, it would seem that we are committed to there being two linguistic expressions associated with ‘will’. Let us grant, then, that there are contexts in which the locution ‘linguistic expressions’ is used to pick out lexemes. However, it is far from clear that this can be used as a basis for vindicating all of what F&M have to say about linguistic expressions. Making that case would require, for example, that different lexemes be manifested by the name ‘John’, one as it occurs in ‘John Donne’ and one as it occurs in ‘John Travolta’. But what would ever justify this conclusion?

Notice that the fact that different people are denoted by uses of this name in various contexts does not settle the issue. Polysemous uses of a single lexeme generate varying denotations as well. Insofar as the data provide guidance, they do not seem to support an ambiguity thesis. It is felicitous to say both “She is Janet, and so is she” (pointing to a different person) and “Every Janet that I know…” These data tell against an ambiguity, and hence, against lexeme proliferation.9 Associating many lexemes with the string ‘John’ in English is bad linguistics. Treating distinct linguistic expressions with the same name as distinct lexemes, we think, may tell against F&M’s views, and not in their favor.

2.2.2 Linguistic Expressions and Anaphora

F&M suggest that some (but obviously not all) linguistic expressions contain names:

Two (name-containing) expressions are identical only if they contain the same name.

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9 We note in passing again that some linguists often refuse to treats names as words, but we shall put that issue to one side here.
But they also hold that pronouns that are ‘bound’ (c-commanded) by linguistic expressions containing names are identical (expressions) to their antecedents, and so, it would seem to follow (by Leibniz’s Law) that these bound pronouns must also contain names! But suppose the string ‘John loves John’ corresponds to the sentence ‘[John] loves [John]’. (It might also correspond to the sentence ‘[John] loves [John].’) Shouldn’t the string ‘John loves himself’, given F&M’s account of linguistic expression individuation, correspond to the first sentence; and so, shouldn’t the linguistic expression ‘himself’ contain the name ‘John’. This is an odd result with untoward consequences.10

Consider the strings ‘Only John loves himself’ and ‘Only John loves John’. According to F&M, there should be a joint reading of them according to which they correspond to the same sentence (‘Only [John] loves [John]’) (since for F&M c-commanding implies identity) but we can retrieve no such reading; and so, they cannot correspond to the same sentence.11

2.2.3 Linguistic Expressions and Ordinary Usage

Putting worries about how best to individuate names and the linguistic expressions that contain them to one side, we still find the distinction between the two is difficult to reconcile with ordinary usage. It is difficult to access a true reading of “The first names of John Travolta and John Kerry correspond to different words,” but don’t F&M predict that this string should have a true reading, namely, the one corresponding to the sentence ‘[John] Travolta and [John] Kerry have first names that correspond to different words?”

Others worries, we believe, also arise over how to interpret (i)-(iii). Suppose you believe that ‘Frege’ refers to Frege; it seems, then, that you should be able to affirm coherently any of (i)-(iii):

(i) ‘Frege’ might have meant Frege without my believing it.
(ii) ‘Frege’ might have meant something without my being aware of it.
(iii) ‘Frege’ and ‘Fergie’ could have meant the same thing without my believing it.12

But it looks to us that F&M’s theory predicts that (i)-(iii) are self-contradictory.

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10 F&M are not insensitive to this worry. They write, “Two NP’s may be occurrences of the same syntactic expression even though one may contain the name “John” and the other the pronoun ‘he’” (p. 57). But we don’t see how they avoid this untoward result.
11 A parallel argument can be run on “If either John or Bill leaves, he must pay to get back in.”
12 As we will see below, even the simple “‘Frege’ could have meant something different than it actually means” causes serious problems for F&M.
Since expressions are individuated by speaker beliefs, it makes no sense for an expression to mean something without the speaker having the relevant beliefs.

We wonder whether F&M might not attempt to account for the intuitions that (i)-(iii) are not self-contradictory by maintaining that in each case ordinary speakers are not locking on to the technical notion of a linguistic expression, but rather on to something like the notion of a “generic name” or “orthographic type.” After all, F&M are perfectly willing to accept the claim that the name ‘Frege’ could have been part of an expression which referred to someone else besides Frege. Perhaps, the reason (i)-(iii) seem non-contradictory is only because ordinary speakers confuse the generic notion of a name with the technical notion of a linguistic expression.

We are happy to grant that ordinary speakers lack an ability to form beliefs or intentions about their technical notion of a linguistic expression. However, if ordinary speakers lack this ability, then their existence cannot be motivated by observations concerning the behavior of ordinary speakers. Perhaps, F&M hold that the best support for their account invokes not ordinary usage but rather its theoretical advantages. How well, then, does their account explain (away) the relevant puzzles surrounding uses of names?

2.3 F&M and the puzzles

Suppose Peter is not irrational, given his circumstances, in affirming both the strings “Paderewski is talented” and “Paderewski is not talented.” According to F&M (p. 76), this requires him to have two linguistic expressions in his lexicon corresponding to a single name. But how then is someone in the know to go about reporting what is happening without ascribing irrationality to Peter? The natural report is to say, “Peter said both that Paderewski is talented and that Paderewski is not talented, but he’s can’t be both.” F&M require this pronoun ‘he’ to be bound by both occurrence of ‘Paderewski’, but this in turn requires that these occurrences correspond to a single linguistic expression. It follows that the report – which is perfectly appropriate – turns out to be inaccurate. So, we are confronted on their account with the following dilemma: If a reporter uses the same linguistic expression to report both occurrence of ‘Paderewski’ in Peter’s mouth, then he misreports him; but if he uses different linguistic expressions to report these two occurrences, then his report winds up being ungrammatical! If this is right, then that’s bad enough but we think even worse, their account fails to generalize.

If F&M were right about identity confusion, then their account should generalize and apply to a range of cases where names are irrelevant. So, suppose someone is told “No one has ever lived here” but then is later is told, “Someone once lived here.” Suppose further that even though he has excellent evidence that these two
uses of ‘here’ refer to different places, in fact they refer to the same place twice over. This scenario is perfect parallel in structure to the Paderewski case, and therefore, it should receive a like-solution. But any such solution applied to this case would require there to be two linguistic expressions in play, ‘[1here]’ and ‘[2here]’. Certainly, some will be unwilling to absorb this consequence, but we believe that if you adopt F&M’s account it will need to be absorbed. Given the complete similarities between this case and the Kripke cases, a unified account of both is to be expected. The account F&M provide, however, seems ill-suited for the case of ‘here.’

F&M might respond in either of two ways. They might bite the bullet and posit multiple lexical entries for ‘here’ (and other indexicals such as ‘that’). Alternatively, they could deny that their account extends to expressions like ‘here’, and instead invoke a resolution to the puzzle that goes beyond the resources of their theory.

Each of these responses, we believe, faces difficulties. The first way results in an ad hoc, bloated lexicon. It is implausible to suppose that every time we use an indexical or demonstrative expression our lexicon grows. What utility is there to a lexicon if new entries can be so easily added? And the second response leaves us wondering why we need an F&M-style framework in the first place if Kripke-like puzzles can be so easily resolved for ‘here’. Absent a special reason for thinking that names behave differently than indexicals in this respect, the second response offers F&M not much of a reply.

A more reasonable explanation of the identity confusion data shuns expression individuation and instead relies exclusively on the notion of particular uses of a single name. Suppose you encounter a use of the name ‘John’ by a speaker U. You may then go on to use that name with the controlling intention that your use of ‘John’ refers to whichever object U was referring to with his use of ‘John’. So construed, it may still turn out that a speaker thinks – wrongly – that the two uses pick out distinct persons.

2.4 Shared Content and Indirect Reporting

Considerations like those stemming from Kripke’s puzzle lead many, including F&M, to individuate the semantic content of a typical belief attribution very fine grainedly. However, views of this form often have trouble explaining how speakers are able at times to say or to believe the very same thing.

Suppose that in one context Rob sincerely utters the string “Tom is happy” and in another Dean also utters string “Tom is happy.” Suppose further that Gina overhears them both speaking and that, while she knows they referred to the
same individual (Tom, in the case), she knows little else about Rob’s and Dean’s beliefs. In such a situation, Gina could still truly utter any of (1)-(3)

(1) Rob and Dean both said that Tom is happy.
(2) Rob and Dean said the same thing.
(3) Rob said that Tom is happy, and Dean said that too.

But how is this possible in F&M’s framework? Given the way F&M individuate the referents of that-clauses, it is unclear how speakers could ever manage to share contents in the way that (1)-(3) seems to require.

It is important that we distinguish two distinct though related problems created by cases (1)-(3). The first problem is about saying and believing: it concerns how, given F&M’s framework, two individuals could ever say or believe something with the same semantic content. Call this the problem of shared content. It’s our contention that F&M make the prospects for shared content look bleak. This, we believe, follows from three central aspects of their framework:

(i) The claim that the contents of a belief or utterance varies with the expression(s) used to express this belief or utterance, and
(ii) The claim that questions about expression identity can only be asked in the context of each person’s individual lexicon, and
(iii) The further claim that it is rare for individuals to ever fully share a lexicon.13

Given (i)-(iii), it would seem to follow that it is rare for two individuals to truly share content. Without further explanation for why (1)-(3) seem true to us, F&M’s theory remains incomplete.

A second problem concerns indirect reporting: reports like (1)-(3) are quite straightforward from the perspective of the reporter; Gina hears what two speakers say, and proceeds to indirectly report them. F&M’s account, however, we believe, renders ordinary indirect reporting difficult to practice. In order to be entitled to report Rob’s and Dean’s utterance with (1)-(3), Gina must first believe that Rob’s and Dean’s personal lexicons overlap in such a way that they have the very same ‘Tom-containing expressions’. But in the case described, she hardly seems entitled to this belief. To be so entitled, she would have to know a great deal more Rob and Dean; in particular, she would need to know a great deal more about each of their de lingua beliefs. Since (1)-(3) seem perfectly appropriate in the case described F&M’s theory remains incomplete for us.

**Conclusion**

13 p. 53
Fiengo and May offer solution to Kripke puzzles that requires a distinction between names and linguistic expressions that contain them. Though their account is both creative and novel, it remains incomplete. In our discussion we posed some worries over their individuation criteria for names and linguistic expressions. We also pushed the idea that any attempt to assimilate linguistic expressions to the linguists’ theoretical notion of a lexeme fails. The account seems incompatible with distributional data, e.g., about ellipsis and anaphora and it did not seem to us well-motivated by the ordinary usage of the notion of a word. Even if good sense could be made of their conception of a linguistic expression, we argued that the account does not seem to account for the puzzling data; and furthermore, that it over-generalizes to linguistic categories (for example, indexicals) for which it seems particularly ill-suited. We ended our discussion with a metaphysical worry about whether content sharing remains possible on F&M’s account, and lastly, with a semantic worry about whether F&M’s account renders certain intuitive indirect reports false. Though we are quite attracted to meta-linguistic solutions to Kripke’s puzzling data, largely for reasons F&M so elegantly articulate, their linguistic (or even pre-linguistic solution), as of yet, we believe remains incomplete.
Bibliography