1. Introduction

We have become accustomed to the idea that meaning is determined externalistically, that the meaning of certain types of terms, for example natural kind terms, depends on facts about the external environment.1 Recently, however, a more radical thesis has emerged, a thesis we shall dub ‘a posteriori semantics’. The suggestion is that not only does the meaning of a term depend on the external environment, in classic Putnam-Burge fashion, but also that the semantics of a term depends on the external environment. For instance, it has been argued that whether or not ‘water’ should be given an externalist semantics or a descriptivist one, depends on facts about the physical environment, such as facts about chemical composition and microstructure.2

A posteriori semantics has two sources. First, it has been employed to help the meaning externalist account for cases where a putative natural kind term fails to pick out a natural kind. Indeed, it has even been suggested that the same recipe should be employed in the case where a singular term, such as a name, fails to have a reference.3 Second, it has emerged as a response to the well-known reductio argument, due to Michael McKinsey, designed to show that externalism is not compatible with a plausible account of self-knowledge.4 A posteriori semantics, thus, must be understood against the background of more traditional meaning externalism, and it can be described as a form of ‘ad hoc’ hypothesis, designed to bring harmony into the externalist picture of meaning and thought content.
In this paper we shall examine the thesis of a posteriori semantics and argue that it is highly problematic. We begin by presenting the thesis, and the motivations behind it, and we then move on to a critical discussion of it. Although we shall focus on a posteriori semantics as applied to general terms, we will at points discuss the case of singular terms as well. We end by suggesting that although semantics cannot be taken to be completely isolated from empirical discoveries, it ought not to be conditional on details of chemistry or physics, large swathes of which remain unknown.

The notion of the a priori is notoriously open to different construals. We shall follow current practice, and understand a priori knowledge as knowledge that is not dependent for its justification on empirical investigations of the subject’s environment. Although standardly employed, this notion of a priority is somewhat unorthodox since it has the implication that knowledge of our own mental states (narrowly construed) comes out as a priori. However, nothing we say hinges on this. Furthermore, we shall follow standard usage and separate a priority from infallibility. Thus, a priori warrant is not to be equated with indefeasibility.

The label ‘externalism’ has come to denote a variety of theses, even when limited to the case of meaning and mental content. Most commonly, externalism is construed as a foundational thesis, concerning the determination of meaning and mental content. On such a construal, externalism tells us that the meaning of a term (or the content of a thought) is determined by facts that are external to the individual, such as facts about her social and physical environment. This is the kind of externalism we are familiar with in the case of general terms from Putnam and Burge. However, sometimes ‘externalism’ is also used to denote a specific theory concerning the semantic values of our terms and concepts. A prime example is the Millian theory of singular terms, according to which the semantic value of a singular term is exhausted by its referent, thereby making it – and propositions containing it –
“object dependent”, and versions of Millianism have been defended in the case of natural kind terms as well.\textsuperscript{8} This is the type of externalism typically associated with Kripke's rejection of descriptivism.\textsuperscript{9} Although externalism of the latter sort appears to entail some version of foundational externalism (such as the causal theory of names), the reverse is not true: there are those who defend foundational externalism while rejecting externalist accounts of semantic value.\textsuperscript{10}

The suggestion that semantics is a posteriori is the suggestion that it cannot be known a priori whether a given term, such as ‘water’ or ‘Plato’, has its meaning determined by the external environment. It is therefore a thesis concerning the epistemic status of foundational externalism. However, since many people hold that foundational externalism goes hand in hand with externalist accounts of semantic value, it is typically also presented as a thesis concerning semantic value: i.e. the thesis that it cannot be known a priori whether a term has an object-dependent semantic value. This is also the type of a posteriori semantics that is required to meet Mc Kinsey's reductio argument.\textsuperscript{11}

Our focus shall be on the stronger thesis, according to which it can neither be known a priori whether a term should be given a foundational externalist account, nor whether it has an externalist, object-dependent semantic value. However, some of our criticisms are directed against the weaker thesis as well, according to which it cannot be known a priori whether the meaning of a term is determined externalistically (even though it can be known a priori that this meaning is not object-dependent).

2. Why a \textbf{a posteriori semantics}?

As mentioned above a posteriori semantics has two different sources. We shall not have anything to say about the second source, concerning the attempt to avoid McKinsey’s reductio
argument against compatibilism, since a discussion of the reductio argument would lead too far. Instead, we shall focus on the more general motivation, deriving from the observation that it cannot be known a priori whether a purported natural kind term in fact picks out a natural kind. However, if we are right, and a posteriori semantics is a problematic thesis, then the attempt to employ this thesis to rebut McKinsey’s reductio argument is of course equally problematic.

It is widely held that whether a term is a natural kind term is a matter of semantics, rather than metaphysics or science. Thus, when presenting his famous Twin Earth thought experiment Putnam speaks as if natural kind terms form a special semantic category, one that can be singled out pretty much a priori. He appeals, for instance, to our semantic intentions and argues that what characterizes these terms is that they are defined ostensively, rather than in terms of the superficial properties that we associate with them. Moreover, following Kripke, Putnam suggests that ‘water’ is a rigid designator and that its rigidity follows from how we intend to use it. When we give the ostensive definition ‘This is water’, Putnam argues, we intend ‘this’ to be de re, to refer to whatever stands in the sameness relation to the liquid referred to as ‘this’ in the actual world.12 Putnam does of course hold that determining what it is to stand in the relation of ‘same liquid as’ requires scientific investigation. However, that the sameness relation in the case of ‘water’ should be understood this way, rather than in terms of observable properties, is itself assumed not to require scientific investigation but to be determinable a priori.

At the same time, it is widely held that the semantics of natural kind terms involves a certain metaphysical unity of the kind, such as the common microstructure of samples of the same substance. What characterizes a natural kind, it is held, is that there is some one underlying property, typically microstructural, that explains and unites the macroscopic, observable properties that we associate with the kind.13 However, it is clear that
it cannot be known a priori that such unity obtains. This is not only a posteriori, but normally requires detailed scientific investigation. And the history of science provides many examples where it has been discovered that an assumed natural kind term fails to name a natural kind (‘air’, ‘jade’, several names for diseases and biological species, etc.). The assumption of unity, therefore, is evidently fallible, yet the term is typically introduced prior to scientific investigations. The question therefore arises what should be said when the assumption fails and there is no underlying unity among the items to which the term has been applied.

It should be pointed out that on a descriptivist picture this question is unproblematic. The descriptivist does not hold that natural kind terms form a special semantic category, and can therefore deny that it is semantically significant whether a term happens to name a natural kind or not. According to the cluster theorist, for instance, the meaning of ‘water’ is determined by a cluster of descriptions or beliefs associated with the term. Among these may be the belief that water is a natural kind, but this belief can be rejected (just as any other belief, taken individually, in the cluster) without any semantic implications. That is, if it turns out that the unity hypothesis is false in the case of water, it is open to the cluster theorist to say that we have simply made an interesting empirical discovery.

The externalist, quite obviously, is not in a position to take this way out, but has to find another solution. One option is to deny that whether or not a term is a natural kind term depends on whether the term in fact succeeds in naming a natural kind. Rather, it could be argued, ‘water’ is a natural kind term because this is part of the term’s semantics, and discovering that the assumption of unity is false is tantamount to discovering that our statements containing this term fail to express a proposition. In such a case, we were simply under the illusion that we were thinking ‘water’-thoughts.

However, it should be clear, this is a rather high price to pay for externalism. The suggestion, in effect, is that if the unity assumption fails then the term in question should
be treated like externalists treat an empty proper name. Even if one were willing to accept the illusion view in the case of non-referring names, it appears very implausible to assimilate the two cases in this way. After all, if we were to discover that water is not a natural kind (that it has a motley of chemical compositions), it would still seem that the term has a non-empty extension, and that our past statements, such as ‘water is wet’, express some proposition. For this reason, externalists have typically tried to find another way of accounting for scenarios in which the assumption of unity fails.

It is at this juncture that the position that we have labeled ‘a posteriori semantics’ will appear promising. The proposal is that we can combine the idea that it is semantically significant whether a term names a natural kind with the idea that the unity assumption is fallible, by allowing that if the assumption fails then the (foundational) semantics of the term is affected. That is, if the assumption does not fail, then ‘water’ is a natural kind term and some externalist semantic theory applies, whereas if the assumption does fail, ‘water’ is not a natural kind term, and is to be given a non-externalist account. This appears to provide a way out for the philosopher who grants that the assumption of unity is a posteriori, who rejects internalism, and who wants to avoid the conclusion that if the unity hypothesis fails, then the term fails to refer. Depending on which type of externalism one endorses, the resulting position may be more or less radical. If one merely endorses foundational externalism, it follows that the physical environment determines whether ‘water’ has its meaning determined externally or internally; if this is coupled with an externalist account of semantic value, it also follows that this environment determines whether the term has an object-dependent semantic value or a descriptivist one.

Interestingly, Peter Ludlow has recently applied this line of reasoning to the case where a singular term fails to refer. Ludlow’s starting point is a familiar dilemma concerning the semantics of names. Although the descriptive theory of names, Ludlow says, offers a
solution to the problem of non-referring names, Kripke has shown that it must be rejected since names are rigid designators. The problem with Kripke’s view, Ludlow continues, is that it seems to imply that sentences containing a non-referring name fail to express a proposition, or that they express some kind of “gappy” proposition. Ludlow’s suggested solution is that we should take externalism one step further, and hold that not only the content of our utterances, but also their logical form, is sensitive to external conditions. He imagines Twin Earth, just like Earth, except that Socrates was an invention of Plato. In such a scenario, Ludlow argues, we should say that Toscar, on Twin Earth, has thoughts that differ not only in content but also in logical form from Oscar’s. Oscar’s thought expressed by ‘Socrates was a philosopher’ is a singular proposition containing Socrates as a constituent, whereas Toscar’s thought is a general proposition. That is, whether ‘Socrates’ is a genuine referring expression depends not on facts about the individual alone, as Russell would have it, but on facts about the environment.

Although Ludlow calls his view externalism about logical form, it should be clear that it is, in effect, a version of a posteriori semantics. The idea is that if ‘Socrates’ refers, it is a logically proper name and is to be given a semantics in accordance with Kripke’s theory; if the name does not refer, however, it should be construed as merely denoting and as standing proxy for a set of descriptions, along the lines suggested by Russell. The reply to the question of what happens when a name fails to refer, therefore, is simply: Then it’s not a genuine singular term, but a complex denoting expression. Ludlow writes: “In effect, one can say that Russell was right. Some names are logically proper names, others are denoting expressions in disguise.” Of course, calling empty names ‘denoting expressions in disguise’ is perhaps slightly misleading, since on the proposed view, a speaker should either have no particular reason to assume that a term is singular (if she is ignorant about whether the
apparent referent exists), or else no reason to think it looks like a name (if she knows that the apparent referent is non-extant).

There is also something peculiar about Ludlow’s suggestion from a methodological point of view. A large part of the reason why Kripke’s Millian theory of names and natural kind terms has gained wide acceptance is that Kripke is generally thought to have demolished descriptivist theories once and for all in *Naming and Necessity*. In discussions of externalism this is usually not even mentioned, but taken as a given. But as we have seen, the motivation for a posteriori semantics is that Kripke’s theory runs into troubles in certain cases, including empty names. And the substance of Ludlow’s proposal is that in those cases, some sort of descriptivist theory should be applied. So here the externalist simply falls back on the theory already rejected; Russell, as it were, gets to clean up after Kripke’s party. This seems to merit at least some discussion, since it looks like a sort of move that has methodological alarms ringing in other cases. If a theory is rejected and its critics advocate a replacement theory, which then runs into difficulties but is saved by selective appeal to the older, rejected, theory, this is not usually considered good methodology. Yet it seems to be precisely what is happening in the case of a posteriori semantics. Of course, this point applies not just to Ludlow but to a posteriori semantics in general.

In what follows, however, we shall leave this methodological worry behind, and concentrate on another set of objections.

3. A posteriori semantics examined

As we have seen above, although a posteriori semantics is a thesis quite distinct from meaning externalism, it has emerged as a response to perceived difficulties concerning meaning externalism. We shall not question these motivations, in the sense that we shall grant that a
posteriori semantics does help with these difficulties. We shall, however, argue that the “solution” comes at too high a price.

3.1 Intentions, environment and meaning

The first difficulty concerns the question how empirical facts about the details of the physical environment, such as facts about chemical composition, can have semantic implications of the sort suggested by a posteriori semantics. According to the original meaning externalist position, the environment of the speaker enters into the picture because of the speaker’s semantic intentions. For instance, as Putnam suggests, the speaker intends ‘water’ or ‘gold’ to be used as natural kind terms, as terms referring to underlying, microstructural properties, rather than observable properties. The current thesis is that the details of the environment determine what sort of term a given expression is, and hence what kind of semantics they should be given in the first place. This should seem extremely puzzling even to the most jaded externalist. What we have here is not just the claim that a term’s meaning may depend on a posteriori knowledge. The thesis is that microphysical facts determine the semantics of common, vernacular terms used for centuries (or longer if you count their ancestors). This alleged “metaphysical” dependence is the reason why it is a posteriori what sort of semantics a sentence (or thought) has, according to the thesis’ proponents. And it is simply obscure how the physical details of the world could play such a pivotal role. Facts about chemistry, it would seem, do not carry that kind of semantic significance – all by themselves.

Ludlow does worry about the role of speaker’s intentions, given his proposed externalism about logical form. He discusses the proposal that the logical forms of our utterances are fixed by the external world “completely independently of facts about our linguistic intentions”, and labels this position “bald externalism”. On this view, he says, the logical form of an utterance such as ‘Socrates was a philosopher’ depends entirely on whether
Socrates exists. However, Ludlow finds bald externalism too radical, and claims that he is not prepared to sever the link between intentions and logical form in this way. Instead, he proposes that the logical form of an utterance is tied to the speaker’s psychology (much as in Russell) but that the speaker’s psychology itself should be understood widely, as determined by the environment. Thus, if Oscar on earth utters ‘Socrates was a philosopher’, his thought expresses a singular proposition containing Socrates as a constituent, whereas when Toscar utters the same words, a general proposition is expressed. This means, according to Ludlow, that Oscar utters ‘Socrates was a philosopher’ with the intention of expressing a particular singular proposition, whereas Toscar utters these words with the different intention of expressing a particular general proposition. Hence, logical form is not disconnected from the speaker’s intentions after all: “By allowing that the forms of our thoughts and intentions can covary according to external conditions, we can rescue the link between linguistic intentions and form.”

But this reply is not really satisfactory. Granted, by making psychological content wide, there will be a connection between the speaker’s psychology and the logical form of her utterances: her utterance will have the logical form of her thoughts. However, this can hardly be characterized as a situation in which the logical form of the utterance is determined by the individual’s intentions. Rather, the logical form of the thought as well as of the utterance is determined by the speaker’s environment – this is why there is a connection between the logical form of the two, and not because there is a prior intention determining the logical form of the utterance. Hence this position seems to be no better off than “bald externalism” when it comes to giving intentions a semantic role.

Let us stress that our concern here is not an epistemic one. Ludlow is chiefly concerned to show that externalism about logical form does not create any additional epistemological problems for externalism. And he is sanguine about the externalist’s
prospects of replying to standard worries concerning self-knowledge by appeal to the externalism of second-order thoughts. In effect, he extends this reply to cover externalism about form. Just as one can know (the content of) what one is thinking when one thinks the thought Water is wet, without being able to differentiate one’s water-thoughts from one’s twater-thoughts, one may know one is intending to utter a sentence that has such-and-such a form, without knowing that it has such-and-such a form or having the ability to individuate utterances on the basis of their form. But whatever the merits of this reply for problems about self-knowledge, it doesn’t really address the worry we just raised. The problem is not that, on this view, we do not know what we intend (although that, too, may be a real concern). Rather, the real worry is that these intentions are utterly inert when it comes to the determination of logical form and, thus, that the world carries the full burden.

There appear to remain two more ways for the a posteriori semanticist to retain a role for speaker intentions. The first is to argue that although intentions cannot determine that a term has an externalist semantics, semantic intentions may still constitute necessary conditions. For instance, an intention that a certain term be a natural kind term may be necessary for the term to have an externalist semantics. This seems to be what Paul Boghossian suggests, on the externalist’s behalf, when he writes that if Twin Earth thought experiments are to establish concept externalism, “the word ‘water’ – whether on Earth or on Twin Earth – must be thought of as aiming to express a natural kind concept; otherwise, the fact that water and twater are distinct natural kinds will not be semantically relevant”. This does mean that the externalist semantics will not kick in unless the speaker has the required intention, and in that sense the semantics does not depend on the world alone. However, notice that if the unity assumption fails then the intention still plays no role whatsoever in determining the semantics of t. The term is then to be given a non-externalist semantics, according to a posteriori externalism, despite the speaker’s intention to name a natural kind,
and quite independently of the speaker’s beliefs about the matter. This seems only marginally less mysterious, if at all, than the position Ludlow labels bald externalism.

The second way in which speaker intentions might be accorded a role is to argue that the intentions are more disjunctive in character and have an explicitly semantic nature. The idea would be that we intend ‘water’ either to have an externalist semantics, if it names a natural kind, or a non-externalist semantics, if it names a superficial kind. In this way, the reply goes, the intentions do determine the semantics of the term.

However, the appeal to disjunctive intentions clearly requires ordinary speakers to have intentions concerning semantics, involving semantic theories, and attributing such meta-semantic intentions (i.e. intentions concerning foundational semantics) to ordinary speakers is utterly implausible – even more so when we consider that we may be asked to attribute them to speakers of, say, 11th century Norse. In the case of foundational externalism, it requires the speaker to have intentions concerning externalist and internalist theories of meaning determination; in the case of externalist semantic theories, it requires speakers to have intentions concerning object-dependence and descriptivism. It is one thing to suggest that speakers intend ‘water’ to name a natural kind, a stuff with a unified underlying structure, quite another to suggest that speakers have meta-semantic intentions of this kind.

3.2 Epistemological difficulties

This takes us to another type of objection. There appear to be some serious epistemological difficulties associated with a posteriori semantics.

The first is that it renders semantical properties not just a posteriori, but epistemically opaque; at least, this becomes a distinct possibility. For consider: if we have to know the chemical nature of water in order to know what type of semantics ‘water’ has, then semantic knowledge is not just a posteriori, but contingent on chemical knowledge whose
emergence is itself clearly utterly contingent. A subject living before the 18th century, or in a counterfactual world where the scientific revolution doesn’t take place, is thereby barred from semantic knowledge. No matter their theoretical sophistication, semantic theorists in short supply of chemists suffer a tremendous handicap. This seems odd (as well as, frankly, chauvinist). Of course, even on a posteriori semantics, a semanticist may hazard a guess that ‘water’ names a kind united by a common nature, and this guess may be correct without constituting knowledge. But short of knowledge, she will not be in a position to claim knowledge of the correct semantics. Moreover, the very notion of “common nature” operative here seems to be closely connected to the chemical and physical knowledge gained in the last couple of centuries; knowledge which the discussion tends to take for granted, but which might never have been attained, and which (qua good fallibilists) we should find it awkward to stake our semantic theory on.

Although this point is quite plain, it almost never gets explicitly stated in the externalist literature. Even when externalists concede the fallibility of the assumption that a putative natural kind term succeeds in naming a unified kind, they tend to adopt a position of epistemically privileged hindsight. Or else they imply that the requisite knowledge will sooner or later be in as a matter of course, by talking about things “turning out” this way or that. (This “turning out” idiom, endemic to the debate, appears to have been inaugurated by Kripke.) But in holding that this knowledge is a posteriori, one also has to grant the possibility that we never attain it. And if the required knowledge is never attained, the semantic knowledge that depends on it will not be had either. The point here is not dependent on any general skepticism – we grant that we have lots of a posteriori knowledge about the chemistry of water and so on. But we don’t know everything. And in holding that semantical facts depend on the facts about the detailed makeup of the world, a posteriori semantics allows that semantic facts may be radically recognition-transcendent even given all the stuff we do know.
The second problem concerns an internal difficulty for the meaning externalist’s preferred methodology. Meaning externalism is generally held to be based on a set of thought experiments and modal intuitions. These intuitions are supposed to give evidence in favour of one semantic theory rather than another. According to a posteriori semantics, however, this methodology must be flawed. We may have the intuition that ‘water’ should not be given a descriptivist semantics, but this intuition cannot in itself constitute any evidence when it comes to our semantic theory since what determines the semantics of ‘water’ is not how we use the term, but facts about the chemical composition of the samples of liquid that we call ‘water’.34

It might be objected that intuitions still provides evidence, although in a more indirect way, since these intuitions are based on beliefs about the empirical environment that may turn out to be false. For instance, intuition tells us that if ‘water’ names a natural kind (on Earth), then ‘water’ must have a different meaning on Twin Earth. However, there are two things to be noted about this move. First, it remains the case that the standard interpretation of Twin Earth proceeds entirely a priori, and is not supposed to rely on empirical assumptions of this sort; hence, there still remains a tension with standard motivations for externalism.35 Second, making the intuitions dependent on empirical assumptions of this sort considerably lessens their impact. If one accepts that it is an empirical assumption that ‘water’ is a natural kind term, one that can be falsified by scientific discoveries, then it is not at all clear why it should be concluded that ‘water’ has a different meaning on Twin Earth. After all, the discovery of twin-water appears to be precisely the kind of discovery that would falsify the assumption of unity.36 That is, since the externalist can no longer appeal to the fact that ‘water’ is a natural kind term, it is not obvious why twin-water should not simply be included in the extension of ‘water’. This, we think, connects with the first point: In order to block this inclusion of XYZ into the extension of ‘water’, the externalist has to claim that the
assumption that ‘water’ is a natural kind term cannot be falsified by empirical discoveries. But this, of course, is exactly what a posteriori semantics denies.

Finally, a posteriori semantics generates epistemological difficulties of a quite different kind. As Ludlow notes, externalism about logical form entails that logic becomes a posteriori too. And since I may therefore be mistaken about the logical form of my utterances (or thoughts), I may quite unwittingly commit inferential fallacies. On Earth, where Socrates exists, ‘Socrates’ is a referring term and the following inference is invalid: “Socrates was a snub-nosed philosopher. Hence: A snub-nosed philosopher taught Plato.” However, on Twin-Earth, where Socrates never existed, ‘Socrates’ is a description in disguise (say, “the most famous character in Plato’s dialogues”) and the inference will be valid. No amount of critical reflection could correct my mistakes, since my errors cannot be discovered prior to detailed empirical investigations of the world (and in some cases go forever unnoticed). As a result, Ludlow writes, the very notion of what counts as a logical inference, “will come unhinged”. Moreover, Ludlow suggests, this has implications for the analytic/synthetic distinction that not even Quine anticipated, since it follows that ‘Socrates was a philosopher’ may be analytic in some worlds but synthetic in others.

A similar worry, it should be clear, arises in the case of natural kind terms. If it cannot be known a priori whether ‘water’ should be given a descriptivist semantics or a Kripkean one, the conceptual and inferential connections of the concept expressed by ‘water’ will in effect only be accessible a posteriori. By making the semantics of a term a posteriori, that is, a threat is posed to our ordinary reasoning abilities, making them dependent on empirical science in a way and to an extent that seems quite implausible. Notice, also, that the standard externalist move with respect to self-knowledge is impotent here. That is, even if it is claimed that my second-order thoughts are guaranteed to be true (I am thinking, with this very
thought, that water is wet), and hence that we know our thoughts a priori, the fact remains that my reasoning abilities will become hostage to empirical investigations of the environment.\textsuperscript{42}

4. Concluding remarks

We have raised two broad types of objections to what we have called a posteriori semantics. The first was that it is simply implausible that micro-physical facts that may make no difference to salient features of our environment should determine which semantic categories our terms belong to; moreover, that they should determine this completely unaided by speaker intentions. The second set of objections were epistemological. One of these concerned a threatening inscrutability. By making semantic facts dependent on the facts about the structure of the world, a posteriori semantics makes knowledge of semantics dependent on detailed chemical knowledge, and thus saddles semantics with an implausible epistemic burden. Another objection was that a posteriori semantics undermines the very methodology on which semantic externalism relies. A final criticism was that a posteriori semantics makes logical form, and hence, validity (as well as inferential connections generally) too dependent on recondite empirical matters.

Since the thesis that the semantics of a term is a posteriori apparently sounds innocent enough to make it attractive to many philosophers, let us be absolutely clear what our complaint is. We have no quarrel with the notion that semantics is a posteriori – in some sense. It clearly has to be, since no one knows even what the vocabulary of their language is independently of empirical investigation (at some stage of their development).\textsuperscript{43} It also seems obvious that empirical and scientific discoveries may in principle motivate revision of semantic theory. In particular, it is commonplace that discoveries within empirical linguistics affect semantic theories. What we find implausible is that the details of the world’s physical structure should dictate what the right semantics of vernacular terms is, even irrespective of
our knowledge of that structure. It is this latter thesis we have discussed under the name of a posteriori semantics. This thesis is less innocent than its label suggests.

Conversely, the a priori status we advocate for semantics by rejecting this thesis is very attenuated indeed. We believe that one may know what type of semantic theory applies to terms like ‘water’ without having knowledge of the chemistry of water. We also think that one may know which semantic category a term belongs to without having detailed knowledge of the environment. Similarly, we think that one can tell the logical form of a sentence like ‘Robin Hood stole from the rich’ largely independently of painstaking historical investigation. In short, we hold that semantics and logic are largely autonomous vis-à-vis chemistry, history, and so on. And we think that philosophy of language should accommodate this relative autonomy, not jeopardize it. If this is apriorism, it is rather more innocent than the label suggests.  

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1 The origins of this thesis are Putnam (1975) and Burge (1979).
3 See Ludlow (2003), but also McLaughlin and Tye (1998).
5 For this construal see for instance Boghossian (1996), Brown (2004) and McKinsey (1991). For a more traditional characterization see Boghossian and Peacocke (2000): “An a priori proposition is one which can be known to be true without any justification from the character of the subject’s experience.” (p. 1)
6 For a discussion of apriority and fallibility see Boghossian and Peacocke (2000, pp. 4-5).
7 See Stalnaker (1997: 535-536) for a good discussion of the distinction between descriptive semantics (a theory assigning semantic values to expressions) and 'foundational semantics' (a theory concerning what the facts are that determine that an expression has a certain semantic value).
9 Kripke 1980.
10 For instance, despite being a renowned externalist Burge claims to subscribe to a more or less Fregean account of semantic value (Burge 1979). Thanks to an anonymous referee for prompting this clarification.
11 The argument, recall, is directed against the idea that a thought content can be both object-dependent and knowable a priori, and the compatibilist replies that it relies on the false presupposition that it can be known a priori whether a thought has an object-dependent content.
12 Putnam (1975, p. 231).
This is not the only way of characterizing natural kinds and, arguably, not the best. It is, however, the characterization standardly given by externalists and it is the one relied on by Kripke and Putnam. For more details, see Häggqvist (2005).

As often noticed, the hypothesis may fail in a more radical way, since not only may it be the case that there is no one underlying property uniting the kind, but a motley, there may be no such kind at all around - phlogiston being one famous example, Boghossian’s Dry Earth another, more outlandish, one. (Boghossian, 1996)

See Wikforss and Häggqvist (2006) for a defense of the cluster theory for natural kind terms.

This is discussed in more detail in Wikforss (2005).


Jessica Brown calls this ‘the illusion view’: ‘the term fails to express any concept at all, and the subject suffers an illusion of thought’. (2004, p. 279)


Ludlow (2003).


Of course, as one referee points out, Russell is in a certain sense not a descriptivist (Ludlow makes this clear too), since he construes logically proper names as referring directly (Russell 1918). However, he does endorse descritivism in the case of ordinary names in natural language.

Similar ideas are presented in McLaughlin and Tye (1998). Whether a thought is a singular, object-dependent thought, they suggest, depends on external factors. For instance, whether ‘Cicero is an orator’ expresses an object-dependent thought, depends on whether the concept of Cicero in fact is a singular concept and this, in turn, depends on whether Cicero actually exists. They write: “If one’s thought that Cicero is an orator is an object-dependent thought, that is an a posteriori fact about it. One can know a priori that one is thinking that Cicero is an orator. What one cannot know a priori is that one’s thought that Cicero is an orator is a singular thought.” (1998, p. 299) See also Brown (2004, pp. 294-295), and Nuccetelli (2003, p. 175).

Ludlow (2003, p. 408).

There is some reason to be wary here, though, in particular when it comes to the reductio argument. See for instance McKinsey 2002, for a criticism of the attempt made by McLaughlin & Tye to avoid the reductio by employing a posteriori semantics.

Ludlow (2003, p. 405).

Ludlow (2003, p. 409).


Boghossian (1996, p. 165). The same point was made (in discussion) by Barry Smith. It is clear that Boghossian construes this notion of a term ‘aiming to express a natural kind concept’ in terms of the speaker’s intentions. Thus, he writes, we are not asking whether the word actually names a natural kind, “but only whether its user intends it to do so.” (ibid., p. 168) It should be stressed, however, that Boghossian does not endorse a posteriori semantics and argues against the proposal that if ‘water’ fails to pick out a natural kind the externalist can fall back on descriptivism.
I may even firmly believe that ‘water’ does not have such a semantics, or that ‘Socrates’ cannot be given a descriptivist account, and be wrong. Brown makes this point in a discussion of the position we have labeled a posteriori semantics. Were the question to arise, Brown writes, the individual “would deny that she is having a descriptive thought.” (Brown 2004, p. 294)

This was pointed out by a referee.

In fact, it is far from clear that current chemical theory, for instance, does underwrite the assumptions about shared nature expressed in e.g. Putnam (1975); see van Brakel (1986) and Needham (2000).

Indeed, we know rather more than is strictly consistent with the usual externalist claims about “the molecular structure of water”, for instance; cf. Needham (2000).

A similar worry applies in the case of singular terms, of course. Kripke appeals to modal intuitions as evidence for his thesis that names are rigid designators. According to a posteriori semantics, however, intuitions cannot play this role. Rather, it is taken to be a definitional truth about names that they are rigid designators, and the role of intuitions, if any, would be as evidence that a term is a name.

This is stressed by Gertler (2004). She considers the proposal that the dependency of the concept water on the existence of water is only a posteriori but rejects it on the grounds that it is “at odds with the methods used to establish externalism.” (p. 46)

This is argued in Wikforss (2005) and Häggqvist (1996).

A related threat posed by externalism to our reasoning abilities is discussed by Boghossian (1994) and Brown (2004).

Ludlow (2003, p. 412). Of course, this assumes that ‘philosopher’ is part of the would-be description.

Ludlow does not pursue these issues further, but simply suggest that they are “theory-internal worries that the externalist about logical form must face” (ibid., p. 409). However, we submit, a semantic theory that generates difficulties accounting for our ordinary, intuitive, logical and conceptual inferences, has more than merely ‘internal’ worries (whatever that means).

This is discussed in Wikforss and Häggqvist (2006).

See Wikforss (2006) for more extended discussion of this point.

Boghossian (1996) makes a related point against the alleged apriority of ‘I have a toothache’.

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