Meaning, Signification, and Suggestion: Berkeley on General Words

Timothy Pritchard

1. Introduction

Berkeley distinguished, or so I hope to show, the following three perspectives on a general word: the word's meaning, the word's signification, and the word's suggestive potential. These distinctions have not, I believe, been adequately appreciated. In particular, what Berkeley said or implied about a word's 'meaning' is often ignored or sidestepped.[1]

Berkeley rejected a theory of general words that appealed to 'abstract general ideas', where these putative ideas were intended to play some sort of mediating role that sets up a connection between a general word and the objects to which the word can apply. Berkeley, in several passages, describes an alternative: a general word is a word that is 'made the sign' of 'several particular ideas'; a general word is 'made to stand' for all particular things of a given sort. This occurs without the intervention of an 'abstract general idea' (Intro. 11, 12, 15, 18; Draft Intro. *Works* vol. 2: 127-9; *Alciphron* VII, 7*). Given this, it is perhaps understandable that Daniel Flage has claimed that there is 'overwhelming evidence' that Berkeley had an 'extensional' theory of the meaning of general terms (1987, 98). Flage describes an extensional theory as one in which the general term refers 'distributively' to all the objects to which the term correctly applies, and where 'it is each of these objects in all their particularity that the term means' (ibid., 94f.).

While this may seem a natural interpretation of Berkeley, I wish to challenge this view. Contrary to Flage's claim, there is good reason to believe that Berkeley did not have an extensional approach to the meaning of general words.

The evidence for an alternative view is not hidden. When Berkeley uses the term *meaning* in discussions about words he does so, as I will show, in a way that strongly suggests that he does not have the extension of a word in mind. The passages Flage uses to support an extensional account are, notably, passages in which Berkeley does not use the term *meaning*. While Flage does have some discussion of those passages in which

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[1] For Berkeley I have used Luce and Jessop (1948-57; cited as *Works*), with the following abbreviations. *PHK*: *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*. Intro.: Introduction to *PHK*. Draft Intro.: Draft introduction to *PHK*. *DHP*: *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*. *NTV*: *Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision*. *TVV*: *The Theory of Vision Vindicated and Explained*. *Alciphron*: *Alciphron, or the Minute Philosopher*. *DFM: A Defence of Free-Thinking in Mathematics*.

For *Alciphron* I cite dialogue number and section number, starring those sections (e.g. 7*) that appear with this number in the first two editions but are omitted from the third edition. For *DHP* I cite dialogue number and page number from the *Works* vol. 2. For the Draft Intro., I cite the page number from *Works* vol. 2. For *PHK*, Intro., *NTV, TVV, DFM* I just cite the section number.

Berkeley speaks of word meanings, he is forced into an unnatural interpretation of them in order to make them fit the proposed extensional account. More often, studies of Berkeley's theory of language simply ignore what Berkeley said about word meanings (see Warnock 1953 chapter 4; Beal 1971; Land 1978; Winkler 2005; Roberts 2007 chapter 2).[2] Perhaps there has been an assumption that Berkeley's rejection of abstract general ideas is, in effect, a rejection of any notion of 'word meaning' (unless such a meaning is accounted for in extensional terms). This assumption, if it has indeed influenced discussion, is not justified.

In this paper I hope to redress the balance by presenting what Berkeley said about the meanings of general words. In section 2 I describe what Berkeley says about the signification and 'suggestive' potential of a word and make some initial comments on how we might envisage the relation between the two. In section 3 I develop the account to include Berkeley's discussion of the meaning of a word, and suggest that this has an explanatory role with respect to both the signification and suggestive potential of a word. In section 4 I consider how Berkeley's account contrasts with the theory of words that he rejects. In section 5 I consider Flage's account.

I restrict my attention to terms like *triangle, body, exist,* which could in principle, for Berkeley, be connected with some sort of 'idea' component. I don't therefore have any discussion of words such as *spirit, mind*, which, for Berkeley, could not be used of an 'idea'. I have restricted my attention to the 'idea'-involving terms because this provides sufficient material for helping clarify an important element in Berkeley's account of words.

I assume that Berkeley's views on language did not undergo any fundamental change between the *Principles* and the *Alciphron*. The interpretation that I offer is consistent with both. Insofar as there is a shift in perspective (Berkeley does seem, in the *Alciphron*, to become less and less interested in considering any 'ideational' component in our response to language), this shift is consistent with the account that I put forward.

2. Signification and Suggestive Power: A First Look

Berkeley has two uses of the term *signification*. I discuss the second use in section 3. In the first sense it is used of the range of objects to which a word applies (the objects that the word 'stands for' or 'denotes'). In explaining the generality of a word such as *triangle*, Berkeley opposes the claim that the word has a single inherently general idea as its signification (Intro. 12, 18; Draft Intro., *Works* 2: 127-8; *Alciphron* VII, 7*). For Berkeley, '*everything which exists, is particular*' (*DHP* I, *Works* 2: 192). A (putative) abstract general idea of a triangle would be the idea of a particular triangle that is 'neither equilateral nor scalenon nor equicrural' (Intro. 15); but this is incoherent because the idea of a particular triangle must be of a triangle with determinate angles.[3] Berkeley replaces

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[2] Winkler (1989, 175-91) does have some discussion of what Berkeley says about the meaning of *exist*, but the relationship between this and Berkeley's theory of words, as expounded earlier in the book (chapter 1), is left obscure.

[3] 'Behind Berkeley's anti-abstractionism is his nominalism – his three-fold conviction that only determinate qualities exist, that they exist only when tied to other determinate qualities, and that they are unique to the particular objects they constitute' Muehlmann 2008, 136.

the claim that a general word signifies a single 'general idea' with the claim that it signifies the multiple particular objects (or 'ideas', in Berkeley's terminology) that the word denotes. A word is 'made the sign … of several particular ideas' Intro. 11. The word *line* derives its generality from 'the various particular lines which it indifferently denotes' (Intro. 12; see also Intro. 15, 18; Draft Intro., *Works* 2: 128-9; *Alciphron* VII, 7*; and *DFM* 47).

This relation, between a general word and the objects it signifies, can be spelt out in terms of the truth-conditions of a general statement that uses the word. If we make a statement about 'whatever has extension', it is implied that 'the axiom concerning it holds equally true … of every particular extension' (Intro. 11). The general statement is true if what is predicated holds true of each particular to which the general term applies.

Several passages in Berkeley might be taken to suggest that the connection, between a general word and the things to which it applies, is established by arbitrary convention. That is to say, we start with what might be called the pre-semantic word (the word considered merely as a phonetic/syntactic item) and then decide that it will 'stand for' a particular range of objects. Berkeley can describe the 'signification … of ideas by words' as 'depending altogether on the arbitrary appointment of men' (*NTV* 152; cf. *TVV* 39). General terms are 'made to stand' for a range of particular objects (Intro. 11; Draft Intro., *Works* 2: 128f.; *Alciphron* VII, 7*).

This interpretation is consistent with several passages that suggest that the correlation between a sign and the things it signifies is one that is learnt by experience:

> [T]here must be time and experience, by repeated acts, to acquire a habit of knowing the connexion between the signs and things signified; that is to say, of understanding the language, whether of the eyes or of the ears. (*Alciphron* IV, 11)

The phrase 'language … of the eyes' is reference to Berkeley's suggestion that visual information is a kind of 'language' which, like verbal language, uses 'signs', and where it is by experience that we learn what these signs stand for (*NTV*; *TVV*; *PHK* 44, 60-66; *Alciphron* IV). For example, by 'constant experience' we learn of a connection between visual faintness (a kind of sign) and distance: hence, by experience we learn that faintness signifies distance. Similarly, by experience we learn that there is a connection between a blush (a sign) and a sense of shame. Berkeley sees these sign/thing-signified connections as instituted by God. Because of this, it is only by experience that we can learn what these visual signs signify: we learn of the sign/thing-signified connections by neither a necessary connection nor by similarity, 'but purely and solely from experience, custom, and habit' (*Alciphron* IV, 10 [cf. *NTV* 17, 21-26, 45, 147; *TVV* 45-47, 62-3]).

In addition to the signification of a word, Berkeley also speaks of what I will call the 'suggestive power' of a word, namely the capacity of a word, when used, to suggest to us some particular idea. While Berkeley developed several criticisms of the claim that 'ideas' play a necessary role in the meaningful use of language[4] (he disagreed with the belief,

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[4] See in particular Intro., Draft Intro. and *Alciphron* VII. For discussion, see Flew 1974; Winkler 2005; Roberts 2007; Williford and Jakapi 2009.

which at an early time he had once held, that a sign ought only to be used if there is 'an idea answering to it'[5]), he retained the notion that at least some words could, when used, 'suggest' a particular idea to the language user. For example, after noting that a general term such as *triangle* is the sign of 'several particular ideas' (or, as we might say, several particular objects), Berkeley adds, 'any one of which it indifferently suggests to the mind' Intro. 11. That is to say, a use of *triangle* can, potentially, raise in the mind the idea of a particular triangle. Berkeley can describe 'suggestion' in different ways: a word can 'suggest to the mind', 'raise in the mind', 'excite in the understanding', 'bring into view', a particular idea (Intro. 11, 19, 20; *Alciphron* VII, 2, 5, 5*, 7*).

What is the basis for the suggestive power that a word can have? Several texts suggest at least a partial answer: the basis for the suggestive power of a word is the 'habitual connexion', between the word and what the word signifies, that we learn by experience (e.g. *NTV* 147). Once we have learned of this connection, use of the word can suggest to us whatever it is that the word signifies. Berkeley gives examples from the signs we get from the senses. The sound of a coach suggests to us a coach 'from the experience I have had that such a sound is connected with a coach' (*DHP* I, *Works* 2: 204). Faintness in vision may suggest magnitude, or distance, but this is only because of an experienced connection between faintness and these things (*NTV* 72). The same holds for language: 'upon hearing a certain sound, the idea is immediately suggested to the understanding which custom had united with it' (*NTV* 17 [cf. *NTV* 73, 144; *PHK* 43]).

It is curious, therefore, that Winkler (2005, 127-32) claims that, for Berkeley, the relation between a word and what it suggests is more fundamental than the signification relation. Winkler states, 'It is, in Berkeley's view, only because a mark suggests an idea that it can stand for something in the world' (128). The only textual evidence Winkler gives for this is *PHK* 43 and *DHP* I, *Works* 2: 174; but neither text supports Winkler's claim. *PHK* 43 describes how certain cues (from vision and other senses), by virtue of 'a connexion taught us by experience', come to 'signify and suggest' distance to us 'after the same manner that words of any language suggest the ideas they are made to stand for'. If anything, this passage supports the opposite of Winkler's claim, suggesting as it does that it is what words are 'made to stand for' that underpins the suggestive capacity of a word. The passage from *DHP* I merely gives a brief reference to the suggestive potential of words with no indication that this underpins the word's capacity to signify things in the world.

Winkler's interpretation seems to arise from the belief that we cannot take the signification relation as a brute fact (cf. 2005, 132). It needs an explanation. I agree that the signification relation does need explaining. The behavior of a formal model of language, in which a predicate letter is arbitrarily assigned its extension (by an interpretation function), is not relevant for natural language. The word *car* does not apply to a particular car because of some prior stipulation that that particular car is in the extension of the word. There is no particular group of objects that has ever been arbitrarily assigned as the extension of the word *car*. Instead we apply the word *car* to anything that is a car, that is to say, to anything that is the 'same sort of thing' as any particular car.

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[5] Berkeley expresses this belief in his early paper 'Of Infinites', *Works* 4: 235-6, cited in Berman (1986, 603).

Berkeley, as is often noted, also expresses this, and it is a point that connects naturally with what Berkeley has to say about the 'meaning' of a word.

3. Word Meaning, Significance, and Suggestive Power

We apply the word *car* to those particular things that we recognize to be cars. Berkeley notes that a word applies to a particular group of objects because those objects can be classified into a 'sort':

> [W]ords become general by being made to stand indiscriminately for all particular ideas which from a mutual resemblance belong to the same kind. (*Alciphron* VII, 7 [cf. Draft Intro., *Works* 2: 128]).

> When upon perception of an idea I range it under this or that sort, it is because it is perceived after the same manner, or because it has a likeness or conformity with, or affects me in the same way as, the ideas of the sort I rank it under. In short, it must not be entirely new, but have something in it old and already perceived by me. (*NTV* 128)

A passage in the introduction to *PHK* can be taken to expand on this. As noted in the previous section, Berkeley denies that a general word, such as *triangle*, signifies a single 'abstract general idea'; instead, such words signify 'indifferently a great number of particular ideas' (Intro. 18). But in proposing this Berkeley notes an objection:

> To this [namely, the claim that a word does not have 'one only precise and settled signification'] it will be objected, that every name that has a definition, is thereby restrained to one certain signification. For example, a *triangle* is defined to be a *plane surface comprehended by three right lines*; by which that name is limited to denote one certain idea and no other. To which I answer, that in the definition it is not said whether the surface be great or small, black or white, nor whether the sides are long or short, equal or unequal, nor with what angles they are inclined to each other; in all which there may be great variety, and consequently there is no one settled idea which limits the signification of the word *triangle*. 'Tis one thing for to keep a name constantly to the same definition, and another to make it stand every where for the same idea: the one is necessary, the other useless and impracticable. (Intro. 18)

This passage shows that Berkeley accepted that some words can be associated with a 'definition' and that, where this is the case, a word is kept 'constantly to the same definition'. So, while Berkeley rejects the idea that a word signifies a single inherently general idea, he still has place for the claim that a (single) definition might have some necessary role to play.

There is, I suggest, a natural intuition that each word of our language has some single

specifiable 'meaning'.[6] Alciphron may be intended to be referring to this natural intuition when Berkeley has him say, '[I]t is current opinion that every substantive name marks out and exhibits to the mind one distinct idea separate from all others' *Alciphron* VII, 5. Assuming (as Alciphron would be taken to be) that a word signifies an idea and that what a word signifies provides the meaning of a word, if we work with the intuition that a word has a single meaning it follows that a word signifies a single idea. It may then be natural to suppose that the 'generality' of a general word needs to be captured in this single idea that the word signifies.

Berkeley opposes the claim that a word has this type of 'one precise and settled signification', but he does not oppose the claim that there is indeed something 'precise and settled' that we can associate with a particular word.[7] This precise and settled thing is not an 'idea' (understood as a particular thing, or the imagined image of a particular thing), but, at least for some words, Intro. 18 indicates we can associate a word with a (single) definition. The definition acts to delimit the range of objects to which the word can correctly apply.

A link between this type of definition and a word's 'meaning' is indicated by *PHK* 49: 'to say a die is hard, extended, and square, is … an explication of the meaning of the word *die*'. Elsewhere Berkeley describes an explication as something that acts to 'unfold the meaning' of a word (*PHK* 79). Hence to explicate, or unfold, the meaning of the word *die* is, for Berkeley, to indicate what characteristics an object needs to have in order for the word to be appropriately used of that object. I suggest that the natural way to interpret this, and below I give further evidence for this reading, is as follows: an explication makes explicit a condition that licenses the appropriate use of a word, and to know the meaning of a word is to know this condition.[8] A word's meaning is not given in terms of an extension. Rather, a word's meaning is seen in terms of a resemblance-condition, knowledge of which enables the language user to 'extend' (so to speak) the word to certain objects; objects that satisfy the condition are of the 'sort' that the word indicates.

This reading is supported by other passages in which Berkeley discusses the meaning of a word. Berkeley's consistent focus when discussing word meaning is on expounding the relevant understanding that should inform a language user's grasp of a word and thereby influence how the language user actually uses the word.

In a section of the third dialogue of *Alciphron*, the disputants are inquiring about the appropriate understanding with which various words should be used. The discussion is framed in terms of a word's meaning (or 'sense', a variant) and the appropriate

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[6] I ignore obvious cases of semantic ambiguity (*bark, bank,* etc.) that do not undermine the basic intuition. More challenging are variations in nuance (polysemy), which I do not take account of here.

[7] G. Warnock notes that there is 'little reason to object to the idea that every word has, or ought to have, "one only precise and settled signification", *if* by this is meant that each word has or ought to have one precise and settled meaning' (1953, 72). Warnock does not explain what the 'one meaning' of a general word might be, though he quotes Intro. 18 in this context.

[8] I suspect that the qualifiers 'necessary' and/or 'sufficient' do not provide us with the right sort of parameters for explicating this type of condition for use of a word. Hence I leave this unexpressed. Reference to 'appropriate' use is intended to provide a relevant, if vaguely expressed, constraint.

'explications' of that meaning. Euphranor asks to be given a definition of the word *honour,* and follows this with a request that Alciphron clarify the 'sense' in which he uses the word *principle*. Euphranor describes Plato's 'explication' of the beauty of virtue, but Alciphron rejects the 'sense' that Plato provides. Euphranor responds by asking Alciphron to '[d]efine it, explain it, make me to understand your meaning' (see *Alciphron* III, 1-7). Berkeley shifts between linguistic and conceptual perspectives (what does the word *principle* mean, what is a principle), but even allowing for this the passages show the close links that Berkeley takes as holding between questions of 'meaning' or 'sense' and explanatory definitions.

It is important in this context to note Berkeley's second use of the term *signification*. As well as using this term for the range of objects to which a word applies, Berkeley can also speak of the 'signification' of a word in contexts where this seems merely to be a variant way of referring to the meaning of a word and where, once again, the focus is not on the extension but on how a word is to be understood. In a lengthy debate on the meaning that ought to be accorded to the word *matter* (*DHP* II, *Works* 2: 216-225), Philonous accuses Hylas of 'annexing' to the word *matter* a 'meaning' contrary to its normal use, of using it in a 'new sense', of adding to or removing from the 'definition' of the word (*DHP* II, *Works* 2: 225). In the same section, and evidently with parallel force, Philonous refers to the person who 'takes the liberty to unsettle and change the common signification of words'. It is very unnatural, in particular given the context, to read this as saying that some take the liberty to 'change the extension' of a word. This becomes even clearer when Berkeley makes the same point at *PHK* 69, referring to those who use the word *matter* 'in some sense very distant from its received signification'. If we interpret *signification* here as denoting the extension, we need to rewrite the phrase completely in order to get any sense out of it (e.g. some use the term *matter* with a definition that indicates an extension that is very different from the extension the word has with its usual definition). Given the phrasing as it stands, the concern, evidently, is that some wish to invest the word with a new sense, a new condition on use which would require explication by a novel definition. When Philonous gives the 'signification' of the word *matter* he uses a form of explication: 'And doth not *matter*, in the common current acceptation of the word, signify an extended, solid, moveable, unthinking, inactive substance?' (*DHP* II, *Works* 2: 225). Note that when Berkeley does use *signification* to refer to the objects in the extension of a word, as in Intro. 18, he expressly denies that a general word has 'one precise and settled signification'. In the above passages, by contrast, Berkeley wishes to pin down the 'signification' of a word to a single accepted sense.

Berkeley has specific discussion of the meanings of a few other words besides *matter*. The word *body* is acceptable as long as we take away any connotation of 'material substance' and instead 'mean by *body* … that which is immediately seen and felt, which is only a combination of sensible qualities, or ideas' *PHK* 95. That is to say, the explication of the word *body* indicates that the word can be applied to that which is immediately seen and felt.[9] Knowledge of this condition will underwrite appropriate use of the word.

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[9] Berkeley seems to allow that the phrase *material substance* could be used with the (suggested) sense that *body* has, in which case it has coherent meaning. See *DHP* III, *Works* 2: 237, 261f..

General statements about 'bodies' will be true if what is predicated is true of anything to which *body* can be applied.

The word *substance* is legitimately used if 'taken in the vulgar sense, for a combination of sensible qualities, such as extension, solidity, weight' (*PHK* 37). I take this to be saying that where some particular thing has particular features of the types extension, solidity, and weight, that thing is legitimately called a substance. Berkeley contrasts this account of the word *substance* with the 'senseless' use where the word is taken 'for the support of accidents or qualities without the mind' (ibid. [cf. *PHK* 9, 13, 15, 54]).

Berkeley asks us to attend to 'what is meant by the term *exist* when applied to sensible things' *PHK* 3.[10] The wording here is strongly suggestive of a distinction between an account of what the word 'means' and an account of the 'sensible things' to which the word – given whatever meaning it has – is applied. Berkeley is not inquiring about what group of sensible objects constitutes the meaning of *exist*; rather, he is asking about what meaning the word *exist* has such that, given that meaning, the word is applied to the things to which it does apply. This is also indicated by the subsequent discussion in which Berkeley, in effect, explicates the condition that guides appropriate use of the word. For a table, the condition is that 'I see and feel it', or would do so if I was in my study; for an odor, the condition is that it was smelled; for a sound, that it was heard. Thus, when applied to sensible things, the condition for appropriate use of the term *exist* is that the sensible thing is perceived or would be perceived. This, by hypothesis, is to explicate the meaning of the word *exist*; it is to make explicit what should guide us in our use of the word.[11]

The evidence, therefore, does not support an extensional interpretation of Berkeley's use of the term *meaning*. The onus, it seems to me, is on those who support an extensional interpretation to show how this is plausible in the light of those passages where Berkeley actually uses the term *meaning* (passages that, inexplicably, are usually ignored). The meaning of a word does though play a role with respect to the extension. The word *triangle* applies to all those things that conform with the definition given in Intro. 18; the definition indicates the relevant 'likeness or conformity' (as *NTV* 128 puts it) that is the characteristic of objects that belong to the sort 'triangle'. C. M. Turbayne is one of the few theorists who comments on the role that a definition has in Berkeley's account of words. He notes that a definition plays a role in 'connecting our language with the world': 'If we know the definition of a complex term we are able to pick out particulars or sensible things that satisfy the definition. ... They are "of the same sort" because they satisfy the same definition' (1970, 24).[12]

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[10] The account is restricted to sensible things so does not explicate the basis for applying *exist* to things like God or self, for which we have no 'idea'.

[11] Berkeley's analysis of words such as *matter, body, exist* can be seen as fulfilling the program he outlined in Intro. 21-25: the endeavour to obtain a clear view of our use of words without being led astray by the words themselves (by leading us to suppose that abstract general ideas play some role, Intro. 18). Cf. White 1955.

[12] It is an exaggeration to say, as G. Pitcher does, that Berkeley 'offers no account of how words are connected to their referents' (1977, 89). But it is true that Berkeley does not offer an account of our

As well as having an explanatory role with respect to the signification of a general word, a word's meaning also helps explain the 'suggestive power' that a word may have. At *PHK* 80 Berkeley notes that some give the term *matter* a 'negative definition' (an unknown something, neither substance nor accident, etc.), which he cannot distinguish from how we understand the term *nothing*:

> [T]his is what appears to me to be the result of that definition … I do not find that there is any kind of effect or impression made on my mind, different from what is excited by the term *nothing*. *PHK* 80

By reflecting on this explication of the word *matter* Berkeley finds that no positive idea is 'excited' (raised, suggested) in his mind at all. Insofar as anything is suggested at all, it cannot be differentiated from what the word *nothing* might suggest. The definition guides how we form, or fail to form, an idea of some object to which the word could apply.[13]

4. Contrast with the 'Abstract General Idea' Theory of General Words

By distinguishing these three relations (meaning, signification, suggestion), Berkeley's account of general words differs importantly from the approach that he rejects. In that approach the three relations all converge on one thing – an abstract general idea. The word *triangle* signifies an abstract general idea and suggests this idea, and (though this is more implicit) the idea is the 'meaning' of the word.

We can see this convergence in Berkeley's presentation of the position that he opposes. Berkeley denies that there is 'one settled idea which limits the signification of the word *triangle*' (Intro. 18; that is, where 'signification' indicates what the word denotes), but this is the position which Alciphron affirms: an abstract general idea is something that general names 'stand immediately and properly for' *Alciphron* VII, 5*.

The abstract general idea is also treated as something that is, and must be, suggested to (raised in the mind of) the language user. Alciphron states that 'it is a current opinion that every substantive name marks out and exhibits to the mind one distinct idea separate from all others' (*Alciphron* VII, 5; a general word will 'never fail to excite in the mind' the general idea that it stands for [*Alciphron* VII, 5*]; to respond knowingly to a statement, we must 'distinctly perceive' the ideas that the words mark [*Alciphron* VII, 3]). If we suppose that the semantic import of a word is explained simply by the general idea for which it stands, any significant use of the word must (by hypothesis) involve that idea – the language user must become aware of the idea, otherwise nothing of semantic import will be conveyed. While Berkeley can deny that an actual suggestion need be made in the meaningful use of a word (that is, that a particular idea need be raised in the mind of the

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ability to recognize similarity (e.g. of a colour, or taste), an ability that is presupposed in his account of words.

[13] This is consistent with the claim that familiarity with particular instances of, say, a horse, can also play a role in stimulating a horse 'suggestion' when we hear the word *horse* used.

language user), this cannot be denied on the approach to words that Alciphron describes. Berkeley can deny this because the 'meaning' of a word, for Berkeley, is not located in an idea that the word might signify.

The third relation that Berkeley describes, between a word and its meaning, is also accounted for, in the opposing hypothesis, by the relation between word and abstract general idea. The terminology that I think is specially relevant here is that of a meaning as 'marked by' or 'annexed to' a word. Alciphron uses this terminology for the relation between word and general idea. Alciphron inquires '[W]hat is the clear and distinct idea marked by the word *grace*?' (*Alciphron* VII, 4). He wants to find out what (if any) idea is 'annexed' to the word (ibid.). He states that 'it is a current opinion that every substantive name marks out … one distinct idea separate from all others' *Alciphron* VII, 5. Berkeley uses similar terminology for the relation between a word and its meaning. He talks about meanings as being 'annexed' to words (*PHK* 17, 88; *DHP* II, *Works* 2: 216). Speaking of the phrase *absolute existence of sensible objects in themselves*, Berkeley comments that to him 'it is evident those words mark out either a direct contradiction, or else nothing at all' *PHK* 24. This parallels Berkeley's observations about the word *matter*. The meaning of the word *matter* can be explicated in such a way that it contains a contradiction, or else is simply a list of negatives that give the word a use that cannot be distinguished from our use of the word *nothing*.

While Berkeley can also use the terminology of 'marking' to describe the relation between a word and ideas it may denote or suggest (e.g. Intro. 20: '[T]he communicating of ideas marked by words is not the chief and only end of language'), I suggest that this usage probably reflects more the position he is opposing than his own preferred usage. I suggest that the notion that a word 'marks' something goes along with the notion that whatever is marked must, in a meaningful use of the word, be in some way apprehended by the language user. What is marked gives the bedrock from which the phonetic/syntactic item can gain a semantic use. For Alciphron, this means that an idea must be 'excited in the mind' because it is an idea that provides this bedrock. For Berkeley it is also the case that a word must mark something (have a meaning annexed to it), and apprehension of this meaning underwrites our usage of the word; but what a word marks can be differentiated from what a word may suggest or from the objects to which the word can apply.

5. Flage's Extensional Account

Flage asserts that there is 'overwhelming evidence', 'little question', that Berkeley had an extensional theory of meaning for general terms (1987, 98, 100): a word applies to a range of objects, and 'it is each of these objects in all their particularity that the term means' ibid. 94f.. Flage's confidence is misplaced. His evidence for this extensional interpretation is based entirely on passages where Berkeley criticizes the claim that a general word is the sign of an abstract general idea and where he replaces this with the claim that a general word signifies 'several particular' things (Intro. 11, 12, 15, 18; Draft Intro. *Works* 2: 127-9; *Alciphron* VII, 7*). In none of these texts does Berkeley speak of the 'meaning' of a word. Flage bases his account of Berkeley's approach to word meaning on the wrong texts.

Berkeley's nominalism, it should be observed, does not provide independent grounds for the extensional interpretation. While Berkeley's belief that everything that exists is particular plays a role in his argument against abstract general ideas and for the alternative in which a word denotes indifferently those objects to which it can be applied, this is consistent with an account in which a word's meaning is differentiated from its extension. As noted in section 3, Berkeley makes important appeal to 'sorts' of things and resemblances between things, and it is with respect to such resemblances that his discussions of word meaning are situated.

Flage does discuss the passage in *PHK* 49 in which Berkeley provides an explication of the 'meaning' of *die*, but in order to retain an extensional account of word meaning Flage gives this passage a forced interpretation :

> Does this provide evidence against my contention that Berkeley proposed an extensional theory of meaning? No. Although the term 'die' denotes all those things that are dies, all the things that are in the class of dies are in various other classes as well: they are in the class of things that are hard, the class of things that are extended, the class of things that are square, … and so on. In providing an explication of the meaning of the term 'die', one provides a list of the several classes of things in which all those objects in the extension of the term 'die' are found. (ibid., 116; cf. 123)

The claim seems to be that, when Berkeley speaks of the 'qualities' of being hard and square and extended, he is in fact speaking of three classes of objects. Flage allows that the explication of meaning acts as a 'criterion' for someone to apply the word *die* (ibid., 123), but he does not describe how a list of classes can act as a criterion. Presumably Flage does not think in terms of a language user first finding out what objects are in the relevant classes and then observing the intersection of these classes, but what the positive account might be is left very unclear. Insofar as Flage does suggest an account of what Berkeley may have had in mind with respect to our learning how to use a general word, this is phrased in terms of noticing 'resemblances' between certain objects (ibid., 96f., 102, 121f.). This fits the notion of an explication understood in terms of accounting for why we 'extend' the word to certain things and not to others. But Flage does not explain how an 'explication of meaning' can be understood in those terms if the 'meaning' is itself constituted by the extension; in that case, the explication would focus on the members of the extension (as in the above quotation from Flage) and not on an account of why we extend a word in the way we do.

In my view, Flage attempts to maneuver around Berkeley's comments on the explication of word meaning rather than taking what he writes at face value. Combined with the general neglect of this aspect of Berkeley's thought, it is easy to get the impression that most theorists feel that what Berkeley said about word meanings and their explication is at best misleading and preferably ignored altogether.

Flage uses an intensional/extensional framework for considering Berkeley's theory of meaning, but this may not be helpful. It is one thing to deny that Berkeley had an extensional theory of word meaning, another thing to claim that 'intensional' is a good way to describe his theory. The terms *intension/intensional* are theoretically loaded and might

suggest commitments that Berkeley does not have. In particular, it is important to clarify the following two points.

First, while Berkeley spoke of 'definitions', I do not think he was interested in providing detailed conceptual accounts capable of providing a guide for classifying objects into scientifically defined sorts.[14] His suggested definitions are outline and simple in nature, with the focus appearing to be on simple cues that prompt our use of particular words. In *Alciphron*, Euphranor notes that what specially marks out a 'language', as opposed merely to any possible sign system, includes the 'easy application of signs' *Alciphron* IV, 12. In effect, Berkeley describes simple features that guide our use of some words.

Second, it may be thought that, by moving away from an extensional theory, I have moved to an account that posits a 'mediating' type of entity that fits uneasily within Berkeley's overall philosophical project. This though is not the case. While Berkeley is concerned to avoid any philosophical theory in which a mediating 'representational' layer intervenes between ourselves and our perception of reality, he does not oppose mediating processes as such. On the contrary, his suggestion that our experience of nature is in fact a 'language' God uses to speak to us (*NTV* 147) is permeated with the contrast between immediate and mediated perception. Our apparent visual awareness of distance is, on Berkeley's account, a 'suggested' (hence mediated) awareness that arises from more immediate visual (and other) cues that, by experience, are found to correlate with distance (see *NTV*). When we say we hear a coach, it is, properly speaking, only a sound that we hear, 'and the coach is not then properly perceived by sense, but suggested from experience' (*DHP* I, *Works* 2: 204). Berkeley suggests that these correlations in our experience are due to connections that God establishes. The visual cue 'signifies' distance because that is how God has set up the language of nature that we are familiar with. No such mechanism is available to account for the connection between a word and the objects it signifies. Unlike the language of nature, for human language there is no sign/thing-signified connection that is established independently of the users of language. Berkeley's discussion of word meanings is part of the missing explanation for this connection. This is not to revert to a theory of abstract general ideas, nor is it to posit the type of mediating entity that Berkeley saw as getting in the way of our perception of the world.

6. Final Comments

I have argued that Berkeley's theory of language has a place for a word's meaning, which can be distinguished from what a word denotes and what a word might suggest. The account is neutral as to whether or not a particular 'idea', or string of such ideas, needs to

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[14] In the Draft Introduction to *PHK*, Berkeley notes that sorts don't seem 'to have any precise bounds or limits at all'; we often have 'doubts and scruples' about the sorting of particular things; 'Neither do I think it necessary the kinds or species of things should be so very accurately bounded and marked out' (*Works* 2: 128). In a later stratum of the draft Berkeley crosses this passage out (see Belfrage 1987, 83), but I assume this is more an attempt to improve the flow of the argument rather than indicating a basic disagreement with the point.

be 'raised in the mind' of a language user in order for the user to understand a statement. The meaning of a word is kept separate from any particular idea that might be suggested by the word. Hence the account is consistent with the claim that a use of a word can be significant even though no idea, corresponding to that word, is suggested to the language user.[15] And reflection may suggest, as it did to Berkeley, that the stimulation of particular ideas is in fact quite remote from what is often required in order to understand a statement (consider Berkeley's comment, via Euphranor, that 'the true end of speech … is not merely, or principally, or always, the imparting or acquiring of ideas, but rather something of an active operative nature' [*Alciphron* VII, 14]). Introspection does not suggest that the understanding of a statement consists in a string of ideas that are connected together (the view that Berkeley puts into the mouth of Alciphron: 'He who really thinks hath a train of ideas succeeding each other and connected in his mind; and when he expresseth himself by discourse each word suggests a distinct idea to the hearer or reader' [*Alciphron* VII, 2]).

Berkeley's account of words offers a degree of differentiation, within the general topic of the 'semantics' (broadly conceived) of a word, which I think it is important to take into account. Berkeley distinguishes a word's meaning from what the word might in use suggest to us, and from what a word might denote. And he also, as briefly mentioned above, distinguishes these from an account of the sort of elements that might occur in our 'understanding' of a statement. The approach to words that he opposes conflates these different elements.[16]

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[15] My interpretation is supportive of the claim that Berkeley's move away from an 'ideational' account of word meaning is not limited to emotive uses of language (see Williford and Jakapi 2009 for an account of this debate).

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