If the phrase “the theory of meaning” stands for a systematic meaning-theory for a given language, and not for any remarks—however casual and unsystematic—about the nature and constitution of meanings of linguistic expressions, or the ontological status of meaning entities, then there is a wide agreement as to the shape which such a meaning-theory should take. It is usually assumed that a meaning-theory for a given language is primarily a theory that assigns meanings to sentences in their assertoric use, and only secondary to subsentential elements of language and to its non-assertoric uses. Given that assumption and the idea that the task of a meaning-theory is to specify what is for sentences of a given language to have the meanings they have, it seems reasonable to suppose that the meanings of sentences in their assertoric use are constituted by the conditions of their truth. The elaboration of that supposition yields a truth-conditional theory of meaning. Hence it is commonly held that a truth-conditional theory of meaning is the standard or default theory in that area, and a very strong case should be made for any departure from it (see e.g. Szubka 2001). There is, however, another way of looking at the matter.

1. A Natural Route To An Alternative Theory of Meaning

Let us suppose that one is interested in a meaning-theory for a given natural language. As a philosopher one is more concerned about the form which such a
A theory of meaning must [...] be conceived of as taking nothing for granted: to the extent that it did, it would be failing to provide the elucidation that constituted its entire purpose (Dummett 1983/1993, p. 131).

This is not, as one may suppose, the highly unrealistic requirement to have a theory that does not make any presuppositions whatsoever, but rather a plausible requirement that a meaning-theory should elucidate what are the meanings of linguistic expressions, and how they are determined and constituted. As Michael Dummett puts it:

A theory of meaning must exploit a general conception of what meaning is – the meaning of an expression of any language. But in order to work out such a theory in detail, it must be thought of as applying to some one specific language. Obviously no such theory can be stated without the use of expressions for some of the concepts expressible in words of the language to which the theory relates: but, in explaining what it is for a speaker of the language to grasp the meanings of those words, it must explain what is involved in his so using them as to express those concepts: it must not attribute to him a prior grasp of the concepts (1998a, p. 11).

It is clear that this requirement excludes, as philosophically useless, all theories of meaning that propose to characterize meanings attached to sentences of a given natural language by translating those sentences into another and more familiar language. Theories of that kind are based on implicit grasp of a concept of meaning, without any serious attempt to illuminate it.

To specify what it is for the words and phrases of a natural language to have the meanings they have, one must know how to provide the correct interpretation of such a language without appeal to the notion of meaning, and without attributing to the speakers of that language the prior and further unexplicable grasp of the concepts those words express. For the most part the interpretation in question amounts to singling out and characterizing those features of linguistic expressions which constitute their meaning. Since what is at stake here is a meaning-theory for a given natural language, one cannot, more or less arbitrarily, stipulate the intended interpretation of that language, but one has to provide an account of how it is actually interpreted by its competent users. In other words, one has to explain how that language is understood, and in what that understanding consist. But how to assess whether such a meaning-theory is correct? For various reasons it seems pointless to ask competent speakers whether the proposed theory of meaning of their language is correct. They may have excellent competence in the practice of speaking that language but be unable to recognize a given meaning-theory as a...
correct one. In judging the correctness of the proposed theory of meaning one has to rely on the observable practice of the competent speakers of the relevant language.

An attempt to construct a correct meaning-theory, faithful—by and large—to the existing linguistic practice, may proceed along the following lines. First, one tries to identify which sentences of a natural language may be counted as assertoric, by taking into account their form, as well as the manner and circumstances of their utterance. Second, one aims at establishing in what circumstances a competent speaker is willing to assert, or actually asserts, a given sentence. In doing so one may be taken as establishing in what circumstances a competent speaker recognizes that sentence as true. The reason of this move is the equation of a speaker’s willingness to assert a sentence with his or her recognition of it as true. Third, one claims that those circumstances of recognizing a sentence as true are, in most cases, the circumstances of its being truth, that is, its truth-conditions. And eventually one concludes that those truth-conditions are what the meaning of that sentence consist in. The next and separate step consists in specifying the meanings of constituent parts of that sentence, that proceeds through identifying their contribution to the sentence’s truth-conditions.

This is, however, a very rough outline, and it requires further elaboration. In particular, the notion of recognizing a sentence as true has to be carefully clarified. If it is not clarified, one will not get an adequate meaning-theory. The notion of recognizing a sentence as true involves two crucial ideas. One of them is the idea of establishing a sentence as true. One properly recognizes a sentence as true only when one does that as the result of observations, or experiments, or deductive and inductive inferences. Except a limiting case of simple observation sentences, recognizing a sentence as true involves inferential reasoning of some kind. Hence, one may say that the recognition of a sentence as true by a competent speaker would amount to finding out that the sentence in question is justified. Nevertheless, recognizing a sentence as true is not merely the matter of justification. Recognizing a sentence as true involves also the idea of acting, or being prepared to act, in accordance with the sentence recognized as true. Thus any adequate theory of meaning must explain how and to what extent the meanings of sentences are determined by consequences of accepting them as true.

For the proponents of a meaning-theory in terms of truth-conditions, establishing a sentence as true and being prepared to act in accordance with that sentence, do not determine its meaning, but rather enables one to identify the truth-conditions that constitute the meaning of that sentence. Thus, what one has here should be considered as two complementary and reinforcing ways of validating a meaning theory formulated in terms of a sentence’s being true.

But perhaps that move to a truth-conditional theory of meaning is not necessary. After all, why to assume that meaning is somehow hidden behind overt linguistic
practice, and that an adequate theory of meaning cannot be constructed directly out of the elements of that practice? If one gives up that assumption, there is no obstacle to suppose that the meanings of sentences of a natural language are determined by whatever constitute their recognition as true, that is by what establish them as true, and what is involved in accepting them as true. The success of such a theory of meaning would allow one to maintain:

An account of linguistic practice requires the concept of recognising-as-true, that of accepting-as-true and that of acting-on-the-truth-of. It is unclear that it needs the concept of being true (Dummett 1998a, p. 23).

What are the prospects of success here? They are quite promising, given that it is reasonable to maintain that both features of linguistic practice, that is, establishing a sentence as true and consequences of accepting it as true, fully and independently determine the meaning of a sentence. A harmony should exist between these two features, and having either, the other should follow. This gives us a dual aspect theory of meaning—justificationist and pragmatic—that has excellent resources for self-correction. Moreover, it does not need to take linguistic practice as sacrosant or self-justifying, since the actual practice of speakers may be criticized and revised in order to restore or improve harmony between justification and consequences.

2. Complexity, Directness, And Truth

Nevertheless, the prospects of a justificationist and pragmatic theory of meaning are not so bright as it seems at first glance. The theory has at least three major problems.

The first problem is connected with the assumption that in giving an account of meaning in terms of justification or verification, one should not repeat the old errors, usually ascribed to logical positivists, of taking sentences in isolation and making futile attempts to determine their meanings one by one. Meanings of many sentences come in groups or packages, and their justification-conditions are mutually dependent. This makes circularity quite a serious danger. That is to say, it is quite plausible that one will have to provide and account of the meaning of some sentence \( A \) in terms of the meaning of some other sentence \( B \), and then—sooner or later—the meaning of the sentence \( B \) in terms of the meaning of the sentence \( A \), or at least in terms of the meaning of a sentence presupposing the meaning of the sentence \( A \). One can ignore the danger of circularity and declare that it is simply an unavoidable feature of our epistemic practices, and thus embrace a rather unacceptable radical holism. A more promising way out is to insist, as Dummett does, that sentences may be ordered in such a way that the meaning of a given sentence can be given in terms of only those justification-conditions that
presuppose the meanings of sentences of lower complexity than the complexity of the sentence in question. Under that assumption a grasp of a sentence will involve a grasp of some fragment of the language to which the sentence belongs,

but and explanation of the language as a whole could be constructed without circularity by starting with sentences of minimal complexity (the observation sentences) and completing the explanation of sentences of any degree of complexity before proceeding to the explanation of those of the next degree (Dummett 1983/1993, p. 139).

A similar strategy of avoiding circularity may be proposed for an account of meaning in terms of the consequences of a sentence’s acceptance:

relative to suitable assignments of degrees of complexity, an explanation of the meaning of any sentence can presuppose the meanings only of sentences of lower complexity, and can be given simultaneously only with the meanings of those of the same complexity (Dummett 1983/1993, p. 141).

The most crucial thing for that strategy is the proper and accurate assignment of degrees of complexity for the sentences of the language under consideration. Dummett suggests that this is not an extremely complicated task and that one has only limited latitude in the assignment. Still, even if it is indeed so, the task seems impossible to complete without some prior intuitive grasp of the meanings of sentences to be ordered in the respect of complexity. What matters here is not, after all, superficial or surface syntactic complexity but much deeper meaning complexity of some sort. From that it follows that it is not possible to recognize the complexity of sentences prior to the grasp of their meanings.

The second problem is similar to the first one, but its sources are different. The problem arises because if the meaning of a sentence is given in terms of its justification-conditions, or in terms of establishing it as true, then one should presumably distinguish between the direct or canonical means of justification that are constitutive to meaning, and indirect or non-canonical ways of justification that assume that the meaning of the sentence in question is already known. Dummett gives a simple and convincing example of that distinction (1998a, p. 20). Let us consider a statement about the number of plates on a shelf in our kitchen. The direct or canonical way of establishing that statement as true consists in counting the plates, and that way is constitutive to its meaning. Of course, there will be plenty of indirect means of establishing the truth of that statement, for instance, by remembering how many plates there were two days ago when all of them were used at the dinner party, and adding those that were bought yesterday. It is easy to provide more such intuitive examples of that distinction; it is difficult, however, to provide a general account of direct or canonical justification. Dummett suggests that direct justification may be described as the justification “which corresponds step by step with the way in which the sentence is built up out of its constituents, and so with the way in which the truth-value of the sentence is represented by the
theory of meaning as being determined in accordance with its composition” (1983/1993, p. 142). The analogous distinction and description holds good for an account of meaning in terms of consequences, since only the most direct consequences constitute the meaning of a given sentence. But if one takes that line, the following question becomes pressing: how is it possible to find out which justification and consequences of a sentence are direct without prior understanding of that sentence, however dim? Perhaps Dummett might reply that no semantic understanding of the sentence in question is required here, but merely the grasp of its syntax, and that does not come as surprise, since any theory of meaning “has to rest upon a syntax, that is, upon an analysis of the structure of sentences as put together out of their constituent parts” (Dummett 1985/1993, p. 154). Still the reply is far from satisfactory: what matters here, as in the former case, is not a surface syntax but some deeper syntax that cannot be easily separated from meaning and its grasp or understanding.

Now briefly about the third problem. The proponents of the justificationist and pragmatic theory of meaning are inclined to maintain that an independent notion of truth is not needed in a meaning-theory. What is really required are two notions: that of establishing a sentence (as true), and that of acting on (the truth of) a sentence. Yet it is apparent that certain features of our linguistic practice, especially some forms of inference, seem to yield sentences the meanings of which can be given neither in terms of their direct justification-conditions, nor in terms of their direct consequences (think about plausible reasonings about the distant past). If this is indeed so, then one is forced to concede that at least in some cases the meanings of our sentences have to be accounted for in terms of their respective conditions of being true.

The first two problems are hardly noticed by the proponents of the justificationist and pragmatic meaning-theory, although they harks back to the well-known criticism of Chomsky’s transformational grammar, made three decades ago by P.F. Strawson (1969-70/1971). The third problem is clearly recognized by Dummett, and in his recent writings he is even prepared to make a remarkable concession to the truth-conditional theory of meaning. For example, he writes:

We must concede that our understanding of statements about the past incorporates, not merely a knowledge of our grounds for asserting them, but a grasp of how they represent reality: how acceptance of them contributes to the picture which we form of the world we inhabit and with which we operate to guide our actions (Dummett 1998b, p. 138).

Such an intellectual honesty speaks good about Dummett as a thoroughgoing critical thinker, but it does deprive the justificationist and pragmatic meaning-theory of its original uniformity and elegance.
3. Conclusion: Towards a Unified Theory of Meaning

Given the above three problems, one may come to believe that instead of struggling with them and making *ad hoc* concessions to the truth-conditional theory of meaning, it is better to revise thoroughly the justificationist and pragmatic theory of meaning, and propose a unified meaning-theory based upon the following simple idea: the meaning of a sentence is determined by its truth-conditions, given not independently of the sentence’s justification and consequences, but by the way which singles out a particular set of procedures as its direct justification, and a particular set of consequences as its direct or immediate consequences. Arguably, this is an intriguing idea, worthy of detailed elaboration and comparison with kindred proposals (see e.g. Peacocke 1986).

References