ABSTRACT. The paper considers a version of the problem of linguistic creativity obtained by interpreting attributions of ordinary semantic knowledge as attributions of practical competencies with expressions. The paper explains how to cope with this version of the problem without invoking either compositional theories of meaning or the notion of ‘tacit knowledge’ (of such theories) that has led to unnecessary puzzlement. The central idea is to show that the core assumption used to raise the problem is false. To render precise argument possible, the paper first identifies and removes some relevant semantic indeterminacy in philosophical talk of ‘semantic knowledge’ and ‘information’. This yields rules for attributing the two to human speakers and information-processors, respectively. The paper then shows, first, that ordinary speakers qualify as possessing all along an other than finite and definite stock of semantic knowledge and, second, that a very simple information-processor running a procedural semantics qualifies as possessing an analogous stock of semantic information. The second result is used to bring out that the first is neither unduly impressive nor particularly puzzling.

I.

By proposing a novel way of coping with the familiar ‘problem of linguistic creativity’ this paper is to show that some acts of desperation are quite unnecessary. The problem is this. We are convinced that ordinary mortals possess, at any given time, but a finite and definite stock of information, so that, in particular,

(1) Speakers possess, at any given time, but a finite and definite stock of semantic information. (Henceforward for short: ‘Speakers are epistemically finite beings.’)

On the other hand, we observe that

(2) Speakers are typically competent with any of indefinitely many sentences.

The problem then is that of reconciling the former conviction with the latter observation, of showing that speakers who possess the competence we observe are, after all, such finite beings as we take them to be. An

explanation that can tackle this reconciliatory task is what is requested by the question commonly used to formulate the problem: ‘How is it that ordinary speakers can understand any of indefinitely many sentences?’

The general form any such explanation needs to take then seems obvious: Any dictionary and grammar-textbook reminds us that our language contains but a finite and definite stock of words and constructions; and that these words and constructions make systematic rather than arbitrary contributions to the meaning of the sentences they occur in. Hence the meaning of a sentence can be worked out on the finite and definite basis of semantic information about the elementary sentence-constituents. We can hence show that competent speakers like you and me, after all, possess but a finite and definite stock of semantic information, by showing that we obtain our knowledge about sentences by processing semantic information about their elementary constituents. But of course we are hardly ever aware of engaging in such information-processing. So this has to be an unconscious process, going on in our heads without our being aware of it.

For want of a better idea, such information-processing is often held to be carried out by means of compositional theories of meaning. A theory of meaning is a theory that contains for each sentence of an object-language a theorem that states its meaning. The theory is compositional just in case there is a canonical derivation-procedure that allows one to obtain each such theorem from axioms that characterise the elementary constituents of the object-language sentence the theorem is about. This idea then leads to the ‘theory of tacit semantic knowledge’. The two central claims of this theory are

(I) To solve the problem of linguistic creativity, we have to assume that speakers possess knowledge of a compositional theory of meaning for their language.

Unfortunately, even the proponents of the theory of tacit semantic knowledge are unable to spell out such a theory of meaning for their mother tongue. So they bite the bullet and add:

(II) This knowledge is tacit knowledge which the speakers themselves are unable to articulate.

The second claim has given rise to some puzzlement, viz., when it was advanced as the claim that speakers possess semantic knowledge that is just like propositional knowledge of the semantic theory, except that they are unable to articulate it. I suppose one may be forgiven for finding this claim a bit desperate: What sets propositional knowledge of a theory apart