I. Reconstruction

Words and utterances can have very powerful meanings. The Propositional Theory of Meaning claims that sentences are meaningful because they express propositions. These propositions are considered to be “abstract objects”. That is to say, these propositions are not located anywhere in space, nor are they physical beings, and they do not exist in time - they are either eternal or everlasting. Because of these properties, propositions are necessarily not causal agents. Put another way, propositions have no causal power. Yet, utterances make people act in particular ways because they mean precisely what they mean. The behavior of people is in part linked to my utterances - their behavior is caused by sentences meaning what they mean. Legal cases, agreements, and entire lives are shaped around sentences meaning what it is that they mean. It must be the case, then, that sentences have some causal efficacy. Therefore, sentences must not have meaning because they express propositions. If this were the case, then we would expect sentences to not be the cause of such actions. Sentences would not have the causal power which they demonstrably do. Therefore, the Proposition Theory of Meaning must be false.

II. Analysis

The conclusion hinges on an ad absurdum kind of argument. If we assume that words are meaningful because they express propositions and these propositions do not have causal powers, then words cannot have causal powers. But this is simply not the case: behavior is causally determined by the words that people say meaning precisely what it is that they mean (in whatever sense this expression is to be understood).
it must be the case that, as these words do have causal powers, these propositions cannot be what it is that they express - the propositions lack something in terms of explanatory power to be able to account for the data, as it were, and sentences expressing propositions contradicts what we know sentences to do.

III. Comment

I find this objection unappealing. It seems to ignore that there is any kind of deliberation or consideration on the hearer’s part as to the meaning of the sentence that they are hearing. There is a component of understanding that goes into conversations, and I think everybody can agree on this point. (If there weren’t, how would you be following what I am saying right now?). As such, could it not be the case that it isn’t the words that have causal powers, but instead your understanding of them that does? Presumably, the hearer is a spatial and temporal entity, and so the hearer is much less an abstract object than propositions are. Upon hearing the statement that the speaker utters, there is some kind of reaction that occurs, be it some sort of mental or purely physical phenomenon is besides the point, which can be described as an action of piecing together the words and coming to understand the sentence as a whole. That is to say, the hearer attempts to grasp the proposition expressed by the sentence. After the hearer is certain that they have properly understood the sentence (if they have not they would merely ask for clarification), then they would begin to exercise their own causal powers. The action is brought on by the understanding of the proposition, not the proposition itself.

GRADE: 95/100
This is a good piece of work. I think you are careless in spots, but I like what you do in the recon and the comment, and your analysis is pretty much just what I'm after. It is important that you ground these in the text, so please cite pages. Also, you complicate the picture in the comment without really making sense out of how propositions can be involved, given that they are not causal. Still, overall, good work!

Michael
Standard Form - Reconstruction

P1. Propositions are abstract entities - nonspatial, nontemporal, nonphysical, timeless/eternal.

P2. Abstract entities as such do not have causal powers.

P3. The propositions expressed by sentences do not therefore refer to things which are causally capable.

P4. However, sentences or utterances lead to action because they mean what they do.

P5. Sentences have causal power.

P6. Sentences must not be meaningful because they refer to propositions.

C. The Propositional Theory of Meaning is false.

Standard Form - Comment

P1. Sentences are meaningful because they express certain propositions.

P2. These propositions are grasped by the one hearing the sentences.

P3. After the hearer understands these propositions, action is taken.

P4. Propositions as abstract objects do not have causal powers.

P5. The behavior elicited by sentences then must be caused by the understanding of the propositions expressed.

C. The objection fails to demonstrate that the Propositional Theory of Meaning is false.