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The nature of meaning

Brandom versus Chomsky*

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Part of the philosophy of language of the 20th century is marked by a shift from a conception of language as a tool of representing the world to a conception of it as a means of interacting with the world. This shift is common to the later Wittgenstein, to pragmatists and neopragmatists including Brandom, and also to Chomsky and his school. The claim of the paper is that though the Chomskyans have offered an admirably elaborated theory of syntax adequate to the interactive view of language, they failed to develop a comparably adequate notion of semantics; and that it is Brandom's approach which, though *prima facie* much more speculative and much less scientific, paves the way to a semantic theory which an 'interactivist' should endorse.

Keywords: Generative grammar, inference, pragmatics, pragmatist turn, rule-following, semantics.

1. Philosophy of language: from the picture theory to the toolbox theory

The attack in the first half of the 20th century by Russell, Carnap and other proponents of the new, 'scientific' philosophy (which is later called *analytic*) on the 'idealist' views of the previous philosophical generation stemmed from the conviction that it is absurd to assume that the world is 'made by our minds'. The world is there and we simply picture it in terms of our language and our thoughts. This conviction led these new philosophers to regard language as a collection of means for *representing things*. The passive role of mind and language within the process of acquiring 'knowledge of the external world' was especially stressed by Russell and Moore, who thereby emancipated themselves from the 'idealism' of the previous generation of English philosophers (see Hylton 1992).

The most elaborated version of this ‘picture theory’ of the language-world relationship was provided by the early Wittgenstein (1921) in his *Tractatus*. However, Wittgenstein was rather quick in recognizing the shortcomings of this picture. He realized that if we pay due attention to the way language really functions, then the idea that it is simply a system of names of things serving us to picture more complex states of affairs — viz. *facts* — fails to be adequate. In particular, Wittgenstein realized that the notion of *naming* or *representing* is itself far too problematic to be taken as an ‘unexplained explainer’, and that we need some deeper level of explanation.

To see why, let us consider the seemingly simple-minded question: *What does giving a name to a thing consist in, in the first place?* It may seem that naming is simply something on a par with sticking a label to an object — an utterly perspicuous move, which is in no need of explanation. However, imagine that we literally take a label with a string of letters and stick it on an object, say on a car. Does it mean that we have given a *name* to the car? Not really: it may count simply as a decoration of the car, or as an indication of the owner of the car, etc. What accounts for the difference between taking the string on the label as a name and taking it as something else? Well, it seems that it is the habits and social practices of the community in question: if sticking names on cars is something usual, then it is likely to be taken as a name and hence therefore *be* a name;¹ in other cases it may not.

Hence something is a name if and only if it is treated in a certain way. We might perhaps want to say that it is a name of a thing if it serves us to articulate claims about the thing. This is what Wittgenstein (1953: §49) points out:

... naming and describing do not stand on the same level: naming is a preparation for description. Naming is so far not a move in the language-game — any more than putting a piece in its place on the board is a move in chess. We may say: nothing has so far been done, when a thing has been named. It has not even got a name except in the language-game. This was what Frege meant too, when he said that a word had meaning only as part of a sentence.

However, at the same time Wittgenstein warns us not to assume that there is one principal purpose of language, like describing or representing things and their constellations. Rather, there are various things we can do with words. Not all these things can be explained in terms of naming. Naming is only *one* of them, moreover, it is inextricably interwoven with some others. Hence, we have to set out for the analysis of the practices. We have to try to understand the ‘language games we play’. This was stressed by Coffa (1991: 267) in his survey of Wittgenstein’s views: “The ultimate explanatory level in semantics is not

given by reference to unsaturation or to the forms of objects or meanings, but by reference to the meaning-giving activity of human beings, an activity embodied in their endorsement of rules". This is what led Wittgenstein to abandon the picture theory of language in favor of what can be called a toolbox theory:

Language is like a collection of very various tools. In the tool box there is a hammer, a saw, a rule, a lead, a glue pot and glue. Many of the tools are akin to each other in form and use, and the tools can be roughly divided into groups according to their relationships; but the boundaries between these groups will often be more or less arbitrary and there are various types of relationship that cut across one another (Wittgenstein 1969: §31).

Wittgenstein also realized that what is crucial for our linguistic practices, which draw on the toolbox of language, is the concept of a rule — there is a sense in which the practices are (essentially!) *rule-governed*. This, however, does not seem to be a great discovery: there are rules associated with almost everything we do. We have rules of chess, rules of cooking, even perhaps something like rules for using a hammer. But Wittgenstein realized that the rules of language are rather unlike such rules, for example those of cooking:

Why don't I call cookery rules arbitrary, and why am I tempted to call the rules of grammar arbitrary? Because I think of the concept 'cookery' as defined by the end of cookery, and I don't think of the concept 'language' as defined by the end of language. You cook badly if you are guided in your cooking by rules other than the right ones; but if you follow other rules than those of chess you are playing another game; and if you follow grammatical rules other than such and such ones, that does not mean you say something wrong, no, you are speaking of something else (ibid.: §133).

From this point of view, the rules of language are more like the rules of chess: they are *constitutive* of our language-games in a similar way in which rules of chess are constitutive of chess. At the same time they are very unlike the rules of chess in one crucial respect: they are not explicit. People follow the rules of chess because they have learned to use them: they have read them, the rules were explained by a teacher, they 'interpret' them, and they 'follow' them. This is not possible in the general case of language: if the rules of our language games were all explicit, they would always have to be *interpreted*, and hence they would presuppose *meaningful* expressions and hence language. An infinite regress looms.

Thus, the rules of language are bound to be non-explicit; they have to be somehow *implicit* to our language games. But can we make sense of an intrinsically implicit rule at all? It might seem that we could assimilate rules to

regularities: we follow a rule in that we act regularly. However, this would erase any distinction between a stone falling ('following the rule of gravitation') and a man playing chess ('following the rules of chess') — a distinction which appears to be intuitively quite obvious. Moreover, *any* finite sequence of events is regular — in that it can be seen as the initial segment of a regular infinite sequence (in fact of infinitely many such sequences).

Wittgenstein therefore came to the dilemma which Brandom (1994: I.1.3) depicts as steering between the Scylla of 'regularism', maintaining that rules must be explicit, and the Charybdis of 'regularism', maintaining that rules are nothing more than regularities. Wittgenstein's considerations have initiated a huge industry of 'rule-following' studies, accelerated especially by Kripke's (1982) book.²

2. The rules of meaning

The later Wittgenstein was surely not alone in getting uneasy with a picture theory of language and the resulting representational semantics. His natural allies were, of course, pragmatists of all sorts: for a pragmatist wants to consider everything as a means to human ends, and so also linguistic expressions. She is hardly tempted to embrace any kind of a picture theory; she is bound to see language as an expedient of certain human doings, and meaning as the "cash-value" of a word, as Ayer (1978) has put it, using an expression of W. James. There are pragmatists in the narrow sense of the word such as James or Dewey, and there are pragmatists in a wider sense — as Brandom (2002) suggests — who endorse the primacy of the practical (the know-how) over the theoretical (the know-that); and these may also find the toolbox conception plausible. Hence Wittgenstein was far from being the only one to favor this conception and the ensuing *use-theory of meaning*. What was special about him was his emphasis on the concept of a rule. But even in this he was not alone — there was at least one other philosopher who became famous for his engagement in the enterprise of explaining language via explaining its rules, namely Wilfrid Sellars (see Peregrin, forthcoming a). And it was Sellars' legacy that was picked up and elaborated by Brandom.

Now if it is *meaning* that we are after, then we need to know which particular kind of rules is constitutive of it — for there are various kinds of rules associated with our language games, many of which have obviously little to do with semantics. There are rules determining which strings are 'well-formed', i.e., serving as certain distinguished tokens of linguistic interactions, there are

rules concerning what to say at the court and to say what if the president sits in the audience, etc. So if we want to get a grip on meaning, we need to single out the semantic ones.

Several philosophers have played with the idea that these may be the rules of inference. This idea is likely to strike a logician, for many *logical* words do seem to derive all their significance from the validity of the inferences they figure in: thus it seems that what it takes for a symbol ‘ \wedge ’ to be a conjunction is the validity of the inferences from $A \wedge B$ to both A and B and from A and B together to $A \wedge B$.³ But Sellars, and Brandom after him, have elevated this to a general paradigm: according to them, the meaning of an expression is, we may say, its inferential role (see Peregrin 2001a: ch. 7).

To turn this into a theory of meaning, we have to give an account of how we are to understand the concept of *inference* in this context. Some statements are clearly inferable from others: thus *Fido is a mammal* from *Fido is a dog*. But what does it mean *to be inferable*? Can it mean that whoever entertains the former thought, or utters the corresponding sentence, goes on to entertain or utter the latter? Hardly. Perhaps then that she *should* go on to entertain or utter it? This does not seem plausible, too — not to mention the fact that the nature of the “should” used here would be as much in need of explanation as the concept of inference itself.

The key to understanding the nature of the Sellarsian and Brandomian notion of inference lies in understanding that the inferential rules we articulate are neither descriptions of regularities of human doings, nor prescriptions articulating how the human doings should proceed in an ‘optimal’ case. They do what the rules of chess do: they restrict the possibilities of our doings — thus constituting a space for a new kind of possibilities. They are *constraints*, or as Sellars was fond of putting it, “rules of criticism”. Within chess, we are allowed to move pieces in a certain way only; and if we respect this, possibilities open up, for example the possibility to sacrifice a piece for a strong attack, etc. Within language, when we accept its rules, we can move in the space of meaningfulness, within which we can mean various things previously unavailable to us, we can communicate with others and think propositionally.⁴

Thus, if I say that we can correctly infer *Fido is a mammal* from *Fido is a dog*, I do not really say what we should do. I rather say what we *should not* do, namely assert that *Fido is a dog* and at the same time deny that *Fido is a mammal*. In this sense inference is, as Brandom points out, secondary to incompatibility. The rules tell us what we should *not* do; and we are free to move within its bounds. We can also investigate the ‘outside’ of the rules by slightly violating

them, which may bring about, in the long run, meager changes of the rules resulting in the development of language.

However, *what kinds of entities are rules and where do they reside?* Brandom's answer is that they are instituted by our *normative attitudes*: we treat certain actions of our fellow human beings, especially their linguistic utterances, as *correct* or *incorrect*. What does it mean to treat something as correct or incorrect? It is supported by the tendency to call for or issue rewards and sanctions; but it is not something which would be translatable into a non-normative idiom. Therefore, Brandom thinks that to account for meanings, and consequently for thinking and agency, we irreducibly need the normative mode of speech (see Peregrin, forthcoming b).

3. Linguistics: The (unfinished?) revolution

Let me now abandon the theme of the rules of language for a while and turn to a different topic — the revolutionary view of language urged by Noam Chomsky, gradually accepted by a large part of the linguistic and a slightly smaller part of the philosophical community. What I take to be the essential message of this revolution is that language must not be seen as an artifact or an invention like the steam engine or the theory of relativity, but rather as an *ability* (or an *instinct*, as Pinker (1994) puts it) that is to a large extent 'hard-wired' in our brains.

Chomsky implies that the traditional way of seeing language, to which most of us unconsciously (and some philosophers consciously) submit, is severely misleading; and that we cannot truly understand the nature of language if we do not manage to dispose of all such preconceptions. Thus it seems that we must forget our 'received wisdoms' and any prejudices which might have come to blur our vision of language.⁵ Doing this and helping ourselves to the usual methods and results of natural sciences, we are, according to Chomsky, bound to arrive at the view of language which he is urging and which is very different from the one he takes to be standard among contemporary philosophers of language.

Now this seems to me to be utterly of a piece with the 'pragmatist turn' of the philosophy of language just outlined. Chomsky himself claims that semantics in the sense of the picture theory is something close to a chimera: "It is possible that natural language has only syntax and pragmatics", he says (1995: 26). This is precisely what the toolbox-theorists urge: semantics cannot

but be a matter of the way we employ expressions, hence of what is traditionally referred to by the term “pragmatics”. Therefore semantics cannot but be somehow parasitic on pragmatics — or, as Brandom (1994: 83) puts it, it must “answer to pragmatics” (see Peregrin 1999).

However, instead of a toolbox view of language and the ensuing use-theory of meaning, Chomsky votes for an “internalist approach to language”, in which he, in effect, reinterprets the word “semantics” so as to refer to peculiar aspects of the components of his reconstruction of the language faculty. Thus Chomsky (1995: 19–20) claims:

[S]ome features of ... expressions ... provide instructions ... for conceptual-intentional systems; this element of the expression is usually called *logical form*. ... The elements of [the logical form] can be called ... “semantic” features [...]. We may take the semantic features *S* of an expression *E* to be its *meaning*.

It is not easy to figure out exactly what Chomsky’s “logical form” is supposed to be: in his probably most extensive work devoted to the philosophical background of his approach to language he says nothing any more explicit than that it is one level of the “structure of language” which constitutes “an interface between language and other cognitive systems” and “yields the direct representation of meaning” (Chomsky 1986: 68).

What Chomsky appears to be doing here is simply substituting *the state of the meaning-knowing mind/brain* for *meaning*. Generative grammar, according to him, brought about “an important change of perspective: from the study of behavior and its products (such as texts), to the inner mechanisms that enter into thought and action” (Chomsky 2000: 5). But it should not go without saying that this “change of perspective” is also a change of *topic*.⁶ The substantiation Chomsky claims for this move is that there is no scientifically respectable way of seizing the old topic, the ‘folk concept’ of meaning as something that an expression has, can acquire or lose, and that a speaker can learn, grasp or forget. But I cannot see that his response is any more warranted than substituting the study of the brains of the players of chess for the study of the game.⁷

Of course, when doing theoretical work we are not obliged to accept a folk notion of semantics in a dogmatic way. But the Chomskyan notion does not lead to such a revision. It leads to something that has nothing whatsoever to do with it. And it thus becomes doubtful whether it deserves to be called “semantics” at all. The trouble, as I see it, is that Chomsky’s brilliant analysis of the syntactic aspect of language does not yield an equally acceptable theory of semantics. It would seem that his notion of meaning may make sense

only when we utterly strip the term “meaning” of its usual sense. It leads to the dissolution of the concept of meaning within the concept of logical form which then is sometimes seen as a matter of a “language of thought” (Pinker 1994: ch. 3).

Moreover, this approach to semantics, apart from not squaring with the intuitive concept of meaning, seems to me to be *utterly* ill-conceived; in fact it appears to be an instance of what Ryle famously called *category mistake*:

The theoretically interesting category-mistakes are those made by people who are perfectly competent to apply concepts, at least in the situations with which they are familiar, but are still liable in their abstract thinking to allocate those concepts to logical types to which they do not belong. ... The representation of a person as a ghost mysteriously ensconced in a machine derives from this argument. Because, as is true, a person’s thinking and purposive doing cannot be described solely in the idioms of physics, chemistry and physiology, therefore they must be described in counterpart idioms. As a human body is a complex organized unit, so the human mind must be another complex organized unit, though one made of a different sort of stuff and with a different sort of structure (Ryle 1949: 18).

I think this is precisely what is going on in many contemporary Chomskyan and post-Chomskyan semantic theories. As we have a profound and very successful theory of syntactic structures and as it is not directly applicable to semantics, it is assumed that we must have a *parallel* theory of ‘semantic structures’ — structures parallel to, but different from the syntactic ones, and embodied in a quite different stuff. However, while syntax is essentially about structures (of expressions), semantics is about the meaning of the expressions thus structured, and also about the way meaning propagates along the syntactic structure (i.e., from compounds to composites or perhaps vice versa).⁸ Hence urging the explanation of semantics in terms of a structure parallel to the syntactic one is, as I have expressed elsewhere (Peregrin 2001a: §10.2), like saying that as the description of boots consists in an account of their cut and material, we should describe the function of boots by revealing some ‘cut and material of the way they are used’.

Hence I see the Chomskyan revolution as essentially unfinished, waiting to be carried over from the syntactic aspect of language to the semantic one — with the same fervor and especially in the same unprejudiced way. How? The answer would appear straightforward: if we are to see linguistic expressions as the means employed by our language faculty, then two kinds of questions arise: *which expressions do we use?* and *how, i.e., for what ends and with what*

effect, do we use them? The former are the *syntactic* questions, questions about which expressions are grammatically well-formed. The latter are the *semantic* — or we should rather say *semantico-pragmatic* — ones, questions concerning significance and meaning (see also Peregrin 1999). In this way we by-pass the traditional questions of referring, denoting, etc., which Chomsky (I think rightly) sees as artificial.⁹ Hence what seems to me to be continuous with the Chomskyan upheaval is not the kind of semantics which is now current among his followers (which concentrates on various kinds of semantic structures or ‘logical forms’), but rather some kind of ‘use-theory of meaning’.

This is to say that given an expression, we can study how the expression consists of sub-expressions and how it is capable of becoming part of super-expressions; and we can also study what happens when people actually utter it, what kinds of changes its utterances are likely to bring about. This agenda agrees with the Chomskyan one in that it is an enterprise naturalistic through and through; however it is essentially externalist — we do not study (only) human minds or brains, but interactions between speakers and their environment.

4. Studying minds (and their language faculties)

As made plain in the beginning of this paper, the version of the use-theory of meaning I follow Brandom in aiming at, is a *normative* one. I claim that we should not aim at an account of regularities of linguistic conduct, but of *rules* ‘underlying’ it — which are to be reconstructed on the basis of recording the regularities of our normative attitudes to linguistic conduct. And this might appear to be incompatible with Chomskyan naturalism. But I do not think it really is. (Though Brandom himself expressly rejects naturalism and declares himself to be a *rationalist* – see, e.g., his introduction to Brandom 2000; and see also my criticism in Peregrin 2001b.)

What conceptual resources do we generally need to account for the semantic aspect of language? Thinkers so different as Chomsky and Quine concur in claiming that we do not need anything more than what we need for accounting for the rest of the world: hence more or less the language of physics. But the fact is that in describing the semantic aspect of language we begin to move into the vicinity of describing minds (which is not to be read as involving the claim that meanings are mental entities! — but the concepts of a *language-using creature* and a *creature with a mind* appear to be closely connected), and in describing minds we actually *do* use a conceptual apparatus different from what we

use when describing the mindless world. We talk about minds as containing thoughts, feelings and intentions and we talk about the actions of creatures with minds as being brought about by these contents of their minds.

Whereas Quine appears to take the concept of physicalism to be straightforward and not very problematic, Chomsky (1995) duly stresses the difficulties of specifying what the “language of physics” really is. For him, the concept of “physicalism” is vague to the point of vanity. It would seem to follow that “naturalism” cannot be characterized but very vaguely: as something like ‘a devotion to the spirit of the methods of the sciences.’ From this point of view, the stress Chomsky puts on the divide between naturalism and the rest appears to be overloaded. He insists that there is no reason to approach minds with a conceptual apparatus essentially different from that established by natural sciences; and he urges naturalism as the opposite to “the doctrine that in the quest for theoretical understanding, language and mind are to be studied in some manner other than the ways we investigate natural objects as a matter of principle” (Chomsky 1995: 28). But this is queer: it could hardly be denied that we study some “natural objects” (say, animals) in a manner which is *to some extent* different from that in which we study other such objects (say, stones). And it is to be expected that studying the specific animals of our own kind, and especially in connection with terms like “mind”, “consciousness”, “reason” and also “language”, will call for other specific methods and concepts. And why, or at exactly which point, must this incur our departure from naturalism?

But perhaps the crux of what Chomsky urges lies in the phrase “as a matter of principle”. Well, it is surely possible to agree that if someone insists that language and mind must be studied in a certain way *before* she pays *any* attention to their real nature, we would reject such a view. (Chomsky (1995) quotes philosophers who appear to be on the verge of saying that a certain approach to language follows from the nature of philosophy alone, irrespectively of the nature of language.) However, in such a case it would be apt to talk about a *prejudice* rather than about a departure from naturalism. Prejudices are to be despised. But I think it is also a prejudice to insist that studying mind and language cannot lead to a legitimate need for methods or concepts not previously employed within the enterprise of the study of nature.

Physicalists appear to think that any kind of ‘folk psychology’, with its feelings, thoughts or intentions, should be construed (if not wholly discarded) as shorthand for speaking of physical reality, and be translatable into the language of natural sciences. But there are people who disagree. Davidson (1970, and elsewhere), for one, argues that there are good reasons for having two different

and mutually irreducible conceptual systems, one for mindless things and another for minded agents. The reason, according to him, is that we aim at strict natural laws when making sense of the former, whereas for the latter we aim at something a little less cut and dried. We do not expect to be able to predict the behavior of fellow people in the way we predict the behavior of much simpler things. Dennett (1987) talks about the *intentional stance*: as people are physical systems too complicated to be understood as such, we have devised a different — less reliable, but practically very useful — way of ‘understanding’ them. We have come to see that if we ascribe thoughts, intentions, etc. to them, and if we assume that they follow such ‘laws’ as that of the practical syllogism, we are able to make sense of what they do in so far as we are able to make very qualified estimates of their behavior (and of course to talk to and otherwise cope with them). And, Dennett concludes, if having thoughts, intentions etc. is what is needed to explain their behavior, then there is no reason to say that these entities are ‘not really there’.

We have seen that Brandom follows a related — yet different — train of thought. He also thinks that we need specific linguistic resources to account for meanings and minds. But he does not think that this should be seen primarily as a matter of new *concepts*; it is rather that of a different *mode* of speech, namely the *normative* mode. Hence his idea is that when speaking of minds and meanings we are forced to talk not about *what there is*, but rather what there *should be*.

This might sound, *prima facie*, weird. When I say what a word means, in what sense do I not speak about what there is? The key to an answer lies in the rule-following considerations we tackled above. If these are right, then an expression may be meaningful only as a consequence of being subject to a collection of rules (just like a piece of wood becomes a chess king by being subject to certain rules of chess). Hence to say what an expression means is to spell out certain rules, and citing rules is saying what *should* (or *should not*) be done.

5. Rules and rule-following

I doubt that anyone would dream of explaining what it takes to be a chess king without talking about how one *should* move it or how it is *correct* to do so. And it should be equally uncontroversial that to say what it takes for a sound- or inscription-type to mean thus-and-so is to say that the item *should* be used in a certain way. (Let us again stress that these *shoulds* do not indicate

that people are to do something in a specific way, but rather that they are to *avoid* certain ways of doing it — thus delimiting a space between the ensuing crash barriers.)

Brandom claims that the *should* arises from our normative attitudes, the attitudes we assume towards our fellows' doings and especially utterings. We, as a matter of fact, have come to take our own and others' utterances as correct or incorrect (on various levels and in various senses); we reward those who do the correct things and sanction those who do not (again in various senses — from arresting oath-breakers to treating those who do not use words in a way which makes sense to us, as non-members of our linguistic community).

The rules and hence the sort of correctness, which is distinctively semantic, rest, according to Brandom, on the institutions of *commitments* and *entitlements*. By making linguistic utterances we commit ourselves to various things — by making a promise we commit ourselves to doing what we promise, by making an assertion we commit ourselves to justifying it, to giving our reasons for holding it, should it be challenged. We also offer entitlements: by giving permission we entitle the addressee to do what we permit him to do, whereas by making an assertion we entitle the addressee to reassert the claim and to defer its justification to us.

Now, according to Brandom — and this may be the most controversial part of his theory — it is asserting and the related cluster of practices of “giving and asking for reasons” that is crucial from the viewpoint of semantics. That asserting, as ‘saying what there is’, assumes a prominent position within the picture conception of language is obvious; but it is much less obvious that it should retain it even within the framework of the toolbox conception.

Brandom's idea appears to be that what makes our language crucially different from, e.g., the communication systems of other animals is precisely its suitability for the “giving and asking for reasons”, and its consequent *inferential articulation*, i.e., the fact that each expression must be part of some statements which entail further statements and are themselves entailed by others.

This means that, from both the Wittgensteinian and the Brandomian viewpoint, to understand language we have to understand the concepts of a linguistic rule and of following a rule. Chomsky (1995: 34ff.) appears to think that we do not need any such concept beyond that of a regularity and that we can reduce the concept of rule-following to the concept of regular behavior. He sees no principled difference between a man following grammatical rules hard-wired to his brain and a hypothetical Martian lacking this wiring and following the same rules by virtue of his explicit mastering of a theory. But it is

hard to believe that he would want to claim that there is no difference between a stone's following the law of gravitation by falling with acceleration g and a person steering her car in a certain way because she consciously follows the rules of traffic (or, for that matter, between a person who follows the rules of traffic subconsciously and another who thinks about them).¹⁰

6. Studying language (and the meanings of its expressions)

From the viewpoint just outlined, studying semantics is studying inferential rules of language. How, then, does the good old concept of meaning fare within this new environment?

On any variety of a picture theory (and here I mean both what I called the 'ontologico-semiotic' and the 'psychologico-semiotic' theories — see Peregrin 2000; 2001a: ch. 2), there is a piece of the world to which a typical meaningful expression is somehow intimately related (though the theories may vary wildly as to the nature of the piece); and meaningfulness consists in this very relationship. To do semantics, then, is to find out what this very chunk of the world consists in. On the other hand, the toolbox conception of language does not tempt us to see meaningfulness as a relation to an object or a state of affairs; for we see it as consisting in the expression's being employed in a certain way, or perhaps being governed by certain rules.

I want to claim — and here I am not sure whether I am still following Brandom — that even in this setting we should not let the concept of meaning go by the board; though we should now see it as more of a *tool* for doing semantic theory than as its *subject matter*. To get a glimpse of how semantics looks when seen from this perspective, it is good to assume the stance of somebody who wrestles with an utterly unknown language. This is the setting of the notorious thought experiment of radical translation or radical interpretation, proposed by Quine (1960) and elaborated by Davidson (1984). How useful does the concept of meaning appear in this setting?

It seems to be clear that when we observe an unknown linguistic community, we gradually come to realize that its members tend to use some kinds of linguistic tokens (i.e., sentences) in certain situations for certain purposes, and others in other circumstances for other purposes. The learning and appreciating of these differences is usually described as learning what these sentences mean. Moreover, as we encounter ever new sentences, sentences never heard before, there is no way to master them save by discovering the *syntax* of the language (a

task which we accomplish, if Chomsky is right, almost effortlessly) and disclosing the roles of lexical items — i.e., discovering *their* general usage. (Reference, for that matter, then comes out as a concept auxiliary to this quest for meaning — a lot of words play a specific kind of role which we know very well from our own language and which has come to be called *referring to something*.)

Chomsky does not think that the traditional concept of meaning is of much use. “Communication”, he claims (1993: 21), “does not require shared ‘public meanings’ any more than it requires ‘public pronunciations’. Nor need we assume that the ‘meanings’ (or ‘sounds’) of one participant be discoverable by the other”.¹¹ And: “From the natural language and common-sense concepts of *reference* and the like, we can extract no relevant ‘relation’ between our words and things in the world” (1995: 44). Hence Chomsky denies any relevance of the concept of “shared meanings” and also of any other traditional concepts characterizing the language-world relationship. (As for meanings, he again concurs with Quine (1992: ch. 3), who sees the concept as a “stumbling block cleared away”).

My opinion, on the contrary, is that language and communication can exist only insofar as there are “shared public meanings”. This is, however, not to say that people speaking the same language always (or frequently) mean the same by the same word; it is to say that I can *communicate* with somebody only insofar as she can *interpret* me — in other words, share the meanings of my words with me. Chomsky (1993: 21) is certainly right when he stresses that “communication is a more-or-less matter” — and so is meaning. But I do not think that it follows that we should dispense with the concept of meaning altogether. Let me explain why.

The point of departure of radical interpretation is the situation in which we observe the natives and their linguistic behavior, and we set out to make sense of it. We notice that their utterances display certain regularities, and some of them also co-variances with the circumstances in which they are produced. We also notice regularities in the ways the natives approve or disapprove of the utterances of their fellow speakers (and we are likely to soon move into the position of suggesting utterances ourselves and urging the approval or disapproval — ‘assent’ or ‘dissent’ — from the natives). On this basis, we try to conjecture the rules of their language games and the roles these rules confer on their sentences and, consequently, their words.

It is almost certain that we can never capture the whole of the employment of a word — and this is not even our task, for what we are after are *circumstance-invariant* rules and the roles of words as determined by *such* rules. We

are happy to see some features of the way a word gets actually employed as not directly a matter of these rules, but a matter of either occasional *violations* of the rules, or of the idiosyncratic strategies of the speakers. What we are aiming at is a kind of *ex pluribus unum* — a *Gestalt* that may be seen as ordering our data into something “intelligible”. It is clear that the emerging *Gestalt* is not determined uniquely by the data — any boundary we posit between circumstance-invariant and hence meaning-conferring rules and the rest of the determinants of linguistic traffic is notoriously vague and fuzzy. And this is not only a matter of our drawing conclusions from restricted evidence — the boundary between the ‘meaning-giving’ part of the usage of a word and its ‘fact-stating’ part is *essentially* fuzzy. It is, in fact, the notorious boundary between the analytic and the synthetic, which Quine (1952) rightly diagnosed as non-existent. It follows that meaning itself is fuzzy, a “more-or-less matter”.

However, it is one thing to say that meaning is a more-or-less matter, and quite another to say that there is no such thing as meaning. After all, *everything* within the real world is a more-or-less matter. There are, for example, no ‘true’ spheres and no ‘true’ cubes in the real world, and yet we make extended use of geometry, regarding many things around us as spheres or cubes. And similarly it may be useful to see meanings as objects — despite the fact that this involves an amount of idealization (Peregrin 2000; 2001a: ch. 9). True, we must be wary of the thought that meanings are things-in-the-world christened by words; but once we are clear about their real nature, there seems to be no reason not to bring the objectifying drift of our minds to bear on them.

When a speaker *X* utters a statement *s*, then the way we normally *perceive* this is that *X* has a belief *b* and this belief is expressed by *s*. Hence what we ordinarily — quite subconsciously — do is ‘decompose’ the body of facts about the natives’ utterances into a theory of what the speakers believe and a theory of what their words mean — and we use meanings, as Davidson (1989) stressed, as something like our ‘measuring units’ to account for our findings just like a natural scientist would use hers. This implies that the decomposition is, in fact, stipulated by the *interpreter*, although she is surely not *free* to posit it wherever she wants. (She has to draw it so as to create a *Gestalt* as helpful as possible for the enterprise of *seeing* what the natives are saying.) But it seems to me that she truly *perceives* the linguistic conduct ‘in terms’ of meanings.¹²

7. Conclusion

I think that what both Chomsky and the ‘toolbox-theorists’ urge is a kind of ‘pragmatist turn’. We should not see language as a system of names denoting objects, but rather as an expedient or vehicle of a certain human activity. Hence we should see semantics as ‘embedded’ within pragmatics — or, as Brandom puts it, see semantics as answering to pragmatics. And we should study the semantic(-pragmatic) aspect of language in a way which is continuous with how we study other human activities and the rest of the world in general.

However, I do not think Chomsky or his followers have offered a theory of semantics which is true to this spirit. Instead of trying to explicate “semantics” in terms of structures yielded by the extrapolation of Chomsky’s theory of syntax, I think we should settle for a use theory of meaning, i.e., a theory according to which the meaning of an expression amounts to the role the expression plays within our linguistic transactions.

Moreover, I am convinced that our linguistic practices are characterized by the fact that they are rule-governed (in the sense in which a game like chess is rule-governed — i.e., as having constraints of the kind of “you-should-not” which create a ‘space of possibilities’, in this case the space of meaningfulness). Therefore, we have to study the rules of language; and, if what we are after is meaning, especially the rules of inference. And this — to my understanding — is the very thing Brandom does.

Notes

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1. Of course it can happen that some people take it to be a name *by mistake*; but taken to be a name *generally and regularly* simply *is what it takes* to be a name.
2. See, e.g., Baker and Hacker (1984), McDowell (1984), Wright (1989), or Boghossian (1989). An exceptionally illuminating discussion of these matters is given by Blackburn (1984).
3. The inferential characterization of logical constants has been elaborated especially within the theory of ‘natural deduction’ (see Prawitz 1965).
4. As for the role of propositional thinking, see also Davidson (1999).
5. Which are, as Wittgenstein (1953: §103) put it, “like a pair of glasses on our nose through which we see whatever we look at”.

6. A related, but separate problem is noted by Stekeler-Weithofer (2001: 120): “Cases of ‘higher’ forms of cognition cannot be *identified* with a mere physiological, or animal *precondition* for displaying a competence in particular performances”, for these preconditions are “only a *condition without not*, they do not explain the competence in question”.

7. Chomsky (2000: 165–166) contrasts two kinds of generalizations concerning language: the kind exemplified by generalizations concerning “what infants know”, which are explained in terms of “inner states”, with the one exemplified by the observation that if someone wants *X*, thinks that obtaining *X* requires doing *Y*, and is easily capable of doing *Y*, then he will typically do *Y*. While Chomsky is certainly right that the latter, in contrast to the former, does not directly lead to a scientific research program, to claim, as he does, that the latter lacks “empirical content” seems preposterous. It seems to me that we do form and verify the latter kind of generalizations all the time — and in fact I cannot imagine how one could *understand* one’s fellow agents and predict their behavior without their help. Thus I agree with Davidson (1970) that though “such accounts of intentional behavior operate in a conceptual framework removed from the direct reach of physical law”, they are none the less not only indispensable, but also theoretically interesting.

8. This is not to rule out the feasibility of something like a semantic structure; but a theory of such structures is not yet semantics, it might at most be instrumental to it. There is no doubt that “logical forms” play a vital role within Chomsky’s well established theory of the language faculty — the objection is that its investigation is not the investigation of *meaning*.

9. Again, this is not to rule out the feasibility of these concepts within a theory of language; it is only to say that they should not play the foundational role they play within many contemporary theories (see, e.g., Devitt and Sterelny 1987).

10. Chomsky might well be right that this difference is not usefully elucidated in terms of an “access to consciousness”, but denying it altogether seems to fly in the face of reason.

11. The comparison to “pronunciations” and “sounds” seems strange: surely talk about “communication” makes sense only when there are sounds which are acknowledged (“discovered”) by an audience, and hence are in this sense “public”.

12. Seen from this perspective, the character of the pronouncement ‘the meaning of *s* is such-and-such’ is not dissimilar from that of ‘the (real) price of *x* is such-and-such’. Just as ‘the price of *x* is such-and-such’ is to be understood as a shorthand for ‘the position of *x* within the selling-and-buying relations among people is such-and-such’, ‘the meaning of *s* is such-and-such’ should be construed as saying ‘the way *s* gets employed within the language game to which it belongs is substantially such-and-such’. Both meaning and price may sometimes be fixed by some explicit act (and in such a case the meaning or the price becomes something which *is* discoverable by natural-scientific methods); however, in the typical case both are a matter of finding an ‘equilibrium’ of a number of intersecting relationships, i.e. of an interpretation. Thus we can talk about meaning only from the viewpoint of an interpreter, of someone who observes the relevant environment and ‘calculates’ the relevant value out of it. Therefore Sellars (1974) speaks about “meaning as a functional classification”.

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