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PROSPECTS FOR MEANING

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Semantics Without Meanings? Sellarsian “Patterned Governed Behavior” and the Space of Meaningfulness

Jaroslav Peregrin

Abstract: While the traditional view was that in order to understand language and our linguistic practices we must explain meaning, the ‘pragmatic turn’ emerging within the writings of various philosophers of the second half of the twentieth century caused a basic change of the perspective: the tendency is to concentrate directly on explaining the linguistic practices and leave the need for explaining meaning to emerge (or, as the case may be, not to emerge) subsequently. I argue that after this turn we should explain the peculiar kinds of ‘meaningfulness’ that characterizes our expressions in terms of what Sellars called “pattern governed behavior”. Furthermore, I argue that the turn should not make us discard meanings, but only to reappraise them: to see them as the roles of expressions *vis-à-vis* the rules that govern our language games.

Meaning as an imprint of the mind

In his *On Interpretation*, Aristotle famously claimed that “spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words”. “Just as all men,” he continues, “have not the same writing, so all men have not the same speech sounds, but the mental experiences, which these directly symbolize, are the same for all, as also are those things of which our experiences are the images.” This is a sketch of the picture that was taken for almost self-evident for many centuries thereafter: words gain their peculiar qualities by being somehow animated by human souls or minds; indeed they are crucial vehicles of the soul’s revealing itself within the material world; and the way in which they are animated is that they become somehow attached to pieces of the soul—to mental contents, in a more contemporary idiom. Hence, with a certain oversimplification, we can say that meaning was traditionally usually conceived of as *a chunk of a mind-stuff glued to a word and animating it*.

This mentalist notion of meaning, tallying as it does with the common sense view of language, kept its intellectual appeal well into the twentieth century and, in some philosophical circles, it is still taken as almost self-evident. Thus, in his influential book John Searle (1983) claims that “the philosophy of language is a branch of the philosophy of mind” (*ibid.*, 160–1). The reason is that “meaning exists only where there is a distinction between Intentional content and the form of its externalization and to ask for the meaning is to ask for an Intentional content that goes with the form of externalization” (*ibid.*, 28), where “Intentionality is that property of many mental states and events by which they are directed at or about or of objects and states of affairs in the world” (*ibid.*, 1).

Similarly, Fodor (1998, 9) writes: “Learning English . . . is learning how to associate its sentences with the corresponding thoughts. To know English is to know, for example, that the form of words ‘there are cats’ is standardly used to express the thought that there are cats; and that the form of words ‘it’s raining’ is standardly used to express the thought that it’s raining; and that the form of words ‘it’s not raining’ is standardly used to express the thought that it’s not raining; and so on for in(de)finitely many such cases.” Fodor, thus, in general concludes that concepts, and hence, in effect, meanings are mental particulars which get associated with expressions.

Despite this, the philosophy of the twentieth century was marked by an unprecedented attacks upon this way of thinking about meaning. The harbingers were especially two scholars of rather different interests: the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1931), seeking a foundation for linguistics and arriving at his structuralist theory of language; and the logician Gottlob Frege (1892a), struggling to fortify the foundations of mathematics and consequently divorcing semantics from psychology and wedding it to mathematics instead.¹

The Saussurean line of opposition has been notably picked up (and in my view, mutilated²) by the French structuralists and poststructuralists. It culminates in the writings of Jacques Derrida, where the rejection of psychologism and of the traditional conception of meaning is interconnected with the author’s case against what he calls the “metaphysics of the presence” and “logocentrism”, which inevitably leads to a very *eccentric* kind of philosophizing (of course, a center is no longer recognized . . .).

1 For a comparison of these two heralds of modern era semantics, see Peregrin (2001, Chapter 3).

2 *Ibid.*

A different, more down-to-earth reason for reconsidering the mentalist paradigm came hand in hand with the flourishing of modern science and the consequent rise in popularity of philosophical naturalism and behaviorism. As the traditional conception of mind slowly gave way to the overwhelming campaign of natural sciences, so the idea that the concept of mind was something beyond the natural, causal order began to appear inherently problematic, and definitely incapable of serving as an 'unexplained explainer'. Tendencies arose to explain mind in terms of language, rather than vice versa (*viz.* the celebrated *linguistic turn*). Although some philosophers still wanted to account for meaning in terms of an apparently unexplainable faculty of human mind, many others strived either to discard the concept of meaning completely, or at least to explain it in an utterly non-mentalist way. Does this mean that meanings are destined to end up in the naturalist mill constructed to produce a unified scientific theory of the whole universe?

Wittgenstein's scruples

Let us look at some of the best arguments against the mentalist construal of semantics. A famous and spectacular case in point was made by Wittgenstein (1953), who urged here is that as our linguistic games are essentially cooperative, intersubjective enterprises, they cannot rest on anything that is purely subjective.³ If meaning were impeccably hidden within one's mind, then its presence or absence, *from the viewpoint of the language game*, would be bound to be irrelevant. (Note that this does not mean that it cannot be relevant from other viewpoints, such as that of the psychology of communication—i.e. the study of what goes on in one's mind when one communicates. Note also that what makes the contents of minds unacceptable as meanings is their inherent non-shareability; thus an alternative approach might be to develop a theory of mind which would take mental contents to be not inviolably private.⁴)

What Wittgenstein wanted philosophers to relinquish was the view of meaning which for so long had held sway—the view that our signs are animated by chunks of our minds, chunks normally hidden within the minds' depths, but which we somehow managed to bring to light by

³ See also Peregrin (2012a).

⁴ Such a theory of mind might seem self-contradictory; however, it has been proffered, e.g., by Davidson (2001).

sticking them to the signs. If people attach something to a word within their minds, then this is a fact of their individual psychologies, not capable of establishing the different fact that the word actually *means* something within their language. In order for it to mean something, it is not enough that each of them individually makes the association, he/she must also know that the others do the same, that he/she can use the word to intelligibly express its meaning in various public circumstances etc. Language is *essentially* public; and as such it cannot rest on private associations.

However, if not chunks of mind, *what* is it that does animate our words? The peculiar difference between a string *meaning something* and a meaningless chain of sounds or scribbles is obvious, and the metaphor that the former, in contrast to the latter, is *animated* appears to be peculiarly apt. The common metaphor of *living* (= meaningful) and *dead* (= meaningless) signs *does* render something intuitively very vital.

Wittgenstein argued that, despite appearances, words may become, and in fact are, animated in a way very different from a chunk of mind being stuck to them. We give them their meaning in that we *use* them in a peculiar way. Besides private associations, what is needed to establish meaning are some *public practices* that make the associations public and shared. (And given the public practices are in place, the private associations become the idle beetle in the box.)

However, is this not a kind of sophistry? True, a thing's being put to a certain kind of use can give it a kind of significance, but is this the kind which is characteristic of meaningful words? When we start to use a suitable piece of stone to drive nails, it undoubtedly gains, thereby, in significance; but it seems that the difference between a meaningful word and a meaningless sound or inscription is something worlds apart from the difference between a stone used for driving nails and one that is of no use. When we say that the former stone, in contrast to the latter one, *means* something to us, we would seem to be employing *means* in a sense which is totally *different* from the sense in which we are using it when we say that a word *means* thus and so. Is not saying that a word has a meaning in the sense that it is useful for some purpose something quite different from saying that the word has meaning in the sense of having a 'semantic value'? What miraculous kind of use could make a word acquire a *genuine* meaning, such as those we experience when we talk?

Wittgenstein's answer is that it is a certain kind of *rule-governed* employment; and therefore he pays such an attention to the concepts of rule and rule following:

For Frege, the choice was as follows: either we are dealing with ink marks on paper or else these marks are signs of *something*, and what they represent is their meaning. That these alternatives are wrongly conceived is shown by the game of chess: here we are not dealing with the wooden pieces, and yet these pieces do not represent anything—in Frege’s sense they have no meaning. There is still a third possibility; the signs can be used as in a game (Wittgenstein as quoted by Waisman, 1967, p. 105).

Hence if we were to follow Wittgenstein, we would have to clarify what peculiar kind of rule-governed game can constitute a melting-pot from which genuine meanings can emerge. Is this possible? Or should we rather conclude that the whole issue of meaning, including all our intuitions mentioned above, is illusory and that the only real matter are human linguistic transactions which can be accounted for analogously to how we describe all other kinds of transactions going on within our world.

The pragmatic turn

Notice the shift of focus brought about by the Wittgensteinian view: we abandon the assumption that explaining meaning must necessarily precede investigating our linguistic conduct; now we concentrate directly on explaining the conduct and leave the need for explaining meaning to emerge subsequently—or, as the case may be, not to emerge. The reason for this shift is that while we persist in seeing the quest for meanings as necessarily *underlying* and prior to any explanation of our language games, we are kept in the grip of a certain view of the nature of language—the view that a word comes to be meaningful only by being associated, within our mind, with some kind of entity. This is part and parcel of the view that Wittgenstein (1953, §103) urged “is like a pair of glasses on our nose through which we see whatever we look at”.

The shift in focus yields a kind of turn which can be labelled ‘pragmatic’,⁵ where this epithet alludes both to *pragmatics* (as opposed to *semantics*) and to *pragmatism* (understanding the term as a referring to giving pride of place to the *practical*⁶): the turn from studying language as a system of signifiers associated with their respective signifieds to studying it as a

5 See Egginton and Sandbothe (2004). Cf. also Peregrin (1999).

6 Cf. Brandom (2002).

tool for interaction.⁷ We shift our focus from meaning to language games. This turn, of course, was not solely due to the later Wittgenstein. A similar perspective had always been natural for all kinds of pragmatists; and in Wittgenstein's times it was revived by neopragmatist philosophers, especially W. V. O. Quine. Quine pointed out that meaning is something which is handed down from generation to generation of speakers, and that the only way to obtain a meaning from other persons is to observe their behavior. Thus, Quine (1969, p. 28) urges, "each of us, as he learns his language, is a student of his neighbor's behavior" and "the learner has no data to work with, but the overt behavior of other speakers". Quine's (*ibid.*, p. 29) conclusion, then, is that "there are no meanings, nor likenesses or distinctions in meaning beyond what are implicit in people's dispositions to overt behavior".

Quine therefore holds that to discover what meaning is, we must study how we acquire meanings, in particular which aspects of human behavior an adept of language must observe to learn what a word means. Concentrating on this issue led Quine to develop his much discussed thought experiments with "radical translation"—the situation where a linguist faces an utterly unknown language and must learn what its words mean by studying the behavior of its speakers. Quine is fascinated by his discovery that the task of assembling a translation manual from the language to be deciphered to the translator's language is unlikely to have a unique solution—*viz.* his indeterminacy of translation thesis. But this, I think, is not the most important lesson (in fact, as I will try to indicate later, such an outcome is not so surprising given the pragmatic nature of the turn); a more important lesson is that *meanings, at least as usually conceived, are perhaps less crucial for semantic theory than previously thought.*

But is this not a contradiction in terms? What else is a semantic theory than a theory *of meaning*? Well: what does it mean to be a 'theory of meaning'? Why have we developed it, why are we interested in meaning in the first place? Because *it matters*; meaningful stuff means something *to us*; words, in particular, are helpful for communicating, shaping and organizing our thought, recording knowledge etc., etc. We want to know what the meaning of a word is because we want to know how the word manages to be so amenable for us. In fact, if we can pinpoint this out without getting hold of any entity which we could call *the meaning of the word*, we

⁷ To make both these aspects fully explicit, I use the term "pragmatist pragmatic" in Peregrin (2012a).

would not seem to miss anything. So semantic theory, apparently, need not be defined as the theory of meaning, but rather as the theory of meaningfulness of words.

And it seems that this is what struck Quine. He realized that we want to know how language works, and therefore we set out to discover what meanings are; however, the best way to find out what meanings are is to investigate how language works. However, once we understand how language works, we are done. We do not need, *in addition*, to know what meaning is—over and above our knowledge of the working of language. Hence, if we can understand the mechanics of language bypassing the question of the nature of meanings, meanings can be eschewed. And this is what Quine concluded he had ascertained. “I would not seek,” he urges (1992, 56), “a scientific rehabilitation of something like the old notion of separate and distinct meanings; that notion is better seen as a stumbling block cleared away.”

Before continuing, let me point out, by way of digression, another important aspect of the ‘pragmatic turn’: the fact that it brings about a certain amount of semantic holism. If meaning of a word were a mental content, then it would appear reasonable to try to discover it by taking the word in isolation and searching out the links leading from it into the mind. (The same would be the case, for that matter, if meanings were conceived as elements of the real or of a Platonist world christened by expressions.) However, if the meaning is rather the *role* of the word within our language games, then the only way to grasp it is to investigate the word’s interaction with other words and with the world within the relevant games. Thus, while the mentalist conception of meaning led to the atomist view of language (‘we find out meanings of individual words and thereby explain language and its workings’), the interactive conception leads instead to the holistic view (‘we must capture the workings of language and meanings will come out as spin-offs’).

It is this holism that ushers in the indeterminacy of meanings of individual words. As it is always a sentence (or sometimes perhaps even a supersentential whole) that must be employed for a valid move within a language game and that is hence independently meaningful in this sense, individual meanings can only be the artificially individuated contributions which the individual words bring to the sentence’s achieving the moves within the relevant games. Thus, specifying the exact meaning of a particular word cannot be more determinate than specifying the exact contribution of a particular player to a football game.

From this viewpoint, the indeterminacy thesis should not be surprising at all. In fact, once we accomplish the ‘pragmatic turn’, it is forthcoming.

And it is important to see that the indeterminacy of *individual meanings* is not an indeterminacy of *semantics*: semantics is a matter of the ability of our linguistic tools to serve as various kinds of vehicles of various language games, and though such an ability is vague in the sense that it is usually not a yes-no matter, it is not indeterminate (indeed it is not even clear what it would mean to call it so). On the other hand, furnishing individual words with values which would compositionally add up to the determinate abilities of the significant wholes can surely be done in more than one way—hence meaning assignment in this sense is indeterminate almost trivially.

The demise of meaning?

Quine's verdict is thus that we should account for human linguistic conduct without a roundabout via meanings. Over and above this, he concludes that as we are not involving ourselves with any such esoteric stuff as pieces of mind, but only with the motions of parts of the material, tangible world, there is no reason to assume that to study, analyze and explain linguistic conduct necessitates any other tools or concepts than those which we already use to study, analyze and explain the rest of the world. Human linguistic behavior is, to be sure, more complicated than the behavior of, say, bees, but this difference seems to be *quantitative*, rather than *qualitative*. With respect to the mentalistic conception (here in the Brentanian and Searlian form of basing meaning on intention), Quine (1960, p. 221) states:

One may accept the Brentano thesis [of the irreducibility of intentional idioms] either as showing the indispensability of intentional idioms and the importance of an autonomous science of intention, or as showing the baselessness of intentional idioms and the emptiness of the science of intention. My attitude, unlike Brentano's, is the second. To accept intentional usage at face value is, we saw, to postulate translation relations as somehow objectively valid though indeterminate in principle relative to the totality of speech dispositions. Such postulation promises little gain in scientific insight if there is no better ground for it than that the supposed translation relations are presupposed by the vernacular of semantics and intention.

Hence, Quine concludes, the analysis of language, including its semantic aspect, cannot but be behavioristic. There is nothing to study save linguistic behavior, for once we pay due attention to the way in which meanings spread, we can see that *nothing is in the meaning that was not earlier in behavior*.

Quine's behaviorism accords with the undeniable successes of natural sciences in describing and explaining ever more parts and aspects of our world, and their subsequent ambition to describe everything whatsoever. It is, it would seem, reasonable to be very careful in deviating from this trend by engaging any 'supernatural' concepts. And Quine is convinced that even those islands which still offer resistance to the trend—especially human minds and their alleged imprints, meanings—must yield. In this way, Quine's original idea that in order to understand what meaning is we should study linguistic behavior (especially within the setting of radical translation) slowly mutates into the idea that the truly important thing is the behavior itself—if studying it brings us also the understanding of the concept of meaning, very well; if not, the worse for the concept of meaning and we should simply throw it by the board.

Hence are we to denounce meanings as red herrings which divert us from concentrating on the important thing—the linguistic behavior? Quine himself is unambiguous: for him meanings *are* decoys, misguiding our attention from the true subject matter of semantic theory. In my view, here it is essential to pause and distinguish two different theses:

- (1) The primary target of semantic theory are linguistic practices (aka language games). Meaning is either our tool of accounting for them or a by-product of such an account. This point of view encapsulates the appeal of Wittgenstein (1953, §656): "Look on the language-game as the primary thing. And look on the feelings, etc., as you look on a way of regarding the language-game, as interpretation."
- (2) Accounting for these practices is methodologically and conceptually continuous with accounting for events in the non-human and inanimate world. Hence, to accomplish such an account necessitates no specific methods, nor specific concepts.

I think we should subscribe to (1)—the moral of the pragmatic turn of the second half of the twentieth century due to the later Wittgenstein, Sellars, Quine, Davidson and others. It seems to me that this turn is illuminating, methodologically fruitful and helps rid us of some persistent prejudices which may subconsciously and misleadingly determine how we see language and meaning. On the other hand, I am dubious about (2)*—I think that the meaningful/meaningless distinction—and the related mind/body

8 See also Peregrin (2005).

one—is something unique, something that our theories *should*—in *some* way—reflect. And I think that, given (1), it should be reflected as the peculiar status of our language games *vis-à-vis* the activities of our non-human pals or the clatter of inanimate things.

Our language games and their rules

Hence, what is so special about our, human, language games? And do we need some specific, irreducible concepts to account for this?

We have already indicated that those who embrace mentalism may want to invoke some specific, irreducibly mentalistic concepts, such as the concept of *intension* recommended by Searle. Another proposal was made by Donald Davidson. Davidson, who follows Quine in many other respects, disagrees that meaning talk can be fully naturalized, and claims that to account for thinking beings and meaningful talk we have developed a battery of specific concepts, which Ramberg (2000) aptly calls the *vocabulary of agency*. Central among these concepts, according to Davidson (1999), is the concept of *truth*.

However, let us return to Wittgenstein's answer to the question about the peculiarity of our language games: these games, we noted, are characteristically *governed by rules*. What is peculiar about this is that the rules are implicit within our linguistic practices, rather than explicitly formulated. They *cannot* be explicit, in pain of a vicious circle. We can have explicit rules of, say, chess or football; however, we cannot have explicit rules for using language—at least not generally. The reason is that to have an explicit rule we already *need* (a) language. To have an explicit rule means to have a sign that must be interpreted—hence to be able to follow this rule we need some rule for the interpretation of the sign, which leads us into a vicious circle:

A rule stands there like a sign-post.—Does the sign-post leave no doubt open about the way I have to go? Does it shew which direction I am to take when I have passed it; whether along the road or the footpath or cross-country? But where is it said which way I am to follow it; whether in the direction of its finger or (e.g.) in the opposite one?—And if there were, not a single sign-post, but a chain of adjacent ones or of chalk marks on the ground—is there only one way of interpreting them?—So I can say, the sign-post does after all leave no room for doubt. Or rather: it sometimes leaves room for doubt and sometimes not. And now this is no longer a philosophical proposition, but an empirical one (Wittgenstein, 1953, §85)

Hence the key problem in making sense of language as a practice governed by implicit rules is to make sense of the very concept of implicit rule (which is an important topic of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*).

Wittgenstein's approach seems to indicate the idea of accounting for our linguistic practices neither wholly in the way of natural science, nor in terms of a set of specific and irreducible concepts: what we need is not new *concepts*, but rather a specific *mode of speech*; aside of the indicative, also the normative mode: 'this ought to be done *thus and so*'. To say what an expression means is not to state how things are, but rather how they ought to be, namely how the expression is correctly used.

This proposal might seem strange. Does it imply that semantic theory states no facts and hence is no genuine theory? Well, the prime task of the theory is to explain our language games. Compare this to explaining a game like football. Would we dream of doing this without mentioning the *rules*, without saying that during a football game, the ball ought not to be touched by hand, that a player ought to avoid kicking his opponents etc.? And would such talk render this explanation somehow problematic or 'supernatural'?

Perhaps the relevant question to ask here is whether the talk about rules is naturalizable. Can we see the talk about the rules of football, and about what ought or ought not to be done during a football game, as a mere metaphor (or shorthand, or loose talk) which could be translated into a talk about the movements of the players, or something else wholly susceptible to expression in terms of the language of natural science? But how crucial is this really? I think that the question of whether, for example, the statement *A football player ought not touch the ball with his hands* (or, for that matter, *Football has such and such rules*) can, without a residuum, be translated into a non-normative claim couched in the naturalistic idiom is quite complex if not murky.⁹ What I do find crucial is that talk about meanings is essentially talk about proprieties rather than about facts.¹⁰

Thus, in my view, the concept of rule, far from being 'supernatural' itself, enables us to account for the specificity of human language, meaning, and reason, without invoking any 'supernatural' concepts. As Sellars (1949, 311) puts it "To say that man is a rational animal is to say that man is a creature not of *habits*, but of *rules*." This has led Brandom (1994, 33) to conclude: "For brutes or bits of the inanimate world to qualify as engaging

⁹ I discussed it elsewhere (see esp. Peregrin, 2012b).

¹⁰ See also Lance and O'Leary-Hawthorne (1997) for a thorough discussion.

in practices that implicitly acknowledge the applicability of norms, they would have to exhibit the behavior that counts as treating conduct (their own or that of others) *as* correct or incorrect.

The problem of understanding the role of rules within human linguistic conduct, then, can be portrayed as that of steering among the Skylla of *regularism*, claiming that a rule is by its nature *explicit* (we have already seen that this leads to a vicious circle) and the Charybda of *regulism*, claiming that rule-governed behavior is nothing more than regular behavior (which would erase any difference between a stone's following the law of gravitation by falling and a person's following the rule of traffic by stopping at a red light).¹¹ Hence, Sellars (1954) suggests that our language games are a matter of a specific kind of behavior which qualifies neither as "merely conforming to rules", nor as fully-fledged "rule obeying". He calls this kind of behavior *pattern governed*: "an organism may come to play a language game—that is to move from position to position in a system of moves and positions and to do it 'because of the system' without having to *obey rules* and hence without having to be playing a *metalanguage game*" (*ibid.*, 209).

Many patterns of behavior are passed from generation to generation simply in force of natural selection: those individuals happening to have such patterns wired in their genes have outsmarted those without them. But we can imagine also a modified picture: namely that what is inherited is not the pattern itself, but rather the tendency to make others display it—to support those of one's pals who display it and to ostracize those who do not.

Before starting to wonder how realistic such a picture is, let us add one more modification. Imagine that what one forces on his pals is not only the pattern itself, but also the tendency to force it on *their* pals, and especially on their young. Given this, the genetic hardwiring becomes redundant, for the pattern is promulgated by 'social' means exclusively. The older generation imposes upon the younger both the pattern and the tendency to impose it further. The promulgation goes on and on purely 'socially'.

However, how is it possible to impose both a pattern and the tendency to spread it further in one fell swoop? The answer is quite simple—it may be done with the help of a tool developed (it would seem) precisely to do this, namely a *rule* or a *norm*. The point is that the older generation institutes the pattern *as a norm*, a cultural artifact that effects precisely what is

¹¹ See Brandom (1994, Chapter I) for a thorough discussion of this.

needed—not only obliging members of the community to behave in a certain way, but also obliging them to require others to do likewise. In Sellars' words, the pattern in question propagates itself because it is something we were taught by our teachers *ought to be*, and hence we take it that we *ought to do* what would bring this *ought-to-be* about. Thus we reinforce that behavior of others, and especially of our own children and pupils, which conforms to the *ought-to-be* and we disapprove of that which fails to conform to it. This creates a (vitalizing) circle which tends to promulgate the pattern of behavior from generation to generation.

Human linguistic behavior thus requires a *society* with the mutual 'pressure' of its members acting upon one another. The relevant patterns are forced upon us not (directly) by natural selection, but by the ongoing demands of our peers. A *rule* is a lever necessary for putting to work the exclusively human kind of forming and maintaining of patterns—it is “an embodied generalization which to speak loosely but suggestively, tends to make itself true” (Sellars, 1949, 299).¹²

What I want to suggest is that the difference between *being meaningful* in the sense of being a suitable means for a particular end (like a hammer) and *being meaningful* in the sense of being expressive of a meaning (like a word) can be elucidated in terms of the difference between those practices which are straightforwardly end-driven and those which are partly governed by deliberate rules. Wittgenstein (1969, 184–5) poses the question “Why don't I call cookery rules arbitrary, and why am I tempted to call the rules of grammar arbitrary?”; he answers as follows:

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.

This indicates that the boundary between the kind of 'meaningfulness' pertinent to a useful tool and the meaningfulness of a word lies precisely between those practices whose 'rules' are merely a matter of an orientation towards an end and those which are deliberate—which are a matter of human sovereignty to build virtual spaces.

¹² See Peregrin (2010) for a more detailed discussion of these Sellarsian views.

A spectatorial theory of meaning?

We have rejected Quine's eschewing of meanings as premature; and we have concluded that though after the 'pragmatic turn' meanings are no longer the fundamental subject matter of semantic theory, they may still be pertinent—especially as *tools* of the theory. After the pragmatic turn, semantic theory is inseparably connected with the *interpretative stance*—semantics is taken to be a matter of use and it is the witness of the use who is in a position to account for it. And that witness's talk about meanings is the talk of the semantically relevant functions of kinds of sounds within the mouths of the interpreted.

This idea was clearly articulated by Davidson (1989, 11):

Just as in measuring weight we need a collection of entities which have a structure in which we can reflect the relations between weighty objects, so in attributing states of belief (and other propositional attitudes) we need a collection of entities related in ways that will allow us to keep track of the relevant properties of the various psychological states. In thinking and talking of the weights we need not suppose there are such things as weights for objects to have. Similarly in thinking and talking about the beliefs of people we needn't suppose there are such entities as beliefs. . . . For the entities we mention to help specify a state of mind do not have to play any *psychological* or epistemological role at all, just as numbers play no physical role.

Does this mean that meanings have no place within the process of communication itself, but only within its *post hoc* theoretical reflection? Does it mean that they exist merely in the eye of the beholder? Is the theory of meanings after the linguistic turn inevitably merely 'spectatorial'?¹³ And how would this square with the fact that I know what my words mean; that I can retrieve their meanings from my memory etc.—without being interpreted by somebody else? In particular, how can it be reconciled with the fact that I *perceive* meanings?

Davidson suggests that we use meanings to measure and classify our fellow organisms' 'belief-states'. (From this viewpoint, to situate beliefs within an individual, and to talk, as many semanticists do, about the individual's 'belief box', is analogous to expressing that a tree is five meters high by saying that the tree has the five meters somewhere within its 'height box'.) Does this mean that people 'in fact' do not mean anything by their words? Of course not (unless by *meaning something* by a word we

13 See Bogdan (1997).

understand furnishing the word with a mental content). The fact that meters are not actually inside a tree also does not preclude it from being five meters high.

Does it mean that I cannot find out meanings by inspecting my mind? That I need an interpreter to tell me what my words mean? No; for, of course, I am an interpreter myself, and though to find out what a word means I need to interpret its users, once I am acquainted with it, I may start to take the word as meaning what it does and in the end finally *perceive* it as the embodiment of the meaning. (In fact, this step is a presupposition of efficient communication; as long as I must recover meanings effortfully, I am not able to communicate in a way that would be considered normal.) Just as I can retrieve from my memory the function of a long unseen tool which I worked with long ago, so I can retrieve the meaning of a word whose meaning I encountered long ago. (Or, if I suffer from Alzheimer's, perhaps not so long ago.) Once I have learnt the meaning of a word, I no longer need to actually look at people using it to know that the word is governed by such and such rules and hence that it means thus and so. Thus, though it is the process of interpretation that is constitutive of meanings, this does not mean that getting hold of a particular meaning must always involve me in interpretation.

Confronted with an alien language, I hear mere sounds and I must amass vast quantities of data to infer from them what these sounds mean. However, in the course of my becoming acquainted with the language, in the course of my learning it, my ability to tell what a sound means becomes non-inferential—I start to *perceive* the sound *as meaning thus and so*, *viz.* I start to *perceive* its meaning. (The perception involves the relevant normative attitudes, just as the perception that somebody is stealing something involves the conviction that this is a crime.) Hence the claim that there is no meaning without interpretation is *different* from the claim that every meaning-perception is the result of an inference—the former does not involve the latter.

The role-semantics

So far we have concluded that it might be helpful to suspend the question *What is meaning?* and move along to the question *What is the nature of our linguistic practices?*; and then we have concluded that the distinctiveness of the way in which our words are meaningful can be traced back to the specific character of our linguistic practices—namely to the fact that they

are rule-governed in the specific sense discussed above. At this point we can ask: does the suspension of the question about the nature of meaning turn out to be its total cancellation, or is it now to be resuscitated?

To this end we should ask: Does the position we have reached w.r.t. semantics yield—or necessitate—a *theory of meaning*? I think it does. The interpretive stance instituted by the pragmatic turn naturally involves what Sellars (1974) called a “functional classification” of expressions (from the viewpoint of the rules of the language games) and consequently the study of their roles *vis-à-vis* the rules. And it turns out that it is such a role which can be taken as a plausible *explicatum* of the intuitive concept of meaning. From this viewpoint, meaning should be seen as an encapsulation of a relevant role. As Sellars (1949, 302) puts it:

To think of a system of qualities and relations is, I shall argue, to use symbols governed by a system of rules which, we might say, *implicitly define* these symbols by giving them a specific task to perform in the linguistic economy. The linguistic meaning of a word is entirely constituted by the rules of its use.

Of course, we must keep in mind that meaning in this sense is not a thing which is *named* or *denoted* or *expressed* by an expression, but rather something the expression *embodies* or *instantiates*. However, there is no reason to abstain from making models of the semantics of language in the form of functions assigning expressions some kinds of objects.¹⁴ (It is no more objectionable than making a model of a society by listing social roles alongside the people instantiating them and drawing arrows from the latter to the former to indicate what role each person assumes.)

Take, for example, the Fregean explication of the concept of concept. A concept, Frege (1892b) argued, is, as a rule, something under which a given object may or may not fall; hence it is a way of classifying objects into two groups (those falling under it and those not falling under it); and so it can be identified with a function mapping objects on the two truth values—*truth* and *falsity*. Many modern interpreters thus see Frege as taking predicates to denote concepts in the sense of *standing for* them. This is harmless unless we fall into the trap of understanding this as a picture of a real relation of denoting between an expression and a concept. This is what Sellars (1992, p. 109n.) finds engraved within Carnapian formal models of semantics:

¹⁴ I argued for this claim at length elsewhere (see Peregrin, 2001).

[Carnap's formalization of semantic theory in terms of a primitive relation of designation which holds between words and *extralinguistic* entities] commits one to the idea that if a language is meaningful, there exists a domain of entities (the *designata* of its names and predicates) which exist independently of any human concept formation.

Nevertheless, if we inspect the way Frege really analyzed the concept of concept, we can see that it was not a matter of a contemplation of concepts *qua* ideal entities, but rather of an analysis of the behavior of the expressions of concepts, *viz.* predicates. A predicate typically connects with a name to form a sentence, which is either true or false, depending on the name, or, more precisely, by the referent of the name. Hence a predicate can be seen as mapping names onto sentences and, on the semantic level, referents of names, i.e. objects, on the truth values of sentences.

There are more misconceptions regarding the ensuing 'role-semantics'. The most frequent of these feed upon the objection that this notion is *circular*. The objection runs as follows: 'The role-semantacist claims that meaning is *conferred* on expressions by rules. However, to know which rules are correct and meaning-conferring we first need to know what the sentences involved *mean*. Hence meaning is both created and presupposed by the rules of language.'¹⁵ To see that this objection is misplaced, it is helpful to explore the parallel between language and a rule-governed game like chess; in particular to show some important respects in which language, in the view of the role-semantacist, *is* like chess (as well as some respects in which it *is not*).

The following table, listing some features of chess side by side with the corresponding features of language, is designed to illustrate especially:

- (1) that a language is *constituted* by rules;
- (2) that the rules have the character of *constraints* and that hence they do not *command* us how to speak;
- (3) that meanings are utterly a matter of rules of language and hence of the normative attitudes which sustain the rules;
- (4) that we need not have meanings *before* we set up the rules, but rather that setting up the rules *is* setting up meanings; and hence
- (5) that it makes *no sense whatsoever* to ask whether it is the chicken of meaning or the egg of inferential rules that comes first.

¹⁵ Variants of this objection surface in Fodor & LePore (1993; 2001), Engel (2000), Hinzen (2001) and elsewhere.

- (1) One can play chess *rightly* (or *wrongly*). But one can do so in two senses: not only in the sense of playing skillfully and beating one's opponents, but also in the more fundamental sense of 'respecting' the rules. (This is not to say that the player cannot *violate* the rules, but there must be reasons to see what he does as *violation*—for example he cannot do so too often.) It is the latter sense that is constitutive to the very game of chess—it is the *rules* of chess which make it possible to play chess at all (hence to play chess *wrongly* in the second sense means not to play it at all; and to play either *rightly* or *wrongly* in the first sense presupposes to play *rightly* in the second one.) The rules of chess are explicitly written down and the players see their own and their opponents' moves as right or wrong (i.e. assume *normative attitudes* to them) according to whether they are or are not in accordance with the rules.
- (2) Rules of chess do not tell us how to move pieces in the sense of advising us what to do at any particular moment of the game (with the singular exception of a *forced* move, i.e. of the situation when there is merely one admissible move left). They tell us what *not* to do, what is a legitimate move and what is prohibited. (Even violating the prohibitions permanently is not necessarily doing something useless or despicable, it may, for example, mean playing another game—but not chess.)
- (1) One can speak English *rightly* (or *wrongly*). But one can do so in two senses: not only in the sense of making oneself successfully understood by English speakers or reading English books, but also in the more fundamental sense of 'respecting' rules of English. (This is not to say that the player cannot *violate* the rules, but there must be reasons to see what he does as *violation*—for example he cannot do so too often.) It is the latter sense that is constitutive to the very language of English—it is the *rules* of the language which make it possible to speak English at all (hence to speak English *wrongly* in the second sense means not to speak *English* at all; and to speak English either *rightly* or *wrongly* in the first sense presupposes to speak *rightly* in the second.) However, the relevant rules of English are not explicitly written down (with the exception of the rules of forming grammatically correct English expressions) and hence they exist merely through the speakers' taking their own and their fellow speakers' utterances for right or wrong (i.e. through their *normative attitudes*).
- (2) Rules of a language do not tell us how to use words in the sense of advising us what to say at any particular moment. They tell us what *not* to say, what is a legitimate move and what is prohibited. (Even violating the prohibitions permanently is not necessarily doing something useless or despicable, it may, for example, mean speaking another language—but not English.)

- (3) It is the rules of chess that make a piece used to play the game into a *pawn*, a *bishop*, a *king* etc. It is not its makeup, but exclusively the role conferred on it by the rules according to which we decide to treat it that provides the piece with its 'value'. It makes no sense to say that what we subject to rules are *already* pawns, bishops etc.—the pieces acquire the values *via* being subjected to the rules. As to accept a rule is to treat some moves as correct and some as incorrect, we can say that the rules, and consequently the values of the pieces, are a matter of the players' normative attitudes. (Though after being written down, the rule's existence is partly independent of the attitudes.)
- (4) When I say that I should move a chess piece thus-and-so because it is, say, a bishop, what I say is not that it must have been a bishop *before* it could be subjected to the relevant rules; rather I say that as the piece is governed by such and such rules, my move is a permissible one.
The rule that I should not move the king so that it would be immediately checked by an opponent's piece and the 'rule' that I should not move the queen in the same way are of different kinds. The latter 'rule' merely indicates that to move the queen in the described manner is not usually the way to win. Due to the explicitness of the rules of chess, the rules are unambiguous and there is a sharp boundary between rules of the former kind and 'rules' of the latter one. Therefore, the values of the pieces are clearly and distinctly delineated (and it cannot be unclear what the value of a piece is).
- (3) It is the rules of language that make a kind of sound/inscription displayed by the speakers into a *name of a dog*, a *conjunction connective*, or a *true sentence*. It is not the way it sounds, but exclusively the role conferred on it by the rules according to which we decide to treat it that provides the sound/inscription with its meaning. It makes no sense to say that what we subject to rules are *already* meaningful words—the words acquire the meanings *via* being subjected to the rules. As to accept a rule is to treat some moves as correct and some as incorrect, we can say that the rules, and consequently the meanings of the words, are a matter of the relevant speakers' normative attitudes.
- (4) When I say that I should use a sound/inscription thus-and-so because it is, say, a conjunction connective, what I say is not that it must have been a conjunction connective *before* it could be subjected to the relevant rules; rather I say that as the sound/inscription is governed by such and such rules, the use is a permissible one.
The rule that I should not assert "This is a dog" and "This is not a dog" pointing at the same animal and the 'rule' that there is no point in asserting "This is this" are of different kinds. The latter 'rule' merely indicates that to assert the described sentence is not usually the way to achieve anything. However, due to the non-explicitness of the rules of English, there is no sharp boundary between rules of the former kind and 'rules' of the latter one. Therefore, the meanings of the words are not distinctly delineated (and it can be unclear what a word means).

- (5) The values of the pieces are exclusively a matter of the rules to which the pieces are subjected, and the rules are the matter of our treating some moves as right and others as wrong. Hence the value of a piece and our normative attitudes to the way it is treated are two sides of the same coin—it makes no sense to say that something is, say, a king independently of the attitudes—to be a king *is* to enjoy this kind of attitudes.
- (6) It makes no sense to say: “What you can *check* is obviously a *king* not a mere piece of wood—hence you cannot formulate rules of chess unless you have pieces which already *are* kings, pawns, bishops ...”. The concepts *check* and *king* are established in mutual interdependence.
- (5) The meanings of the words are exclusively a matter of the rules to which the words are subjected, and the rules are the matter of our treating some moves as right and others as wrong. Hence the meaning of a word and our normative attitudes to the way it is treated are two sides of the same coin—it makes no sense to say that something is, say, a conjunction connective independently of the attitudes—to be a conjunction connective *is* to enjoy this kind of attitudes.
- (6) It makes no sense to say: “What you can *assert* is obviously a *meaningful sentence* not a mere meaningless sound/inscription—hence you cannot establish rules of language unless you have expressions which already *are* meaningful.” The concepts *to assert* and *meaningful sentence* are established in mutual interdependence.

The space of meaningfulness

The physical space in which we live our lives is formed by certain laws—the laws making some of the things we can think of doing (flying by ourselves, living under water . . .) *impossible*, thereby delimiting a certain spectrum of *possibilities*. In a sense, the space *is* the spectrum of the possibilities. And we can, as if, imitate this by creating our own (i.e. distinctively human) virtual spaces.

The basic difference between such a man-made space and the nature-made ‘real’ space is in that the former, in contrast to the latter, is not a matter of making some courses of action *impossible*, but rather of making them merely *improper*. (The spaces may be also more or less *embodied*—i.e. their possibilities may to some extent depend on those of the real space.) Propriety might appear as merely a poor *simulacrum* of possibility: for we *can* (only ought not to) do what is *improper*. However, this weakness of spaces delimited by human rules rather than by natural laws is at the same time their strength: we can build them ourselves, change them and develop them according to our experience and finally reach incredibly impressive edifices.

Consider, once more, the game of chess. Although it is a matter of a relatively small collection of rules, they institute a space of chess games which is vast and incomprehensible not just for human reason, but as yet also for our most advanced computers. Even a small deviation from the current rules could potentially corrupt the whole space (in the sense that there may emerge an obvious winning strategy for one of the players). And to be truly within the space, to enjoy the thrill of moving through it and winning or losing, one must *accept* the rules—the price of their recurrent violation would be one's own expulsion from the paradise of chess.

I suggest that a similar situation holds for language and meanings. The rules of language create a huge space of meaningfulness, the space in which we can play our language games, meaningfully communicate and, indeed, think in our distinctively human way. It is only within such a space that something can become meaningful in the way in which our words are, in contrast to the way in which mere useful tools are.

I have also endeavored to show that the basic material out of which the space of meaningfulness (along with many of its poorer relatives, such as that of chess games) is built are *rules*. Rule is a kind of social reality or institution which allows for a purely 'social'—and very efficient—spreading of patterns. Because we humans are able to have (i.e. establish, respect and follow) rules, we open the door for the transgenerational elaboration of complicated patterns which come to constitute our culture. Therefore (as already Kant pointed out) it is rules that are most characteristic of the human kind of existence.

Hence, meanings are reasonably seen as creatures of our activity of setting up rules to deliberately bind ourselves with them, thus entering new kinds of spaces which thereby come into being. Meaning is what emerges within the intricately orchestrated (arch)space that we have somehow brought into being through accepting the rules which govern our language games (and especially the game which Brandom, 1994, calls *the game of giving and asking for reasons*).

Moreover, meanings are best seen not as things we describe when describing our language games, but rather as tools of our description, as the means of our representing the games and their rules. (Nevertheless, because all participants of the games are themselves describers, these tools are also themselves, in a sense, part of the game.) To say that an expression means thus and so is essentially to say that it ought to be used in a certain way. Thus, meanings are 'beyond the natural, causal order', but, at the same time, are not 'supernatural' in any abstruse or esoteric sense.

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