

# Chapter 11

## The normative dimension of discourse

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### 1. Discourse and normativity

It is not too controversial to say that discourse may interact with normative relationships among people, relationships such as *obligations* or *entitlements*. Some speech acts may produce novel normative links: if you promise your friend to return the money he lent you, then your speech act institutes an *obligation* on your part, the obligation to return the money. Some speech acts may presuppose specific already extant normative relationships: for example, to speak at the banquet of a scientific conference presupposes some entitlement yielded by the speaker's status – such as his being the head of the organizing committee or perhaps the dean of the faculty backing the conference.

In some cases, a speech act may both presuppose and institute normative relationships. A typical case in point is ordering (commanding): this purports to institute an obligation on the part of its addressee; but it succeeds in instituting it only if it meets the condition that the actor's position is in a relevant sense superior to that of the addressee. Moreover, it would seem that ordering can be *completely characterized* in terms of the changes of the normative links it brings about: ordering, we can say, is simply *the* act which, when carried out by an entitled actor, creates a specific obligation on the part of the addressee. However, ordering is not usually thought of as a particularly typical speech act; language, so the usual story goes, is more a matter of something like "encoding and decoding information" (*vide* Wikipedia) or "communicating ideas and feelings", while giving orders, or other ways of building on or establishing normative links, is little more than a by-product of this.

In this article I want to explore the possibility that normativity is far more crucial to language than this. An idea flickering in the theories of several twentieth century philosophers of language (and seen earlier in Immanuel Kant) is that a certain kind of normativity is constitutive of our distinctively human mind (aka reason) founding our concepts and infiltrating the semantics of our language. If this is true, then normativity is not only an accidental element of some of our speech acts, but rather their essential ingredient. Here we want to expose the motivations supporting this view and search out its consequences.

To foreshadow this approach to language and discourse, let us take as a basic thesis that meaningfulness is not a (naturalistic) property of a type of sound or an inscription, but rather a

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'propriety': saying that an expression means thus and so is saying that it is *correct* to use it thus and so, that it is governed by a certain set of *rules*. The mechanism is supposedly similar to that animating games and sports: saying a piece of rubber is an ice-hockey *puck* is not ascribing the piece a peculiar (naturalistic) property, but citing its role *vis-à-vis* the rules of ice hockey. Hence from this viewpoint, discourse is like a kind of game, it is governed by rules (though in contrast to ice-hockey, not necessarily *explicit* rules) and meaningfulness is the effect of the rules.

## 2. Transferring information?

Consider the received wisdom that language is a matter of *transferring information*. There seems nothing particularly normative about such transfers (aside of the trivialities that it can be exercised, as any other kind of act, correctly or incorrectly, well or badly, appropriately or inappropriately, etc.). What is going on is the moving of something from one head to another – a perfectly naturalistic enterprise.

But is this truly so? Consider the act of 'transferring information' accompanying the act of assertion. What happens when I assert something, tell something to somebody, or inform somebody about something? I emit a certain sound (let us disregard the written form of language, for simplicity's sake), and it reaches my audience's ear. What can be effected by a mere *sound*? Seeing it as merely a sound, rather than an expression, then we can imagine that its capabilities might include being able to scare the audience or attract its attention; but using the specific kinds of sounds that constitute language enables us to do much more complicated and very specific things: for example, we might cause somebody at a distant place to open a particular door, go into a room and take something from a particular drawer. How do we achieve this?

There is the temptation to have all the explanatory work done by the terms *information* and, indeed, *meaning*. The sounds that constitute language differ from other kinds of sounds, and acquire their almost miraculous abilities, because they have been furnished by meanings. (How? Perhaps – we pull another rabbit out of the hat – by means of a *convention*!) This grants them the ability to transfer information from one head to another, and as potential pieces of information constitute an incredibly large and fine-grained spectrum, we can achieve, by sending them to our audience, a very large and differentiated spectrum of reactions.

However, using such concepts as *information* and *meaning* as unexplained explainers begs the question. Almost everybody would agree that the talk about transferring information by means of words is merely metaphorical, that there are no such things as actual units of *information* literally hanging on the words that flow from my mouth to your ear<sup>1</sup>. But what is it a metaphor of? An immediate answer might be that our brains have the ability of dealing with language in the sense that they discern a vast number of sounds and somehow recognize them as 'codes' encoding something. Hence the speaker uses the ability of his brain to 'encode'

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<sup>1</sup> The details of the workings of the metaphor were analyzed by Reddy (1979); see also Lakoff and Johnson (1980).

information and the hearer uses it to 'decode' it. Thus, nothing must literally hang on the words, it 'hangs' on them merely metaphorically in that they *encode* it.

But in what precisely does the encoding/decoding ability of our brains consist? Does the brain contain some huge 'code table', which allows it to translate information to and from the linguistic codes? This seems to be precisely the idea put forward by Chomsky, who urges that language is a huge system of pairings of sounds and meanings<sup>2</sup>. But how do such 'code tables' materialize in our brains?

Clearly, this must happen during the process of learning the language in question. (It cannot be innate, for the codes, the worlds, differ from society to society.) A forthright picture of how this happens was described by Augustine: we are shown things and told their names, thereby building the table<sup>3</sup>. This has developed into what can be called a *semiotic* or a *representationalist* picture of language, according to which meaningfulness consists, first and foremost, in *standing for something*. But is this picture plausible? Two problems immediately surface: First, although we can be shown things or people, and perhaps also, less straightforwardly, we can be introduced to qualities such as redness or manhood by being shown red things or male persons, there still remains a plethora of words where it is utterly unclear what we can be shown (think, for example, of adverbs, such as *rapidly* or *always*). Second, to speak a language is to have use of an *unlimited* number of expressions, so inevitably no amount of pointing can furnish them all with their meanings.

These problems are usually not considered insurmountable. As for the first, it is assumed that only some of the words of our language are learned by ostension and thus come to function as proxies for things, whereas the rest of them constitute some kind of auxiliary scaffolding for employing the 'core words' (see, e.g. Weinreich, 1962, p.36). As for the second, learning a language is seen to consist of learning the meanings of words plus mastering ways of composing meanings of complex expressions out of those of simpler ones.

Note, however, that this essentially compromises the picture of our semantic competence as a matter of the possession of a code table. As for the first problem, the remaining worry concerns *what* it is that is stored in our brains along with words like *rapidly* or *always*. As for the second, we can certainly say that what effects the encoding/decoding should be seen more as an algorithm than as a table, which would account for the potential infinity of meaning-

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<sup>2</sup> "Each expression is, in this sense, a pairing of sound and meaning. It has been recognized for thousands of years that language is, fundamentally a system of sound-meaning connections," as, e.g., Hauser, Chomsky & Fitch (2002) put it.

<sup>3</sup> This is the picture invoked – and criticized – by Wittgenstein (1953, §1): "When they (my elders) named some object, and accordingly moved towards something, I saw this and I grasped that the thing was called by the sound they uttered when they meant to point it out. Their intention was shewn by their bodily movements, as it were the natural language of all peoples: the expression of the face, the play of the eyes, the movement of other parts of the body, and the tone of voice which expresses our state of mind in seeking, having, rejecting, or avoiding something. Thus, as I heard words repeatedly used in their proper places in various sentences, I gradually learnt to understand what objects they signified; and after I had trained my mouth to form these signs, I used them to express my own desires."

sound pairs; but what about the infinity of meanings themselves? Certainly if we are to encode a potentially infinite number of entities, we need to *have* the entities (if only merely potentially). But how do we generate all the meanings expressible in a language? Of course, we can generate them via generating all the expressions expressing them; but if they are to be *encoded* by the expressions, then it seems they should be available *before* the encoding happens. And if we have an *unlimited* number of meanings, what sense does it make to think that we *have* them as being *assembled* in our brain for a potential encoding?

We may try to meet this challenge by claiming that the meanings are something we are born with – that nature and our genes endow us with a "language of thought" that does not consist of expressions codifying meanings, but rather of expressions that directly *are* meanings. This seems to be the strategy of Fodor (1975; 2008) and his followers. However, if we see a *language* as a collection of sound- or inscription-types that become meaningful via their engagement within their involvement with our complicated discursive practices, then such a detachment of meanings from expressions is basically problematic: once again it leads to unexplained explainers that stand in essential need of explanation themselves.

### 3. The pragmatist turn

At this point, the picture of communication as principally a matter of exchanging encoded information loses its initial plausibility, encouraging us to consider some other approach. And as many philosophers and linguists have recommended, a useful alternative might be to see language not in terms of representing things and encoding/decoding information, but rather in terms of practical ends to which linguistic items can serve as means, to see expressions as *tools* rather than as *codes*. This insight is characteristic of philosophical pragmatism (see Haack and Lane (2006)), but it has found its way into various other philosophical and linguistic conceptions of language in the later twentieth century. It is central to the neopragmatist theories of Quine and Davidson, it animates the later Wittgenstein's theory of *language games* and it is partly also present within the speech act theory initiated by Austin and Grice. I will call this view of language and communication *pragmatist pragmatics*. From this perspective, questions of meaning and information, of course, are radically altered.

Consider a toolbox (the metaphor for language favored by the later Wittgenstein<sup>4</sup>). I may learn various ways of using the tools the toolbox contains; and not only each of them alone, but also in combination: the hammer and a nail, the screwdriver and a screw, a bolt and a nut ... . I may accomplish various useful things. The more skillful I am with the tools, the more practical tasks they can help me solve. Moreover, they render it possible for me to do things I would never have even considered before: to build and mend things I would previously have been unable to imagine. Thus, although sometimes I use tools to cope with tasks that would have faced me independently of whether I had a toolbox or not, very often I use them to do

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<sup>4</sup> Wittgenstein (1969, §31) says: "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."

things that I would not come to think about were it not for my experience with the toolbox – it is the skill of using the tools that makes many tasks that can be solved by its means visible in the first place. For this reason it would be absurd to think of the tools and their combinations as responses to tasks given beforehand.

Switching to this pragmatist view of language also prompts us to re-evaluate the traditional view of the semantics/pragmatics boundary. Recall that the traditional definition of the boundary between semantics and pragmatics, as given by Morris (1938) and Carnap (1942)<sup>5</sup>, was conceived within the representationalist framework. Semantics was considered to address questions central to the framework, namely what things our words stand for, while pragmatics was relegated to the sphere of peripheral, residual questions of how we use words – how the words endowed with meanings get also peripherally endowed with our habits, moods or fancies.

Given the pragmatist turn that leads us to see language more as the vehicle of an activity, semantics is effectively swallowed up by pragmatics – *everything* is a matter of how we use language. Of course, we can still have a semantics/pragmatics boundary, but now pragmatics will not be an unessential appendage of semantics, but rather semantics will be a slightly artificially demarcated part of pragmatics (such as, for example, that dealing with truth-conditions, as Stalnaker, 1970, suggests).

Hence, the pragmatist turn may help us overcome the obstacles generated by the earlier idea that what we principally do with language is transfer information, which led to the consequent code conception of language<sup>6</sup>. From the pragmatist viewpoint, language is not a mere instrument of dealing with the extralinguistic world: while in some cases, it may help us cope with problems we would face independently of us having or not having a language, more often than not we will use it for tasks which only came into being with the birth of language – discussing theoretical questions, reciting poetry, buying a book, and so forth. Hence it seems that the tasks for which expressions are fitted co-evolve with language. For this reason it

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<sup>5</sup> "In terms of the three correlates (sign vehicle, designatum, interpreter) of the triadic relation of semiosis, a number of other dyadic relations may be abstracted for study. One may study the relations of signs to the objects to which the signs are applicable. This relation will be called the *semantical dimension of semiosis*. ... The study of this dimension will be called *semantics*. Or the subject of study may be the relation of signs to interpreters. This relation will be called the *pragmatical dimension of semiosis*, ... and the study of this dimension will be named *pragmatics*. ... The formal relation of signs to one another ... will be called the *syntactical dimension of semiosis*, ... and the study of this dimension will be named *syntactics*. (Morris, 1938, 6-7). "If in an investigation explicit reference is made to the speaker, or, to put it in more general terms, to the user of a language, then we assign it to the field of pragmatics.... If we abstract from the user of the language and analyze only the expressions and their designata, we are in the field of semantics. And if, finally, we abstract from the designata also and analyze only the relations between the expressions, we are in (logical) syntax." (Carnap, 1942, 9). See Récanati (2005) for a discussion.

<sup>6</sup> As Wittgenstein (1953, §304) puts it: "The paradox disappears only if we make a radical break with the idea that language always functions in one way, always serves the same purpose: to convey thoughts – which may be about houses, pains, good and evil, or anything else you please."

seems to me to be misleading to imagine expressions as codes of something given independently of them.

Note that, although we claimed that this pragmatist approach to pragmatics is not alien to the speech act theory of Austin and Grice (viz. their *perlocution* dimension of the speech act), ultimately it is an alternative to the specifically Gricean approach to pragmatics based on the concept of intention, which dominates current pragmatics scene. Just as this avoids taking either the concept of *information*, or that of *meaning* as an unexplained explainer, so it also avoids taking *intention* as such. In this way it is more thoroughly naturalistic.

Hence the impasse into which we were brought by the code conception might be overcome if we take the pragmatist turn; but from the opening comments of this paper it follows that we want to consider one more turn, namely a *normative* one. Why is this? Why should we not rest content with the pragmatist turn?

#### 4. What ties an observation report to what it reports?

Consider the sentence *This is a dog*. What does the fact that it means what it does in English consist in? It would seem that whatever else might come into its meaning, what is essential is that English speakers use this sentence when confronted with a dog, and not when confronted with, say, a horse.

However, is this true? For a start, we can think of cases where competent speakers might utter *This is a dog* when confronted with a horse – as a result of bad sight, of jocularly, irony, or poetic inspiration, etc. But perhaps such cases may be dismissed as statistically insignificant, and more substantial is the observation that the majority of English speakers when confronted with a dog would be extremely unlikely to actually utter *This is a dog*. In fact, I suspect the number of positive cases may well be statistically insignificant. (As Chomsky (1975) conjectured, the statistical probability of uttering almost any specific expression in a given situation will not be significantly higher than zero.)

Hence we are back at the conundrum of what establishes the connection between *This is a dog* and dogs. The usual rabbit that philosophers and linguists pull out of their hats here is the concept of *disposition*. *This is a dog* means that this is a dog (and not, say, a horse) because speakers are *disposed* to utter it when confronted with a dog. This disposition sometimes provokes the overt utterance, but more often than not it remains covert.

But this rabbit, I feel, is just a trick to delay clarification. What does it mean that a speaker has a covert disposition to utter *This is a dog*? It amounts to the counterfactual claim that the person would utter it were it not for some hindrance. What would substantiate such a claim? Certainly, it would be well substantiated were we able to identify some mechanism in a person's brain which tends to lead to the utterance, which may be obstructed by certain factors, and which may be shown to be so obstructed in the case in point. But at present we are party to no such mechanisms.

Alternatively, we can interpret the claim as not a claim about an inner mechanism, but rather about empirical regularities. We may report that *This is a dog* is always uttered in the presence of a dog unless certain 'hindering' factors occur. But for such a claim to have empirical content (to be, for example, testable) we would have to be able to specify the

relevant factors. Otherwise the claim would be empty: *any* evidence would be compatible with it. (We would never be able to object that the claim is at variance with the facts: cases of speakers reacting to dogs with *This is a dog* would be in order, and cases of those not reacting in this way could always be explained away with reference to unspecified hindering factors.)

But are we able to give an exhaustive catalogue of things or events that stop one exclaiming *This is a dog* in the presence of a dog? Can we say, for example, that principal factors are unwillingness to talk, preoccupation with other matters or not noticing the dog in question? Hardly; we can clearly think of any number of others. Hence it seems that invoking the concept of disposition here is a mere illusion of explanation. Does this mean that there is, despite appearances, no intelligible connection between *This is a dog* and dogs after all?

I do not think so; but I think that that we tend to look at this connection in the wrong way. What I think is the case is that the connection is *normative* rather than causal. This is to say that the link between the occurrence and the utterance is not a matter of any causal mechanism connecting the two, but rather of the fact that to utter *This is a dog* when a dog is in focus is *correct*.

However, without a further ado, this would be at most a gesture towards an explanation (if not merely another trick). What is a *non-causal, normative connection*? Should one imagine some kind of supernatural fiber leading from dogs (and other potential objects of reference) to the minds of speakers? It is clear that unless we give a viable clarification, this alleged explanation would not really be useful. Hence it is the clarification to which we now turn our attention.

## 5. Correctness

To foreshadow where we expect our normative turn to lead us to, let us consider an activity seemingly very different from using language: the game of football. What is important for us is that playing football amounts to enjoying a spectrum of actions that are not available for us outside of its framework: get into an offside, foul an opponent or (joy of joys!) score a goal. How do such actions become available for me? Obviously because I, as well as my teammates and our opponents, *submit to the rules of football* – it is the *rules*, and in particular the collective submission to them, that open up the space for the new kind of actions. And the thesis I want to put forward and discuss is that *linguistic actions*, actions that we tend to describe as cases of *meaningful talk*, *transfer of information* or *stating facts* (or whatever else one can do with *meaningful* language), arise analogously: namely as a result of our collective submission to the rules of language.

Let us start from the question of how we recognize the presence of a normative link of the kind discussed above. (After all, as Quine reminded us, we all learn to speak by means of observing our elders and peers and as what we can perceive is exclusively behavior – hence, we can say, *there cannot be anything in meaning that was not in behavior before*.) How does a language-learner recognize that *This is a dog* is 'normatively linked' to dogs (rather than horses) and so grasp the meaning of the sentence (and especially of the word *dog*)?

Well, when learning language we may witness a demonstration of using *This is a dog* as accompanying pointing at a dog. However, though this can indicate the existence of a link, it cannot intimate the nature of the link, let alone that it is a *normative* link. Given our genetic tendency to imitate, we may come to utter *This is a dog* when pointing at a dog ourselves; but nothing apparently stops us from uttering it when pointing at things other than dogs – say, all furry things, or even at anything whatsoever.

The decisive step here is that we must learn that using it when pointing at something not a dog is *incorrect*. How do we learn this? By experiencing some kind of 'social friction', by facing 'corrective reactions' of other speakers to such misuse (our own or somebody else's). What constitutes such a 'corrective reaction'? It may be anything from a true punishment to a mild dissatisfaction or puzzlement. Anyway, one of the principal 'social skills' anybody must master to be an integral part of his or her society is to recognize which kinds of behavior count as 'corrective' (and being able to feel this kind of 'friction' appears to be one of the most essential social skills).

Hence the original encounter with the normativity of meaning is in this 'must not': We do not learn what we should do, but rather what we should *not* do. This is important, for this may help clarify one of the most frequent misunderstandings regarding the normativity of meaning: the normativity does not rid us of our *freedom* in using language and hence does not contradict the obvious fact that using language is a *spontaneous* activity – it merely *restricts* the freedom still leaving a vast number of possibilities. (We will return to this later.)

This also indicates that the normativity of meaning is somehow carried by the *corrective*, or as we may say more generally, *normative* attitudes of speakers to other speakers' pronouncements. And this may bring us to a suspicion that we have not done away with the concept of disposition we deemed suspicious above, but merely shifted it one level up: for do we not need the concept for the characterization of the concept of normative attitude? Can we say that normative attitudes *consist* in a 'corrective behavior' – or do we have to say that they consist in the *disposition* to corrective behavior? After all, not everybody who uses language incorrectly faces correction by others!

It is true that though the occurrence of a generic 'corrective behavior' is more easily predicted than individual pronouncements, it is not, of course, the case that we cannot say that a pronouncement is wrong only if some such behavior occurs. But we may avoid the concept of disposition in the same way as before: instead of saying that an utterance is incorrect either if it faces corrective behavior, or if others would have the disposition to the 'corrective behavior' towards it, we can say that it is incorrect if the corrective behavior towards it would be *correct*.

However, this definitely looks like a trick, and in this case a particularly naive one. (Am I criticizing my colleagues for pulling rabbits out of their hats only to end up pulling one of my hat myself?) Is it not merely shifting the whole problem to a third level and thus possibly starting an infinite regress? The attempt to reduce correctness to behavior or to dispositions to behavior would indeed lead us to an infinite regress; but my answer is that this is to be taken as indicating that the reduction is impossible.

But is this, then, not a mere *reductio ad absurdum* of the whole idea of the 'normativist turn'? Am I suggesting that behind (or above) human behavior (and the whole network of causal relationships, in which it is embedded) there looms some different, supernatural stratum of reality where we can encounter correctnesses?

Of course not (though admittedly it may sometimes be useful to invoke this picture as a metaphor). The point is rather that there are no such *things* as correctnesses. Why they *seem* to be here is that we seem to state facts about them; but what looks like declarative statements about such correctnesses – I will call the statements *normatives* – are not always really declaratives. Hence what is behind the untranslatability of the normative idiom into the declarative one (and hence the reduction of 'norms' to 'facts') is not the incommensurability of a "normative" and a "factual" stratum of reality, but simply the more mundane fact that many of the normatives are not genuine declarative sentences at all, but rather belong to a different species of speech act. They are, as Wilfrid Sellars put it, "fraught with ought".

Return to the case of football; and consider the statement *Hands should not touch the ball*. This is a normative. There are two ways of employing a statement of this kind. First, one can state the fact that this kind of rule is in force in some community. This is, as it were, an 'outsider' statement; a statement made by a disengaged observer describing the practices of the community in question. Second, one can state this as an 'insider', which does not amount to (or *only* to) stating a fact, but also to *upholding* the rule, urging its propriety or at least confirming its legitimacy. And *true* normatives are normatives posed precisely from this perspective. It follows that to say that rules *exist* is strictly speaking a metaphor: they do not exist, of course, in the way rocks, trees or dolphins do. To say that a rule exists is to take some true normatives people use for ordinary declaratives. It seems to be our human way to do this; but we should be aware of the fact that this is a sense of *existence* different from the one in which we use the word when we talk about the existence of spatiotemporal particulars and their constellations.

And here we come to the mystery of how correctnesses, or proprieties, can exist relatively independently of our attitudes, and yet without being situated in some independent stratum of reality. The point is that any verdict we reach regarding correctness is at best tentative, it belonging to the nature of the concept that the verdict is considered as always amendable by our successors. They can find out that what we hold for correct is in fact not correct – but unlike in the case of *blue*, *indivisible* or *animate*, we do not always see such cases as errors in the application of the concept, but rather as discovering the true nature of the concept.

Perhaps we can say that a rule or a norm is always an *unfinished and open project* (see Gauker (2007)). Usually it grows out of our current practices, is continuous with them, sometimes to the extent that we can understand its statement as a description of the practices as they, as a matter of fact, are; but the statement of a norm is also usually its prolongation, an urge "And we should go on like this!" Hence a rule is never a completed whole, it is always open to the future, not only to prolongations, but also to modifications and amendments. It is like a track that we must go on extending to ever new horizons.

## 6. Norms and convention

I have mentioned the concept of *convention* as a "rabbit" which is usually pulled out of the semanticist's hat when we need to say what ties an observation report to the observation it reports. But at this point someone might want to wonder whether the theory I have been developing in terms of the concepts of *norms* and *normativity* is not about what semanticists have been referring to by means of the term "convention" long ago. Well, in one sense it is; however this is due to the fact that the term is largely ambiguous; and *some* of its senses do refer to normative phenomena.

As Rescorla (2007) points out in his overview article, "in everyday usage, 'convention' has various meanings, as suggested by the following list: Republican Party Convention; Geneva Convention; terminological conventions; conventional wisdom; flouting societal convention; conventional medicine; conventional weapons; conventions of the horror genre." And he offers a useful list of possibilities what the "conventional" may be contrasted with: "the natural; the mind-independent; the objective; the universal; the factual; and the truth-evaluable". This indicates that to deal with the concept of *convention*, we need to start with some kind of disambiguation. I think there are at least three senses of the term relevant for the theory of language. In the first sense, "convention" is something like a *habit*; in this sense, "the conventional" is, in the words of Goodman (1989), "the ordinary, the usual, the traditional, the orthodox as against the novel, the deviant, the unexpected, the heterodox". In the second sense, convention is what has been established by man and has not been part of nature all along; in this sense, "the conventional" is, using Goodman's words again, "the artificial, the invented, the optional, as against the natural, the fundamental, the mandatory". In the third sense, "the conventional" is what has been explicitly agreed upon.

I think that the attractiveness of the term "convention" stems largely from the conflation of the three senses. When we encounter a problem concerning the way language hooks on the world, we often invoke the term in the second sense. Surely the sentence – *viz.* the sound-type – "This is a dog" is not *naturally* connected with dogs, hence the relation is *conventional*. So far so good; but aside of giving the relationship a label nothing has been explained yet. However, the next step often is that we do not really need to explain anything, for the concept of *convention* is more or less self-explanatory. However, whereas this might be true for "convention" in the *third*, or perhaps also in the *first*, sense, it is definitely not true for "convention" in the second sense, for this sense remains blatantly neutral with respect to how conventions come into being and what their nature is. And it is clear that if we use the term to account for how language hooks onto the world, then it cannot be generally convention in the third sense of the word: language cannot be based on this kind of convention, for language is *presupposed* by this kind of convention<sup>7</sup>.

Could it be "convention" in the first sense, convention as a habit, that holds together the sentence and dogs? Habits do not seem to be too unperceptible; so maybe it is "convention" in this sense that those that use the term as the universal unexplained explainer use it.

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<sup>7</sup> As Davidson (1984, p. 280) puts it, "convention is not a condition of language ... The truth is rather that language is a condition for having conventions".

However, "conventions" in this sense clearly do not overlap with our normative account of language and discourse: habits as such do not have any normative dimension. If my habit is to go for a walk every evening, it may be surprising that I do not go out today, but it is in no sense *wrong*.

Habits, to be sure, may *evolve* into norms. Once people start to take the habitual as not merely what usually happens, but rather what *should* happen, there emerges a norm – or, you may want to say, the habit becomes a norm. But here the latter step is crucial. For consider chess or football, which we use as our models of our discursive practices. People may acquire the habit not to take the ball into their hands; but the game cannot really get off the ground once this starts to be felt as what *should not* be done and once those who keep doing this start to be prosecuted. Hence the habitual substrate is by far not everything that makes up norms.

When you look into the writings of Austin (1961; 1964), Grice (1989) or Searle (1969), what you find there is that the terms "convention" and "conventional" are among the most frequently used words, but despite this none of the authors poses the explicit question what conventions are. Of course there are some hints: Austin (1961, p. 64), for example, when mentioning a "semantic convention" adds a parenthesis "(implicit, of course)" which indicates that what he has in mind is *not* "convention" in our third sense of the word. Elsewhere he talks of an assertion justified "not merely by convention, nor merely by nature", which in turn indicates that he uses "conventional" in opposition to "natural"; hence that he uses it in the second of our three senses.

There is a flagrant disproportion between the huge explanatory work the concept of *convention* is supposed to do in such writings and the absence – or near absence – of its own explanation. This can be, to a great extent, justified by the fact that these authors use the terms "convention" and "conventional" in a sense that they do not see as being in need of explanation, hence, I would think, mostly in our second sense. But sooner or later, then, we must face the question how this kind of conventionality comes into being.

The first person who realized that this is a serious problem was David Lewis (2002). He clearly realized that the concepts of *convention* and *conventionality* that occur so frequently in writings about language cannot be generally construed as explicit agreements, and set himself the task of showing how "tacit conventions" can come into being. His solution of this problem is based on two assumptions: conventions come into being to solve *coordination problems*, and the solution of such problems can evolve spontaneously along the lines envisaged by game theory.

I think that despite the fact that Lewis laudably brought the concept of convention into the focus of attention and showed how some tacit conventions may emerge spontaneously (thus breaking from the vicious circle into which we would fall if we wanted to base language on explicit conventions), his approach is not general enough. In particular I think that by no means all the norms language is based on can be seen as deriving from conventions solving coordination problems – at least not unless we generalize the concept of *coordination problem* to the extent that it will no longer be explainable in Lewis's simple game-theoretical terms.

Look at chess or football again. Can we say that their rules are a matter of conventions? Obviously, we can; in fact it would seem that the rules of games or sports are prototypes of what we would call *conventional*. (As we saw, there might be some terminological disputes over whether we should say that the rules themselves *are* conventional, or whether they *evolved from* conventions, but this is not important now.) But can we see them as solutions to *coordination problems*? This does not seem to be too plausible.

The fact is that, as I have argued elsewhere (see Peregrin, to appear), from the game-theoretical viewpoint the basic kind of rules relevant for language is more akin to those governing the games of the kind of the Prisoner's Dilemma (solving genuine conflicts) than those of coordination. Thus I do not think that the sector of game theory Lewis took into account is general enough to account for the problems standardly addressed under the heading of normativity.

On the other hand, I repeat that I think that it *is* possible to see a large overlap between "normativity" and "conventionality". However, one thing to keep in mind is that this is due to the catholic nature of the concept of *conventionality*. Moreover, if we stick to the sense of conventionality for which this overlap obtains, this sense of convention is not sufficiently explained and the present considerations may be seen as a contribution to its explanation<sup>8</sup>.

## 7. Normative speech acts theory?

The ideas exposed in the previous sections have led to the project of normative pragmatics that was first explicitly formulated – on a very general level – by Brandom (1994, Chapter 1)<sup>9</sup>. Brandom's tenet is that "it is only insofar as it is appealed to in explaining the circumstances under which judgments and inferences are properly made and the proper consequences of doing so that something associated by the theorist with interpreted states or expressions qualifies as a *semantic* interpretant, or deserves to be called a theoretical concept of a *content*" (*ibid.*, p. 144). In this sense semantics must be "answerable to pragmatics", namely to normative pragmatics.

When Searle (1969), in his classic book about speech acts, elaborated on the Gricean and Austinian speech act theory, his major example, discussed in the third chapter of the book, was the act of promising. His incipient characterization of this act consists of eight conditions:

1. Normal input and output conditions obtain.
2. S expresses the proposition that p in the utterance of T.
3. In expressing that p, S predicates a future act A of S.
4. H would prefer S's doing A to his not doing A, and S believes H would prefer his doing A to his not doing A.
5. It is not obvious to both S and H that S will do A in the normal course of events.
6. S intends to do A.

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<sup>8</sup> See Glock (to appear) for a defence of a conventional nature of language based on the assumption that *conventionality* = *normativity*. Glock understands convention as "a shared, arbitrary rule" and defends the view that conventions thus construed must underlie language.

<sup>9</sup> See also Peregrin (2009).

7. S intends that the utterance of T will place him under an obligation to do A.
8. S intends (i-I) to produce in H the knowledge (K) that the utterance of T is to count as placing S under an obligation to do A. S intends to produce K by means of the recognition of i-I, and he intends i-I to be recognised in virtue of (by means of) H's knowledge of the meaning of T.
9. The semantical rules of the dialect spoken by S and H are such that T is correctly and sincerely uttered if and only if conditions 1-8 obtain.

This characterization involves a normative notion, namely the notion of *obligation* (point 7). Then Searle points out that his characterization leaves no room for insincere promises; so he then proposes to replace condition 6 with 6a:

- 6a. S intends that the utterance of T will make him responsible for intending to do A.

Thus he introduces the normative notion of *responsibility*. (As the concepts of *obligation* and *responsibility* may be interdefinable, maybe it is not *another* normative notion, but merely the reiteration of the original one.)

However, is the list, and especially the role of the normative notions in it, formulated adequately? Does one, making a promise, *intend* to be placed under an obligation? Of course, as we assume that a typical promise is an intentional act, we would tend to consent; but is this inevitable? Suppose that I agree, say in a written form, to return somebody some money he lends me. Then suppose that I do not do so and when my creditor sues me, I tell the court that I did not really intend to have this obligation, hence that my act was not really a promise. (And let us suppose this is all true.) Am I likely to win the trial on the basis of proving that I have promised anything? (It is hard to imagine how my declaration about my intention – if we understand the term *intention* in the sense of Grice and Searle as a basically *internal* act – could be challenged, for I alone have direct access to it.)

In view of this fact we can consider replacing 7 with 7\*:

- 7\*. The utterance of T will place S under an obligation to do A.

Then, it would seem, some of the other entries on the list may become superfluous. Consider, for that matter, 6 or 6a. Suppose that someone promises me to give me some money, but in fact does not intend to be responsible for it. Does it mean that what he does is not promising?

In fact, it would seem that the rest of the list might also dwindle (if not vanish completely). True, the inflation of the point 7 to 7\* results from using a more robust concept of obligation than the one used by Searle: insofar as I understand him, what he has in mind is obligation as a matter of psychology, whereas the one suggested by me is obligation in the sociologico-institutional sense. Hence inflating the normative dimension of the act also involves moving the act 'out of the head', into the open. This means that some or all of the differences between Searle's account and the proposal made here may be terminological.

This does not mean, though, that the difference between them is insubstantial. The normative twist given to speech act theory involves a significant reinterpretation of the whole enterprise – instead of having psychological states as its direct concern, it now concentrates

on normative statuses. Unlike its traditional version, it is wholly broken away from psychology of communication (which is the result of the conviction that language, and especially meaning, is more an institution than a psychological reality, and that psychology of communication is no more directly connected to communication than psychology of chess to chess).

Moreover, a normative speech act theory must make it plausible that not only speech acts like promising or ordering, which it can handle relatively easily, but also such speech acts as asserting can be characterized in normative terms. This is a much harder nut (see, e.g., Pagin, 2004, for a skeptical viewpoint). Anyway, the idea here is that making an assertion is nothing over and above assuming the commitment to provide a specific justification; and to entitle anybody else to reassert the sentence in question deferring its justification to you.

Kukla and Lance (2009) proposed a kind of normative version of speech acts theory, according to which speech acts are generally characterized by the normative conditions of their appropriateness and the normative outcomes of their occurrence. Thus, for example, ordering is appropriate if the orderer is in some sense superior to the orderer; and in such a case its normal felicitous outcome is the commitment on the part of the orderer to do what he or she was ordered. Using this unusual key to the classification of speech acts yields us an unusual classification: for example, the usual category of assertions divides into declaratives and what Kukla and Lance call *observatives*. The two acts differ in their conditions. Declaratives, assertions like *There is a pig in the yard*, are indiscriminately available to anybody; whereas only certain people are entitled to observatives, assertions like *Lo, a pig!*.

Another peculiar kind of speech act which has surfaced after Kukla and Lance put our linguistic practices under the normative lens is what they called *vocatives*, acts of the kind of *Hey, you!* While *observatives* are characterized by having specific normative conditions (not everybody is entitled to make them), but general normative outcomes (they entitle everybody to make use of them), with *vocatives* it is the other way around: they have general normative outcomes (everybody is entitled to them), but their outcome is specific (they entitle a specific individual to enter the ongoing language game). Kukla and Lance claim that the identification of such speech acts, which do not surface in traditional speech act theory, significantly advances our understanding of language.

All of this, of course, presupposes that we accept that there is no *meaningfulness* without a normative dimension. This is, recall, the result of taking the Wittgensteinian picture of our discursive practices as a cluster of language games at face value, not only in the sense that the practices are heterogenous, but also in the sense that they are essentially underlain by rules. Given this, any speech act is individuated by the way in which it fits into the normative scaffolding that constitutes the space which provides the necessary substrate for such speech acts. And given this, in turn, our perspective on discursive practices shifts significantly, and may illuminate aspects hardly discernible from the perspective of Austin and Grice.

## **8. Conclusion**

The traditional approach to language was based on the assumption that we must first explain how a word means something (which was, in turn, taken as tantamount to explaining how it

can stand for the something), and then we would be able to explain language as a product of the synergic effect of an assembly of meaningful words. The pragmatic turn in the twentieth century (especially in its pragmatist variety) inverted the perspective: we must explain, the *credo* has come to be, directly how language works, i.e. our linguistic practices, using the concept of meaning at most as an expedient of this enterprise.

What I have been exploring here is the possibility of this pragmatic turn being given a normative twist: of meaningfulness being explained as a matter of roles *vis-à-vis* rules of language. Let us return to football. As I noted above, once you accept its rules, you can do things which you were not capable of doing before. Note that this does not mean: some things you *were* capable of doing before (like kicking a round thing through a gate-like thing) now receive new descriptions ("scoring a goal"). Scoring a goal is not reducible to kicking. I and my team-mates might do precisely the same movements we do now, but without being caught in the normative network constituted by the rules of football they would not be scoring goals and they would not have many of the effects they have now (like making us happy, making our opponents annoyed, bringing money to those who laid bets on us, while causing those who betted against us lose their money etc.). In short, the rules of football constitute a new spectrum of actions not available for us before. And likewise, the amazing spectrum of things we can do with words is created analogously – by means of the rules of language.

When Carnap and Morris presented their division of the theory of language into syntax, semantics and pragmatics, they gave, in effect, pride of place to semantics (relegating syntax to the auxiliary role of honing the vehicles that only semantics discloses as carrying meanings; and relegating pragmatics to the marginal role of sidekick to semantics). Moreover, Carnap then reconstructed semantics as a mostly logico-mathematical, armchair enterprise: the semantic theories he presents in his *Introduction to semantics* (1942) or *Meaning and necessity* (1947) do not seem interconnected, in any significant way, with any empirical investigations of natural languages. I think this was an unhappy development (and it justified the revolt of the many theoreticians of language who subsequently made pragmatics, rather than semantics, the centerpoint of the study of language<sup>10</sup>), and I want to ensure that the normative turn discussed here should not lead to a similar consequence.

It is true that *normativity* seems to be a tool that only philosophers have in their philosophical toolbox. Linguistics, one is tempted to say, is a down-to-earth science, and science describes how things are, not how they should be – so what use for *normativity* is there? The present paper has tried to offer an answer, an answer as down-to-earth as possible. Human activities, be it chess or football or some much more complex and socially important ones, are *governed by rules* – indeed they are *constituted* by the rule-governance. This is clearly nothing mysterious or at odds with science – it is simply an empirical fact. And here I want to suggest that in so far as this applies also to language (which presupposes seeing

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<sup>10</sup> Elsewhere (See Peregrin (2001, Part III) I indicated that such pragmatization of semantics need not involve discarding all the achievements of the Carnapian formal semantics, but rather merely their reassessment. See Peregrin (2008) for an outline of a normative theory of meaning.

language as a social institution, rather than, say, a psychological reality), we may come to see that this enterprise has an important normative dimension and that to understand this dimension may be essential for understanding language and discourse.

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