

"Show Me How You Do That Trick": Reconciling Linguistic Naturalism and  
Normativism

by

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DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY  
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## Abstract

This dissertation is about two attitudes we might have in thinking about language. Linguistic naturalism is an attitude premised on the claim that language is a natural phenomenon, capable of being studied using methods familiar from the natural sciences. Linguistic normativism, on the other hand, is an attitude taking language to be a distinctly social and normative phenomenon that must be investigated by methods distinct from those used in the natural sciences. In this dissertation, I investigate three points at which these attitudes appear to come into conflict: justifying advice about language, determining the metaphysical character of linguistic content, and deciding on a proper methodology for linguistic study. My goal is to show that, contrary to appearances, these attitudes are capable of being reconciled with each other.

In the first chapter, I briefly introduce linguistic naturalism and normativism. In Chapter 2, I consider how these attitudes bear on a practical question: What justifies advice about grammar and usage? I begin by considering the two most popular answers to the question, before arguing that neither succeeds in producing a satisfying account of advice. Instead, I argue for a hybrid model that requires adopting normativist and naturalist attitudes at different stages in the advice-giving process. In Chapter 3, I turn my attention to semantics and defend the claim that linguistic meaning is, in some real sense, a normative phenomenon, concluding with an investigation of Robert Brandom's normativist-pragmatist semantics. In Chapter 4, I examine and critique another approach to meaning—the naturalist, internalist semantics provided by Noam Chomsky and James McGilvray. In Chapter 5, I explore the common methodological assumptions underlying Chomskian and Brandomian approaches to meaning, arguing that a common antipathy to a representationalist order of explanation provides the basis for a reconciliation of our normativist and naturalist attitudes to language. In Chapter 6, I argue that such reconciliation is best pursued if we start from the assumption that all projects of linguistic study involve doing some naturalist and some normativist work. In the final chapter, I briefly consider examples of other phenomena sharing the same natural-normative character as language.

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# Chapter 1- Introduction

## 1.1 It's Magic (You Know)

At a friend's birthday party, a young child becomes enthralled by the performance of a magician hired to entertain the guests. One trick in particular grips his interest. The magician borrows a coin from one of the children, and, in quick succession, makes it appear and disappear in increasingly unlikely ways. After the performance, the child, convinced he has seen a case of genuine wizardry, approaches the magician and begins to ask her all kinds of questions about the supernatural abilities he supposes her to possess. Impressed, perhaps, with the child's passion, the magician explains that she possesses no supernatural abilities—the disappearing coin was just a trick. When the child does not seem convinced, the magician demonstrates the basic hand movements involved in the illusion, and tells the child that, with enough practice, he too could become skilled enough to perform the trick himself.

The child remains skeptical, but takes what the magician has told him to heart. He decides to test her claims by spending several months diligently practicing the manoeuvres. Although somewhat clumsy at first, over time his movements become increasingly speedy and fluid. He comes to believe that the magician was right—the trick requires no supernatural abilities, only natural human abilities performed at the right speed and in the right sequence. Furthermore, as his rapidly improving skills suggest, the trick is, in principle at least, something that anyone could perform.

After a few more months of practice, he at last feels confident enough in his



abilities to perform the trick for his friends at school. Alas, although they are impressed by his evident skill, they do not accord his performance the same reverent awe they showed to that of the magician some months earlier. For instance, despite the speed at which his hands cycle through the required moves, his audience always seems to be aware of the coin's position, and the amateur magician is unable to convince them otherwise. He concludes that his hands will never be fast or subtle enough to ever properly deceive even the casual observer.

Some months later, at another friend's party, the child gets the opportunity to watch the magician perform again. As a consequence of his newfound skill, he is able to follow the magician's moves with more ease than before. Still, there are several moments when even he loses track of the coin's position. And yet, to his eye, the magician's hands do not appear to be moving especially quickly. He concludes that there must be something more to the trick beyond what the magician had taught him—perhaps she possesses magical powers after all. After the performance, he confronts the magician once again, demanding that she admit that she really does possess special powers. Once again, the magician denies that her abilities are supernatural, and asks the child if he has been practicing the moves she had taught him. When he answers in the affirmative, she asks to see his performance of the trick. As he performs, the magician immediately sees the trouble. Although his movements are mechanically sound, he has not yet grasped the idea that he is performing for an audience. As such, he performs the trick silently, with no attempt to distract the audience with patter or misdirection. He betrays no sense that he knows what his audience's expectations are, or where their attention is to be directed. With great patience, the magician explains to the child that the 'magic' of the trick lies not

in possessing any magical power (for there is no such thing), nor in making one's hand move faster than the eye (for this is impossible), but in making one's audience *believe* that one does and that one can.

## 1.2 Two Types of Disenchantment

What moral should we draw from this fable? What seems clear is this: however we choose to interpret the magician's final lesson, we cannot take it to be simply a case of re-imbuing the magic trick with a supernatural character. Whatever magic is to be found in the trick, it is resolutely of this world (and not of any other).<sup>1</sup> After this fairly straightforward denial of supernatural influence, things begin to get a little murky. On the one hand, it seems that the magician was totally right to begin her explanation with a description of the physical actions involved in performing the trick. Without developing these skills, the child would have no chance of successfully pulling off the illusion. However, although these physical skills are necessary for a successful performance of the trick, they are not sufficient. Indeed, a successful magician needs to know not only how to manipulate the position of a coin, but the attention and expectations of her audience as well.

We might attempt to understand the second type of skill on the model of the first. Just as the movements of the coin are determined by facts about its composition and the dexterity of the magician's hands, the reactions of a given audience member will be determined by facts about her psychology and perceptual abilities. On this approach, the

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<sup>1</sup> Professional magicians are generally fairly hostile to claims of the supernatural. Indeed, many magicians and illusionists (Harry Houdini, Derren Brown, and James Randi, among others) have side-careers in debunking mediums, spiritualists, and psychics.

moral of the story is that an understanding of the psychology and perceptual abilities of one's audience is an essential part of being a successful magician. And while some facts involve the properties of physical objects (coins, hands), and others the properties of traditionally mental abilities (beliefs, perceptions), the know-how involved is basically the same—the ability to manipulate one's audience is not different in kind from the ability to manipulate the position of a coin. Rather, performing the illusion means having at least an implicit grasp of the relevant facts in both domains.

There is, however, another way of interpreting the fable. The moral of the story remains the same: Magicians neglect the psychology of their audiences at their peril. On this second reading, however, the ability to manipulate the psychological states of one's audience is different in kind from the ability to manipulate the position of the coin.

Although an understanding of psychological and perceptual facts may well aid in the successful performance of an illusion, it is not sufficient for one, even when it is joined with knowledge of the physical skills involved. Instead, we need to realize that the disappearing coin trick is part of a wider practice that includes the social context of the performance: that is to say the expectations and attitudes of the members of an audience, and their relationship to the one performing. As we will soon see, the important thing to realize is that these attitudes and expectations have a normative character; that is to say, they involve social standards which can be met or fulfilled to a greater or lesser degree. As such, they help determine both how the performer ought to behave and how the audience ought to interpret her behaviour. For this reason, the magician's knowledge of her own abilities and the psychology of her audience is not sufficient for a successful performance. She must also understand her role as a *performer*, and all the intimations of

authority, rapport, and trust that come with it. It is through an understanding of this role, and not through any special understanding of the minds of her audience, that a magician is able to successfully perform the illusion.

Both readings of the fable involve a kind of disenchantment. Neither version of the story involves positing entities or properties foreign to the world of everyday experience. There are no spirits, no intimations of extra-sensory perception. There are only psychological facts and social norms. As such, anybody who believes in the existence of genuine magical powers will be disappointed with both varieties of explanation. In some minimal sense, therefore, both approaches deserve to be called 'naturalist' ones. Under more robust definitions of naturalism, however, only the first approach—the approach that takes psychological and perceptual facts to be of a kind with physical facts—will deserve the label. In contrast, the second approach, which intimately involves the actions of social norms in explanations of the magic trick, can be called the 'normativist' one.

Both approaches to explaining the trick enjoy intuitive support. It certainly seems to be the case that having a grasp (even if it is only an implicit grasp) of psychology (what people are likely to see, what they are likely to ignore, etc...) would help a magician deceive an audience. On the other hand, if the goal of the exercise is to explain a *successful* performance of the trick, then it appears as though normativity has got to be involved (at the very least in determining what the conditions for success will be). Despite the intuitive support for each approach, they appear, *prima facie*, to be in conflict with each other. An adequate account of sleight of hand magic must therefore attempt to adjudicate this conflict and determine which approach, if any, is the correct one. What's

more, the clash between normativist and naturalist intuitions is not unique to the case of magic. Indeed, it stands behind a number of contemporary debates in the philosophy of science, mind, and language.

### **1.3 Magic Words**

In this dissertation, I aim to examine the clash between naturalist and normativist intuitions as it bears on attempts to explain the structure, content, and use of human natural languages. We language users find ourselves in a position not dissimilar to the child in the story related above, with one crucial difference: While the child had yet to develop the physical and social skills needed to perform the trick successfully, we already have the basic ability to use a language. Nevertheless, we find it very difficult to explain how it is we are able to do so.

We do, however, have some familiar intuitions. On the one hand, we sometimes think that speaking a language is a question of mastering some finite number of routines; that in learning a language we have come to have some (perhaps implicit) knowledge of the facts governing its structure, content, and use. For one thing, despite the fact that it is specifically produced by humans, there is no reason to suppose that natural language need be treated any differently from any other natural phenomenon. Indeed, we often think that there is fact of the matter about how a language is structured. Furthermore, the existence of linguistics, a scientifically-oriented body of study devoted to the description of the observable features of natural languages, suggests that the magic of language might well be explained naturalistically. It is these intuitions that I have in mind when I refer to our *naturalist intuitions* about language.

On the other hand, however, we sometimes believe that speaking a language is something one can do more or less successfully—that being a successful language user involves having an understanding of the norms governing the social expectations of our audience. Although it has many other functions, it is important, I think, to keep in view the sense in which using a language is something *performative*; that is, it is something done with an audience in mind (even if the audience is just oneself). Just as a magic trick is just a sequence of movements without an audience, language use does not seem to make sense outside of a social environment. This is not to say that language use is to be identified purely with communication, but only that there appears, *prima facie*, to be an importantly social dimension to linguistic phenomena, and that this social dimension is governed by norms that constrain our linguistic performances in particular ways. It is these intuitions that underwrite a *normativist* approach to language.

It will be the task of this dissertation to determine whether, in their linguistic guises, normativist and naturalist intuitions are necessarily in conflict with each other, or if they can be reconciled in some productive fashion. Before proceeding with this line of enquiry, however, it will be helpful to set some limits by being as clear as possible about the concepts in play.

#### ***1.4 Naturalism and Normativism Defined***

I have taken as my starting point two sets of contrasting intuitions about language. These sets of intuitions coalesce into two general approaches to explaining linguistic phenomena, which I shall call *linguistic naturalism* and *linguistic normativism*.

As I see it, linguistic naturalism involves taking on the following commitments: 1)

*Realism*: There exist robust facts about linguistic structure, content, and use; 2)

*Descriptivism*: Explanations of linguistic phenomena (such as syntax and meaning) are descriptions of facts in the relevant domain; 3) *Unificationism*: Explanations of linguistic phenomena are, in principle, unifiable with (if perhaps not reducible to) the explanations of normal science.<sup>2</sup>

It is somewhat more difficult to develop a straightforward definition of the normativist position. As we will see later on in this dissertation, to say that a range of phenomena is *normative* is sometimes just to say that it resists naturalization.<sup>3</sup> This might be because there are no natural facts about the phenomena in question (as there are no natural facts about magical powers), or because descriptions of such facts are not sufficient to explain them (so, for example, moral norms, if one accepts Moore's 'open question' argument).<sup>4</sup> However, this cannot be all there is to the story. For example, if any magic powers exist, there would be no natural facts about them, and descriptions of any such facts in the vicinity would not be sufficient to explain the phenomena. However, by resisting naturalization, magic powers would not thereby become *normative* phenomena. For this reason, we need some other way of characterizing the normative sphere.

A better way of approaching normativity emerges if we think about the capacity to guide actions. Phenomena can guide our actions in one of two ways. On the one hand, one's actions may be guided by the natural properties of one's environment. I may wish to travel from Halifax to New York in as straight a line as possible, but facts about my

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<sup>2</sup> I use 'unificationism' instead of 'reductionism' so as to avoid begging any questions about the proper relationship between the linguistic and physical sciences. I explore this issue in more detail in Chapter 5.

<sup>3</sup> I explore this claim in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

<sup>4</sup> Moore (1903)

swimming stamina and the distance to be travelled over water compel me to stick to the land. On the other hand, one's actions may be constrained even when there is no obvious external force acting on them. I may find wearing a tie constricting and useless, but I would feel compelled to wear one were I to attend a state dinner at the White House. Here, my behaviour is constrained not by my natural environment, but by my desire to avoid the sanctions of others.

Let us then provisionally define normativism as the view that there exist phenomena with the ability to guide one's actions by means of the sanctions (perceived or genuine) of others. Such phenomena might take the form of explicit rules or standards, or they might be implicit norms and sanctions evident only in one's tendency to bend one's actions in concert with others. Summing up, then, we can say that linguistic normativism involves commitments 1) to the existence of norms (or normative attitudes), 2) to the bindingness of prescriptions derived from these norms, and 3) (at least initially) to the separateness of the normative and natural spheres.

## **1.5 The Scope of the Enquiry**

Even when the scope of the discussion is limited to the linguistic sphere, any account of the normativist/naturalist debate will seem rather daunting. This is because the linguistic debate has bearing on a number of issues in (among many other domains) the philosophy of mind, epistemology, and ethics. In order to preserve the sanity of both author and reader, I will set a few limits on the present enquiry. These limits might, at first, seem somewhat artificial, but I hope that they will be vindicated by the discussions in the



following chapters.

I say very little in what follows about language acquisition. While some aspects of the naturalist/normativist debate seem quite tied to a particular theory of how one comes to speak a language,<sup>5</sup> I think the clash of intuitions and attitudes arises no matter what theory of acquisition one endorses. And so while I may briefly make reference to particular theories of acquisition in order to explain the background of certain approaches to semantics and linguistic methodology, I will not attempt to evaluate the relative merits of any particular account.

Although I spend two chapters discussing the potential normativity of linguistic content,<sup>6</sup> I say relatively little about the normativity (or non-normativity) of *mental* content. While I think the two types of content are not completely unrelated, many philosophers discuss linguistic normativity merely as a way of establishing/attacking mental normativity.<sup>7</sup> In what follows, I aim to resist this trend. To the extent that I talk about the normativity (or non-normativity) of mental content, it will be in service of an attempt to get a grip on the linguistic.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I take no stance in this dissertation on any global project to naturalize normativity.<sup>8</sup> In general, attempts to resolve the clash of intuitions usually take the form of projects aiming to reduce all forms of normativity to some class (or classes) of natural facts. To return to our animating myth, such projects would attempt to treat the social context of a successful magic trick in the same way as

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the relationship (discussed in Chapter 4) between Chomskian semantic theory and the commitment to linguistic nativism.

<sup>6</sup> Chapters 3 and 4

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Boghossian (2003) where the normativity of linguistic content is expressly denied in order to establish the normativity of mental content.

<sup>8</sup> I am thinking here about attempts to ground normativity in cognitive or evolutionary facts. In particular, I am thinking about the work of Ruth Millikan. See, for example, Millikan (2004).

we attempt to understand its physical dimension. While there are any number of projects that attempt to ground normativity *tout court* in natural facts, for the purposes of the present inquiry, I wish to remain agnostic about whether such a global reduction is possible. I will, however, say that I hope what I have to say in these pages will be helpful, even if only at a pragmatic level, no matter what stance one takes on that issue.

## 1.6 The Plan

If I'm right, then the clash between normativist and naturalist intuitions and attitudes is an important feature of both our pre-theoretical and our philosophical attitudes to language. Although I think the clash is present, pre-theoretically, in all natural languages, it is particularly salient in the case of English, which lacks the explicit regimentation possessed by other languages.<sup>9</sup> For the most part, these clashing intuitions do not pose a practical problem for language users; the users go about speaking and writing the best way they know how. Indeed, I doubt many speakers or writers give much thought to underlying theoretical issues. In some contexts, however, such issues bubble to the surface.

One such context is the debate over the justification of language advice (that is to say advice about speaking and writing). While speakers may not think very much about theoretical approaches to language when they go about their day-to-day linguistic business, when they are confronted with an array of different ways of expressing themselves, they may seek out advice about which option to take. Although usage and grammar advice has not traditionally been the subject of much attention from

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<sup>9</sup> For example, despite a number of attempts, there is no central language academy for English (as there is for French, Spanish, etc...). For popular histories of such attempts see Crystal (2006) and Lynch (2009).

philosophers, the practical question of determining good language advice from bad requires resolving the clash between our normative and naturalist intuitions. In the next chapter, I will argue that the traditional ways of approaching the advice issue, prescriptivism and descriptivism,<sup>10</sup> fail to adequately justify the advice they recommend. Instead, I argue in favour a hybrid view that respects both our naturalist and normativist intuitions.

Having dealt with the practical question of language advice, I spend the next two chapters of the dissertation in more traditionally philosophical territory: semantics. Chapter Three consists of a detailed discussion of the debate over the normativity of meaning arising in the wake of the skeptical argument presented by Kripke's reading of Wittgenstein. I consider arguments both for and against the claim that the meanings of linguistic constructions are substantially normative. I ultimately argue that linguistic content is normative, but that facts about the world and human psychology also have a non-trivial role to play. I then sketch and evaluate the normativist account of semantics provided by Robert Brandom, eventually concluding that it is too focused on language use as a *rational* enterprise.

In Chapter Four, I shift gears in order to consider the naturalistic semantic theory proposed by Noam Chomsky and his followers. Unlike the semantic theories discussed in the previous chapter, the Chomskian approach to meaning is internalist and computationalist in character. Meanings, on this view, are understood as syntactically-individuated states of an innate language faculty which, through their interface with other systems of the human mind, may be applied to particular situations in the world.

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<sup>10</sup> Roughly corresponding to the normativist and naturalist side of the debate, respectively.

Particular ways of using words or phrases, and any normative issues related to such use, are thought to be irrelevant to a theory of meaning. So, for example, the meanings of words like 'water' or 'horse' are not determined by the actual properties of the things they name. Nor are they determined by the ways in which some or all English speakers are disposed to use them. Rather, they are determined by the internal computations of the human language faculty, the same computations that generate and decompose syntactic structures. After tracing the outlines of the Chomskian approach to meaning, I examine the ways in which it is determined by the Chomskians understanding of naturalistic inquiry. I critique this understanding of naturalism as being insufficiently flexible to accommodate the unity of linguistic study, and argue that, once we free ourselves from the overly rigid Chomskian framework, we have little reason to ignore the pragmatic dimension of linguistic meaning.

I end the dissertation by expanding my account to encompass the ways in which the naturalist/normativist clash plays out in the context of debates about the proper methodology for linguistics. In Chapter Five, I revisit the Chomskian account of naturalism, playing it off the work of Robert Brandom, who argues that, to borrow a phrase from Wilfrid Sellars, human language is 'fraught with ought'. I argue that, although the extreme naturalism of Chomsky and the extreme normativism of Brandom appear to be diametrically opposed, they have a common enemy—a traditional philosophical view of linguistic study that I call 'representationalism.'<sup>11</sup> Representationalists commit

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<sup>11</sup> I use the term with some trepidation, as it has been applied to a rather motley assortment of views. Indeed, Chomsky himself occasionally uses the word 'representationalist' to describe his own view. In a Chomskian context, however, the representations in question are the *internal* representations of linguistic rules which constitute a person's knowledge of her native way-of-speaking (and not representations of some *external* reality.) I will flesh out this distinction in more detail in Chapter 5.

themselves to the view that language is essentially, or primarily, in the business of representing the world, and that semantics is the central project of linguistic study. Both Chomskians and Brandomians reject this claim, with the former pushing for the centrality of syntax, and the latter for that of pragmatics. I conclude the chapter by arguing that this common antipathy provides the ground for a possible reconciliation between the two approaches.

In Chapter Six, I consider the number of ways such a reconciliation could be carried out. Ultimately, I argue that the best shot at bringing together our naturalist and normativist linguistic intuitions lies in taking linguistic study to involve both naturalist and normativist work. Furthermore, I argue that neither kind of work can be pursued in strict isolation from the other, nor can one kind of work be easily reduced to the other. As a result, I argue that any successful project of reconciliation must be one in which the normativist and naturalist perspectives are fully integrated. The final chapter of the dissertation consists of a concluding discussion tying together themes from language advice, meaning, and study to show how the promise of this spirit of reconciliation may someday be fulfilled.

In the end, I hope what follows convinces my readers that naturalism and normativism not only express our most basic intuitions about the way languages are structured, used, and studied, but that the clash between these intuitions is only an *apparent* clash—that the real magic of language consists in making them work together.

## Chapter 2: Who Gives a %\$#% 'bout an Oxford Comma: What Justifies Language Advice?

### 2.1 Preamble: Ghosts at the Banquet

In April of 2009, the 'Room for Debate' blog on the New York Times' website convened a panel of prominent language experts and commentators to assess the impact and usefulness of Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*, on the occasion of the publication of a 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of the work. Although the discussion was published under the title of "Happy Birthday, Strunk & White!", the tone was hardly celebratory. All five panelists concluded that the book's enduring popularity and its hallowed reputation among certain writers and educators had very little to do with the quality of the advice offered. Patricia O'Connor, also a writer of grammar advice guides, praised the style advice at the beginning of the book (such as to always use concrete language) but tempered her praise with the claim that "much of the grammar and usage advice in the rest of the book is baloney, to use a good concrete word." Geoffrey Pullum, a linguist, described the prescriptions put forward in *The Elements of Style* as 'uninformed' and claimed that they "would not guarantee good writing if they were obeyed." The writer and editor Ben Yagoda took aim at the idiosyncratic nature of Strunk & White's advice. Making reference to one particular piece of advice, namely that one should include a comma before the 'and' in lists of three or more items (the so-called 'Oxford Comma'), he went on to write: "It's hard to refute [it], but one wonders why it deserves nearly half of one of the book's fewer than 100 pages." The consensus view seemed to be that the

advice offered in Strunk and White was either too out-dated, too uninformed, or too idiosyncratic to be of much use to writers.

For my part, I write neither to praise Strunk and White, nor to bury them. I do, however, think that the concerns raised by the panel about the advice offered in *The Elements of Style* show there is a genuine problem with the justification of advice about language. Indeed, I believe that what I call 'the problem of advice' is one instance of an apparent conflict between naturalist and normativist intuitions about language.

Naturalized intuitions treat language as a natural phenomenon and treat linguistics as an extension of natural science. Normativist intuitions see language as a cultural, norm-governed, conventional phenomenon. According to normativist intuitions, the study of language has more to do with moral or legal philosophy than with physics, chemistry, or biology. I contend that our pre-theoretical attitudes towards language, including our attitudes towards language advice, are informed by both kinds of intuitions. Pre-theoretical attitudes, I contend, also influence debates at the theoretical level. Although I will not endeavour to discuss these theoretical debates in any great detail here, I do have a couple in mind.

First, there is the dispute about the proper way to characterize linguistic content. There has been considerable debate in recent years as to whether linguistic meaning is, in some robust sense, normative. This debate will be the focus of Chapter 3 of this dissertation. On the other hand, Noam Chomsky and others have argued for an internalist, computationalist account of linguistic meaning, in part because they believe that only such accounts of meaning may be naturalized. This account will be examined in Chapter 4. Second, there is the problem of determining which projects of study may be pursued

from within a unified conception of linguistics. For example, whether or not one takes pragmatics to be part of linguistics will depend on whether one takes a naturalist or normativist approach to linguistic study. In Chapter 5, I will examine the differences between these approaches in detail. Furthermore, if, as I contend in this dissertation, naturalist and normativist attitudes to language can be reconciled, there will be a problem determining exactly what form this reconciliation should take. The varieties of normativist-naturalist reconciliation will be the topic of Chapter 6. I think we can find reasonable solutions to these problems, but at the cost of a type of metaphysical purity. In fact, I think any adequate theory of linguistic advice, content, or study will need to pay heed to both sets of intuitions.

Before beginning things in earnest, a quick note about vocabulary: In what follows, I'll be using 'way of speaking' to denote the general pattern of linguistic behaviour exhibited by language users (this should be taken to include oral, signed, and written language). I use it here to skirt around a few troublesome ontological issues regarding the status of languages, dialects, and idiolects. Although such ontological questions are important ones, I'm convinced that the problems of language advice, as described below, remain problems whatever linguistic ontology we select.

## **2.2 The Problem of Advice**

To say that different groups of people speak in different ways is not to make a particularly bold claim. That people in Halifax speak a different language from those in Hong Kong is about as close to a truism as one can get. But it is almost equally certain that people in Newcastle speak differently from people in New York (even while putatively speaking the



same ‘language’). And because these different ways of speaking co-vary with geography, level of education, and socioeconomic status (among many other factors), it should not be surprising that differences in ways of speaking often form the bases of evaluative judgments of the person speaking/writing. Some ways of speaking are judged good and others bad, some correct and some incorrect, some beautiful and some ugly. In addition to these evaluative judgments, certain ways of speaking are also judged to belong exclusively to particular social groups. As such, negative evaluative judgments about certain ways of speaking may reinforce or be reinforced by negative evaluative judgments about social groups and their members. Therefore, there is an incentive for people whose ways of speaking/writing are subject to negative evaluative judgments to change their ways of speaking in such a way as to improve the judgments made of them on that basis. There is thus sufficient demand to provide the basis for a healthy market in language advice.

By ‘language advice’ I do not mean the directives aimed at small children still learning a language, or exercises aimed at teaching a language to non-native speakers (whether or not one thinks these are distinct cases). Rather, as I conceive it, language advice is aimed at speakers and writers who already have some competence in a particular way of speaking. Indeed, the discussion that follows does not presuppose any particular theory of language acquisition. The only assumption is that those seeking advice are already disposed to speak in some particular structured and stable way.

In its basic form, language advice covers grammar (linguistic structure) and usage (word and phrase use), but also includes information about proper pronunciations, prosody, inflection, diction, spelling, as well as pragmatically related issues of force and

speech acts. In many cases, this advice takes the form of claims about the grammaticality, clarity, or appropriateness of a given linguistic construction. Where a particular linguistic expression is found wanting, an alternative may be proposed.

All of this would be fairly straightforward if those offering the advice could agree on the kinds of linguistic constructions to be proscribed and those alternative forms to be prescribed in their place. But given the wide diversity of opinion on these matters, we need some means of 1) telling good advice from bad, 2) evaluating the justification of a linguistic claim, and 3) assessing alternative constructions. But how are we to go about making such an assessment?

In answer to this question have arisen a number of views that, for the most part, converge around two distinct positions. Descriptivism is the view that the goal of language advice is to give the speaker/writer an accurate description of the features of the target way of speaking. In other words, descriptivists argue for a correctness criterion that is *internal* to a particular way of speaking. A given linguistic construction is 'correct' only if it occurs as a part of the target way of speaking. Prescriptivism, on the other hand, is the view according to which the goal of language advice is to guide speakers/writers to *the* correct way of speaking/writing (however defined)—usually by means of a series of prescriptions and proscriptions. On such views, the correctness criterion is taken to be external to any particular way of speaking.

Although writers on both sides of the descriptivist/prescriptivist divide take the justification question to be largely about the *study* of language, I will argue that we can say sensible things about how to justify language advice, while remaining agnostic about how it is to be properly studied. Finally, I will argue that neither descriptivist nor

prescriptivist theories of language advice provide a satisfying solution to the problem of justification. Instead, I suggest that a particularized approach to advice that attempts to match the intentions of speaker/writer to the expectations of her audience offers our best shot at figuring out how to solve the problem. As we will see, such an approach draws on both our naturalist and normativist intuitions.

### **2.3 Descriptivism**

For the most part, Descriptivists tend to be linguists, lexicographers, or empirically-minded philosophers of language—in other words, those who endorse a broadly naturalistic view of language. For Descriptivists, speaking or writing correctly involves paying heed to a number of objective facts, including facts about “sounds and sound patterns, the basic units of meaning, such as words, and the rules to combine them to form new sentences.”<sup>12</sup> For the most part, descriptivists believe that one does not need to be explicitly taught these facts about one's native way of speaking in order to speak it—they are things of which one has a perfect (albeit an implicit) knowledge.<sup>13</sup> Although this knowledge will allow one to do everything one needs to do (linguistically) within one's own linguistic community (narrowly construed), it will not be the same knowledge possessed by speakers/writers with a different native way of speaking. Furthermore, on this view all ways of speaking are considered equal—All will allow speakers to express the same ideas, with the same level of effectiveness. Although there may be reasons to prefer one way of speaking to another in particular circumstances—because, say, it is the

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<sup>12</sup> Fromkin et al. (1997), p. 11

<sup>13</sup> This claim does not presuppose any particular theory of language acquisition, only the assumption that one's knowledge of one's native way of speaking is both complete and (to some extent) implicit.

way of speaking employed by a politically powerful social group—these reasons are not linguistic ones.

Given this, the task of language advice is *not* to give advice about the grammar of the language spoken natively by the speaker in question—the speaker already brings that to the table. Rather, the role of language advice is to provide information about some other (usually more privileged) ways of speaking to those who would wish to speak in those ways. For example, imagine the case of someone who wishes to learn the way or ways of speaking most privileged in her society. Although, linguistically speaking, the privileged way or ways of speaking are no better than less-privileged ones, their privileged status makes them advantageous for people to learn (as, say, a prerequisite for full-citizenship) and given that divergences from this way of speaking will form the occasion for negative social evaluation, there is also a strong incentive to make sure one is doing it right. From a descriptivist point of view, what consumers of language advice demand in this case is nothing short of an *accurate* picture of the privileged dialect as it is *actually* spoken.

In order to meet this demand, any advice offered must, in some sense, be true to the facts that constitute the targeted way of speaking. This way of addressing the demand for language advice might be seen as being in tension with the key descriptivist claim that all ways of speaking are created equal. Indeed, some descriptivists see themselves as opting out of the advice game entirely. For example, in an address to the 2004 annual general meeting of the Modern Languages Association, the aforementioned Geoffrey Pullum argued that the difference between descriptivist and prescriptivist approaches to language is that descriptivists aim to uncover the constitutive rules of a given way of

speaking, while prescriptivists aim to apply a set of regulative rules in order to guide its use. On such a view, advice would be a purely regulative, and thus prescriptive endeavour. So, to the extent that descriptivism is seen as merely an account of the way things are and not a theory of how things ought to be, linguistically speaking, descriptivists may claim that the demand for advice is premised on a simple mistake: that there is a single 'correct' way of speaking.

But a descriptivist approach to language advice need not commit itself to such hard and fast distinctions. The evaluative judgments giving rise to the demands for language advice need not be considered to be so utterly foreign to the descriptive enterprise. Some descriptivist approaches to advice, such as the one favoured by David Crystal,<sup>14</sup> focus on the notion of 'appropriateness'. The notion of appropriateness functions to make speakers/writers aware of the contextual features of relevant situations in which they may want to write or speak. Consider, for example, the following case:<sup>15</sup> A popular historian, in the course of a radio interview, used the present tense to describe the attitudes and beliefs of people living in nineteenth century England. Because some of the attitudes he described might apply to any number of ages, including the present one ('People are worried about their jobs', 'People are worried about war'), it soon became difficult to figure out which age he was referring to. Crystal, despite being an avowed descriptivist (the episode is recounted in the epilogue to a book that largely decries prescriptivist attitudes towards advice), concludes that the historian was wrong to speak in the way that he did.

I think Crystal's radio example is helpfully illustrative of what I have been calling

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<sup>14</sup> Crystal (2006)

<sup>15</sup> Crystal (2006), p. 219-222

the problem of advice. Here is a case in which we would presumably want to say something about what the historian is doing, but it is not immediately obvious what should be the target of our opprobrium. As Crystal points out, the problem is not a grammatical one—the historian used perfectly grammatical sentences. Nor is it a semantic problem—a tense keyed to the present can be used to refer to events in the past. Indeed, it is a well-established literary and journalistic device used to create a sense of immediacy. The form of the utterance is utterly respectable—it was simply inappropriate for the circumstances. How then, is one justified in making this assessment? What, on a descriptive account of this particular way of speaking, makes it possible for us to make the judgment? The problem of language advice, vis-à-vis description is as follows: If the language as it is actually spoken is to be our guide, then the advice offered will be at once too strong and too weak. It will be too strong in that all ways of speaking will be on equal footing—without regard to appropriateness—and too weak insofar as any judgments of appropriateness, however reasonable, will be without justification.

## **2.4 Prescriptivism**

In its most straightforward sense, prescriptivism starts from the observation that competence (and for that matter excellence) in language use seems to be an achievement. It is a skill most often acquired through education. The positive evaluative judgments of speakers and writers of privileged dialects come from a recognition of their achievement in this regard. Given that it is a real achievement, language competence is also something which it is possible to have in greater or lesser amounts. So, for example, one might say that the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States is a more gifted writer and speaker than the

43<sup>rd</sup>. As such, there is an educational component to language advice—the goal being to improve the linguistic abilities of the educated speaker. For this reason, language advice must involve prescriptions dictating proper linguistic behaviour and proscriptions ruling out mistakes. But, as was observed earlier, there does not seem to be a consensus on the prescriptions and proscriptions to be applied to English.

That no universally accepted set of prescriptions and proscriptions has been applied to English might be explained by reference to the history of the language. French, for example, has had an institution, L'Académie Française, to issue such directives for hundreds of years (since the time of Napoleon), while English-speakers never developed such a body (although not for lack of trying).<sup>16</sup> Notwithstanding this, some aspects of English, particularly spelling, have standards that are more or less fixed and (for the most part) garner wide agreement. However, simply having a standard is not enough to make prescriptivism an adequate theory of language advice. Recall that the problem of language advice was to find a means of telling good language advice from bad. With this in mind, it is not enough to simply make prescriptions willy-nilly. These prescriptions must also be, in some sense, justified. What makes the problem of language advice a real problem for prescriptivists is that many linguistic standards are simply arbitrary (recall the different ways different languages treat double negatives). While this need not be an insurmountable barrier to a prescriptive theory of language advice, it does at least rule out a couple of rough and ready proposals.

One such candidate ruled out by the arbitrariness of linguistic standards is the

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<sup>16</sup> The role of language academies has, in most English speaking countries, been filled unofficially by dictionaries. However, they approach neither the unanimity nor the breadth of official bodies. What's more, compilers of dictionaries face the same tensions between descriptivism and prescriptivism that bedevil writers of advice manuals. For more on this, see Lynch (2009).

idea that good advice concerning a natural language should work towards making it more ‘logical’. That Standard English (though not all other dialects) forbids the double negative (at least in most cases) does not, in any sense, make it any more logically coherent than, say, Polish, which does not.<sup>17</sup> Both languages picture logical relations, but do so in different ways. And it is not a given that speakers and writers ought to always be looking to maximize logical perspicuity in their prose. Although we might target what advice we do give to a particular task or purpose (e.g. producing logically perspicuous prose), we lose the idea that there are a universal set of rules which, if followed, would guarantee good writing. For these reasons, it seems as though advice justified on the basis of logical form alone will not always be good advice.<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, different European languages bear different relationships to Latin. That Latin was, at one time, the standard language of scholarship and religious worship cannot be denied. But its standards are simply not those of Modern English, which incorporates elements from a number of different language groups. Advice for speakers of Modern English based on the grammar and usage patterns of Latin would be bad advice. Advice based on Old English would be equally bad.

These extreme cases notwithstanding, there are reasons to believe that a prescriptive approach to language advice may still be viable, even in the teeth of the arbitrariness of linguistic standards. One reason that we might think that language advice could proceed in this way emerges if we reflect upon the success that some prescriptions

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<sup>17</sup> Pullum (2005)

<sup>18</sup> It may simply be that natural languages are not constructed so as to maximize logically perspicuous prose. This is one of the reasons it is helpful to develop formal languages. Just what the proper relationship is between formal and natural languages is, of course, open to debate. I will return to this subject in Chapter 4.



have had in entering the consciousness of speakers and hearers. The prohibition against ending sentences with a preposition can be traced back to the poet John Dryden.<sup>19</sup> The use of 'he' in contexts in which the sex of the subject is unknown also started as such a usage suggestion (dating from the mid-18<sup>th</sup> Century),<sup>20</sup> as have the more recent gender-neutral alternatives. Clearly, however, not all suggestions are as effective.

Consider, for instance, the divergence of cases in which it makes sense to use 'that' from those in which it makes sense to use 'which'. In *Style: Towards Clarity and Grace*, Joseph M. Williams traces the history of prescriptions aimed at governing their use. Generally, in spoken and written English, 'that' is used only to introduce restrictive clauses while 'which' may be used to introduce both restrictive and non-restrictive clauses. In 1906, in an attempt to simplify this pattern, Henry and Francis Fowler prescribed that the use of 'which' should be limited to introducing non-restrictive clauses. By pairing each type of clause with a unique word, the Fowlers had in mind to impose some order on a troublesome part of usage. The results, however, have been mixed. Although the Fowlers' take on the that/which distinction is widely cited and is used as the basis for a number of prescriptions, it does not seem to have altered common usage all that much. Indeed, even Henry Fowler, in his *Dictionary of Modern English Usage* appended the following after a discussion of the rule: "Some there are who follow this principle now; but it would be idle to pretend it is the practice either of most or of the best writers."<sup>21</sup> This raises the question: Of what use is prescription if it is not, in practice, followed by the majority or the best writers?

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<sup>19</sup> Lynch (2009), p. 32

<sup>20</sup> O'Connor makes this point in the *New York Times* piece cited above.

<sup>21</sup> Fowler 1926, quoted in Williams & Colomb (1995), p. 183

I think there are a couple of important lessons to be learned from Fowler's example. In the first place, there is a good reason to believe that prescriptions, if issuing from a genuine demand from speakers, can have an effect on the perception of certain usages. So although his proposals for the that/which distinction have not clarified matters in quite the way Fowler intended, they have at least been taken up by a number of style manuals and usage guides. More to the point, the proposals have entered the minds of many speakers and writers who attempt, with varying levels of success, to apply them to their speech and writing. The second lesson is that such effects are limited by facts about common usage (or at least our intuitions about the grammaticality or ungrammaticality of certain linguistic constructions). As such, simply making prescriptions, in the absence of any attempt to fit them to such intuitions, will not be enough to produce good writing and speaking.

In a sense, what we are looking for is a way to exploit the seemingly natural tendencies of human beings to develop, follow, and amend certain social conventions. Where such a linguistic convention already exists, prescriptions can help to codify it, and allow it to survive longer than the momentary alliance of the purposes and needs of individual speakers. But this presents us with a problem: unless we are to pursue the prescriptions for their own sake, we need some clear sense of what they are meant to be in service of. However, given the seeming arbitrariness of linguistic standards, it is difficult to see what something like an ideally logically perspicuous, or ideally clear, language would look like.<sup>22</sup> So such considerations are unlikely to be firm goals.

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<sup>22</sup> I suspect they would look a lot like formal languages. This not to say that there is no way to judge the clarity or logicity of a given piece of natural language writing, only that there is no universal standard that cuts across all contexts.

We might characterize speaking and writing well as speaking and writing that pays heed to the rules of the language in question. Indeed many prescriptivist authors defend their dicta by appeal to the language itself—e.g., by using phrases such as ‘this or that construction is not part of the language’ or ‘that is not a word’ (‘blog,’ ‘internet,’ etc...) We are then left with the problem of figuring out what the rules of the language are. If current usage is to be our guide, then prescriptivist language advice simply collapses into the descriptivist approach presented in the last section. If, however, we take an ideal state of the language to be our goal, then we are left with the arbitrariness problem. This then is our dilemma.

## 2.5 An Alternative Prescriptive Account

There may be a way to work with the ideal language hypothesis without running into the problem of arbitrariness. That way would be to embrace the arbitrariness as a part of the theory. The idea goes something like this: It is not so important that we adopt any *particular* standard to represent (for example) negation so long as we all adopt the *same* standard. So it does not matter whether we choose a system (like the one used in Standard English) in which two negatives make a positive, or a system (like the one used in Polish or French) in which they make a negative. The important thing is that all speakers of a language use the same system. A community of speakers using a single system for negation will be able to make their thoughts more logically perspicuous than a community that uses multiple systems, or at least so the story goes.<sup>23</sup> Now, since

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<sup>23</sup> Of course, such accounts presume that the various parties in a conversation require a common language in order to communicate. If, following Davidson (1986), we hold that a common language is not required, this version of prescriptivism may lose much of its plausibility. Thank you to Duncan McIntosh for raising this point.

individual speakers may be more or less inclined to use one system or another, it will require education to get them using the standard system. Coming to use the standard system will therefore be something of an achievement, and the process of language advice will follow the schema sketched above.

A view such as the one described will take us part of the way towards a prescriptivist theory of language advice. It will not, however, take us all the way there. What we need is an account of why *prescriptions* are the best way of establishing and enforcing the standard. To answer this question we need to think about what is at stake if the standards are not explicitly enforced. Many prescriptivists like to write as though the health of the language, or of meaningfulness in general, was at stake. Such claims, however, seem to be only so much hyperbole. For example, they have been made at various points in the history of English,<sup>24</sup> yet it is safe to say that, even as the language has changed, we are no less capable of expressing ourselves now than we were then. We might prefer the way of speaking that dominated educated and high-prestige discourse in the Elizabethan, or Victorian Ages, but it is difficult to see how such judgments could be based on anything other than personal aesthetic preferences. If we attempt to generalize such judgments, we run into the problem of arbitrariness.

Consider, however, the following case: a particular political community, perhaps even one whose members nominally speak the same language, may contain several distinct linguistic communities, each employing quite different ways of speaking. These language communities would, in speaking the way they do, be obeying standards different from those obeyed elsewhere in the wider community. For the sake of the political

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<sup>24</sup> For examples, see Crystal (2006) and Lynch (2009)

functioning of the state, it may well be worthwhile to adopt a single standard. Since the various linguistic communities are, by hypothesis, unlikely to do so on their own, prescriptions (and the evaluative judgments that come with them) will need to be put into effect. Again, the important thing is not so much that any particular standard be put in place, only that a standard be there.

Now, we might make a case that the standard should stand in a certain relation to the ways of speaking/writing that held sway in this nation's history. Ideally, the standard we choose should allow the literature, philosophy, and founding legal and political documents of the nation to remain intelligible to its current citizens.<sup>25</sup> Michael Dummett, in his *Grammar and Style for Examination Candidates and Others*, makes this point in bemoaning the pace of linguistic change:

In a literate community, like our own, the language does not comprise only the words spoken in conversation or printed in newspapers: it consists also in the writings of past centuries. An effect of rapid change is that what was written only a short time ago becomes difficult to understand; such a change is of itself destructive. It cannot be helped that Chaucer presents some obstacles to present-day readers; but I have been told that philosophy students nowadays have trouble understanding the English of Hume and Berkeley, and even, sometimes, of nineteenth-century writers. That is pure loss, and a sure sign that some people's

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<sup>25</sup> In a comment on an earlier draft of this dissertation, Duncan MacIntosh made the point that one might argue that this problem could be avoided if we periodically performed a series of translations of these documents, as, for example, has been done with the Bible. One response, as indicated in the Dummett quote below, is to note that, for at least some prescriptivists, the issue is the *pace* of change. The worry is that if language is allowed to change at a rapid rate, it will become increasingly difficult to choose from among the variety of translations available. So such a policy may end up working against the stated goal of political integration. The case of the Bible is instructive here, since (for example) there are sects who accept only the authority of the King James Version.

use of English is changing much too fast.<sup>26</sup>

The aim of preserving the intelligibility of historical literature, however, may be consistent with any number of possible sets of standards. Once such a set has been decided upon, prescriptions (and proscriptions) may be drawn up and sent out into the provinces.

Aside from the stated goal of political integration, the ideal view provides a structure for artistic expression. The fact that there are well-recognized and observed standards for speaking and writing means that flouting or bending them has a much stronger effect than if these rules were not almost universally observed. In other words, it is far easier, on a prescriptive framework, for the audience to identify, and therefore to follow, what an author is doing, than if there were no such widely known prescriptions. Indeed, we might say that it is the existence of such well-recognized and enforced rules that makes genuine artistic creation possible. While this view is certainly plausible, I will not undertake the job of defending or rejecting it here.

Another reason some people might find what I will call the ‘ideal view’ attractive is that it keeps the social aspect of language production and use firmly in view. The danger, on descriptivist accounts, is that questions of culture, politics, and social relations get pushed aside, as these are not thought to be directly relevant in distinguishing good language advice from bad. There are, on that view, only language forms that are produced by a given community and language forms that are not. The only social consideration that might apply is group membership, but such a consideration is already built-in to the descriptions. However, this is problematic. Group membership is something that would

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<sup>26</sup> Dummett (1993), quoted in Pullam (2005)

seem to depend a great deal on what might be called ‘idealized’ linguistic conditions—that is to say the same conditions that marked the ‘ideal’ view. When trying to determine what features might distinguish one way of speaking from another, we (if we are good descriptivists) are to look at differences in the linguistic behaviour of a group as compared to others. But, and this is a point that descriptivists are quite firm on, there exist considerable variations in linguistic behaviour across the members of even a single linguistic community. As such, the decision to count this or that person as a member of this or that linguistic community (and so use their behaviour as constitutive of this or that way of speaking) requires making evaluative judgments about social/political matters. The work required to get a descriptivist theory off the ground therefore resembles that needed to motivate the ‘ideal’ view. In this sense, descriptivism, seen as a non-prescriptive approach to language advice, is self-defeating.<sup>27</sup>

## **2.6 Problems with the ‘Ideal’ view**

This seems to be a plausible prescriptivist account of language advice, though not an unproblematic one. For one thing, the ‘ideal view’ crystallizes many of the problematic political issues lurking just under the surface of the advice debate. Indeed, the very notion of ‘Standard’ or ‘correct’ English resembles some of the oppressive norms of the kind that Michel Foucault described in *Discipline and Punish*: “[T]he power of normalization imposes homogeneity; but it individualizes by making it possible to measure gaps, to determine levels, to fix specialties and to render the differences useful by fitting them one

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<sup>27</sup> This argument is essentially the same as the one in Wallace (2001).

to another.”<sup>28</sup> By insisting on standards that enforce a single, homogeneous way of speaking on what is (by hypothesis) a diverse population, proponents of the ‘ideal’ view, and of language academies more generally, risk reinforcing the very social divisions (with their attendant negative evaluative judgments) that they sought to eliminate. But even if we somehow get past these important political worries, I think there are at least four reasons to doubt the practical viability of the ‘ideal’ view as account of real world language advice.

First of all, the ‘ideal’ view seems to work best when one is considering setting up a language *de novo*. In such cases, whether one is starting from scratch (Esperanto), or is constructing a new way of speaking on the model of a previous, now extinct one (modern Hebrew), one is free to lay out what the rules are ahead of time and then suggest how the produced form will accordingly look. In a sense, in such cases, one gets to *decide* what the rules of the language are—one need not *discover* them. The problem comes in when one attempts to apply the model used in the ‘ideal’ view to a pre-existing, heretofore unregulated way of speaking. In such cases, it is difficult to simply decide which rules are to be enforced—one must take on at least a minimally descriptive account of the way of speaking in question in order to properly determine which rules *can* or *ought* to be in force.

Secondly, the ‘ideal’ view does not pay proper attention to the role of precedent in fixing the shape and sound of a way of speaking. In this case, the problem is not with the rules themselves, but with the ways in which they are enforced. In order to get a better grip on this criticism, it will help to reflect a little on its relation to the first. Because we

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<sup>28</sup> Foucault (1977), p. 184



do not (in the case of natural languages) stipulate the rules to be followed in speaking them, we need to fit our prescriptions to the ways in which people are already inclined to speak. In some cases, this might be as straightforward as identifying features of a particular way of speaking that ought to be amended (call these ‘mistakes’). The specific prescriptions making up a body of language advice are meant to target these mistakes. In the hard cases, it might involve a complete renovation of a spoken language. To some extent, these are the tasks that national language bodies (such as the ones in France and Germany) are continually engaged in. In both the easy and hard cases, a sense of the language as currently spoken is essential to formulating the necessary prescriptions. One can claim from this that prescriptivism requires a descriptivist step, in order to set its targets.

The third criticism is more directly related to the problem of language advice. The ‘ideal’ view would seem to make advice a fairly simple proposition—once the rules of the game are named, advice consists in reminding each other (and ourselves) of what they are. Enforcement should be automatic once we know what we are to enforce—it is simply a matter of setting up the proper sanctions. As such, we reward good rule-following behaviour, and punish deviations from the standard way of speaking. But things are obviously not so simple. At the beginning of this chapter, I remarked that, even amongst prescriptivists, there was considerable disagreement about which prescriptions should ultimately be issued. This should come as no surprise—natural languages are rather complex things, especially if we accept the assumption motivating prescriptivism, that people can be more or less skilled in using language. If we then attempt to deal with the problems already enumerated and take precedent into account, the number of

prescriptions required to account for all speakers of a language is likely to be rather vast. And while many prescriptivist style guides, grammar books, and usage manuals, attempt to get around this by listing only representative or common mistakes, it is entirely possible that the work required to reach the ideal state of language use (the top level of the 'ideal' model) will be too hard for any speaker/writer to complete.

Finally, there is a problem dealing with places in which two or more radically different ways of speaking come into contact. As described above, the 'ideal' view is a rather conservative approach to integrating a linguistic community in which the polity is made up of fairly similar individuals who just happen to speak a bit differently from each other. But languages, and the people who speak them, do not exist in a vacuum. In the course of learning and mastering a certain way of speaking, a person or community will likely (if they are not completely geographically isolated, like the Icelandic Norse) come into contact with individuals or communities having different ways of life, and different ways of speaking. When two ways of speaking come into contact, there is likely to be some transfer—of vocabulary, of idiom, perhaps even of grammatical convention. As such, a prescriptivist program must keep this tendency in its sights and either suitably alter the foreign elements to fit the pre-existing order (or vice versa) or suggest new alternatives from within the order to fit the functions the foreign elements have been borrowed to fill. In those countries that have set up language academies, such repair work is one of their more salient activities. But note, in order to do this properly, the authorities must have a sense both of the present state of the language in question, and the precise function of the foreign elements. Both of these tasks are descriptive ones.

This leads us to the last major problem with prescriptivist approaches to language

advice. Though useful in some cases, prescriptive advice (of the kind we have been discussing) may simply be unnecessary. To see why, consider the following: it has already been noted that the prevention of meaninglessness is not a particularly strong justification for taking on a prescriptivist approach to language advice. After all, many of the prescriptive rules at issue in the debate are no older than 250 years. The point is, if people were capable making themselves understood in English (or French, or German, or Mandarin) at a time before these rules were named and enforced by style guides and language academies, it is not at all clear to see the necessity of taking this approach now.

In response to this observation, I sketched what I called the ‘ideal view’-- the goal of which was to foster a single linguistic community by attempting to create a single standard way of speaking, in the hope of uniting speakers from a wide geographical area and across several generations. The worries expressed above suggest that the ‘ideal’ view is simply not a workable model for prescriptive advice. Because the same forces that preserved meaningfulness (namely the desire to understand others and be understood by them) in the pre-prescriptivist era never really go away, it is safe to assume that people are capable of adapting their ways of speaking to one another's communicative expectations even in the absence of explicit rules or prescriptions. So, it is unclear at best whether the goals espoused in the ‘ideal’ view are best achieved by prescriptive means. Instead, I think we need to step back somewhat from the prescriptivist/descriptivist debate. We need to re-evaluate the goals of each, and see if such an exercise will help us move things forward.

## 2.7 The Prescriptivist/Descriptivist Debate Reconsidered

It will be recalled that descriptivist and prescriptivist approaches to language advice each started with a set of contrasting intuitions. Descriptivists started with the belief that no one needs to be taught their own native way of speaking. Speakers are either born with the core competence to speak and understand their native language, or else acquire it in the early years of life. In contrast, prescriptivists started with the belief that the ability to speak and write well is something of an achievement—something that speakers and writers need to learn.

As they stand, the two major assumptions seem well motivated. In the first case, children do not, it seems, require much explicit instruction to learn how to speak and understand their native language.<sup>29</sup> Although children are taught in school how to read and write, they are not taught to speak (or at least with nothing near the level of instruction needed to adequately teach reading and writing).<sup>30</sup> In the second case, it seems as though we *do* learn something when we come to master certain aspects of linguistic use: we learn how to write poetry, to write a formal essay, to say ‘please’ and ‘thank you’. In short, the intuitions motivating both prescriptivist and descriptivist approaches to language advice seem to be well founded. The solution to the problem of language advice, I contend, will be to deny that these two guiding intuitions necessarily conflict with each other. Simply put, I think the intuitions motivating both hard-line prescriptivism and descriptivism can be turned towards another approach to language advice that both

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<sup>29</sup> Exactly how much explicit instruction is required to learn a language is, of course, an empirical question. Furthermore, I am not here denying that parents often do provide some explicit instructions to their children. Note, however, that I am only making the comparatively weak claim that learning to *speak* one's first language requires *less* explicit instruction than learning to *read* or *write* it.

<sup>30</sup> See, for instance, Cowie's (2010) summary of Chomskian accounts of language acquisition.

adequately reflects our abilities as speakers and writers and respects our desire to improve. With this new apparatus in place, I think we can finally find a way of transcending the noise of the so-called ‘usage-wars’.

## **2.8 Beyond Prescriptivism and Descriptivism**

I think the place to begin is with the notion of language at play in both approaches. The sense of ‘language’ as it is used in descriptivist approaches appears to refer to the ‘basic linguistic competence’ (BLC) required to speak; that is to say the know-how needed to express oneself, and understand the expressions of others. The BLC may be defined in any number of ways, but it is not, even on its broadest construal, meant to suppose that a native speaker will at all times, and in all ways, exhibit mastery over all linguistic conventions. One may well be able to make oneself understood, but there is no guarantee that one will be efficient or artful in doing so (however we choose to define these concepts). In other words, although one might be able to speak grammatically, there is no guarantee one will learn how to master the conventions that govern, say, the writing of a formal essay. Rather, the BLC may be understood as basic working knowledge of the rules of the linguistic game—not as the knowledge of how to best exploit those rules to one’s advantage.

To push the game metaphor, a bad or mediocre basketball player is not bad or mediocre because he does not know the rules of basketball. Similarly, the job of a basketball coach is not (except, perhaps, in the very initial stages) to teach her players the rules of the game. Rather, the mediocre basketball player is mediocre because he is either unaware of a way to match his knowledge of the rules with his sense of his own physical

abilities in a successful manner, or else finds himself physically unable to exploit the rules successfully. Likewise, the coach's job is to advise her players, given their knowledge of the rules of the game and their respective levels of physical ability, on how to successfully (or artfully) play the game—perhaps by devising strategies and directives to help bring this about. And the rules of basketball are consistent with a fairly large number of possible strategies and directives.

Consider now, the meaning of 'language' as it is used in expressions of prescriptivist intuitions. In such contexts, it seems to refer to the set of conventions the mastery of which goes above and beyond basic competency with regard to one's native way of speaking. It is this sense of 'language' that speaks to the intuitions that language mastery is a real achievement and something that can admit of degrees. Let us call this sense of language 'Socio-Linguistic Mastery' (SLM). The achievement need not be a grammatical one. It need not refer to basic competence at all. It need not be about knowing the basic rules of the game, but the best means of achieving success within the bounds of the rules. The point I am trying to make is the following: Grammar underdetermines expression. For whatever it is that one wants to say, there will likely be several grammatically respectable ways of saying it. But depending on the medium, the context, the audience, and one's communicative aims (among many other factors), some of these ways of speaking will be more effective than others. The purpose of language advice is, on this view, to inform speakers and writers of the options available to them, and to provide a basis on which to choose among them.

Note: this helps to explain cases like Crystal's radio historian. Considered solely at the level of his words, he did nothing wrong—he spoke grammatically. However, when

facts about the context of his speech (e.g. the fact that he was speaking on the radio; the fact that radio broadcasts do not allow for ‘backtracking’) are taken into consideration, he turns out to have done something inappropriate. Why are we justified in reaching this conclusion? Because the historian’s purpose in using the words that he did was to communicate something to the listening audience—namely facts about life in the nineteenth century. However, talking about things on the radio involves matching abilities between speaker and listener—a set of expectations that can be met or unmet. Often, the expectations a listener brings to the situation are not conscious ones. If they fail to be met, the listener will simply not get the message, or will receive only part of it. The listeners will respond either by expressing their confusion or by simply giving up on listening. As such, it is up to the people speaking to recognize what is or is not expected by their potential listeners. These expectations might, on occasion, be subverted (see, for example, the Orson Welles adaptation of *War of the Worlds*). But insofar as these subversions work, it is because the expectations are already in place. These expectations do not imply prescriptions for further actions on the part of speakers. Nor do they necessarily require sanctions in order to be enforced. The only penalty for failing to meet them is the failure of one’s purpose in speaking. This is penalty enough—the ways of speaking that fail to connect speakers and hearers, ways that lead to confusion or to nonsense, will simply die out, in favour of those that achieve the speaker’s purpose in speaking.

The radio historian, speaking in present tense about events in the nineteenth century ran afoul of one such convention. Because, unlike the printed page, radio does not allow its audience to double back, there is a problem with establishing in their minds, and in keeping this fact established, the exact context of what is being said. So someone who

is just tuning in will have no idea who is talking and what precisely he is talking about, unless she is explicitly informed. This, I think, is why seasoned radio hosts reintroduce their guests and conversation topics at regular intervals. With this in mind the historian could have still spoken as he did by inserting regular reminders of the time period every couple sentences or so. Unfortunately, this would make the exercise somewhat self-defeating, as this would frustrate the use of the present tense to make the subject matter seem more immediate. As a result, one can conclude that of the options available, the use of the past tense would be most appropriate in the circumstances.

One of the consequences of the model of linguistic convention used above is that there are many different conventions for many different purposes. Depending on who one is, and what one is trying to accomplish, one may need to master a number of different conventions. So there is a sense in which learning to use a language counts as a kind of achievement. And because these conventions may sometimes be at cross-purposes to each other, it may be true that only the most gifted speakers and writers will be able to effectively communicate to multiple audiences at once. Consider for instance a speech that is read to a live audience, broadcast on the radio, shown on television, and reproduced in text form in a newspaper. It takes a special kind of writer to make her message come across in the intended ways across all these media.

I now return to the question I posed in my title: what justifies language advice? The answer is grammar facts, no doubt, but also facts about (to name just a few) the function of the kind of discourse being pursued, about the normative social conventions governing that discourse, about the intended audience and their expectations, and about the behaviour of others who have successfully fulfilled the pragmatic goals involved. In



other words, a motley assortment of natural and normative facts that forestall easy systematization.

While I take debates about the proper characterization of language advice to be distinct from debates about the nature of linguistic content or debates about the methodology for linguistics, I believe that all three classes of debate share a common point of origin in the conflict between our naturalist and normativist linguistic intuitions. My hybrid (or, if you will, mongrel) solution to the problem of language advice suggests that these intuitions need not always conflict. And so if concord between the normative and natural may be found amid the noise and rancour that mark discussions of how best to produce good speaking and writing, my hope is that it may yet be found in the domains of meaning and method.

## **2.9 Some Objections**

Before moving on, it will be worthwhile to give voice to a couple of objections that will bear on the discussion to come. The first objection comes from the naturalist camp: the provisional theory of advice laid out in this chapter is based, in part, on a distinction between what I called the Basic Linguistic Competence (BLC) and Socio-Linguistic Mastery (SLM). Furthermore, I argued that advice about language is more properly targeted at the second set of abilities than at the first. If so, argues the naturalist, then language advice is not really advice about language at all. Instead, BLC consists of those abilities which constitute a person's ability to interpret and deploy their native way of speaking. SLM, on the other hand, involves those abilities required to linguistically navigate the larger social sphere. The naturalist accepts the distinction, but goes further,

arguing that the abilities contained within the BLC exhaust the category of linguistic abilities. The abilities contained within the SLM may well require advice, but they are not linguistic abilities. Rather they are best understood as a kind of etiquette, standing to the abilities of the BLC as table manners stand to nutrition.

The second objection comes from the normativist side of the debate. The normativist argues that the provisional theory of advice fails because there is no principled way of drawing the distinction between BLC and SLM. The argument is as follows: The distinction between BLC and SLM depends on there being a set of abilities (the BLC) which the speaker possesses to a more or less perfect degree. The other set of abilities consists of those which one may possess to a greater or lesser degree. The normativist challenges us to provide an account of how everyone is able to possess a BLC for their native way-of-speaking. If, following the rather loose definition, the BLC consists of those abilities one requires in order to get around in one's native linguistic community, it remains as yet unclear what it is about those abilities that are such as to require no advice. In other words, the normativist asks us what it is about the standards represented by the BLC that renders them non-normative. Finally, the normativist may claim that, in the absence of any principled breakdown of which abilities are to be classed into each group, the distinction is ad hoc at best.

One of the things standing in the way of replies to both objections is the problematic question of how to classify linguistic meaning. Is one's knowledge of how to interpret and deploy contentful expressions part of the BLC or the SLM? The naturalist and normativist offer different answers, each underscoring the principle behind their respective objections to the provisional theory.

As we will see in the following chapter, there are good reasons to think that the very idea of linguistic meaning is a normative notion. If this is so, then it would make sense to class one's knowledge of meaning as part of the SLM. Doing so, however, would not leave much in the BLC. Indeed, all that would remain as part of basic competence would be one's ability to deploy the grammar of one's native way of speaking. And, as we will see in Chapters three and five, normativists argue that even one's grammatical abilities might be normative in some robust sense. If these arguments go through, then we will be forced to concede the substance of the normativist objection: the distinction between BLC and SLM is not a principled one—language is normative from top to bottom. The norms go all the way down.

In Chapter 3, we will consider arguments from Noam Chomsky and others aiming to show that linguistic meaning, like grammatical structure, comes about as a result of computations occurring within an innate language faculty in the mind. As such, one's ability to interpret and deploy the vocabulary of one's native way of speaking is innate, requiring no explicit instruction or advice in order to be developed. So it would make sense to class it within the BLC. Furthermore, Chomskians argue that only those phenomena having their origin within the human language faculty are truly linguistic phenomena. This is because it is only these features that admit of formal, naturalistic (scientific) explanations. Although the term 'language' might well be applied to phenomena originating elsewhere (such as the social world), such a use is merely an informal, unscientific one. If these arguments go forward, then the distinction between BLC and SLM is deeper than one might have thought—it marks the very boundary between the linguistic and non-linguistic. If so, then the provisional theory of language

advice would fall victim to the naturalist objection—the abilities to which such advice is targeted are not *linguistic* abilities. We would thus need no advice about language.

## Chapter 3—What We Talk About When We Talk About

### Meaning: Semantic Realism and Semantic

### Normativism

#### 3.1 Preamble

The starting point of this dissertation was the observation that, across multiple domains, there is an apparent conflict between normativist and naturalist intuitions about language. In the last chapter, I examined the conflict as it appeared in disputes about the practical question of how advice about English grammar, style and usage was to be justified. I argued that the traditional way of understanding the dispute—as a disagreement between descriptivist and prescriptivist approaches to linguistic study—was misinformed. Instead, I argued that language advice, of the kind sought by native speakers of a language such as English, contains both descriptive and prescriptive content. The descriptive content of language advice is made up of an *accurate* account of a particular way of speaking—perhaps the native way of speaking employed by a privileged or powerful group. The prescriptive content of language advice aims to fit one's (perhaps implicit) knowledge of one's own native way of speaking to the expectations and needs of particular audiences. The moral of the story was that the conflict between naturalist and normativist intuitions in the domain of advice was only an apparent conflict—both sets of intuitions must be respected if we are to have an adequate theory of advice.

I now turn my attention to a more traditional philosophical problem. In this chapter and the next, I aim to explore the apparent conflict between realist (including

naturalist) and normativist theories of linguistic meaning.<sup>31</sup> As in the domain of advice, there is a tradition of taking these two sets of intuitions to be incompatible with each other. Indeed I will argue that this incompatibility is presupposed by many of the major figures in the debate about the normativity of meaning that arose in the wake of Saul Kripke's *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*.<sup>32</sup> In what follows, I will argue that this presumption of incompatibility is mistaken—it is possible (and perhaps required) to respect both naturalist and normativist intuitions when constructing a semantic theory.

### 3.2 A Confession

I'm told that many North American English speakers are rather at a loss when confronted with the word 'aubergine'. Indeed, in my younger and more foolish days, I too was somewhat mystified by the word. I knew it to be a British word for a common vegetable, but beyond this I found myself at a loss. Eventually, I, for reasons now lost to me, decided that the word referred to what most Canadians and Americans would refer to as a *zucchini*. I cannot say for how long I persisted in this usage, but eventually I came to learn that it was incorrect. In fact, the British call zucchinis 'courgettes'. As I learned, the word 'aubergine' correctly refers to the vegetable North Americans would typically call an *eggplant*. Having learned that 'aubergine' means *eggplant*, I now acknowledge that my previous usage was incorrect. But in what, exactly, does the incorrectness of my past usage, and the correctness of my present one consist?

There are two ways of answering this question, each associated with one of the two poles of the naturalist/normativist debate. On the one hand, one may well be tempted

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<sup>31</sup> In the case of linguistic meaning, it makes sense to see naturalism as a variety of realism (see the taxonomy in section 3.3).

<sup>32</sup> Kripke (1982)

to think that my error was a factual one. In thinking that 'aubergine' meant *zucchini*, I *believed* something *false*. On the other hand, one might interpret my error as a failure to act appropriately. In applying 'aubergine' to zucchinis, I was *doing* something *wrong*. These two ways of explaining correct and incorrect use are often taken to involve mutually exclusive attitudes toward meaning. As we shall see, much of the contemporary debate about the normativity of meaning rests on the presupposition that if meaning can be shown to be genuinely normative, then realist approaches to semantics (including naturalist theories) can be completely ruled out.

### **3.3 Semantic Realism: Naturalism, Platonism, and Anti-Reductionism**

If we take correct and incorrect meaning to be a factual matter, the content of my false belief might be given by the following proposition:

(1) 'Aubergine' means *zucchini*.

While the content of my new, correct belief would be:

(2) 'Aubergine' means *eggplant*.

In the actual world, with the facts of English meaning being what they are, (1) is false, while (2) is true. To believe that meaning is a factual matter is to believe a) that meaning statements (like (1) and (2)) express the correctness conditions for the words they define

and b) that these correctness conditions may be specified by citing some fact or set of facts (about ourselves, or the world) that determine the reference of the words or phrases in question. In other words, correctness conditions tell us which states of affairs must obtain in order for one to correctly use a given word or phrase. I am correct in using 'aubergine' only in those situations in which I apply it to eggplants. This is because it is a *fact* that the word 'aubergine' means *eggplant*.

Call the notion that there are facts about meaning *semantic realism*. As the term 'realism' is used to name a number of quite distinct views, our definition here requires further refinement. Following Alexander Miller, let us say that to be a realist about something is just to say that the thing or things under consideration 1) exist, and 2) have the properties they do independently of what anybody thinks, believes, or perceives.<sup>33</sup> One can, for example, be a realist about everyday objects: one can believe that, say, the objects in my apartment exist, and that they continue to do so whether or not I am there to see them.<sup>34</sup> More controversially, one might be a realist about certain properties of everyday objects, for example their colour: I might argue that the redness in an apple is present in it and would be present in it even if there were no one around to see it. An anti-realist about colour, by contrast, might argue that the redness of the apple is present only in the minds of those who perceive it, and that it has no existence outside of the minds of those perceivers.

There are couple of different ways of working out the semantic version of realism. On the one hand, one might take meanings to exist even in the absence of any way of knowing what they are. Meaning statements like (1) and (2) would be thus either true or

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<sup>33</sup> Miller (2010)

<sup>34</sup> An idealist (such as Berkeley), however, might disagree.



false even if there were no way of determining which was which.<sup>35</sup> Meanings, on this view, would be verification-transcendent. Meanings, however, could be verification-transcendent in a couple of different ways. First of all, meaning facts might be identified with ordinary natural facts, discoverable through empirical investigation, and perhaps reducible to facts about human psychology, social relationships, and/or the physical world. Because this account of meaning facts makes no appeal to any facts beyond those examined in natural science, we can, by analogy with other forms of philosophical naturalism, call this type of realism *semantic naturalism*.<sup>36</sup> Alternatively, one might be inclined to take meaning facts to be irreducible to any natural fact. Following philosophers such as Jerrold Katz, one might take meanings to be *sui generis* Platonic entities independent of both the world and our minds.<sup>37</sup> Meaning facts, on such a view, would be facts about such Platonic entities. Call this *semantic platonism*.

On the other hand, one might identify the meanings of certain statements with their truth conditions. This is a weaker criterion for semantic realism, since it does not require meanings to be recognition- or verification-transcendent in order for them to be real, only that they be identified with truth-conditions and not anything else. Meanings would not exist independently of how speakers act or of what they believe, but meaning statements could still be true or false. This is because we would be operating with a deflationary account of truth and meaning. Taking such statements to be true or false does not, at least without further argument, commit us to the existence some special class of metaphysical entities called 'meanings' (as the Platonist argues), nor does it commit us to meaning facts being identified with facts about the natural world (as the naturalist

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<sup>35</sup> Thanks to Michael Hymers for stressing this point to me.

<sup>36</sup> I adopt this definition from Hattiangadi (2007).

<sup>37</sup> For example, consider some of the methodological arguments in Katz (1984).

argues). The approach counts as a realist approach, because meaning is here considered to be a matter of truth, and not something like assertibility.<sup>38</sup>

Let us call the assumption that meaning statements bear truth-values and express facts, 'the semantic realist thesis' ('the realist thesis' for short). As we can see from this brief discussion, the realist thesis lies at the foundation of a number of quite distinct semantic views, ranging from naturalism to platonism to deflationism. If the thesis can be undermined, then a whole range of realist views will be threatened. For this reason, those interested in denying a factual basis for meaning aim to show that the realist thesis is untenable for a variety of reasons. In what follows, I want to focus on one such challenge to the realist thesis, the claim that it should be rejected because it is incompatible with another seemingly intuitive semantic thesis: that meaning is, in some real sense, normative.

### **3.4 The Semantic Normativity Thesis**

Consider the second of the two accounts of correct and incorrect use that we rehearsed at the beginning of this chapter. It will be recalled that this second way of reading my mistake about the proper application of 'aubergine' was to treat my error as a normative one. Instead of believing something false, I was doing something wrong.

In other words, on this way of looking at meaning, statements such as (1) and (2) do not express facts, so much as they express possible norms of behaviour. The correctness conditions for words and phrases are thus not in the business of pointing out a particular fact (as they would if they were aimed at factual correctness); they instead

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<sup>38</sup> The realism/anti-realism distinction seems to break down in such cases, and indeed, even a realist reading of this approach seems consistent with linguistic normativity. Thanks to Michael Hymers for this point.

express the (perhaps implicit) rule, norm, or standard according to which one is to govern one's linguistic behaviour. Knowing the meaning of a word or a phrase therefore has real implications for the way that one *ought* to use it. Let us call the assumption that meaning statements express norms of behaviour, the 'semantic normativity thesis' (the 'normativity thesis' for short). It is this claim that is supposed to be incompatible with the realist thesis. The claim that the two theses are incompatible has its origins in a particular reading of Kripke's Wittgenstein's skeptical argument.<sup>39</sup> It will thus be well worth our while to go over the basics of the skeptical argument so that we might see the origins of the incompatibility claim.

### 3.5 Meaning Skepticism

In *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, Saul Kripke claims to have discovered a 'new form of skepticism' in the course of a reading of the sections leading up to section 243 of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*.<sup>40 41</sup> The skepticism arises, argues Kripke, because any attempt to account for meaning by citing facts will result in a paradox.

Kripke develops this paradox by means of the following scenario: A subject (let us call her Irmgard), taken to be competent in arithmetic, is asked to add two numbers greater than any she has added before. Although these numbers will, of necessity, be very large, for simplicity's sake we can stipulate that they are 57 and 68. After doing the calculations, Irmgard arrives at the answer '125'. So far so good. But imagine now that a

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<sup>39</sup> This reading of Kripke's Wittgenstein originates with Paul Boghossian (1989) and continues with (to name only a few) Wikforss (2001), Boghossian (2003), Hattiangadi (2006, 2007), and Whiting (2007).

<sup>40</sup> Section 243 is traditionally taken to be the beginning of the Private Language Argument.

<sup>41</sup> Strictly speaking, the skeptical argument should be attributed neither to Wittgenstein, nor to Kripke, but to a particular reading by Kripke, of Wittgenstein.

'bizarre skeptic' asks her how she can be so confident in her answer. Irmgard might well reply that, given the meaning of 'addition' (or 'add' or '+') and her own mathematical abilities, she can be certain that her answer of '125' was the correct one. The skeptic, however, may respond by asking her to cite some fact, the knowledge of which *constitutes* her knowing the meaning of 'addition'. Irmgard might answer this question by citing any number of different facts. For example, she might appeal to the fact that she has added numbers many times before and that, in this case, she is merely carrying out her past intentions. The skeptic might respond by noting that, since these are two numbers she has never before added, her past intentions would be perfectly consistent with some other rule. For example, Irmgard may well have been following the rule of 'quaddition', which states something like the following:

Q: Take the sum of the two arguments, except when one of them is greater than 67, in which case answer 5.

Because Irmgard is (by hypothesis) dealing with unfamiliar numbers, there is no way to determine whether her past intentions were to add, or whether they were to 'quadd'. For this reason, facts about her past intentions cannot *constitute* her knowledge of the meaning of 'addition' or 'plus', since these facts will be equally consistent with the knowledge of the meaning of 'quaddition' or 'quus'. Similarly, facts about Irmgard's past behaviour will be consistent with both interpretations. Indeed, argues Kripke, *any* fact we cite in support of Irmgard's semantic knowledge will be consistent with such bizarre scenarios.

What Kripke's skeptic asks the realist to do is this: Cite some fact or another that (without begging the question) distinguishes cases in which someone like our subject has made a mistake of addition, and cases in which she correctly executes quaddition (or some other equally bizarre arithmetic rule). The argument just rehearsed suggests that there is no fact capable of making this distinction.

It is worth pausing at this stage in the discussion in order to dispense with a couple of early objections. For instance, one might think that the skeptical argument just rehearsed applies only to characterizing what is meant by individual speakers ('speaker's meaning'). If we were to expand the scope of our investigation to encompass a community of speakers, and consider their collective knowledge of the language they speak, we might get around the physical and functional limitations of individual minds. In so doing, we might hope to avoid the worst bite of the skeptical argument. Changing the scope of the investigation in this way, however, fails to eliminate the skepticism. This is because, though much wider than that possessed by individuals, the experience of linguistic communities is still *finite*. Consider again the case of addition. Now, the relevant meanings of 'plus' and 'addition' are thought to reside with the intentions of the community to go on in the same way.<sup>42</sup> The problem of unfamiliar numbers again reasserts itself. At some point, someone in the community will be asked to add two numbers no one in the community has yet added. As such, all facts about the past intentions or behaviours of that community will be just as compatible with 'quaddition' interpretations as facts about the intentions or behaviours of a single speaker. Therefore knowledge of such facts cannot constitute understanding the meaning of the plus sign. Kripke takes this form of scepticism to be *global* in scope— the paradox occurs whether

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<sup>42</sup> If communities are the type of things that can be said to have intentions.

we take meaning facts to be the province of the individual or the community.

One might also be inclined to think that the problem described above is limited to mathematical concepts such as addition (where there are potentially infinite possibilities of application). But it is fairly easy to draw up examples to show that this is not the case. For example, in our favourite case, what fact makes it true that I misapplied 'aubergine' rather than followed a different semantic rule? Assume that I changed my usage of the word on June 9<sup>th</sup>, 2004. My past behaviour is consistent with the following rule of meaning: "Use 'aubergine' to refer to zucchinis at all times prior to June 9<sup>th</sup>, 2004. Afterwards, use it to refer to eggplants." This rule of meaning, however bizarre it may appear, would be consistent with all facts about my past behaviour and intentions. Therefore these facts cannot *constitute* the correct interpretation of the word.

Kripke also entertains objections originating from dispositionalist theories of meaning, and it is at this point that semantic normativity explicitly enters the field of play. Dispositionalists attempt to get around the problem of unfamiliar numbers by pointing to one's disposition to perform the same behaviour or obey the same intention as one has in the past. In the addition case, our subject has never added any number greater than 67, but she is still justified in answering '125' when asked to add 57 and 68 because her disposition is to treat unfamiliar numbers in the same way as she treats familiar ones. In other words, we can say that she knows the meanings of 'addition' and 'plus', even in unfamiliar circumstances, because she is *disposed* to use those words in the same way she always has.

Kripke, however, does not believe that such an account counts as an *explanation* of meaning. The reason is that "[t]he Dispositionalist gives a *descriptive* account of this

relation: if '+' meant addition, then I will answer '125'. But this is not the proper account of the relation, which is *normative*, not descriptive."<sup>43</sup> The problem, it seems, is dealing with the possibility of error: "Computational error, finiteness of my capacity, and other disturbing factors may lead me not to be *disposed* to respond as I *should*, but if so, I have not acted in accordance with my intentions."<sup>44</sup> In suggesting that one's past behaviour and intentions can be extended to unfamiliar circumstances, the Dispositionalist effectively makes a *prediction* about what one will do once those circumstances are in place. But errors are a fact of life. If, due to fatigue or some other impairment, Irmgard makes an error when adding two unfamiliar numbers, this prediction will go unfulfilled. If we amend our account of the disposition so that it allows for the error, it can no longer count as the *meaning* of "plus" (because the error would then cease to be an error).

Dispositional facts are of no help in giving the meaning of words and phrases because they are focused on explaining what speakers *actually* do. And actual speakers make all kinds of errors. As such, we need some account of what a subject *ought* to do, not of what she *will* do.

### 3.6 The Skeptical Solution

Where does this leave us? In order to see the options open to us, recall, once again, the two meaning statements cited above:

- (1) 'Aubergine' means *zucchini*.
- (2) 'Aubergine' means *eggplant*.

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<sup>43</sup> Kripke (1982), p. 37

<sup>44</sup> Kripke (1982), p. 37

Sentence (1) accords with my past usage of the word 'aubergine', while sentence (2) accords with my present one. All are agreed that my past usage was incorrect and that my present one is correct. At issue, is how my error (and my rectification of that error) is to be understood. On a realist picture, my error consisted in not apprehending some fact or another. When I used the word 'aubergine' to refer to zucchinis, it was because I either believed something false (perhaps the statement in (1)), or else did not apprehend the proper fact. If the skeptical argument goes forward, however, then there is no fact of the matter the knowledge of which would constitute my knowing the meaning of 'aubergine.' We might answer the skeptical argument in one of two ways. First of all, we might try to find some heretofore unmentioned fact that somehow is not subject to the doubts expressed by the skeptical argument. This would be a *straight* solution to the paradox. Secondly, if we suspect that no such candidate facts are forthcoming, we might deny that knowing the meaning of a word involves knowing a fact. This would be a *skeptical solution* to the skeptical argument. Kripke takes this second tack.

Kripke's skeptical solution is to suggest that a person may be asserted to understand the meaning of a word or phrase when she behaves in ways that do not deviate too much from what the relevant linguistic community expects: "All that is needed to legitimize assertions that someone means something is that there be roughly specifiable circumstances under which they are legitimately assertible, and that the game of asserting them under such conditions has a role in our lives."<sup>45</sup> This means that speakers may still be deemed to understand the meaning of a word, even if they

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<sup>45</sup> Kripke's discussion of the skeptical solution begins on page 55 of *WRPL* (the cited passage is from page 77-78). For more detailed accounts of the skeptical solution see Kusch (2006), 25-41 and Hymers (2010), p.136-147.



occasionally make mistakes. If these mistakes are widespread and persistent, however, we might revoke our judgment that the speaker understands the meaning of the term in question. So, in my younger and foolish days, when I used 'aubergine' to mean *zucchini*, my actions would lead other English speakers to judge that I did not understand the meaning of the term. Nowadays, however, my usage of the term more closely conforms with conditions expressed in statement (2)--More often than not, when I use the term 'aubergine', I use it to refer to eggplants. Even so, due to tiredness, distraction, or impairment, I may occasionally slip up and use the word to refer to zucchinis. When I do so, I am not using the word correctly. But so long as I do not persist in this behaviour, I will still be judged to understand what the word means.

It is important to note at this juncture, that Kripke is not claiming that meaning sentences are true or false in virtue of the beliefs or opinions of members of the relevant linguistic community. If this were so, meaning would have a factual basis—namely the sociolinguistic fact that the members of a given linguistic community agree about how the word is to be used. This would make Kripke's solution a straight, and not a skeptical, one. In any case, such socio-linguistic facts would be subject to the same worries that affected other realist candidates for meaning. A community's past intentions are consistent with a potentially infinite number of possible interpretations. So wide inter-subjective agreement cannot be a viable basis for meaning if we are to sidestep the skeptical argument.

What Kripke does seem to mean is that the assertibility conditions for someone's knowing the meaning of a word are weaker conditions than truth conditions (which are susceptible to the skeptical argument). If knowing the meaning of a word or phrase were

a matter of truth or falsity, then there would have to be some mental state, some fact I could know, that would count as 'knowing the meaning of aubergine'. The conclusion of the skeptical argument suggests that there could be no such fact. And yet, we talk about meanings all the time. If we are to understand what we talk about when we talk about meanings, our meaning discourse cannot be fact stating. Just as to be justified in believing something does not imply that it is true, being justified in asserting something does not imply that it is true, only that one has good reasons to say that it is. And so it goes with saying that someone knows (or understands) the meaning of a word like 'aubergine.' To understand the meaning of a term is to be judged to use it correctly, and this judgment is something that can be reconsidered and revoked under any number of circumstances. So one need not always get things right to count as knowing the meaning of a word. One need only be right consistently, most of the time, in a way that does not deviate too much from what the members of one's language community are given to expect. As such, meaning statements such as (1) and (2) express possible standards of behaviour which one may meet to greater or lesser degree. It is these assertibility conditions that we talk about when we talk about meaning.

At this point in the proceedings, I want to defer any evaluation of Kripke's skeptical solution until we have had a chance to discuss challenges to the skeptical argument more generally. For the time being, let us just note that the skeptical solution, when taken with Kripke's critique of dispositionalist theories of meaning suggests that he thinks that normativity is an important aspect of meaning. Because meaning is here considered to be something distinctly normative, we can call this particular approach to problem of meaning *semantic normativism*. It is this thread which will tie together our

discussions in the rest of the chapter.

### 3.7 The Incompatibilist Reading of the Skeptical Argument

If sound, the skeptical argument establishes that meaning cannot be a matter of fact. Even among those prepared to grant the argument's soundness, however, there are very different ways of explaining how it is supposed to work. In particular there is a debate about what role semantic normativity is supposed to play in driving the skepticism. Of particular interest to the present enquiry is the claim that Kripke's skeptical argument *presupposes* the incompatibility of the normativist and realist theses. Call this the 'incompatibilist reading' of the skeptical argument. If we take this assumption as Kripke's starting point, then the argument which follows can be seen as a procedure to determine which thesis to accept and which to reject. With the failure of each successive attempt (past intentions, dispositions, *sui generis* facts) to evade the skeptical argument, we have another reason to reject the realist thesis. If we start from the claim that the realist and semantic normativity theses are incompatible, and if error can only be explained by presupposing that meaning is normative, then it is the realist hypothesis that must be rejected.<sup>46</sup> If semantic correctness is a matter of right or wrong, it cannot also be a matter of fact.

Realists and anti-realists alike might have reason to find the incompatibilist reading attractive. For the latter group, it reconfigures the skeptical argument as an argument against the realist thesis: if what we are trying to explain is correct use, any

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<sup>46</sup> Of course, I have said nothing at this point about what kind of normativity might be involved here. Certainly, the skeptical argument will rule out many possible candidates. For example, as we saw in the last section, the normativity of meaning cannot be given in the form of a system of explicit rules, since such rules would themselves require interpretation. I take up this issue in more detail in my discussion of Brandom's approach to meaning. Thank you to Duncan MacIntosh for raising this issue.

explanation citing facts alone will be unable to do the job. Since the realist thesis is here conceived as explanans and the normativity thesis as explanandum, it is the realist thesis that should be rejected. Nevertheless, realists may well be attracted to the incompatibilist reading of the skeptical argument because it opens up a relatively straightforward way of refuting the skepticism: If semantic normativity thesis can be shown to be false, then the skeptical paradox dissolves.

### **3.8 Is Semantic Correctness a Normative Notion?**

In the previous section, I claimed that, on an incompatibilist reading, Kripke's skeptical argument presupposes the incompatibility of the semantic normativity and semantic realist theses. I also suggested that the skeptical argument itself can be read as an argument for jettisoning the realist thesis—the skepticism is driven by the apparent fact that semantic normativity cannot be accounted for by any theory with a realist orientation. Meaning, for Kripke, is thus an essentially normative phenomenon. To say that meaning is essentially or irreducibly normative, however, is not to say very much by way of a positive account. Kripke argues in favour of a view equating meanings with assertibility conditions, but few have found this 'skeptical solution' convincing. In the absence of such an account, semantic normativism itself stands in need of direct justification. Indeed, a number of philosophers have, in recent years, attempted to run Kripke's argument the other way—accepting that the two theses are incompatible, but marshalling arguments against the normativity thesis by way of arguments in favour of the realist one.

Recall the facts of our central case: At one time in my life, I took the word 'aubergine' to mean *zucchini*. Later, I learned that this usage was incorrect and that the

correct meaning of the word was *eggplant*. It is possible to gloss my change in usage as an instance of my learning the correctness conditions for 'aubergine'. The question under discussion is whether or not this move was a normative one. There are a couple of important observations about this case to keep in mind: 1) Because I was able to use 'aubergine' incorrectly, it seems that it should be possible to be mistaken about matters of meaning. Indeed, even if my mistake was merely a one-off affair, attributable to fatigue or inattention, a theory of meaning must account for the possibility of semantic error. 2) When I learned the actual correctness conditions for the word, I changed my usage in order to accord with them. In other words, learning the meaning of 'aubergine' seemingly caused me to alter my behaviour.

Observations of this kind form the basis of the intuitive appeal of the semantic normativity thesis. Indeed, it was the apparent inability of realist approaches to account for these features that drove Kripke's skeptical argument. The aim of what I will call 'anti-normativist' arguments is to show that the notion of correctness uncontroversially attributed to linguistic content does not in itself account for either the possibility of usage mistakes or the capacity to guide action. Although they come at the problem of meaning with different aims in mind,<sup>47</sup> most anti-normativists approach the topic with the belief that by undermining the intuitive appeal of the semantic normativity thesis, Kripke's skeptical argument can be short-circuited. The conflict between the realist and normativist theses would therefore be decided in favour of the former.

With some minor variations, all the anti-normativist arguments just mentioned use

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<sup>47</sup> For example, Paul Boghossian (2003) argues against the semantic normativity thesis in order to highlight a distinction between linguistic (non-normative) and mental (normative) content. Wikforss (2001) uses the anti-normativist argument in order to defend a dispositionalist theory of meaning. Finally, Hattiangadi (2006) uses the argument to defend a generally realist approach to meaning (though not, ultimately, to defend any *particular* realist account).

a version of the following argument:

- 1) The correctness conditions for words or phrases imply only hypothetical, and not categorical imperatives.
- 2) Hypothetical imperatives are descriptive rather than prescriptive in nature.
- 3) *Only* prescriptive/categorical normativity is incompatible with semantic realism.

This argument schema requires considerable fleshing out. Anti-normativists are willing to grant that linguistic meaning is normative in the minimal sense that words and phrases have conditions of correct application. At issue is whether this amounts to the normativity expressed by the semantic normativity thesis. Since they are also committed to the incompatibility of the semantic normativity and semantic realist theses, anti-normativists would appear to answer 'no'.

The first premise of the schema draws a connection between correctness conditions and the distinction between categorical and hypothetical imperatives. If correctness conditions guide action, the story goes, then they must do so by means of the first type of imperative. The second premise is a claim about a particular way of drawing the distinction between hypothetical and categorical imperatives. In particular, it is the claim that hypothetical imperatives are better understood as descriptions rather than as prescriptions. The third premise is a recapitulation of the incompatibility thesis, albeit one that suggests that only a particular form of normativity, the one taking the form of categorical prescriptions, is incompatible with a realist or naturalist understanding of meaning. Taken together, these premises are meant to establish the conclusion that meaning is not normative in the robust sense required to motivate the skeptical argument. Let us now consider the arguments aiming to establish the truth of each premise.

### 3.9 Hypothetical vs. Categorical Imperatives

Let us consider the first premise in more detail. If knowing the correctness conditions for words and phrases guides our actions, it must give us reasons for those actions. But what sort of reasons? Well, the reasons in question will be either instrumental or intrinsic. Intrinsic reasons are reasons for action regardless of what end one has in mind. Instrumental reasons count as reasons for action only insofar as one has a particular aim in mind. Intrinsic reasons give rise to categorical imperatives—rules that must be followed regardless of who one is and what one wants to do. Instrumental reasons, on the other hand, imply hypothetical imperatives—rules that function to encode relationships between particular means and ends. They are, therefore, only in force insofar as one has that particular end in mind.

Where semantic correctness conditions are involved, we are now faced with the question of whether they provide intrinsic reasons for using words or phrases in a particular way, or whether they merely provide instrumental reasons for so acting. A hypothetical imperative tells us what to do, given some desired end. If one lacks the desire to have the outcome in question, then the imperative will be without force—it will not serve as a reason for acting. A categorical imperative, on the other hand, is supposed to give one a reason to act regardless of the particular ends one has in mind. The notion of correct use is ambiguous between these two senses. In order to better understand this phase of the argument, it will help to clarify just what sort of role correctness conditions are meant to play in fixing meaning.

By way of a first approximation, we can say that the correctness conditions for a word or phrase help us to distinguish cases in which it is used correctly, and those in

which it is used incorrectly. If meaning is normative in the sense required by the incompatibility thesis, then we should expect correctness conditions for words or phrases either to draw the distinction between correct and incorrect use themselves, or else to police a distinction that is drawn by other means. Åsa Maria Wikforss has argued that the most natural way of construing the slogan that 'meaning is normative' is to take correctness conditions for words and phrases to track the truth conditions of sentences involving the concepts they name.<sup>48</sup> So, for example, one *ought* to use the word 'aubergine' only in cases in which one is presented with an eggplant. This is because sentences containing the word 'aubergine' are true only when referring to eggplants, and false otherwise. So one might be tempted to say that the norm in question involves the imperative "Apply 'aubergine' to all and only eggplants." But, Wikforss notes, this can't be all there is to the story. The reason is that truth telling is merely one of *many* things we do with language. In fact, one often utters sentences in ways contrary to their truth-conditions.

Consider, for example, the following two scenarios: 1) A grocer, finding himself in possession of a surplus of zucchini during a mania for eggplant-based cuisine, tells what he takes to be an inexperienced client that he has plenty of aubergines in stock, with the intention of delivering zucchini instead. 2) Upon delivery, the client (not so inexperienced as the grocer thought), opens the crate full of zucchini, turns to her partner and says, her voice dripping with sarcasm, "These aubergines seem awfully green. They must not be ripe yet." Both scenarios involve using the word 'aubergine' in ways distinct from its truth conditions. In the first case, the grocer tells a lie—he uses the word 'aubergine' to refer to zucchini in order to deceive his interlocutor. In the second case, the

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<sup>48</sup> Wikforss (2001)



word 'aubergine' is again used to refer to zucchini. In contrast to the first case, however, the intention here is not to deceive—the customer intended to make a joke; she was speaking *ironically*.

Since it is possible both to lie and to speak ironically, the anti-normativist concludes that the correctness conditions for a word or phrase (if taken to be the truth conditions of sentences containing it) imply only hypothetical, and not categorical imperatives. Although there may be some possible categorical imperative that one ought to always speak the truth, it is not clear that this would in any sense be a *semantic* norm, that is to say a norm that applies at the level of *linguistic* meaning. Instead, the claim that one ought only to make true statements would likely express a *moral* norm, while the claim that one ought only to *believe* true things would express an *epistemic* norm. Indeed, this is a line many anti-normativists take. For example, Boghossian argues against the normativity of linguistic meaning by arguing for the normativity of *mental content*.<sup>49</sup> In his view, linguistic meaning only *appears* to be normative because it is derived from the content of our beliefs and we have an obligation only to believe things we take to be true. In this case, the normativity would be epistemic, and not linguistic, in nature. Because of this derivative nature, semantic normativity would thus pose no barrier to providing a realist or naturalist account of meaning.

### **3.10 Descriptive vs. Prescriptive**

The second premise involved the claim that hypothetical imperatives are descriptive, rather than prescriptive in nature. If we accept the first premise of the anti-normativist argument, then the correctness conditions for words and phrases imply hypothetical and

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<sup>49</sup> Boghossian (2003)

not categorical imperatives. The second premise deals with the potential for correctness conditions to guide action. Anandi Hattiangadi argues that the major issue is whether correctness conditions (which she calls 'rules of correctness') *prescribe* or merely *describe* correct use. Hattiangadi defines a rule of correctness as a rule that “distinguishes between those uses that accord with the meaning and those which do not.”<sup>50</sup> A rule of correctness is thus a means of sorting possible uses of a word or phrase into those which are 'correct' and those which are 'incorrect'.

The intuitive support for this phase of the anti-normativist argument derives, I think, from the observation that hypothetical imperatives often encode means-ends relationships. So the imperative “If you want to get from Toronto to Windsor without busting your budget, take the train” identifies a means (taking the train) that accomplishes a given end (getting from Toronto to Windsor inexpensively). The felicity of this imperative relies on a series of facts (the distance between Toronto and Windsor, whether there is train service between the two cities, whether this service is inexpensive compared to other means of transport). Now, one might dispute the truth or falsity of any one (or indeed all) of these claims, but, in so doing, one will notice that there is not a normative claim to be found among them. The connection between means and ends is established without recourse to any normative premises or concepts. Hypothetical imperatives of this sort merely encode *descriptions* of the world.

In contrast, the moral imperative “If you want to be good, maximize happiness” contains a normative concept (i.e. 'good') and expresses the claim that this normative concept is fulfilled only if one maximizes happiness. Again, one might dispute the felicity of this claim, but in doing so, one is disputing a pretty straightforwardly *normative* issue.

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<sup>50</sup> Hattiangadi (2006), p. 223

This, it is thought, is the import of Moore's 'open question' argument.<sup>51</sup> Normative concepts such as 'good' cannot be constitutively related to purely natural concepts (such as 'producing pleasure in humans') because once this claim is asserted, it is perfectly intelligible to ask whether 'good' really is 'producing pleasure in humans'. Insofar as means-ends claims make statements about the relationships holding between various non-normative facts, they are really covert descriptions. Moral claims, because they make claims about the relationship between normative and non-normative concepts, make *prescriptions*.

This is a subtle point, so it will help to have an example. To borrow one of Hattiangadi's, a sign, posted in front of a roller-coaster, that says that one must be at least four feet tall in order to ride, seems to express something normative (in the sense of expressing who is or who is not permitted to ride the roller-coaster), but it does so by means of picking out some non-normative fact about the world (height).<sup>52</sup> A child under four feet tall is not permitted to ride the roller coaster, because she is too short. While this is, in some sense, a normative claim, it is not so in any robust sense because “whether or not she [meets the standard] is a straightforwardly non-normative, natural fact—it is the fact that she is four feet tall.”<sup>53</sup> Since there is nothing that can be done to make this fact obtain that is within the power of the individual so advised, there is no sense in which the rule expressed by the sign *prescribes* an action.

Consider now a rule derived from the correctness conditions for a word like 'aubergine'. Such a rule would pick out certain situations in which it would be correct to apply the term to something (specifically, those cases in which one is presented with an

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<sup>51</sup> Moore (1903)

<sup>52</sup> Hattiangadi (2006), p. 224

<sup>53</sup> Hattiangadi (2006), p. 224

eggplant). According to the rule, it would be correct to apply the word 'aubergine' only to eggplants. But being an eggplant is not itself something normative. All the correctness conditions for the word 'aubergine' have done is show that the class of eggplants overlaps with that of things sincerely called 'aubergines'.

In Hattiangadi's view, such a rule may well be a description of correct use, but such a description will be motivationally inert. It will tell one nothing about how one is to act. Although one might, under certain circumstances, feel obligated to apply the word 'aubergine' only to eggplants, such an obligation is best understood as a moral or pragmatic, not as a semantic, norm. Rules of semantic correctness are not genuine instances of action-guiding normativity, they merely encode means-end relationships. Hypothetical –i.e., means-ends—imperatives are consistent with a descriptive or naturalist approach to phenomena, since they merely describe a relationship between their antecedents and consequents. In the semantic case, Hattiangadi argues, rules of correctness apply only in cases in which one desires to speak the truth (or at the very least, cases in which one desires to use words in accordance with their conventional meanings). If one does not have the desire to speak the truth (as in the cases of the liar and the ironist), then there is no reason to heed the imperative derived from the correctness rule. In order to make trouble for realist theories of linguistic content, the norms involved must guide actions in a *prescriptive* sense.

### **3.11 Prescriptivity, Categorical Imperatives, and the Incompatibility Thesis**

Finally, let us consider the third premise of the anti-normativist argument. As will

be recalled, it states that only categorical, prescriptive normativity is incompatible with semantic realism. So put, the third premise is a specification of the incompatibility claim. The realist thesis holds that meaning statements express statements of fact (however these facts are thought to be construed). The normativity thesis states that meaning statements express standards of behaviour. In other words, it often seems as though the correctness conditions for words and phrases tell us how we ought to behave. It was this action-guiding role for semantic normativity which was thought to render the two theses incompatible.<sup>54</sup> For these two theses to be incompatible, the sense of rightness or wrongness expressed by the normativity thesis must be incapable of being expressed in terms of factual statements. The third premise of the anti-normativist argument states that the incompatibility occurs only when the normativity involved is categorical in nature.

An action might be motivated by some desire, or it might be motivated by some rule or standard. If the former, the action should only be performed if it satisfies that desire. If the latter, the action should be performed regardless of what one's desires happen to be. Imperatives are statements of what one ought to do. Hypothetical imperatives encode means ends relationships—that some action or another is an effective means of achieving a particular end. But if one does not have a desire to achieve the end, one will not be motivated to perform the action. Categorical imperatives, on the other hand, are both constitutive and prescriptive.<sup>55</sup> They tell us what kinds of things ought to be valued (the good will, happiness, flourishing) and how one ought to recognize those values in our acts (by, for example, acting according from a good will, or by maximizing

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<sup>54</sup> Recall, once again Kripke on the dispositionalist: “[t]he Dispositionalist gives a *descriptive* account of this relation: if ‘+’ meant addition, then I will answer ‘125’. But this is not the proper account of the relation, which is *normative*, not descriptive.” (Kripke 1982, p. 37)

<sup>55</sup> I adopt this way of putting things from Hattiangadi (2006).

happiness).

To use a word or phrase in a particular way is to perform a particular kind of action. If linguistic meaning were normative in a categorical sense, the correctness conditions for words and phrases would both tell us what the words mean, and impel us to use them in a particular way, regardless of our other aims and desires. But as the case of the dishonest grocer would indicate, we are often not so impelled. It was not that the grocer did not understand the meaning of 'aubergine', it was that he intentionally used it in a way contrary to its meaning. If correctness conditions were categorical imperatives, then he should have been forbidden from doing this *on semantic grounds*, and this does not seem to be the best way of describing what is wrong in this case. Here the normativity involved appears to be moral, and not linguistic in nature. So while the correctness conditions for a word or phrase may well constitute what that word or phrase means, they do not prescribe how it is to be used. The motivation must come from elsewhere (from a moral imperative to tell the truth, or a desire to use words only according to their conventional meanings).

Accordingly, although correctness conditions help us to distinguish between correct and incorrect use, they do *not* guide our actions in the sense of providing us an intrinsic reason for using a word in a particular way. Although they may appear to guide our actions, the guidance originates from some other source. The anti-normativist thus concludes: correctness conditions for words or phrases are either categorical or hypothetical imperatives. If hypothetical, they describe means-ends relationships which do not threaten the realist. If categorical, their normativity is derived from some other domain. There is thus no reason to believe that meaning is normative in any sense that

would threaten a realist picture of meaning.

### **3.12 Defending Semantic Normativity (Or: Tales From the Riverbank)**

Or so, at least, the story goes. The upshot of the anti-normativist argument is that attributions of meaning (specifically linguistic meaning) are normative only in the sense that hypothetical imperatives are. Norms of this kind are not *prescriptive* but *descriptive*, and so their presence is *not* incompatible with the existence of robust meaning facts. The anti-realist implications of Kripke's skeptical argument can be discounted on this view, because the semantic normativity required to properly instantiate the incompatibility thesis must be categorical and not hypothetical in nature. What are we to make of this argument?

I am willing to grant the first premise of the anti-normativist argument. Meaning norms are more like hypothetical than categorical imperatives. The action-guiding potential of semantic normativity is desire-dependent. So long as we adhere to a truth-conditional account of semantics, the lying case shows that semantic normativity cannot be categorical in nature. If one's aims are served by lying or misleading one's interlocutor, it will not do to rigidly adhere to the truth conditions of the words one uses. In what follows, let us then take as granted that correctness conditions for words or phrases imply only hypothetical imperatives.

The second and third premises are more problematic. As we saw in the last section, anti-normativists like Hattiangadi and Wikforss are prepared to grant that there are such things as correctness conditions on the use of words and phrases. They are also

willing to grant that it makes sense to call such conditions 'normative'. What they deny is that this normativity is of a sort required to motivate Kripke's skeptical argument and to vitiate the notion of meaning facts. The main anti-normativist point, I think, is the following: hypothetical norms do not, it seems, tell us what one ought to do come what may. Instead, what they tell us is what features of the world or of our experience are necessary and/or sufficient for the completion of some end or another. They are therefore descriptive, not prescriptive, and are thus not incompatible with a realist (or naturalist) account of meaning.

In response to the anti-normativist argument, consider the following fable: A village is located near a slow moving, and not particularly deep river. The residents of this village are unable to swim, but must, on some occasions, cross the river in order to acquire supplies. There is no efficient means open to them to bridge or ford the river, but the river is sufficiently shallow to allow those villagers taller than six feet to cross without drowning. This means that only villagers over six feet in height will be able to cross to the far shore. The facts in this case are fairly straightforward. The cut-off level of six feet is set by the depth of the river, a natural fact if there ever was one. Similarly, the division of villagers into those able and those unable to cross the river is merely the division of the villagers into those over and under six feet tall. All the facts of the case are natural facts, and there is no problem providing a naturalistic explanation of why Andrea (who is six-foot-one) is able to venture to the far side of the river while Paul (who is five-foot-eight) is not.

Imagine, now, that time passes and the river shallows out such that it is now only six inches deep. Crossing it now poses no danger for even the shortest villager. The



villagers (descendants of those from the first fable), however, only *allow* people taller than six feet to cross the river. There is strong social pressure on those less than six feet in height, such that they will seldom attempt to cross the river. If they do attempt to do so, they will face harsh sanctions (up to and including being tossed out of the village). Here the fact that divides those villagers *allowed* to cross the river and those not is the same as before (being above or below six feet in height). This is a perfectly natural fact. However, the reason why Astrid is allowed to cross the river while James is not allowed is not simply that Astrid is over six feet tall while James is not. If he so desired, James could cross the river, in the sense that there is nothing physically preventing him from doing so. How, then, to explain his reluctance to do so? While the distinction is made on the basis of a natural fact, the *significance* of that fact is something non-natural.

Recall, once again, Hattiangadi's example of the amusement park sign. The sign forbid any person under four feet in height from riding the ride. Hattiangadi claimed that the sign did not express anything truly normative because it merely divided prospective riders into groups of people taller and shorter than four feet and there was nothing a person shorter than four feet could do to ensure that he would meet the standard.

Hattiangadi's example seems to me to be closer to the situation described in the second fable of the riverbank than the one described in the first. If we assume that a rule of correctness serves to divide things into two classes, we need to be aware both of what makes the difference (the fact that is the basis for the distinction) and the significance of this fact (why it matters for crossing a six-inch deep river that Astrid is over six-feet tall). In cases in which the facts in question are *arbitrary* it seems to me that no further fact will explain the *significance* of the difference-making fact. And the application of

linguistic signs and symbols to particular states of affairs is arbitrary in this sense. I think this is where the normativity comes into linguistic meaning. Now, this normativity may be reducible to some kind of natural fact by means of a generalized theory of normative reduction, but the prospects of such a global project are beyond the scope of the present project. For now, it suffices to observe that there is no straightforward reduction of even hypothetical norms to natural facts to be had in such cases.

To return to our central example, when distinguishing the correct application of 'aubergine' from that of 'courgette' it will not do to simply point to the perceptual abilities that allow me to distinguish one kind of vegetable from the other. My problem was not that I was unable to distinguish eggplants from zucchini (that is, it was not that I failed to discern that a fact was in place), but that I did not use the correct words to refer to respective sides of the distinction. So it is true that the correctness conditions of the word 'aubergine' hinge off certain parts of the world (eggplants) and that the distinction is drawn on the basis of some natural fact—that eggplants/aubergines are different from zucchinis/courgettes is a natural fact if there ever was one. But the conceptual distinction is not at issue here. The problem is that of determining the correct application of a word.

Here, I think it helps to think a bit about the notion of *correct and incorrect use*. As we have seen, there is some dispute as to whether or not the notion of semantic correctness is genuinely normative. This is because 'correctness' has both normative and non-normative articulations. One can be factually correct (in the sense of saying something true) and procedurally correct (in the sense of following the proper rules).

In order to better understand the distinction, consider the following example,

taken from an episode of *Cheers*:<sup>56</sup> In the episode in question, Cliff Claven, the bar's resident know-it-all, gets the chance to appear on *Jeopardy!* He does shockingly well, and by the end of the first two rounds has amassed a seemingly insurmountable lead. In Final Jeopardy, he is presented with the following clue (in the category 'Movies'): "Archibald Leech, Bernard Schwartz, and Lucille LaSuer". Panicking, he loses all of the money he has earned by answering (as per Jeopardy rules, with a question) "Who are three people who've never been in my kitchen?" Although factually correct (the first sense of 'correctness'), his answer is deemed procedurally incorrect (for being insufficiently specific). The correct answer (according to both senses of the word) was (of course) "Who are Cary Grant, Tony Curtis, and Joan Crawford?" What I am trying to argue is that meaning can be normative, if semantic correctness is of the second type (procedural correctness). And this form of correctness, I believe, escapes the worst bite of the anti-normativist argument.

There are multiple things we do with language, including lying and speaking ironically. But to lie, it will not do to say anything whatsoever. One must still be aware of the conventional meanings of the words that one uses. We can think about this in terms of the expectations of one's audience. To use words in a certain way is to put oneself forward to be the object of judgements by one's interlocutors. The correct way of interpreting a meaning sentence such as "'aubergine' means *eggplant*" is not that one ought, in all cases, to use 'aubergine' *only* to refer to eggplants, but that, within a community of British English speakers, it is correct to *expect* that one's audience will interpret 'aubergine' as *eggplant*. This, I think, is the upshot of talk about correctness

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<sup>56</sup> "What is...Cliff Clavin?" written by Dan O'Shannon and Tom Anderson, Directed by Andy Ackerman, originally aired January 18, 1990.

conditions—they are not directions about how to speak but norms of how one is to interpret the speech and anticipate the expectations of others. It is only because these norms are in place that one can have a practice of lying.<sup>57</sup>

Let's take stock: Earlier, I argued that correctness conditions were genuinely normative because they not only marked the facts on the basis of which one should distinguish words with particular meanings (the facts which make the difference) but also indicate that these facts are important/significant/relevant in some way. The normative component comes in in considering the facts in question salient, relevant, or otherwise significant in determining the proper interpretation of the words and phrases in question. Secondly, I argued that the correctness conditions apply not to how one is to speak, but how one is to *interpret* the words and phrases used by others.

Knowing the meaning of a word on this account does involve knowing some fact or another—namely the fact that individuates the meaning. But it also involves being subject to the norm of interpretation that holds that it is this fact (and not some other fact) that is decisive in giving the meaning of the word or phrase in question. These norms need not be explicit: indeed if they were, we would be subject to the same considerations about rule following that drove Kripke's skeptical argument. So, in claiming that meaning is crucially a matter of the expectations of one's audience, I am not claiming that it is reducible to some sociological fact about what members of a given linguistic community explicitly believe or expect about the interpretation of a given word or phrase (such facts are possible victims of quus/plus style transformations). Rather I claim that what matters are the implicit norms of interpretation that govern these expectations.

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<sup>57</sup> Note that this is different from saying that the practice of lying is parasitic upon that of truth-telling: here both practices rely on the same norms of interpretation.

It is not the case that the correctness conditions for 'aubergine' imply a prescription that one ought to *use* that word only when referring to eggplants, but rather that under *normal* circumstances (which may well be normatively determined) one ought to *interpret* it as applying to such vegetables. This interpretation-centred role is no less *normative* than an action-guiding prescription. Meaning is therefore normative in some real and ineliminable sense.

### **3.13 Brandom and Semantic Normativity**

At this stage, it may be wondered how the account of meaning just presented differs from the one Kripke puts forward in his skeptical solution to the rule-following paradox. It will be recalled that Kripke's account of knowing the meaning of a word involved substituting assertibility for truth conditions. To know the meaning of a word is not to know some fact, or be in some mental state, but to be judged (by the relevant linguistic community) to be a competent user of the word. For my part, I argued that to know the meaning of the word is both to know a fact—namely the fact that individuates the meaning—and to be subject to an implicit norm of interpretation which holds that this fact is decisive. At first blush, these two accounts of meaning may seem quite similar. Both reserve a role for community judgment in determining whether someone is using a word correctly, and both accounts treat these judgments as defeasible—Kripke's assertibility conditions are only rough and ready conditions for correct applications, while my norms of interpretation may vary according to circumstance.

There are differences, however. In reserving a factual element for meaning (correctness conditions are in the business of picking out facts, though they are not *only* in that business), I hedge closer to providing a straight solution to the skeptical paradox

rather than a skeptical one (though I shall not attempt to argue this here). Secondly (and more importantly), I do not identify the implicit norms of interpretation I cite with the norms of assertion. But if not assertibility conditions, what then are the norms of meaning? If what I have argued above is successful, this normativity does not come in the form of categorical imperatives, nor is it wholly constitutive of meaning, but it is nevertheless an ineliminable part of the semantic sphere. Notwithstanding its importance, I have said very little in the discussion so far about the origins and character of this normativity. Of particular importance is determining whether it is genuine *semantic* normativity, or whether it has been imported from elsewhere. In answering these questions, it helps to have a model to follow.

Although many philosophers have endorsed some version of the semantic normativity thesis, the version adopted by Robert Brandom in *Making it Explicit*, *Articulating Reasons*, and *Between Saying and Doing* is particularly well suited to address the issues we have been considering. Brandom's account of mental and linguistic content is characterized by the following (non-exhaustive) set of commitments:

- 1) Pragmatism: Meaning is to be understood in terms of use. Specifically, linguistic content is to be understood in terms of the role language plays in certain social practices.<sup>58</sup>
- 2) Normativism: The social practices that confer meaning on bits of language are normatively constituted. These norms are not explained in terms of anything else—they are taken to be basic.<sup>59</sup>
- 3) Inferentialism: Of particular importance are the norms of material inference.

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<sup>58</sup> See, for instance, Brandom (1998), Chapter 2, Part II, Section 3

<sup>59</sup> Brandom (1998), Chapter 1, Part IV

Inferential role, not representational status, is the basic determinant of meaning. Words and phrases have meaning not from what they represent, but from the role they play in inferences. Representation is to be explained in terms of inference and not the other way around.<sup>60</sup>

4) Discursiveness (or ‘the primacy of the discursive’): The norms of inference must be social norms having a certain form. Making inferences involves making and evaluating claims. Claims, in turn can only be expressed by means of sentences in declarative form, which express propositions, and have the pragmatic status of assertions. In *Between Saying and Doing*, Brandom refers to this as the ‘iron triangle of discursiveness’.<sup>61</sup> Discursiveness (or, as Brandom calls it, participating in ‘the game of giving and asking for reasons’) is the paradigm sapient behaviour.

5) Prescriptivism: The social norms that ultimately determine linguistic content imply prescriptions for future behaviour, including linguistic usage.<sup>62</sup>

6) Holism: Linguistic content is conferred by the totality of discursive practice—there are no independent, meaning-conferring domains of discourse.<sup>63</sup>

### 3.14 Unpacking the Commitments

*Pragmatism:* As we have been considering it, the problem of meaning is a metaphysical one. Specifically, it is the problem of adjudicating between realist (including naturalist) and normativist intuitions. Realist intuitions suggest (among other things) that meaning is

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<sup>60</sup> Brandom (2000), p. 45-47

<sup>61</sup> Brandom (2008), p. 117

<sup>62</sup> Brandom (1994), p. 83-85

<sup>63</sup> Brandom (2000), p. 15-16

a factual matter, that meaning statements express cognitive content, and that meaning statements have truth-values. These intuitions, however, may give rise to any number of metaphysical commitments. Naturalists and Platonists take meanings to be, in some sense, things in and of themselves. They might be thoughts or mental entities (à la Locke), the objects or states of affairs in the world that are referred to by words and phrases (à la Russell), or entities such as Fregean senses that are neither found in the mind nor in the world, but in a quasi-Platonic 'third realm'. In all such cases, however, meanings are thought to exist independently of how the words that bear them are used. Even on minimalist or deflationist views of meaning, the way a word is used is thought to, at best, provide *evidence* for what it means. It does not, in any sense, *constitute* its meaning.

To see this attitude in action, think of prescriptivists like those I discussed in the first chapter. One might attribute to them a claim like the following: “It doesn’t matter that most people today use 'disinterested' to refer to a state of boredom. It wouldn't matter if Shakespeare or Jane Austen or the authors of the King James Bible used the word in that way either. The word “disinterested” means (for whatever reason) *not having a stake in*. Any usage contrary to that meaning is simply wrong.” On this understanding, the ways in which a word or phrase is used can only conform or fail to conform with its meaning—a meaning which is, in some real sense, independent of them.

Brandom, however, turns this picture on its head—meanings are not pre-existing entities to which we must endeavour to fit our usage. Instead, usage constitutes meaning. In particular, the meaning of a certain word, phrase, or sentence is constituted by the role it plays in certain social practices. It is by sharing in these social practices that one comes



to share meanings with others. A 'social location' model of linguistic content will emerge as we unpack Brandom's other commitments.

*Normativism:* Since we are to look to linguistic use in constituting linguistic meaning, we should expect meaning to have definite normative character on this view. This is because the social practices that provide the context for linguistic use are themselves normatively constituted. In particular, participants in such social practices are, in virtue of participating, accorded normative statuses. A meaningful utterance is one that has the potential to change the normative status of some or all of the participants in the practice. These statuses, and the norms that institute them, are, on Brandom's view, taken to be basic. This means that, unlike many other philosophers of language, Brandom is not interested in reducing these norms to anything else, or does not think it is required.

In *Making it Explicit*, Brandom aims to explain linguistic meaning and the norms involved in it without succumbing to the twin pitfalls of regulism and regularism.<sup>64</sup> Regulism is the view that the norms of language (or social practice) must be given in the form of explicit rules. Brandom rejects this view since he thinks that it is not necessary to know an explicit rule in order to act according to a norm. Our social behaviour is normative in the sense that it is often open to sanction or praise without its necessarily being clear just what the rules involved are.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, the attempt to explicitly state all of our social norms in the form of explicit rules is likely to run afoul of the kind of skepticism about rule-following that drove Kripke's skeptical argument. This is because rule following is itself a normative activity. If we required explicit rules in order to

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<sup>64</sup> Brandom (1994), Chapter 1, Part III

<sup>65</sup> Brandom (1994), 42-46

engage in any kind of normative behaviour, we would require rules to tell us how to follow our rules (and then rules to tell us how to follow *those* rules and so on in a vicious regress).

Regularism also runs afoul of the rule-following considerations. Regularism is the approach that takes norms to be reducible to regularities in behaviour. So, for example, one might identify the norms of English usage with the patterns of the actual use we observe among English speakers. But this approach, in Brandom's view, is likely to run afoul of worries about gerrymandering. For any bit of behaviour, one may be able to identify any number of potential regularities. Although one might be tempted to pick out just those behaviours that instantiate the desired rule, in so doing one would be assuming what it is one was hoping to discover—a way of identifying norms with certain regularities of behaviour.<sup>66</sup>

So, for Brandom, meaning norms cannot simply be explicit rules, nor can they be reduced to simple regularities. However, if one takes these norms to be basic, irreducible, and implicit, one avoids many of the problems that marked regulism and regularism.

*Inferentialism:* Brandom is committed to grounding meaning in use and furthermore to grounding meaning in the norms of linguistic practice. Now he must give us an account of just what those norms are. By committing himself to an inferentialist order of explanation, Brandom commits himself to the view that the norms that mark linguistic meaning are the norms of inference. Specifically, Brandom commits himself to the view that the norms of meaning are the norms of *material* inference.<sup>67</sup> Material inference is to

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<sup>66</sup> Brandom (1994), p. 26-30

<sup>67</sup> Brandom (2000), p. 52-57

be distinguished from its formal cousin insofar as it is meant to be defeasible and non-enthymematic. This means that material inference (for example, the inference from ‘the match is struck’ to ‘the match will light’) can be defeated by appealing to new claims or evidence (e.g. ‘the match is under water’). In such cases, the new evidence ‘defeats’ the inference. Therefore material inference differs from formal inference by being non-monotonic—the addition of new premises can turn a good inference into a bad one.

Another respect in which material inference differs from formal inference is that material inferences are considered good without appeal to suppressed premises (enthymemes). The inferences are considered good (in a provisional sense) in virtue of the meaning of the claims they contain, and not because of any formal properties they possess.

What then are the norms that characterize material inference? In Brandom’s view, they are the norms of commitment and entitlement. Specifically, it is the norms involved in being committed or entitled to a variety of claims. Brandom believes that this pattern of commitment or entitlement will explain the defeasibility of material inference. More important for the problem of meaning is what might be called the “inferential profile” of a claim: that is to say what other claims one must hold in order to be entitled to it (the claims it follows from), what claims one becomes entitled to in virtue holding it (the claims that follow from it), and what claims one is precluded from holding by committing oneself to it (the claims that are incompatible with it). A claim’s inferential profile determines the meanings of the words and phrases it contains.

In conceiving of meaning in this way, Brandom inverts what he takes to be the traditional (representationalist) understanding of the relationship between meaning and

inference. On that view, the meaning of terms came out of how well (or poorly) sentences containing them expressed states of affairs in the world. The goodness of inference was then explained in terms of this connection to the structure of the world. On Brandom's account, however, the goodness of inference (explained in terms of the norms of commitment and entitlement) is taken as basic. And it is only once such inferential norms are in place that we can sensibly begin to speak of representation.

*Discursiveness:* So far, Brandom has committed himself to a use (pragmatist) theory of meaning, to the essential and irreducible normativity of linguistic (and mental) content, and to the relevant norms being the norms of material inference. Brandom's fourth commitment involves the social dimension of linguistic use, meaning and normativity. For Brandom, it is very important that linguistic meaning, and the norms that govern it, be essentially social phenomena.<sup>68</sup> This means that "the game of giving and asking for reasons" is not one that can be played alone. Indeed, the norms of commitment and entitlement described in the last section can only be recognized and tracked from within a given community. Brandom, following David Lewis, calls these tracking and recognition activities 'discursive scorekeeping.'<sup>69</sup> To keep score in a conversation is to keep track of the claims uttered by oneself and by one's conversational partners, and note how uttering each claim (becoming committed to it) alters the respective normative statuses of the participants (oneself included)—that is to say their future entitlement to other claims. This scorekeeping cannot be done on one's own (without any previous social experience).

Why should this be so? For Brandom, the discursive character of linguistic

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<sup>68</sup> Brandom (1994), p. 52-55

<sup>69</sup> Lewis (1979)

content and normativity is guaranteed by the structure of the claims involved. In Brandom's view, claims of the kind we have been discussing (the kind that can change the normative status of someone involved in a conversation, and thus be subject to discursive scorekeeping) must be complete sentences, in declarative form, expressing propositions, and making assertions. In *Between Saying and Doing*, Brandom calls this "The Iron Triangle of Discursiveness." The game of giving and asking for reasons is the primary function of language for Brandom—it is the linguistic activity from which all other meaningful linguistic activities can be developed. So Brandom's commitment is not just to discursiveness in general but to the primacy of the discursive in explanations of linguistic phenomena.<sup>70</sup>

With this new commitment in mind, we can now reconstruct an account of how the other commitments fit together. Because language is only meaningfully used in a social context, and because meaningful use of language in that context presupposes the mastery of the discursive game, we can see that it is the norms of this game that determine our use of the words and phrases we utter, and, because of the basic structure of the claims involved, this use must be dictated by the norms of material inference. And since all linguistic use is parasitic on discursive practice, we can see that use alone provides a reasonable basis for linguistic meaning.

*(Semantic) Prescriptivism:* From the discussion of Brandom's first four commitments we can realize that there is a tight connection between the norms of inference and social

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<sup>70</sup> "That our expressions play a suitable role in reasoning is an essential, necessary element of *our saying*, and *their meaning*, anything at all. Apart from playing such a role in justification, inference, criticism, and argument, sentences and other locutions would not have the meaning appealed to and played with by all the other games we can play with language." (Brandom 2008, p. 43)

activity and the patterns of linguistic use that constitute linguistic meaning (though not in the sense of a mere regularity of behaviour). That linguistic meaning is normative in this robust, original, and ineliminable sense, has important implications for further action. The norms in question, in other words, are not only constitutive of linguistic meaning, but prescriptive of further use. Brandom thus embraces the notion that his is a prescriptivist theory of meaning.<sup>71</sup>

Although they share a name and some superficial structural similarities, Brandom's prescriptivism about linguistic meaning should not be understood in the same way as the 'advice-prescriptivism' I discussed in the first chapter. Those prescriptivists, it will be recalled, understood their prescriptions in a more free-floating, explicitly regulist fashion—the prescriptions in question took the form of explicit rules, with language advice taking the form of a simple reiteration of those rules. Note, however, that Brandom's prescriptions need not and cannot all be explicit rules, lest we fall into the same rule-following worries that beset the views he criticizes. Advice, for Brandom, will thus not simply be a list of 'the Rules of the Language.'

*Holism:* In addition to the five commitments just enumerated, Brandom is committed to a variety of semantic holism. In his view, a commitment to semantic holism follows as a direct result of the commitment to inferentialism: "On an inferentialist account of conceptual content, one cannot have *any* concepts unless one has *many* concepts. For the content of each concept is articulated by its inferential relations to *other* concepts.

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<sup>71</sup> "Conceptual contents, paradigmatically propositional ones, are associated with linguistic expressions as part of an attempt to specify, systematically and explicitly, the correct *use* of those expressions." (Brandom 1994, p. 133)

Concepts, then, must come in packages.”<sup>72</sup> Because conceptual content is given by the inferences in which it is implicated, there is no sense in which it can be understood on its own. Furthermore, it is crucial, on a Brandomian approach, that the relationship between conceptual contents be a *normative* one:

Such holistic conceptual role approaches to semantics potentially face problems concerning both the *stability* of conceptual contents under change of belief and commitment to the propriety of various inferences, and the possibility of *communication* between individuals who endorse different claims inferences.

Such concerns are rendered much less urgent, however, if one thinks of concepts as *norms* determining the *correctness* of various moves.<sup>73</sup>

The meaning of “aubergine” does not change once one discovers that it is synonymous with “eggplant”. The meaning is given by the inferences one ought to make, not by the inferences one actually does make.

It may help to think about this in terms of conversational scorekeeping.<sup>74</sup> To the extent that we take a claim to be meaningful, it is because we recognize its ability to change one’s normative status in some way. Becoming committed to a claim commits one to other claims and precludes one’s being committed to others. But the meaning of a word or phrase is not limited by the inferences in which it actually (over the course of a given conversation) involves itself. Rather, it’s meaning is determined by *all* the inferences in which it may play a role. Furthermore, and most importantly, the norms in question are *public* ones, that is, ones which bind one regardless of what one believes.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Brandom 2000, p. 15-6, (emphasis retained)

<sup>73</sup> Brandom 2000, p. 29 (emphasis retained)

<sup>74</sup> See, for instance, Lewis (1979)

<sup>75</sup> Brandom sums this up in the following way: “It is up to me whether I play a token of [a particular] type

This commitment has two important implications. The first implication is the one we have just been considering: the meaning of a word or phrase cannot be determined in isolation, but must be given by the totality of a discursive practice. To use Brandom's phrase, "concepts [...] come in packages."<sup>76</sup>

The second implication ties in to the Brandomian commitment to the primacy of the discursive: One cannot, even in principle, imagine a separate, meaning-conferring practice outside of the game of giving and asking for reasons. We might imagine autonomous discursive practices operating in complete isolation from each other (for example: two languages spoken by two distinct groups that are geographically isolated from each other). It is, however, simply not the case that these two practices will fail to be (in principle) mutually intelligible to each other. In a sense, there are no meanings that are inaccessible for some speaker or another, though often the practical challenges of producing an effective translation will turn out to be too great.

### **3.15 A Worry**

In this account of Brandom's six commitments, we now have a sense of how linguistic meaning might work on a normativist framework. The meaning of the word or phrase is given by the particular material inferences licensed by the sentences containing it. How well does this account of meaning fit with the account laid out in section 3.12? The question is a difficult one to answer. On a superficial level, the two approaches to the normativity of language seem to be kindred spirits. For one thing, both make the case that linguistic meaning is importantly normative. Upon closer inspection, however, a number

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in the game of giving and asking for reasons. But it is not then up to me what the significance of that move is." (Brandom 2000, p.29)

<sup>76</sup> Brandom (2000), p. 16



of points of tension emerge. One point of tension can be found with relation to Brandom's appeal to semantic prescriptivism: In the hybrid view described above, semantic norms are norms of interpretation, and not (exclusively) of use. For Brandom, however, the norms are importantly related to both use and interpretation.

I think it is possible to resolve this tension by thinking about how norms of use and interpretation can be related. In the context of a conversation, someone speaking will have occasion to make any number of claims. It is up to those participating in the conversation to keep track of the claims made and to police the making and interpretation of any made in the future. Each claim made in the course of a conversation becomes part of the background for any claims made later on. Making a claim commits one to certain other claims, entitles one to make others, and precludes one from making others. It is up to all participants in the conversation to keep track of these commitments, entitlements, and incompatibilities. The process of keeping conversational score unites the dimensions of use and interpretation.

These considerations, however, uncover what I take to be a more troubling tension between the Brandomian approach to meaning and the one I endorsed in section 3.10. The Brandomian commitment to the primacy of the discursive suggests that that not all forms of linguistic activity are created equal. Although there are many things we do with language, all forms of meaningful discourse are ultimately derived from the production and evaluation of inferential claims. Although I did not, in setting up the hybrid approach to meaning, take a strong stand on the issue of whether there is a primary or essential function of language, I believe there are principled reasons for refusing to do so. In particular, I want to claim that whatever account we give of meaning, we must respect the

idea that there are multiple things we do with language.

It will be recalled that I differentiated my approach to meaning from the one endorsed in Kripke's skeptical solution by stating that the norms of interpretation I had in mind were not merely the norms of assertion. There are many things we do with language (we tell jokes, give orders, ask questions, and talk rubbish, to name just a few). While I find Brandom's account of conversational scorekeeping an attractive account of *philosophical* disputation, I am uncomfortable using it as a model for language use as a whole. Put somewhat more flippantly, my worry is that in attempting to give an account of the norms governing the linguistic behaviour of *homo sapiens*, Brandom ends up giving an account of the norms governing the behaviour of *homo philosophicus*. This gives us a tantalizing glimpse of what may be possible on a normative theory of meaning, but it is only a glimpse. In Chapters 5 and 6, I will attempt to develop this worry into a critique of the methodology Brandom uses in arriving at his conception of the linguistic—of what is, and what is not, central to language. For now, let us conclude by considering how these considerations relate to the problem of justifying language advice.

### **3.16 The Problem of Meaning and the Problem of Advice**

The picture of language advice I laid out in the first chapter relied on a distinction between two sets of skills or abilities a speaker or writer may possess. A speaker's basic linguistic competence (BLC) was defined (provisionally) as the skills required to understand and make use of one's native way of speaking. Socio-linguistic mastery (SLM), on the other hand, was defined (again provisionally) as those skills and abilities that, for example, allow one to speak or write to multiple audiences (with multiple ways of speaking), to engage in complex forms of discourse (such as writing a poem, or a

formal essay), or to engage in expected linguistically-mediated social gestures (such as saying 'please' and 'thank you'). Although I argued in that Chapter that the prima facie plausibility of the distinction would be enough to motivate the picture of advice that I went on to describe, the way it was presented there glossed over many important details. In particular, I said very little about how to sort language skills into one category or the other.

The semantic normativity debate, outlined in the previous section, shows the difficulty of classifying language skills. This suggests a way of mounting a stiff challenge to the distinction between BLC and SLM. For if linguistic meaning is normative, in any kind of robust sense, then the ability to speak meaningfully cannot count as part of the BLC. It will be recalled that the distinction seemed to rest on the fact that the abilities involved in attaining socio-linguistic mastery are normatively oriented while those constituting basic linguistic competence are not (mastery is an achievement, it requires work; competence is not, and does not). But if meaning is normative, there will be no principled way of drawing such a distinction, since the basic business of using and understanding one's native way of speaking crucially involves interpreting and producing meaningful discourse. So if meanings are normatively understood, then what was thought to be one of the constitutive abilities of BLC, instead finds itself as part of SLM.

We can think of the challenge posed by the semantic normativity hypothesis in the following way: in principle, according to the rough and ready distinction I employed, one should not be able to criticize someone for skills related to competence—that is to say skills related to conducting meaningful discourse in one's native way of speaking. This is because the speaker is already equipped with perfect (though perhaps implicit)

knowledge of the kind required to make herself understood and to understand others in her native language. But a big part of understanding others and making oneself understood is knowing the meanings of the words one is using. If the semantic normativity hypothesis is correct, then one's semantic abilities will be open to the judgement and criticism of others. Under that hypothesis, a person who uses 'aubergine' to refer to zucchini is not in possession of a mistaken belief; she is doing something wrong. And if her mistake is not a factual one, then semantic abilities cannot be considered part of the BLC.<sup>77</sup>

The normativist might go further: to the extent that any linguistic role is subject to social sanction, there is no reason to believe that syntax is necessarily norm-free. This leaves BLC with virtually no content. The normativist may then conclude that the distinction between BLC and SLM fails and with it our proposed theory of language advice. Even if we do not grant the normativist's claims about syntax, the rump-state version of BLC will be insufficiently meaty to make the distinction worth making. The connections between syntax and semantics will be explored at length in the next chapter. For now, it suffices to focus on the normativist's arguments as they apply to the semantic sphere.

### **3.17 Looking Forward**

So where does this leave us? If the above arguments are sound, then linguistic meaning is normative in some important sense. Brandom's identification of semantic norms with the irreducible norms of material inference offers an attractive, if ultimately limited picture of

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<sup>77</sup> Thanks to Duncan MacIntosh for this point.

semantic normativity in action. In particular, Brandom's account importantly takes the game of giving and asking for reasons to be the central activity of language—the activity we must first understand if we are to understand any others. In Section 3.15, I expressed my discomfort with this way of understanding the bounds of the linguistic. I also outlined a few points of tension between the hybrid theory of meaning (developed over the course of the first half of this Chapter) and Brandom's account (developed in the second half of the Chapter). Resolving this tension will be one of the major tasks of Chapter Five. For the moment, however, I want to shift gears somewhat and consider a challenger to both accounts of meaning, namely the approach to semantics championed by Noam Chomsky and his followers. This challenge will be developed in greater detail in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 4- The Name of this Chapter is Talking Heads: Chomskian Semantics**

### **4.1 Preamble**

In the second Chapter, I considered what I called ‘the problem of language advice’. Given that there is a well-attested and well-motivated demand for advice about grammar, usage, and style, how are we to tell good advice about language from bad? I suggested that the traditional ways of thinking through the problem, prescriptivism and descriptivism, miss the mark because they are unable to balance the genuine demand for advice about speaking and writing with the condition that such advice be accurate. In place of these traditional approaches, I pushed a hybrid account of advice, incorporating descriptive and prescriptive steps, and based on a distinction between two categories of skills or abilities: basic linguistic competence (BLC) and Socio-Linguistic Mastery (SLM). Basic linguistic competence consists of the skills required to understand others and make oneself understood in one's native way of speaking. Socio-linguistic mastery, on the other hand, consists in those skills and abilities required to navigate the wider social sphere. Language advice is targeted primarily (if not exclusively) at abilities of the second category.

In the last Chapter, I moved away from the practical dimension of language advice and into the metaphysical domain of meaning. In particular, I argued that normativism about linguistic meaning (the view that norms are somehow essentially implicated in determining the meanings of words and phrases) is compatible with the

notion that there are facts about meaning. The upshot of my argument was that linguistic meaning is best understood as a hybrid natural-normative phenomenon, in which the apprehension of certain facts is interpreted, by others, to be an appropriate means to a linguistic end (whatever such an end may be).

In this Chapter, I want to defend this approach to meaning from a possible objection originating from the naturalist camp. I have in mind a naturalized account of meaning initially championed by Noam Chomsky and developed in greater detail by James McGilvray. In contrast to the naturalist views canvased in the last chapter, this approach rejects the supposition that a theory of meaning must provide a way of determining the correct use of words and phrases. Indeed, the Chomskian approach deems questions of correctness to be irrelevant to a theory of meaning. Instead, the crucial problem of semantics is understood to be how to individuate meanings. This shift in strategy has both metaphysical and methodological consequences.

## **4.2 On the Problematic Nature of Linguistic Meaning**

The Chomskian approach to semantics is different in a crucial respect from the approaches discussed in the last chapter. There, the naturalist and normativist approaches shared a common assumption: that an adequate theory of meaning must seek to explain the 'correctness' of certain usages and the 'incorrectness' of others. Naturalists believed that an appeal to facts of reference would be sufficient for such an explanation, while normativists argued that an appeal to norms was necessary in order to have a sufficient answer. The hybrid view for which I advocated involved taking both natural facts and social norms to be necessary and jointly sufficient for an adequate theory of meaning.

I introduced the hybrid view by way of the fable of the riverbank: A group of

villagers live near a river deep enough that only those villagers taller than six feet are able to successfully ford it. If, later on, the river shallows out to the point that anyone is able to cross, but the villagers only *allow* those taller than six feet to do so, we have need for some further explanation for their behaviour. And this second case, I contend, is similar to that of meaning. Because the relationship between signs and referents is arbitrary, the issue of correctness cannot merely be explained by pointing at the factual distinction (as between those who are above or below six feet in height). Instead, the distinction between correct and incorrect uses of a word, though drawn on the basis of a fact (namely being over or under six feet tall), is not merely a factual distinction. Rather, it must rely on the judgment of others in the community that this is a fact which makes a difference.

Semantic correctness requires drawing distinctions based on facts, but precisely which factual distinctions one is to draw will be a normative matter.

In contrast to these assumptions, a Chomskian approach to meaning begins with the assumption that the crucial semantic phenomenon in need of explanation is individuation—that which makes one meaning distinct from another—and not correctness. So the task of a theory of semantics is not to determine when a word is correctly or incorrectly applied to a situation in the world, but to determine what makes it mean something different from some other linguistic construction. For the approaches discussed in the last chapter, individuation was largely a matter of reference. 'Cow' means something different from 'horse' because the first is only correctly applied to cows, while the second is only correctly applied to horses.

The Chomskian approach denies this union between individuation and reference, resulting in a theory of meaning that is distinctly internalist. Very roughly speaking, to be



an internalist about linguistic meaning is to say that meanings are 'in the head'. With a bit more precision, we can say that a theory of meaning is internalist insofar as it claims that it is possible to specify the meanings of words and phrases without appealing to anything beyond the cognitive resources possessed by a given language user. Because meanings are individuated by syntax, this means that language users have the capacity to have different words for 'horse' and 'cow' even if they never develop the capacity to actually distinguish horses from cows. The meaning of a word or phrase does not depend on what it is applied to in the world.

Furthermore, as we shall see, Chomsky's approach to meaning is internalist in an additional sense—meanings can be specified by appeal to the contents of a single part, or module, of the mind. As McGilvray puts it: “The basic thesis is that meanings are contents intrinsic to expressions (intrinsic contents), and that they are defined and individuated by syntax, broadly conceived.”<sup>78</sup> For this reason, states of affairs in the external world, and mental states not contained within the language faculty have no relevance for a theory of meaning on a Chomskian framework. From the perspective of explaining how we are able to perform the 'trick' of speaking a language, Chomskians hold that the real magic is to be found in the language faculty alone. Language users are, on this view, nothing more than 'talking heads'.

### **4.3 Background**

The background to this approach to semantics will be familiar to anyone who has previously encountered Chomskian themes in linguistics and/or the philosophy of language. Roughly speaking, Chomskians take on the following three commitments: 1)

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<sup>78</sup> McGilvray 1998, p. 225

*Linguistic nativism*: The capacity to speak a language is innate. One does not need to learn the rules of one's native way of speaking. Instead, all possible linguistic rules are contained within the mind from birth, and the speech one hears in one's early life serves only to select which of these rules will be the ones to govern one's idiolect.<sup>79</sup> 2) *Mental modularity*: The mind is not an ungeneralized thinking thing, but is divided into distinct faculties or modules. Each module is assigned to a particular task or function. Among these modules is one devoted to language processing.<sup>80</sup> 3) *Computationalism*: A mental module generates its output by formally manipulating abstract symbols that “deal with the states/processes/events of its domain.”<sup>81</sup> The symbols used depend on what is being processed. The language faculty operates on symbols that stand for the syntactic features of natural languages. Its outputs are the surface forms of the language one speaks and hears.<sup>82</sup>

These three commitments have their roots in observations about the manner in which natural languages are used, and the circumstances under which they are acquired. In particular, Chomskians put a lot of stress on the observation that “language use is unbounded, stimulus free, but (typically) appropriate.”<sup>83</sup> How are we to understand this claim? Language use is unbounded in the sense that there are no limits on the number of grammatically respectable forms that can be produced in a natural language. It is, for example, possible to combine ordinary words and phrases into entirely novel sentences (sentences that have not, heretofore, been produced in the history of the language), and be

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<sup>79</sup> Cowie (2010)

<sup>80</sup> McGilvray (1998), p. 248

<sup>81</sup> McGilvray (1998), p. 231

<sup>82</sup> Although, as we shall see, this is a highly simplified account of the Chomskian language module.

<sup>83</sup> McGilvray (1998), 236-237. Chomsky describes “the ordinary use of language” in the following way: “without any finite limits, influenced but not determined by internal state, appropriate to situations but not caused by them, coherent and evoking thoughts that the hearer might have expressed, and so on.” (Chomsky 2000, p. 17)

sure that such sentences will be grammatically (if not always semantically) tractable.<sup>84</sup> Language use is stimulus-free inasmuch as one can use a particular linguistic construction in any situation that one desires—that is to say there is no causal link between an utterance and its circumstances. If I desire to say, “It is raining” when the sun is out, there is nothing to stop me. Nevertheless, the utterances we make are typically appropriate to the circumstances in which they are uttered. The task of a science of meaning is to explain the appropriateness of these utterances in the absence of explicit instruction, or a causal link between what is uttered and the circumstances under which it is uttered.

Key to understanding the Chomskian approach to meaning is the famous poverty of stimulus argument. Simply put, the argument runs as follows: Children seem to move from silence to fully-fledged speech in a relatively short period of time. Languages, however, are complex things (for all the reasons listed above), and are governed by a number of complex rules. How, then, have do children come master these rules in such a short period of time? Children do not receive much, if any, explicit instruction during these years, and any they do receive may not be correct or accurate (remember the problem of language of advice discussed in chapter 2). Furthermore, the quantity and quality of linguistic information (stimulus) present during the early years of a child's life is remarkably poor. No child, Chomskians contend, is exposed to the full range and variety of expressions present in their native way of speaking during the critical period.<sup>85</sup>

The poverty of stimulus argument makes use of these observations in order to rule

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<sup>84</sup> See, for example, “Colourless green ideas sleep furiously” (Chomsky, 1957), or Stephen Fry's “Hold the newsreader's nose squarely, waiter, or friendly milk will countermand my trousers.” (From *A Bit of Fry and Laurie*, Series 1, episode 2, 1989)

<sup>85</sup> Cowie (2010)

out alternative theories of language acquisition. Since poverty of stimulus cases are the norm (*nobody* is exposed to enough information during the critical period to properly derive the complete rules of a language from the outside), an account of linguistic competence must show how all the essential features of language could be acquired in such a context. This rules out behaviourist theories of language acquisition whereby linguistic features are acquired by means of conditioning, since, Chomskians claim, no person could be explicitly conditioned to respond in appropriate ways to the infinite number of contexts in which one might use a particular utterance.<sup>86</sup>

The poverty of stimulus argument also rules out theories of language acquisition that picture language learning as involving explicit hypothesis construction and testing.<sup>87</sup> On such an approach, the child would be in much the same situation as a field linguist attempting to decipher an unfamiliar language for the first time. Like the linguist, the child would observe the speech around her and form hypotheses about its structure, use, and proper interpretation. Eventually the child emerges with a complete picture of the language. Chomskians reject this approach to explaining language acquisition because, in their view, there is not enough linguistic evidence around to decide one way or another about the truth of a given hypothesis. Linguistic nativism is thus the only theory left on the table.

The Chomskian approach has had the most success in terms of explaining syntax, and it is has been syntactic features that have been taken to be the innate features that are computed within the mind's language faculty. As the general Chomskian approach has

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<sup>86</sup> Cowie (2010)

<sup>87</sup> Although the inner workings of the language faculty are sometimes explained by way of a hypothesis construction/testing model, such process occurring at the level of a single mental module would be quite different from one occurring at the level of conscious human being. For this reason, I suspect that any talk of hypothesis construction/testing in the language faculty should be understood as metaphorical.

developed, however, the language faculty has been taken to be the locus of an increasing number of linguistic phenomena. In particular, Chomskians have argued that it is the locus of linguistic meaning.

Where semantics is concerned, Chomsky and his followers distance themselves from debates like the ones described in the last chapter. Those theories of meaning (including the so-called naturalist-descriptivist theories) take representation and reference to be the central concerns of a semantic theory. But those phenomena depend crucially on our social world. Indeed, if we follow Kripke's Wittgenstein, determining what a word refers to is, at least in part, a normative process. As such, reference and representational function are unable to be the subject of a systematic theory (Chomskians and Wittgensteinians seem agreed on this point). If semantic theory is possible, then, it cannot be about (or primarily about) representation. Chomskians believe that we should look to syntax, and to generative theories of syntax in particular, in order to find a solid ground for meaning.<sup>88</sup>

#### **4.4 The McGilvray Elaboration**

In his 1997 paper, "Meanings are Syntactically Individuated and Found in the Head", James McGilvray surveys the Chomskian approach to meaning, and attempts to fill in some gaps in Chomsky's own discussion of the topic. In so doing, he makes use of arguments that touch on both the metaphysics of language (and of linguistic meaning in particular) and on the methodology of linguistics (and of semantics in particular). Two of his arguments are of particular interest to the present inquiry. The first is an argument for an extended conception of syntax that includes all the features processed by the language

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<sup>88</sup> McGilvray (1998), p. 230

faculty (including semantic and phonological features). The second is an argument for replacing the so-called 'picture theory of meaning' with an internalist semantics that takes meanings to be 'perspectives' generated by the language faculty, which can then be used by our conceptual/intentional systems to interact with the world. Both arguments require some unpacking.

#### 4.5 The Argument for 'Broad Syntax'

Traditionally understood, syntax is the study of the formal features of linguistic structure: the science of the combination and decomposition of abstract, and as yet uninterpreted signs. What McGilvray calls 'broad syntax' goes beyond this traditional ('narrow') account of syntax by including information about the symbols themselves. What sort of information? Well, to start with, broad syntax includes information about grammatical categories (such as 'noun', 'verb' and so on) that indicate what syntactic nodes ('N', 'V', etc.) can be filled by a given linguistic symbol.<sup>89</sup> McGilvray, however, wants to go further. Chomskians, it will be recalled, identify syntactic structures with the features processed in the language faculty. If a linguistic phenomenon is such that it can be processed in this way, McGilvray argues, then it deserves to be counted as part of syntax. For McGilvray, then, "the domain of syntax includes all locally determined, intrinsic features of *linguistic* mental events."<sup>90</sup> But which linguistic phenomena, beyond the features of traditional, 'narrow', syntax, can sensibly said to meet these criteria?

Phonological features for one, semantic features for another. To understand why, it will help to understand how McGilvray thinks language-processing works. The

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<sup>89</sup> McGilvray (1998), p. 252

<sup>90</sup> McGilvray (1998), p. 243, (*italics in the original*).

Chomskian model of language processing is explicitly modelled on David Marr's model of visual processing.<sup>91</sup> Marr argued that the processing of visual information could be understood in terms of mathematical functions operating over numerical values. No appeal to the phenomenal character of visual experience need be made. On a Chomskian picture, language processing proceeds along similarly abstract lines. There is one important difference: instead of numerical values, the algorithms operating within the language faculty operate on specifically *linguistic* features. Among these features are those that govern, among other things, the sounds available in a given person's idiolect (or 'I-language'), the ways in which the symbols of the idiolect may be formally combined and decomposed, and (perhaps most controversially) the different ways in which these symbols (or structured groups of symbols) may be interpreted. At some point, the processing splits into two streams: the phonological features are stripped off, and eventually reach the module responsible for running the body's speech production systems (on this approach, this module is separate from the language faculty). The remaining features continue in their own stream, until they reach the interface with the conceptual and intentional systems responsible for language use (also taken to be distinct from the language faculty). McGilvray uses 'PHON' to refer to the structured set of features that interface with the production system and 'SEM' to refer to the features that connect with the conceptual-intentional systems.

The use of the term 'SEMs' to refer to the products of this second processing stream suggests that McGilvray takes them to contain genuine semantic information. But how could genuine semantic information arise from the operations of algorithms over

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<sup>91</sup> Or rather a particular interpretation of Marr's model. Marr explains his system in externalist terms—see McGilvray (1998) and Egan (2003) for arguments that, initial appearances notwithstanding, Marr is best understood as an internalist.

abstract symbols? The answer is that the information is already there. The language faculty comes stocked with all the information required to produce all possible languages. On the basis of speech heard by the child during the critical period, the language faculty selects the phonological, syntactic, and semantic features of what will become the child's I-language from this innate store of information.<sup>92</sup> It will be these features that will henceforth be computed by the faculty (using algorithms such as MERGE and MOVE/ATTRACT) in order to produce/interpret the interfaces which connect with the production and conceptual/intentional systems.<sup>93</sup>

This is an understanding of what goes on in the language faculty that goes far beyond what even philosophers sympathetic to both the modularity hypothesis and Chomskian nativism may be willing to accept. In order for this approach to work, the computations occurring within the language faculty must be supple enough to produce the fine-grained meanings that the typical appropriateness of language use seems to demand. In other words, for a nativist, internalist account of meaning to work, we need to show how the model of language processing just described is sufficient to individuate lexical items.

## 4.6 Against Representationalism

In the first chapter of *New Horizons on Language and Mind*, Chomsky expresses his dissatisfaction with representationalist theories of meaning. The problem, as he sees it, is

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<sup>92</sup> The phonological and syntactic elements in question should not be mistaken for the rich semantic, syntactic content associated with even ordinary language use. Although Chomskians contend that the language faculty contains everything one needs to use, produce, and interpret a language, the faculty requires input during this period in order to develop.

<sup>93</sup> McGilvray bases his account on Chomsky's 'minimalist program', the most recent iteration of his nativist approach to language. What makes the minimalist program distinct from earlier Chomskian models of language processing is that the number of algorithms have been drastically reduced (this speaks to the Chomskian commitment to producing a system that is as formally simple as possible).



that such theories, and externalist theories of content in general, are insufficiently scientific. One reason is that they require using methods (such as appeals to intuition, and elaborate counterfactual thought experiments) that, though familiar in philosophical contexts, have no application to scientific inquiry. Scientific inquiry, for its part, involves the application of specifically defined methods to a stable and coherent body of phenomena. Philosophical accounts of language (such as representationalist theories) do not have this character: “The surface grammar of philosophical analysis has no particular status in the empirical study of language; it is something like phenomenal judgment, mediated by schooling, traditional authorities and conventions, cultural artefacts, and so on.”<sup>94</sup> Philosophical methods are just too sloppy in their application to be of much use in a scientific account of meaning. Instead we must look to the concepts and methods of natural science.<sup>95</sup> Accordingly, Chomsky suggests we give up the notion that representation is somehow central to meaning and the idea that semantics is about providing an account of the ways our words connect to the world.

The study of I-languages, on the other hand, does possess all the features Chomsky associates with scientific (as opposed to philosophical) inquiry: “We are studying a real object, the language faculty of the brain, which has assumed the form of a full I-language and is integrated into performance systems that play a role in articulation, interpretation, expression of beliefs and desires, referring, telling stories, and so on. For such reasons, the topic is the study of human language.”<sup>96</sup> By limiting our enquiries to

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<sup>94</sup> Chomsky (2000), p. 28

<sup>95</sup> The distinction between scientific and philosophical (or at least non-scientific) methods reappears in a different form in the distinction between natural languages (which are geared for a common-sense view of the world) and scientific symbol systems (which are rigidly regulated technical means of representing states of affairs in the world). See the discussion in section 4.8 of this chapter.

<sup>96</sup> Chomsky (2000), p. 27. It might seem as though a Chomskian ought to reject categories such as 'belief', 'desire', and other folk-psychological terms/concepts, since they seem to be cut from the same cloth as

the I-Language, Chomsky believes, we gain the stable and coherent body of phenomena needed to sustain a genuine science of language.

The shift to the study of I-language helps to explain why a Chomskian account of meaning must be internalist. As McGilvray puts it:

restricting the domain of the theory to a restricted class of happenings in the head is one key to success—here and in other cognitive domains. To extend the domain of a computational theory of a cognitive competence to things outside the head, and within the head to other cognitive domains, is to broaden the task of the theory to the point that it becomes unmanageable: it undermines the effort to construct an honest theory.<sup>97</sup>

In this way, the theory is a doubly internalist one—it stays not only within the limits of the head, but entirely within the limits of the language faculty.<sup>98</sup> This is because we are looking for linguistic phenomena that can be generated algorithmically from relatively modest beginnings (the algorithms and processed features contained within the language module). Put another way, the goal of such a theory is to show how we can go from such humble beginnings to the wide range of linguistic phenomena demonstrated in everyday language use without leaving the confines of home (the language module).

These constraints limit the number of phenomena that can be covered by the theory. Traditional narrow syntax is in, as is basic phonology (though not the phonology that is actually produced). And so, contends McGilvray, are meanings. And not merely syntactic categorizations, but the fine textured stuff we expect from a *lexical* theory. If

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the philosophical concepts Chomsky is deriding. A Chomskian may respond by arguing that a commitment to naturalism need not involve a commitment to eliminativism. I'll have more to say about this in Chapters 5 and 6. Thanks to Duncan MacIntosh for raising this issue.

<sup>97</sup> McGilvray (1998), p. 234

<sup>98</sup> Egan (2003)

that's what's in the theory, what's out? Well pragmatics, for one thing—its just too messy—and with it questions of reference and representation.

Reference and representation critically involve the world and so threaten to make a mess of the theory. They also crucially seem to be normative notions (Chomsky appears ready to concede this claim to the normativist in the debate discussed in the previous chapter). As such, they cannot be essential parts of language. And this is because there are so many things that we do with language, that picturing the world, the activity most associated with questions of reference and representation, is but one of many. For this reason, such questions are kicked out of semantics and punted to pragmatics (where they exist as a kind of normative residue that resists scientific investigation).

#### **4.7 The Positive Account**

If not representations, what then are meanings on this framework? The answer: “Meanings are instances of event sorts that are in the head that constitute interfaces/concepts; they are syntactically defined and individuated. They are SEMs, or relevant parts of SEMs.”<sup>99</sup> Let’s unpack each of these concepts in turn.

Individuation is simply the process of distinguishing individuals of the same kind. In the case of meaning, it is the process of showing how one meaning is distinct from any other. One approach to individuating meanings would involve distinguishing them in virtue of the different ways they are used. Another approach would individuate them in virtue of some relation to objects and states of affairs in the world. Yet another approach would individuate meanings in virtue of their relation to something like a Fregean sense. What all these approaches have in common, however, is that individuation is something

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<sup>99</sup> McGilvray (1998), 264

that happens outside the heads of particular speakers. In other words, on such approaches, individuation is a feature of what Chomsky calls 'E-language'. E-language is the flip side of I-language. It is language conceived of as something *external* to the minds of individual language users. As such, it includes all socially- and politically-modulated linguistic phenomena. The paradigm of an I-language is the idiolect of a particular speaker. A paradigmatic E-language is, in contrast, something like 'English' or 'Mandarin', a public language distinguished not by its structural features, but by its social, political, or normative environment. On a Chomskian framework, a theory of E-language will necessarily involve an unscientific, or 'folk' conception of the linguistic. If we accept the above arguments against the relevance of E-language for scientific inquiries into the linguistic, we must either look for individuation in I-language (the proper evidence-base for the science of language), or else deny that it can be explained scientifically.<sup>100</sup>

McGilvray argues that the fine-grained semantic texture we seek can be generated via a suitably fleshed out account of broad syntax. To say that meanings are syntactically individuated is to say that meanings are capable of being distinguished in virtue of grammatical structure. Unlike the approaches to individuating meanings just canvassed, individuation by syntactic means is more readily integrated into a computational, internalist, and nativist theory of mind. Semantic features thus take part in language processing even at the very lowest levels. When these features reach the border of the language module as SEMs, they provide 'perspectives' which can then be made use of by conceptual/intentional systems to apply to one's experience of the world. As such, it would be wrong to say that one has the concept of 'cow', 'computer', or 'cantilever bridge' already from birth. It would be right to say, however, that one's language faculty has the

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<sup>100</sup> Stainton (2011)

ability to produce perspectives that would help our cognitive/perceptual/intentional system pick out those things in the world that could fill these roles.<sup>101</sup>

Since the processing that happens within the language faculty is formal and abstract, we need some means of connecting these computations to the dimension of use. We can make this connection by thinking once again about the different kinds of processing that go on in the language faculty. The language faculty is but one of many modules of the mind. Although these modules conduct their processing in isolation from each other, information is passed from one system to another. McGilvray calls this information an 'interface'. On the Chomskian story, the language faculty produces two kinds of interface: PHONs and SEMs. PHONs are passed over to the systems that govern the physical production of language, while SEMs are passed over to the conceptual/intentional systems that govern the use of language. Once split, PHONs and SEMs are independent of each other, which is why the relationship between the form and meaning of an utterance is arbitrary. Put another way, PHONs and SEMs are the information contained within the language faculty, organized in such a way as to be made use of by other systems.

On this approach to explaining language processing, there is no distinction made between semantics and syntax. By claiming meanings are syntactically-individuated, McGilvray and other Chomskians are not claiming that syntactic features are being *applied* to some undifferentiated semantic mass in order to produce lexical items. Rather, they are claiming that syntactic and semantic features are one and the same. The same processes that determine how phrases and sentences are to be constructed determine how

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<sup>101</sup> McGilvray goes on to argue for a nominalism, according to which, concepts are to be identified with these perspectives, effectively arguing that the language faculty is the faculty for world-making [at least in the conceptual sense]. I do not take up that argument here.

they are to be interpreted. Meanings are thus just as much *structural* features of language as syntactic features. Both areas of inquiry involve the *structure* of the information contained and processed within the language module.

#### 4.8 The Exclusion of the Normative

It is beyond the scope of the present project to evaluate the empirical adequacy of the general Chomskian approach. So I will say very little in what follows about objections to linguistic nativism, mental modularity, or computationalism. Nor will I attempt to assess the cogency of the poverty of stimulus arguments which underwrite this approach to meaning.<sup>102</sup> On what basis do I thus propose to evaluate Chomskian semantics? I am interested in the ways in which this approach aspires to be a *naturalist* account of semantics. In particular, I am interested in how a particular conception of naturalistic enquiry leads Chomskians to place constraints on what would constitute, to borrow McGilvray's terminology, an *honest* semantic theory. What I want to argue is that Chomskian semantic theory is determined as much by the methodology employed as by the empirical evidence. We can see this dynamic at work in the way that McGilvray approaches the subject of linguistic normativity.

At first glance, normative matters do not figure very much in McGilvray's account of semantics. In the early stages of his argument, McGilvray keeps his focus on the goings-on within the language faculty. As his focus shifts to showing the differences between his account of meaning and traditional representationalist accounts, it becomes clear that, for McGilvray at least, the absence of normative matters in a semantic theory

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<sup>102</sup> For a fairly extensive discussion of arguments for and against the poverty of stimulus, see Cowie (2010).

should be counted as a feature and not a bug. Indeed, in the following remarks, he criticizes representationalist accounts for opening the door to normative considerations:

when you think in terms of the expressions as representations in the sense of representing something in the world, you introduce normative issues: you have to speak to epistemic issues of truth and correctness of judgment and have to contend with the contrariness of human action. All these difficulties, highlighted by the creative aspect, show why semantics as it is often understood—as the domain of reference and truth—is beyond the scope of a serious science of language.<sup>103</sup>

Aside from running afoul of the creativity of language use (an empirical claim), a requirement that a theory of meaning account for reference also introduces normativity into the equation. It appears as though McGilvray here yields to the normativist in the normativity of meaning debate discussed in the last Chapter. The rigid internalism of the Chomskian approach to meaning is thus a way of getting around the rule-following considerations. By opening up a theory of meaning to phenomena outside the language faculty, one opens a theory to a wide range of normative phenomena, including the 'contrariness of human action'. In other words, it threatens to make semantics a 'theory of everything.' For this reason, questions of reference and representation must be excluded from any serious discussion of semantics.

Indeed, McGilvray stresses repeatedly that meanings (the SEMs produced by the language module) are importantly human-centred. That is to say they are useful for the type of creature we are. This contention fits well with couple of central Chomskian claims about language.

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<sup>103</sup> McGilvray (1998), p. 237

In the first place, the notion that meanings are interfaces between the language faculty and the cognitive-pragmatic systems seems to work well with the Chomskian animosity towards teleological approaches to language.<sup>104</sup> Tying linguistic content to the world requires we assign some particular function to language, a function that could be performed in better or worse ways. But given that we do many different things with language, it seems somewhat arbitrary to treat one as uniquely central or constitutive of the linguistic.<sup>105</sup> We therefore need an account of linguistic constructions that makes them appropriate to all existing forms of use. Because the language faculty, and the information contained within it, *constitute* the sphere of the linguistic on a Chomskian view, the process of providing such an account is simplified. The unbounded and stimulus-free character of language use is guaranteed by its compositional structure. Because the language faculty is able to generate an infinite number of SEMs from its innate resources, they are available to be applied to virtually any normal circumstance we humans are likely to come across.<sup>106</sup> We may not be able to say what it would be like for an idea to be green, or for milk to be friendly, but should we encounter a situation that requires us to speak of them in that way, we will not find ourselves at a loss for words. The SEMs generated by the language faculty are in no sense *designed* to be used in such

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<sup>104</sup> For example, here is Chomsky arguing against the idea that the basic function of language is communication “[I]t is unclear what sense can be given to an absolute notion of ‘basic function’ for any biological system; and if this problem can be overcome, we may ask why ‘communication’ is the ‘basic function.’” (Chomsky 2000, p. 30)

<sup>105</sup> Arbitrary, if this choice is made without argument. Note, however, that most arguments for the centrality of, say, assertion or discursiveness, rely on an E-language approach to the linguistic. They will thus not seem compelling to advocates for a Chomskian system. I will have more to say about this point in the next two chapters.

<sup>106</sup> For instance, McGilvray claims: “[A]n infinite number of SEMs is available, including an infinity that have not been used; the expressive power of natural languages cannot be exhausted.” (McGilvray 1998, p.276) Of course, merely having an infinite *number* of available SEMs would not guarantee the expressive inexhaustibility of natural languages, since one would have an infinite number of SEMs, even if one could only generate them for the natural numbers. Rather, it seems the appropriateness of natural language use could only be guaranteed by positing an infinite number and *variety* of SEMs. I thank Darren Abramson for this point.



situations,<sup>107</sup> but having been so generated, they are available to be used in any way our conceptual/intentional systems see fit.

Of course, the SEMs generated by the language faculty will fit some uses better than others. Furthermore, because they are produced with no particular function in mind, these interfaces may be used to greater or lesser effect. This is particularly the case where the use involved is representing the world. To see why, consider the sharp distinction Chomskians draw between natural languages and what McGilvray calls scientific symbol systems.

As has already been mentioned, natural languages are, for Chomskians, I-languages—that is to say the internal states of the human language faculty. The SEMs generated by the faculty by computations over these states are put to use by the mind's conceptual-intentional system, but these uses in no sense determine the structure or nature of the SEMs. As such, the semantic properties of linguistic constructions are generated independently of any particular context of use. Although some of these contexts may be judged more or less appropriate for a particular usage, this is no concern of the linguist. Her domain rests squarely within the confines of the language faculty itself. For this reason, the meanings of particular constructions of natural language are not in any way related to notions of truth, correctness, or accurate representation.

Scientific symbol systems, on the other hand, are ways of speaking specifically designed to operate in particular scientific or theoretical contexts. As such, they differ from natural languages in a number of different respects. McGilvray characterizes the

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<sup>107</sup> In keeping with the 'double internalism' of the Chomskian view, the language faculty operates separately from both the conceptual-intentional and the production systems. Indeed, it is only properly called the 'language' faculty because of its relationship with these other systems. In some other creature, with a different mental architecture, a faculty performing the same computations might be responsible for controlling locomotion, or digestion.

differences in the following way: “learning a scientific language is notoriously late and laborious, and people differ greatly in their abilities. Scientific systems are interesting, for unlike natural language, they actually come quite close to allowing one to define the meanings of expressions in terms of theory-internal truth-role or function.”<sup>108</sup> Note how scientific symbol systems are glossed in normative terms. Mastering a scientific symbol system is matter of degree and constitutes a real achievement. What's more, the meanings of technical or scientific terms are defined along the lines described in the last chapter, in terms of their relationship to the things in the world they name or describe.

At the end of his discussion of natural languages and scientific symbol systems, McGilvray makes explicit this split between the natural and the normative, noting that “if I-languages are natural languages and scientific symbol systems are not, the usual assumption that scientific languages are continuous with the languages humans naturally speak (and do not learn, but develop), is wrong.”<sup>109</sup> The non-continuity of natural languages and scientific symbol systems has a number of important implications. First of all, a number of externalist intuitions about semantics are ruled out. The standard externalist cases involved establishing an equivalence between a natural-language term (such as 'water') with a technical or scientific one (such as 'H<sub>2</sub>O'). When we discover that the colourless, odourless, substance found in our lakes and rivers is composed of two parts and hydrogen and one part oxygen, we can express this discovery by the sentence “Water is H<sub>2</sub>O”.<sup>110</sup> The idea is that natural language terms are meant to be common-sense concepts, while the terms of scientific symbol systems involve concepts developed to serve the very specific demands of particular areas of study. So while the terms 'water',

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<sup>108</sup> McGilvray (1998), p. 242

<sup>109</sup> McGilvray (1998), p. 242

<sup>110</sup> The example, of course, is from Putnam (1975)

and 'H<sub>2</sub>O' may ultimately refer to the same substance, their meanings are not equivalent. . Similarly, whether 'arthritis' refers to a disease of the joints or the muscles is undoubtedly a question for the experts, but (exactly for this reason) it should not be mistaken for a term of natural language.<sup>111</sup>

Secondly, because the technical terms used in linguistics are themselves a kind of scientific symbol system, the terms used to study natural language are not themselves natural language terms. Indeed, since McGilvray explicitly links natural language terms to common sense concepts, the distinction between natural and scientific languages provides another reason why common sense conceptions of language are not helpful in explaining linguistic phenomena. To see why, it helps to remember that, for Chomskians, language is both part of the common sense world, and the means by which the common-sense world is structured. Just as we have common-sense beliefs about water, or fire, we have common sense beliefs about language. These common-sense beliefs originate with the interfaces produced by the language faculty and passed along to the conceptual-intentional system. These concepts are then applied to the world of experience to produce our common-sense beliefs. These common-sense beliefs, however, originating as they do in the innate stock of the language faculty are in no sense guaranteed to be accurate. In fact, McGilvray argues that if we are to study language scientifically, we should really be describing the relevant phenomena by way of a scientific symbol system.

## **4.9 The Chomskian Approach in Context**

With these considerations in mind we can now situate the Chomskian approach to semantics in the context of the issues previously discussed in this dissertation. Consider,

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<sup>111</sup> Chomsky (2000), 32. The example comes from Burge (1986).

for instance, one of the objections to the provisional theory of advice I laid out in Chapter 2. This objection, it will be recalled, was that the provisional theory conflates usage facts with meaning facts. To the extent that advice is aimed towards correcting usage, it will not be language advice. The story sketched above allows us to see why. To the extent that something is classed within the knowledge-base of basic linguistic competence, it originates as an internal state of the language faculty. Chomskians would not deny that one requires no advice pertaining to this knowledge-base—the knowledge already comes pre-loaded. By claiming that meanings are syntactically individuated, McGilvray is arguing that semantic facts belong in the BLC knowledge-base as well. As such, they are paradigmatically linguistic facts (since linguistic facts are delimited by their presence in the language faculty).

Usage facts, on the other hand, pertain to the way language users behave when they are navigating the social world. Undoubtedly, we need advice about how to behave in the social world, but the facts involved are not facts about the internal state of the language faculty. As such, they are not linguistic facts. Therefore, concludes the Chomskian naturalist, advice concerning usage is not advice about language. Thus, in order to defend the provisional theory of language advice, I need to find a way of blocking this inference.

Now consider the debate described in Chapter 3. There, the naturalist and normativist disagreed about whether meaning was a natural or normative phenomenon. In particular, the debate centred on the status of correct use. The naturalist argued that there was nothing in the notion of correct use that precluded the existence of facts of meaning. The normativist, on the other hand, argued that norms were an essential part of the

picture. In my defence of the normativist, I argued that it makes sense to think about semantic correctness as a phenomenon that consists of the union of a natural fact and an evaluative judgment about the relevance of that fact to a given situation.

It should be clear from the discussion so far that Chomskians are naturalists about meaning. They are, however, naturalists in a different sense from the naturalists described in the last Chapter. Firstly, they take the normativist side in the dispute over semantic correctness. Correct use is an irreducibly normative phenomenon. But whereas someone like Brandom takes this to imply that *meaning* is normative, the Chomskian takes it to imply that reference cannot be a central feature of semantics. So the Chomskian is driven to develop an internalist account of semantics. This means that, in order to defend the claim I made in the last Chapter, that meaning itself (and not simply correct use) is a normative matter, I need to show why *this* version of naturalized semantics does not offer a compelling objection.

#### **4.10 Contra Chomskian Semantics**

The approach to semantics just canvassed seems to be well integrated with the three core Chomskian commitments to nativism, mental modularity, and computationalism. My aim in what follows is to remain agnostic about these core commitments. Therefore I will say very little about them in these closing sections. Instead, I want to focus on the way the Chomskian approach to semantics either upholds or fails to uphold the general Chomskian commitment to *naturalism*.

As has already been noted, Chomskians take themselves to be committed to providing a naturalistically respectable theory of meaning. An account of meaning must be tractable, it must explain the relevant phenomena, and it must resemble the rest of

science (paradigmatically the 'hard' sciences). Chomskians argue that only their internalist/nativist/computationalist account is capable of meeting these constraints. So compatibility with naturalist metaphysics and methodology seems to be a criterion for a successful theory. I think, however, that there are reasons to object to this way of conceiving linguistic naturalism.

Chomskian theories of meaning are naturalistic in two ways. First of all, they aim to produce a semantics for *natural languages*, here conceived as distinct from both the technical or scientific ways of speaking, and officially recognized languages (such as 'French', 'English', or 'Mandarin') that are identified with particular political jurisdictions or social groups. In short, natural languages are 'I-languages', the internal states of the language faculties. Call this 'metaphysical naturalism'. Secondly, Chomskians are committed to a view of linguistics as a kind of naturalistic inquiry. Linguistics, here, is conceived as a science, different from physics or chemistry only in virtue of the domain it seeks to explain. Call this *methodological naturalism*.

There are good reasons, I think, to be suspicious of the way Chomskians understand both varieties of naturalism. With regard to their understanding of naturalism, I think there are good reasons to resist the 'I-language'-as-natural-language account, as personified in McGilvray's appeal to broad syntax. With regard to the Chomskian understanding of naturalistic inquiry, I think there are reasons to think that it constitutes an unwarranted restriction on the evidence base for linguistic inquiry.<sup>112</sup>

#### **4.11 Against Broad Syntax**

Once again, McGilvray's big claim is that an enriched (or broadened) conception of

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<sup>112</sup> I adopt this way of talking about the problem from Iten, Stainton, & Wearing (2007)

syntax will give us an adequate account of natural language semantics without having recourse to anything happening outside of the language faculty. This constraint is important because Chomskians hold that it is only by limiting our inquiries to the contents and operations of the language faculty that it is possible to study language in a scientific manner. Furthermore, since understanding and operationalizing the meanings of linguistic constructions appears to be an ability possessed by competent language users, there must be some way of scientifically conceiving of semantics. Hence the promise of broad syntax: the same computations that serve to compose and decompose linguistic constructions (such as sentences) are also sufficient to individuate lexical items. So broad syntax involves the study not only of the formal features of linguistic structure, but of any feature that is the subject of computations occurring within the human language faculty.

It might be objected that this broadened conception of syntax is something of a cheat—that by lumping lexical items in with syntactic structure, Chomskians assume what they ought to explain. After all, syntax is traditionally understood as the study of the combination of abstract, *uninterpreted* symbols. By including lexical items among the features being processed in the language faculty, Chomskians risk the explanatory adequacy of their project. A genuinely explanatory account of syntactic meaning individuation, the objection goes, would be to somehow generate lexical items out of the *formal* features of language alone. While it may well be true that syntax, suitably enriched, will include an account of how semantic contents are individuated, one must be careful not to enrich it to the point that it fails to explain anything at all.<sup>113</sup>

A Chomskian might respond to this criticism by claiming that it misconceives the proper relationship between syntax and semantics. Specifically, it mistakes the explanans

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<sup>113</sup> Thank you to Darren Abramson for suggesting this objection.

for the explanandum. For Chomskians, the aim is to explain human language use in the context of poverty of stimulus data. Both syntax and semantics are projects of explanation in this respect. Broad syntax is not about *explaining* meaning individuation. Rather, it is a theory of the typical appropriateness of language use in the context of the poverty of stimulus data. In order to explain this, it needs to involve semantics. And since an account of meaning must meet the same constraints of any scientific approach to language, semantics must also proceed along nativist, internalist, and computationalist lines. The objection misses the point because it assumes a traditional notion of how the work of linguistics is to be divided. Although syntax and semantics are traditionally considered to be separate areas of inquiry, dealing with distinct linguistic phenomena, Chomskians argue that this distinction should only hold so long as it explains the empirical and methodological constraints of a scientific conception of linguistics. Given the poverty of stimulus data, however, and the naturalist methodology of linguistics, we are free to abandon any sharp distinction between syntax and semantics.

It is worth noting that this response is another reiteration of the Chomskian argument for a narrow form of naturalism. Although there are empirical premises at play in the argument (the appeal to poverty of stimulus data), the conclusion is a methodological one—syntax and semantics, properly conceived, are not separable. Broad syntax is defended by the claim that it is the only way of securing a scientific account of meaning that would otherwise be unable to be studied systematically. The Chomskian thus puts the following stark choice to other would-be naturalists: accept this theory—accept nativism and internalism, accept the folding of semantics into syntax—or else accept quietism about meaning. In other words, it's this theory, or no theory. The



starkness of this choice ought to worry us. Indeed, I think there are reasons to believe that the Chomskian is here offering a false choice. I'll have more to say about this and other methodological worries in the next two chapters.

#### **4.12 Objection: Just What is a Natural Language?**

If the central project of this dissertation is to succeed, we need some way of driving a wedge between semantics and syntax, and of building a bridge between the natural and the normative. Let's begin by examining the Chomskian distinction between natural language and scientific symbol systems. I have two worries about the sharpness of this distinction.

The first worry has to do with the origin of scientific symbol systems. If natural and scientific languages are distinct in kind (the former being the natural product of the way humans are put together and the latter being constructed according to scientific norms), then we are left with a question of how scientific languages come about in the first place. It seems as though speaking a natural language is a pre-requisite for mastering a scientific one (we could not do the latter without first being able to do the former). If, however, there is no continuity between natural and scientific language, the ability to develop, master, and make use of the latter seems somewhat mysterious. It will be recalled that, on this view, the term "H<sub>2</sub>O" is fundamentally different than the term "water". "H<sub>2</sub>O" is part of a scientific symbol system—the language of chemistry. It is responsible to theory-specified truth conditions. If something is not composed of two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen, it is not "H<sub>2</sub>O". It is also a public term. Those who use it agree to use it in the same way, and will presumably defer to experts in order to establish the limits of its reference (can something be called "H<sub>2</sub>O" if it has salt dissolved

in it?).

The case of “water” is different. As a part of a natural language (that is to say a particular I-language), it is not responsible to the way the world is or might be. Although the SEM associated with the term is structured so as to be used by the conceptual-intentional system in a particular way (perhaps in the presence of certain phenomenal experiences—of, say, wetness, colourlessness, odourlessness, etc.), there is no guarantee that everyone will apply the SEM in exactly the same circumstances. While one's usage will likely accord with that of those in one's community, this accord is owed more to the universal endowment of the language faculty than to any notion of a public language.

My worry is as follows: given that “H<sub>2</sub>O” and “water” are different in kind from each other, how does scientific or technical language come about in the first place? Elements of scientific symbol systems have a phonology (we can pronounce the word “H<sub>2</sub>O”), and they have a syntax. But, by hypothesis, their semantics are determined externally to the language faculty. There are two possibilities. Scientific symbols either originate in the language faculty, or they do not. If they originate in the language faculty, then we are owed some kind of story that distinguishes them from natural language terms.<sup>114</sup> If they do not, then we need some explanation of how they come to have a similar form to genuine language (so similar, in fact, that they have often been confused for it).

My second worry is perhaps more troubling. It seems as though words and phrases originating in technical contexts refuse to stay (as it were) on the reserve. Consider, for instance, a term like 'atomic'. Now this term has a theoretical meaning

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<sup>114</sup> It is possible that such a story could be told. Perhaps they *are* natural language terms whose syntactically-determined meanings are suppressed for pragmatic reasons. But then, what would the meaning be for the natural language analogue of “H<sub>2</sub>O”?

(indeed, it has many different theoretical meanings depending on whether one is a particle physicist, a chemist, or a scholar of pre-Socratic philosophy), but it also seems to participate in the wider culture. Which usages are technical ones and which, if any, are those of natural language? Now consider the following sentence: “The clown filled the balloons from a helium tank.” Presumably, 'helium' is a piece of technical vocabulary, and yet it seems to share a syntactic structure with a number of other words ('clown', 'balloons', 'filled', 'tank') that presumably are natural language terms on a Chomskian picture. Perhaps, in this example, 'helium' is a natural language term as well (with a meaning only of 'gas lighter than air'), and it is only a technical term in cases where the context is clearly a scientific one (as in “A helium atom has two protons”).<sup>115</sup> But we still lack some principled way of determining which contexts are scientific and which are not. Does a scientific paper, written for a wide audience, call for scientific or natural language? I am not certain that the Chomskian approach to semantics contains enough resources to settle such questions.

#### **4.13 Methodological Worries**

In previous sections, I have argued that in addition to the empirical claims relating to the poverty of stimulus, Chomskian semantic theories importantly depend on a particular, and somewhat idiosyncratic, understanding of the naturalist project. In the last section, I argued that this commitment manifests itself in a problematic understanding of the concept of a natural language. In this section, I want to highlight some of the ways in which the Chomskian commitment to naturalism affects the methodology of linguistics. In order to do so, it is worth investigating how Chomskians understand 'naturalistic

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<sup>115</sup> But what about the 'has' in that sentence. Is this a technical term? Or is it a natural language term?

inquiry'.

Chomskians reject representationalist theories of content in part because such theories allow (or perhaps require) meaning to be investigated in philosophically familiar, though naturalistically suspect ways (i.e. via Twin-Earth-style thought experiments and other forms of intuition mining). I contend that, where meaning is concerned, the Chomskian view of naturalistic inquiry can be summed up in the following argument.

- (1) It is possible to study linguistic meaning naturalistically
- (2) If something can be studied naturalistically, then the methods used will resemble those of the natural sciences.
- (3) The methods required to study representation and reference are not those of the natural sciences.
- (4) Therefore, to the extent that linguistic meaning can be studied naturalistically, it is not essentially or constitutively linked to reference and representation.

The first premise is assumed by hypothesis—to the extent that Chomskians undertake projects of linguistic explanation, they are committed to such projects being naturalistic in character. Premise two provides a statement of how Chomskians generally define naturalistic methodology.

The third premise is the contentious one. On a Chomskian model, it is established by appeal to diversity of language use in the world. Because language use is unbounded and stimulus-free, words and phrases may be combined in any number of ways and used in any number of situations. Therefore the links between words and the world, whether pictured as representational or as mediated by means of some other kind of entity (like a Fregean sense or a Platonic form), do not constitute a stable and coherent body of

phenomena, such as one might find in physics or chemistry. At best, they admit of insightful descriptions—useful, perhaps, as a means of providing a purely local account of how a word is used, but useless as a basis for accounts operating at a more general level. Reference and representation, though genuine phenomena, resist naturalization. If we accept these three premises, the Chomskian argues, we are forced to accept the conclusion: a naturalized account of meaning can have no truck or commerce with notions of representation or reference. Thus, the ‘pragmatic’ aspect of meaning is stripped away, because this is the aspect that resists being ‘naturalized’.

For the moment, let us concede the first premise of the argument—it is possible to study meanings naturalistically. Let us also concede the third premise: to the extent that reference and representation can be accounted for, they are not accounted for in the same way as the objects of physics and chemistry are. Indeed, this was our conclusion in the last Chapter—semantic correctness is at least a partially normative notion. This leaves the second premise, the definition of naturalistic inquiry as that which uses the methods of natural sciences. What reasons do we have to accept this premise? In answer to these questions Chomskians offer two related claims: 1) Using the methodology consistent with that of the natural sciences keeps linguistic theories tractable, and 2) Using such a methodology keeps linguistic theories simple.

I will return to both of these claims in the next chapter. For now, I will conclude this chapter by noting my worry that, however it is justified, the stringent definition of naturalistic inquiry places undue a priori constraints on theories of language in general and semantic theories in particular. For this reason, and because such constraints are being used to rule out rival theories, I think the methodological claims underlying the

Chomskian approach to meaning require further examination. This is my task in the next chapter.

# Chapter 5: “Just One of Those Things”: On the Revolutionary Character of the Normativist/Naturalist Debate

## 5.1 Founding Intuitions

Let us start by restating one of the central assumptions of this dissertation: Language users have particularized, often implicit, and occasionally conflicting practical intuitions about their native ways of speaking and writing. These intuitions include the grammaticality of a particular sentence, the meaning of a particular word or phrase, or the force of producing a particular utterance. No training in philosophy or linguistic science is required to possess these intuitions. Indeed, one need not even be consciously aware of them in order to have them. All that is needed is a sense that the words one uses are an apt way of describing a situation, or that one's utterance will have a particular effect on one's audience, even if one cannot explicitly say why. In certain contexts (such as providing or seeking language advice, or reflecting on the correct meaning of a word or phrase), however, we can become explicitly aware of our linguistic intuitions. When this happens, we also become aware of the ways in which these intuitions can potentially come into conflict.<sup>116</sup> In this dissertation, I have been concerned with one such potential conflict: Some of our particularized linguistic intuitions seem to presuppose taking a naturalistic (objective, realist, descriptivist) attitude towards language, while others seem

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<sup>116</sup> Some of these conflicts are genuine (for example, clashes of intuition about the truth or falsity of empirical propositions), others are only apparent. For the time being, I want to avoid begging any questions about which are which.

to presuppose taking a normativistic (human-centered, prescriptive) attitude.<sup>117</sup>

In Chapter 2, I considered how this conflict crystallized into two contrasting approaches to justifying advice about grammar and usage.<sup>118</sup> In Chapters 3 and 4, I considered how naturalist and normativist attitudes guided rival approaches to accounting for linguistic meaning. In the next two Chapters, I aim to examine how the apparent clash between normativist and naturalist intuitions plays into the process of explaining linguistic phenomena. In the present chapter, my aim is to examine the methodological (and meta-philosophical) underpinnings of Chomskian and Brandomian accounts of meaning. My positive project here is relatively modest; to show that Chomskian Naturalism and Brandomian Normativism share a common antipathy towards the nexus of metaphysical and methodological assumptions which, taken together, constitute a dominant philosophical approach to studying language, an approach I call 'representationalism'.<sup>119</sup>

## 5.2 What Is Representationalism?

The term 'representationalism' has been used to name a number of quite distinct views. Its exact meaning varies depending on what is being represented (rules, concepts, states of affairs) and/or how this representation takes place (resemblance, isomorphism, convention, or causation). In what follows, I will use 'representationalism' to name any approach to explaining linguistic phenomena which is committed to providing explanations solely, or primarily, in terms of the way that linguistic constructions (words,

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<sup>117</sup> In particular, that they seem to be concerned with the positive or negative sanction of others.

<sup>118</sup> Namely, Prescriptivism and Descriptivism. In chapter 2, I argued that neither approach was sufficient to provide an adequate account of language advice.

<sup>119</sup> I borrow this line of argument from Jaroslaw Peregrin (2005), though we ultimately draw different conclusions. See Chapter 6 for a discussion of where we part ways.



phrases, and sentences) represent, or *picture*, objects and states of affairs in the world.

This rules out versions of representationalism which involve the internal representation of rules or formal structures (it is in this sense which Chomsky characterizes his approach as 'representationalist').<sup>120</sup>

The hallmark of this kind of representationalist approach is the pride of place given to semantics in explanations of linguistic phenomena. The primary desideratum of a semantic theory on such an approach is to account for the ways in which our words represent (or 'picture') things and states of affairs in the world. So, for example, to understand the meaning of 'aubergine' would be, in some sense, to know which sorts of things in the world could be accorded that name. More broadly, we can characterize representationalism as involving a commitment to the following four claims:

- 1) Human language has a specific function or purpose;
- 2) This purpose or function is (or crucially involves), representing objects or states of affairs in the world;
- 3) To understand how language works is to understand how it represents the world;
- 4) Semantics is the central project of linguistic study.

The first two claims are metaphysical claims about what (and how) language is. The last two claims involve methodological claims about how language is to be studied. Let us examine each claim in turn.

The first claim expresses the relatively straightforward idea that human natural

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<sup>120</sup> “[T]he internal representations of language enter into interpretation, thought and action, but there is no reason to seek any other relation to the world, as might be suggested by a well-known philosophical tradition and inappropriate analogies from informal usage” (Chomsky 2000, p. 160)

language is constructed with a particular end or function. The second claim identifies this *telos* with the function of representing or picturing the world. The third claim follows from a strong reading of the first two. Because language, on this view, is defined as a system of representation, any general account of language must involve an explanation of how linguistic representation works. The final claim is that the key to understanding linguistic representation lies in understanding meaning, here understood as being the relationship between word and world. The result is that other projects of linguistic study, such as syntax and pragmatics, are to be considered as secondary to the study of meaning.

### **5.3 Representationalism in a Historical Context**

So understood, representationalism has long been a favoured approach in the philosophy of language, even if it has not always been invoked under this name. In its most basic form, the representationalist approach involves the assumption that the purpose or function of language is (or essentially involves) representing the world.<sup>121</sup> Linguistic constructions (words, phrases, and sentences) represent, stand for, or *picture*, objects and states of affairs in the world. The representations in question may be direct (in which words or phrases are conventionally applied to objects and states of affairs in the world), or they may be mediated (in which words and phrases stand for an abstract object, a platonic form, or Fregean sense). In either case, explaining how language works crucially involves explaining the relation between word and world. Key to providing such an explanation is the notion of 'correct representation', the idea that a given linguistic construction is the accurate or appropriate way of referring to a particular object or state

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<sup>121</sup> The parenthetical clause is included so as to allow for the idea that language has *communication* as its primary end.

of affairs in the world.

At this (admittedly very general) level of articulation, representationalism stands behind a number of otherwise quite disparate views: including (among others) Platonist, Lockean, Fregean, and direct reference theories of meaning. Although all these theories differ in what they take linguistic meaning to be, they are all, in a sense, concerned with answering the same questions. Under a representationalist approach, the philosophical investigation of language seems to be about explaining how words get their meanings, and how the meanings of individual words may be combined into meaningful discourse. This focus on representation makes a fair amount of sense, because it suggests a connection with a number of other philosophical projects, most notably those aiming to explain perception, knowledge, and mental content. Consider the following examples:<sup>122</sup>

In the third book of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke provides an account of words and their use which is in keeping with the empiricist epistemological program outlined in the first two books. In detailing his approach to language, Locke touches on all four of the core representationalist claims listed above. With regard to the metaphysical claims, Locke argues explicitly that words have a particular function, namely “to be the sensible marks of ideas,”<sup>123</sup> and furthermore that they are “used for recording and communicating our Thoughts.”<sup>124</sup> By identifying a particular end or purpose to language use, Locke endorses the first representationalist claim. In identifying this purpose with representation and communication, Locke endorses the second claim. In particular, Locke argues that “the ideas [words] stand for are their proper and

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<sup>122</sup> And they are *just* examples, I have no ambitions here to trace the historical development of representationalism, merely to show that it is present in a number of distinct views over a long range of time.

<sup>123</sup> *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (III.ii.1)

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.* (III.ix.1)

immediate signification.”<sup>125</sup> So, on a Lockean account, things represented by words, phrases, and sentences are the ideas contained in our mind. While these ideas are the ultimate object of the linguistic representational function, they are themselves copies of our experience of the world. For this reason, the connection between word and world is not direct, but is mediated by mental entities. For example, the meaning of the word 'aubergine' would be, on such a view, identified with the complex idea I have formed via my experience with that variety of vegetable. If one has not had an experience with an aubergine, one may still approximate the meaning of the term which names it, by means of a definition composed of terms for the simple ideas (roundness, purpleness, etc.) which, together, form the complex idea.

Although Locke does not explicitly endorse the methodological claims, the scope and focus of his project in Book 3 make it clear that, for him at least, the interesting projects are those of explaining how the different kinds of words we use (proper names, general terms, particles, and connectives, to name just three) may be related to the ideas we hold in our mind. This general emphasis on the semantic suggests that Locke would accept the last two representationalist claims. At the very least, these claims seem to be consistent with the general scope and elaboration of his project.

Frege's project, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, of de-psychologizing semantics can be seen as a way of rejecting the particulars of Locke's view while holding on to the same basic structure. Once again, the word-world connection is of primary interest. If the meanings of words and phrases (and of the sentences containing them) are our ideas of the objects and properties they name, then we will have a hard time guaranteeing the specificity and universality of language. After all, everyone has a different experience of

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid. (III.ii.1)

the world. And if the meanings of the words one uses just are one's ideas (derived from one's own idiosyncratic experience), then we lose our grip on the public nature of meaning.<sup>126</sup> Nevertheless, the basic representationalist commitments are present in the familiar puzzles Frege considers in “On Sense and Reference.”

Consider, for instance, the puzzle presented by co-referring expressions. If Harvey does not know that 'Batman' and 'Bruce Wayne' name the same individual, he will not believe the statement “Bruce Wayne wears a cape” to be true, even while believing the statement “Batman wears a cape” is true. That the same individual might appear to us under different names leads Frege to invoke the notion of a 'sense'—a quasi-Platonic entity distinct from the objects of experience, and the idiosyncratic contents of one's mind. Although 'Batman' and 'Bruce Wayne' refer to the same individual, they have different senses, and thus sentences containing them will have different cognitive significances.

Frege's invocation of puzzles like this one helps to situate his approach as a representationalist one. Importantly, the puzzles he cites concern the relationship between word and world. Language is still thought to be in the business of representing the world, and it is this process that requires explanation. Frege's solution to the problem of co-referring expressions, the invocation of public senses, is meant to provide a public intermediary between the subjective mental sphere and the objective realm of objects. In this sense, at least, Frege's methodological approach to the linguistic is largely the same as the one pursued by Locke. We are interested in building a bridge between our thoughts

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<sup>126</sup> “A painter, a horseman, and a zoologist will probably connect different ideas with the name “Bucephalus.” This constitutes an essential distinction between the idea and the sign's sense, which may be the common property of many and therefore is not part of a mode of the individual mind.” (Frege 1980/2000, 47)

and the world, and language is our best means of establishing this connection.

In his *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein also shows himself to be interested in uncovering the word-world relationship. Here, however, the connection is understood to be direct and unmediated. A proposition, the content expressed by a sentence of natural language, “states something only in so far as it is a picture.”<sup>127</sup> A linguistic construction is only meaningful when it pictures something in the world. So tight is this connection, that language itself functions as a picture of reality as whole. So, for example, Wittgenstein makes the following claim in proposition 4.26:

If all true elementary propositions are given, the result is a complete description of the world. The world is completely described by giving all elementary propositions, and adding which of them are true and which false.<sup>128</sup>

The approach here is quite clearly a representationalist one. Because the structure of language mirrors that of the world, and because linguistic constructions are meaningful only insofar as they picture some fact or another in the world, a concern with the representational function of language and the world-word relation dominates the Tractarian picture of the linguistic. And yet, in many ways, the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* is merely making explicit something present in discussions of language from Locke on down: Language is in the business of representing the world, and our investigations must be aimed at determining the ways in which our words map onto the world.

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<sup>127</sup> Wittgenstein 1974, 4.03

<sup>128</sup> Or, consider the more evocative claim from 5.6: “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.”

## 5.4 Background to Brandom

Let us now consider Brandom's approach to the linguistic. We got a taste of Brandom's understanding of language in Chapter 3, when we considered the commitments underlying his semantic theory. For the moment, however, our aim is to investigate Brandom's position in relation to the representationalist one just sketched. As Jaroslaw Peregrin has noted,<sup>129</sup> Brandom's approach to language has its roots in the transition between Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and his *Philosophical Investigations*.<sup>130</sup> In the earlier work, Wittgenstein argued that language, suitably idealized, could be mapped onto the world of experience. Indeed, the two domains shared the same basic structure. As such anything (moral facts, logical facts, religious facts) that could not be directly expressed in this language would not be part of the world, but remain outside of it. Any attempt to talk about them would result in either senselessness or nonsense.

In the *Investigations*, however, Wittgenstein appears to give up this way of looking at things. Wittgenstein's exact reasons for changing his mind need not concern us here, though it should be remembered that insofar as the Tractarian view involved identifying the meaning of a proposition with a fact about the world, the position would be susceptible to the skeptical paradox we considered in the first half of Chapter 3. This is because knowing this fact would not constitute knowing the proper interpretation of the proposition. We need some account of how it is that *this* fact gives *this* meaning to *this* proposition. In other words, the Tractarian account seems to be missing the normative dimension of meaning.

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<sup>129</sup> Peregrin (2005)

<sup>130</sup> There is much dispute whether the *PI* constitutes a complete break with the ideas of the *Tractatus*. In any case, I think we can at least think of the arguments of the *PI* as being opposed to those of the *Tractatus*, as it is usually construed.

In place of the Tractarian view of language as mirror of the world, Wittgenstein argues that it makes little sense to say that language has any central purpose or essence over and above the various ways it is used in practice. There is no one thing that we do with language, no single essence or telos.<sup>131</sup> When we assume that there is, we are apt to let this assumption lead us into irresolvable philosophical puzzles. Instead, by focusing on the specific linguistic job we are trying to do, we can diagnose and cure ourselves of such puzzles. The end result is a turn away from seeking the essence of language and towards investigating its use— a turn away from semantics and towards pragmatics.

This turn is not without its costs: by giving up the search for the essence of language, we risk losing many of the good things that came with a representationalist approach. Indeed, Wittgenstein is sometimes interpreted as asking us to give up on producing a systematic theory of linguistic phenomena. Although we occasionally might be able to provide an account of the meaning of a word or a phrase, such descriptions are theoretically inert—that is to say they are not capable of being strung together into a global (or even a local) project of linguistic explanation. The study of language, on such a view, consists of a few unconnected projects of philosophical clarification by means of insightful descriptions of the ways a troublesome word or phrase is used in certain contexts. For this reason, Wittgenstein is sometimes understood as arguing for a kind of pragmatically-centred, theoretical quietism.

Whether or not one takes a quietist reading of the Later Wittgenstein, it is clear

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<sup>131</sup> Peregrin calls this the ‘toolbox view’, and cites the following passage from section 31 of the *Philosophical Grammar*: “Language is like a collection of very various tools. In the tool box there is a hammer, a saw, a rule, a lead, a glue pot and glue. Many of the tools are akin to each other in form and use, and the tools can be roughly divided into groups according to their relationships; but the boundaries between these groups will often be more or less arbitrary and there are various types of relationship that cut across one another.” (Wittgenstein (1969), quoted in Peregrin (2005), p. 41)



that he has moved away from the global project of representationalist linguistic explanation suggested by the *Tractatus*. We will never get a complete picture of what language is (because language is not any one thing). Brandom's project is best read in this context—we might not be able to use the representational route to explaining language, but to the extent that we do want to improve our understanding, there are projects we can take on. In particular, we can start by investigating the role language plays in our social practices.

In this, Brandom steers a middle course between the generalized account of language offered by the old representationalist order and the theoretical quietism emanating from certain readings of the later Wittgenstein. Unlike the representationalist, Brandom focuses on the ways in which language plays a part in social practice. Unlike Wittgenstein on a quietist reading, Brandom believes it is possible to give a systematic account of at least some aspects of language. In particular, Brandom thinks that if we focus on the ways in which language is implicated in the normative practice of holding each other accountable for the inferences we make, it becomes possible to give a systematic account of linguistic phenomena such as meaning, pragmatic force, and perhaps even structure.<sup>132</sup> Holding each other responsible for our inferences is a *normative* practice insofar as it is a practice that can be done with greater or lesser success, and insofar as it crucially involves sanctioning behaviour on the part of at least some participants in order to get off the ground. In focussing on making inferences, and

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<sup>132</sup> Interestingly, Brandom almost never mentions syntax. It does not, for example, appear in the index to *MIE*. A cryptic endnote in that work suggests that Brandom thinks that syntax is a normative conception. However, he does not, to my knowledge, develop these thoughts in any great detail. Peregrin (2005) suggests that Brandom abandon this rather sketchy account of syntax in favour of a more Chomskian approach (while suggesting that Chomskians give up their semantic theory in favour of a Brandomian approach). I will have more to say about Peregrin's suggestion in the next chapter.

on holding each other accountable for them, we can see how Brandom is advocating for the normativist party.

Where does someone like Brandom come down on the four representationalist theses listed above? With regard to the first, the results are mixed. Brandom does not endorse a specific function for language, but he does suggest that there is one set of practices (the practices that collectively make up the game of giving and asking for reasons) that is prior to, and more autonomous than any other. The two claims may seem to be equivalent, but there is reason to see the second as considerably weaker than the first. The first claim, the one that constitutes the first thesis of the representationalist position, says that language has a *single* function. Brandom's thesis, on the other hand, is compatible with language having *multiple* functions, with one of these functions being more central than all the others. For this reason, my inclination is to say that Brandom rejects the first representationalist claim, though I acknowledge that this is a less radical stance than, for example, the one taken by Chomskians. I will return to this point later on in this chapter.

In any case, Brandom's revolutionary credentials are established by his attitude towards the second representationalist thesis—the one that identifies the function of language with that of representing the world. Even if according one linguistic activity primacy over all others is equivalent to taking it to be *the* function of language, it is clear that Brandom's favoured linguistic activity is not that of representing the world. Indeed, it is discursiveness—participating in the game of giving and asking for reasons—that takes centre stage on Brandom's account. For him, the primary thing that language does is encode inferential relationships. Although Brandom does allow that language is in the

business of representing the world, this function is secondary to, and parasitic upon, its role in inference.

As for the third representationalist thesis—the methodological thesis that the central project of linguistic study is the explanation of the ways in which our words represent things in the world— Brandom rejects it as well. Although Brandom is open to the study of linguistic representation, he rejects the notion that it is the primary, or central project of linguistic study. To see why, consider the story so far. If the essential function of language is to represent the world, then it is very important to clearly define the concept of correct representation. It is only once we have a sense of how our words might represent something that we are able to account for something like linguistic meaning. Furthermore, the notion of correct representation is an essential part of explaining what we *do* with our words. This includes making inferences. An inference from A to B is a good one, on a representationalist framework, when truth (understood as correct representation) is preserved. Brandom, as we have seen, turns this picture on its head. Now it is correct inference that undergirds correct representation. It is only by holding ourselves and others responsible to the implicit norms of material inference that we are able to make sense of correct and incorrect representation. For this reason, the study of language must have, at its foundation, these norms of inference. The study of representations cannot, therefore, be the central project of linguistics.

Finally, I think it is clear from the above that Brandom rejects the fourth representationalist thesis—the thesis that semantics is the central project of linguistic study. The shift in emphasis from representation to inference involves a shift from semantics to pragmatics. As a result, the study of language is now intimately concerned

with the ways in which the norms governing social practice affect the structure, use, and interpretation of language. In particular, Brandom urges us to look to the norms of material inference, for it is these norms that determine the character of sapient language use.

## 5.5 Naturalism

Noam Chomsky has attacked the representationalist order on other grounds. Given that scientific investigation of at least some linguistic phenomena is *prima facie* possible, we should hesitate before accepting any methodological assumptions that might automatically rule out such investigations. Indeed, Chomsky's main quarrel with the representationalist tradition is that it seems to endorse what he calls a 'methodological dualism' about matters of mind and language. Under the old order, language and mind are not distinct from the natural world in the sense of being different substances, but they are distinct insofar as they require different kinds of explanations. Instead Chomsky endorses a view he calls 'methodological naturalism': A view that sees linguistics as a field of study unifiable with (if not completely reducible to) the rest of natural science. It is under this methodological assumption that the Chomskian commitments to nativism, internalism, and computationalism receive their strongest articulation.

Let us begin by thinking through Chomsky's attitude towards the four claims that constitute the representationalist order. Chomsky is generally quite hostile to teleological explanations of linguistic phenomena. He has, for example, explicitly argued against the notion that language is essentially a system of communication.<sup>133</sup> Indeed, Chomsky tends to be also hostile to attempts to give teleological accounts of language. From this, we can

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<sup>133</sup> Chomsky (2000), p. 30

conclude that Chomsky would probably reject the first claim. Now, although he does not explicitly attack the language-as-system-of-representation view (as put forward in the second claim), his rejection of referential semantics (as detailed in Chapter 4), taken together with his reluctance to assign any particular purpose or function to human language, scuppers the second claim. Moving on to the methodological premises, it seems straightforward to say that he would reject the third premise, given his denial of the representational function for language. Finally, Chomsky's proposed partition of semantics into syntactic (meaning individuation) and pragmatic (ethnoscience) projects (again as detailed in Chapter 4) suggests that he rejects semantic primacy as a methodological principle (thereby rejecting the fourth premise).

Why adopt this methodological orientation? Perhaps it is an empirical issue—the problem with the representationalist theory is that it is empirically untestable. But the question of which theories or approaches are supported or unsupported by evidence crucially depends on that of determining what the evidence base for linguistics is supposed to be.<sup>134</sup> This is a question of methodology—what one takes to be the appropriate way of studying language will determine what evidence is deemed to be relevant in evaluating a given theory. Returning to the present case, I think Chomsky's rejection of representationalism has something to do with his embrace of a very strong kind of naturalist methodology. What are the features of this methodology? Chomsky's discussion of methodological dualism is a good place to start.

Classical substance dualism (of the kind that we find in Descartes and Locke) posits that mind and matter constitute separate substances. They are simply different kinds of things, the former characterized by the presence of thought, the latter by spatial

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<sup>134</sup> Iten, Stainton, & Wearing (2007)

extension. The distinction is a metaphysical one: Descartes and Locke were making claims about how the world really is, and not (at least in the first instance) about how it is to be studied. Substance dualism is opposed by rival metaphysical doctrines (such as physicalism or idealism) that are also in the business of making claims about the world (that the world is purely material, or that it is purely mental/spiritual).

Methodological dualism, in contrast, is the doctrine that mental and physical phenomena require distinct modes of explanation. The physical and the mental/linguistic do not, on this doctrine, constitute different substances. Both are, in some sense, part of the same world. Instead, mental/linguistic phenomena are to be distinguished from natural phenomena by the types of explanations they occasion and by the methods according to which they are to be studied. Instead of making claims about how the world really is, methodological dualism is a doctrine about how the world is to be studied.

The contrast case to this type of dualism is the doctrine Chomsky calls ‘methodological naturalism’ and it forms the core of Chomsky’s methodological outlook on language and mind: “a ‘naturalistic approach’ to the mind investigates mental aspects of the world as we do any others, seeking to construct intelligible explanatory theories, with the hope of eventual integration with the ‘core’ natural sciences.”<sup>135</sup> In contrast, Chomsky defines methodological dualism as

the view that we must abandon scientific rationality when we study humans ‘above the neck’ (metaphorically speaking), becoming mystics in this unique domain, imposing arbitrary stipulations and *a priori* demands of a sort that would never be contemplated in the sciences, or in other ways departing from normal

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<sup>135</sup> Chomsky 2000, 76

canons of inquiry.<sup>136</sup>

So while the physical world is to be investigated via the methods of natural science, mind and language, are, on the dualist picture, investigated by other means. For the dualist, the appropriate means of investigating the mental and linguistic are the methods of speculative philosophy; in particular, appeals to thought experiments and intuitions.

In his critique of methodological dualism, Chomsky is actually fighting a battle on two fronts. On one side are those thinkers and traditions who are generally suspicious of the methods and explanations of natural science. On the other front, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, is the naturalist tradition in philosophy, a tradition that Chomsky calls naturalism in its epistemological, or metaphysical mode. Chomsky thinks that this tradition is too caught up in pursuit of simple reductions to accept a truly scientific approach to language and mind.

Throughout his critique of dualism, Chomsky takes great pains to distinguish *unification* from *reduction*. This distinction is an important one for Chomsky, because it helps to define exactly what type of naturalism he is pursuing. For my purposes, I am not interested in determining whether Chomsky is providing an accurate picture of scientific development—my interests lie more in the way that he understands the naturalist project. Reductionism is the view whereby a particular body of knowledge or area of study is shown to equivalent to some other body or area. So, for example, one might be tempted to reduce all 'water facts' to facts about H<sub>2</sub>O. Unification, on the other hand, is a process by which two or more fields of inquiry are brought together under a single project of study. Instead of simply translating one way of talking about the world into another, more basic, way of expressing things, both domains of discourse must change if the unification

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

is to succeed. To choose one of Chomsky's favoured examples, the future development of physics did not proceed the way that many thinkers in the Early Modern period might have expected. If other fields of inquiry had been reduced to the physics of the time, we would expect that chemical, biological, or mental processes could be explained purely in terms of the mechanical philosophy (that is, in terms of the results of collisions and motions of microscopic particles). Instead, Newton reintroduced the notion of force at a distance, seeping the old mechanical philosophy away. If, for example, chemistry and physics have now grown much closer together, it is because our assumptions about the underlying physical theory have changed.<sup>137</sup>

The reason that Chomsky rejects eliminativistic theories of mind and language such as those championed by Paul and Patricia Churchland, is that they involve a wrongheaded understanding of how science proceeds, namely via reduction. Chomsky argues instead that, for the most part, science proceeds by a process of unification.<sup>138</sup> For this reason, we should not expect that mental or linguistic concepts are best described in terms of our best physical, or psychological theory. Rather, we should be engaged in a process of improving our understanding of both linguistic and psychological phenomena so as to make future unification possible. The further details of Chomsky's critique of eliminativism need not concern us at this stage of this inquiry. For now, it suffices to note that Chomsky is keen to establish linguistics as both a scientific and an independent discipline. For these reasons, I think we can think of Chomsky's project in this discussion as an attempt to carve out a place for linguistics in the sciences.

As we saw in Chapter 4, the distinction between methodological dualism and

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<sup>137</sup> Chomsky (2000), p. 84-85; 109-111

<sup>138</sup> Chomsky (2000), p. 115-116



naturalism also plays a secondary role in Chomsky's *New Horizons*-era writings.<sup>139</sup> Not only does it allow Chomsky a means of providing a scientific conception of linguistic study, but it also allows him to rule out rival hypotheses on methodological grounds. Consider, for example, Chomsky's arguments against externalist semantics (as rehearsed in section 4.8 of the last chapter). The problem with externalist semantics is twofold in Chomsky's view. Firstly, the phenomena they attempt to explain (including the social character of language use) do not form a stable and coherent class of features. The minute we go outside the head, Chomsky argues, we run into all kinds of social, political, epistemic, and normative considerations that muddy the waters considerably.

Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, externalist semantics derives its support from arguments which Chomsky considers to be methodologically suspect. In particular, the cogency of externalist semantics seems to depend on the intuitions dredged up by the likes of the Twin-Earth thought experiment. The problem with such thought experiments? Well, for one, they run together natural language and scientific symbol systems. On Putnam's Twin-Earth the substance filling the lakes and rivers and called 'water' does not have the chemical structure H<sub>2</sub>O but the considerably more complicated structure XYZ. The upshot seems to be that the truth value of a sentence like 'Water is H<sub>2</sub>O' seems to crucially depend on whether it happens to be uttered on Twin-Earth or our own. In Chomsky's view, the problem is that 'water' is a term of natural language, while 'H<sub>2</sub>O' is part of a scientific symbol system. The first seems to be an ordinary term of the language, and seems to require very little effort (if any at all) to acquire, while the second requires a great deal of time and experience in order to master.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Chomsky (2000)

<sup>140</sup> Indeed, on a Chomskian picture, it is part of the innate stock of concepts generated by the computations

Over and above the problems inherent in mixing natural languages and scientific symbol systems, Chomsky argues that the appeal to thought experiments and philosophical intuitions begs the question against the naturalist. This is because the appeal to such examples presupposes something about how language is to be studied. In a sense, Chomsky accuses externalists of conceiving of linguistics as a kind of ‘armchair science’—an investigation that can be done with little or no appeal to empirical evidence. If we take the intuitions dredged up by Twin Earth examples to be constraints on any adequate theory of meaning (intuitions that must be respected come what may) one will be forced to discard the semantic theory Chomskians take to have the most empirical support (namely the internalist/computationalist model discussed in Chapter 4).

## 5.6 Revolution vs. Reform

Revolutionary alternatives to traditional representationalism should be distinguished from approaches which attempt to *reform* the notion of representation while keeping the order of explanation largely the same. As we have seen, one of the major problems with traditional representationalist approaches was that they failed to recognize the normative aspect of representation—the sense in which representations may be correct and incorrect, and not merely true or false. Since (recalling Kripke's Wittgenstein) a particular usage may be consistent with any number of possible rules of meaning, we need to be able to distinguish between cases in which someone fails to represent some aspect of the world correctly, and those cases in which they are simply representing a different aspect of the world. So the key here is to explain how misrepresentation is possible. In light of these normative considerations, revolutionaries argue that we should abandon the

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occurring within the language faculty.

traditional representationalist paradigm for one that explicitly recognizes this normative component. It is because correct representation is a normative matter that Chomskian naturalists deny that it can be the subject of a serious study of language. Brandomian normativists, on the other hand, treat the normativity as basic—something deeply ingrained in our social practices which cannot be made entirely explicit.

There is another way of responding to the apparent normativity of representation: Instead of abandoning the representationalist framework, one might attempt to reform the notion of correct representation by finding some way of explaining how this normativity comes about. This might be accomplished by presenting a naturalized account of misrepresentation. In showing how it is possible for a natural system to misrepresent the world, it might alleviate the internal tension in the representationalist framework which has led people to abandon it for other orders of explanation. Fred Dretske and Ruth Millikan have both independently attempted to provide just such a naturalized account of misrepresentation. They base their approaches in a notion of biological functions or purposes.<sup>141</sup>

Human intentional systems have the function of representing the world. That is to say that they are in the business of producing an intentional state, the content of which is the state-of-affairs in some part of the environment (perhaps, that there are cookies baking in the oven). The relationship between the intentional state and the state-of-affairs it represents may be mediated by all kinds of conditions which are not themselves part of the intentional state. When I walk into an apartment and form the belief that there are cookies baking in the oven, I am not aware of the operations of the receptor cells in my nose, or the electrical signals which carry the sensory information from my nose to my

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<sup>141</sup> Dretske (1986); Millikan (2004)

brain. The thought that there are cookies baking in the oven represents cookies baking in the oven, not that particular chemicals have affected my receptor cells in my nose in particular ways, or that the signal has been carried to my brain in a particular way. Indeed, it is possible for these more proximal conditions to be met while failing to meet the more distal condition. To continue our example, we can imagine (as I have heard said) that the owner of the apartment, having heard that units smelling of baking cookies sell for higher amounts than those which do not, has sprayed the apartment with an artificial cookie scent. Here, my perceptual systems act as before, but the belief “There are cookies baking in the oven” will be false. In forming the belief that there were cookies baking in the oven, I have misrepresented the world.

False representations are representations in virtue of being created by systems with the *function* of representing the world. It is in this sense that misrepresentations can count as products of the natural world. But the product of a representational system only has content insofar as it manages to serve the purposes of the entity in possession of it. And given that misrepresentations fail to represent anything at all, they will not be very useful. Misrepresentations are thus without content, and are unlikely to survive or proliferate.<sup>142</sup> Here, we have the outlines of a naturalized account of misrepresentation. How does this naturalized approach differ from Chomsky's revolutionary naturalism?

In the first place, both Dretske and Millikan are operating with the assumption that language has a particular *telos* or end. Indeed, because they account for representation in *functional* terms, the first representationalist claim is an essential part of their systems. As we have already seen, Chomsky and his followers reject this claim. Secondly, both Dretske and Millikan identify this *telos* with communication. Thirdly,

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<sup>142</sup> Millikan (2004), Chapter 7

their accounts are centred on explaining how people manage (or fail to manage) to use their words to refer to things in the world. Finally, in virtue of their focus on representation, both Millikan and Dretske place semantics squarely at the centre of linguistic investigation. In this, despite their naturalized account of representation, they retain the traditional representationalist order of explanation. Since the revolutionaries' quarrel was methodological rather than merely metaphysical, they would be unlikely to accept these approaches to language. Dretske and Millikan can thus be seen as offering reformist, rather than revolutionary, positions on the relationship between the study of representation and the study of language.

Why revolt instead of reform? First of all, insofar as approaches of this kind involve a global reduction of (many, if not all) normative properties (through the concept of biological function), they fall outside the particular purview of this dissertation. From the beginning of this enquiry, my goal has been to see if the natural and normative attitudes towards language can be brought together on their own terms, so revolutionary approaches offer a much more inviting object of investigation for the present enquiry. Secondly, and more substantively, I think it is at least an open question whether or not an evolutionary account can be marshalled to explain something as variegated as human language use.<sup>143</sup> Even granting that, as a matter of historical fact, human languages developed because they allowed us to better represent the world, and so better coordinate our activities, it does not follow that all things we do with language can be explained with reference to this original function. So while Dretske and Millikan may have given plausible naturalized accounts of the representational function of language, it does not

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<sup>143</sup> Millikan attempts something like this in her 2004 book, though a through discussion of that project would take us too far off the path laid out for us.

follow that they have given us a plausible account of language *tout court*.

## **5.7 Problems with Naturalism and Normativism as Methodological Approaches**

At this stage of the discussion, it is worth reflecting on the ways in which the Brandomian approach both resembles and differs from the Chomskian one. Both Brandom and Chomsky reject the representationalist picture for similar reasons. Of particular importance is the observation that language has multiple and often contradictory uses. Because language is used so many different ways, and plays so many different social functions, we need principled reasons to select one possible function over all the others. Both Chomsky and Brandom think that the representationalist lacks such reasons. But while both Brandom and Chomsky resist identifying the function of language with representing the world, they part company when it comes time to decide what is to be done. Chomskians, for their part, take the multiplicity of linguistic activities to imply that an adequate account of meaning cannot be based in the social world. As naturalists, they desire to have an account of language that resembles those in the established natural sciences. For this reason, they retreat to providing a formal theory of the properties and activities of the language faculty. Brandomians, for their part, seek to identify some function to tie all linguistic activities together. By placing the game of giving and asking for reasons at the centre of their account, Brandomians hope that it will function as a kind of anchor, to which all other linguistic activities might be secured.

Both Brandom and Chomsky develop their approaches by attempting to set some limits on the linguistic sphere. As it was this methodological move that gave rise to the

worries expressed in Chapters 3 and 4, it is worth spelling out in some detail. On a Chomskian view, the only truly linguistic phenomena are those that have their origin in the human language faculty. While phenomena originating in the social world, or in other faculties of the mind, may sometimes be classed under the name 'language', in such cases, the term is used only in a loose and unscientific sense. Defining the bounds of the linguistic in this way is no act of whim; it is essential if the study of language is to proceed along naturalistic lines.

Why is this the case? Because the word 'language' is applied to many different phenomena, in many different contexts, it is important to distinguish which contexts will form a stable and coherent object of study. In particular, Chomsky seems to be after an account of language that can be given a *formal* articulation. It will be recalled (from Chapter 4) that Chomsky endorses a computational theory of mind and language. The mind is differentiated into distinct regions, each having been set to accomplish a different kind of task. These tasks are not specified in advance, by the type of computation done, but in terms of the role they play in interactions with other systems. This means the language faculty is only the language faculty insofar as it is connected to systems aiming to produce and use human language.

The computations that go on in the language faculty could be hooked up to something different—a locomotive system for example—without changing their basic nature. As it happens, however, they are connected to the systems that perceive, use, and produce linguistic phenomena in human beings. An account of these computations will, on Chomsky's view, produce an explanation of the supervening phenomena. It will, for example, tell us how the language is structured (its syntax), what phonetic or

phonological distinctions speakers of a given language will be able to make, and how meanings are to be individuated.

The linguist's role, on Chomsky's view, is limited to the investigation of the initial state of the language faculty (its innate properties) and the perspectives it produces for use by other faculties (what McGilvray calls PHON and SEM). There is no mention of usage or reference in the Chomskian framework. Chomsky endorses a form of (pseudo-) Wittgensteinian quietism about such issues. In a sense (although Chomsky does not make the argument in quite these terms), Wittgenstein was entirely right to say that there is no essence of language and thus right to draw the implication that no systematic account of language was possible over and above a number of projects aiming to describe various practices of use. Where Wittgenstein was wrong was in holding onto the methodological implications of the picture theory while rejecting its metaphysical substance. Because Wittgenstein rejects the picture theory, he gives up on the hope of any kind of systematic linguistic theory.

This form of quietism is wrong, by Chomsky's lights, because it rests on the same assumption that motivated the now-rejected picture theory: that if language has an essence, it is as a system of representation and communication (Claim 2). Since Wittgenstein rejects this notion of a linguistic essence, he should not then undertake to reject all other such notions. Instead, Wittgenstein's skepticism should be understood as being of a far more local sort—focused on the dimension of linguistic use. So long as that dimension is not counted as the only domain of linguistic phenomena, there is no longer any reason to believe that Chomskian naturalism and Wittgensteinian pragmatism need be in conflict with each other.



Brandom, for his part, also attempts to place a limit on the kinds of phenomena that are relevant to linguistic study. He does this by placing the game of giving and asking for reasons at the centre of discursive practice. It is this practice, and no other, that gives content to linguistic utterances and provides the norms that govern use and structure. It is this activity that a minimally linguistic creature would have to be able to participate in, even if he were able to participate in no other. Put another way, Brandom is interested in giving an account of sapience, and one of the ways he intends to do this is by showing how natural language is entirely bound up in pragmatic norms of material inference. The most straightforward way of showing this to be the case is by making the assumption that the rules of the game of giving and asking for reasons just are the norms which govern natural language. We do many things with language, but we would not be able to do any of those things if we did not use language to hold each other accountable for our beliefs (give and ask for reasons). It is in *this* sense that the game of giving and asking for reasons (and all that comes with it, including the primacy of assertion) is set up as the 'downtown' of language.

## **5.8 A Few Worries About the Revolution**

If Chomskian naturalism and Brandomian normativism are indeed revolutionary alternatives to a representationalist methodology for linguistic study, then I am sympathetic to the cause. I find the central anti-representationalist argument, that we do many things with language aside from representing the world, convincing. Although focussing on the representational function of language may be useful for examining questions of interest to philosophers, it has the effect of making the investigation of language itself a secondary, or merely instrumental project of explanation. As one of the

aims of the current project is to shift philosophical attention back to language itself (and not on what it might do for us), I am sympathetic to attempts to replace the old representationalist order. Furthermore, since this project has, as its main focus, an attempt to reconcile our naturalizing and normativizing impulses, I find myself drawn to revolutionary, rather than reform-minded, approaches to resolving the crisis.

Sympathy for the cause, however, does not necessarily translate to sympathy for a particular method of achieving it. Although I, standing with Chomskians and Brandomians, call for a revolutionary alternative to traditional representationalism, I have grave doubts about both proposed solutions. I believe my reluctance to join either faction can be traced to my commitment to the founding anti-representationalist assumption: representing the world is just *one of many* different things we do with language. If I am reluctant to join either camp, it is because I suspect that the Chomskians' and Brandomians' commitment to this principle does not run as deep as it would appear.

As we have seen, Chomsky argues forcefully for what he calls 'methodological naturalism'—an approach to language that takes it to be capable of being investigated in using the same methods as the natural world. Furthermore, Chomsky argues that methodological naturalism is to be distinguished from more traditional forms of naturalism in that it is not a theory of what kinds of things there are in the world, but rather of how they are to be studied. And yet, given Chomsky's antipathy towards traditional naturalism, he ends up endorsing a view of the objects of scientific study that rather closely approximates that taken by those more traditional approaches. As a result, it sometimes seems that Chomsky has the procedures and reductions of physics in mind when he sets the limits on inquiry into the linguistic sphere. In practice, this means that

mathematical or formal explanations of linguistic phenomena are privileged over purely descriptive accounts. Physicists are not (at least in most cases) interested in explaining, say, why a particular cannonball followed a particular trajectory, so much as they are interested in uncovering the fundamental forces which underwrite all physical phenomena. By analogy, Chomsky argues, if we take a scientific approach to linguistic study, we should not be interested in describing our linguistic abilities as they are implicated in the world, so much as we should be interested in providing an account of the formal features which underwrite them, even if these idealizations do not map exactly onto our everyday experience of language use.

As a result of this, Chomsky ends up endorsing a very narrow conception of what the study of language can and ought to be. While the desire to carve out a space for scientific study of language, free of a priori evidential restrictions, is one that I share, I worry that Chomsky ends up dismissing too many important and potentially fruitful projects in linguistics in the process. It is not so much that Chomsky (and his followers) deny the importance of pragmatics and the social dimension of language; it is just that he does not believe that these projects will yield the systematic and interesting explanations that would show them to be of a piece with the norms of normal science.

My worry here is that Chomsky's argument does not refute methodological dualism so much as it merely reorients it. Like the semantic externalist, Chomsky also embraces a dualism about linguistic phenomena. The difference is largely one of where we draw the line between the genuinely and non-genuinely linguistic. But where the semantic externalist draws the line between science and philosophy at the forehead, Chomskians draw the line at the edge of the language faculty. While some such

phenomena (syntax, meaning individuation) may be studied according to the methods of science, other phenomena (pragmatics, reference) may only be studied in a piecemeal, traditionally ‘philosophical’ fashion. A Chomskian may well reply that, in this case, the dualism is motivated empirically—the line between linguistics and ethnoscience just is the boundary between successful and unsuccessful projects of linguistic study. This may well be true, but it remains the case that the boundary also seems to mark an in-principle distinction. To the extent that it does, it reveals what I take to be a major tension in the Chomskian naturalist program: A naturalized methodology of linguistic study was motivated, in part, by the observation that representing the world is just one of the many things we do with language. And yet, when the time comes to spell out this naturalized methodology, it turns out that we cannot use it to provide an account of the various things we do with language. Instead, we are to constrain our inquiries to the formal systems operating within the language faculty. We are left with rather attenuated notions of both what constitutes the linguistic (the properties of the language faculty) and linguistic study (the study of those properties).

My qualms about the Brandomian project are similar in the general outline, but different in the details. One of the attractions of Brandom's approach is that it allows for something resembling a systematic account of the pragmatic sphere. Indeed, it is in the pragmatic sphere (rather than the semantic, or syntactic ones) that we are to begin our investigations. At the very least, I believe that the prospects for producing a systematic account cannot be determined a priori. I also think that the pragmatic sphere influences the semantic in important ways. Brandom's exclusive focus on discursiveness, however, suggests that we are working with a distinction between *core* and *peripheral* projects of

linguistic study. The core projects are those that aim to explicate the game of giving and asking for reasons, while those that do not are given only a peripheral reading.

I base this objection on the one offered by Mark Lance and Rebecca Kukla.<sup>144</sup> Their worry is as follows: by modelling language use on the exchange of reasons, Brandom loses track of the actual (embodied) way that language is deployed. For Lance and Kukla, language is not an abstract vehicle of inference and disputation; it is the means by which we are able to accomplish many of our goals. Accordingly, our linguistic theories must take into account the plurality of speech acts and roles they play in our lives. Like the other revolutionaries, Brandom began with the observation that there are many different things we do with language. Strikingly, however, he does not thereby endorse a pluralist position on language. Rather, his major objection to representationalism appears to be that it gets the relationships between representation and inference, and pragmatics and semantics, backwards. Only if we locate the downtown of language in discursiveness, not in representation, will we be able to get a philosophical tractable account of the linguistic. What then is the problem? The worry, I think, is that the game of giving and asking for reasons, though an important element of what we do with language, does not exhaust linguistic behaviour. As a result, Brandom sometimes seems as though he is offering an account not of language as such, but language as it is used by philosophers. This move is not surprising; Brandom is, after all, a philosopher. But those, like me, who were drawn to the anti-representationalist position seeking methodological liberation may well be disappointed.

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<sup>144</sup> Lance & Kukla (2010)

## 5.9 The Problem in Context

At this point in the discussion, it will help to pause and think about how the revolutionary character of the naturalist-normativist debate affects some of the issues we have been concerned with in this dissertation. As we have already rehearsed the ways in which these methodological issues affect the problem of meaning, let us focus now on the problem of advice. We can begin by revisiting the naturalist objection to the theory of language advice I proposed in the second chapter.

It will be recalled that the substance of that objection was that the theory of advice, targeted as it was at achieving socio-linguistic mastery, simply fails to be *language* advice. We've already discussed the metaphysical aspect of this objection when we worked through the Chomskian solution to the problem of meaning (in Chapter 4). There is also a methodological component to the objection: the theory of advice we presented in the first Chapter attempts to balance the genuine desire for advice with descriptive adequacy. People want advice about speaking/writing. However, insofar as people want advice *about* how to speak/write in a given domain or for a particular audience, we cannot issue just any prescriptions. We must therefore aim to constrain our advice in such a way that it balances the demands of the ones seeking advice and the actual practices of the desired community of speakers.

Enter the naturalist: the descriptive constraint is too vague about what aspects are to tell against one or another putative prescription. In principle, the descriptive aspect of language advice is meant to cover both the abilities we've called basic linguistic competence (BLC) and those that make for socio-linguistic mastery (SLM). That is to say we need accurate information about both the structural features of the target way-of-

speaking and the social contexts in which it is used. The demand for language advice, on the other hand, exists entirely in the socio-linguistic sphere (by hypothesis, no one requires advice about their own native way of speaking). The problem is as follows: from a linguistic point of view, there is no choosing between one way of speaking and another. So an appeal to the basic linguistic competence will not be enough to decide which advice is licit and which is not. If, however, we were to rely on a descriptive account of socio-linguistic mastery, we would be leaving the space of the scientific and would have to rely on a much less extensive data set. Furthermore, once we depart from the basic linguistic competence, we in a sense depart from the space of the robustly linguistic. So to the extent that we attempt to answer the demand for language advice, we lose our grip on the distinction between the linguistic and the merely social.

The problem from a naturalist's point of view is that the category of socio-linguistic mastery is too vague about the connection between the social and the linguistic. In other words, the category 'socio-linguistic mastery' appears to approximate the pragmatic category that Chomskian naturalists believe to be utterly impervious to systematic investigation. For this reason, the advice produced will not be language-oriented in the robust way it seemed to be when we presented the theory earlier. In other words, the naturalist accuses us of false advertising: we promised language advice that adequately covered the shape and structure of a variety of ways of speaking/writing. But insofar as we are able to offer advice, this advice is parasitic on non-linguistic social norms—norms that *are not* and *could not* be studied in the same way that genuine linguistic facts are. So we are not getting a theory of *language* advice after all.

Think, now, about the normativist objection to the provisional theory of language

advice. It will be recalled that the objection was that there was no principled way of drawing the distinction between BLC and SLM. In light of the present discussion of Brandom's methodological commitments, it is now possible to put some flesh on the bones of this objection. Brandom's commitments to linguistic normativism and holism imply the principle expressed by the slogan "the norms go all the way down." If the distinction between BLC and SLM is meant to confine language advice to those skills and abilities that are most normatively infused, then we need some in-principle way of distinguishing those normative from non-normative linguistic abilities. If, however, the norms do go all the way down, we will lack such a principled way of making this distinction. The skills which constitute basic linguistic competence are the same which constitute socio-linguistic mastery. It is just that, in the case of the former, the norms involved are largely left implicit. In the latter, however, the norms are nearer to the surface, in part perhaps because we have been involved in projects of translating one way of speaking to another. The point is that if the distinction between BLC and SLM is meant to distinguish between those aspects of language which are normatively governed, and those which are not, then this is simply not a distinction we can make.

## **5.10 Summing Up**

The subject matter of this chapter has been the proper way to characterize the evidence base for Linguistics. It would be a mistake, however, to understand this project as an attempt to explain the nature of language. This would be to mistake the metaphysical for the methodological. This discussion started from the assumption that a scientific examination of certain linguistic phenomena is possible. The question, then, is one of setting the bounds and limits of this investigation. How should this limit setting be



accomplished? Well, one might, for example, decide before any particular investigation that linguistic phenomena are to be distinguished by their ability to meet certain necessary and sufficient conditions—so, for example, the four representationalist theses listed above serve as a means of distinguishing linguistic from non-linguistic phenomena. Alternatively, one might treat the demarcation problem as an empirical problem, and deny that there is any a priori way of determining which evidence may be relevant to one's explanations. In the next Chapter, I will attempt to resolve some of these issues by canvassing three ways of reconciling the study of the natural and normative elements of language.

## Chapter 6: On the Varieties of Reconciliation Projects

### 6.1 Questions and Answers

Let's step back from the nitty-gritty of the naturalist-normativist debate for a minute in order to think about what is at stake in the dispute. There is any number of questions we might ask about language. We might ask why a word is spelt the way it is. We might ask about its meaning or about its origin. We might ask whether it is a word someone of one's social position is permitted to use. We might ask what using it entails, or (if this is not the same thing) what the practical implications of using it are. We might ask about what structural positions it might occupy as a part of a sentence, and how its meaning changes when it is placed in different contexts. We might ask of any particular use of a word whether it is correct or incorrect. We might ask what sorts of sentences are grammatically or semantically possible. We might ask whether the meaning of a sentence changes in the context of different discourses. We might ask whether the word takes any inflection, and how this relates to its meaning.

We might ask any or all of the above questions and many more to boot. In asking them, however, we commit ourselves to thinking about how they might be answered. In particular, we must ask what features of the world we are trying to explain and what evidence we need for our explanations. In addition to distinguishing explanans from explanandum, we might ask whether the same body of evidence will be sufficient to answer all our questions about language, or whether information from other domains is necessary in order to answer some of them. We may even ask whether these questions are legitimate ones to ask about language, or whether they are more properly applied to other

domains (such as mind, or social relations). This dissertation has focussed on these second-order questions about language. These second-order questions, however, do not all share the same focus. Indeed, they may be classified according to two important distinctions.

First of all, there is a distinction between those questions that aim to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for phenomena to count as linguistic phenomena and those that are aimed at determining how those phenomena are to be explained. Call this a distinction between asking questions about the *metaphysics of language* and asking questions after the *methodology of linguistic study*.<sup>145</sup> Second, within the category of methodological questions, there is a distinction between those questions that must be answered using methods resembling those used in the natural sciences, and those which might be successfully answered by other means. Call this a distinction between *naturalist* and *non-naturalist* methodologies of linguistic study.

These are both distinctions that make a difference. If we fail to distinguish metaphysical from methodological questions, we risk underrating real empirical progress in the study of language. By mistaking the methodological questions for metaphysical ones, we risk confusing the claim that a particular research project has no place in linguistics with the claim that a particular phenomenon is 'not really part of language'. Consider the claim that, properly speaking, scientific symbol systems are not the proper object of linguistics. Whatever the merits of this particular claim, it strikes me as different from the claim that scientific symbol systems are not part of language. We can see this dynamic at work in debates over the status of so-called public languages.<sup>146</sup> It is also

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<sup>145</sup> The terms 'naturalism' and 'normativism' are ambiguous between these two senses.

<sup>146</sup> See Stainton (2011)

possible to mistake metaphysical questions for methodological ones. This, I think, was part of the problem faced by the prescriptivists about language advice I discussed in the second chapter. The claim that language is a normative or social object does not preclude the ability to make relevant *descriptions* of it. So a normativist metaphysics of language need not preclude a naturalist methodology (and vice versa). Indeed, as I also argued in the second chapter, at least some mixing of this kind must be possible, since descriptions of paradigmatically 'good' speech act as constraints on whatever prescriptions we might offer by way of advice.

Similarly, if we fail to distinguish between those questions which presuppose naturalist methodologies of linguistic study and those which do not, we will have a hard time determining what evidence will be of relevance in answering particular questions. On one way of framing the problem, we will have difficulty determining which problems in the philosophy of language require empirical input, and which may safely be pursued from a conceptual/theoretical perspective. So if we fail to make this distinction, we risk obscuring a number of issues of importance to both linguistics and philosophy. The struggle between naturalists and normativists is, in this domain, a debate about how to draw this methodological distinction.

## **6.2 The Field of Play**

Positions in the naturalist-normativist debate can be plotted in a field stretching between two extremes. On one extreme is what might be called *severe anti-naturalism*. On this position, the study of language is considered to be radically distinct from the study of the natural world. By way of illustration, consider Chomsky's imagined opponent described

in the last chapter, the methodological dualist.<sup>147</sup> It will be recalled that, unlike more traditional dualists, the methodological dualist does not see the domains of language and mind as different in *kind* from the natural world, but as requiring a different mode of investigation. In particular, the dualist takes the study of language to allow for, or even require importantly different methods than those used to investigate the natural realm. Furthermore, absent some global project of reducing normativity to natural facts, the explanations produced in the course of a dualist project of linguistic study are considered to be independent of those produced by the likes of physics, chemistry, biology, or even cognitive psychology.

I am more interested, however, in a more measured variety of linguistic anti-naturalism. As Robert Brandom has served as our stalking horse for this end of the debate, it is fair to ask just how deep his anti-naturalist commitments run. Unlike the methodological dualist, Brandom does not rule out the scientific investigation of certain linguistic phenomena. But such explorations are not considered to be nearly as productive, or nearly as central as projects aiming to explain discursiveness. In the following passage from *Between Saying and Doing (BSAD)*, Brandom addresses the claim (which he attributes to Jacques Derrida) that philosophy (including his own work) is too focussed on the game of giving, asking for, and evaluating reasons, at the expense of other things that we might do with language:

That our expressions play a suitable role in reasoning is an essential, necessary element of *our saying*, and *their meaning*, anything at all. Apart from playing such a role in justification, inference, criticism, and argument, sentences and other

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<sup>147</sup> Or, consider the sharp critique of scientific linguistics contained in the first chapter of Baker and Hacker (1984)

locutions would not have the meaning appealed to and played with by all the other games we can play with language. We philosophers should be proud to acknowledge and affirm our logocentrism, but should also justify it by an account of the relations between meaning and use, conceptual content and discursive practice.<sup>148</sup>

Brandom thus situates the game of giving and asking for reasons as the 'downtown' of language. In so doing, he commits himself to the asymmetric importance of a particular set of questions and a particular range of methods to answer them. The important questions, on a Brandomian view, have to do with explaining sapience—the role language plays in reasoning. So, for example, the Brandomian account of linguistic meaning is explicitly tied to the notion of correct inference. The task of the semanticist, on this view, is to map the relations of commitment and entitlement that mark the game of giving and asking for reasons. And while Brandom admits that we do many things with language beyond participating in this game, he claims that all of these activities are, at least in principle, capable of being derived from it.<sup>149</sup> For Brandom, all roads lead to downtown. In various places in this dissertation,<sup>150</sup> I have worried that such an approach to language is far too limiting. The range of questions is far too small, and the methodology employed far too specialized, to provide a general account of the linguistic. For the questions I want to ask, Brandom is too close to the anti-naturalist pole to provide adequate answers.

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<sup>148</sup> Brandom (2008), p. 43

<sup>149</sup> One of the major projects of *BSAD* is to show how putting the game of giving and asking for reasons at the centre of linguistic activity allows for the inter-translatability of more specialized vocabularies via specifications in one vocabulary of what one must *do* in order to count as deploying the other vocabulary. I will discuss this project in more detail later on in this chapter.

<sup>150</sup> For example, in Chapter 3 (Section 3.13) and again in Chapter 5 (Sections 5.7-5.8)

On the other end of the spectrum is a position that is as resolutely naturalist as the aforementioned one is non-naturalist. This position would hold that all serious questions related to the study of language are to be investigated by means of the methods of science. At its limit, this position would resemble the eliminativism advocated by Paul and Patricia Churchland in the philosophy of mind. Linguistic phenomena would be explained exclusively in terms reducible to the concepts and judgments of natural science. Putative linguistic concepts that could not be so described would be considered, at best, to be the remnants of a folk theory of language, and could safely be eliminated.

I do not know of any linguist or philosopher who has explicitly taken such an extreme position, but Chomsky and his followers come the closest. While they allow for the possibility that linguistic phenomena not related to the mind's language faculty are capable of being studied, they explicitly deny that such a project would produce the systematic explanations we should expect from a genuine science of language. Although such projects (which include projects in pragmatics, sociolinguistics, historical linguistics, and the study of scientific symbol systems), may be such as to produce insightful descriptions of actual use, such descriptions are not systematic, they are not abstract, and they are not formal. So they can have no place in the scientific study of language. Instead, these projects are moved into the domain of what Chomsky calls 'ethnoscience'.<sup>151</sup> Unlike our imagined eliminativist, Chomskians do not think the projects of ethnoscience are spurious, only that they are not sufficiently scientific to be the subject of the linguist's enquiry. I have already expressed my worry that the distinction between linguistics and ethnoscience is undesirable in theory, and untenable in

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<sup>151</sup> Chomsky (2000), p. 90-91

practice.<sup>152</sup> While I approve of the Chomskian move towards a more naturalized account of language, the conception of the linguistic sphere is too narrow and the range of methods on offer too attenuated to adequately account for the intuitions that have guided the present enquiry.

So while not *the* extreme positions in the methodological debates between naturalists and non-naturalists, Brandomian and Chomskian approaches to linguistic study are to be found nearer to the edges than the centre. It is striking, therefore, that such extremes should be considered candidates for projects aiming to bring together naturalist and normativist methodologies. And yet, the seeds of just such a reconciliation are to be found in the original articulations of both positions.

### **6.3 What is a Reconciliation Project?**

In what follows, I will use the term “reconciliation project” to refer to any project that attempts to unite naturalist and normativist attitudes towards language under a single methodological approach. The aim of such a project is to describe how normativists and naturalists can be understood as engaging in a common enterprise, the examination of language, while giving some account of how possible conflicts between them may be resolved. The idea is that the dispute between normativists and naturalists need not be taken to be irresolvable, if only we are clear about the proper relationship between linguistic facts and norms. We can picture this relationship in many different ways, however, so it is important to be clear about what *kind* of reconciliation project is on the table.

Traditionally, reconciliation projects employ one of two strategies. In what

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<sup>152</sup> In Chapters 4 and 5



follows, I will rehearse what I take to be the important features of each strategy, explaining how each attempts to reconcile normativist and naturalist attitudes towards language. I will then argue that both kinds of traditional reconciliation strategy fail: that is to say they do not produce an account that adequately reconciles the two attitudes. In order to keep viable the prospects of a genuine reconciliation between naturalist and normativist approaches to language, I propose what I take to be a novel reconciliation strategy that, I contend, both naturalists and normativists should find amenable.

## **6.4 Varieties of Reconciliation**

The first variety of reconciliation project involves taking naturalist and normativist accounts of linguistic phenomena to constitute separate levels of explanation. Such an approach acknowledges that it makes sense to describe language from a naturalistic or normativistic point of view (on a more 'shallow' or 'less basic' level of the investigation), while claiming that the phenomena in question are ultimately explained (at a 'deeper' or 'more basic' level) by the corresponding approach. Such a strategy counts as a reconciliation project because it does not claim that the approach taken (or the vocabulary used) on the shallower, or less basic, level of explanation should be eliminated, only that it can (at least in principle) be explained in terms of the approach taken on a deeper, or more basic, level.

As this strategy involves translating the descriptions provided by one approach into those characteristic of the other, let us call it an *assimilation strategy*. One of the advantages of assimilation strategies is that they allow for what I will call 'explanatory unity'. This unity comes about because the explanations produced by normativist and naturalist accounts of the linguistic are, at the most basic level, assumed to be one and the

same. In what follows, I will argue that Brandom's methodological approach, particularly his account of representation in terms of existing social norms (understood as basic), is a textbook example of such a strategy at work.

The second variety of reconciliation project takes normativist and naturalist accounts of linguistic phenomena to be on an explanatory par with each other. That is to say neither kind of explanation is taken to be more basic than the other. Instead, reconciliation proceeds by clearly delineating which projects are to be studied by each approach. So, for example, one might argue that projects aiming to answer questions about syntax are to be pursued by naturalistic means, while claiming that projects centred around pragmatics require normativistic explanations. The founding principle of such an approach is that a sharp line can be drawn between the natural and normative. It is therefore usually paired with arguments that attempt to situate one set of projects as more properly (or more authentically) within the domain of linguistics than other possible candidates. As this variety of reconciliation project involves considering normativist and naturalist explanations of linguistic phenomena to be 'separate, but equal', we can term it a 'segregation strategy.' In the next section, I will argue that the picture of linguistic study that emerges from Chomsky's discussion of methodological dualism is a clear example of a segregation strategy at work.<sup>153</sup>

## **6.5 Segregation Strategies**

Methodological dualism, it will be recalled, is the view that mind and language are to be studied using different methods than those used to investigate the natural world.

Externalist semantics, non-nativist accounts of language acquisition, and attempts to

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<sup>153</sup> I discussed methodological dualism and naturalism in Section 5.4 of the last chapter.

model natural languages on the symbol systems used in science are all, in Chomsky's view, the result of taking a dualistic approach to language. For Chomsky, the problem with the dualist approach is that it does not allow for a scientific conception of linguistics. Instead, language is investigated by familiar 'philosophical' methods, including thought-experiments (like Twin-Earth examples) and intuition mongering. While such methods may allow us to make the occasional 'insightful description' of ways in which language actually is used, it will not give us a systematic, wide-ranging theory. For this, Chomsky endorses a program of 'methodological naturalism' for linguistics—a program that aims to study language using the same standards used by biology, chemistry, or physics in investigating their respective phenomena.

In order to get such a naturalist program off the ground, Chomskians suggest that we limit our linguistic investigations to those phenomena that 1) form a stable, coherent class of investigable features, and 2) are capable of systematic and scientific explanation.<sup>154</sup> It is important to remember that, on this approach, only *some* phenomena which one might, *prima facie*, take to be linguistic are to be studied as a part of linguistics. Pragmatics, for example, may not be studied as a part of the Chomskian model of linguistics. Instead, it may belong to ethnoscience.<sup>155</sup> It is not that Chomsky denies that there is a pragmatic element to language, or that, for example, language is often used to represent the world. Rather, he thinks that those dimensions should not be studied within the field of linguistics, conceived of as a scientific discipline. Instead, these projects of study may be approached by means of the methods employed by other

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<sup>154</sup> See, for instance, Chomsky (2000), McGilvray (1996), and Stainton (2006), though Stainton does not completely endorse the full Chomskian program.

<sup>155</sup> Along with, it will be recalled, projects aiming to explain relations of representation and reference. See, Chomsky (2000), 132

disciplines (including speculative philosophy).

The distinction between linguistics and ethnoscience is at once metaphysical and methodological—the two research programs are understood as studying different kinds of phenomena, and as using different methods in doing so. Consider, once again, the distinction between E-language and I-language.<sup>156</sup> On one level, the distinction is a metaphysical one: If deemed external to the language faculty, linguistic phenomena are classed as E-language, if internal to it, they are classed as I-language. So pragmatic phenomena (such as force), being elements of the social articulation of language, and normative phenomena at that, are classed as part of E-language, while syntactic phenomena, including, on a Chomskian view, the mechanisms of meaning individuation, are classed as I-language. This informal, metaphysical, reading of the distinction will only take us so far. For one thing, really only one well-defined class of phenomena, I-language, emerges from the distinction. E-language, for its part, seems to be defined with regard to what it is not, rather than what it is.

More importantly, however, the distinction between I- and E- languages is also methodological. I-language is the stable, coherent class of phenomena that admits of fruitful explanations. The study of E-language, on the other hand, consists of a motley assortment of distinct projects, requiring different methods at different times, and which are all shot through with normative commitments. Accordingly, the study of E-language is variously a nebulously defined ethno-scientific project, separate from *real linguistics*, or else as a degenerate research project, which the study of I-language is meant to supplant. The latter tack is backward looking, in that it encapsulates the major

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<sup>156</sup> McGilvray (1998), p. 240-42

Chomskian critique of traditional representationalism.<sup>157</sup> The first approach, on the other hand, is rather more forward-looking, since it seems to allow for the development of a separate (but equal) project of linguistic study. It is this forward-looking version of what might be called 'E-linguistics' which forms the basis of a Chomskian reconciliation project.

At this point it might be objected that the distinction between I- and E- languages is not a distinction between normative and non-normative linguistic phenomena, but one between linguistic phenomena internal to the language faculty, and those external to it. While it is true that such a distinction will result in the segregation of normative and (some) non-normative elements of linguistic phenomena, this is not its only intent. Rather, it is only because syntax and meaning-individuation are to be found within the language faculty, while (for example) pragmatics and representational function are not, that the apparent naturalist/normativist cleavage appears. Now while I do not think that Chomsky and McGilvray explicitly conceive of the strategy on normativist/naturalist grounds, I also think there is good reason to believe that the desire to describe language from a naturalist perspective is the driving force behind their methodological remarks. In other words, the basis for the division between E- and I- language is not merely an empirical one (as perhaps Chomsky and McGilvray would claim), but a principled, methodological one as well. Chomskians want to study language in a particular way (naturalistically) and so they conceive of linguistics as consisting of those projects that allow naturalistic explanations.

This, I think, helps to explain the rather odd Chomskian approach to semantics—it is because meaning individuation can be given a syntactic reading that it, and not other

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<sup>157</sup> I reconstructed this critique in detail in section 5.4 of the last chapter.

kinds of putatively semantic phenomena (such as representation or reference), is taken to be sufficient to produce a complete semantic theory. The claim that a syntactic account of individuation is sufficient for a semantic theory appears, at first glance, to be an empirical claim. After all, the goal is to explain how language users are able to produce meaningful discourse. Any theory of semantics must be able to account for the relevant phenomena, which for Chomskians include poverty of stimulus considerations. The problem is that the jury is still very much out on the empirical adequacy of the syntactic meaning individuation—Chomskians have yet to present a fully worked out account of the exact means by which fine-grained semantic individuation is produced by the actions of the language faculty.<sup>158</sup> While the general picture is in place, we lack many details—too many, I suspect, to adequately defend the theory on empirical grounds.

For this reason, I argue that the sufficiency claim is, at least this stage, *primarily* a methodological claim. In particular, it is a claim about what evidence is necessary and sufficient to explain a particular phenomenon—in this case linguistic meaning. In its methodological guise, the claim acts not so much as an empirical *prediction*, but as a methodological *standard* to be met. Chomskians want to study language naturalistically, and they have committed themselves to the view that I-language constitutes the only naturalistically respectable object of linguistic study. Since no adequate account of language would lack an account of meaning (even if semantics is, as was argued in the last the chapter, no longer considered to be the central project of linguistic study), there must be some providing such an account within the study of I-language. And since the study of I-language is oriented towards the study of the computations occurring within

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<sup>158</sup> McGilvray (1998) admits as much, though he seems confident that further research will bear out this approach.

the human language faculty, an account of linguistic meaning must also proceed along these lines. Hence, the sufficiency claim.

The sufficiency claim is thus a methodological claim about what a naturalistically respectable account of linguistic meaning must look like. It therefore rules out any pragmatic or normative dimension to semantics. As I argued in the last chapter, this approach does not refute methodological dualism so much as it reorients it. By this, I mean that we are still left with a strong distinction between the natural and the non-natural methodological spheres. All Chomskians have managed to do is carve out a space within the sphere of natural science in which a scientifically conceived study of language may be pursued. This is no mean feat, but in constraining the study of language to such a small class of possible projects, taking such an approach risks underrating the diversity and fecundity of other projects of linguistic study, particularly those pursued in pragmatics. I will return to this point in the following section.

In the last chapter, I also made reference to a project proposed by Jaroslav Peregrin.<sup>159</sup> This project involved convincing Chomskians to abandon their approach to semantics in favour of the Brandomian project described in MIE. Here again, I maintain that we have an attempt at reconciliation by segregation. One of the reasons that Brandomian pragmatics and semantics fits so well with Chomskian syntax is that neither core program crosses over into the other's domain. Although adopting Peregrin's proposal would involve Chomskians abandoning their semantic theory, or at least their commitment to individuation as the sole determining factor of linguistic meaning (the sufficiency claim), it leaves their syntactic commitments intact.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Peregrin (2005)

<sup>160</sup> It might be objected at this point that adopting such a proposal would involve abandoning Brandom's

Of more concern is the damage adopting this proposal would do to Brandom's avowal that the 'norms go all the way down'. If Peregrin is right, and reconciliation between the Chomskian and Brandomian projects is possible, then there will be an area of seemingly rule-governed behaviour that is not, at least at first blush, regulated by norms. There are a couple of ways out of this problem. The first is to remind ourselves that, under a segregation strategy, both normativist and naturalist accounts of linguistic phenomena are held to be on an explanatory par. So it is not the case that the normativity of pragmatics and semantics floats upon a strata of naturalized syntax. Rather, the Chomskian and Brandomian proceed along parallel tracks—each aimed at uncovering different aspects of the *prima facie* linguistic sphere. Therefore Peregrin's proposal need not violate the Brandomian dictum. The norms still go all the way down, but they are not needed to explain syntax.

## 6.6 Assimilation Strategies

Brandomians, however, might find the second reading of the proposal more to their liking. The second reading involves taking Peregrin's proposal as involving not a segregation strategy, but a covert *assimilation* strategy. The idea stems from the notion that syntax, though capable of a naturalist/descriptive explanation, is ultimately underpinned by the same norms of behaviour which support semantics and pragmatics. Given Brandom's openness to preserving some account of representation within his otherwise inferentialist framework, it is possible that he would endorse a vaguely (or

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syntactic theory. Although Brandom does not present his readers with a fully worked out theory of syntax, it is worth taking this objection seriously. Nevertheless, it should be noted that Brandomians do not lose much in the deal. Because Brandom's remarks about syntax in *Making it Explicit* are brief and sketchy at best, it is possible to imagine that he not attached to any particular theory of syntax. But consider Brandom's pro-sentential approach to truth, this might be a way of deriving a more robust account of syntax—thanks to Mike Hymers for this point.



perhaps not so vaguely) Chomskian program for syntax so long as could be fit within a broadly normativist approach to language as a whole. On such a view, the methods for studying syntax would remain the same (the approximate methods of the natural sciences), but instead of being unified with the natural sciences (as Chomsky et al would like), the study of syntax would be placed within the sphere of the normative (just as many facts about, say, sports or games might be given naturalistic readings, but make sense only in the context of the normative endeavours of which they are a part).

One might wonder why assimilation strategies deserve to be called reconciliation projects at all. After all, such strategies involve the claim that one approach or set of explanations is more basic (or more real) than any others. We might therefore wonder why any proponent of the explanations to be assimilated would accept such an arrangement. The key here, I think, is that assimilation strategies of this kind are non-eliminativistic. That is to say that even though one set of explanations is more basic than any other, those explanations which are reduced still retain explanatory power. This makes constructing such explanations worth doing, even if a more basic level of description is available. Consider, for instance, the case of chemistry and its relationship to physics. Even if (and this is by no means clear) it could be absolutely shown that the actions of chemical phenomena could satisfactorily be explained in the language of physics, this would not make chemical vocabulary and concepts superfluous—it would still be handy to talk about chemical phenomena and perhaps even to explain such phenomena in the language of chemistry, without appeal to any concepts in Physics. Similarly, one might (pace the Churchlands) argue that folk-psychological concepts still have an explanatory role to play even if explanations in terms of brain chemistry are the

ones that give a complete account of mental phenomena.

The phenomena given naturalistic descriptions may retain those descriptions even when, at a lower level of explanation, normative foundations are ascribed to them. Even if some phenomena are, at root, normative, it still makes sense to describe them as if they were not. This way of conceiving of assimilation is, I think, of a piece with Brandom's account of philosophical analysis in *BSAD*. In that book, he endeavours to develop what he calls "an analytic pragmatism". The idea here is that, unlike the traditional conception of analysis (in which one vocabulary or domain of discourse is shown to be directly equivalent to another), the type of analysis Brandom aims to apply to philosophical contexts involves using one vocabulary to specify what one must do in order to count as deploying a different vocabulary. This opens up a pragmatic route for analysis by which vocabularies that could not be directly analyzable into more basic ones are at least specifiable in those vocabularies. So while, for instance, normative vocabulary cannot be explained in terms of ordinary intentional vocabulary, it can be specified in it. This project of analysis does not amount to a reduction of one vocabulary into the other, at least as such reductions are usually supposed to run. This is because the aim is not to translate all the vocabularies into a single base vocabulary, but instead to show the links between different areas of discourse. And it is this ability to translate between vocabularies that is a hallmark of assimilation strategies.<sup>161</sup>

If Brandom's account of analytic pragmatism gives us an explicit example of an assimilation strategy in action, it also highlights the flaws of such strategies. Indeed, by focussing on methodological issues, we can bring some of the criticisms expressed in the Chapters 3 and 5 into sharper relief. Although there is no such thing as a universal base

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<sup>161</sup> The afterword to *BSAD* is particularly clear on this point.

vocabulary on a Brandomian picture, there is such a thing as a universal linguistic practice—the game of giving and asking for reasons. From a methodological point-of-view, this provides the explanatory unity characteristic of assimilation strategies, but at the cost of explanatory equality (since it is these *practices* which must be explained before any other). This worry will be developed as we move forward in this chapter.

## 6.7 Pluralism

Let us take stock. At the beginning of this chapter I suggested that the naturalist and normativist attitudes towards language could be reconciled in a single approach to linguistic study. I described and evaluated two broad strategies for achieving such a reconciliation: assimilation strategies, which take naturalist and normativist accounts of linguistic phenomena to constitute separate levels of a single explanation, and segregation strategies, in which normativist and naturalist accounts deal with distinct phenomena and use distinct methods. I argued that while both strategies show some promise, they ultimately fall short of a genuine reconciliation. Nevertheless, I think it is possible to leverage the strengths of both strategies by recovering two desiderata for naturalist-normativist reconciliation projects. The first desideratum, explanatory unity, is met when normativist and naturalist accounts of some linguistic phenomenon both contribute to explanations of that phenomenon. The second desideratum, explanatory equality, is met when neither naturalist nor normativist explanations are taken to be more basic than the other. I argued that assimilation strategies achieve explanatory unity but not explanatory equality, while segregation strategies achieve equality, but not unity. In the rest of this chapter, I will argue for a third kind of reconciliation strategy, an *integration* strategy, which, I contend, is capable of meeting both desiderata.

Before arguing directly for the viability of an integration strategy, it will help to get clear on what it would mean for a strategy to meet both of the aforementioned desiderata. I contend that meeting both desiderata requires taking a *pluralistic* attitude towards particular classes of linguistic phenomena and particular domains of linguistic study. By this I mean that in order to successfully reconcile our normativist and naturalist intuitions, we cannot assume that language is purely a natural or normative thing. Furthermore, I argue, genuine reconciliation requires us to acknowledge that even broad swathes of linguistic phenomena and broad areas of linguistic study are neither wholly normative, nor wholly natural in character. So, for example, it will not do to claim, as the Chomskians do, that syntax (and some projects in semantics) are paradigm projects of naturalistic inquiry, while pragmatics (and the remaining projects of semantics) are not. For this reason, producing something like a theory of meaning is going to require both naturalist and normativist work.

The question may be asked: given that Chomskians and Brandomians have already signed on to their own (non-pluralistic) reconciliation projects, is there any reason to believe they would accept this level of pluralism in their metaphysics and methodology? I think there is. The first sign of hope is that neither assimilation, nor segregation strategies need involve the elimination of non-conforming discourse. From the Brandomian perspective, the norms may go all the way down, but this is no reason to abandon non-normative discourse. Assimilation need not equal elimination. Similarly, for all their antipathy towards E-language, Chomskians do not claim that common sense discourse about language needs to be eliminated. It simply cannot be the topic of a serious study of language (as Chomskians conceive of it). The problem with

Ethnoscience, from a Chomskian point-of-view, is not that it isn't productive (the descriptions it produces are, after all, *insightful* descriptions), but that it just isn't all that interesting from the point of view of producing a promising *theory of language*, especially when compared with the work of Linguistics.

The impulse towards pluralism is more difficult to discern in the Chomskian segregation strategy. This is, in part, because it is in the nature of such strategies to divide rather than unite, and in part due to the strong Chomskian commitment to naturalism. Because Chomskians are interested in producing a naturalistic account of some linguistic phenomena, they are less interested in developing the ethnoscience side of the divide. They therefore leave us wanting an account of the types of explanations produced by attempts to study E-language. Still, I think it is possible to see some openness to pluralism, even in the teeth of such divide. In addition to the already discussed Chomskian hostility towards eliminativism, there is the sustained reluctance to assign any function or purpose to language. Repeatedly, there is a call to remember that we do many things with language and that communication, or discursiveness, is just one of many linguistic activities.

What is the upshot of all this talk of pluralism? I think, at its best, pluralism requires accepting that there is no 'first linguistics'. There is no project of linguistic study that is prior or of more central importance than any others. This, I think, is the best way to unite explanatory equality with explanatory unity. Now that we have suitably canvassed the desiderata for a pluralist reconciliation strategy, we can begin to see that if what I have argued in the previous sections is right, then neither an assimilation, nor a reconciliation strategy is liable to do the job.

## 6.8 Integration Strategies

The purpose of this chapter is to find some way of reconciling our normativist and naturalist attitudes about language. To wit, I have been considering the two major reconciliation projects present in the literature. Neither, I have argued, will be sufficient for a genuine reconciliation, here defined as a unified theory that accounts for the substance of both kinds of attitudes. Where does this leave our project?

Dead in the water, unless we can find some way of accounting for both sets of attitudes that manages to fulfill both desiderata for reconciliation. I want, now, to propose a new strategy that does just that—a strategy that preserves the explanatory equality of segregation strategies, while taking advantage of the explanatory unity provided by assimilation strategies. The strategy begins with the claim that the study of language is at once a normativistic and naturalistic enterprise. This claim is true both for the study of language as a whole, and for individual projects of linguistic study. Therefore it is not possible to identify distinct naturalist and normativist projects of linguistic study as required by segregation strategies. On the other hand, neither approach is taken to be more basic, or prior, to the other, as is required by even a non-eliminativistic assimilation strategy. The norms may well go all the way down, but so do the facts.

The basic idea is that language is an example of I will call a 'borderline phenomenon'—that is to say a phenomenon that straddles the natural-normative divide.<sup>162</sup> Borderline phenomena are hard to classify because the usual intuitive tests for objectivity and naturalness seem to fail. For example, if we imagine no intelligent life in the universe, language disappears. Yet this does not mean that it has no objective or natural

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<sup>162</sup> Other cases of borderline phenomena may include cities, health, sports, and food.

characteristics. It is just that these natural facts depend on intelligent life for their existence. Compare: if there were no humans, there would be no human footprints in existence. Yet this does not seem to make human footprints any less objective, or any less natural. And yet, unlike other by-products of human existence (like the aforementioned footprints), language does not seem to be a purely natural phenomenon either. Indeed, it seems to have normative features such as the notions of correct use and successful speech acts. Furthermore, language appears to be, in some important sense, a social phenomenon. Although the social dimension can be removed from accounts of linguistic structure and content (as we saw in Chapter 4), the rationale for doing so seems to depend on an overly stringent conception of naturalistic inquiry. For these reasons, we need some way of picturing the study of language that provides an account of the way it arises within us as a skill, ability, or capacity, and then, how it spreads out in the world through the medium of our social relations.

In short, I propose that we adopt an *integration strategy* for reconciling our normativist and naturalist attitudes towards language. I choose the name 'integration strategy' to bring out the contrast with segregation strategies. Where segregation strategies proceed by keeping the normative and natural spheres separate, an integration strategy allows them to overlap. Where segregation strategies divide the metaphysical space into normatively inflected and non-normatively-inflected linguistic phenomena, an integration strategy makes no such heavy distinctions. No less important are the ways in which integration strategies are conceived as distinct from assimilation strategies. Where assimilation strategies run together the natural and normative spheres, seeing the study of language as either a naturalist or normativist endeavour, integration strategies take the

process of explaining linguistic phenomena to involve work of both kinds.

In advocating for an integration strategy, I do not claim that there is no insight to be gained by *treating* certain projects of linguistic study as naturalistic or normativistic endeavours. I do not claim, for example, that all linguistic evidence is, even in principle, relevant to all projects. So it may make sense to talk about certain projects in syntax as possibly reducible to projects in cognitive science. What I do deny is that entire types of project (such as 'syntax' or 'pragmatics' considered as generalized projects) should, *a priori*, be considered to be naturalist or normativist endeavours only.

## **6.9 Integration Strategies and the Problem of the Unity of Linguistics**

Integration strategies have many advantages over alternative forms of reconciliation. First of all, they respect a distinction between the natural and the normative spheres, a distinction that risks being elided under assimilation strategies (even if such strategies are not eliminativistic). Secondly, they respect the ways in which the normative and natural spheres overlap in linguistic contexts. Unlike segregation strategies, which propose implausibly sharply defined boundaries between normative and natural projects of linguistic study, integration strategies take seriously the give and take between the two sets of intuitions and attempt to account for these interactions. In this way, integration strategies offer attractive means of explaining some of the phenomena discussed elsewhere in this dissertation.

## **6.10 Integration Strategies and the Problem of Meaning**

So, for example, what does using an integration strategy for linguistic study mean for the



problem of meaning? First of all, it allows us to circumvent some of the restrictions Chomskians place on an adequate semantic theory. The theoretical backdrop to the Chomskian account of linguistic meaning was a commitment to a sharp division between those projects of linguistic explanation that could be pursued naturalistically, and those which could not. In particular, those projects that involved normative considerations were specifically excluded from the work of linguistics. On a Chomskian view, such projects belonged to the field of what Chomsky calls 'ethnoscience', the study of the contingent socio-political milieu of language use. The upshot for the study of meaning was that a few *prima facie* projects of semantic study, particularly those tasked with explaining intentional or referential relationships were cast out of linguistics and into the methodological netherworld of ethnoscience. Indeed, the internalist, nativist, computationalist account of meaning preferred by the Chomskians is preferred in part *because* it is, in their view, the only theory that successfully manages to respect the distinction. Elsewhere in this dissertation, I have presented a variety of arguments against respecting this division, at least where meaning is concerned. The concept of an integration strategy allows us to give these objections a more systematic form.

One objection had to do with the Chomskian distinction between natural languages and scientific symbol systems.<sup>163</sup> Natural languages consist of the internal states of the human language faculty. They are accordingly internalist and innate, and, according to Chomskians, capable of being studied by means of methods derived from the natural sciences. Scientific symbol systems, on the other hand, are ways-of-speaking that are designed for a particular scientific or technical purposes. The meanings of the

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<sup>163</sup> This is, of course, not only a Chomskian distinction. However, tying the distinction to the one between the natural and the normative is a distinctly Chomskian innovation.

terms contained in scientific symbol systems are determined by convention, and require time and effort to master. They are also, in some real sense, normative—there is a possibility of being right or wrong about their correct application, and the correctness or incorrectness of particular usages is subject to the same rule-following arguments that motivated the normativity of meaning debate. The objection ran as follows: the distinction between natural and scientific languages is ill-formed, because it fails 1) to account for how scientific language might arise from natural language, and 2) to give adequate ways of determining whether or not a given linguistic construction in a particular context is natural or technical in origin.

Why should a Chomskian accept an integration strategy? Well, for one thing, as we have already noted, the Chomskian appeal to segregation strategies has a methodological, in addition to a purely empirical or metaphysical, basis. By positioning the union of nativism, internalism, and computationalism as the only acceptable approach to linguistic study, Chomskians may be attempting to defuse some of the initial resistance to the view from philosophers and linguists. In articulating the view, the goal is only to get an empirical project to catch on. The appeal to naturalism is thus a means of selling the program of nativist linguistics to a skeptical scientific/philosophical community. The actual *substance* of the views, however, stands or falls with the empirical data alone. Integration strategies make this point clear. They allow a naturalist (or indeed a normativist) orientation to be taken to particular projects when required. Therefore they are not inconsistent with whatever empirical program Chomskians wish to pursue.

## 6.11 An Integration Project in Action: Christopher Hom on Racial Epithets

There are other benefits to employing an integration strategy for producing explanations of linguistic phenomena. Indeed, there are many problems in semantics that, I think, would benefit from pursuing such a general strategy. Take, for example, the problem of providing an account of the workings of racial epithets.<sup>164</sup> Epithets, like other kinds of pejorative or derogatory speech, are difficult to account for because they appear to involve two different kinds of content. First, they appear to pick out a certain class of people—the members of given a racial, ethnic, or social group (Africans, Asians, British, French), while seemingly asserting something derogatory about them. The problem arises because, *prima facie*, it seems possible to understand the (full) meanings of such epithets while disclaiming their derogatory components. In a recent article, Christopher Hom has identified two traditional routes to accounting for the derogatory content of epithets of this kind.<sup>165</sup>

The semantic route takes the derogatory content to be part of the meanings of the epithets themselves, while the pragmatic route locates the derogatory component of epithets in the contexts in which they are used. For his part, Hom favours taking a semantic route—albeit one that differs in important respects from traditional approaches of that kind. In what follows, I will argue that Hom's proposed solution to the problem of racial epithets, a position he calls 'combinatorial externalism' can be seen as a textbook example of an integration strategy in action.

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<sup>164</sup> In comments on an earlier draft of this chapter, Michael Hymers suggested that similar analyses might be possible for indexicals and generics.

<sup>165</sup> Hom (2008); He extends this approach in order to provide a general analysis of pejoratives in Hom (2011)

Hom's basic claim is that the derogatory content of racial epithets derives from the existence of a racist ideology that 1) identifies a particular group; 2) Attributes certain properties to members of that group on the basis of the racist ideology; and 3) Prescribes that particular negative sanctions be applied to them in virtue of belonging to that group and having the attributed properties.<sup>166</sup> So, for example, the epithet 'Boche' is usually targeted at Germans. In using the term, one attributes a property to Germans, namely the property of being senseless brutes. Finally, using the epithet prescribes that negative sanctions should be applied to Germans on the basis of being German, and on the basis of the brutishness that being German is supposed to entail.

Epithets therefore contain both descriptive and prescriptive content. Being German is a descriptive property, in the sense that there are neutral ways of establishing who does and who does not belong to the group. Similarly the ascription of brutishness is structured as a descriptive claim, albeit a false one. The prescriptive content of the epithet is given by the claim that Germans ought to be subject to negative sanctions in virtue of being German and, as a result, brutish. We can think of the difference between derogatory and non-derogatory content by thinking of an epithet as being something like a literal weapon: a guided missile, for example. For a missile to be an effective weapon, it must find a target, and it must deliver its payload. The two types of semantic content found in racial epithets are analogous to a targeting system and payload. The non-derogatory content is the targeting system—it is what picks out those individuals to which the epithet will be applied and the features in virtue which they will be so picked out. As such, it is consistent with a number of non-derogatory uses (just as something like the Global Positioning System has both military and non-military uses). The derogatory content, on

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<sup>166</sup> Hom (2008), p. 431

the other hand, is analogous to the missile's payload. It is the (false) ascription of some negatively valenced property to members of the group, and the prescribed negative sanction that actually does the damage.

While it might be an oversimplification of the matter to treat the non-derogatory content of an epithet as the natural/factual content and the derogatory content as the normative content, it is clear that, in being grounded in a racist ideology, the derogatory content is entirely normatively constituted while the non-derogatory content is based (at least in part) in fact. Given this, what does Hom's suggested solution to the problem of racial epithets tell us about the viability of various reconciliation strategies?

First of all, it is worth noting that Hom's solution treats the natural and normative considerations on an explanatory par. Both facts and norms are required to explain the character of such words. Furthermore, there is no attempt to reduce one kind of content to the other. Both the non-derogatory and derogatory contents of epithets are understood as necessary contributions to their meanings. Finally, both the descriptive and prescriptive claims are taken to be part of the *meaning* of the epithet (the prescriptive claims are not, for example, taken to be a feature of the context of utterance). As such, they form the part of a unified explanation of this portion of the linguistic sphere. We therefore seem to have a case in which the explanation of some linguistic phenomenon (in this case the meaning of racial epithets) exhibits both explanatory unity and explanatory equality. It is for this reason that I take Hom's solution to the problem of racial epithets to be a paradigm case of an integration strategy in action.

## **6.12 Integration Strategies and the Problem of Advice**

It is also worth considering the differences between segregation and integration strategies

in the context of provisional theory of advice I laid out in the second Chapter. There, it will be recalled, I suggested that there were two sorts of skills or abilities with which we interact with language. The first set of abilities, which I named 'basic linguistic competence' (or BLC) consisted of those skills and abilities related to the deployment of one's native way of speaking in the context of one's immediate community. The linguistic forms one produces in such a context are generally pretty stable (so long as one's context remains stable), and one requires no advice as to their proper structure and interpretation. Complementing the BLC are the skills required to navigate ways of speaking and speech contexts different from one's own. The linguistic forms one produces in such contexts are always open to revision, and therefore the skills can be exemplified to greater or lesser degrees. The ideal at which these skills aim, I called 'Socio-Linguistic Mastery' (SLM). Since these skills require the deployment of ways-of-speaking quite different from one's own in far different contexts than one's basic competence allows for, it is they which are the proper target of advice about usage, grammar, and spelling.

At first glance, the provisional theory of language advice appears to be a classic segregation strategy. We set aside some skills as being 'basic' and 'immune' from advice, claiming that they are sufficient for getting around linguistically in the context of one's home. The other skills, those specifically required for interacting with people outside one's home group, *are* subject to advice. In the division between the BLC and SLM, one can see hints of the old Chomskian divide between the natural and the normative.<sup>167</sup>

When considered in these terms, the objection seems damning. Let me now attempt to defend the provisional theory of advice from claims of segregationism.

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<sup>167</sup> My choice of vocabulary is not helpful here. 'Basic Linguistic Competence' carries hints of the linguistic competence that is supposed to be the proper subject of Chomskian linguistic inquiry.

The first thing to note is that employing an integration strategy does not relieve us of the responsibility of distinguishing natural from normative intuitions, phenomena, and/or methodologies. Indeed, it is for this reason that it can be called a reconciliation strategy, for in the absence of any distinction between the natural and the normative, there would be nothing to reconcile. So it makes sense, when embarking on a project of linguistic study, to clearly delineate which elements of the phenomena in question display normative characteristics, and which range of methods of investigation will best be able to capture these elements. In the case of advice, the relevant phenomena, the skills or abilities displayed by language users, seem to have normative elements. In particular, the skill of determining the *most appropriate* way to express one's message seems, quite clearly, to be a normative one. Accordingly, it seems to be the development of this skill that is the proper target for language advice.

The second thing worth mentioning is that, all appearances to the contrary, the distinction between BLC and SLM does not mark a distinction between the natural and the normative. To see why, consider the following point: one of the goals of language advice is to educate speakers and writers about the abilities and expectations of different audiences. Part of this education involves coming to understand the features of the various ways-of-speaking one is likely to encounter, and the ways in which these features differ from those of one's own. And yet, it is quite likely that a foreign way-of-speaking will be natively deployed by one or more people. In virtue of its being their native way-of-speaking, they will require no advice about it. In other words, its deployment will be part of their BLC, and part of one's own SLM. One does not require advice about the BLC because, being the collection of all one's stable linguistic abilities, it is *constituted*

just by what one is able to do. This does not make it any more or less normative or natural. The distinction between BLC and SLM is thus a practical one about when and where to seek advice. It is therefore completely irrelevant to any broader distinction between the normative and the natural.<sup>168</sup>

Where then, do our naturalist and normativist intuitions enter into the advice debate, if not through the distinction between BLC and SLM? The answer is to be found in the two-step process involved in formulating language advice. The first step was a descriptive step—determining which features are involved in a target way-of-speaking and how these features differ from those of one's own. The second step is a prescriptive one—selecting the most appropriate from the range of grammatically acceptable forms at one's disposal (this is because grammar underdetermines expression). If we take identifying and describing the features of a target way-of-speaking to be naturalist work and selecting the most appropriate grammatically respectable form to be normative work, we have the distinction we seek. Note, however, that this distinction does not involve a strict separation of the natural from the normative. Indeed, the process of offering advice requires both kinds of work.

Adopting an integration strategy also helps to address some of the problems related to normativist objection to the provisional theory of advice. It will be recalled that the normativist objected to the provisional theory of advice on the basis that there was no principled distinction to be drawn between BLC and SLM, since all linguistic phenomena are normatively inflected in some sense. We can respond to this objection in much the same way as we did to the naturalist objection, by noting that it is *not* a distinction

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<sup>168</sup> We can think of language advice as information about how to produce a better passing theory, along the lines of the story told in Davidson (1986).



between the normative and natural parts of language, but a distinction between contexts in which one may require advice, and those in which one may not.

### **6.13 Summing Up**

In a sense, an integration strategy suggests the following: a naturalistically respectable theory of some linguistic phenomenon must not only be unifiable with the natural sciences, but also the normative/social phenomena that float on top of it. From the perspective of the integrationist, language is not a natural thing with social add-ons, or a social thing with a naturalistic basis. This is because language is not any one thing, but a set of related phenomena that interact in a number of particular ways. Some of these phenomena and interactions may be studied naturalistically, while others require a normative articulation.

## Chapter 7—Conclusion

### 7.1 The Story So Far

This dissertation has been about two different attitudes we bring to language. These attitudes, naturalism and normativism, have often been thought to be in irresolvable conflict with each other. Naturalism treats language as a natural phenomenon, capable of being studied according to the same methods used in physics, chemistry, or biology. Normativism, in contrast, treats language as an essentially normative, social phenomenon; one that (if it can be studied systematically at all) requires different methods than those employed in the natural sciences. In the first Chapter of this dissertation, I argued that both attitudes enjoy a fair measure of intuitive support, and that a number of debates in the philosophy of language could be understood as attempts to reconcile these apparently incompatible intuitions. My goal in this dissertation was to examine this apparent conflict as it bore on three major issues: the practical problem of justifying language advice, the metaphysical problem of accounting for linguistic meaning, and the methodological problem of determining the proper way to approach the study of language.

In the second chapter, I took on the practical question of how to distinguish good and bad advice about language (typically, though not limited to advice about grammar, spelling, and usage): Given that there is significant demand for advice about good speaking and writing, and given that there is not wide agreement about what constitutes good speaking and writing, there is a serious question about how language advice is to be justified. Over the course of the chapter I considered and rejected two major approaches

to language advice: descriptivism and prescriptivism. Descriptivism involved basing advice on an accurate account of how a language is *actually* spoken, while prescriptivism involved an attempt to bring one's way of speaking or writing in line with some external goal (such as clarity, or logical perspicuity). I argued that descriptivist approaches failed to adequately meet the apparently genuine demand for such advice, while prescriptivist approaches had trouble with the demand that such advice be accurate. Finally, I presented a hybrid account, arguing that we should understand language advice as being justified by way of a two step process: the first step being the acquisition of an accurate account of the range of expressive options at one's disposal given one's abilities and those possessed by one's audience. The second step involved choosing the most appropriate of these options based on one's particular purpose in speaking or writing.

This provisional account of language advice was grounded in a distinction between two different sets of skills or abilities: what I called Basic Linguistic Competence (BLC) and Socio-Linguistic Mastery (SLM). One's BLC consists of those skills one requires to make oneself understood in one's native way of speaking. It does not require much (if any) formal instruction to be acquired, and it does not admit of degrees of instantiation: it is merely the stable set of skills or abilities one needs in order to function in one's native way of speaking. In contrast, the skills involved in gaining Socio-Linguistic Mastery do seem to admit of degrees, and acquiring them seems to count as a kind of achievement. SLM consists of those skills or abilities required to achieve one's ends in ways of speaking other than one's own. In particular, it involves those skills required to target one's speech or writing to a specific audience or audiences. On the hybrid view, language advice ought only to be aimed at developing skills of this

second sort.

In the next two Chapters, I shifted my focus from practical questions to metaphysical ones. In Chapter 3, I considered recent challenges to the claim that linguistic meaning is essentially normative. I began by tracing the background to the normativity claim in Kripke's reading of Wittgenstein, and identified a tradition that takes Kripke's skeptical argument to rely on the incompatibility between the claim that meaning is normative and the claim that it is a matter of fact. I then rehearsed the structure of the anti-normativist argument, noting that it seems to depend on the claim that only categorical normativity (that is to say normativity that implies categorical imperatives) is incompatible with a realist conception of meaning. I then presented a counter argument to this claim, arguing, first of all that hypothetical normativity is still normativity in a real sense, and then claiming that facts alone are not sufficient to provide the basis for meaning without the further claim that the fact in question is relevant to the purpose one is citing it for. Finally, I presented the approach to semantics endorsed by Robert Brandom as an example of what a normative semantics might look like.

In Chapter 4, I presented a challenger to the hybrid account of semantics I proposed in the previous chapter. The approach to semantics championed by Noam Chomsky and certain of his followers is entirely focused on those phenomena having their origin in the language module of the mind. In so doing, they reject any attempt to explain linguistic meaning in terms of reference or representation. Instead, they identify meanings with interfaces of the language faculty specifically produced to be used by the mind's conceptual-intentional systems. These interfaces are produced by the same mechanisms in the language faculty that process syntactic structures. Finally, Chomskians

claim that these interfaces are the only scientifically respectable objects of semantic study. At the end of the Chapter, I presented arguments against taking this approach. One objection centred on the existence of technical scientific vocabulary. Since deploying such vocabulary requires that one speak a natural language, we are owed some account of how this technical vocabulary (which, unlike natural language, does not seem to be internally constituted) comes about. Secondly, I argued that the line between I- and E-language seemed somewhat arbitrary, and seemed to be drawn on methodological, rather than merely empirical grounds.

In the last two chapters, I confronted these methodological questions head on. In Chapter 5, I considered the ways in which Chomskian and Brandomian approaches to linguistic meaning both appear to originate in a common antipathy to a dominant philosophical approach to meaning (which I called 'representationalism'). This approach to linguistic study identified representing the world as the sole, or primary, function of language, and semantics as the core or most basic project of linguistic study. I argued that Chomskian and Brandomian approaches to languages turn this picture on its head. Chomskians, for example, deny a particular function for language, and identify syntax as the core project of linguistics. Brandomians, on the other hand, reject representation as the central function of language, and begin their account of language firmly in the domain of pragmatics. I argued that these approaches can be understood as different factions in the same revolutionary cause—each committed to eliminating the representationalist order of explanation, but having different ideas of the methodology to be set up in its place. Finally, I signed on as a cautious supporter of the revolution—expressing my own discomfort with the representationalist approach, but refusing to join

either faction. Instead, I suggested there was reason to believe that the two revolutionary factions might be reconciled.

In Chapter 6, I considered the various forms such a reconciliation might take. I described three strategies for achieving reconciliation: Segregation strategies, where natural and normative phenomena are kept separate and are studied with different methodologies, assimilation strategies, in which normative phenomena are explained in terms of natural phenomena (or vice versa), and integration strategies, in which natural and normative phenomena are taken to be jointly essential for producing explanations of linguistic phenomena. I went on to argue that only integration strategies offer the best shot at reconciliation. This is because they preserve both explanatory unity and explanatory equality. Finally, I rehearsed Christopher Hom's account of the semantics of racial epithets, which I took to be an example of an integration strategy in action.

## **7.2 Adventures on the Borderline Part 1—The World's Fastest Human**

If the story I've told in this dissertation seems a plausible way of approaching questions about how language is to be used and studied, I hope that some of these lessons may be of use further afield. Before wrapping things up, I want to briefly consider how the basic claims of this dissertation<sup>169</sup> may be extended (with suitable amendments) to the other borderline phenomena. It will be recalled, that I defined a 'borderline phenomenon' in the last chapter as a phenomenon that straddles the natural-normative divide, and

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<sup>169</sup> That human natural languages straddle the borderline between the natural and normative spheres, that language use should not be identified with any particular purpose or function, that when attempting to reconcile naturalist and normativist attitudes, it is best to follow a strategy that preserves explanatory equality *and* explanatory unity

which can only be explained by invoking both facts and norms. In that chapter, I argued that language is one of many borderline phenomena, all of which may be described as natural-normative hybrids, however they may differ in their particular constitutions. To take a fairly simple case, consider the category of 'world's fastest human'. Traditionally, this title has been awarded to the person who holds the record for the 100 m sprint. At the time of writing the holder of this record, and thus the holder of the title as world's fastest human, is Usain Bolt, of Jamaica. Now, at first blush, Bolt's status as world's fastest human seems to be a relatively straightforward affair. He has, under certain conditions, run at a certain speed, which exceeds (perhaps only barely) the top running speeds of others. As a result, it is tempting to think that the title "world's fastest human" is a purely descriptive statement of fact. Upon further reflection, however, we can begin to ask questions. For example, we might ask why it is that it is the 100m world-record holder who receives the title.<sup>170</sup> The fact itself is not in dispute, but it is possible to argue about the significance of this fact. This suggests that there is a normative element in play in determining what constitutes the fastest human being.

We might approach the issue in a number of ways. We might, for example, claim that the question of who is the fastest human being is an uninteresting question, one that does not warrant any serious scientific investigation. Indeed, it might be argued that to the extent that it does not warrant such investigation, it is a category that may safely be discounted. And yet, I suspect even the most dedicated naturalists would not want to eliminate the category entirely. Why? Because the category "world's fastest human" plays

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<sup>170</sup> This standard was called into question during the 1996 Olympic games when Donovan Bailey, a Canadian, won the 100m, while Michael Johnson, an American, won the 200m. The issue was eventually settled by a special 150m race, won by Bailey (though only after Johnson pulled up short due to an injury).

a role in our life—it has significance for certain projects and desires some of us may possess. Eliminating the category would negatively affect the completion of these projects and the satisfaction of these desires.

But we should be careful, lest we go too far in the other direction. In granting that the title 'world's fastest human' seems to have normative elements, we should not thereby assume that the category is *entirely* normative. We should not, for example, assume that there is no matter of fact relevant to determining who holds the title. A far more sensible approach would be to note the ways in which our apprehension of certain facts, and our judgment that these facts are important, constitute the category. And this, I think, is the best way to deal with a category such as this.

### **7.3 Adventures on the Borderline Part 2—Health**

There are other borderline phenomena. Consider, for example, the concept of health. On the face of it, the problem seems to be about determining whether or not certain facts (blood pressure, cholesterol, heart rate) obtain. In other words, it might seem as though health is merely an objective state of human body—a constellations of facts which may or may not obtain for particular individuals. Yet, to the extent that this constellation of facts is meant to constitute healthiness, we need a further account of *why those facts should constitute the standard*, and what it means to meet or fail to meet it. And this seems to be importantly *normative* work.

Again, there are a number ways of responding to these observations. On the one hand, one might focus exclusively on the objective correlates of health, even if this does not correspond to our common-sense application of the concept: Although it might be difficult, in certain cases, to exactly ascertain whether the body is in a state of disease or



health, this is an epistemic, and not a metaphysical or methodological problem. Even so, we are once again faced with answering the question of why certain states of affairs should count as healthy and why certain others should count as diseased. On the one hand, one could claim that, appearances to the contrary, notions such as health and disease are all socially constructed, normative concepts. We could then suggest that talk of health be held separate from talk of the physical conditions often associated with it. Or perhaps one might claim that there is no fact of the matter about which states are indicative of health and which are not.

However we decide the issue, it is important to note that being in a state of health is both a factual and normative matter. One will not be considered healthy unless one meets at least *some* physical standard or another, but this is entirely consistent with those standards being set normatively. Any attempt to investigate health must proceed with these considerations in mind.

As language users, we must live our lives on the borderline between facts and norms, the natural and social spheres. If what I have argued in these pages is cogent, then it will be clear that this need not be considered a harsh sentence. Rather, I hope that by embracing our status as border-dwellers, we will come closer to finally unravelling the magic of language, and revelling in knowing, at long last, how the trick is done.

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