

SEMANTIC NORMATIVITY

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1. INTRODUCTION

SEMANTIC normativists believe that meaning has a constitutive part, i.e. a part without which there is no meaning, that imposes certain obligations on language users. In other words, according to semantic normativity, to mean something by a term *alone*, i.e. merely because you mean that thing by that term, implies certain obligations such as “one *should* use that term in a certain way”. For example, if you want to mean *green* by “green”, this alone (without having any further goals external to meaning) implies that you should use “green” in a certain way. Of course, it is the case that if you want to reach certain goals external to meaning, you might be obligated to use words in a certain way. But this does not make meaning normative. For a fact, such as meaning, to be normative, it is needed to have a constitutive part that implies certain obligations. What is such a part of meaning? The most famous candidates for such a part, according to semantic normativists, are correctness, truth and intention. To argue that any of these candidates is the successful candidate, therefore, it is needed to show that (1) it is a constitutive part of meaning (hereafter, the condition of constitution) and that (2) it produces certain obligations on its own (hereafter, the condition of obligation-producing). The prospects of the debate, as will be brought, do not seem to be so promising in favor of any of these candidates. However, I believe that there is a forth missing candidate, namely linguistic communication, which can be shown to satisfy both above conditions using what Davidson says in his triangulation thesis. In what follows, accordingly, firstly, I show the account and the failure of the three above mentioned candidates respectively; secondly, I introduce Davidson’s triangulation thesis; thirdly, I show how Davidson’s thesis can help us to argue for linguistic communication as a more plausible candidate.

2. THREE MAIN APPROACHES TO SEMANTIC NORMATIVITY

2. 1. *Correctness-based semantic normativity*

Let us consider what Boghossian says regarding semantic normativity:

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«Suppose the expression ‘green’ means *green*. It follows immediately that the expression ‘green’ applies *correctly* only to *these* things (the green ones) and not to *those* (the non-greens). The fact that the expression means something implies, that is, a whole set of *normative* truths about my behavior with that expression: namely, that my use of it is correct in application to certain objects and not in application to others». (Boghossian 1989, p. 514).

In the first two sentences of the above paragraph, Boghossian claims that:

t means $F \rightarrow (x)(t \text{ applies correctly to } x \leftrightarrow x \text{ is } f)$.

Where t is a term, F is its meaning, and f is the feature (or features) in virtue of which F applies to t . If we assume that if meaning is normative, certain obligations are imposed on the speaker who means F by t , then Boghossian seems to have something like what follows in mind:

S means F by $t \rightarrow (x)(S \text{ applies } t \text{ correctly to } x \leftrightarrow x \text{ is } f)$.

Where S is the speaker and the other terms are defined above. The question is then: where does “the whole set of *normative* truths” come from? Does it come from the term “correct”? It seems that Boghossian thinks so: if a certain application of a term is *correct*, it implies that the speaker who grasps the meaning of that term *ought* to make that particular application of the term. It is this *deontic* interpretation of the term “correct” which gives rise to semantic normativity here. To arrive at such a conclusion, the conditions of obligation-producing and constitution, as noted in the introduction, should be satisfied regarding correctness. In what follows, it is argued that at least the condition of obligation-producing is not satisfied and therefore correctness cannot be an obligation-producing constitutive part of meaning.

It is a consensus among anti-normativists that it is not the case that all notions of correctness necessarily imply an “ought” (Gluer 1999; Gluer 2001; Wikforss 2001 and Hattiangadi 2006). According to them, “correct” is just a catch-all phrase for the various relations term can have to the world. In other words, “is correct” stands for “refers to”, “denotes”, and “is true of” and the like. If so, to say that something is “correct” is nothing more than saying that it meets a certain standard (criteria). Hattiangadi puts the matter through a nice example:

«For example, think of the theme parks where there is a minimum height requirement for some of the more dangerous rides. This is a standard children must meet if they are to go on the ride. But however happy Niblet may be to meet the standard, whether or not she does is a straightforwardly non-normative, natural fact – it is the fact that she is four feet tall. We might say that Niblet is the ‘right’ height or the ‘correct’ height, but this is clearly not to say that it is a height she ought to pursue quite independently of any of her desires». (Hattiangadi 2006, p. 224).

To sum up, according to anti-normativists, it is a *platitude* to say that some use of a term is “correct” in the sense that it accords with the conditions under which the term “refers to”, “denotes” or “is true of” something in the world, but it does not follow that “correct” implies “ought” because the latter unlike the former is a prescriptive term. This follows that correctness does not satisfy the condition of obligation-producing.

However, let us assume for the sake of argument that Boghossian is right to construe “correct” as a prescriptive term (i.e. a term which includes ought) and let us see whether it can produced required meaning obligations. According to a deonic reading of “correctness”, the following conditional might be what Boghossian has in mind when he claims that “the fact that the expression means something implies, that is, a whole set of *normative* truths about my behavior with that expression”:

S means F by $t \rightarrow (x)(S \text{ ought to apply } t \text{ to } x \leftrightarrow x \text{ is } f)$.

Regarding *ought*, one can derive two readings from the above formula, namely narrow and wide scope readings, as follows:

Narrow scope: S means F by $t \rightarrow (x)(S \text{ ought (to apply } t \text{ to } x) \leftrightarrow x \text{ is } f)$.

Wide Scope: S means F by $t \rightarrow (x)(S \text{ ought (to apply } t \text{ to } x \leftrightarrow x \text{ is } f))$.

Let us deal with these two scopes respectively.¹ Concerning the narrow scope, one can easily break it into the two following conditionals as conjuncts of that formula:

(a) S means F by $t \rightarrow (x)(x \text{ is } f \rightarrow S \text{ ought (to apply } t \text{ to } x))$.

(b) S means F by $t \rightarrow (x)(S \text{ ought (to apply } t \text{ to } x) \rightarrow x \text{ is } f)$.

Now let us see whether any of (a) or (b) can give us meaning obligations. Regarding (a), it clearly is in conflict with the intuitive principle of “ought implies ‘can’”.² For assume that t is “green”. Then (a) implies that if you mean *green* by “green”, for every green object in the world you ought to have applied “green” to that object. But it is a too strong requirement because there are a lot of green objects in the world that you will never see. So you could not even imagine them, let alone applying “green” to them.

What about (b)? It does not seem to suffer from the same problem because it has reversed the direction of the conditional. But in so doing, it has lost its normative force. Look! If x is f , no “ought” follows because the direction is from “ought” to “is” and not from “is” to “ought”; and if x is not f , a lack of “ought” rather than an “ought” is followed because (b) equals to:

¹ Some parts of the following discussion of narrow and wide scopes are borrowed from: HATTIANGADI 2006, pp. 225-7.

² Here, “can” means the possibility of doing something regarding one’s real world situation, similar to what is meant by moral possibility, in contrast to logical possibility.

(b') S means F by $t \rightarrow (x)(x \text{ is not } f \rightarrow \text{It is not the case that } S \text{ ought (to apply } t \text{ to } x))$.

And not to:

(b') S means F by $t \rightarrow (x)(x \text{ is not } f \rightarrow S \text{ ought not (to apply } t \text{ to } x))$.

Let us now turn into the wide scope:

Wide Scope: S means F by $t \rightarrow (x)(S \text{ ought (to apply } t \text{ to } x \leftrightarrow x \text{ is } f))$.

As "ought" here has a wide scope over a bi-conditional, the speaker who means F by t has two ways to satisfy the obligation: applying t to all x in the world which are f , which seems again to conflict with the mentioned intuitive principle of "'ought' implies 'can'"; or changing the world in a way that x is no more f because if so, the speaker is no more obligated to apply t to x . But this latter requirement too cannot always be satisfied. For example, if t is "number", how could one make an x such as 2 which is a number, a non-number? Even in the cases where it seems possible to do so, the point is that doing so does not seem to be among any of one's semantic requirements to mean something by an expression.

What is concluded here is that even a deontic construal of "correctness" cannot provide us the required meaning obligations for semantic normativity. It provides us a separate and even stronger argument to the effect that correctness does not satisfy the condition of obligation-producing.

2. 2. Truth-based semantic normativity

Another account of semantic normativity assumes that truth, or better to say truth-telling, is the required constitutive obligation-producing part of meaning. In what follows, it is shown that truth (or, truth-telling) does not satisfy the condition of constitution and hence even if wanting to tell the truth imposes certain obligations on the speaker, the result obligations are useless for semantic normativity.

To show that truth does not satisfy the condition of constitution, Wikforss draws the distinction between a linguistic mistake and a factual mistake in the following way:

«When I make a statement, such as "That's a horse", two types of mistake can be made. First, I can make a factual mistake, as when I misperceive. Second, I can make a linguistic mistake, as when I use the word 'horse' to express my belief that the animal is a cow. I have then not made a factual mistake (my belief is correct) and yet my statement is linguistically incorrect» (Wikforss 2001, p. 210).

This means that one could easily differentiate between the four following cases. Assuming that "rabbit" means *rabbit*:

Case A: S desires to express the belief that x is a rabbit, x is in fact a rabbit,

and *S* applies “rabbit” to *x*. Here, *S*’s use of “rabbit” is both *factually* and *linguistically correct*.

Case B: *S* desires to express the belief that *x* is a rabbit, *x* is in fact a duck, and *S* applies “rabbit” to *x*. Here, *S*’s use of “rabbit” is *factually mistaken* but *linguistically correct*.

Case C: *S* desires to express the belief that *x* is a duck, *x* is in fact a rabbit, and *S* applies “rabbit” to *x*. Here, *S*’s use of “rabbit” is *factually correct* but *linguistically mistaken*.

Case D: *S* desires to express the belief that *x* is a duck, *x* is in fact a duck, and *S* applies “rabbit” to *x*. Here, *S*’s use of “rabbit” is both *factually* and *linguistically mistaken*.

If it is a necessary condition of meaning something by an expression, Wikforss argues, that the speaker should tell the truth, i.e. that he should be factually correct then in each of the above cases in which *S* is factually mistaken, he has lost or changed what he means by “rabbit”. So, in these cases, he has used “rabbit” in a different meaning rather than its previous intended meaning, i.e. *rabbit*, and hence he is linguistically mistaken. However, case B is obviously a counter example to this idea that one cannot be simultaneously factually mistaken and linguistically correct. The point is that truth as a necessary condition to mean something by an expression does not make any room for a distinction between factual and linguistic mistakes: whenever you are factually mistaken in applying a term, you are also necessarily linguistically mistaken which seems totally counterintuitive. Accordingly, one cannot assume truth (or, truth-telling) as a necessary condition to mean something by an expression and hence truth does not satisfy the condition of constitution.

2. 3. *Intention-based semantic normativity*

Wright and McDowell are committed to semantic normativity because they believe that we are intuitively subscribed to a *contractual theory of meaning*, according to which to mean something by an expression is to be committed to a particular *pattern of application* of that expression and it is exactly this commitment that obliges the speaker to use a word in a certain way whenever he wants to mean something by that expression. In their own words:

«We [McDowell and Wright] find it natural to think of meaning and understanding in, as it were, *contractual terms*. Our idea is that to learn the meaning of a term is to acquire an understanding that *obliges* us subsequently – if we have occasion to deploy the concept in question – to judge and speak in certain determinate ways, on pain of failure to obey the dictates of the meaning we have grasped; that we are ‘committed to certain patterns of linguistic usage by the meanings we attach to expressions’» (McDowell 1993. Originally published 1984, *Synthese* 58, p. 257) [Emphasis added].

The role of intention in this interpretation of semantic normativity can be formalized in the following way:

S means F by $t \leftrightarrow S$ intends that $(x)(S$ ought (to apply t to x) $\leftrightarrow x$ is f).

That is, it is a necessary and sufficient condition to mean something by an expression that the speaker intends to use that expression in certain ways. The noted intention comes out exactly from his being committed to certain patterns of linguistic usage that his linguistic community attaches to expressions. But if so, how could one intend to lie meaningfully? For, according to the above bi-conditional, to lie meaningfully is simultaneously intending to use an expression incorrectly (in order to lie) and intending to use it correctly (in order to mean something by that expression) which is obviously impossible (Hattiangadi 2006). This shows that intention, as came above, cannot be a constitutive part of meaning and hence even if we assume that intention produces certain obligations, which is not a consensus among philosophers³, the result obligations are useless for semantic normativity.

At this point, it seems that the battle is over in favor of semantic anti-normativists. In other words, it seems that there is no remaining candidate fact which can satisfy both the conditions of constitution as well as obligation-producing. In what follows, using Davidson's triangulation thesis, I argue that linguistic communication is such a candidate fact. Accordingly, firstly a brief introduction of Davidson's triangulation thesis is brought, secondly, and more importantly, it is shown how Davidson's thesis help us to make linguistic communication a more plausible candidate.

3. DAVIDSON'S TRIANGULATION THESIS

According to Davidson's externalism, what determines the content of a thought (or an intentional state) is what *typically causes* that thought (Davidson 1991, pp. 191-202). For example, what determines the content of a chair-belief, i.e. a belief about a certain chair, is that particular chair which typically causes that belief. The determination of such a cause, according to Davidson, cannot be done by just considering a single person who normally stands in many causal relations with objects and events in her environment. Davidson poses both the problem and his solution in the following way:

«The cause is doubly indeterminate: with respect to width, and with respect to distance. The first ambiguity concerns how much of the total cause of a belief is relevant to the content. The brief answer is that it is the part or aspect of the total cause that typically causes relevantly similar responses. What makes the responses

³ For relevant arguments, see WIKFORSS 2001.

relevantly similar in turn is the fact that others find those responses similar ... The second problem has to do with the ambiguity of the relevant stimulus, whether it is proximal (at the skin, say) or distal. What makes the distal stimulus the relevant determiner of content is again its social character, it is the cause that is shared» (Davidson 1997, p. 130).

In other words, to determine the relevant cause, firstly, it should be determined which of many causal lines which goes from the person in a certain direction is the relevant line, and secondly, it should be determined where on this relevant line locates the relevant cause. According to Davidson, for both of these determinations to be done, another person is needed. The reason is that it is the second person who finds the first person's similar responses in different situations in which there is the relevant cause, *similar*; and the exact location of the stimulus is determined by the intersection of the lines which go from each of the persons in the direction of the stimulus:

«It is a form of triangulation: one line goes from us [i.e. the second person] in the direction of the table [i.e. the relevant stimulus], one line goes from the child [i.e. the first person] in the direction of the table, and the third line goes from us to the child. Where the lines from the child to table and from us to table converge 'the' stimulus is located» (Davidson 1992, p. 119).

Thus, the second person has two roles: first, providing a standard of similarity of the first person's responses by *consciously correlating* the responses of the first person with objects and events in the first person's world⁴ and second, participating in identifying (for the first person) the stimulus to which the first person is reacting. For the second role to be played, the two persons need to *know* that they have the same object in their minds because it might be the case that they have similar reactions to different stimulus. The only way, according to Davidson, to know this, is that they start to speak and ask each other of what they are thinking now. So, to sum up, the determination of the content of thought needs a triangle, one apex of which is the person whose content of thought is to be determined, the second apex of which is another person who finds the responses of the first person in situations in which there is the relevant stimulus of the first person's thought, similar and determines the location of the stimulus; and the third apex of which is the relevant stimulus itself. Although the second person can participate somehow in identifying the similarity in the first person's responses, but to identify the intersection of the lines of thought which go from each of them in the direction of the stimulus, they need to know that they are thinking of the same stimulus in that

⁴ It is the second person that acknowledges that the first person is behaving verbally sufficiently similar in similar situations in which there exists the stimulus. The first person, by herself, is incapable of recognizing this.

situation. For this latter to be accomplished, they should establish a linguistic communication with each other. So finally, *the determination of the content of the thought requires linguistic communication.*

4. IN DEFENSE OF THE FORTH APPROACH,
NAMESLY LINGUISTIC COMMUNICATION-BASED SEMANTIC NORMATIVITY

In what follows, I try to show, using Davidson's thesis, how linguistic communication satisfies the conditions of constitution and obligation-producing respectively.

Regarding the satisfaction of the condition of constitution, the following argument can be run:

Premise 1: According to Davidson's no-priority thesis, there is no language without thought.

Premise 2: According to Davidson's triangulation thesis, there is no thought without linguistic communication.

Conclusion: According to Davidson, there is no language without linguistic communication.

The second premise is what is brought at the end of the previous section, as a direct consequence of Davidson's triangulation thesis. The first premise is what Davidson says in his no-priority thesis (Davidson 1984) according to which language and thought come and go with each other. In other words, there is no language without thought. If so, assuming the obvious validity of the above argument, the conclusion is what is needed to argue for the satisfaction of the condition of constitution regarding linguistic communication, or better to say to argue that linguistic communication is a constitutive part of meaning for in the above argument it was concluded that linguistic communication is a constitutive part of language and assuming plausibly enough that without language there is no meaning, it can be finally concluded that linguistic communication is a constitutive part of meaning.

Regarding the satisfaction of the condition of obligation-producing, one might suspect that whether linguistic communication (to be successful) imposes certain obligations on the speakers. One possible answer is that what is needed to have successful linguistic communication with others is just that the communicators convey their intentions of using the terms to each other. As long as this conveying is successfully done, in any way, there is no need to use the terms in a certain way to mean something by them and hence no obligations are produced out of linguistic communications. Consider the following example: I am in a room with my friend who is familiar with my odd way of using terms to mean something by them. In this situation, I say to him "give me Wedgewood!" and he understands that I mean "give me Wedgewood's book!" Here, a successful linguistic communication is established without us-

ing terms in the standard way. If so, linguistic communication fails to satisfy the condition of obligation-producing. Davidson's triangulation thesis, I argue, helps us to show why this condition needs to be satisfied. The reason, in brief, is that if such a condition regarding linguistic communication is not satisfied, Davidson's triangulation thesis falls in a vicious circle. In other words, Davidson's triangulation thesis provides us a conditional acceptance for the condition of obligation-producing regarding linguistic communication. In what follows, I show why such a circle arises and how requiring the satisfaction of the condition of obligation-producing regarding linguistic communication can break it.

According to Davidson's triangulation thesis, as came above, the first person to know what the content of her belief is needs another person that acknowledges her similar verbal reactions in situations in which there exists the stimulus. To be sure that her similar reactions are reactions to what the second person is also entertaining in her mind the simplest way seems to ask the second person about it. However, according to Davidson's radical interpretation thesis, to understand what the second person says in respond, the first person needs to ascribe her own belief in that situation to her. If so, to know what the content of her belief is, the first person requires appealing to her own belief. This is the circularity objection which Gluer raises against Davidson's triangulation thesis (Gluer 2006). The argumentative form of the objection seems to be something like the following:

Premise 1: According to Davidson's radical interpretation thesis, we benefit from thought to establish linguistic communication.

Premise 2: According to Davidson's triangulation thesis, we benefit from linguistic communication to establish thought.

Conclusion: According to Davidson, we benefit from thought to establish thought.

Let us look more precisely at the circle and see how requiring the satisfaction of the condition of obligation-producing regarding linguistic communication can break it. Davidson has already (in his radical interpretation thesis) said us that a linguistic communication is successfully established not because communicators feel compelled to use the terms in a certain way, but because the interpreter comes to know what the interpretee intends to mean by her use of the terms (this knowing, itself, is accomplished through assigning by-and-large the same beliefs as of herself in similar situations to the interpretee). But if so, in his triangulation thesis, Davidson cannot appeal to linguistic communication as a possibility condition of thought, for linguistic communication itself, according to Davidson's radical interpretation, to be successfully established requires appealing to thoughts. The noted circle, I think, can be broken by requiring the satisfaction of the condition of obligation-producing regarding linguistic communication. Such a condition implies that the speakers should use their terms in a certain way to establish a successful linguistic

communication. If so, they need no longer appeal to each other's thoughts to understand each other for they know each other's meanings through each other's uses of the terms and hence the noted circle would be broken. Appealing to each other's thoughts in linguistic communication in radical interpretation scenario, in contrast to triangulation scenario, is plausible for the two scenarios are radically different from each other. The main difference is in the purposes for which each of these two scenarios is designed. The radical interpretation scenario is designed to determine the meaning of the interpretee's terms. Therefore, what should be fixed, between belief and meaning, is what is nearer to the interpreter's disposal, i.e. the interpretee's belief. The triangulation scenario, on the other hand, is designed to determine the content of the first person's (content of) belief. Therefore, what should be fixed, again between belief and meaning, is what is again nearer to the interpreter's disposal, i.e. the interpretee's meaning (or better to say, the interpretee's use of the term for meaning is use). That's why, I think, linguistic communicators, in scenarios like triangulation in which linguistic communication is a means to know each others' thoughts (what happens in ordinary linguistic communications between those who belong to the same linguistic community) should not (or, better to say, need not) appeal to each other's thoughts and thereby no circularity occurs. This lead us to a conditional acceptance of the condition of obligation-producing regarding linguistic communication according to which in triangular situations, in which people understand each other's language (what happens in ordinary linguistic situations), the speakers should use their terms in a certain way to establish a successful communication.

5. CONCLUSION

In contrast to correctness, truth and intention, linguistic communication seems to be a more plausible candidate for a constitutive obligation-producing part of meaning. However, since the satisfaction of both the conditions of constitution and obligation-producing regarding linguistic communication, at least as I argued, depends on the acceptance of Davidson's triangulation thesis, this dependence might remain as a major objection to my account. The modest conclusion of the present paper therefore might be that a Davidsonian who believes in triangulation cannot argue at the same time against semantic normativity. This can be an interesting conclusion because Davidson is famous for his anti-normativist position.

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ABSTRACT: *Semantic normativists believe that meaning has a constitutive part that imposes certain obligations on language users. The most famous candidates for such a part of meaning, according to them, are correctness, truth and intention. Semantic anti-normativists, in contrast, argue that each of these candidates is either not a constitutive part of meaning or, even if it is, it does not produce any obligations. In this paper, firstly, I show the account and the failure of the three above mentioned candidates respectively; secondly, I introduce and use of Davidson's triangulation thesis in order to argue for a more plausible candidate, namely linguistic communication.*

KEYWORDS: *Semantic normativity, Correctness, Truth, Intention, Linguistic communication, Triangulation.*