

Horwich's anti-normativism

In his paper, "Deflationary Theory of Meaning", P. Horwich¹ analyzes – “*from a deflationist point of view*” - five of the so-called “*constraints*” that an adequate theory of meaning would have to satisfy (*The Relationality Constraint, The Representation Constraint, The Compositionality Constraint, The Normativity Constraint, and The Use Constraint*). In this essay I will focus on the analysis of Horwich's *Normative Constraints* and I will try to clarify his position with respect to semantic normativity.

Starting with Kripke's critique of dispositionalism in *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*², an essential division between **semantic normativists** and **semantic anti-normativists** shows up in the field of Philosophy of Language. On the one hand, there are authors like Wright³ who claim that remarks such as "*meaning is normative*" are truisms, and on the other hand authors like Bilgrami⁴, who claim that normativity is irrelevant when it comes to the meaning of words. Clearly, Horwich is closer to Bilgrami's position, but his criticism of the role of normativity of meaning is slightly different. In what follows, I will elaborate on the theory of normativity endorsed by Kripke. (There would be some additions and changes on the idea introduced by Kripke - Boghossian⁵, Gibbard⁶ - but for the purposes of this essay I believe that Kripke's presentation is sufficient) and, after that, I will bring up a series of critiques of this semantic theory. Ultimately we'll be able to see clearly which kind of criticism is closer to Horwich's.

¹ Paul Horwich – Deflationary Theory of Meaning

² Saul Kripke – Wittgenstein on Rules and Private language

³ C. Wright, “Does *Philosophical Investigations* 1.258–60 Suggest a Cogent Argument Against Private Language?”, in *Subject, Thought, and Context*, J. McDowell & P. Pettit (eds), 210–66 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 256

⁴ A. Bilgrami, “Norms and Meaning”, in *Reflecting Davidson*, R. Stoecker

⁵ Boghossian, “The Rule-Following Considerations

⁶ Alan Gibbard –Meaning and Normativity

Kripke, in **WRPL**, was trying to prove that there are no facts by virtue of which the terms may have meaning. To prove this he sketched his well-known "skeptical argument."⁷ The idea is that among the various constraints which are applied to the facts that could serve to determine the meaning, the most important is the "*essential normative character of the meaning.*" According to this constraint, one can argue against any theory that does not accommodate a normative requirement. This targets *a fortiori* the dispositional theory. Although there are more issues related to dispositionalism, e.g. impossibility to account for a mistake or imprecision - because even if we wanted or not, there must be a distinction between correct and incorrect applications of expressions. Whether the meaning of a term would only be determined by how the agent is willing to use it, there could be no misapplication of that term. (The dispositionalists have argued that what seems to be an error in application is just a difference in meaning. Therefore, they reject the distinction between what seems right to the speaker and what is right). A second problem is that for dispositionalists facts are just descriptive and cannot justify the agent's actions. And the third issue - which Kripke is particularly interested in - is that the dispositions can only account for what the agent actually does and not what the agent **ought** to do. As a result, Kripke states that norms of meaning must exist. To understand a term means to have to engage into a particular kind of action when you use it or when you answer to the questions. The implications must be and are therefore normative:

*"Suppose I do mean addition by '+'. What is the relation of this supposition to the question how I will respond to the problem '68 + 57'? The 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. The point is not that, if I meant addition by '+', I will answer '125', but that, if I intend to accord with my past meaning of '+', I should answer '125.' . . . The relation of meaning and intention to future action is normative, not descriptive"*⁸

Now considering the criticisms that are made to semantic normativism, they are made from two different positions: We have on the one hand the anti-normativists who argue that the discussions about semantic normativism are based on a misidentification and on the other hand we have the second strategy of reasoning known as "*missing rules strategy*".⁹

⁷ Saul Kripke – Wittgenstein on Rules and Private language

⁸ Saul Kripke – Wittgenstein on Rules and Private language

⁹ Martin Kusch – Sceptical Guide to meaning and Rules

According to the first way of argumentation, what it is understood as a semantic normativity is actually another kind of normativity. There are certain contexts, such as the context of learning a foreign language, for example, where "oughts" are used; But, in such a context the type of normativity engaged is a prudential one and not a semantic or lexical one. Sometimes, semantic normativity is deduced from pragmatic use of language; thus, the boundary between pragmatics and semantics is denied and in this way there is a risk to put forward a theory of meaning that is quite controversial. Another objection to normativism is that it doesn't make a distinction between the rules of semantics and the rules of rationality. Davidson¹⁰ is one of those who come closest to this way of arguing. He claims that success in communication does not imply shared semantic norms; the only rules involved in communication are the rules of logic and rationality. The only thing that is required to understand others is to assume that the basic laws of logic and rationality apply to their language and linguistic behavior. Davidson argues that we do not have to obey the norms of language for our words to be understood. All we can risk when we do not obey these rules - he says - is to be unintelligible, but that does not mean that we will not speak a language. On the contrary, anti-normativists believe that the semantic obligations are non-essential, they are just additions to the natural phenomenon of communication.

The argumentation, according to the "missing rules strategy", implies that – contrary to what the normativists believe - rules are not essential in speaking a language or communicating. Often, acquiring a language does not require the knowledge of rules. Those can be helpful only when learning a second language. Anti-normativists, in order to better support their point of view, ask the question about the type of semantic rules to which normativists refer. Are these rules "regulative" or "constitutive"¹¹? Because semantic rules should tell us what we ought to do and how we ought to talk, normativists should normally argue that the rules are regulative. Only these kinds of rules are prescriptive. But if this is true a problem arises. Leaving aside the fact that there is an important tradition in the philosophy of language to model the rules of language according to the rules of games (Wittgenstein, Sellars)¹², the important problem that emerges is that semantic normativists tend to argue that the rules governing the use of language are semantic and not pragmatic. What they want to show is that there is a different form of normativity,

¹⁰ Davidson, "The Social Aspect of Language"

¹¹ J. R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*

¹² Martin Kusch – Sceptical Guide to meaning and Rules

namely a semantic one. Such a rule would be the only one that would make thought or language possible; without it the latter would not be possible. Although anti-normativists state that even if the semantic normativity seems plausible, it is based on a mix of regulative and constitutive rules. It seeks to motivate regulative rules, by invoking their constitutive powers. The same rule cannot be both constitutive and regulative. A regulative rule legislates for an already existing domain of action, while a constitutive rule creates such a domain.

Now, seeing the criticism of semantic normativism, and given that Horwich holds an anti-normativist position, we can conclude about what kind of criticism he adopts. What Horwich argues in the text is that although the meaning has "normative consequences", these consequences are not so intrinsically. The normativity of these consequences would be derived from the more general normative principle and hence the meaning property of "dog" does not have an intrinsic normative character. (Here it could be argued against Horwich, - according to Gibbard¹³ - that "meaning property" is not a concept of meaning, and if the latter is always normative "meaning properties" are just descriptive – but I will let this aside because in this essay I left out Gibbard's theory of normality). Furthermore, Horwich argues that the normative implications of meaning can only be reached from pragmatic positions to the extent that, according to this view, there is an advantage in having true beliefs. And thirdly, following rules of use of language does not inherently mean that we have the obligation to conform to them, but rather that we follow the rules because we desire to follow them. In short, the general idea would be that meaning properties do not have an intrinsic normative character, but on the contrary, their normativity is derived from a more general principle.

Now it becomes evident that Horwich's position is closer to the first of the critical positions, namely the one which states that semantic normativism misidentifies the domains. Horwich, like the other anti-normativists like Davidson, accepts the existence of general rules of rational action, but rejects a "particular" belief in semantic rules specific to individual expression.

¹³ Alan Gibbard –Meaning and Normativity

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