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The normativity of meaning without the normativity

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Abstract

The normativity of meaning matters because if meaning is normative, then theories of meaning will have to explain normativity, and not all theories of meaning are equipped to do that. Throughout the debate about the normativity of meaning, there has been considerable discussion of what putative features of meaning count as 'normativity.' The suggestion of this paper is that the issue of normativity can be bypassed. We can, instead, focus directly on the ways in which various features of meaning constitute constraints on theories of meaning. Since meaning facts directly entail correctness conditions, which in turn rule out certain reductive theories of meaning, correctness conditions—often thought to be peripheral to the debate about the normativity of meaning—matter in exactly the way that the normativity of meaning was thought to matter.

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Perhaps the greatest accomplishment of the cumulative philosophical effort of those working on the normativity of meaning over the last thirty years is the realization that debate on this topic can only proceed productively if we settle on a specific conception of the *kind* of normativity that is supposed to be involved. And almost all philosophers working in this area have indeed settled on a specific conception: the kind of normativity that is putatively an intrinsic feature of meaning consists of '*ought's* or *reasons for action*.¹

The aim of this paper is to challenge this settled conception. The normativity of meaning can and should be understood, instead, in terms of *correctness conditions*. Correctness conditions are, of course, already widely discussed in the normativity of meaning literature.² But they are

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¹Papineau 1999; Wikforss 2001; Horwich 2005, 105–6; Hattiangadi 2007; Glüer and Wikforss 2009; Ginsborg 2012, 2018.

²Boghossian 1989, 513; Hattiangadi 2007, 37; Verheggen 2015; Ginsborg 2018.

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not thought to be the feature of meaning that themselves that deserve the title ‘normativity.’³

Somewhat paradoxically, in order to show that the normativity of meaning should be understood in terms of correctness conditions, we need to formulate the central issues of the normativity of meaning without the term ‘normative.’ Once we are no longer focusing on what phenomena count as ‘normative,’ we can see that correctness conditions themselves—and not full blown ‘ought’s or reasons for action—are enough to settle at least a great deal of the issues at the heart of the normativity of meaning debate.

1. The normativity of meaning and why it matters

The normativity of meaning is a putative feature not of meaning itself, but of meaning’s relation to use. For example, suppose that a speaker uses the word ‘table’ to mean *table*. This is a meaning fact.⁴ What kind of relation does it have to the speaker’s use of the word? Kripke claims that the relation is not descriptive, but normative.⁵ The fact that a speaker uses ‘table’ to mean *table* does not directly entail that she *does* apply ‘table’ only to tables. Rather, Kripke claims, the fact that a speaker uses ‘table’ to mean *table* directly entails that, in some sense to be further specified, she *ought* to apply ‘table’ only to tables, or that applying ‘table’ only to tables would be *correct*, or something broadly of that sort. According to normativism about meaning, the fact that a speaker means *table* by ‘table’ doesn’t directly entail anything about how she will use ‘table.’ Rather, it directly entails that her use of ‘table’ will have a certain normative status—it will be subject to semantic norms.

Both words in the phrase ‘directly entails’ are important to the formulation of the normativity of meaning thesis. The word ‘entails’ is important because there is some debate among normativists as to the order of explanatory priority between meaning facts and normative-use facts. On one side of the debate, there are those who think that the meaning facts are more fundamental.⁶ And on the other side, there are those

³Horwich 1998, 184; Papineau 1999; Wikforss 2001, 205; Glüer and Wikforss 2009, 36; Hattiangadi 2007, 52; Horwich 2005, 105–6; Ginsborg 2018.

⁴This is distinct from the stable, standing meaning of an expression within a language. In the interest of simplicity, this paper restricts itself to what a speaker means by a word on a particular instance of language use.

⁵Kripke 1982, 37. The idea that normativity is an explanatory obstacle of the relevant kind does precede Kripke, such as in Dummett 1959.

⁶Glüer and Wikforss (2018) label this view ‘meaning engendered normativity.’

who think that the normative-use facts are more fundamental.⁷ The relation of entailment is neutral as to the order of explanatory priority. And so by defining the normativity of meaning in terms of entailment, this paper can remain neutral as to this debate.

It is also important that the entailment between meaning facts and normative-use facts is ‘direct’—i.e. the entailment holds without any other significant auxiliary premises. If the entailment did not need to be direct in this sense, then virtually all phenomena would be normative. It follows from the fact that a door’s hinges are installed such that the door opens away from me that I ought to *push*, rather than *pull*, it. Does this suggest that door-hinge facts are normative? No, because the entailment only holds given a significant normative auxiliary premise: that I ought to open the door. The fact that normative facts can follow from door-hinge facts shows only that door-hinge facts are *governed by norms*, as many things are, and not that door-hinge facts are themselves normative in any fundamental or interesting sense. The same goes for meaning facts. As long as one can combine them with auxiliary normative premises, it is undoubtedly true that meaning facts entail normative-use facts. It is only if this entailment holds directly—i.e. in the absence of such auxiliary premises—that meaning facts have normativity as an intrinsic feature that must then be accounted for by theories of meaning.⁸

1.1 Why the normativity of meaning matters

Why does the normativity of meaning matter? It matters because if meaning is normative, then some theories of meaning are doomed. If normativity is a feature of meaning, then it constitutes a *constraint* on theories of meaning. A constraint, in the sense used here, is a burden or a responsibility that applies to theories of the phenomenon in question—it is an obstacle that those theories must overcome if they are to stand a chance of fully explaining the phenomenon they seek to explain. Therefore, whether something is a constraint is actually a matter of degree. A feature of meaning, for instance, is *more* of a constraint on theories of

⁷Glüer and Wikforss (2018) label this view ‘meaning determining normativity.’

⁸Hattiangadi (2007, 182) makes this point clearly with a similar, more standard analogy. It may follow from the fact that it will rain that I ought to carry an umbrella. But the entailment requires the normative auxiliary premise that I ought to behave so as to avoid getting wet. Therefore, as Hattiangadi puts it, ‘A theory of rain would not have to accommodate the fact that I ought to carry an umbrella in the rain.’ Similarly, as Ginsborg (2018, 999) puts it, ‘The mere fact that there are pragmatic norms bearing on the use of antibiotics does not give grounds for saying that there is anything normative about antibiotics themselves, that is, that calling something an antibiotic is making a normative claim about it.’

meaning to the degree that it constitutes a greater burden, or a more difficult explanatory obstacle, for otherwise plausible theories of meaning. And a feature of meaning is *less* of a constraint to the degree that it constitutes a lesser burden, more easily overcome by theories of meaning. The most obvious indicator that a feature of meaning constitutes a constraint on theories of meaning, is the fact that it rules out some theories of meaning. Though that feature may be relatively easy for other theories of meaning to explain, if it rules out *any* theories of meaning, then it counts as *some* constraint, at least as these terms are used here.

As we will see, exactly *how much* of a constraint normativity is on theories of meaning is a matter of some controversy. But the general point is straightforward. Various theories attempt to explain meaning facts in terms of some set of broadly naturalistic explanatory resources, including causal, informational, behavioral, or dispositional facts. If meaning is normative, then these theories of meaning have an explanatory burden—the burden of explaining normative facts—for which they seem ill-equipped. Therefore, we should care about the normativity of meaning to the degree that we care about which theory of meaning is true.⁹

When it comes to specifying exactly *how much of a constraint* the normativity of meaning is, the best place to start is Saul Kripke's introduction of the issue in *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*.¹⁰ In the first half of the book, Kripke presents a skeptical argument, meant to show that there are no facts in virtue of which a speaker means *addition* by '+' rather than *quaddition*. In the course of making that argument, he considers dispositionalism—the theory that 'to mean addition by '+' is to be disposed, when asked for any sum 'x + y,' to give the sum of x and y as the answer.'¹¹ Kripke then introduces the normativity of meaning—though he never calls it by that name—as a way of showing that dispositionalism fails. As Kripke might put it, how speakers are disposed to behave will only ever tell us how they *will* or *would* use linguistic expressions, not how they *ought* to use them. And since the latter is an intrinsic part of meaning, dispositionalism is not up to the task of explaining meaning. The normativity of meaning is meant to be a somewhat obvious, pre-theoretic fact about meaning that functions as a constraint on theories of meaning. In Kripke's view, it is at least enough of a constraint that it rules out dispositionalism.

⁹For a particularly clear statement of this point, see Liebesman 2018; 1017.

¹⁰Kripke 1982

¹¹Kripke 1982; 22.

Twenty-five years after the publication of Kripke's book, Anandi Hattiangadi presented an alternative characterization on the scope of the normativity of meaning constraint. In *Oughts and Thoughts*, Hattiangadi argues that meaning is *not* normative, at least not in any sense that she considers to be significant. But in situating the normativity of meaning within Kripke's broader skeptical argument, she claims that *if* meaning were normative, *then* it would constitute much more of a constraint on theories of meaning than one would suppose just from Kripke's discussion of it in relation to dispositionalism. By applying Moore's open-question argument to the realm of semantic normativity, Hattiangadi argues that the normativity of meaning would allow Kripke's skeptic to present an *a priori* constraint on theories of meaning that rules out not only dispositionalism, but all reductive theories of meaning.¹² And then, by applying Mackie's queerness argument to the realm of semantic normativity, Hattiangadi goes even further and suggests that the normativity of meaning might allow Kripke's skeptic to rule out non-reductive theories of meaning as well.¹³ For the purposes of this paper, I will focus primarily on the putative challenge that the normativity of meaning poses specifically for reductive theories of meaning. But either way, Hattiangadi thinks that if meaning is normative, then that has consequences for more than just dispositionalism. The normativity of meaning, as Hattiangadi understands it, is a putative constraint on theories of meaning. And it is putatively enough of a constraint that it rules out, at least, all reductive theories of meaning.

In either case, then, the normativity of meaning—if it is real—places a constraint on theories of meaning. The disagreement is about how much of a constraint. On one view, it is at least enough of a constraint to rule out dispositionalism. On another, it is at least enough of a constraint to rule out all reductive theories of meaning, and perhaps non-reductive theories as well.

1.2 Varieties of normativity

As we have seen, the normativity of meaning is the putative, pre-theoretic feature of meaning whereby meaning facts directly entail normative-use facts. But exactly what kind of normativity is involved in these normative-use facts? There are three different kinds of normativity that might be involved, though Kripke himself slides from one to another without

¹²Hattiangadi 2007; 38.

¹³Hattiangadi 2007; 38.

distinguishing them.¹⁴ Of course, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with failing to make a distinction, or series of distinctions. But one notable accomplishment of the cumulative philosophical literature about the normativity of meaning, since it took off in the 1990s through today, is that it has more-or-less established that the differences among the following three varieties of normativity are relevant.

The first type of linguistic normative-use fact involves *correctness conditions*.¹⁵ The normativity of meaning—understood in terms of correctness conditions—was perhaps given its best expression in Boghossian’s prominent presentation of Kripke’s skeptical problem in his 1989 paper *The Rule-Following Considerations*:

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 behaviour with that expression: namely, that my use of it is correct in application to certain objects and not in application to others ... The normativity of meaning turns out to be, in other words, simply a new name for the familiar fact that ... meaningful expressions possess conditions of *correct use*.¹⁶

That is, the meaningfulness of an expression entails that there is a standard of evaluation that applies to the use of that expression. And the existence of that standard of evaluation is what licenses the application of at least some normative terminology—e.g. ‘correct’ and ‘incorrect.’

The idea of normativity understood in terms of correctness conditions is explicitly present in Kripke’s original discussion. Countless times throughout the book, Kripke refers to ‘125’ as the ‘correct’ answer to ‘68 + 57’. And Kripke clarifies that his focus is not on mathematical correctness, but *semantic correctness*—the feature by which the use of ‘+’ fits with his meaning *plus* rather than *quus*.¹⁷

The second type of linguistic normative-use fact involves ‘*ought’s* or *reasons for action*’.¹⁸ Understood this way, the normativity of meaning is

¹⁴Kripke 1982.

¹⁵Hattiangadi’s (2007, 37) label for the feature by which some phenomenon entails correctness conditions ‘norm-relativity.’

¹⁶Boghossian 1989, 513

¹⁷And when Kripke (1982, 24) rejects the dispositional theory of meaning, he does so, in part, by asking the rhetorical question ‘Is not the dispositional view simply an equation of performance and correctness?’ The point he is making is that a theory of meaning must explain semantic correctness facts, and that dispositionalism fails to do that because it only has the resources to explain what a speaker is disposed to do, not what it is correct for that speaker to do.

¹⁸There are many reasons why we might wish to distinguish ‘ought’s from reasons for action, but those reasons do not apply in this particular case. So I group them together.

not merely the claim that meaning facts directly entail facts about which uses of linguistic expressions are correct or incorrect, but, more substantially, that meaning facts directly entail facts about how, *ceteris paribus*, speakers ought to use linguistic expressions.¹⁹ As Kripke puts it, a theory of meaning must explain how it is that ‘only “125”, not “5”, is the answer I “ought” to give.’²⁰ We should not, I think, be concerned with the fact that Kripke puts ‘ought’ in quotes, as he makes the point several times without the quotes, sometimes using ‘should’ rather than ‘ought’:

A candidate for what constitutes the state of my meaning one function, rather than another, by a given function sign, ought to be such that, whatever in fact I (am disposed to) do, there is a unique thing that I *should* do.²¹

This type of linguistic normative-use fact is what most philosophers dealing with the normativity of meaning mean by the general label ‘normativity.’²²

The third type of linguistic normative-use fact involves *guidance-providing representations*. The idea here is that a speaker not only has reasons to use an expression in a certain way, but that she has internalistic access to those reasons, and that she can therefore be motivationally guided by them. On several occasions, Kripke phrases the normativity of meaning in these terms. The normativity of meaning is a ‘basic condition’ in virtue of which any candidate theory of meaning must identify facts that ‘tell me what I ought to do in each new instance.’²³ The skeptical puzzle around which the book is constructed concerns whether “125” was an answer *justified* in terms of instructions I gave myself, rather than a mere jack-in-the-box unjustified and arbitrary response.²⁴ In this passage, Kripke emphasizes the word ‘justified,’ but what distinguishes this guidance-providing variety of normativity from the mere reasons-giving variety is the idea that the justification is formulated in terms of *instructions* that function by *telling* someone what behavior is justified or what they ought to do. As Kripke puts it a few pages earlier:

¹⁹For more on the distinction between correctness and ‘ought’s or reasons for action, see Rosen 2001, 620–621; Hattiangadi 2007, 7, 11, 37, 52 and many others.

²⁰Kripke 1982; 11.

²¹Kripke 1982, 24. Also, there is the passage that is quoted in virtually every published philosophical work concerning the normativity of meaning and content: ‘The point is *not* that if I meant addition by ‘+’, I will answer ‘125’, but that, if I intend to accord with my meaning of ‘+’, I *should* answer ‘125.’ (Kripke 1982; 37).

²²Hattiangadi 2007, 37; Horwich 1998, 184; Papineau 1999; Wikforss 2001; Glüer and Wikforss 2009; Horwich 2005; 105–6.

²³Kripke 1982; 24. Also see Ginsborg 2012, 2018.

²⁴Kripke 1982; 23.

Even now as I write, I feel confident that there is something in my mind—the meaning I attach to the ‘plus’ sign—that *instructs* me what I ought to do in all future cases. I do not *predict* what I *will* do ... but instruct myself what I ought to do to conform to the meaning.²⁵

The problem, of course, with insisting that meaning facts entail guidance-providing representations of this kind is that it leads to the same kind of regress that Kripke uses to undermine various accounts of the facts in virtue of which a speaker means something by the use of an expression. Instructions can only tell someone which uses of an expression are justified if that person can grasp the meaning or content of those instructions. And the ability to grasp that meaning or content is precisely what Kripke’s skeptic is calling into question.

There are three main senses in which meaning might be normative: meaning facts may directly entail (1) correctness conditions, (2) ‘ought’s or reasons for action, or (3) guidance-providing representations.²⁶ Because this third kind of normativity seems to lead to a paradigmatically Kripkensteinian regress, it is more-or-less ignored in most discussions of the normativity of meaning.²⁷ The first, correctness-condition-involving kind of normativity has been thought by most philosophers writing about the normativity of meaning—both normativists and anti-normativists—to not constitute a significant constraint on theories of meaning.²⁸ That is, meaning facts do directly entail correctness conditions, but those correctness conditions do not constitute the kind of normativity at the heart of the debate. Papineau puts this point by saying that the ‘correctness’ found in semantic correctness conditions is merely shorthand for truth—i.e. the fact that applying ‘table’ to a table is correct is nothing more than the fact that saying of a table that it is a

²⁵Kripke 1982; 21–2

²⁶Verheggen 2011 also canvasses three senses in which meaning might be normative, though a different three. Verheggen’s first sense, which she calls ‘trivial normativity,’ is the same as my first sense—the meanings of expressions directly entail correctness conditions for the use of those expressions. She calls her two other senses of normativity ‘robust.’ Meaning is normative in Verheggen’s first robust sense if semantic correctness conditions are themselves determined by either individual or communal norms. And meaning is normative in her second robust sense, which corresponds closely to my second sense in which meaning might be normative, if either categorical or hypothetical norms are themselves entailed by semantic correctness conditions.

²⁷Exceptions include Gampel 1997; Ahmed 2007; Verheggen 2011; Bridges 2014; Jones 2015; Wikforss 2001; Zalabardo 1997; Miller 2000; Ginsborg 2012, 2018. For an explicit rejection of this third type of semantic normativity, see Wikforss 2001.

²⁸Horwich 1998, 184; Papineau 1999; Wikforss 2001, 205; Glüer and Wikforss 2009, 36; Hattiangadi 2007, 52; Horwich 2005; 105–6.

'table' is true—and truth is 'a descriptive property, like car-speed or celibacy.'²⁹

As a result, it is the second kind of normativity—normativity understood in terms of 'ought's or reasons for action—that most philosophers working on the normativity of meaning think is relevant and deserving of the title 'normativity' in the context of this debate. Of course, semantic correctness conditions may be relevant insofar as they are a *clue* or an *indicator* of the existence of semantic 'ought's or reasons for action. But correctness conditions themselves, it has been thought by many, are not the sort of thing that a theory of meaning will struggle to explain.³⁰ The real debate about the normativity of meaning has to do with whether or not meaning facts directly entail facts about what speakers ought to do, or, at minimum, what they have *pro tanto* reason to do.³¹ Most anti-normativists, therefore, have focused their argumentative energy on showing that meaning facts do not directly entail 'ought's or reasons for action.³²

2. Doing without the normativity

Let us grant that these anti-normativists are entirely correct about which normative or normative-adjacent facts follow directly from meaning facts. Assume, that is, that meaning facts *do* directly entail correctness conditions, *do not* directly entail 'ought's or reasons for action, and *do not* directly entail guidance-providing representations.

The question is this: if meaning facts directly entail correctness conditions, is that enough to make meaning normative? Few philosophers writing in the last two decades have directly investigated the possibility of answering this question in the affirmative, but that is exactly what Gideon Rosen does in one of the earliest works to touch on the normativity of meaning—his 2001 paper, *Brandom on Modality, Normativity, and Intentionality*. Rosen attempts to tackle this question by listing several paradigmatically normative notions—he lists *good*, *right*, *reasonable*, *vile*, and *legitimate*—and determining whether or not correctness

²⁹Papineau 1999, 20. For an argument that belief is central to the existence of mental content, that truth is an essential aim of belief, and that any account of mental content must therefore account for truth, see Boghossian 2003, 619. This line of thought could potentially be extended from mental content to linguistic meaning as well, though that is a point of controversy.

³⁰For discussions of theories of meaning that are constrained by correctness conditions, see Hattiangadi 2007; Verheggen 2015.

³¹Horwich 2005, 105–6; Hattiangadi 2007; 179–208.

³²Papineau 1999; Wikforss 2001; Hattiangadi 2007; Glüer and Wikforss 2009.

entails the applicability of one or more of these notions.³³ Rosen rightly notes that ‘normativity’ is a semi-technical, philosophical term of art. Therefore, it seems to me, determining whether correctness conditions count as normative is, *in part*, a matter of sociology of academic philosophers—having to do with how academic philosophers use and understand a term, and whether some more specific phenomenon fits with that use and understanding. This approach is difficult for philosophers to execute, not least because they are almost always untrained in sociolinguistics. Independent of this difficulty, however, Rosen’s own approach runs into the problem that there will inevitably be controversy concerning which features are distinctive of normativity, leading him to wonder ‘whether the concept of normativity is clear enough to serve as a useful focus for debate.’³⁴ It would be nice, therefore, if the question of whether or not correctness conditions count as ‘normative’ could be bypassed altogether. I suggest that it can.

Recall the reason that the normativity of meaning mattered in the first place: it functions as a constraint on theories of meaning. We want to know whether meaning is normative because if it is, then theories of meaning face the non-trivial explanatory obstacle of having to account for normativity—an obstacle that some theories of meaning will prove unable to overcome. So when confronted with the question of whether correctness conditions count as normative for the purpose of the debate about the normativity of meaning, we can skip over the normativity question itself and simply ask whether correctness conditions constitute an explanatory obstacle of this kind.³⁵ Whether or not correctness conditions deserve the full title ‘normative,’ they are, at minimum, normative-adjacent. Kripke repeatedly appealed to them both when setting up his skeptical challenge and when presenting the normativity of meaning as an obstacle for dispositionalism. And there was no immediate outcry when Boghossian formulated the normativity of meaning in terms of correctness conditions in 1989.³⁶ At the time, it seemed entirely sensible to formulate the normativity of meaning hypothesis in terms of correctness conditions. Even if we ultimately decide that it is better to reserve the title ‘normativity’ for other phenomena, the fact that including correctness conditions under that heading seemed, for a time, altogether

³³Rosen 2001; 616–621.

³⁴Rosen 2001, 620.

³⁵A hint at something like this strategy can be found in Horwich 2005, 106, though the actual approach taken there, both in general and in detail, is entirely different from my own approach.

³⁶Boghossian 1989, 513.

unobjectionable suggests that the existence of correctness conditions is a phenomenon that is, at least, *in the general neighborhood* of normativity. Therefore, if correctness conditions are, at minimum, quasi-normative, and if correctness conditions turn out to matter in precisely the way that the normativity of meaning was supposed to matter in the first place, then we will be able to answer the question at the heart of the normativity of meaning debate without worrying about what gets granted the full title of ‘normative.’ To be clear, I do not suggest that we can avoid any and all discussion of normativity. Indeed, the last several sentences of this paragraph contain an argument—partly by way of reference to Kripke and Boghossian and how the philosophical community responded to their assumptions and outright assertions that correctness conditions are normative—that correctness conditions are, at minimum, *quasi-normative*. All of this involves some discussion of normativity, which I do not believe can be avoided. What can be avoided is the further debate, which can often seem intractable, as to whether correctness conditions count merely as quasi-normative or as fully normative. It is enough to determine whether correctness conditions play the role relevant to theories of meaning that the normativity of meaning was meant to play, and it need not be determined whether they deserve full status under the heading ‘normativity.’ Thus, I set aside the issue of normativity and focus on the following question: does the apparent fact that meaning facts directly entail the existence of correctness conditions constitute a constraint on theories of meaning? Or, more pointedly, are there any theories of meaning which are unable to account for correctness conditions and that therefore fail? I will argue that the answer to both of these questions is ‘yes.’

3. Are correctness conditions enough?

The way to answer these two questions is by focusing on the second question first. If we find some theories of meaning that are unable to account for correctness conditions, then we will know that correctness conditions constitute a constraint on theories of meaning in general.³⁷ Exactly *how much* of a constraint is an important issue, as we will see. And perhaps some theories will have no difficulty conforming to this constraint. But the way to start is to consider theories of meaning of various

³⁷We can be sure that correctness conditions constitute a constraint on theories of meaning, if both (a) some theories are unable to account for correctness conditions and (b) correctness conditions are, indeed, a feature of meaning.

types and ask whether they have the explanatory resources to account for correctness conditions. By noting which of them fail to meet the explanatory challenge, we will be able to see whether the putative fact that meaning facts directly entail correctness conditions matters in precisely the way that the normativity of meaning matters.³⁸

3.1 Dispositionalism

Let us start with the theory of meaning that Kripke himself considers: dispositionalism. To translate from Kripke's arithmetic example, dispositionalism can be roughly understood as the view that to mean *table* by 'table' is to be disposed, among other things, to answer the question 'What is that?' with 'A table.' only in the presence of tables.³⁹ The problem is that dispositional resources seem insufficient not only for the task of accounting for 'ought's, reasons for action, and guidance-providing representations, but also for the task of accounting for correctness facts. In non-linguistic contexts, at least, the existence of dispositions does not entail or explain the existence of correctness conditions. For example, although the precise causal mechanism is unknown, approximately 18–35% of the world's population exhibits the *photic sneeze reflex*.⁴⁰ This reflex is a disposition: when sunlight shines into a person's eyes, she is disposed to sneeze. Suppose that someone has this disposition. Sunlight shines in her eyes. She sneezes. Has she thereby done something that is—in any sense whatsoever—*correct*? No. If she does not sneeze, is her behavior in any way *incorrect*? No.

The same is true of behavior that falls more squarely under a person's voluntary control. An avid movie-goer may be disposed to go see a movie every Tuesday evening. This fact alone is not sufficient for the existence of any correctness condition. On the rare week when she does not go to see a movie, her behavior (or lack of behavior) is *unusual*. It is not *incorrect*. And that is because her disposition to behave in a certain way does not

³⁸It is worth noting that there are philosophers of mind and language working on the normativity of meaning who have explicitly discussed reductive theories of meaning that are ruled out by correctness conditions (notably Hattiangadi 2007; Verheggen 2015). Where I depart from these philosophers is in regards to how high to set the bar for what counts as 'normativity.' My claim is that we should not only accept as 'normativity' a feature of meaning that rules out all reductive theories. Indeed, we should not, at least not in the first instance, be concerned with what counts as 'normativity.' The only matter of substance is how much of a constraint on theories of meaning a putative feature of meaning is.

³⁹Of course, this isn't exactly correct. But I allow myself roughly the same degree of hand-waving that Kripke (1982, 22) allows himself when characterizing the view as the claim that 'to mean addition by '+' is to be disposed, when asked for any sum 'x+y' to give the sum of x and y as the answer.'

⁴⁰Pagon 2002.

directly entail the existence of a correctness condition. Alternatively, if the relevant correctness condition does exist—if movie attendance is, in some sense, *correct* and movie non-attendance *incorrect*—then the existence of that condition cannot be fully explained merely by appeal to the attendee’s behavioral disposition.

What exactly does this show? It does not show much about the explanatory power of complex dispositional states of affairs. The examples just considered only concern simple, first-order dispositions. So they demonstrate only that correctness conditions are enough of a constraint so as to rule out the simplest version of the dispositionalist theory of meaning.

But there is a version of dispositionalism, represented in the philosophical literature, which is not too far from the version laid out by Kripke: Paul Horwich’s theory, as primarily presented in *Meaning and Reflections on Meaning*.⁴¹ Horwich calls his view a ‘use-regularity theory of meaning,’ and it is one of the clearest and best-defended of the various attempts to flesh out Wittgenstein’s idea that the meaning of an expression consists in how that expression is used.⁴² On Horwich’s view, the meaning of a word consists in ‘the ‘acceptance conditions’ of certain specified sentences containing it,’ or what he calls the word’s ‘basic acceptance property.’⁴³

Different sorts of expressions have different sorts of basic acceptance properties. To take a perceptual term, for example:

... the explanatorily fundamental acceptance property underlying our use of ‘red’ is (roughly) the disposition to apply ‘red’ to an observed surface when and only when it is clearly red.⁴⁴

By contrast, the basic acceptance property for ‘and’ is the disposition to accept something like the argument schemas for conjunction introduction and elimination. And the basic acceptance property for a natural kind term like ‘water’ is some disposition involving what is taken to be the underlying nature of the clear, drinkable liquid in rivers and streams.

This is a rough and extremely brief summary of Horwich’s view, but there are two relevant points. First, exactly how reductive and dispositional this theory really is depends on how we understand ‘acceptance’ and ‘application’ in the various basic acceptance properties. And this will, in turn, determine whether this version of dispositionalism can

⁴¹Horwich 1998, 2005.

⁴²Horwich 2005; 106.

⁴³Horwich 2005, 26, 1998; 45.

⁴⁴Horwich 1998, 45.

account for correctness conditions. Second, when it comes to the aim of this paper—determining whether correctness conditions constrain theories of meaning in the way that the normativity of meaning has been thought to—we need not test every existing theory. The fact that correctness conditions rule out the simplest version of dispositionalism, in combination with the fact that they are indeed a feature of meaning, shows that correctness conditions are *some* constraint on theories of meaning.⁴⁵

Horwich himself argues against the claim that meaning is normative in the sense of directly entailing 'ought's or reasons for action, but does not focus on the possibility that correctness conditions might themselves constitute the relevant constraint.⁴⁶ Let us assume, however, that if he were to consider that possibility, he would be able to successfully show that his version of dispositionalism can account for correctness conditions. Our aim here is to show that correctness conditions constitute a constraint on theories of meaning—an obstacle that those theories need to overcome, so to speak. The point is not to disprove any particular theories of meaning. If some such theory successfully explains correctness conditions with merely dispositional resources, then that demonstration is itself an acknowledgment that correctness conditions were an obstacle that needed to be overcome. This is all a significant departure from the more popular line in the normativity of meaning debate, whereby it is denied that there is any obstacle there that needs to be overcome.

3.2 Causal-Informational theories

What about causal-informational theories, such as Jerry Fodor's Asymmetric Dependence Theory or Fred Dretske's Teleological Theory? Can these theories explain correctness conditions? These are not theories of meaning *per se*, but rather theories of content determination. However, for our purposes we can understand them as theories of *linguistic* content determination, and therefore as the kinds of theories of meaning that the normativity of meaning is supposed to constrain.

Beginning with Dretske's account, the teleological theory is fundamentally an attempt to explain intentional content or representation in terms

⁴⁵One can imagine more complex versions of dispositionalism than the ones considered in this section: for example, we might attempt to explain meaning *table* by 'table' not just in terms of being disposed to respond to the question 'What is that?' with 'a table' only in the presence of tables, but also in terms of criticizing those who answer with 'a table' when not in the presence of tables by saying something like 'That's incorrect.'

⁴⁶Horwich 2005, 106. In chapter 3 of *Reflections on Meaning*, however, Horwich does insist on a deflationary approach to truth and reference, and he could do something similar for correctness conditions.

of the combination of causal-informational and teleological facts.⁴⁷ Can such a theory explain correctness conditions? The answer depends on how teleological facts are understood. One way in which they can be understood is in Ruth Millikan's 'nonevaluative' sense:

There are nonevaluative measures from which the facts or from which instances can depart; for example, a simple average is also a kind of norm. I argue that the central norms applying to language are nonevaluative.⁴⁸

If we think of a *telos* in this nonevaluative sense—involving merely a 'simple average'—then we will be unable to explain correctness conditions. The distinctive feature of correctness conditions is that they consist of rules, rather than mere regularities. And Millikan admits that 'nonevaluative measures' consist exclusively of the latter.⁴⁹

Alternatively, the relevant teleological facts can be understood in a more robust sense such that they are capable of explaining correctness conditions. Although some of Dretske's own comments suggest that he would reject this view, we can consider this view on its own, whether Dretske would endorse it or not.⁵⁰ Assume that there are two Dretskeian causal-informational theories of meaning determination: one with a richer set of explanatory resources, which is, therefore, able to explain correctness conditions, and another with a poorer set of explanatory resources, which is, therefore, unable to explain correctness conditions. Some teleological facts make it possible for a theory of meaning to explain correctness conditions, and other teleological facts—or, at least, facts that some are willing to label 'teleological'—do not.

Fodor's theory, in contrast to both of these options, leaves teleology out of its explanatory base. Like Dretske's theory, Fodor's theory faces the problem of distinguishing those causal relations with representational content from those causal relations without such content. But Fodor attempts to explain this difference by appealing to higher-order relations among causal relations. Put simply, the non-representational causal relations hold *because* the representational causal relations hold, but the representational relations do not similarly depend on the non-representational ones.

Is this theory able to explain correctness conditions? Fodor believes that it does not need to. As he puts it:

⁴⁷Dretske 1984; Dretske 1986; Dretske 1988.

⁴⁸Millikan 2005; vi.

⁴⁹Millikan 2005; vii.

⁵⁰Dretske 2000.

The trouble is that requiring that normativity be grounded suggests that there is more to demand of a naturalized semantics than that it provide a reduction of such notions as, say, *extension*. But what could this ‘more’ amount to? To apply a term to a thing in its extension *is* to apply the term correctly; once you’ve said what it is that makes the tables the extension of ‘table’s, there is surely no *further* question about why it’s *correct* to apply a ‘table’ to a table.⁵¹

But things are not as simple as Fodor claims. And an insight from Gideon Rosen allows us to see how.

Rosen distinguishes correctness itself from the *correct-making feature* for some instance of correctness.⁵² The correct-making feature is that property that some event or act must have in order to count as correct in that instance. To modify one of Rosen’s own examples, suppose that the correct way to dance the mambo is to step one’s right foot *here* and then one’s left foot *there*. Call this pattern of foot stepping ‘foot-stepping pattern *p*.’ Foot-stepping pattern *p* is entirely non-normative. It is simply one way that one’s feet can move. And it happens to be the correct-making feature for dancing the mambo. However, as Rosen points out:

... the claim of correctness does not predicate the correct making-feature. It is a higher order claim to the effect that the performance possesses that feature—whatever it may be—that makes for correctness in acts of that kind.⁵³

To say that one has danced the mambo correctly is not to say that one has stepped according to foot-stepping pattern *p*. Rather, it is to say that one’s way of stepping has the correct-making feature for dancing the mambo, though saying so does not specify what the correct-making feature happens to be. As it turns out, in this case, the feature happens to be foot-stepping pattern *p*. But we should not mistakenly *identify* correctness with foot-stepping pattern *p*. Similarly in the semantic case, to say that a term has been applied correctly is not to say that it has been applied to a thing in its extension. Rather, to say that a term has been applied correctly is to say that that application of the term has the correct-making feature for term application, whatever that correct-making feature turns out to be. As it turns out, the feature happens to be applying the term to a thing in its extension. But, just as with dancing the mambo, even though applying a term to a thing in its extension is the feature that makes that application of the term correct, it does

⁵¹Fodor 1990; 135.

⁵²Rosen 2001; 619.

⁵³Rosen 2001, 620.

not follow that, and it is not true that, applying a term to a thing in its extension is *identical* with applying it correctly. With this distinction between correctness itself and a correct-making feature in hand, we can see that Fodor's theory does indeed need to explain semantic correctness conditions.

One might give a certain kind of theory of the mambo—a theory specifying that one steps one's right foot *here* and then one's left foot *there*. And such a theory would be fine, as far as it goes. But having understood Rosen's distinction, we can see that such a theory is a theory *only* of the mambo's correct-making feature. And there is indeed a further question that may be asked: in virtue of what does that pattern of stepping count as the correct way of dancing the mambo? That is, we may wish to know not just what the correct-making feature of dancing the mambo *is*, but also what makes it count as *correct*. Fodor's asymmetric dependence theory attempts to identify the correct-making feature of the application of linguistic terms. It is controversial whether it succeeds in doing that, but suppose that it does succeed—it picks out the extension of 'table.' However, if applying the term 'table,' like dancing the mambo, has correctness conditions, then there is the further question: in virtue of what do those conditions count as *correct*?

The fact that Fodor bothers to assert that his theory does not need to explain correctness conditions, suggests that he thinks it may lack the resources to provide that explanation. Is that right? Are dependence relations among causal relations unable to explain correctness conditions? I think so.⁵⁴ But I do not have an argument capable of showing this. So we can consider this question's answer as indeterminate. However, as I suggest in the final section, the central claim of this paper stands even without a definitive answer as to whether Fodor's theory can explain semantic correctness conditions.

4. Where this leaves the normativity of meaning

In discussing these several theories of meaning in the previous section, the aim was not to assess the theories themselves. That task would have required a much more detailed examination. Rather, the aim was to determine whether the theories have sufficient explanatory resources

⁵⁴Indeed, I think this point applies to all of the theories discussed in this section—all versions of dispositionalism and all versions of causal-informational theories of content determination when those theories are understood as theories of meaning in the sense relevant here. However, I do not have an argument to demonstrate this point, I do not highlight the generality of this claim in the main text.

to account for the relevant feature of meaning—correctness conditions. Due to obvious space constraints, it was not possible to consider every theory of meaning, or even every reductive theory of meaning, but, as we will see, discussing only some of the most basic and most prominent types is more than enough. The results for those theories that were discussed are as follows.

The simplest version of dispositionalism was unable to explain correctness conditions. Horwich's version of dispositionalism cannot explain correctness conditions if the terms 'acceptance' and 'application,' as used within the theory, are understood in a minimalist sense. If those terms are understood in some more robust sense, then perhaps the theory can explain correctness conditions, though that is not certain, and understanding those terms robustly makes Horwich's theory less reductive, and plausibly no longer a form of dispositionalism. The Millikanian nonevaluative version of the teleological theory was unable to explain correctness conditions. And the more robustly evaluative version of the teleological theory can plausibly explain correctness conditions. Finally, though Fodor insists that his asymmetric dependence theory does not need to explain correctness conditions, we can consider it undetermined whether the theory has the explanatory resources adequate to explain them, if it does need to.

To summarize, one theory was determined to plausibly be able to explain correctness conditions, two theories were difficult to evaluate, and two theories were determined to lack the explanatory resources required. That is enough to achieve the minimum aim of this paper: to show that correctness conditions are *some* constraint on theories of meaning. They matter in the way that the normativity of meaning was supposed to matter, at least on some accounts.

Importantly, it has *not* been shown that correctness conditions are enough of a constraint to support Hattiangadi's claim that if meaning is normative, then it provides an *a priori* argument ruling out all reductive theories of meaning. But it has been shown that it is wrong to think that correctness conditions constitute no obstacle whatsoever for a putative theory of meaning because they amount to nothing more than 'a descriptive property, like car-speed or celibacy.'⁵⁵

Meaning facts entail correctness conditions. And correctness conditions constitute some constraint on theories of meaning. Correctness conditions, whether we want to call them 'normative' or not, matter in

⁵⁵Papineau 1999, 20.

precisely the way that the normativity of meaning was thought to matter.⁵⁶

In focusing on semantic correctness conditions, and not on semantic 'ought's or reasons for action, have we gone too far from the understanding of the issue had by those engaging in the normativity of meaning debate? No. Kripke's original discussion of the normativity of meaning uses the language of *correctness* at least as often as it uses the language of *should* or *ought*. Indeed, the question posed by the skeptic concerns the grounds for taking '125' to be *correct* and '5' to be *incorrect* as the response to '68 + 57'. Then, when it comes time for Kripke to dispatch with dispositionalism, he finds himself in need of a way to drive home the point that dispositions are explanatorily insufficient for explaining semantic correctness. The appeal to what a speaker *should* or *ought* to do very much reads as an attempt merely to *emphasize* the point that the object of explanation is not purely descriptive. But in pursuit of that emphasis, Kripke slides from correctness talk to 'ought' talk. This is why Boghossian's influential 1989 presentation of the rule-following considerations presents the normativity of meaning as a matter of correctness conditions. In a way, by focusing on the entailment between meaning facts and correctness facts, we are not departing from the established understanding of the normativity of meaning, but rather returning to what it originally was.

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⁵⁶Similar claims can be found in Verheggen 2011; Boghossian 2015. Verheggen calls the direct entailment of correctness conditions 'trivial normativity.' Her aim is not to show that it constitutes an obstacle for theories of meaning (though she thinks it does), but rather that to show that the fact that correctness conditions entail the existence of hypothetical imperatives that are more significant than those entailed by all facts, including natural facts, still does not amount to more of a threat to naturalization than trivial normativity. Boghossian argues that if only naturalistic facts determine meaning, then meaning (and, by extension, semantic correctness conditions) is indeterminate. Or, put another way, either meaning facts (and, by extension, semantic correctness conditions) are non-naturalistic or they are indeterminate. This is akin to one of the central claims of this paper. Perhaps the clearest way to state the relation is that this paper takes Boghossian's conclusion, which he did not take to rest on any version of Kripke's Argument from Normativity, and argues that it, in the end, supports a version of Kripke's Argument from Normativity.

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