

BOOK REVIEW

Mark Norris Lance and John O'Leary-Hawthorne, *The Grammar of Meaning*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997; xiii + 450 pp.

The linguistic turn associated with the 'classical' period of analytic philosophy fostered the conception of philosophy as a kind of *pursuit of meaning* (Schlick). Philosophers desired, first and foremost, to get their grip on meaning, be it simply by meticulous studying and mapping of the intricacies of ordinary language, or by improving of this language via logical or mathematical 'engineering'. Meaning was usually seen as something hidden (within a Platonic heaven or within our minds) which philosophers were to disclose, analyse (and, perhaps, 'fix').

Some of the (post)analytic philosophers of the second half of the twentieth century, notably the late Wittgenstein, challenged this approach by pointing out that the picture it suggests, namely the picture of language as a set of labels stuck on some ready-made things, can be severely misleading. Among American philosophers, the most significant critics were Quine and Sellars (as Rorty, 1980, duly pointed out): Quine indicated that it is problematic to see meaning as a thing because it is usually too vaguely and indeterminately delimited (and concluded that it would be better to try to entirely relinquish the concept) while Sellars urged that meaning is not a thing because it is an essentially normative matter.

Sellars' criticism has not become so popular as Quine's (probably because Sellars' writings are very hard to read), but recently a number of philosophers seem to be realising that it is perhaps even deeper and more far-reaching. The view of language urged by Sellars has been recently also remarkably elucidated and developed by the book by Sellars' disciple Robert Brandom (1994): language is, according to Sellars and Brandom, primarily a tool of our, human 'game of giving and asking for reasons', and as such it is essentially a matter of implicit proprieties and norms (which can be made explicit – thus becoming accessible to critical assessment and, as the case may be, alteration – in semantic and logical discourse.) Thus, according to this line of thought, when we speak about meaning, we spell out the norms implicit to our linguistic practices.



The authors of the book under the present review accept this Sellarsian insistence on the essentiality of the normative and the consequent non-naturalistic account of meaning, but what they suggest is that even this kind of appreciation of normativity is still not radical enough. When speaking about meaning we, according to them, are not describing or spelling out the actual norms governing our (nor anybody else's) linguistic behaviour (the rules of the relevant language game), what we are doing is making essentially normative ('ought to') statements (aiming at modifying the rules). Thus, if we say that 'gavagai' means rabbit, or that bachelor is an unmarried man, we are not stating what is the case (we neither describe relationships in a platonic realm of concepts, nor the way words are used by our or by somebody else's community), we are, rather, suggesting what ought to be done: how words *ought to* be used or how they *ought to* be translated, and that we *ought to* 'censure' the people failing to use or translate them in this way. This is a surprising, and for somebody maybe even preposterous, thesis, so let us examine how the authors arrive at it and what they have to say in its support. This is the content of the first part of their book.

The first chapter discusses the problem of translation (so popular within analytic philosophy since Quine's seminal thought experiments with radical translation) and interlinguistic semantic discourse in general. After a critical summary of the Quinean views, the authors call the attention to an aspect of translational claims which is not reflected by Quine, namely to the fact that these claims "are speech acts whose point is to influence a structure of social practices, to impose a (possibly new) socially recognised constraint upon behaviour" (p. 61). This is to say that when we establish a translational manual, we do not simply record regularities of the natives' linguistic behaviour, we propose a way to build a bridge, between the native and our community, to "form one large community where there previously were two" (p. 64). This is to say that adopting a translational manual is "not a process of describing a prior set of standards, either implicit or explicit. Rather, it is a matter of agreeing to a normatively binding document, a set of constraints on further behaviour" (p. 63). Consequently, "meaning claims license certain inferences and license censure to those who do not acquiesce in such inference, censure that does not take the form of mere disagreement with the person censured, nor even of the attribution of irrationality, but which instead treats them as at least partially exempt from the 'language game' " (p. 64). Thus, the principal effect of the claim '*gavagai* means rabbit' is, according to the authors' conception, the license to treat the natives' talk about '*gavagai*'s as a talk about rabbits,

and the license to banish those who do not treat them so from our newly established natives-us linguistic alliance.

In the second chapter the authors turn their attention to intralinguistic semantic claims, with the goal of showing that also claims of this kind are best seen in terms of licensing and censuring, as purporting to establish normative proprieties. They start their argument with a reappraisal Quine's challenge to the analytic/synthetic distinction: is there a kind of analyticity, they ask, which would be compatible with the Quinean picture of language (*pace* Quine himself)? And their answer is positive: a sentence is analytic in this workable sense if "failure to assent to it is (or would be) taken as excellent evidence that the person has failed to understand one word or other (and thus, relatedly, as good grounds for moving from the realm of substantive argument to that of stipulation, paraphrase, or pedagogy)" (96). This means, the authors suggest, that although there does exist a feasible notion of analyticity, it can only be understood in normative terms, viz in terms of a censure to those who do not accept statements analytic in this sense. From this finding they move towards a general conclusion about the normativity of meaning claims: "To claim, for example, that '*F*' means '*G*' on our account is to *license* a certain sort of inference [namely the inference from '*F*' to '*G*'] and to *license* a certain sort of censure [namely of those who refuse to endorse the inference]" (p. 127). Thus, "meaning talk is primarily used to provide normative guidance for *inferential* behaviour" (p. 138).

Chapter three then addresses the heart of the matter – here the authors develop their own conception of the normative and show how it can lend further support to their conclusions about the normativity of semantic discourse. Normative assertions are, according to them, neither declaratives, nor imperatives: they are "of a grammatical category which, while having the same sort of criteria of application as descriptive assertions, have in certain crucial respects the same sort of consequences of applications as imperatives" (p. 198). Normative utterances are, according to them, to be understood in terms of an effort to change the form of a practice, to change the rules of a game we are playing. "Normative assertions", the authors say, "are to be seen, on the side of their constitutive consequences, as efforts to bring into explicit question the future development of a particular practice" (p. 209). This means that we have to reject both the *transcendental* conception of norms (which sees norms as absolute and independent of any factual practice, while normative discourse makes sense only within the framework of a practice), and the *attributive* conception (which sees norms as simply rules of a game, and thus leaves no room for questioning them – for to question a rule of a game is to question whether we should

play this very game, not to question whether the game should have this very rule). The authors claim that the common failure of both the conceptions consists in the fact that they postulate some level of unchangeability (the absolute norms in case of the transcendental conception, and game-constitutive rules in case of the attributive one), while genuine normative discourse is marked by the absence of such an unchangeability, its constitutive point being, we could perhaps say, the entertainment of human freedom (or *spontaneity*, to use the Kantian term recently resurrected by McDowell, 1994). Thus, the verdict is the following: “The goal of asserting a normative propriety . . . is to attempt to constrain the future proprieties of play within a game, the existing practice of which is provisionally assumed to be generally in order and which thereby forms the context within which the normative proposal has its sense” (p. 213).

I think that this part of the book possesses everything that warrants an excellent book: it opens an entirely new vista on traditional problems while being extremely intelligible and well argued. And it challenges some of the most central pillars of the standardly held views with such vehemence that if one accepts the arguments of the authors, one is indeed likely to experience a real “shock of recognition”.

Also, I think that the authors do point out something of basic importance: that the assumption that semantics amounts to some or other kind of description (which appears to be an “unspoken dogma” common to the majority of contemporary analytic philosophers, from Quine and Lewis to Dennett and Searle) may obliterate something vital. Thus, while Sellars and Brandom urged that to understand the point of semantics it is not enough to cease seeing it as disclosing some ‘things-of-the-mind’, but that it is also necessary to cease viewing it as reporting regularities of linguistic usage and to start viewing it as spelling out norms and proprieties, the authors of the present book indicate that even this may still not suffice. And they give good arguments in support of their thesis.

Moreover, their original conception of norms steers ingeniously between the traditional absolutistic Scylla and the relativistic Charybda: it is enough to accept that we humans somehow have the ability to assess and modify the rules we live by (perhaps it is the very ability we call, since Kant, our *Vernunft?*), and we can render the normative as something which is neither absolute (for it does not make sense outside of the context of an existing set of rules), nor simple relative (for it does make sense to criticise the existing rules and such criticism can be *right* or *wrong*). If this is right, then it is the space for the exercising of human freedom, lacking from those rather rigid pictures traditionally offered to us by the majority of analytic philosophers, which is needed to account for the real nature of semantics.

This is not to say that the conception of the authors does not raise doubts – it does provoke various kinds of doubts (and it would be a wonder if a truly novel conception did not do so). Let us mention at least two. First, it is hard to accept the authors' 'normative radicalism' which appears to suggest that semantic discourse is normative *through and through*. What their arguments do make plausible is that *some* meaning claims are *utterly* normative, and perhaps that *many* of them are *partly* normative, but it is hard to conclude that *all* of them are *utterly* normative. This is to say that although one may well feel persuaded that the point of some utterances of '*gavagai*' means *rabbit* is simply to propose or establish a rule for a newly created linguistic alliance, it is hard to believe that there are not cases in which it simply reports, if not *the natives use the term 'gavagai' as we use 'rabbit'*, then *what the natives take to be the correct usage of the term 'gavagai' is what we take to be the correct usage of 'rabbit'*. Such utterances appear to be straightforwardly descriptive, and not normative in the authors' sense. (There is, of course, a sense in which *every* pronouncement whatsoever is normative: if I say *This is a horse*, then I license a censure to accept the entity pointed at as a candidate for the UN chancellorship – but this is clearly not very interesting.)

Second, the authors claim that normative claims lie somewhere between indicatives and imperatives, but what they say about their role within our linguistic practice seems only to elucidate their imperative aspect: to propose an alteration of an accepted practice, which is the alleged point of semantic claims, is to urge *we ought to use these linguistic items thus and so*. (Let us note in passing that if we assimilated such claims to fully-fledged imperatives of the kind of *let us use these linguistic items thus and so*, we would be echoing proposal of Ayer, 1936, and others to see analytic truths as suggestions to use words in certain ways). We are left in virtual darkness about the indicative aspect of the pronouncements. There is the fact, to be sure, that they can enter into inferences, but is this all? Are we to see normative claims as, besides proposing something, also reporting something?

This last worry is perhaps partially addressed by the second part of the book, but unfortunately in a way which is likely to raise more new doubts than it resolves. Here the authors turn to problems of what they call *the metaphysics of meaning*: "Are there facts about meaning? If so, what sort of entities are they? What sorts of facts, if any, do facts about meaning supervene upon? How are claims about meaning to be analysed? By virtue of what do words and sentences have the particular meanings they do? What is the relationship between semantic facts and non-semantic facts?" (p. 242)

I think the reader may rightly expect that the reaction to such questions, implicit in the conclusions of the first part of the book, will be that meaning talk is not the kind of talk for which a ‘metaphysics’ would make much sense, and consequently that all the above questions are either beside the point, or capable of being answered in some trivial, uninteresting way. After all, if semantic claims are “attempts to constrain the future proprieties of play within a game”, what sense, over and above a trivial one, could it make to see it as expressing facts?

And in fact, in the next three chapters, chapters four to six, the authors seem to fulfil this expectation: they try to subvert various attempts to render ‘meaning facts’ as consisting in, or supervening on, ‘naturalistic facts’, i.e. attempts to naturalise the meaning talk. However, this part of the book is rather less comprehensible and less persuasive than the first one: the trouble is that the authors seem to be not content with arguing against the naturalistic theories of meaning from their own position (if they are right that the meaning talk is irreducibly normative, then any kind of a theory which tries to translate the talk into naturalistic terms is *eo ipso* simply wrong) and to wish, additionally, to defeat their opponents using the opponents’ own weapons. Thus, they engage in lengthy discussions of issues not directly relating to the central argument of their book.

The real surprise comes in the last chapter of the book, where the authors, despite their rejection of the possibility of naturalising the meaning talk, argue for the necessity of a ‘metaphysics of meaning’ and indicate their own way of approaching it. They claim that although they have so far provided “some illumination concerning why we need meaning discourse . . . a number of important metaphysical questions remain” (p. 375). However, as I indicated earlier, this seems to be far from clear – and I think that the reader may question, why, if we accept that “to make a claim about meaning is not to attempt to describe, but to attempt to legislate, rigidify, amend, or codify” (p. 374), we need, in addition, any kind of “metaphysics”. When we consider, e.g., the question *are there facts about meaning?*: does the authors’ conception not imply the (uninteresting) answer that there are no facts in the strict sense in which facts are correlates of the *descriptive* talk, and that there are facts in the loose sense in which facts are correlates of any kind of talk which admits of rightness or wrongness? Does it add something to our understanding of the meaning talk if we see it as a fact-expressing enterprise?

The authors try to reject all kinds of reasons which undermine seeing semantic claims as truthvalueless or not fact-expressing – however, they somehow fail to consider the one which is perhaps the most obvious, namely that the claims are ‘ought-to’ statements. This might square with

their earlier insistence that the normative, 'ought-to' statements have not only an imperative, but also an indicative aspect – but the reader would probably expect an *explanation* of this fact, whereas this is only its reassertion. Thus, if the authors say that “if . . . semantic decisions are intertwined with one's theoretical decisions, then metaphysics cannot but be regarded as an exercise in fallible theoretizing” (p. 376), the objection which comes to mind is that this is not true, for metaphysics can also simply be spurned as an enterprise inappropriate to the nature of the matter.

Despite all such reservations, I think the book belongs to the very best of recent publications in the field of philosophy of language: it dismantles many superstitions, opens new and surprising horizons, and suggests many novel answers to traditional questions. And even if you do not accept all the answers, the hard work you are going to have with substantiating your disagreement is likely to do much good to your personal understanding of the nature of language. Briefly, a bright book which is likely to provoke deep and interesting discussions.

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