

## NORMATIVE PRAGMATICS

AUTHOR: Jaroslav Peregrin

Whereas pragmatics generally deals with the ways speakers use expressions, normative pragmatics stems from the assumption that it is *rules* of their usage that is crucial and hence concentrates on the study of the rules. The basic paradigm is that of language as a kind of game, like chess or football: just like it is the rules of the game that make pieces of wood into *pawns* or *kings*, or events of kicking a round thing through a square thing into *scoring a goal*, it is the rules of our 'language games' that make the types of sounds we make (or of the inscriptions we produce) into *words and expressions meaning thus and so*. This view of language is not alien to the later Wittgenstein, but it was propagated especially by the American philosopher Wilfrid Sellars and elaborated by Robert Brandom and his followers.

Sellars was an influential philosopher and one of the founding fathers of analytic philosophy in the USA. He was deeply influenced by the teaching of Rudolf Carnap and his fellow logical empiricists from the Vienna Circle, but he almost completely reassessed the doctrines of logical empiricism and developed his own distinctive philosophical system. His philosophy of language is mostly presented in his papers (see especially 1949, 1953, 1954, 1969).

Whereas Carnap (1942) saw the **semantics** of language as a matter of expressions representing certain entities and considered **pragmatics** as a matter philosophically not so interesting, Sellars' view of **semantics** is much more dynamic and his border between **semantics** and **pragmatics** much less clear-cut. But as Sellars stressed the role of *rules* for human linguistic conduct, his version of pragmatics became *normative*. However, he urges that our language games are rule-governed neither in the sense of merely displaying regularities, nor in the sense of being a matter of following explicit rules. Sellars claims that they are rule-governed in a specific sense and speaks about "pattern governed behavior" (see also Peregrin, 2008): "an organism may come to play a language game – that is to move from position to position in a system of moves and positions and to do it 'because of the system' without having to *obey rules* and hence without having to be playing a *metalanguage game*" (1954, p. 209).

Sellars claims (1974, pp. 423-4) that, in general, our linguistic activities fall into three basic kinds:

- (1) Language Entry Transitions: The speaker responds to objects in perceptual situations, and in certain states in himself, with appropriate linguistic activity.
- (2) Intra-linguistic moves: The speaker's linguistic conceptual episodes tend to occur in patterns of valid **inference** (theoretical and practical), and tend not to occur in patterns which violate logical principles.
- (3) Language Exit Transitions: The speaker responds to such linguistic conceptual episodes as 'I will now raise my hand' with an upward motion of the hand, etc.

Inherent to all these activities, according to him, are certain *proprieties* and in this sense the activities are governed by *rules*. However, the rules are of the kind that Sellars calls "rules of criticizing" (as opposed to "rules of doing" - see 1992, p. 76). This means that for example the most important of the three kinds of transitions, the intra-linguistic moves, or inferences in the narrow sense of the word, should be seen as not telling us *what to do*, but rather what to

*avoid* - and hence are really more the rules of what *not* to do. They delimit a space of what is approvable: if you assert that Fido is a dog, then you should not deny that Fido is a mammal; and if you do deny it, you are a legitimate target of criticism.

As a result, any content a linguistic expression comes to have comes to it from the rules governing its usage within our linguistic practices (rules not necessarily explicit, but often implicit to the practices in the sense that we take some ways of the practices as proper while others as improper). This wholly eschews the Carnapian picture of **pragmatics** as a mere supplementum to **semantics** - on the contrary, **semantics** falls out as an appendix to **pragmatics**, though a distinctively *normative* one. And normativity becomes, for Sellars, the hallmark of rationality: "To say that man is a rational animal," he writes (1949, p. 297), "is to say that man is a creature not of *habits*, but of *rules*."

This also breathes new life to the already mentioned parallel between language and chess (see Peregrin, 2001, for details). Just like a piece of wood becomes a *chess pawn* solely in virtue of the fact that we let it be governed by certain rules of the chess game, an expression comes to *mean thus and so* in force of the fact that we let it be governed by rules of our language games. Hence just like the rules of chess constitute a space in which we can enjoy chess games; the rules of our language games constitute the space of meaningfulness (called also the *space of reasons* by Sellars, in view of the fact that the most direct projection of the rules of **inference** onto our linguistic practices is giving reasons) in which we can enjoy our distinctively human meaningful talk.

The phenomenon of rules within the context of our linguistic practices was also discussed thoroughly by **Wittgenstein** in his *Philosophical Investigations* (1953). Wittgenstein famously pointed out the multiversity of our 'language games', but at the same time he paid a lot of attention to the problem of how we can learn, follow and maintain rules that are inherent to these games. He pointed out some crucial aspects of rules that are not immediately obvious: especially that not all rules may be explicit, for to be able to follow an explicit rule we would need to interpret it, and to interpret it correctly, we would need some further rule, which would lead us into an infinite regress. Another thing he pointed out is that it is hard to see how the examples of application of the rules we are shown when we are taught the language could allow us to really grasp a *unique* rule (which made Kripke, 1982, interpret him as a skeptic - an interpretation which has led to huge disputes<sup>1</sup>).

For Brandom (1994; 2000; 2008), this view of language became part and parcel of his project of *inferentialism*. Brandom, just like Wittgenstein, sees language as a way of carrying out an activity, the activity of playing certain language games; but unlike many postmodern followers of Wittgenstein he is convinced that one of the games is 'principal', namely the *game of giving and asking for reasons*. It is this game, according to him, that is the hallmark of what we are - thinking, concept-possessing, rational beings abiding by the force of better reason.

Brandom points out that language games are governed by inferential rules, or that our language is, as he puts it, *inferentially articulated*, because the inferential rules are what is needed to make language into a vehicle of the game of giving and asking for reasons. To be able to *give* reasons we must be able to make claims that can serve as reasons for other claims; hence our language must provide for sentences that *entail* other sentences. To be able to *ask*

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Baker & Hacker (1984) for a view of Wittgenstein very different from Kripke's.

for reasons, we must be able to make claims that count as a *challenge* to other claims; hence our language must provide for sentences that are *incompatible* with other sentences. Hence our language must be structured by these entailment and incompatibility relations.

In fact, for Brandom the level of inference and incompatibility is merely a deconstructible superstructure, underlain by certain normative statuses, which communicating people acquire and maintain via using language. These statuses comprise various kinds of *commitments* and *entitlements*. Thus, for example, when I make an assertion, I *commit* myself to giving reasons for it when it is challenged (that is what makes it an assertion rather than just babble); and I *entitle* everybody else to reassert my assertion reflecting any possible challenges to me. I may commit myself to a claim without being entitled to it, i.e. without being able to give any reasons for it, and I can be committed to all kinds of claims, but there are certain claims commitment to which blocks my entitlement to certain other claims.

Brandom's idea is that living in a human society is steering within a rich network of normative social relationships and enjoying many kinds of normative statuses, which reach into many dimensions. Linguistic communication institutes an important stratum of such statuses (commitments and entitlements) and to understand language means to be able to keep track of the statuses of one's fellow speakers – to keep score of them, as Brandom puts it<sup>2</sup>. And the social distribution is essential because it provides for the multiplicity of perspectives that makes the objectivity of linguistic content possible.

This interplay of commitments and entitlements is also the underlying source of the relation of incompatibility - commitment to one claim excluding the entitlement to others. Additionally, there is the relation of inheriting commitments and entitlements (by committing myself to *This is a dog* I commit myself also to *This is an animal*, and being entitled to *It is raining* I am entitled also to *The streets are wet*); and also the relation of co-inheritance of incompatibilities (*A* is in this relation to *B* iff whatever is incompatible with *B* is incompatible with *A*). This provides for the inference relation (more precisely, it provides for its several layers).

Brandom's response to the Wittgensteinian challenge regarding the impossibility of explicitness of all rules of language is that, indeed, at least the most fundamental of them must be implicit. They exist through the speakers' *normative attitudes* - their treatings of the utterances of others (and indeed of their own) as correct or incorrect. But though the rules exist only as underpinned by the attitudes, which are manifested within the 'causal order', the rules themselves do not exist within the 'causal order'. In other words, though we may be able to describe, in a descriptive idiom, how a community can come to employ a normative idiom, the latter is not translatable into the former.

Inferentialism is a species of pragmatism and of the use-theory of meaning - our expressions are seen as tools which we employ to do various useful things (though they should not be seen as *self-standing* tools like a hammer, but rather as tools, like, say, a toothwheel, that can do useful work only in cooperation with its fellow-tools). Also inferentialism gives pride of place to the practical over the theoretical, it leads to seeing

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<sup>2</sup> The concept of *scorekeeping* was introduced, in a slightly different setting, by Lewis (1979).

language as a tool of social interaction rather than as an abstract system. Thus, any explication of the concepts such as *language* or *meaning* must be rooted in an account of what one *does* when one communicates - hence semantics, as Brandom puts it, "must be answerable to pragmatics".

A theory of speech acts within the normative setting is developed by Lance and Kukla (2009). Their idea is that every kind of speech act can be characterized by the *normative input conditions* that is supposed to be fulfilled when the act takes place, and the *normative output conditions* resulting from the act's taking place. Thus, for example, the input condition for an *imperative* is that its utterer is entitled to give orders to the addressee; whereas the output condition is that the addressee is committed to doing what (s)he is ordered.

### ***Suggestions for further reading.***

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