

## **Semantic Values?**

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Lance and Hawthorne have served up a large, rich and argument-stuffed book which has much to teach us about central issues in the philosophy of language, as well as sports trivia. I shall concentrate, not surprisingly, on points I either disagreed with or found unclear; there are many acute observations, particularly in the second half of the book, that fall into neither of these categories.

The main thesis of *The Grammar of Meaning* is that, contrary to the “received view”, “[t]he role of meaning discourse is not to describe anything at all...the very speech act of making a meaning claim is itself normative, that saying what something means is *prescribing*” (p. 2); and: “to translate is to put forward a normative injunction—to propose a rule designed to govern cross cultural communication” (p. 12). Is this some “expressivist” account of our talk about meaning, on which sentences like:

(1) “Red” (in English) means the same as “rojo” (in Spanish),

and:

(2) “Los tomates son rojos” (in Spanish) means that tomatoes are red,

are not used to assert anything, but merely to prescribe or propose certain practices (for example, certain ways of using words)? No, it is not. According to L&H, when someone typically utters (1) she is not just prescribing or proposing: she is also *asserting* that “red” (in English) means the same as “rojo” (in Spanish), and moreover she is asserting a (normative) *fact* (see, e.g., p. 174; p. 403).<sup>1</sup>

A thesis about the various speech acts typically performed by those who utter sentences of certain type should be sharply distinguished from a thesis about the semantic content of those sentences. Failure to make that

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<sup>1</sup> And so, as far as I can see, there is a perfectly good sense in which, according to L&H, meaning claims are “descriptive”.

distinction was the fundamental mistake made by emotivists. Thus it does not follow from the claim that someone who utters a sentence like (1) and (2) is typically prescribing or proposing, that facts expressed by such sentences are themselves normative. So one may find a lot of truth in L&H's remarks about the point of translation and meaning-talk, while denying that facts about meaning and morality have much in common (cf. p. 2).<sup>2</sup>

Why think that facts about meaning *are* normative? L&H have an interesting line of argument for this conclusion, and that is what I shall chiefly discuss.

### ***The “indexicality of meaning”***

In arguing for the normativity of meaning L&H appeal to a thesis they call “the indexicality of meaning”. The case for this thesis turns on an example (described in much more detail than in the following brief sketch: see pp. 45-6). Imagine a somewhat fictionalized version of seventeenth-century Salem, Mass. The word “witch” is used in this community to refer to women who are variously interested in magic (although magic does not work in Salem), “herbal medicine, childbirth, and improving the psychological condition of women in general” (p. 45). Now imagine two other communities who “have had towns much like Salem in their past” (p. 46): the Land of Faerie and the Land of Science. In the Land of Faerie, it was discovered that magic works. The community has learned to distinguish people with genuine magical powers from those who can merely use herbs for medicine. The Land of Science, on the other hand, is much closer to our own community. It was discovered that magic is bunk. But, “[a]s time went on, the witches began to realize that the arcane aspects of their work were irrelevant, and proceeded to develop what we might call a feminist science, which concentrated on the kinds of herbal cures, psychological influence, and attention to natural

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<sup>2</sup> On the importance of distinguishing between speech acts and semantics, see John Searle, *Speech Acts*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969, pp. 136-141. L&H's view that “saying what something means is *prescribing*” might suggest that they think that a claim like  $\alpha$  means (the same as)  $\beta$  is to be analyzed as an explicit performative, for instance *I prescribe/propose that  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  be used in similar ways*. However, this is definitely not L&H's position, which is just as well, because it is false for the reasons given by Searle.

agricultural techniques which they took to have been central to witchcraft all along” (p. 46).

Call the word “witch” (in the language of the Salemities), “witch-M”, and the word “witch” in the languages of Faerie and Science, “witch-F” and “witch-S”, respectively (p. 47). It is supposed to be a consequence of the description of the example that witch-F does not mean the same as witch-S (p. 47). And: “It seems clear that a linguist from either community would translate the language of the Salemities homophonically” (p. 47). “But what did the term [“witch”] *really* mean as used by the Salemities prior to cultural contamination?...There are four possible positions” (p. 48):

- (i) Witch-M means the same as witch-S.
- (ii) Witch-M means the same as witch-F.
- (iii) Witch-M has “some sort of indeterminate meaning, thus making both [above] translational hypotheses incorrect” (p. 48).
- (iv) Both translations “would be correct from the perspective in which they would be given...meaning is an indexical matter” (p. 51).

L&H’s basic reason for preferring (iv) is that translators from the land of Faerie and Science would find their respective homophonic translations unproblematic.

Now sometimes a perfectly good translation for the purposes at hand is not an exact translation. There is therefore no obvious problem in reconciling the plausible claim that the Faerie and Science translators are each justified in plumping for the homophonic translation with the denial that “meaning is an indexical matter”. And this is fortunate, because I do not see why L&H’s argument is persuasive.

First, let’s get clear about what the “indexicality of meaning” is supposed to be. A superficial reading of section 1.4 might suggest that it is some dark Quinean doctrine that words only have meanings relative to (acceptable) translation manuals, and that as far as witch-M is concerned, both the Science and Faerie manuals are acceptable.

However, as is apparent from section 1.7, this interpretation is wrong. The indexicality of meaning is in fact the perfectly intelligible:

### Thesis A

What a word means in a particular community at a particular time is not determined by facts intrinsic to that community at that time. In particular, the meaning of a word can depend on whether there are any future translators of the community's language. For example, consider two Salem-ish communities,  $S_1$  and  $S_2$ , intrinsically alike throughout the seventeenth-century, with  $S_1$  later visited by Faerie translators and  $S_2$  by Science translators. The word "witch" as used in the seventeenth-century by  $S_1$ , and the word "witch" as used in the seventeenth-century by  $S_2$ , have *different* meanings. In particular, "witch" as used by  $S_1$  means witch-F and "witch" as used by  $S_2$  means witch-S.<sup>3</sup>

Thesis A is a version of *externalism* about meaning. According to Thesis A, what a word means depends on the presence or absence of translators of the community's language. It is thus closer to the sort of "social" externalism defended by Burge, than it is to the "environmental" externalism defended by Putnam (see p. 79).<sup>4</sup>

Imagine three Salem-ish communities, intrinsically alike in the seventeenth-century. The first is visited at a later date by Faerie translators, the second by Science translators, while the third is never visited by translators. Call the word "witch", as respectively used by the three communities (prior to any "cultural contamination") "witch- $M_F$ ", "witch- $M_S$ ", and "witch- $M_0$ ". According to Thesis A, witch- $M_F$  means (the same as) witch-F, and witch- $M_S$  means witch-S. Now, according to L&H, what does witch- $M_0$  mean? Witch-F, witch-S, or neither? (We may assume with L&H that witch- $M_0$  can't mean both.) L&H do not consider the question, and I am

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<sup>3</sup> The indexicality of meaning certainly seems to be Thesis A. But if it is, then L&H chose the wrong answer from (i)-(iv) above. The right answer, by their lights, is that either (i), (ii), or (iii) is correct, but we do not have enough information to determine which, because the future history of Salem is left unspecified.

<sup>4</sup> "The indexicality of meaning" is probably not the best name for Thesis A, just as "the indexicality of 'water'" is not the best name for the results of the Twin-Earth thought experiment (see Tyler Burge, "Other Bodies", in *Thought and Object*, ed. A. Woodfield, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982, at pp. 103-7).

not sure how they would answer. In any case, it seems to me that once it is admitted that witch-M<sub>0</sub> can't mean both witch-F and witch-S, this completely undercuts L&H's argument that witch-M<sub>F</sub> means witch-F, and witch-M<sub>S</sub> means witch-S.

L&H's argument has the following premise:

It seems clear that neither translator—neither the one from Faerie nor the one from the Land of Science—will find any problem with her translation. She will be just as happy with her translation as will any actual translator, and conversation between the two cultures will proceed perfectly smoothly (p. 52).

And this seems right. But now if we imagine the Faerie and Science translators considering the question of how to translate the word “witch” as used in a hypothetical Salem-ish community that is never visited by translators, presumably they won't “find any problem” with the homophonic translation either. That is, imagine asking Faerie and Science translators the following two questions:

- (a) If you were to visit a Salem-ish community, and translate their language, what would be the correct translation of their word “witch”?
- (b) Consider a (hypothetical) Salem-ish community, never visited by translators. What is the correct translation of their word “witch”?

Won't reasonable translators give the *same* answer to both? The Faerie translator will answer “My word ‘witch’ [i.e. witch-F]” to (a) and (b), and the Science translator will answer “My word ‘witch’ [i.e. witch-S]” to (a) and (b). According to L&H, the two answers to (a) are correct but at least one answer to (b) is *incorrect*. Therefore they must admit that a reasonable translator may not “find any problem” with an *incorrect translation*, and this means that by their own lights they should not take the premise mentioned above as showing that witch-M<sub>F</sub> means witch-F, and witch-M<sub>S</sub> means witch-S. Hence L&H have not established Thesis A.

### ***From indexicality to normativity***

According to L&H, the indexicality of meaning supports the view that meaning is normative. Specifically, it supports the view that “[i]n asserting a meaning claim *one is simply asserting that a word or sentence should be used in a certain way*” (p. 62, my emphasis); and: “meaning claims are normative claims seeking to legislate similarity of usage between terms of different languages” (p. 63). This is because the normativity view “would lead one to expect indexicality of the sort we described” (p. 63), and “[t]he indexicality of meaning phenomenon does not seem to sit very happily with [rival non-normative views]” (p. 57). Thus the normativity of meaning is supposed to be rendered plausible because it is the best explanation of the indexicality of meaning.

I shall shortly argue that the conclusion of the argument is incorrect: claims like  $\alpha$  means (the same as)  $\beta$  are not claims about how words should be used. But before doing that, I want to examine whether the indexicality of meaning lends any support to the normativity of meaning.

It might seem that the argument is straightforward. Return to the first and second of our three Salem-ish communities, intrinsically alike in the seventeenth-century, with their words witch-M<sub>F</sub> and witch-M<sub>S</sub>, respectively. Now suppose that  $\alpha$  means  $\beta$  is a claim to the effect that  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  should be used in similar ways. (And let us just grant that “using words in similar ways” can be satisfactorily explained.<sup>5</sup>) Someone around in the first community when the Fairie translators are visiting presumably *should* use witch-F and witch-M<sub>F</sub> in similar ways (after all, communication will proceed most smoothly if he does). And similarly, *mutatis mutandis*, for someone around in the second community when the Science translators are visiting. So witch-M<sub>F</sub> and witch-F should be used in similar ways, and witch-M<sub>S</sub> and

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<sup>5</sup> This is my expression, not L&H’s. Although they do not give an explicit normative analysis of claims like  $\alpha$  means (the same as)  $\beta$ , their basic idea is clear enough. Note that the right reading, or so I assume, of “ $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  should be used in similar ways” is one on which “should” has widest scope; in other words, the intended interpretation is *It should be the case that  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  are used in similar ways, not It should be the case that  $\alpha$  is used in a certain way, and it should be the case that  $\beta$  is used in a certain way, and these two ways are similar.*

witch-S should be used in similar ways. But that, given our supposition, is simply to say that witch-M<sub>F</sub> means witch-F, and witch-M<sub>S</sub> means witch-S, which is just what Thesis A says. Thus the normativity of meaning does indeed “lead us to expect” the indexicality of meaning, as required.

This argument is mistaken, however. The problem is that the interpretation of “should” in “Witch-M<sub>F</sub> and witch-F should be used in similar ways” that is required to make it uncontroversially true makes the resulting version of the normativity of meaning obviously wrong. In what sense is “Witch-M<sub>F</sub> and witch-F should be used in similar ways” uncontroversially true? In the sense in which “should” indicates a *reason* for doing something, given the agent’s opinions, goals, and situation. In this reason-giving sense, assuming Biggs to be an unprincipled villain who wants a large quantity of cash, “Biggs should rob the train”, and “Biggs should club the train driver” might well be true. (Contrast the most natural readings of “Biggs should not have robbed the train”, and “Biggs should be in Rio by now”.) Thus, in the sense in which “Witch-M<sub>F</sub> and witch-F should be used in similar ways” is uncontroversially true, it can be roughly paraphrased as follows: the inhabitants of the first community have a reason to use witch-M<sub>F</sub> and witch-F in similar ways (because, let us suppose, these people want to aid communication with visiting Faerie translators).

Now imagine two communities at either ends of the universe who never meet (or, alternatively, imagine the two communities in different possible worlds). The first community’s language contains a word  $w_1$ , the second a word  $w_2$ , and (we may suppose),  $w_1$  means  $w_2$ . But in the reasons-giving sense of “should”, it is *false* that  $w_1$  and  $w_2$  should be used in similar ways. For *no one* has any reason to use  $w_1$  and  $w_2$  in similar ways. Therefore, if “should” is understood in the reasons-giving sense,  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  *should be used in similar ways* is not what is asserted by an utterance of “ $\alpha$  means  $\beta$ ”. But if L&H have some *other* reading of “should” in mind, it is unclear why they are entitled to the claim that witch-M<sub>F</sub> and witch-F should be used in similar ways, and so unclear why they think that the normativity of meaning should “lead us to expect” the indexicality of meaning.

Could it be replied, on behalf of L&H, that claims like  $w_1$  and  $w_2$  *should be used in similar ways* are to be understood in a “hypothetical” reasons-giving sense, as claims about reasons people *would have* if the two communities *were* to meet up? No, because this implies that witch-M<sub>0</sub> means

witch-F and that witch-M<sub>0</sub> means witch-S. This is because if the isolated Salem-ish community were to meet the Fairie community, people would have a reason for using witch-M<sub>0</sub> and witch-F in similar ways (or so we may suppose); likewise if the Salem-ish community were to meet the Science community. But, according to L&H, either witch-M<sub>0</sub> does not mean witch-F, or else it does not mean witch-S.

Therefore, even if we grant the indexicality of meaning, this seems to help not at all in deriving the normativity of meaning.

In any event, claims like  $\alpha$  means (the same as)  $\beta$  are not claims about how words should be used. In fact, the two sorts of claims are logically independent. First, consider the right-to-left direction, from claims about how words should be used to claims about what words mean. As a representative example, take the normative claim expressed by an utterance of “ $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  should be used in similar ways” (let the context be one in which translation is salient, if you think it helps). Does this claim entail  $\alpha$  means  $\beta$ ? No: surely the utterance of “ $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  should be used in similar ways” can express a truth even if  $\alpha$  does not mean  $\beta$ . Perhaps  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  should be used in similar ways because otherwise the religious authorities will take offense, or because of something else.

Second, the left-to-right direction. This, it might be thought, is the nub of the issue. If normative claims follow from meaning claims, isn’t this enough to show that meaning is normative? And surely there is such an entailment. From (the claim expressed by) (1) above it follows that “red” and “rojo” should be applied to the same objects, and from (2) above it follows that “Los tomates son rojos” should be assertively uttered only if tomatoes are red (cf. pp. 58-9; p. 180). But these normative conclusions do not follow (here I am simply parroting the standard response). Instead, what follows from (2), for example, are claims like if someone should/ought to speak the truth, he should assertively utter (the Spanish sentence) “Los tomates son rojos” only if tomatoes are red, and if someone wants to speak the truth, he should assertively utter (the Spanish sentence) “Los tomates son rojos” only if



*tomatoes are red*. And plainly *these* entailments do not show that meaning is normative.<sup>6</sup>

So I am unconvinced that “the grammar of meaning is normative” (p. 2). However, L&H have convinced me of *one* normative claim: more should be said.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See fn. 11 of Paul Horwich, “Meaning, use, and truth”, *Mind* 104, 1995, pp. 355-68. For an extended and illuminating discussion, see Gideon Rosen, “What is the normativity of meaning?” (manuscript, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> Thanks to Michael Glanzberg, Jim Pryor, Susanna Siegel, Ralph Wedgwood, and Steve Yablo.