

Charity and the Normativity of Meaning

It has frequently been suggested that meaning is, in some important sense, normative.¹ However, precisely *what* is particularly normative about it is often left without any satisfactory explanation, and the ‘normativity thesis’ has thus, justly, been called into question.² Furthermore, the normativity thesis, if true, would seem to rule out a large group of popular ‘use-based’ theories of meaning,³ so the popularity of such theories may give one *prima facie* reason for being suspicious of the normativity thesis.⁴ That said, it will be argued here that the intuition that meaning is ‘normative’ is on the right track, even if many of the purported explanations for meaning’s normativity are not. In particular, rather than being particularly social,⁵ the normativity of meaning may follow from the more *logical/epistemic* relations between use and meaning. Because of this, some use-based theories will still be able to accommodate the normativity of meaning by allowing that while meaning supervenes upon use, the *function* from use to meaning is a normative one.

Meaning and Norms

What would it be for meaning to be ‘normative’? For present purposes it will be that an account of meaning satisfies the following three conditions:

- (1) **Non-Reducibility:** No fact about what someone means is reducible to some purely descriptive property of that person,
- (2) **Bindingness:** The norms must be in some sufficiently robust sense *binding* on us. Anyone who means anything by their words will not be able to ‘opt out’ of such norms.
- (3) **Autonomy:** The norms in questions should be genuinely *semantic* norms. That is, the norms should be meaning-determining, and not (like some prudential and epistemic norms) simply applicable to items that are independently meaningful.⁶

¹ See, for instance, Brandom 1994, Boghossian 1989, Ebbs 1997, Kripke 1982, Lance and O’Leary Hawthorne 1997, McDowell 1985, McGinn 1984.

² See, for instance, Bilgrami 1993, Davidson 1993, Fodor 1987, Horwich 1998, Wikforss 2001, Hattiangadi 2002, 2003.

³ Conceptual role theories, causal-informational theories, interpretational theories, etc.

⁴ This worry is presented the most clearly in Wikforss 1999.

⁵ As with Brandom 1994, Kripke 1982, and Lance & O’Leary Hawthorne 1997.

⁶ For a discussion of this third requirement, see Wittkorse 2001, p. 205.

So why should we think that facts about what we mean satisfy any of these three conditions?

The thesis that meaning is normative is currently most commonly associated with Saul Kripke's reading of Wittgenstein, where Kripke argues as follows:

Suppose that I do mean addition by '+'. What is the relation of this supposition to the question of how I will respond to the problem '68 + 57'? The dispositionalist gives a descriptive account of this relation: if '+' means addition, then I will answer '125'. But this is not the proper account of the relation, which is normative, not descriptive. The point is not that, if I meant addition by '+', I *will* answer '125', but that, if I intended to accord with my past meaning of '+', I *should* answer '125'. Computation error, finiteness of my capacity, and other disturbing factors may lead me not to be *disposed* to respond as I should, but if so, I have not acted in accordance with my intention. The relation of meaning and intention to future action is *normative*, not *descriptive*. (Kripke 1982, p.37)

However, just what this normativity amounts to is not made especially clear by Kripke. The most obvious way to cash out the normativity in question is to argue that with any term there is a *correct* and an *incorrect* way to use it. That is to say there are things which the term is *true of* (or refers to) and others that it is *false of*, and we should apply a term to just those things that it is true of. However, as has been noted,⁷ this does not necessarily establish that there is anything particularly normative about meaning. "Correctly applies" is used here as little more than a synonym for "refers to", and if one can give a purely descriptive account of reference, then there will be purely descriptive account of what makes a certain use of a term 'correct'. Consequently, the fact that our terms have correctness conditions gives us no reason to conclude that any of the three desiderata must be satisfied.

That would leave the normativity as coming from the fact that we 'should' apply terms to what they are true of. However, while it is probably right that we should apply terms to those things they are true of, there is no obvious reason to think that the norm behind this 'should' is a *semantic* one. In particular, there are perfectly good *prudential* explanations of why we should apply our words correctly,⁸ in which case there is no need to think that there are any particularly *semantic* norms involved here. The fact that we have good reason to use our words correctly thus fails to meet the third condition. It might also fail to meet the second condition, since someone who was not interested in, say, their well being would still seem capable of speaking meaningfully, even though

⁷ Wittkorse 2001, Hattiangadi 2002.

⁸ For a discussion of this, see Wikforss 1999, Horwich 1998, Hattiangadi 2002.

they would be in a position to ignore all such prudential norms. Prudential norms would thus not be *binding* in the relevant sense.

It is then, not an obvious *a priori* consequence of our words having correctness conditions that meaning be normative. However, meaning may still turn out to be normative because, say, no purely descriptive theory can account for the correctness conditions of our terms. If it turns out that those theories that understand the function from use to meaning in more descriptive terms can't capture what we intuitively take the correctness conditions of our terms to be,⁹ and a more normative theory can, then we would have good reason for thinking that meaning is normative. Still, it would be something that followed from our account of meaning, not an *a priori* constraint that guided us in choosing the theory that we did.

Kripke's book gives some reason for thinking that purely descriptive use-theories are not up to the task of accounting for the correctness conditions of our terms,¹⁰ but if no alternative is offered in their place, one is left with the suggestion that meaning facts are *primitive*. It is unclear, however, whether this would entail that meaning is *normative* in any interesting way. In particular, the claim that there are simply primitive facts about the correctness conditions of our words does not require that there be corresponding semantic norms that are *binding* on us in any interesting way.

Still, even if purely descriptive use theories couldn't capture the correctness conditions of the terms in our language, there are less purely descriptive use-based theories that may fare better. In particular, I'll argue that there is a use-based theory that captures these conditions, and explain their 'normative' element, by taking meaning to be determined by a version of what is typically referred to as "the Principle of Charity".

Charity

The Principle of Charity was originally formulated by N.L. Wilson as the following semantic rule used to determine the referents of the names in a speaker's language:

⁹ A task that is often classified as the "problem of error" or the "disjunction problem", since it is usually explaining why certain cases that are intuitively misapplications of our terms are so that cause problems for such accounts.

¹⁰ For a useful discussion of this, see Boghossian 1989.

“We select as designatum [of a name] that individual which will make the largest possible number of [the speaker’s] statements true.”¹¹

Wilson’s principle is tailored to proper name reference, but his account generalizes quite naturally along three dimensions. Doing so replaces statements with the more general notion of commitments, referents with the more general notion of semantic values, and strict numerical maximization with a more general ‘weight-sensitive’ notion.

Wilson formulates Charity in terms of the statements made by the speaker, but maximizing the truth of all of the speaker’s *beliefs* is clearly his target.¹² It is, from here, not much of a stretch to treat the Principle as enjoining us to select the objects that make true the most of what will hereafter be called the “commitments” of the speaker. The commitments include not only explicitly held beliefs, but also the interpreter’s implicit presuppositions and assumptions.¹³ Some are happy to use the term “belief” for this more general sense of commitment, but since others are not, the subject’s “commitments” will be the focus of this more general formulation of Charity.

Furthermore, the notion of ‘maximization’ must be generalized as well. All of the speaker’s commitments need not be treated equally. Some will be more centrally held than others, and thus carry more weight when it comes to determining which object or objects ‘maximizes the truth’ of the set.¹⁴ There is nothing charitable about an assignment of referents that makes a centrally held commitment false in order to preserve the truth of two marginal commitments.

In addition to these other generalizations, ‘semantic values’ will here be substituted for objects or designata. The semantic value of a word is whatever determines the contribution the word has makes to the truth values of the sentences in which it occurs,

¹¹ Wilson 1959, p. 532. Wilson intends Charity to be part of an answer to the question “how do words hook up to things?” (Wilson 1959, p. 528). Charity should guide how the interpreter assigns a referent to a name because it captures factors that are constitutive of the semantic relations that the interpreter is investigating. There are significant differences between Wilson’s principle and Davidson’s well-known explication of it. In addition to being less well motivated, Davidson’s understanding of the doctrine is unlikely to produce the result that meaning is normative. This is discussed further in Jackman 2003, which also defends the adequacy of such a charity-based account to the task of explaining the correctness conditions for the terms in our language.

¹² Wilson 1959, p. 531.

¹³ Many of these ‘implicit’ commitments need not be understood as explicitly ‘represented’ in any way. Rather, we need only be disposed to act in a way that will manifest a commitment to the truth of what is implicitly understood.

and Charity need not, in itself, settle the question of what we should understand the semantic values of our terms to be.¹⁵

Finally, Charity can't be applied to single words in isolation, since whether an assignment maximizes the truth of the commitments associated with a single word can't be determined independently of assigning semantic values to all of the other terms found in the sentences containing the initial term. Consequently, the Principle should be formulated as one that applies 'holistically' to all of the words in the language at once. With these generalizations in place, the Principle of Charity becomes:

The semantic values of the words in a speaker's language are the values in the set that maximizes the truth of the speaker's commitments.

This generalization preserves the spirit of Wilson's principle, and allows his own formulation to be an application of the Principle to the special case of proper names.

This paper won't gone into just how Charity-based (or "charitable") accounts can explain the correctness conditions of our terms,¹⁶ but will focus instead on why such an account, if correct, explain the sense in which meaning is normative.

Charity and Normativity

It may seem strange to give an explication of the normativity of meaning in terms of a principle so commonly associated with Donald Davidson, given that Davidson himself seems so critical of the idea that meaning is normative.¹⁷ However, Davidson's hostility to the idea that meaning is normative comes from his tendency to understand this normativity exclusively in 'social' terms, where the distinction between correct and incorrect usage is spelt out as the distinction between an individual's own usage and that of his community.¹⁸ On such accounts, semantic norms would seem independent of the

¹⁴ This is stressed by Wilson himself (Wilson 1959, p. 535).

¹⁵ This use of "semantic value" draws Dummett 1975 and Evans 1982. However, since I tend to understand the semantic value of some of our words in terms of what they refer to, I will occasionally speak in terms of referents rather than semantic values.

¹⁶ Though, once again, I do this at some length in Jackman 2003.

¹⁷ Davidson 1993,1994. This anti-normative aspect of the Davidsonian tradition is developed very clearly in Bilgrami 1992, 1993.

¹⁸ For a discussion of this, see Jackman 1998. I should also add that the normative aspects of the 'Davidsonian' approach may be less obvious to Davidson because, as discussed in Jackman 2003, his way of explicating Charity tends to obscure them.

speaker's own intentions, and Davidson is, rightly, skeptical of this. By contrast, the type of normativity endorsed here still has an 'individualistic' basis. The distinction between correct and incorrect usage is funded within the individual's own usage, and so the type of 'methodological individualism' that Davidson endorses is, in spite of Davidson's suggestions to the contrary, compatible with the claim that meaning normative.¹⁹

We should now discuss how the charitable account can satisfy the conditions of non-reducibility, bindingness, and autonomy.

Non-reducibility

The first proposed requirement of the normativity thesis, that claims about what a person means not be reducible to a descriptive property of that person seems to be satisfied by the 'charitable' account. In order to maximize the truth of our entire set of commitments, we tie what we mean to a kind of idealized belief revision that doesn't lend itself to reduction into purely descriptive terms. Facts about what a person means by a term are ultimately a function of what, given his other commitments, it is *rational* for him to believe, and unless rationality itself can be captured in purely descriptive terms,²⁰ there will be no explanation of what we mean that can be completely cashed out in non-normative terms.

Reductive approaches to the relation between meaning and use typically presuppose a type of 'strong naturalism' about meaning facts according to which both the function from use to meaning, and the inputs to that function, can be understood naturalistically. (I.e., correct use is identified with some naturalistically specifiable sub-set of our usage, such as the original use, the use upon which the rest is asymmetrically dependent, the use that is associated with certain 'optimal' conditions, etc.) The charitable approach, on the other hand, is only compatible with a type of 'weak naturalism' according to which the inputs to the function from use to meaning (dispositions and actual usage) can still be understood naturalistically, while the function itself (charity) is not. Something

¹⁹ Timothy Schroeder (2003) has recently argued that Davidson's theory of mind is actually non-normative, and given how Davidson explicates Charity, this is understandable (see Jackman 2003), but if charity is understood in the way suggested here, a 'Davidsonian' theory will be a normative one.

²⁰ For reasons for doubting that this is possible, see Davidson 1970, McDowell 1985, Putnam 1981 (ch. 5), 1985.

normative (rationality) is what takes us from the naturalistic facts about usage to the facts about meaning. In this sense we can say that what we mean *supervenes upon*, but does not *reduce to*, how we use our terms.²¹

Bindingness

The second conditions of adequacy on any theory of semantic norms is that they be understood as ‘binding’ upon us. For instance, Davidson’s problems with attempts to cash out normativity in social terms is precisely that such social norms are *not* binding on us. We might have good (prudential) reasons for following norms enjoining us to speak the truth (or simply just as others do), but we could still speak meaningful while ignoring them. ‘Semantic norms’ of this social sort have, in that sense, an ‘external’ relation to the speaker *qua* language user, and if he is lacking the interests in question, he has no reason to follow such norms.²²

By contrast, meaning-determining norms should be have more of an *internal* relation to the speaker’s status as a speaker, not in the sense that every speaker has to *satisfy* them, but in the sense that every speaker must be bound by some of them. One does not, if one is to be a speaker or a thinker, have the option of opting out of all such norms.

Meaning determining norms explicated here are internal in this sense. If you ‘take a sentence to be true’ either in a judgment or an assertion, then you are committed to its truth, in which case you are committed to its consistency with other sentences you have taken true.²³ If the set isn’t consistent, then you are committed to giving up one of the commitments in question. Consequently, one can be committed to give up a sentence one has taken to be true if it turns out to be incompatible with too many of one’s other commitments. This commitment is not ‘external’ to one’s language use. If one gives up on such commitments, one gives up on taking sentences to be true, in which case one is giving up on assertion, judgment and meaningful discourse.²⁴

²¹ For a related discussion of this, see Jackman 2003b.

²² Though there are good reasons to think that we often do have commitments that tie what we mean to social usage, see Jackman 1998, 2003.

²³ This is, of course, simplified quite a bit, and for an interesting complication of these issues, see Wilson 1994.

²⁴ Unless, of course, one give up one of the other ‘incompatible’ commitments or one’s commitment to one’s having not changed what one meant over the period in question.

Autonomy

The autonomy constraint might seem to be the one where the charitable account is at its weakest. For instance, if I falsely (but sincerely) apply “cat” to a very cat-like raccoon, why shouldn’t one claim that I have merely violated an *epistemic* norm. On charitable account, semantic norms can seem clearly distinct from *moral* or *prudential* norms, but they seem less clearly distinct from *logical* or *epistemic* norms. Fair enough. On the roughly Davidsonian framework suggested here, the tight connection maintained between our theory of meaning and our theory of belief may not allow for there to be a sharp distinction between semantic and epistemic norms. Indeed, it should be natural that these two sorts of norms should merge together within this sort of post-Quinean framework where the line between changes in belief and changes in meaning are blurred.

Still even if the Davidsonian account shows that semantic and epistemic norms are interdependent, that doesn’t mean that the former are really just instances of the later. As long as the norms in question are meaning-determining (rather than simply norms that apply to things that have meanings), then there is a perfectly good sense in which they are *semantic* norms. Viewed *locally* such norms can seem as if they are ‘merely’ epistemic, but when their role is viewed *globally*, they can be recognized as meaning-determining and semantic.

By contrast, the more prudential norms which enjoin us to speak the truth or as others do because it is in our interest to do so, apply to words that already have meaning rather than determining what those meanings are, and so they fail to satisfy the third requirement in a way that the semantic norms associated with the charitable account do not.

Conclusion

In conclusion, if Charity is understood in the way suggested above, there is a perfectly good sense in which a roughly Davidsonian theory can allow that (and explain why) meaning is ‘normative’.²⁵ The claim that meaning is normative thus not as radical

²⁵ Whether such a modified Davidsonian theory is *correct* is, of course, another story. Though, if it does, the theory so modified allows Davidson to run his argument for anomalous monism that is not subject

as some suggest, since it is perfectly compatible with the natural view that what we mean by our terms is a function of how we use them.

2738 words

to the sorts of objection found in Jackman 2000.

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