Discourse as practice: from Bourdieu to Brandom

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Abstract. This paper investigates Robert Brandom's programme of *logical expressivism* and in the process attempts to clarify his use of the term *practice*, by means of a detailed comparison with the works of sociologist and anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu. It turns out that the two scholars have a number of concerns in common, including the means by which core practices can be amalgamated into more sophisticated ones, and the possibility of explicating practices without distorting them or generating incoherent codifications. We find some congruences between the two approaches but also a number of divergences. In particular, Bourdieu deprecates the well-known distinctions between *langue* and *parole* (Saussure), and *competence* and *performance* (Chomsky), while (we argue) Brandom ends up instituting his own "competence" model. We conclude by questioning how far this is compatible with his avowed aim of developing an "analytic pragmatism".

1 INTRODUCTION

This paper investigates Robert Brandom's *logical expressivism*, and does so by the somewhat unusual route of comparing his approach with that of the French sociologist and anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu. Brandom and Bourdieu have both been described as exemplars of *practice theory* [15, 20, 16], though Brandom is rather sketchy on what is taken to constitute a "practice". The intention is that Bourdieu's rather more thorough-going considerations of this concept, largely informed in [2] by fieldwork among the Kabyle of northern Algeria, will suggest ways in which Brandom's use of it can be interpreted or extended. Bourdieu's highly influential work on the *logic of practice* [2, 3] focusses on the notion of practices as the fundamental level of description of the behaviour of individuals in social contexts. He is particularly concerned with problems that arise when anthropologists attempt to codify or formalise the practices they observe among particular communities, or when local informants are asked to adopt a "quasi-scientific attitude" to their own practices. Brandom [4, 5, 6] sets out to show how one can develop an account of linguistic meaning grounded in normative social practice, eschewing semantic or intentional concepts, and in particular how formal logic can be shown to be grounded in everyday linguistic practice. Rouse (op. cit.) places them in opposing camps: according to him, Bourdieu is one of the theorists who "make central to their discussion of practices those aspects of human activity which they regard as tacit and perhaps inexpressible in language", while Brandom belongs to the party who "treat language itself (or 'discursive practice') as a paradigmatic application of practice talk". In fact a close reading of two key texts [2, 6] suggests that they have a number of concerns in common, and an examination of their differing responses to these issues may well

serve to illuminate the thinking of both scholars. For example, Brandom (op cit:33) claims to offer a "logic of practical abilities" while Bourdieu argues that "practice has a logic which is not that of logic" (op cit:109). And both are "downstream" of the later Wittgenstein, in particular the passages of the *Philosophical Investigations* concerning rule-following. Wittgenstein notes that the idea of "following a rule" itself assumes that there are "rules for following rules", while any type of behaviour can be claimed to be consistent with a rule with sufficient ingenuity, and suggests that at the end of the day all one can usefully say is "This is just what I do" ("So handle ich eben" [24]).

This paper will begin by going into a little more detail about what is understood by "practice theory" in anthropology and philosophy, and will then proceed to compare the stances of Bourdieu and Brandom on the issues listed below. We will focus on points (3 - 5), returning to the remaining topics in future work.

1. Communication as *challenge and riposte*. Bourdieu (op cit:14) claims that this is "the limit towards which every act of communication tends" while Brandom's notion of autonomous discursive practice requires a speech act of challenging entitlement to propositional commitments [22, 7].

2. Tacit/implicit knowledge in the form of *habitus* or *material inference*. For Bourdieu, individual practices are both constrained by and contribute to the *habitus*, defined as "Systems of durable, transposable dispositions ... Objectively 'regulated and regular without being in any way the product of obedience to rules ...'" (quoted by [10]). For Brandom, command of a language involves the practical ability to deploy a particular vocabulary, including the ability to make and endorse inferences such as that from *This coat is scarlet* to *This coat is red*.

3. *Generative schemes* and *algorithmic elaboration*. Both authors outline ways in which basic or core practices can be combined to generate new practices appropriate to particular situations. Bourdieu discusses how the gravity of a theft and the concomitant severity of punishment are determined among the Kabyle of Algeria on the basis of "a small number of schemes that are continually applied in all domains of practice" [2], while Brandom argues that certain "primitive practices-or-abilities" can be algorithmically elaborated into more complex ones by procedures equivalent to transducing automata [6] – though in other cases, "advanced" practices cannot be algorithmically derived from lower-level ones and Brandom falls back on a notion of "elaboration by training" (op cit:83-86).

4. *Explicitation*. Both authors are concerned with the issue of codifying or explicating practices. As noted above, Bourdieu argues that "practice has a logic which is not that of logic" and that clusters of practices cannot always be explicitly codified without distortion or logical contradiction. Brandom is generally more optimistic, maintaining that logical vocabulary serves to make explicit

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inferential moves which are already implicit in any autonomous discursive practice that lacks this vocabulary [23, 8].

5. *Competence and performance*: Bourdieu is strongly critical of de Saussure's dichotomy of *langue* and *parole*, and Chomsky's related distinction between competence and performance, both of which privilege the first term of the pair and (according to him) treat actual practices as mere degraded "executions" of a pre-existing set of rules. I shall argue that Brandom [6] in fact reinstates a competence-performance distinction, and does not deal with actual practices so much as abstract, potential practices of idealised agents that are not subject to psychological constraints and are capable of "perfect" reasoning. I will question to what extent this is compatible with his avowed "pragmatist" programme.

2 Practice Theories

As noted above, *practice theory* is a term that has been applied to a variety of approaches (or practices?) in the social sciences and humanities that seek to study the behaviour of individuals in social contexts by focussing on performances classed as *practices* against a background of other practices in place of such monolithic categories as *culture*, *class*, *gender*, *rules*, *values*, *norms* and so on. One motivation for this is that analysts can focus on observable events rather than postulating unobservable entities such as beliefs, values or traditions, or speculating about the psychology of the participants' motives. There is quite a range of activities that have been considered under this heading, from eating with specific utensils to gift-giving, playing chess or conducting scientific research. Rouse [16] provides a useful survey of practice theories across a variety of disciplines. Ortner [15] gives a participant-observer's account of the 1980s "practice turn" in anthropology which has acquired the status of a classic. Turner [20] is more sceptical about the possibility of identifying practices across different performances, but recognises the importance of the concept in today's "information society".

Bourdieu [2] contrasts practices with rule-governed behaviour by observing that the latter "ceases to convince as one considers the practical mastery of the symbolism of social interaction...presupposed by the most everyday games of social interaction", rather we apply a "practical knowledge" which functions like a "self-regulating device" providing for continual "adjustment of practices and expressions to the reactions and expectations of other agents". One is not consciously consulting internalised lists of rules for social behaviour, but carrying out approriate practices in a constantly-changing social milieu according to the constraints of the *habitus*. For example, he discusses how "customary law" in traditional societies

> ...always seems to pass from particular case to particular case, from the specific misdeed to the specific sanction, never expressly formulating the fundamental principles which "rational law" spells out explicitly

3 Discursive Practice

Rouse [16] identifies the role of language as a contentious issue in practice theory, and argues both that "to use and respond to words and sentences as semantically significant is to engage in discursive practice" and that discursive and non-discursive practices are ultimately inseparable. The idea that meaningful utterances can function as actions that have effects in the social world is associated with the speech act theories of Austin, Searle and Grice [1, 11, 18]; practice

theories take a different tack, proposing that meaningfulness can itself be accounted for as an outcome of social practices. Bourdieu [3] develops a notion of "symbolic power", according to which the meanings of utterances and the efficacy of speech acts derives from the "social power" of speakers [13]. Brandom takes a more nuanced approach, seeking to show how semantic meanings can be grounded in social practices of "normative pragmatics", without the requirement of any explanatory role for semantic or intentional concepts. As we shall see, his approach involves a somewhat rarefied, abstract and irreducably normative account of what constitutes a "practice".

Brandom's approach is concerned with "deontic" attitudes of hearers, and of speakers as self-monitors, rather than intentional attitudes of speakers as in classic Speech Act theory. In place of beliefs and desires, Brandom discusses "doxastic" (propositional) and practical commitments, which interacting agents may acknowledge or ascribe to one another.

The normative dimensions of language use according to Brandom comprise *responsibility* - if I make a claim, I am obliged to back it up with appropriate evidence, argumentation and so on - and *authority* - by making a claim to which I am assumed to be entitled, I license others to make the same claim. The essential idea is that making an assertion is taking on a *commitment* to defend that assertion if challenged. There are obvious shared concerns with the notions of commitment developed by [12, 21]. Brandom's elaborations include the notion of *entitlement* to commitments by virtue of evidence, argumentation etc; the interpersonal inheritance of commitments and entitlements, and the treatment of consequential commitments and incompatibility

The mechanism for keeping track of agents' commitments and entitlements consists of deontic scoreboards maintained by each interlocutor, which record the set of commitments and entitlements which agents claim, acknowledge and attribute to one another (claims and acknowledgements are forms of self-attribution). Scoreboards are perspectival and may include both explicitly claimed commitments and consequential commitments derived by inference. Thus an agent may be assessed by others as being committed to propositions which are entailed by his overt commitments, whether or not he acknowledges such commitments. There is another echo here of Bourdieu, who speaks of agents having "objective intentions" which always outrun "conscious intentions". Agents may be in a position of claiming incompatible commitments but may not be assessed as entitled to more than one of them (if any).

In Brandom's model, entitlement to a propositional commitment mostly arises in one of two ways: by inference from a commitment to which one is already entitled, or by deferral to the testimony of an interlocutor who is entitled to the commitment. Stated thus simply, there is an obvious threat of infinite regress on both scores, since it appears we may not in general acquire any entitlements unless there are already commitments that we or our interlocutors are entitled to. Brandom finesses this danger by proposing a "default and challenge" model: entitlement to a commitment is often attributed by default, though remaining potentially liable to be challenged by the assertion of an incompatible commitment. Which commitments are taken to be prima facie entitled and which are liable to vindication is a matter of "social practice".

Brandom's account of action and intention is initially quite similar to his propositional story in its overall structure: the role of intentions is taken by practical commitments which can stand in inferential relations to propositional or other practical commitments, and to which one may be entitled or not entitled. It is notable that practical commitments can be inferred from propositional commitments as in ex-

amples like:

1. Only opening my umbrella will keep me dry, so I shall open my umbrella.
2. I am a bank employee going to work, so I shall wear a tie.

Brandom argues that these inferences are not enthymematic, relying on suppressed premises "I wish to stay dry" or "Bank employees should wear ties", but that (1) and (2) are in fact examples of what he (following Sellars) calls "material inference": the consequent follows from the antecedent by virtue of its content, and the putative "suppressed premises" are ways of making explicit the implicit norms or preferences that make the inferences go through.

Many people encountering Brandom's work find the notion of material inference puzzling and suspicious, particularly in the way it seems to provide free inference tickets for deriving "ought" from "is". In fact, it seems that the disposition to make or endorse such inferences is taken to be part of the practical ability involved in the mastery of a particular vocabulary or field of activity, as is the ability to recognise incompatibilities among commitments. Going back to Bourdieu's discussion quoted above, the bank clerk who puts on a tie in the morning is not necessarily following a rule of appropriate dress for bank staff (even though such a rule may turn out to be codified in the staff handbook) but is conforming to a practice – because "This is what I do" – just as he does not intentionally consult any explicit rule when deciding whether to put on a pair of shoes rather than trainers or hiking boots. So the Bourdieusian idea of "practice" turns out to be closely related to the Sellars/Brandom notion of material inference.

Practical commitments are taken to stand in inferential relations with both propositional and other practical commitments, and an action is taken to be rational if it fulfils a practical commitment for which the agent can give a reason. For example: "Why are you wearing a tie?" "I'm on the way to work". Putting things a little more technically: to demonstrate entitlement is to offer a chain of reasoning which terminates in a practical commitment which is compatible with one's other acknowledged commitments, and actions result from "reliable dispositions to respond differentially to the acknowledgement of certain sorts of commitments" [5]. Scorekeepers are licensed to infer agents' beliefs from their intentional actions [Ibid.].

In summary, participation in a discursive practice in Brandom's terms minimally involves:

- ability to deploy a vocabulary in ways which are acceptable to other members of a speech community;
- ability to make and endorse a variety of *material inferences*;
- ability to keep score of commitments undertaken by interlocutors and oneself, to recognise incompatible commitments, and to ascribe both entitlements and consequential commitments to participants in a discourse;
- ability to challenge other practitioners who are assessed as not entitled to particular commitments.

Note that none of these bullet-points specifically mentions meanings, beliefs or intentions, but it is claimed that a practice involving these abilities can count as a linguistic or discursive practice. Note also that the practice involves an abstract notion of a "scoreboard" and is essentially normative, concerned not so much with observed practices as with what agents ought to be able to do to count as engaging in dialogue.

4 Elaboration and Explication

Brandom's ambitious programme, most fully set out in [4], is to start from a pragmatist approach to language use involving practices such as assertion and inference, and the assessment of oneself and others as committed or entitled to putting forward claims, and to show how one can proceed in a top-down manner to account for phenomena that are more conventionally studied under the banner of linguistic semantics such as: the "meaning" or inferential roles of nouns and verbs; anaphora; quantification; de re/de dicto distinctions, and so on. The avowed aim of [6] is to contribute to the development of an "analytic pragmatism". In this paper we are concerned with one particular aspect of this programme, *logical expressivism*: this is essentially the thesis that logical operators serve to make explicit patterns of inference which are already available in a "base" language that lacks this vocabulary, and that the introduction of these operators is semantically transparent and inferentially conservative in that it does not license any inferences which were not previously available.

In [6] the expressivist project is presented in terms of the notions of *elaboration* and *explication*. The idea is that a set of basic abilities can be marshalled into a process which implements a higher-level ability (elaboration), and that one can then define a vocabulary that specifies or codifies this set of practices (explication). In the particular case of logical expressivism, the argument is that this elaboration/explication or LX relation enables speakers to *say* whether a particular inference is good or bad, rather than simply *treating* it as such. Elaboration and explication are considered separately in the following two subsections, where each is compared with similar concepts to be found in Bourdieu [2].

4.1 Generative Schemes and Algorithmic Elaboration

As noted above, Brandom proposes *algorithmic elaboration* as providing a "logic of practical abilities", while Bourdieu argues that "customary rules" in a community can be understood as the product of

> ...a small batch of schemes enabling agents to generate an infinity of practices adapted to endlessly changing situations, without those schemes ever being constituted as explicit principles (op cit: 16).

So for example the penalties for theft can be determined by combining the appropriate customary sanctions, taking account of whether the offence was committed by day or by night, from someone's house or in a distant field, and so on. Bourdieu's notion of generative schemes appears (at least in this case) to be "horizontal", determining how practices should be combined in particular instances, while Brandom's algorithmic elaboration has a "vertical" dimension, seeking to show how new kinds of practice can emerge from marshalling together a set of core or basic practices. One specific type of elaboration focussed on in [6] is the introduction of conditionals. Suppose an agent has the ability to assert p and q, and to "respond differentially to the inference from p to q by accepting or rejecting it". These abilities can be considered to function as automata, the argument goes, and the automaton can be rewired so that it will respond to the conditional assertion "if p then q" in the same way as it would have done to the inference from p to q.

This is a ruthlessly condensed version of Brandom's proposal, but I think there is enough detail to see how the following issues can arise:

1. The use of automata theory to demonstrate these processes assumes that agents' behaviour is deterministic, which seems an unrealistic assumption for human agents and, I would argue, starts to introduce a competence/performance distinction which I return to in section 5.
2. The kind of things that can function as inputs and outputs of these automata is rather unconstrained: so inputs or "stimuli" can include abilities to distinguish "poetry that qualifies as lyrical, actions that are cruel . . . " while outputs or "responses" could include "painting well-composed pictures, toeing the party line. . . ".
3. Turner [20] notes that practices can be "underdetermined" and it may not always be obvious which practice is instantiated by a particular performance. In this instance, it is not necessarily clear how one could infallibly recognise a practice of "accepting or rejecting an inference". Returning to the example:

   (a) I am a bank employee going to work. (b) I am wearing a necktie.

   there is clearly the scope for ambiguity over whether the speaker is expressing an inference from (a) to (b), or simply providing more information about his current activities. That is, the relation between (a) and (b) could be analysed in RST terms as Elaboration rather than, say, Volitional Cause [14, 19].

4.2 Explication and Logical Expressivisim

Bourdieu problematises the explicitation of practices on two scores:

1. Attempts to collate and set down on paper various collections of practices, as for example in the different ways subjects observe the agrarian calendar, can lead to distortion or incoherence: features which are "compatible practically" may turn out to be "logically contradictory". That is, invidual subjects may pursue practices that do not interfere with each other, but attempts to codify and harmonise their combined implicit knowledge may show up inconsistencies. This objection can be summed up as "practice has a logic which is not that of logic".
2. Once a practice has been codified and set down on paper, reflection on the practice may lead agents to go back and revise it: explicitation is not a one-way street.

Brandom seems to be more optimistic on point (1): he argues that logical vocabulary must be "semantically transparent" and "inferentially conservative" with respect to material inferences that can be exhibited in the base language. However, he seems to come closer to Bourdieu's stance on point (2), acknowledging that

   Once the logical vocabulary has been introduced, it may induce practitioners to alter their prior practice, in the light of what it now allows them to say about that practice. [8]

This does in fact seem quite consonant with Bourdieu's notion of "the dialectic between the schemes immanent in practice and the norms produced by reflection on practices" [2]; both authors appear to be in agreement that explication of practices is not just a one-way process but can feed back into modification of those practices. A difficulty for Brandom's programme of logical expressivism is that we can only verify this by observing inferential practices before and after the introduction of logical vocabulary. However, the idea that this vocabulary is "introduced" into a linguistic practice which had previously lacked such terms is a fiction. All we have to go on is up-and-running practices involving both logical and non-logical vocabulary: as far as

we know there is no natural language or any historical record of one which lacks negation or conditional locutions, for example. Logical expressivism therefore has to be interpreted as a claim that logical vocabulary allows us to codify practices which can be manifested in a language that has been stripped of such vocabulary. In this situation, it is hard to see how one could identify the "basic" or "core" practices as distinguished from practices that may have been altered in the light of reflections facilitated by logical vocabulary.

A more technical point: Weiss [23] discusses the logical consequence relation defined in [6] which is based on a primitive notion of incompatibility, and assumes that speakers are able to determine "a fully determinate incompatibility relation between arbitrary finite sets of sentences". He raises the issue that this may be beyond the reasoning capacities of speakers of the base language, but that the introduction of logical operators may enable them to "*decide* undetermined incompatibilty relations*" (emphasis in original). It is not clear that Brandom satisfactorily addresses this specific point in his reply to Weiss [8].

5 Competence and Performance

As mentioned above, Bourdieu is highy critical of Saussure's well-known distinction between *langue* and *parole* [17], and of Chomsky's related notions of competence and performance [9]. Chomsky posits an "ideal speaker-listener", a "homogenous speech community" and "perfect grammatical competence". Bourdieu argues that privileging *langue* over *parole*, or competence over performance, abstracts away from the social context of speech acts, which are always shaped by the speaker's position in the social structure, and that actual practices unfolding over time are thus reduced to (partially successful) "executions" of a synchronic set of rules.

In fact, this is not too far from what Brandom offers with his notion of "algorithmic elaboration" [6] discussed in section 4.1 above. He acknowledges a number of idealisations, including:

1. *response substitution*: any input that an agent can discriminate can be connected to any of its repertoire of responses. In principle, it should be possible to train an agent to respond with unfeigned delight to a disgusting smell such as that of rotten fish, for example [6, p. 38]. Any restrictions on the ability to arbitrarily hook "discriminative and performative abilities together in arbitrary combinations" count as "*psychological* restrictions".
2. *arbitrary state formation*: state transition tables can be formed arbitrarily from any combinations of "stimulus-response connections" of which a system is capable. Again, falling short of this capability counts as a pyschological restriction.

In sum, Brandom's automata appear to be rather unconstrained both in terms of their internal operations and in the range of entities that can be discriminated as inputs or generated as outputs; rather less constrained even than Chomsky's "idealised speaker-hearer" with "perfect grammatical competence". It is interesting to note that labelling restrictions as "psychological" evidently has the significance that nothing more can or should be said about them in the current discussion, or that they are someone else's problem.

6 Conclusion

In order to get more of a handle on what is meant by the term "practice" in Brandom's account of normative pragmatics and inferential pragmatics, we have looked in some detail at how his use of the term

compares with that of the sociologist and anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu. We have found a surprising number of similar concerns, in particular with ways that "core" practices can be combined to form more elaborate ones, and with issues of making explicit the implicit knowledge which is taken to be immanent in practices. This has led us to problematise some aspects of Brandom's programme, in particular:

1. The fact that we have to deal with up-and-running linguistic practices which already include logical vocabulary, and that the availability of this vocabulary may have led practitioners to revise their prior inferential practices, makes it hard to see how one can reliably identify the "pristine" practices which are supposed to have been elaborated into pre-logical reasoning, other than via hypothetical reconstructions.

2. Rather than taking actual observed practices as a starting-point, Brandom [6] sets up a rather abstract and unconstrained formal apparatus or *competence*, with actual practices having the role of *performances* which are degraded by "psychological restrictions". Thus on this point he ends up in a position completely opposed to that of Bourdieu.

It seems almost as if the project of developing an "analytic pragmatism" is in danger of drowning the pragmatist baby in the analytic bath-water. A fruitful direction for future research might be to cease to regard the psychological dimension as a source of regrettable imperfections but as an area of study in its own right, and to investigate whether Brandom's framework of scoreboards, commitments, entitlements and so on can provide a useful framework for guiding empirical studies of human reasoning.

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