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### Knowing linguistic conventions

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# Knowing linguistic conventions<sup>1</sup>

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A linguistic convention is a principle or norm that has been adopted by a person or linguistic community about how to use, and therefore what the meaning is of, a specific term. Examples of such norms or principles are those expressed by propositions that express the laws of logic or those that express implicit definitions. Arguments about the epistemic status of linguistic conventions, very broadly, fall into two camps: the one holds that the basis of linguistic conventions is objective and that, therefore, such conventions are genuinely truth-bearing. Knowledge of such conventions is therefore knowledge of the objective truth of such conventions. This camp might be labelled 'realist'. The other holds that there is no *known* basis to linguistic conventions and that conventions are, to the best of our knowledge, not objective, but invented. Their truth is stipulated by the relevant speaker or linguistic community. Such truth is, consequently, trivial and knowledge of such conventions simply knowledge of the stipulation. This camp might be labelled 'anti-realist'. These are three standard accounts of the epistemic status of linguistic conventions, which all play into the first camp: (1) knowledge by intuition, (2) inferential *a priori* knowledge and (3) *a posteriori* knowledge. I give reasons why these accounts should be rejected. I then argue that linguistic conventions, if conceived of as trivial truths, are knowable non-inferentially *a priori*. Such an epistemic account provides support for the second camp. In this regard, I marshal support from some recent work by Wright and Hale.

## Introduction

This paper offers an account of how we know linguistic conventions. With it I conclude that knowledge of linguistic conventions is non-inferential *a priori*.

The arguments to follow marshal support, in various places, from Hale and Wright (2003) and Wright (2004). In Hale and Wright's paper 'Implicit Definitions and the *a priori*' (2003) they refer to the epistemic relationship between *implicit definitions* and non-inferential *a priori* knowledge as 'the traditional connection'. They defend the traditional connection in their paper. My current arguments, however, conclude more broadly; I make claims about *linguistic conventions* and the theoretical relationship with non-inferential *a priori* knowledge. What then entitles me to draw support from Hale and Wright (2003) and Wright (2004)?

Hale and Wright's defence of the traditional connection rests on the fact that they see implicit definitions as stipulations of truth *and* that such definitions demand no further metaphysical commitments to settle their truth. Definitions are, for Hale and Wright, a case of the 'invention' of meaning derived from the free stipulation of the truth of the proposition that expresses them (Hale & Wright 2003). Wright, in 'Intuition, Entitlement and the Epistemology of Logical Laws', argues similarly for the epistemology of logical laws. Wright argues that logical laws have no knowable/cognisable objective foundations that permit us to think of them as genuinely truth-apt. They are freely or arbitrarily stipulated. It is based on this trait of implicit definitions and logical laws that Hale and Wright respectively argue for the *a priori*, and particularly *non-inferential a priori* (as opposed to intuition, inferential *a priori* or *a posteriori*), knowledge of them (Wright 2004).

1 I would like to thank the University of KwaZulu-Natal for funding my attendance of the annual Conference of the Philosophical Society of Southern Africa in Bloemfontein on 20–22 January, 2014.

Even though not all linguistic conventions are either implicit definitions or the propositions expressing the laws of logic, I maintain, it is the characteristically stipulative nature of implicit definitions and the laws of logic that make them linguistic conventions and which they, at minimum, share with all other linguistic conventions. More importantly, it is this trait of the sentences that express conventions such as the laws of logic and implicit definitions which forms the seminal reason, in the arguments I draw support from, for the meanings of such sentences being knowable non-inferentially *a priori*.

I adopt the term ‘traditional connection’ to refer to the theoretical relationship between linguistic conventions and non-inferential *a priori* knowledge. It is this relationship that I defend in this paper.

I use the term ‘stipulation’ to mean any sentence or proposition that is stipulated to be true, without any reference to, or need of, further matters of fact to settle its truth.<sup>2</sup> Propositions that are stipulated to be true are not made true by ‘the world’. It is an objective of this paper to argue that, if the traditional connection is to be preserved, linguistic conventions *must* be stipulations in this sense. This paper answers the question about what the conditions are for preserving the traditional connection.

Lastly, in what follows, when I speak of being a realist or anti-realist about conventions I am not speaking about whether or not a theorist admits or denies the *existence* of conventions. This is hardly in dispute. I am, naturally, speaking of being a realist or anti-realist about the meaning of conventions. Similarly, when I say ‘knowing conventions’ I am not speaking about knowing of their existence. I am speaking about knowing their meaning.

### What are linguistic conventions?

A linguistic convention is a principle or norm that has been adopted by a person or linguistic community about how to use, and therefore what the meaning is of, a specific term.<sup>3</sup> ‘Conventionalism’ when pertaining to language is, consequently, a theoretical position which holds that the meanings of terms are yielded by such conventions. Conventionalism, however, does not appear as a neatly homogenised thesis. There is, for instance, famously, Quine’s rejection of Carnap’s type of conventionalism in *Truth by Convention* (Ebbs 2011). Nevertheless, Quine, despite rejecting Carnap’s conventionalism, endorses a type of conventionalism consistent with his particular brand of empiricism (Ebbs 2011). Conventionalism ‘proper’ is, broadly, of the anti-realist type; it is mostly, in one way or another, consistent with an account of the truth of conventions as evidentially constrained.<sup>4</sup>

A broad description of what is at stake in the standard debates about conventions is whether they are propositions that have been stipulated as true, and are consequently best understood as linguistic *constructs*, or whether they are propositions that, even though expressing conventions, either do, or do not, also track objective facts about the meanings of their constituent terms. Theorists who take linguistic conventions as somehow tracking external (to language) facts might still speak of them as ‘stipulations’, but hold that such stipulations are truth apt or truth-bearing (Boghossian 2006). The latter type of linguistic convention is described as ‘truth-bearing’ or ‘fact-tracking’, whereas the first is not, even though it is true in a reduced or minimal sort of way. Proponents of conventions as fact-tracking take conventions to be ‘genuinely’ truth-apt, since they are made true by matters of fact in the world and are, therefore, not *freely* stipulated (i.e. realism).<sup>5</sup> Proponents of conventions as constructs, or free stipulations, take conventions to be true in a purely logical or trivial sense (i.e. anti-realism).

2 But Boghossian (2006) uses stipulation in a slightly different way. To be discussed further on.

3 Adapted from *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (O’Hear 1995).

4 I say ‘proper’ because, for instance, it is possible to be a conventionalist and maintain that ‘conventions’ somehow track objective rules about use and meaning. This type of conventionalism is certainly not what is standardly understood as conventionalism. Also, the anti-realism that I am interested in and endorse is not one that has metaphysical commitments. In other words, I am agnostic about the genuine existence of objective meaning facts. The anti-realism here endorsed is epistemologically motivated; we do not *know* of such facts, and this makes realist semantic theories about conventions unstable or wrong.

5 By ‘freely’ I mean that the stipulation is not made to correspond to some presumed antecedent and mind-independent matter of fact about the meanings of terms, whether logical constants such as ‘if ... therefore ...’ or nouns such as ‘atom’. It is therefore ‘free’ of meeting obligations to correspond in this sense.

Linguistic conventions, if stipulating the use and meaning of words, are definitions. Roughly, let's say there are two overarching types of definitions (with many subtypes, of course): (1) referring definitions and (2) non-referring definitions.<sup>6</sup> A good definition of *any kind* fixes the use of a term in such a way that it also explains its meaning. But non-referring definitions must do so even though there is no knowledge of it denoting anything in the world. A definition for '+' must be able to, by suggesting how we ought to use the term '+' within standard algebra, establish what is meant by '+', in such a way that a speaker will be able to provide a more explicit definition of '+' if asked to.

But if a stipulation of '#f' falls short of fixing the meaning of an appropriately general range of contexts even when allied to other explanatory moves, then – even allowing that we may nevertheless have fixed the use of a wide class of sentence types involving 'f' – a recipient will naturally feel that she does not really associate a meaning of 'f', even though competent in the practice in which its use is a part, as far as it goes (Hale & Wright 2003: p. 140).

An *explicit definition* for 'entailment': 'entailment is when the conclusion of an argument follows necessarily from its premises'. Dictionary definitions are explicit. Whether this is a referring definition depends, minimally, on it having genuine truth-conditions; 'entailment' must denote some property, entity or relationship in the world.

Let's imagine that there are objective truth-conditions for 'entailment'. What might these be? We must, at the outset, rule out the observation of written down or spoken arguments that 'display' a logically necessary relationship between the premises and conclusion. No one is denying the existence of arguments. The issue is a deeper one: are there objective, mind-independent states of affairs that we recognise as logical necessity, and that are not just the invented rules of a linguistic community? A realist would have to answer, yes, to this and, to satisfy the anti-realist, would have to show where they can be located.

Depending on what sort of realist one is, truth-conditions might come in either of these two forms (and perhaps there are even more possibilities): (1) a naturalist might say 'entailment', in the end, is extensional, so the entailment between the sentences of an argument refers to a relationship between parts of the natural world; (2) or a rational Platonist might say that there is an objective and mind-independent logical relation that is the referent of 'entailment'.

But an explicit definition, unless ineffectual, has to be able to perform its function *irrespective* of whether there are realist truth-conditions or not.

An *implicit definition* of 'entails' is: 'X and Y entail Z'. An implicit definition defines 'entail' by having it in a sentence, where it is being used correctly. 'Correctly' is determined by the consistent use of the word in the broader context in which it is used, e.g. logic, and within the context of the sentence. This definition might have objective truth-conditions or not. But, like an explicit definition, an implicit definition has to be able to perform its function irrespective of whether there are (realist) truth-conditions or not.

For implicit definitions to be able to fix the use of a term and explain its meaning all other terms in the sentence expressing the definition must be understood and used properly already. In the case of the latter example, the logical constant 'and' is understood and used correctly and it is understood that 'X' and 'Y' are variables. The idea is that if 'and' and 'X' and 'Y' are used correctly and understood properly, the introduction of the definiendum, 'entail', is constrained by the use and meaning of these other constituent terms. So understanding the definiendum has nothing to do with being able to interpret its meaning *first*, but rather that its meaning is determined by how the use of it is constrained *within* the sentence: 'The proper intelligibility of implicit definition has to consist not in its interpretability but in the type of constraints it imposes on the use of the definiendum' (Hale & Wright 2003: p. 145).

6 There might be some doubt about whether there are things such as non-referring definitions. This is not for discussion here. But the thought is a simple one; if there is the possibility of some purportedly denoting terms not actually denoting anything (i.e. 'unicorn' or 'faerie' or 'The Angel Gabriel') then it is such terms, and their definitions, to which I refer as non-referring.

### Three standard theories about knowing linguistic conventions

Wright distinguishes between first-order and second-order claims (Wright 2004: p. 158). First-order claims are claims such as ‘The law of the excluded middle is valid’ and second-order claims are claims such as ‘Knowledge that the validity of the law of the excluded middle is valid is *a posteriori*’. Wright holds that claims about the epistemological basis of the laws of logic are second-order claims. So an epistemological account of conventions would have to offer justification for a claim such as ‘Linguistic conventions are knowable *a posteriori*’.

So, when pertaining to implicit definitions, we are not aiming to defend a claim such as ‘Logical terms are implicitly defined’ but rather, for example, ‘The propositions expressing the meanings of logical terms are knowable *a posteriori*’. The latter claim addresses an epistemological question (Wright 2004: p. 158).

The three standard theories about how we know linguistic conventions are those respectively proposing intuition (*a priori* apprehension), inferential *a priori* knowledge and *a posteriori* knowledge. Part of a defence of the traditional connection is to offer reasons why the standard three epistemic accounts fail.

#### *Linguistic conventions and intuitional knowledge*

Intuition is understood as ‘rational or *a priori* apprehension’ (Wright 2004). And if this is a good way of describing intuition then two points follow. The first is that to intuit something is the function of a special perceptual faculty; one which allows apprehension. The second is that it is a faculty which is aimed at the apprehension of some suitable object, something which can be apprehended in this particular manner. What then makes intuition a *rational* or *a priori* faculty? It is *a priori* because intuitive knowledge is understood as knowledge we have independently of using any of the usual five senses. So, it is not visual, audial, olfactory, prandial or tactile. It is, therefore, not *a posteriori*.

Pertaining to the present discussion about linguistic conventions (or rather their content), to intuit a convention is not to bring it into existence, construct or stipulate it. Nor is to intuit a convention to infer it, with appeal to established rules of inference, from either other matters of fact or more basic propositions. If the discussion is about the conventions that establish the meanings of logical constants, and therefore the laws of logic, we cannot assume those laws and claim to have intuited the objectivity of the conventions that express them.

So, when I *intuit* that ‘ $2 + 3 = 5$ ’ is a true claim and that therefore ‘+’ is a valid mathematical operation, it is not *because* I had antecedent knowledge, implicit or explicit, of the workings of algebra. If this were the case, then my knowledge of the validity of ‘+’ would be deductive, inductive or even abductive; yielded by some other more foundational premises or propositions, which I first have to give an epistemic account of. To intuit something, such as the validity of logic, is to directly apprehend the truth conditions of the propositions stating the rules of logic (Wright 2004: p. 156).

Intuitionism fails for three reasons: (1) claims to ‘obviousness’ are superstitious and self-congratulatory, (2) there is still no decent account of how the faculty works and (3) there are no criteria by which to determine which propositions are genuinely primitive or foundational, which is required for the justification of the second-order claim, ‘Linguistic conventions are knowable by intuition’ (as opposed to by rational inference).

Accounts of intuition often rest on claims such as the ‘obvious’ truth of propositions, or the ‘obvious’ validity of logic, or the ‘obviousness’ of there being objective facts about meaning. It is for this reason that, for instance, other accounts of meaning such as conventionalist accounts of meaning are described as counter-intuitive. For instance, realists in science ask whether it is not *obvious* that the success of science is in part due to the fact that theoretical terms are treated as referring to mind-independent entities. But this is not obvious to everyone. The opposing camp might ask whether the success of science is not in fact due to the existence of obviously objective truths but not rather whether we have correctly worked in accordance with our stipulated conventions for scientific practice.

The crux of the matter, though, is whether the appeal they have, appreciated in this way, is the appeal of obvious truths – better: obviously valid principles – as opposed to: obviously correct codifications of actual intentional practice. The distinction is crucial (Wright 2004: p. 168).

For the anti-intuitionist, the problem with obviousness is related to issues of disagreement, of course. If it were ‘obvious’ in the sense that it would have to be for intuition to be regarded as a decent epistemic tool, then there are two theoretical requirements of intuition: (1) there has to be an explanation for why there can be intuitively based disagreements about a mind-independent world and (2) then, this explanation has to be accompanied by, let us say, an epistemic device, which is not someone’s intuition, to distinguish supposedly correct from incorrect intuitions. Without the fulfilment of these requirements there can be no claim to *knowledge* from intuition because then intuition only amounts to personal opinion or preference and does not constitute knowledge.

The phenomenology of obviousness that attends basic logic is beyond dispute. But to acknowledge that is no commitment to the idea that such obviousness is the marker of a very fundamental, very solid form of cognitive success (Wright 2004: p. 157).

There has been no decent description given of how intuition, as a rational faculty, works; in other words, the question of how speakers rationally apprehend objective facts without using the usual five senses has not been answered. We understand, even though we evidently worry about whether we are right to be confident about it, how logical inference works. But understanding logical inference is not to intuit a factual basis for it. This much is clear; an account of the intuition of a factual basis needs to signify actual fact-tracking. We also understand, or are at least in a position to forward decent scientific hypotheses (i.e. *testable* hypotheses), about how sensory apprehension works. In terms of intuition, all that is on offer is that postulating such a faculty seems, to some, the best explanation for so many of our pre-theoretical instincts that we hold dear (Wright 2004: p. 156).

This then leaves one of two options open for intuitionism when pertaining to conventions: it either presupposes that such conventions have objective mind-independent foundations which are being intuited (as discussed) or it presupposes there *are none* and that intuition is the same as knowing freely stipulated convention. The second option is eliminated by the fact that intuition is understood as a form of apprehension or observation. This means that there must be matters of fact to apprehend. These matters of fact must be mind-independent for the mind to *apprehend* (as opposed to construct) it. Intuitionism about conventions therefore implies commitment to realism of the type that endorses a truth-conditional account of conventions, but where the truth-conditions are, evidently, evidence transcendent.

### ***Linguistic conventions and inferential a priori knowledge***

There are realists, such as Boghossian (2006), who hold that there are objective and mind-independent ‘meaning facts’ *and* that we know them *a priori*. This means that they are not trackable in the sensory extra-linguistic world. They are, therefore, not empirically available. Boghossian speaks happily of ‘conventions’ and ‘stipulations’. Nevertheless, Boghossian argues that an account of linguistic conventions does not preclude objective facts about meaning. In fact, if conventions are to be truth-apt, which they must be to be knowable, for Boghossian, there *must* be mind-independent facts to which they pertain (Boghossian 2006). This makes him a type of realist about conventions.

According to Wright, Boghossian suggests that, despite the fact that there seems to be no account of the much sought-after axiomatic principles of logic which will supply us with the certainty we so covet, we are still entitled to infer from the success of logical processes, under a specific condition whilst doing so, that we have genuine knowledge of logical laws when we draw conclusions (Wright 2004: p. 157). To help explain this entitlement, Boghossian posits, what

he calls, ‘blind inference’. Blind inference is ‘reasoning uninformed by self-conscious logical policing’ (Wright 2004: p. 158). Chiefly, the condition which blind-inference must meet to be legitimate is that it must be in accordance with concept constituting rules; that is that the speaker is in possession of at least one concept in the premises or conclusion. Once this is secured, and the speaker reasons correctly using the rules of inference, the speaker may assume knowledge of the validity of the rules, even though the *objective* facts for doing so have not been knowingly tracked (Wright 2004: p. 158).

But, since it is possible to be accidentally right about something it is not impossible to be right about something that we do not know. So, that we might be correctly employing the tools which logic offers us, by using and understanding logical terms correctly, is very plausible. It is also possible that there might be primitive axioms which secure the validity of logic, that we do not know them, but that, despite this lack of knowledge, we might still be reasoning correctly. So, perhaps, Boghossian’s case is one worth taking seriously.

The second order claim here would look something like this: ‘Knowledge that *modus ponens* is valid is *a priori* and inferred from unknown axioms’. Or perhaps, ‘Knowledge of the linguistic convention expressing the meaning of ‘entail’ for *modus ponens* is inferred from unknown axioms’. If the truth conditions for either claim are realist then epistemic support would have to be of the type that indicates how it is possible for the unknown, yet ‘certainty providing’, axioms of logic to somehow, *unbeknownst* to speakers, impinge on (i.e. cause) their ability to reason.

A claim that inferences are knowledge conferring even if inferred from unknown/able premises is ‘arrogant’; such a thesis is metaphysically presumptuous in that the truth of it relies, minimally, on the existence of antecedent matters of fact which somehow determine the validity of logic in such a way that we can claim to have knowledge of this validity (Hale & Wright 2003). If there are such objective matters of fact the nature of them would have to be of an extraordinary type.

Firstly, they would have to be of the type that despite being mind-independent and, therefore, existing independently of the act of stipulation, are nevertheless knowable without appeal to any senses. So, for instance, in the case of their being facts about the meanings of logical constants, they would have to be of a non-sensory nature, yet securing the objective truth of stipulations expressing definitions, *but* in such a way as to ensure that we *know* that these stipulations are true. This means that these truth conditions are both evidence-transcendent and epistemically constrained. This is neither coherent nor plausible. Furthermore, since we are entitled to infer knowledge *blindly* from these axioms, they would also have to possess the ability to correctly and *secretly* influence our faculties of reasoning in such a way so as to become overtly available to us. Aside from such a thesis being inherently unstable it is hard to imagine what such matters of facts might be. The upshot of all this is that a realist treatment of conventions is not tenable in conjunction with the proffered epistemology.

### ***Linguistic conventions as knowable a posteriori***

To offer an *a posteriorist* account of knowing conventions is to say that there is an empirical/sensory basis for conventions. There are two potential theoretical advantages to the second-order claim ‘Linguistic conventions about the use of logical terms are empirically knowable’: (1) an empirical basis for, for instance, the conventions of logic means that there is an end to the infinite regress of what the foundations of logic are – there cannot be anything more axiomatic than empirical matters of fact and (2) an empirical basis for the conventions of logic might imply that the account given of such a basis is not viciously circular; it does not assume the validity of the rules of inference since tracking empirical facts is not the same as constructing a logical argument, which must assume the validity of logic in doing so.

If the foundations of conventions are empirical, then the tracking of these empirical foundations is when we have knowledge of the truth of such conventions. Empirical foundations have to be mind-independent, of course. But, I argue, despite the promise that empirical accounts hold they fail in three ways: (1) they beg the question, (2) they fall prey to the same problems about ‘apprehension’ as intuition does (I have argued to this effect already) and (3) they too are guilty of vicious circularity.

To justify the second-order claim ‘The linguistic conventions of classical logic are knowable *a posteriori*’ is to *indicate recognisable* sensory states of affairs that are purportedly the truth-conditions of a sentence expressing the convention. To not indicate where or what these are, is to only advertise the theoretical advantages of conventions being empirical but not address the second-order challenge.

I give here a brief synopsis of Millikan’s naturalism about meaning (Millikan 1984, 2006). I use Millikan’s account of language as an example of an *a posteriorist* account of meaning, and therefore an *a posteriorist* account of linguistic conventions (Millikan 1984: p. 11).<sup>7</sup>

Millikan (2006) holds that all linguistic activity is traced back to parts of the extra-linguistic world – part of the natural world. Speaker intention, which is what gives rise to the signs we use in language, is part of the natural world (Millikan 1984: p. 85). She argues for a semantic theory where ‘...interpreting conventional language signs is surprisingly like perception’ (Millikan 2006: p. preface x). By using ‘perception’ Millikan hopes to direct her reader to the sensory or experiential basis of linguistic activity.

For Millikan language is built up of words, phonemes, syntactic structure, elements of prosody and so on. Language obtains meaning when these elements are combined to ‘produce the functions of the full phrases’ (Millikan 2006: p. 24). If what a semantic theory is supposed to give an account of is how words or propositions represent or ‘map’ the world then, for Millikan, this is done by investigating speaker intention (which is biologically based) and the purpose with which signs and the structure of language (i.e. grammar) is created. Inherent to a sign is its purpose or function. And it is this function that is the meaning of the representation. So meaning is not determined by the usual realist notion of *truth* conditions (even though she is a self-proclaimed realist [Millikan 1984: p. 11]), but rather by a notion of *use*. The proposed theory of what signs are must accord with a natural epistemology (Millikan 2006: p. 73). Here Millikan replaces the notion of ‘apt for truth’ with ‘apt for use’.

This accords with the governing idea, suggested in chapter 3, that a useful notion of natural sign should define a category useful to the natural epistemologist. Intentional signs are purposefully produced for sign-users. It follows that besides a theory of what natural signs are, we also need a theory of what sign use is (Millikan 2006: p. 73).

Millikan argues that intentional representations are representations of these purposes or functions. But they do not signify these purposes, they *contain* or *are* the purposes they represent (Millikan 2006: p. preface x). So ‘functions’ are ‘essential’ to intentional signs (Millikan 2006: p. preface x). And because our intentions are an aspect of the natural world, the functions of signs and, therefore, meaning is also a product of the natural world. Millikan further maintains that it is not necessary for speakers to be aware or conscious of intentions in order to understand how to use such signs (Millikan 2006).

To justify such a claim would require an ontology of the purported matters of fact that correspond to the words and rules of language. These would have to be sensory. Such an ontology, Millikan acknowledges, would be very difficult.

My business is only to give a coherent account in which such items as signs, inner-representations, meaning, truth and knowledge appear and their peculiarities are understood within the natural world [...] It is not at all clear how to describe an ontology that will support this view or how to articulate the kinds of rules involved (Millikan 1984: p. 87).

Millikan’s coherent account is this: she explains that, unlike bee dances, which are built into bee behaviour by evolutionary processes, language is learnt. This means shared language practices are learnt (Millikan 1984: p. 98). Millikan explains the success of linguistic practices (i.e. the fact that we are able to communicate with each other and that we can distinguish

<sup>7</sup> Millikan does not employ terms such as ‘*a posteriori*’, but makes it quite clear what her ‘epistemology’ is. There is no doubt about the fact that she does not think anything like ‘*a priori*’ justification is possible for any type of sentence.



between true or false indicative sentences) is because they are governed by rules. These rules, however, are not the ‘invented’ conventions of the conventionalist ‘proper’, but are rather the rules that are established by a sort of inductive success of communication and apt denotation (Millikan 1984: pp. 99, 131).

Millikan’s theory is a suitably *a posteriorist* account of meaning. Whether it survives the criticism levelled against *a posteriorist* accounts is what I look at next.

Indeed, much more can be sensibly said about the mechanics of sensory observation than intuition. *A posteriorist* accounts are, therefore, in better epistemic ‘shape’ than, say, the faculty of intuition. But Millikan has to do both of the following things to justify her position. (1) Signify the empirically available world of people reacting to and/or constructing conventions. This she does easily, of course, but it doesn’t help her case. That flesh and blood people must participate, and endeavour to do so effectively, in a flesh and blood world is taken for granted by *all theorists* interested in these matters. A conventionalist would agree with Millikan’s ‘biological’ account of how we learn language. *A posteriorists* who are naturalists also have this charge: (2) to show the natural ‘propositional’ content of linguistic conventions. In other words, there have to be *meaning-matters of facts* available to the senses for, for instance, this linguistic convention: ‘Intension, as having to do with a network of inference rules that enmesh a term or a sentence, with justifications of causes of its application, or with its role in a theory, is something quite other than sense’ (Millikan 1984: p. 11). Millikan has not shown how the content or meaning of such a sentence might be located in the natural world. She has given a very plausible account of how such sentences might be learnt by and shared in linguistic communities. But there is nothing controversial about this part of her account, as far as I can see. Furthermore, given that conventions express norms and principles (‘rules’ in Millikan’s terminology), it is very hard to see how the normative force of such stipulations are to be tracked in a natural (assumedly value-neutral) world.

Evidently, most realists maintain that speaker knowledge/awareness of truth (or use)-conditions is not necessary for knowledge of use and meaning. But such a semantic theory would be well aided by empirical support of how it is that the world is therefore able to impinge on speaker efficacy. In short, realist semantics requires an account, then, not of how language maps the world, but of how a disinterested and, for present purposes, inanimate world maps language.

Also, is Millikan’s account able to end the vicious circularity that occurs when philosophers assume the very laws of logic whilst trying to explain them? No. Millikan explicitly states that she presents ‘arguments’ (Millikan 1984: pp. 95–113). And she does so in order to persuade us of her naturalist semantics. Arguments assume the validity of our inferences. In addition to this, there is no empirical theory that can be said to be genuinely free of logical inference.

...any claim that the Quinian proposal might have to forestall the misgivings about intuition is rapidly exploded by the reflection that it must surely be equally vulnerable to the difficulty which motivated the intuitional view in the first place. Simply: any plausible account of the methodology of empirical theory, a fortiori of ‘deeply entrenched’ empirical theory, must represent it as riddled with logical inference (Wright 2004: p. 157).

In the end, *a posteriorist* claims about conventions, without independent *a priori* support for their purportedly natural bases, are just different conclusions from rationalist arguments. Thus the question remains begged and the circle vicious.

### **Linguistic conventions and non-inferential *a priori* knowledge**

To preserve the traditional connection between linguistic conventions and non-inferential *a priori* knowledge is to offer justification for the following second-order claim: ‘Knowledge of linguistic conventions is non-inferential *a priori*.’

If non-inferential knowledge is knowledge that has not been inferred, then it is either (1) knowledge of that from which inferences follow or (2) it is knowledge of some sort of event that has nothing to do with inference at all. If linguistic conventions are stipulated norms about how to use and understand terms, then which option expresses the conditional correctly? Choosing

will be informed by what features linguistic conventions must have to be knowable, not only non-inferentially, but also *a priori*.

When trying to decide whether non-inferential *a priori* knowledge of a linguistic convention is knowledge of a stipulated norm or knowledge of a factual proposition, it must be established which of these two, if any, can be known *a priori*. Norms or principles, if stipulations and not fact-tracking propositions, are knowable *a priori*. Factual propositions, if genuinely truth-bearing, have truth conditions that are mind-independent and objective. Can such genuine truth conditions be known *a priori*? No. Reasons have already been given why the two standard *a priorist* accounts for knowing truth-bearing propositions fail.

I now argue that when linguistic conventions are knowable non-inferentially *a priori* they must be ‘non-arrogant’ or ‘conservative’. This means that conventions do not fix references and make no appeal for their truth or correctness on antecedent, objective, matters of fact about use or meaning.<sup>8</sup> For a convention to be thought of as genuinely truth-apt, i.e. referencing to matters of fact in the world, it would have to be indicated where and what these matters of fact are *as well as* how they are knowable empirically. So, there are two ways in which a stipulation risks being arrogant. The first is, by fixing a reference. Referencing fixing requires additional (to mere stipulation of truth) empirical work because to fix a reference is to know something about the extra-linguistic world.<sup>9</sup> And the second way of ensuring arrogance is if it is assumed that there are *antecedent* meanings (meanings which pre-date the act of stipulation), even if only the associated thoughts or sense of a term. To track both, or either, the reference or antecedent meaning of a term calls for additional epistemic work.

Let us call *arrogant* any stipulation of sentence, ‘#f’ whose truth, such as the antecedent meaning of ‘#\_’ and the syntactic type of ‘f’, cannot be justifiably be affirmed without collateral (*a posteriori*) epistemic work (Hale & Wright 2003: p. 14).

And

So a thinker who is party to a stipulative acceptance of a satisfactory implicit definition is in a position to recognise both that the sentences involved are true – precisely because stipulated to be so – and what they say. That will be to have non-inferential *a priori* knowledge of the truth of the thoughts expressed (Hale & Wright 2003: p. 26).

To avoid arrogance we think of stipulations as follows: to justify a claim about the *stipulation* of the truth of a proposition about the validity of, for instance, *modus ponens* is to simply take cognisance of the act of expressing a norm or principle. But such an expression of a norm, *only if* assumed to be independent of further more objective or mind-independent matters of fact or more primitive axiomatic conventions, is free to *stipulate* the *truth* of a proposition. This truth, of course, cannot be objective. It cannot accommodate realism about truth. Such conventions should be given an anti-realist semantic treatment: understanding their meaning and use requires knowledge of the conditions under which they are true. So, if no objective truth conditions are cognitively accessible, then we assume they are non-referring and, therefore, trivially true. In other words, they are true by stipulation (Hale & Wright 2003: p. 12).

If the meaning of a sentence is related to the conditions under which it is true, then there can be no knowledge of meaning if there is no knowledge of truth conditions. It is, therefore, impossible to take seriously how objective and mind-independent matters of fact would aid fixing the use of a term or determining its meaning when acquisition of these very matters of fact seems to be impossible. Such matters of fact must, if able to aid *comprehension* of use and meaning, be *cognisable*. Until realist accounts also indicate where these matters of fact are, the postulation of

8 There are further conditions, which I am not able to discuss in this shortened version of this paper. \*

9 See Carnap in ‘Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology’ (1950) for an explication of ‘extra-linguistic’. But, in short, the extra-linguistic world is the one that is not merely constructed or invented in the act of stipulating the truth of various linguistic conventions. It has objective and mind-independent existence and would be the world responsible for importing genuine truth to truth-bearing propositions.

such matters of fact do not only *not* further, but actively undermine, an effective semantic theory of linguistic conventions.

...and second, that the realist should explain what evidence there is that we actually possess any such conception – what our use of any particular statement would distinctively manifest that we understood what it was for that statement to be true in a manner transcending our capacities for verification (Wright 1987: p. 86).

### Conclusion

I have argued that the only successful account of linguistic conventions, while conserving the traditional connection with non-inferential *a priori* knowledge, is that the stipulations which express them must be conservative. Knowledge of stipulations of truth is knowledge only of the sense of or the associated thought with the term. And sense or associated thought is an invention of the speaker or linguistic community. Given that there is no knowable objective basis for linguistic conventions, the knowledge of such stipulations is both *a priori* and non-inferential.

I have premised this argument on the following salient point: if the purpose of a linguistic convention is to fix a use and explain a meaning, it must be possible to have cognisance of the truth conditions of this convention. The only account that permits cognisance of the truth conditions of our linguistic conventions is when we take their content, or ‘truth conditions’, to be inventions. But for such ‘truth conditions’ to be thought of as inventions, it is required that the stipulation neither attempts referencing fixing nor assumes the existence of antecedent meanings or rules for use. So, when linguistic conventions are, for instance, implicit definitions, for such definitions to be inventions they must be allowed to define their ingredient terms entirely without reference to further objective matters of fact.

One clear desideratum to have emerged is that a satisfying account of explanation via implicit definition must leave room for the capacity of such explanations to *invent* meanings.... (Hale & Wright 2003: p. 12).

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