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Models of language: towards a practice-based account of information in natural language

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Final comments

In the remaining of the present work I would like to sum up some of the main topics that have concerned us here, and to briefly expose some consequences of the position I have argued for along the previous chapters. Also, I would like to summarize and take stock of the open issues for future research that have been raised along the road.

Main topics

The issue that entails perhaps the deepest disagreement between mainstream theories in semantics and my own approach concerns the attitude towards the ‘individualistic frame of reference’, viz., the presupposition that the properties of language mirror the properties of individual speakers. Semanticists that, in one form or another, subscribe to a psychologist explanation of language make the presupposition of the ‘individualistic frame of reference’. As opposed to this attitude, the account propounded here starts out from a framework in which a single individual’s properties are but a part of the story, which must be complemented with other individuals and the interactions among them—i.e., social practices. One of the main claims made here is that to the extent that the properties of the interwoven nexus of social practices go beyond the properties of individual speakers, the properties of the information carried by language cannot mirror the properties of individual speakers.

Another crucial disagreement concerns the sort of ‘naturalization’ presupposed by mainstream theories in semantics. Such naturalization runs together two philosophical attitudes, namely, *physicalism*—i.e., “the thesis that everything is physical, or as contemporary philosophers sometimes put it, that everything supervenes on, or is necessitated by, the physical” Stoljar (2009)—and *explanatory reductionism*—i.e., the thesis that “all genuine explanations must be couched in the terms of physics, and that other explanations, while pragmatically useful,

can or should be discarded as knowledge develops” (*Idem*). The sort of naturalization that I attribute to mainstream theories, and which I reject, consists in the idea that any answer to the issues how signs are meaningful and what meaning they actually have, must be given in terms of a formal, mechanical theory, which somehow supervenes on some sort of pattern of brain activity. No other answer is acceptable if it is to be in accordance with the standards of rigor of science. As opposed to this attitude, I presuppose that an account of linguistic information is not in the business of making claims as to the constituents of physical reality; an explanation as to how signs are meaningful and what meaning they actually have can be given in non-physicalistic terms. Rather, an organization of our descriptions of our phenomenological experiences of language-use are just what we need to enhance our understanding of such issues. To be sure, this answer presupposes a particular ontology, to which I will come back in a moment.

The rejection of the sort of naturalism of mainstream theories in semantics is motivated by the conviction that the phenomenon of language, as such, arises out of our experiences of our uses of signs, our reactions to these experiences, and the interactions among people that they give rise to. Language, meaning, and understanding, are not natural kinds, but symbolic ones. Thus, the criteria of adequacy that I set as a measuring-rod amounts to a demand to preserve our descriptions of such experiences, so as to preserve the phenomenon from an artificial distortion produced by our tools brought to studying it.

Throughout the criticisms, based on our descriptions of language-use, of the notion of semantic competence as knowledge of a set of rules, we saw that our abilities to understand and produce signs are not independent from the characteristics of these signs, and that abstracting away from ‘limitation factors’, as mainstream theories do, always produces a significant departure from our descriptions of our experiences of language-use. As against this conception of semantic competence, I propose that to understand an expression is not to enter in an ideal epistemic relation with an entity that is intrinsically independent from the means used to express it. Neither is linguistic competence an abstract, ‘implementation-free’ kind of software. Rather, the required model of linguistic competence that seems more appropriate to these descriptions is an embodied ability to use signs to achieve innate, as well as socially shaped, purposes. To take the embodied and embedded nature of linguistic competence seriously allows us to make sense of the ubiquitous phenomenon of incomplete understanding, and that our exchanges are successful despite the incomplete, and uneven, understandings of the participants.

Experiences of language-use and our reactions to these experiences partly underwrite the information carried by many signs in our everyday practices. When these practices are taken into account, it is possible to show *how* many signs become meaningful. However, an explanation as to what information they carry is only accessible to those who are familiar with the practices that bestow meaning on these signs—but then again, no further understanding can be gained by a merely theoretical account. The embodied and embedded ability that linguistic

competence consists in clearly comes in degrees. Some speakers, in virtue of their familiarity with certain practices, are more competent with certain expressions than other speakers, who are, as it were, novices or laymen as regards these practices. The ubiquity of this situation entails that the study of language must not start from a notion of 'full' linguistic competence, on top of which an account of linguistic information and linguistic communication must be conceived.

The notion of practice-based information—i.e., the information carried by signs in virtue of the roles that they play in our everyday practices—has consequences for two of the open issues raised in chapter one, namely, the rejection of an instrumentalist view of formal semantics, and the assessment of contextualism.

According to the instrumentalist view, the interpreted formal languages put forth by the semanticist are merely theoretical tools for classifying, systematizing and predicting semantic intuitions (e.g., truth conditions, validity of certain inferences, etc.). Such semantic intuitions are taken to constitute the domain of study of theories dealing with the semantics of natural language. But if we take the notion of practice-based information seriously, as well as the concomitant notion of incomplete understanding of such information, we can see that the claim that the domain of semantics consists in individual intuitions is a misguided supposition. For the intuitions of an individual provide access but to one aspect of some practices, namely, to the introspectable experiences of the practices that she is familiar with. These experiences, however, are different from speaker to speaker, and this situation makes it difficult to make sense of a domain of semantics that is accessible for scientific research. Such difference must not be concealed behind the claim that a common core of these experiences must exist; for such claim represents an ungrounded assertion, which must be substantiated by a serious empirical research. Moreover, the embodied abilities that underwrite language-use are not merely different because they are based on different histories: they are also different in degree, just as someone is more capable to play the piano than someone else. But more importantly, the supposition of intuitions as the domain of semantics cannot account for the roles of signs in our practices, for such roles are not constituted by the experiences of a single speaker, just as buying a beer at a certain price is not constituted by the buyer's experiences. A proper explanation of practice-based information, which I take to permeate our uses of language, requires a broader framework than the mere experiences of a single individual. To sum up, to classify, systematize and predict intuitions cannot constitute a legitimate study of semantics, given that the target of explanation of semantics must be the information carried by words, and the account of such information requires a broader framework than the mere experiences of a single individual.

Similar objections against Recanati's contextualism can be raised. Recall that the pillar of his critiques is the availability assumption, according to which what is said must be intuitively accessible to the conversational participants (unless something goes wrong and they do not count as 'normal interpreters'). The notion of a normal speaker is completely artificial, and is dictated by the ability to

intuitively have access to what is said. This supposition, too, reduces the domain of semantics to the intuitions of individual speakers; hence, it brings to the party all the above-mentioned problems with such reduction. Furthermore, although Recanati's contextualism explains why a word has different meanings in different contexts, it does not explain how these various meanings nevertheless remain constant across a range of contexts. These contexts must be characterized in terms of the practices that bestow meaning on these words, and the identification of these practices constitutes the so-called 'primary pragmatic processes'. Last but not least, since Recanati works inside a Gricean framework, the notion of communication against which language-use is conceived must be rejected. Linguistic communication does not consist in the process of recognition of communicative intentions. For communication might well be successful between participants with incomplete, and uneven understanding of both the purposes of the exchange, as well as of the proper use of the expressions used therein; and hence their mental states cannot define such purposes or such proper use (cf. the example of the cappuccino).

Open issues

Ontology

An account of practice-based information is not in the business of making claims as to the constituents of physical reality. However, such account presupposes an ontology of practices. In my view, we can explain this ontology in physicalistic terms; however, such explanation does not become an ultimate explanation of practices or practice-based information. It merely shows the apparatus that gives rise to the experiences, reactions, interactions, and physical objects that allow for these practices to take place. It is beyond the scope of the present work to delve into this complicated issue. All I can attempt to do here is to draw the outline of a possible account of the relation between practices and such apparatus.

The gist of the attempt is to use a similar strategy as the account of the mind/brain dualism in terms of the analogy with the software/hardware description. In this case, however, there is no mind, but a practice, and there is no one brain, but several bodies. The apparatus that allows for our practices to take place is the analog of the hardware. Our bodies moving around, acting on things and on the bodies of others are like the circuits of a hardware, or the wheels and gears of a machine. They are physical objects and their movements are bound by physical laws. But our practices and the practice-based information they give rise to are the analog of the software. They run on the machine that is constituted by the hardware, but they are different from it.

To assume a shared and determinate theme in communication

Another open issue raised along the road is the nature of the assumption of a shared and determinate theme in communication. When we are engaged in linguistic communication with someone, and when the exchange is successful, we experience that we share a theme with our interlocutor. For instance, our experiences of language-use usually contain images (e.g., of objects, situations, etc.) as well as an assumption of determinateness of the subject matter that is under discussion in the situation of use. But such experience of a determinate subject matter is not (just) a visual experience. For instance, when we think about words such as “leaf,” or “green,” we have an experience that goes beyond a mere image of a leaf or a red patch: we also experience these images as ‘schemas’. The most promising line of inquiry into our experiences of a shared and determinate theme consists, in my view, in making an exegesis of Wittgenstein’s later work in the light of my account of information as a complex phenomenon. We can shed some light on this topic by considering the way in which Wittgenstein explores the experience of a definition by means of samples in his *Philosophical Investigations*. Paragraph 73 starts like this:

When someone defines the names of colours for me by pointing to samples and saying “This colour is called ‘blue’, this ‘green’ ...” this case may be compared in many respects to putting a table in my hands, with the words written under the colour-samples.

From this passage I would like to focus on the analogy of stating a word’s meaning with using a table that matches words with color samples. And from this analogy I would like to focus on the feeling, suggested by the table of colors, that the meaning of a word is something definite, namely, the relation between the name and the color sample. The text continues:

One is now inclined to extend the comparison: to have understood the definition means to have in one’s mind an idea of the thing defined, and that is a sample or [image].²⁴ So if I am shewn various different leaves and told “This is called a ‘leaf’ ”, I get an idea of the shape of a leaf, an [image] of it in my mind.

This feeling of definiteness comes along with an image. When one hears or uses the word “leaf” one usually has a visual experience. The same goes for the word “green” and in fact most words bring about such experience—even those words that do not have physical referents (think of the words “liberty,” “democracy,” etc.). In the case of, say, the word “leaf” the visual experience may present us

²⁴I shall use “image” instead of the term “picture,” found in the English translation that I used, viz., Wittgenstein (1954).

with a sharp image of a leaf. But our experience of the use of the word “leaf” goes beyond this visual experience. The leaf is experienced as a schema. In §74 in the text we find the following explanation:

Here also belongs the idea that if you see this leaf as a sample of ‘leaf shape in general’ you *see* it differently from someone who regards it as, say, a sample of this particular shape.

Such ‘seeing’ is not having a visual experience. Though the sense of determinateness is nicely illustrated by the table analogy, which emphasizes the sort of visual experience that comes along with such ‘seeing’, there is more to it than meets the eye. For ‘seeing’ something as a schema is more than seeing it as a sample of a particular thing; it is internally related to the practice of using samples. The text continues:

Now, this might well be so—though it is not so—for it would only be to say that, as a matter of experience, if you *see* the leaf in a particular way, you use it in such-and-such a way or according to such-and-such rules.

This point is also stated in §73 in the following way:

[F]or such a schema to be understood as a *schema*, and not as the shape of a particular leaf, and for a slip of pure green to be understood as a sample of all that is greenish and not as a sample of pure green—this in turn resides in the way the samples are used.

The thread of ideas goes from the explanation of the *experience* of a definition to the explanation of the *uses* of samples. But to explain such uses one needs to move up to an altogether different level from experiences, namely, the level of practices. Hence, the explanation is finished by describing practices in which the uses of samples play a role. Consider, for instance:

[T]here is a variety of cases in which we should say that a sign in the game was the name of a square of such-and-such a colour. We should say so if, for instance, we knew that the people who used the language were taught the use of the signs in such-and-such a way. Or if it were set down in writing, say in the form of a table, that this element corresponded to this sign, and if the table were used in teaching the language and were appealed to in certain disputed cases.

We can also imagine such a table’s being a tool in the use of the language. Describing a complex is then done like this: the person who describes the complex has a table with him and looks up each element of the complex in it and passes from this to the sign (and the one who is given the description may also use a table to translate it into a picture of coloured squares). This table might be said to take over here the role of memory and association in other cases. (We do not usually carry out the order “Bring me a red

flower” by looking up the colour red in a table of colours and then bringing a flower of the colour that we find in the table; but when it is a question of choosing or mixing a particular shade of red, we do sometimes make use of a sample or table.) (Wittgenstein, 1954, §53).

I believe this is a promising route of understanding Wittgenstein’s texts, as well as gaining a substantial knowledge on our experiences of language-use. But of course this route shall remain as a topic for future research

Normativity

Normativity plays an implicit role at several places in my account: the notion of incomplete understanding presupposes a notion of normativity as regards understanding; practices presuppose a notion of normativity as regards our doings and sayings; explanatory practices presuppose a notion of normativity as regards explanations, justifications, definitions, etc. Moreover, given the prominent place of discussions of normativity in semantics, the present work owes an attempt to shed a different light on the notion of semantic normativity. Such attempt, however, shall remain as a topic for future research.

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