# Dreams and Nightmares.
## Conventions, Norms and Meaning in Davidson's Philosophy of Language
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## 0. Introduction

Donald Davidson has famously denied that linguistic communication requires convention. Since about the same time, the philosophy of language has been echoing with the Kripkean slogan "meaning is normative". Rarely, however, have the two claims been brought together.[1] The issue here is lexical or semantic normativity, and while I agree with Davidson's view that communication neither requires the conventional assignment of the *same* meanings across speakers and times nor individually over time, I also think that such Davidsonian anti-conventionalism leaves open a more basic question about meaning determination. If we look at recent discussions about the so-called normativity of meaning, it might seem as if the relation between the meaning of an expression and its use might be determined by norm or convention even if conventional assignment of the *same* meaning over time is not required. I am going to argue, however, that this is not the case; on a Davidsonian account of meaning, there is no room for the so-called normativity of meaning. Moreover, or so I am going to suggest, it is a mistake to conceive of this relation as essentially normative at all.

I shall proceed as follows. In the first section, I shall give a sketch of Davidsonian anti-conventionalism and its underlying approach to linguistic meaning. In the second section, I shall present such readings of the normativity thesis as would prima facie be tenable even in the face of Davidsonian anti-conventionalism. The normativity thesis usually runs two claims of normative determination together that it is helpful to distinguish: These are the claim that meaning has normative consequences for the use of expressions and the claim that meaning itself is determined normatively, i.e. by rules, conventions, or norms. In sections 3 and 4, I shall discuss the question whether meaning has normative consequences for the use of expressions. Being concerned with semantic normativity, such consequences could either follow directly from meaning (section 3) or be argued for from the idea that meaning itself is normatively determined (section 4). In the last section, I shall make use of Wittgenstein's own analogy with games to suggest that it is a mistake to conceive of the relation between meaning and use as essentially determined by norms or conventions at all; the meaningful use of linguistic expressions lacks characteristic features required of activities essentially governed by rules or norms.

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[1] Exceptions are Davidson 1992 and Bilgrami 1992, 1993.

## 1. Davidson's anti-conventionalism

In "Communication and Convention", Davidson quotes David Lewis, who wrote: "It is a platitude - something only a philosopher would dream of denying - that there are conventions of language" (Lewis 1975, 7). But isn't that really one of the secret dreams of any philosopher: To show that something everybody thought was too trivial to dispute actually is highly problematic? In "Communication and Convention" and subsequent writings, Davidson made such a dream come true.

What Davidson tries to make us see is that it is anything but a platitude that there are, or have to be, conventions of language. Rather, this is a philosophical thesis loaded with theoretical content. To expose the supposed platitude not only as highly theoretical, but moreover as false, Davidson suggests two seemingly slight but actually momentous modifications to our basic approach to language. First, he shifts the focus of attention from the concept of *a language* to that of *communication by language*. What we have to realize when we take this stance is the great deal of abstraction implicit in even the seemingly most innocent talk about meaning and language. Not only is it highly theoretical to talk about the meanings of words but the same goes for the meanings of sentences: "In the end", Davidson says, "the sole source of linguistic meaning is the intentional production of tokens of sentences. If such acts did not have meanings nothing would" (Davidson 1993, 298). What is meaningful, that is to say, are utterances, i.e. particular actions by particular speakers at particular times. And even at this characterization, we must not stop. For the concept of meaning itself is a theoretical concept. "The notion of meaning", Davidson says elsewhere, "depends entirely upon successful cases of communication" (Davidson and Glüer 1995, 81). Meaning, therefore, is of a fundamentally intersubjective nature; what is meaningful are first and foremost utterances whose intended meaning is actually understood by their interpreter. It is successful communication that concepts like meaning, language, word or sentence are used to explain.

The second step, then, is to identify the philosophical nature of such explanation. To be philosophically interesting, the "conventional platitude" needs to be invested with a certain necessity; it needs to be read as the claim that communication by language is *essentially* conventional. The philosophically interesting question here is not the empirical one of whether people in fact talk to each other in fairly conventional ways; rather, the question is whether conventions are necessary to communication by language.

As is well known, Davidson answers this question by arguing that "convention does not help explain what is basic to linguistic communication" (Davidson 1982, 280) regardless of the theoretical level at which convention is supposed to do its work. Here, however, we shall look at the lexical or semantic level only. Davidson himself considers the question whether "the meaning of a word is conventional, that is, that it is a convention that we assign the meaning we do to individual words and sentences when they are uttered or written" (Davidson 1982, 276). From a Davidsonian point of view, it clearly is not necessary for communication that there are *shared* conventions governing the assignment of meanings to words (and sentences). That is, for two speakers communicating with each other, it is not necessary that there is a convention assigning the *same* meaning to an expression regardless of who utters it. It is not necessary that there is a convention to this effect since it is not necessary that the same meaning is assigned to an expression across speakers at all, no matter what the nature of the assignment is. All that matters for successful communication is that, regarding a specific utterance, the hearer assigns the meaning that the speaker intended.

Neither is it necessary that there is a convention to assign the same meaning to an expression whenever a particular speaker utters it. What the speaker intends the hearer to interpret him as meaning with a particular expression does not have be the same whenever he utters it. On a Davidsonian account, such variation in literal meaning is perfectly possible as long as the hearer can plausibly be expected to understand what the speaker is doing. Understanding and being understood, on such an account, are holistic enterprises in which the parameters meaning, belief, desire and intention are mutually interdependent. Understanding and making oneself understood, in other words, involve too many interdependent parameters for it to be necessary that the connection between expression and meaning be held stable by convention. And again, that convention is not necessary on this account follows from it not being necessary that that connection be stable at all, no matter how stability might be effected.[2]

However, conventionality of this type shall not be my main topic here. What I am interested in is not so much the question whether there have to be conventions to the effect that the *same* meaning is to be assigned to expressions, regardless of whether across speakers and times or individually over time. It seems to me, for Davidsonian reasons, that that is not the case, but I also think that this leaves open a more basic question about meaning

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[2] Note, however, that anti-conventionalism does not have to take this form. For even if regular assignment of meaning would be necessary for communication, be it across times or across times and speakers, there would still be room for denying the essentially conventional nature of the regularity.

determination and conventions. For even if conventions to the effect of assigning the *same* meaning to an expression over time are not necessary for communication, it might still be the case that meaning is determined by convention.

## 2. Is meaning normative?

At this point, I think, it is instructive to bring in recent discussions about the so-called *normativity* of meaning. That meaning is normative has these days become as natural a platitude as conventionalism once was. This undoubtedly is due to Kripke and the rule-following boom his *Wittgenstein* initiated in the recent philosophy of language. Nabokov once called "numbers and rows and series - the nightmare and malediction harrowing pure thought" (Nabokov 1969: 450); and Kripke's meaning skeptic may provide an illustration of what he might have had in mind in saying this. Normativity, however, is part of what Kripke describes as our intuitive conception of meaning, moreover, normativity is that part of this conception that he ultimately makes responsible for the alleged impossibility of meeting the skeptic's demands; normativity, thus, is the ultimate reason for nightmares here.[3] Commentators accordingly agree that normativity is an essential feature of meaning and has to be part of any straight solution to Kripke's problem. Apart from that, however, there is considerable lack of agreement about what the normativity of meaning might exactly amount to.

Still, most of its proponents seem to agree on the following: The normativity of meaning resides in the relation between the meaning of an expression and its use. This relation is one of normative determination in a double sense: It combines the idea that meaning has normative consequences for the use of expressions with the idea that meaning itself is determined normatively, i.e. by rule, convention or norm. On a use-conception of meaning, meaning determining norms simply *are* norms for the use of expressions, that is, they do double duty: they determine both the use of an expression *and*, thereby, what meaning it has. Thus, two relations of determination fuse into the two directions of an equivalence relation. In assessing the normativity thesis, however, the distinction should not be forgotten.

Proponents of the normativity of meaning often take for granted that such norms require regular use over time, that is, that they require use of the same expression according to the same rule over time, but this does by no means follow immediately. The idea to be pursued

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[3] Thus Kripke about the "various philosophical theories as to what the fact that I meant plus might consist in. There will be many specific objections to these theories. But all fail to give a candidate for a fact as to what I meant that would show that only '125', not '5' is the answer I 'ought' to give" (1982, 11).

here, then, is the following: Even if there don't have to be conventions of using expressions with the same meaning over time or across speakers, it might still be the case that there have to be conventions (or other norms) determining how to use an expression *if* it has or is intended to have a particular meaning (at a particular time and for a particular speaker).

Let's start by casting a look at that passage in Kripke that has become the locus classicus of the normativity thesis in recent literature. Kripke says: "Suppose I do mean addition by '+'. What is the relation of this supposition to the question how I will respond to the problem '68 + 57'? The dispositionalist gives a *descriptive* account of this relation: if '+' meant 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 intend to accord with my past meaning of '+', I *should* answer '125'. (...) The relation of meaning and intention to future action is *normative*, not *descriptive*" (Kripke 1982, 37).

In the context of our discussion, a couple of points should be noted: First of all, the normativity thesis here is formulated in terms of the individual speaker. So far, nothing is presupposed about what his speech community means by the plus-sign. So far, that is, there is no conflict with the Davidsonian claim that meaning does not presuppose *shared* languages, conventions or rules. Secondly, the proviso in the formulation of normativity needs to be noted: "*if I intend to accord with my past meaning of '+'*, I should answer '125'". The normativity that Kripke initially invokes places no restrictions on what a speaker intends to mean by some specific expression, but tells him what to do *if* he has a certain intention. The norm here is, in Kantian terms, a "hypothetical norm". So far, therefore, there is no conflict with the Davidsonian claim that a speaker under certain conditions very well might intend to mean something idiosyncratic by a certain expression. And thirdly, Kripke makes an interesting connection in summing up his normativity thesis: "The relation of meaning *and intention* to future action is normative". This can be read in two ways: either, he is saying that both meaning and intention are normative for future action, or else it is meaning *in combination* with intention that is normative. If we take the proviso seriously, only the last interpretation makes sense.

Thus, the relation Kripke is characterizing as normative seems to fit nicely with what we were looking for: It is a relation between expressions, the meaning a speaker intends them to have at a time and their use at that time.[4] Moreover, the normativity Kripke is talking about

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[4] Much of this changes with the skeptical solution. In particular, meaning loses its individuality and becomes a community affair instead. Accordingly, what is salvaged of the initial normativity becomes a matter of community-wide *regularity* over time. But I shall not be concerned with the skeptical solution here.

derives from the intended meaning itself; it does not need any other source. To see how exactly normativity might be seen to derive from (intended) meaning, it is instructive to look at Boghossian's reconstruction of Kripkean normativity.[5]

Boghossian argues as follows: "Suppose the expression 'green' means *green*. It follows immediately that the expression 'green' applies *correctly* only to *these* things (the green ones) and not to *those* (the non-greens). The fact that the expression means something implies, that is, a whole set of *normative* truths about my behaviour with that expression: namely, that my use of it is correct in application to certain objects and not in application to others. This is (...) a relation between meaning something by it at some time and its *use at that time*" (1989, 513). According to this reading, the normativity of meaning "turns out to be (...) simply a new name for the familiar fact that, regardless of whether one thinks of meaning in truth-theoretic or assertion theoretic terms, meaningful expressions possess conditions of correct use" (Boghossian 1989, 513).

Now, it is hardly deniable that meaningful expressions do possess such conditions. If Boghossian is right, however, then it is equally undeniable that meaning is normative; the one cannot be divorced from the other. That meaning is normative, or so Boghossian suggests, simply means that conditionals like the following are true:

(G)     For any speaker s, and any time t: If "green" means *green* for s at t, then it is correct
        for s to apply "green" to an object x iff x is green at t.

Again, the relation that is characterized as normative fits nicely with what we are looking for; it is a relation between expression, meaning and use at a time and for a speaker and, moreover, it is clear that correctness conditions are determined by meaning. What is less clear, however, is in what sense, if any, conditionals like (G) are normative.

As stressed above, this question can be read in two different ways. These are usually combined, and, possibly therefore, not always sufficiently distinguished. On the first reading, the question would be whether (G), by itself, has normative consequences for the use of "green", given that "green" means *green*. Both Kripke and Boghossian answer this question in the affirmative; both quite naturally proceed to interpret correct use in deontological terms

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[5] Kripke himself characterizes this normativity in a rather mystifying variety of ways; he for instance describes it in terms of "justification" (1982, 11), of telling the speaker what to do (1982, 24), of what one "should" do or "ought to" to, and what one is "compelled" (1982, 11) or what it is "inevitable" (1982, 40) to do. How all this is supposed to go together, he does not tell us, however; there seems to be tension at least between the ideas that what follows from the intended meaning is how one *should* use an expression and the idea that, given the intended meaning and some other conditions, it is *inevitable* to use it in a certain way. For more discussion see Glüer 1999a, chapter 4, and Glüer 1999b.

as use that *should* or *ought to* be made of the expression. More generally, the question is whether any hypothetical imperatives and/or evaluations of actions in a strong, normative sense follow immediately from conditionals like (G). In other words: Do they, by themselves, have any action-guiding or -appraising force?

On the second reading, meaning itself is determined normatively, that is, the relation between the meaning of an expression and its use, here, its correct use, is conceived of as established by norm or convention. This question can be put in terms of *truth or validity*; is (G) true because there is a norm or convention to that effect? Note, that an affirmative answer to the first question does not imply an affirmative answer to the second. Even if hypothetical imperatives or appraisals were to be derived from (G), this would not necessarily mean that (G) itself was "true by convention". Note, too, that the converse does not hold, either; even if (G) was true by convention, it would not follow that it, by itself, had to have any action-guiding or -appraising force. I think that both claims actually are false; conditionals like (G) are neither true by convention nor do they have any purely semantic action-guiding or -appraising force. I shall argue against these claims in reversed order. In the next section, I shall take issue with the idea that possession of correctness conditions *directly* implies normative consequences. In section 4, possible arguments for the normative force of correctness conditions from the idea that meaning is, or has to be, determined by rule or convention shall be discussed. And in section 5, I shall mobilize Wittgenstein's own analogy with games to argue that conditionals like (G) are not true or valid by rule or convention.

## 3. Correctness and deontology

Do correctness conditions directly imply normative consequences? I shall mainly discuss this claim in its prevalent deontological form; however, as will be noted later, the main results of this discussion apply to a reading in terms of strong evaluation or appraisal as well.

On the suggested reading of the normativity thesis, normativity resides in the incontrovertible fact that meaningful expressions possess conditions of correct application. Blackburn once put this as follows: "The topic is that there is such a thing as the correct and incorrect application of a term, and to say that there is such a thing is no more than to say that there is truth and falsity. (...) It is not seriously open to a philosopher to deny that, in this minimal sense, there is such a thing as correctness and incorrectness" (1984, 281f). That is surely true. However, normative consequences can only be derived on the following additional assumption: "It is an essentially normative judgment that we are chasing. It is the

judgment that something is correct or incorrect" (Blackburn 1984, 286f). And this, it seems to me, is perfectly controvertible, not the least so where semantic evaluation is concerned.

Correct use, on this reading, is *semantically* correct use. What semantically correct use amounts to, however, depends on the choice of basic semantic concept. If it is truth, semantically correct use is true use, if it is justification, it is justified use. (G) is formulated in terms of "correctness" precisely in order to be neutral between these options; "correct" here is some kind of variable, to be replaced by your favored basic semantic concept. Read as a "normative" truth, however, "correctness" in (G) is understood not only as a semantic, but also as an already *deontologically contentful* concept. This might well be owing to equivocation.

Conditions of semantic "correctness" are first and foremost conditions for the application of the basic semantic concept. They make semantic evaluation possible, but what needs to be noted here is that, as far as semantics is concerned, this does not have to mean anything beyond the possibility of *categorizing* utterances, of *sorting* them into true (or justified) and false ones. That we also tend to view truth or justification as values is a different matter; since we do not do that for semantic reasons it needs to be abstracted from in our context. In consequence, however, talk of "correctness conditions" might turn out to be deontologically completely innocent as far as semantics is concerned. What should be clear, therefore, is that normative consequences do not follow *directly* from correctness conditions. Additional argument is needed to show that semantically correct use at the same time already is prescribed use; what is lacking so far is precisely the *source* of this supposed prescriptive force.

It also should be clear that any step from correctness conditions to evaluations in a strong sense, i.e. to appraisals or real value judgments, is as indirect and in need of motivation as that from correctness conditions to prescriptions. No doubt, we do tend to conceive of semantic correctness as a value, but for merely semantic purposes, values are not required. What semantic "evaluation" does require is semantic categorization, and in this normatively innocent sense we could, if we like, call (G) a "standard of correctness". What we must not forget, however, is that in this sense, *any* concept is a standard of correctness. The "standards" of semantic evaluation therefore could be completely without normative consequences; semantic evaluation does not necessarily come in a package with action-guidance or -appraisal.

**4. Whence normative force?**

The next question to consider is whether the missing normative force could be derived from the idea that the prescriptions or strongly evaluative standards in question are themselves what determines meaning, from a combination, that is, of both readings of the normativity thesis.

The first point to note here is that prescriptive force cannot be derived by considerations like the following: (G) tells us how to use "green" in order to mean *green* by utterances of "green". It doesn't. We don't have to *follow* (G) in order to mean *green* by "green". It is perfectly possible to mean *green* by "green" and to apply it incorrectly at the same time; otherwise, any semantically incorrect application would have been turned into a change or loss of meaning. It would not even be possible to use "green" for the expression of an empirical mistake, and, consequently, "green" would have lost its correctness conditions, would have lost its meaning.[6]

However, the defender of meaning determining imperatives does not have to identify semantically correct use with use with a specific meaning. Thus, Sellars once remarked, only seemingly paradoxical, that "ordinary empirical judgments can be correctly made without being true" (1956, 166). And we find the same point in Moore: "It is obvious that you may use language just as correctly when you use it to assert something false as when you use it to assert something true" (1954, 80). Both obviously do not identify the correctness they are after with semantic correctness. However, we do not have to bring two different notions of correctness into play, and if we are interested in saving meaning determining imperatives, imperatives, that is, that determine the conditions of semantic correctness, refraining from this seems wise. Instead, we can distinguish between *following* a rule and its being *valid*. This, moreover, seems entirely natural; the idea of violating a rule depends just as much on its nevertheless being valid as the idea of saying something empirically false depends on one's words nevertheless retaining their meaning.

Based on this distinction, the defender of meaning determining imperatives could argue that the meaning of the expression "green" could well be determined by a prescription like the following:

(PG)  Apply "green" to objects iff they are green.

This prescription would not have to be followed in order to mean *green* by "green"; rather, "green" would mean *green* exactly as long as (PG) is *valid* or *"in force"* for a speaker.[7] Other

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[6] For this, I have argued in more detail in Glüer 1999b.

[7] This suggestion is due to Peter Pagin. See Pagin 1987. See also Glüer and Pagin 1999.

questions regarding the possibility of prescriptions to utter nothing but truths aside,[8] the main problem with this suggestion in our context is that it does not seem necessary that meaning is determined this way. Of course, if (PG) is valid or in force, then "green" is correctly applied to objects iff they are green. But why should the converse hold? In order for semantic evaluation of utterances of "green" as meaning *green* to be possible,

(CG)  It is correct to apply "green" to an object x iff x is green

has to be *true,* but so far, nothing has been done to show that (CG) has to be true because (PG) is in force.[9]

It is in Dummett that we find passages out of which an argument to this effect can be reconstructed, an argument to the effect that there would not be any correctness conditions if speakers did not have a "prescriptive attitude" towards the language they are speaking. He writes: "any speaker beyond the initial stages of mastering language must have some conception of what language he is speaking and hold himself responsible to that. (...) Using language and playing a game are not like doing one's hair and taking a bath. One may do either of the last two things as one likes and still be doing it. But, if the game ceases to have rules, it ceases to be a game, and, if there cease to be right and wrong uses of a word, the word loses its meaning" (1991, 85). Reconstructed in our terms, Dummett is not claiming that words must be used correctly in order to have meaning, but that they would not even have correctness conditions if correct uses would not be regarded as prescribed by the speakers. Thus, no correctness conditions without prescriptions regarded to be in force by their subjects. But why?

Dummett again: "The paradoxical character of language lies in the fact that while its practice must be subject to standards of correctness, there is no ultimate authority to impose these standards from without" (1991, 85). The standards of semantic correctness, Dummett seems to be saying, are, somehow or other, of our own making; language is paradoxical in the sense that we, by practicing it, at the same time set the standards for practicing it. Their validity depends on our attitude towards them, and if we didn't regard them with prescriptive attitude, they would vanish or change. On the basis of what we have argued so far, we can distinguish two steps in this line of argument: Dummett claims, first, that the standards of semantic correctness are set by us, and that that means that they are valid by norm or convention. And, second, that these norms or conventions have to be prescriptions.

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[8] But see Glüer 1999b and Wikforss 2000 on this.

[9] Again, it should be clear that the same holds for the idea that (CG) is true because a strongly evaluative standard for the appraisal of applications of "green" to green objects is in force.

However, Dummett's first claim does not sufficiently motivate the second; even if we agree that language is paradoxical in Dummett's sense, the "standards" of semantic correctness might, as far as semantics is concerned, still be merely classificatory. Of course, one might challenge the claim that it is us who conventionally set the correctness conditions for our concepts, and I shall do so in the next section. What interests us here, however, is that even if this were true, there still would be no argument for the claim that correctness conditions have to be set by prescriptions (or, for that matter, strongly evaluative standards). Conventional  agreement on the truth of merely classificatory claims would seem to be at least as good a candidate. Before we go on, I would therefore like to inspect one last argument for the essential prescriptivity of semantic correctness, an argument to the effect that even classificatory standards would not be valid unless they were, by and large, actually followed.

Above, we made much of the fact that an expression like "green" does not necessarily have to be applied correctly in order to express the concept *green* with it. But from this it does of course not follow that "green" could *always* be applied incorrectly without losing this meaning. Arguing in a familiar Davidsonian way, this does not only not follow, it actually seems false. For if someone apparently never applied an expression correctly, what reason would we have to think that we had even interpreted that expression correctly? Such an outcome would rather give very good reason to think that we had come up with the wrong interpretation, that we had assigned the wrong correctness conditions to that expression as used by our speaker. This is simply part of the *principle of charity* which, in turn, on a Davidsonian account is a condition on the possibility of meaning. Thus, by and large correct use of an expression, correct use, that is, according to the interpretation intended by the speaker, seems to be a condition on that expression's having correctness conditions at all, even though for any particular utterance it holds that it might be incorrect. Davidson himself has in more recent writings been putting considerations like these into terms of "practices"; he says, for instance: "meaning something requires that by and large one follows a practice of one's own, a practice that can be understood by others" (1994, 15/6).

Given the obvious Wittgensteinian connotations of the term "practice", considerations like these might seem to support claims to the effect that in order to be interpretable, a speaker *should* use his expressions by and large correctly. Analogously, our claim that the "standards" of semantic correctness might simply be classificatory, and not prescriptive, could be countered by arguing that unless they were at least by and large actually followed such standards would not even be valid.

This line of argument is mistaken. Consider a Davidsonian model of understanding. Here, it is important to remember the distinction we made at the beginning of this paper, the distinction between requirements to use one's expressions regularly, i.e. with the *same* meaning over time, and requirements as to how to use an expression if it is to have a particular meaning at a particular time. Using an expression by and large correctly means using it by and large correctly with respect to one particular meaning, which, in turn, of course means to use it with the same meaning on all the respective occasions. Thus, it might now seem as if the requirement to use an expression by and large correctly if it is to have particular correctness conditions undermines our distinction, thus overriding earlier anti-conventional arguments to the effect that regularity in the first sense is not necessary for meaning. This, however, is not the case.

On a Davidsonian account, there is no general requirement that any particular expression, if it is intended to have a particular meaning at a particular time, has to be by and large used correctly (with respect to that meaning) over time.[10] It is not even required that it be used over time at all. It might be used only once. It might even be used only once and to express an empirical mistake. Seen from the speaker's side of the interaction, what he can understandably do or what the best means of making the interpreter understand him is, depends on the various other intentional and non-intentional parameters of the situation. These are most radically restricted if I am a "radical speaker", that is, trying to make myself understood to a radical interpreter. Then, I can be pretty sure that I won't succeed if I frequently try to switch the meanings of the expressions I use. And there will be trouble for the interpreter, too, if I am making tons of empirical mistakes. With an old friend, on the other hand, who knows a lot about me and my odd sense of humor, it might be perfectly reasonable to expect him to come up with the right interpretation even if I use an uncommon expression only once. And this even holds when I use it for expressing an empirical mistake – as long as my friend can be expected to understand the belief that I am expressing. Thus, on a Davidsonian approach, there is no general requirement regarding particular expressions to be derived from the principle of charity.

Secondly, even it this were the case, it would not follow that the speaker *should* use his expressions correctly. It would not follow, in other words, that what is required is not only that an expression actually is used by and large correctly but that this, moreover, has to be the result of following a rule or doing what a prescription requires one to do. Even if regularity in this sense were necessary for meaning, that is, it might be mere regularity in behavior,

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[10] This is also stressed by Bilgrami, see Bilgrami 1993.

without being rule-following at all. Thus Davidson asks Dummett: "what magic ingredient does holding oneself responsible to the usual way of speaking add to the usual way of speaking?" (1994, 8).

Finally, and quite independently of a Davidsonian approach, it should be noted that for a standard of semantic correctness to be valid or in force it is of course *not* required that the expression it is a standard for is applied by and large correctly. What needs to be applied by and large correctly is the standard itself. What is required therefore is conventional agreement on judgments of semantic correctness and we have found no convincing argument to consider these as judgments with intrinsic normative import for the use of signs. In the next section, I would like to round off this discussion by using Wittgenstein's own game-analogy to suggest that it is a mistake to conceive of the relation of meaning and use as obtaining by norm or convention at all, that it is at least very misleading to spell out what Dummett calls the paradoxical character of language in terms of rules, norms or conventions.

## 5. Games, constitutivity, and arbitrariness

Wittgenstein treated activities like applying a predicate with a particular meaning to objects, activities we might well call "semantic practices" in terms of the game-analogy, that is, as in certain respects analogous to paradigmatically rule-governed activities. I am going to argue, however, that especially if seen in terms of the game-analogy, we find reasons *against* regarding "semantic practices" as essentially rule-governed activities. They are in illuminating ways like such activities but without themselves literally being such activities.

It is instructive here to look at a characterization of what Wittgenstein calls the "rules of grammar" from his middle period when he actually did identify using language with using a calculus according to rules. For it is here that he explicitly brings out the specific characteristics that the rules of essentially rule-governed activities possess. And this is, as far as I can see, not a matter about which he changes his mind later. In *Philosophical Grammar,* we for instance find the following: "Why don't I call cookery rules arbitrary, and why I am tempted to call the rules of grammar arbitrary?  Because I think of the concept 'cookery' as defined by the end of cookery, and I don't think of the concept 'language' as defined by the end of language.  You cook badly if you are guided in your cooking by rules other than the right ones; but if you follow other rules than those of chess you are playing another game; and if you follow grammatical rules other than such and such ones, that does not mean you say something wrong, no, you are speaking of something else" (PG X, 133).

Games are the paradigm cases of essentially rule-governed or rule-constituted activities. Their rules do not depend on natural laws prior to and independent of anyone's being guided by them in cooking or other activities. On the contrary, the rules of games clearly are "human creations, made, not found" (Baker and Hacker 1985: 63). They are *arbitrary* in just this sense. And we can come up with endlessly many different sets of rules, endlessly many different games; there is nothing like the right game, or the right set of rules. The second main characteristic of essentially rule-governed activities like playing chess is that it not only is impossible to play chess *without rules*, but impossible to play chess without the *rules of chess*. Such activities are *defined or constituted* by their rules; if you change the rules, you automatically change the activity. Taken together, or so I shall argue, these two characteristics, arbitrariness and constitutivity, make it impossible to regard the relation between meaning and use as rule-constituted.

Of course, there is an analogy here; as Wittgenstein says: "if you follow grammatical rules other than such and such ones, that does not mean you say something wrong, no, you are speaking of something else" (PG X, 133). What has puzzled commentators about this remark is why Wittgenstein takes a change in rules to amount to talking of something else rather than to playing a different game (e.g. cf. Schulte 1989, 116). The upshot of the analogy usually is taken to be this: If you follow rules different from the ones established for your language you speak a different language. It then follows that if you want to speak a specific language, say, English you have to follow the rules for English.

However, this is not the conclusion Wittgenstein himself draws. If he who follows different rules is merely taken to speak a different language it is not at all clear why he automatically would be talking about something different as well. To relinquish the possibility of talking about the same things in different languages that easily would be careless, indeed. But since Wittgenstein emphasizes the difference in what is talked about rather than in the language that is spoken, it looks as if he were concerned with different rules in a deeper sense. A little earlier, Wittgenstein explains the relation a specific expression and the rule for its use stand in as follows: "without these rules the word has as yet no meaning; and if we change the rules, it now has another meaning (or none), and in that case we may just as well change the word too" (PG X, 133). Obviously, he does not take rules to be individuated by the expression that is used according to them. Rules therefore cannot be taken to necessarily vary with difference in language where a language consists of a list of words plus rules for their use. In particular, simply exchanging those words for different ones does *not* mean changing the rules. Changing the rule according to which one and the same

expression is used, however, does amount to a change in meaning and, in this sense, to talking about something else. In other words, the rules Wittgenstein talks about are not rules for the use of specific signs in a specific language but rules that determine or constitute a relation between a specific meaning, a specific use and any expression whatsoever, given that they are valid for this expression.

For this very reason, neither a prescription like (PG) above, nor a conditional like (CG) can do duty as a meaning constituting norm or standard. Of course, (PG) and (CG) are *arbitrary* insofar as the specific expression they are bound to is arbitrary. Trivially, any other expression whatsoever could have been used for expressing the concept *green*. In our context, however, this is exactly what creates the problem. For even though (PG) or (CG) would confer the meaning *green* upon any sign substituted for "green", they are bound to "green". Therefore, these rules are changed by the substitution of another sign for "green". The activity to be constituted, however, the activity of expressing the concept *green* or of meaning *green*, remains the same. Consequently, neither (PG) nor (CG) are constitutive for that activity.

Trying to come back on this by arguing that the constituted activity should not be identified as meaning *green*, but rather as meaning-*green*-by-"green" does not seem helpful. Neither does suggesting meaning-*green*-in-English. Put in terms of the game-analogy, this would be like talking about the rules of chess-played-with-a-specific-set-of-chess-figures. This is clearly not the level at which the analogy is intended or illuminating; given that we can play chess with any set whatsoever (and even without) and that we can express the concept *green* in different languages, the rule we are after is a rule *establishing* a relation between the meaning *green* and the correctness conditions given in (CG) for any sign it is valid for. For remember, this rule is not only to be constitutive, it is also to be *arbitrary*; it must not rely on any relations existing prior to its being valid or in force for any specific sign. Neither (CG) nor (PG) however, do this, and they cannot be made to, either, for they do not tell us anything about the meaning or concept to be expressed. Rather, both (CG) and (PG) presuppose that a determination relation already holds between correctness conditions and meaning.

Rectifying the level on which the rule we are looking for works thus sends us back to

(G)     For any speaker s, and any time t: If "green" means *green* for s at t, then it is correct for s to apply "green" to an object x iff x is green at t.

(G) formulates a relation between meaning, expression and correctness conditions that can easily be read in terms of variable expressions and that is clearly constitutive for the activity

of expressing the concept *green*. But is (G) arbitrary? A standard true by convention? Does (G)'s validity depend on anyone's attitude towards it, on anyone's putting it into force or regarding it as valid? I tend to think that the answer to these questions is 'no'; relations like the one given in (G) are not arbitrary in any sense that would make it illuminating to conceive of them in terms of norms, rules, or conventions.[11]

In order to see why, we should first try to get a better understanding of what such arbitrariness would exactly amount to. Let's therefore look at the game analogy again and try to understand the sense in which the rules of games are arbitrary. The first thing to note is that arbitrariness must *not* amount to the possibility of *changing* the relation established by the rules as we can, for instance change the law determining the appropriate punishment for murder; it is as impossible to change the rules for moving the king of chess, for instance, without thereby changing the game as it is impossible to change correctness conditions without thereby changing meaning. Read thus, no rule could be arbitrary and constitutive with respect to the same type of action at the same time. Moreover, this is exactly what is analogous between rules of games and the relation of meaning to use, as Wittgenstein makes quite clear. Arbitrariness in this respect therefore cannot be what he has in mind when the analogy is tempting him to call the rules of grammar arbitrary. Note, however, that he explicitly calls this a *temptation* – thus strongly suggesting that it should be resisted.

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[11] Note, that prima facie it might look as if a more traditional conception of constitutive rules would not fall prey to these criticisms. According to a tradition having its roots in Wittgenstein, and elaborated especially by philosophers such as Midgley (1959), von Wright (1963), Shwayder (1965) and Searle (1969), constitutive rules are understood as rules for action very different from prescriptions. Such rules, as von Wright puts it, "neither describe nor prescribe, but determine something" (1963, 6), for instance *what it is* to play a certain game. According to Searle, their typical form is this:

(S) Doing X in context C counts as doing Y (1969, 35).

Such rules do not tell us what we *should* do; rather, they tell us *how* to perform an action of a specific type in a specific context. Applied to meaning, such a rule would tell us, for instance, that

(SG)    Uttering "green" in C counts as expressing the concept *green*.

However, even though rules like (SG) bring in the concept to be expressed, they are clearly bound to particular expressions, and, therefore, not constitutive of the activity of expressing the concept in question. If "red" was substituted for "green" in (SG), and (SG) true or valid, the rule would have changed, but not the activity constituted; then, uttering "red" would count as expressing the concept *green*. Moreover, rules like (SG) are in fact as guilty of presupposing the relation they are supposed to establish as rules like (CG); for even though (SG) mentions the concept *green* and the use of the expression "green", the conditions for semantically evaluating such use are not specified. Again, a prior relation between concept or meaning and correctness conditions is presupposed. For more on this, see Glüer 2000.

In what sense, then, *are* the rules of games arbitrary? In the passage quoted above, Wittgenstein draws another comparison, a comparison with rules that are *not* arbitrary in the sense he is talking about, the rules of cooking for instance. Rules of cooking are what von Wright later would call "directives" (1963, 9ff); directives tell us by what means to reach certain ends given the underlying facts of nature, the underlying natural laws. Directives clearly owe their validity, their action-guiding and action-evaluating force to relations obtaining prior to and independently of any hypothetical imperatives being derived from them: the laws of nature. Such, however, is not the case for the rules of games. They are arbitrary in the sense that their validity does not derive from relations existing prior to and independently of them. And this holds for the rules of games as well as, for instance, the laws of the state.

Of course, it is tempting to think analogously about concepts or meanings. They are, after all, *our* concepts, *our* meanings. Nevertheless, I think this is a temptation that should be resisted; if not for Wittgensteinian, then for Davidsonian reasons. The analogy between the rules of games and the basic relations constitutive of our concepts, or so I should like to urge, breaks down in decisive respects: There are different games we can play, but there is only one system of concepts. And, consequently, the rules of games can be "switched on and off" while those of grammar cannot.

There is no alternative to the rules of chess, we said, if we want to play chess. However, if all we want to do is play some game, there are a lot of games to be chosen between. But from a Davidsonian point of view, there is no alternative to our system of concepts. It does not even make sense to speak of (radically) different systems here (cf. Davidson 1974).[12] From

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[12] But doesn't Davidson himself stress the normative nature of meaning or content determination? He says, for instance: "The reason mental concepts cannot be reduced to physical concepts is the normative character of mental concepts. Beliefs, desires, intentions and intentional actions must, as we have seen, be identified by their semantic contents in reason-explanations. The semantic contents of attitudes and beliefs determine their relations to one another and to the world in ways that meet at least rough standards of consistency and correctness. Unless such standards are met to an adequate degree, nothing can count as being a belief, a pro-attitude, or an intention. But these standards are norms – *our* norms – there being no others" (1987, 46).

It is not completely easy to understand what this talk of norms and normative character exactly amounts to. Discussing the question whether such basic standards or principles are to be considered as normative or descriptive, Davidson doubts "that there is an interesting way of understanding that distinction" (1985a, 89) to be drawn in this context; in some respects they are normative, but not in others. Using the example of "some sentential operator in the speaker's language that when applied to a sentence always converts assent to dissent and vice versa" (1985a, 91), Davidson says that the interpreter's best guess is to interpret the operator as negation. However, such a principle is *not* normative "in that no alternative strategy is available for deciding

the point of view of the radical interpreter, no one can be counted as meaning anything or having any intentional states at all unless these are interpretable in terms of our concepts. Of course, we can discover that a creature lacks certain concepts, but those that it has nevertheless have to be interpretable in terms of ours. Having concepts therefore basically is

what the speaker means" (1985a, 91). For an intentional creature, there is no alternative to these basic standards; holding them to be true or valid is a condition on being an intentional creature (cf. 1985b, 351). Moreover, as stressed above, by and large conforming to them is such a condition as well (cf. for instance 1985a, 90). In this respect, the respect salient for my discussion, Davidson thus clearly agrees that these basic standards are not normative.

But then, in what sense are they normative? Interpreting the operator in the example as negation, Davidson goes on to argue, "is normative in this respect: it imposes a small part of the interpreter's logic on the speaker, for it interprets him as inferring that a sentence is to be held to be false if it is the negation of a sentence held to be true" (1985a, 91). It is this part that I confess to find difficult to understand. Is the normativity in the imposing? In this case, I don't understand what would be normative about that, given that there is no choice. Or is it that what is imposed on the speaker is acceptance of something normative, i.e. acceptance of a normative standard?

What, then, does "normative" exactly mean here? That the standard has normative consequences for the speaker's judgments? Above, I have argued that conditionals like (G) are not essentially normative in this sense, at least not for reasons of meaning determination. I think that this generalizes to content determination and its principles in general. The principles or basic standards of content determination are not normative in the sense of determining *how to act or judge*. More precisely, they are not normative in this sense exactly *because* they are the basic principles of content determination. In the most basic cases, there simply is *no room* for any norm telling us what to do. Take for instance the belief that a sentence s is true, interpreting ¬ as the negation sign and the belief that ¬s is false. If there were room for a norm here, a norm telling us how we *should* judge or what it is to judge rationally, it would have to be possible to be in the former states without being in the latter. But this is exactly what the basic "norms" of content determination prevent. Failing to have the last belief is not violating some norm; rather, it is impossible to attribute holding s true to a speaker and interpreting ¬ as the negation sign if he doesn't hold ¬s to be false. That intentional creatures in fact to a very large degree do accord with the basic standards of content determination is a condition on their being intentional creatures, a condition on being able to follow and accept norms, not something induced by the acceptance of basic norms.

Of course, we can say that these principles are "standards" in the deontologically innocent sense that they determine conditions of correctness, conditions of correct inferring and judging. These are, on a Davidsonian account, as content or meaning determining as conditionals like (G) discussed above, but, as for (G), this does not mean that it follows directly that they are essentially *evaluative in a strong, normative sense*, i.e. in terms of real value judgments, either. As in the case of semantic evaluation, the standards of content evaluation give the conditions of application for basic intentional concepts like rational inference or judgment, and even though we in fact tend to see these as values, these conditions are by no means intrinsically deontological or appraising. For reasons of content determination, this seems superfluous. As far as I can see, there is therefore no good reason, from a Davidsonian point of view, to conceive of the basic constitutive principles or standards of intentionality as norms at all.

having our concepts. It is these very concepts that are a condition on having any intentionality, any beliefs, desires, intentions and the means of expressing them through language at all. They are, consequently, also a condition on playing or inventing any games, and a condition on making decisions like the one now to play some chess or to stop playing chess now and play checkers instead. Put in terms of games, there therefore is no sense in which we could play any other "game" than the intentional; this is the one "game" we cannot but play, no matter what we do. But then the question is, of course, how illuminating it is to conceive of this as a game at all.[13]

This difference can also be brought out in terms of the validity of the rules in question. Rules of games tell us what to do, they tell us how the king of chess is to be moved, for instance, or that spearing is not allowed in ice-hockey. On the most general level, such rules enable some sort of evaluation or classification of actions; moving the king thus and so is a move allowed in chess, spearing is a violation of the rules of ice-hockey and will be punished, a player's having possession of the ball in the opponent's end zone while a play is in progress is scoring a touchdown in football. Outside the context of the game in question, the rule does not apply; if no game of chess is on, moving *this* little wooden figurine called king of chess does not constitute making a move of chess, no matter whether it is in accordance with the rules or not. Searle once remarked that it is possible that twenty-two men go through all the physical movements as gone through by two teams playing football, but if there were no rules of football, there would be no sense in which their behavior could be described as football. The mere *existence* of the rules, however, is hardly more than a necessary condition for those movements actually being a game of football. Another condition is that a game is actually on. And this can, as Peter Pagin (1987) has suggested, be put in terms of the rule's being in force: A game of chess is on if the rules of chess are in force.[14] Deciding to start a game of chess thus can be understood as "switching on" the rules of chess, as deciding, that is, that they do apply to subsequent relevant actions, for instance, movements of specific wooden figurines on a checkered board. Basic conceptual relations, however, are something that we already have to presuppose if we consider a physical movement as an action at all. Unlike the rules of

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[13] Wittgenstein's stand on this issue is not completely easy to understand. Like Davidson, he clearly maintains the necessity of agreement for communication but it is not quite clear whether he excludes the possibility of languages that we could not understand. He e.g. says: "If a lion could talk, we could not understand him" (PI II, xi). This seems to imply that there could be languages that we cannot understand (see also OC, e.g. OC 375). However, there are also passages which seem to point in the opposite direction, e.g. PI 207.

[14] For more on this, see also Glüer and Pagin 1999.

games, basic conceptual relations cannot be "switched on or off". Rather, their validity is a condition on the possibility of meaning and intentionality and, as such, *sui generis*; the basic "rules of grammar" neither owe their validity to underlying laws of nature as the rules of cooking do, nor are they arbitrary in the sense the rules of chess are.

We have to conclude, I think, that on a Davidsonian account there is no room for the so-called normativity of meaning. Neither have we found good reasons to conceive of meaning as essentially normative at all – neither in the sense of meaning intrinsically having normative consequences for the use of linguistic expressions nor in that of meaning itself being normatively determined. Somewhat ironically, the analogy with games, paradigm cases of essentially rule-governed activities, breaks down at characteristic features of such activities.[*]

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