

Sense and Prescriptivity

Kathrin Glüer

Abstract

Unruly speakers have been threatened with exclusion from their community because of insanity by a variety of authors. That meaning itself is essentially normative is a claim at least equally widespread, and the idea that both claims are systematically related has suggested itself to many. Investigating the question whether we can (at least partly) understand rationality in terms of the rules or norms of language, however, requires understanding what the so-called normativity of meaning exactly amounts to. On the most standard reading of this thesis, normativity is understood as prescriptivity, and the normativity of meaning is directly derived from the fact that meaningful expressions possess conditions of correct use. Limiting the discussion to semantic rules, I argue that this reading is untenable. In the absence of a tenable understanding of the normativity thesis, however, the project of explaining rationality by means of linguistic rules hangs in the air as well.

Keywords: Normativity of meaning, rationality, linguistic rules, rule-following, language as a rule-guided activity.

1. Some people think that only those having language are rational. I tend to think that's true but this won't be our topic here. The connection between rationality and meaning I shall be investigating is a more modest one.

Let's start with a simple example. Imagine we are going to the grocer and ask for five apples. He gives us three. No, we correct him, it's five apples that we want. He gives us seven. We start laughing. He however remains perfectly serious; moreover, he does not even seem to appreciate what's so funny. We try once more; we would like five apples. This time, he gives us seventeen. Loosing patience, we scream: "Five! Aren't you able to count, or what?" He smiles apologetically, yet seems bewildered. "But", he says, "I *am* counting. Look." And one after the other, he takes four apples from their basket, saying: "Seventeen, three, twenty-one, five".

It's pretty clear, I think, that we will now start entertaining certain doubts regarding our grocer's sanity. And this apparently has to do with his use of the number words. Even though

he is claiming, or better: even though he seems to be claiming that what he is doing is counting it obviously isn't what we call "counting". What meaning he takes the number words to have becomes unclear; moreover, it is not even clear that they have any meaning at all. All we can see is that he doesn't use these words as we commonly do. And isn't it just this aberrance that makes us entertain those doubts regarding the rationality of his actions? Isn't there a connection between rational action and the use of linguistic expressions, a connection with the following direction: If you use linguistic expressions in too irregular ways you encourage doubts regarding your sanity?¹

This connection between rationality and linguistic meaning we can now try to understand in terms of the so-called normativity of meaning. In substance, of course, the claim that meaning is normative is hardly new; in form of the slogan "meaning is normative", it has become fashionable only lately. This we owe to Kripke. Although he himself never quite formulates it that way, his Wittgenstein-book clearly is the source of our slogan. That meaning is normative seems rather obvious to many, if not most philosophers of language; so obvious, in fact, that hardly anybody takes much trouble about explaining what this normativity amounts to. Meanwhile, saying that there are about as many different understandings of this normativity around as there are confessing normativists wouldn't be to exaggerate much.

Intuitively, the claim that meaning is normative seems to have two aspects. The basic idea would be this: What a linguistic expression means has normative consequences, consequences, that is, for what I *should* do with it. That meaning is normative, in other words, is a claim about the relation between the meaning of an expression and its *use*, a relation that is taken to be normative. This idea, however, is often combined with a second, namely the idea that meaning itself is determined normatively. These two ideas initially concern two different relations of determination: there is one relation between something that determines the meaning of an expression and that expression, and then, there is a second relation between the expression with a given meaning and its application. However, on further reflection, we might come to think that what we are really concerned is only one relation. The second idea, that meaning itself is determined normatively, usually is understood in terms of rules: it is rules that determine meaning. Rules, however, or so the thought goes, determine meaning by

¹ I am here trying to set out the connection I am after without prejudice as to how to understand the deviance in question. In the literature, we find two basic options: we can try to understand irregularity as deviance from the use of an expression established in a speech community or we can try to understand it as individual irregularity. In what follows, I am going to discuss problems of trying to understand deviance by means of norms or rules that are more basic and, therefore, common to both ways of spelling out deviance. However, I have taken care to set up the grocer in a way that makes it clear that he is not merely using a different language for counting but uses signs in an alien way. This way, the supposed connection with rationality comes out more clearly.

determining how the expression they are to confer meaning upon should be used. What determines meaning, in other words, is exactly the relation between an expression and its use that we were concerned with in the first place; it is how the expression should be used that determines its meaning. And conversely, given that an expression has a certain meaning, this determines how it should be used. The determination relation simply runs both ways. Thus, the normativity thesis presents a way to understand for instance the following dictum from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Grammar*: "It is grammatical rules that determine meaning (constitute it) and so they themselves are not answerable to any meaning and to that extent are arbitrary. (...) [W]ithout 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). As we shall discuss it here, then, the normativity thesis minimally comprises the following claims: The meaning of linguistic expressions is *determined* by norms or rules for their use. The relation between such norms and use is that of *action-guidance* or prescriptivity. More precisely, in the thesis that meaning is normative, these claims combine in the following way: meaning determining rules tell us what should be done with an expression if it is to have a particular meaning. The normative force of such rules thus is essentially linguistic in nature, it derives from meaning itself.²

Now, the normativity of meaning seems to point to a way in which to explain why we had such difficulty understanding the actions of our grocer. What he did with the number words violates the rules according to which these are to be used. Here, it is important to realize that there are two senses in which we can say that we don't understand the grocer. On the one hand, we don't understand what he says. We don't know what he means by "five" for instance. And on the other hand, we don't understand what he is doing. Clearly, he isn't counting. To understand what somebody is doing, however, means to know with what intention and for what reason he acts. To understand an action therefore means to ascribe a certain minimal and basic rationality to it. In this minimal sense, to understand an action simply is to interpret it as intentional and done for a reason.³ Taken to the extreme, idiosyncratic use of expressions seems to obstruct the understandability of actions in both senses. And by means of the normativity of meaning we can now try to understand this connection in the following way: If you (too often) violate the rules of your language, you

² See Glüer and Pagin 1999 for a discussion of further problems arising from the combination of action guidance with meaning determination. There, we ask how rules guide action in terms of practical reasoning and argue that rules that do both, guide action and determine meaning, are not to be had. In this paper, I am looking at this combination from a somewhat different perspective, that is, from a particular suggestion as to what the norms in question are.

³ This does not have to be a *good* reason, however. In this minimal sense, an action is done for a reason iff the actor has a reason for which he performs it. This usually is understood in terms of explanatory practical reasoning: a basic or "primary" reason in

will get excluded from your (speech) community because of irrationality. In other words: you will be declared insane.

This type of connection would not necessarily be confined to the semantic level at which we so far have been taking the normativity thesis. Rather, arguments to the conclusion that extreme violation of linguistic rules endangers the agent's basic rationality can be tried and in fact are to be found on all levels at which we might want to conceive of language as a rule-guided activity. No matter whether the rules are semantic or pragmatic in character, our use of linguistic expressions is to be regarded as intentional; there are reasons for such actions. The suggestion then is that the rules in accordance to which they are performed at the same time function as *standards of a basic rationality*. And "actions" that (to an extreme degree) violate these standards cannot be understood as minimally rational actions at all. They stand outside the realm of the intentional. Therefore, the rules in question aren't rules that *just* prescribe, prohibit or permit something, but rules that simultaneously (partly) *define* what it is to act intentionally, i.e. with reasons. They define, in other words, what it is to be a minimally rational creature. The threatening exclusion from the community thus is not merely a collective decree. Rather, it marks a limit beyond which it becomes impossible not only to understand why somebody is acting as he does but what it is he is doing at all. And since so very many of our everyday actions aren't even conceivable without the meaningful use of linguistic expressions, the supposed normativity of meaning (at least partly) explains what rationality is.

In the remainder of this paper, I shall first look at some examples for such ideas from the literature (section 2). Then, the question will be what the normativity of meaning exactly consists in and the specific reading of it that is to be discussed here will be presented (sections 3 to 5). In the last three sections (sections 6-8), three problems with this reading are raised, problems that make it appear doubtful that meaning really is normative in the sense discussed and, consequently, that the project of understanding rationality by means of this normativity can be carried out.

2. Before going on to ask whether the normativity of meaning actually can explain rationality in this way, I would like to present three examples of such ideas that can be found in the literature. In Kripke, the idea that linguistic rules are standards of rationality occurs in the context of what he calls the "skeptical solution". As is well known, Wittgenstein, according to Kripke, in the rule-following considerations presents a paradox that allows for a

this sense consists of a belief-desire pair explaining the action. Cf. for instance Davidson 1963; the term "primary reason" is

skeptical solution only. For the normativity of our intuitive conception of meaning this skeptical solution offers a skeptical ersatz, too. This ersatz consists in the pressure a speech community exerts on speakers whose reactions deviate too often from those of the majority. Kripke explains: “A deviant individual whose responses do not accord with those of the community in enough cases will not be judged, by the community, to be following its rules; he may even be judged to be a *madman*, following no coherent rules at all. When the community denies of someone that he is following certain rules, it excludes him from various transactions such as the one between the grocer and the customer” (Kripke 1982: 93, *emph. mine*). And of course, this does not only hold for the grocer but for all simple, basic transactions between members of the community that are typical of our everyday life. In the extreme, we might come to the conclusion that the deviant creature isn’t really saying anything or performing any intentional actions at all. Such considerations surely have a certain plausibility that is quite independent of their skeptical context. Therefore, let’s ignore the skeptical context here and treat the claim as a straight one.

Our next quotation then should come from Wittgenstein himself. It might well be passages like the following from the *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* that inspired Kripke’s skeptical version thereof: “Well, it never in fact happens that somebody who has learnt to calculate goes on obstinately getting different results, when he does a given multiplication, from what comes in the arithmetic books. But if it should happen, then we should declare him *abnormal*, and take no further account of his calculation.” (RFM I, 112, *emph. mine*).⁴ Note, however, that Wittgenstein does *not* talk about deviant use of expressions here, but about an individual outrightly arriving at different results when multiplying.

Our last is an example showing how linguistic rules can be understood as standards of rationality on other levels than the semantic, too. Habermas, for instance, discusses a “skeptic” that tries to radically refuse to argue, that tries, in other words, to radically violate the rules of argumentation (partly) constitutive of our “communicative rationality”. If such a “skeptic” simply refuses to argue at all, it *prima facie* looks like he wins. He “would not have the last word but would be, so to speak, performatively right – he would silently and impressively keep his position”⁵, says Habermas. But: “At this point in the discussion it helps to reflect that the skeptic by his behaviour cancels his membership in the community of those who argue – nothing less, but nothing more, either. By refusing to argue he cannot (...) deny

his.

⁴ The German original reads: “Nun, es kommt tatsächlich nie vor, daß der, welcher rechnen gelernt hat, bei dieser Multiplikation hartnäckig etwas anderes herausbringt, als was in den Rechenbüchern steht. Sollte es aber geschehen; so würden wir ihn für abnorm erklären, und von seiner Rechnung weiter keine Notiz nehmen”.

that he shares a socio-cultural form of life, has been brought up in contexts of communicative action and reproduces his life in those contexts. (...) Otherwise he would have to escape into suicide or into *serious mental illness*⁶ (Habermas 1983: 109f, transl. and emph. mine). The upshot seems to be that the most basic rules of communicative action cannot be violated at all – unless at the price of being a rational animal. You might cancel membership in the community of those who argue, but not membership in the more basic community of communicating creatures. This membership comes with life, at least if by life we mean the life of a basically sane person capable of intentional action.

3. Prima facie, the considerations of the first two sections appear rather plausible, if somewhat vague. We must not forget, however, that what we have embarked on is trying to explicate one problematic concept, that of rationality, by means of another: that of normativity. Thus, the philosophy of language not only gets entangled with the theory of action but does so by appropriating a concept even more foreign to it – normativity – without usually spending much time on explaining it. Surely, understanding normativity cannot seriously be taken to be unproblematic. And if this is the case for the concept of normativity simpliciter, the situation does not get easier if we talk of the normativity of meaning.⁷ The project we are ultimately interested in here, the project of understanding rationality at least partly in terms of following linguistic rules clearly stands or falls with the normativity of meaning. Should the normativity of meaning turn out to be a chimera, that project is left hanging in the air.

In what follows I shall try to instill some doubts concerning the plausibility of the normativity of meaning in my readers. To put my cards on the table: I think that with the normativity thesis the philosophy of language is taking a wrong turn. Of course I cannot fully substantiate this claim here.⁸ In what follows I shall restrict my discussion to the semantic level. It is only semantic rules I shall be talking of. And even here, I shall discuss only one possible reading of the normativity thesis, that reading, however, that has seemed most natural to many philosophers.

⁵ The German again: Er “behielte zwar nicht das letzte Wort, aber er bliebe sozusagen performativ im Recht – er würde seine Position stumm und eindrucksvoll behaupten”.

⁶ “Bei diesem Stand der Diskussion (...) hilft die Überlegung, daß der Skeptiker durch sein Verhalten seine Mitgliedschaft in der Gemeinschaft derer, die argumentieren, aufkündigt – nicht weniger, aber auch nicht mehr. Durch Argumentationsverweigerung kann er beispielsweise nicht (...) verleugnen, daß er eine soziokulturelle Lebensform teilt, in Zusammenhängen kommunikativen Handelns aufgewachsen ist und darin sein Leben reproduziert. (...) Sonst müßte er sich in den Selbstmord oder in eine schwere Geisteskrankheit flüchten.”

⁷ Gibbard, for instance, notes that on his understanding of normative judgements or statements which is a form of norm-expressivism there is some danger of self-defeat: “the thesis that meaning statements themselves are normative (...) might undermine norm-expressivism” (Gibbard 1994: 101).

⁸ But see Glüer 1999 for a comprehensive discussion of the claim that meaning is normative.

Let's try to get more clear about the connection between rationality and linguistic rules on the basis of what we have said so far. An action A is rational in a basic sense if it is performed intentionally: it is rational in the sense of being done for a reason, if not necessarily a good reason. Basic rationality thus amounts to understandability in the sense of there being reasons for an intentional action in the light of which it can be understood as the action it is. As remarked above, many of our everyday actions now depend on the use of language, and here, understandability takes two basic forms: understanding what meaning is expressed and understanding what action is being performed. Expressing meanings by uttering sounds, however, is acting intentionally; thus, if meaning is determined by rules, following those rules in order to be understandable itself already is acting rationally in a basic sense.

And it is here that the normativity of meaning comes in: If an action A consists of uttering an expression e in a particular situation, the basic reason for uttering e would consist of an intention to express a particular meaning and believing that uttering e is a means of fulfilling that intention. And the rules of meaning are supposed to tell us exactly that: what to do in order to express particular meanings. Hence, it seems to be a basic condition of rationality to use expressions *correctly*, i.e. in accordance with the rules for their use. And now, all depends on how to conceive of the correct use of linguistic expressions. What is it that the rules of language tell us to do?

4. Let's first have a look at that passage from Kripke that has become the *locus classicus* of the normativity thesis. This passage is from the context of Kripke's discussion of dispositionalist theories of meaning. Dispositionalist theories pretty clearly are the current paradigm in the theory of meaning, and with normativity, Kripke raises a serious obstacle for such theories, an obstacle that often is taken to be even insurmountable. Kripke writes: "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).

Nothing in this passage is as clear as it *prima facie* appears; the least so what Kripke means by "normative" here. One of the many questions to be asked regards the Kripkean dichotomy between "will" and "should". The relation in question apparently qualifies as normative by

being characterizable in terms of such a “should”, characterizable, that is, in terms of the deontic modalities. Not what the speaker is actually going to do but what he should do determines what he means. Now, of course it is hardly deniable that a speaker *can* do all sorts of things when asked ‘68 +57?’. He can, for instance, say “five” or scream inarticulately. However, if he means plus by ‘plus’, or so it seems, there is – and there has to be – a *prescription* in force, a norm prescribing that the speaker should give the correct answer.

But if we take a closer look at Kripke’s example this is not so clear anymore. In this reasoning, a further condition that Kripke imposes on the situation is suppressed: the speaker *intends* to mean *plus* by ‘plus’. In what sense can we say that he intends to mean plus if he says ‘five’? Or performs his Tarzan stunt? Given that he doesn’t intend to mean 125 by ‘five’, it is hard to see how we could even say that the speaker intended to mean *plus* if he answers ‘five’. Unless, of course, he simply thinks that 68 plus 57 really is 5. Unless, that is, he grossly miscalculates.

Now, large parts of the ensuing discussion of dispositionalism in Kripke are concerned with dispositions to make mistakes of this sort, mistakes that Kripke earlier characterizes as arithmetical in character (in contrast to “metalinguistic”; cf. Kripke 1982: 8f). Nevertheless, I tend to think that the normativity Kripke aims to capture would count against dispositionalism even if it were able to cope with mistakes in this sense; for even then, the relation of meaning and intention to future action would be descriptive, not normative, according to dispositionalism. After all, what dispositionalism is supposed to do in the context of Kripke’s wider dialectic is to provide an answer to the meaning skeptic. That is, it should tell us why ‘125’ is the “metalinguistically” correct answer, not ‘5’. Accordingly, when we first meet Kripke’s skeptic, the scenario contains yet another condition: the speaker does not miscalculate. And now, the challenge still is to say why ‘125’ is the correct answer, i.e. the answer he *should* give (cf. Kripke 1982: 11f).⁹

However, in this situation the “should” appears misplaced. Under these circumstances there is what Wittgenstein in his Middle Period was still fond of calling an “internal relation” between the intention to mean *plus* by ‘plus’ and the answer ‘125’. And even though that means that it is *not an empirical question* what an agent who has such an intention does this

⁹ 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” (Kripke 1982: 11). And specifically about dispositionalism, he says: “As a candidate for a ‘fact’ that determines what I mean, it fails to satisfy the basic condition on such a candidate, stressed above on p. 11, that it should *tell* me what I *ought* to do in each new instance. Ultimately, almost all objections to dispositionalism boil down to this one” (Kripke 1982: 24, sec. emph. mine). See also Boghossian 1989: 532. Kripke exegesis is not my main topic here; quite independently, my next point seems worth emphasizing. Kripke’s claim, however, would not profit much from an alternative interpretation; if all he were concerned about were dispositions to make arithmetical (or empirical) mistakes, his “should” would amount to a prescription against such mistakes, an idea the soundness of which is highly questionable. See section 8 below.

does not imply that the relation is normative. Rather, it holds that if you have the intention to mean *plus* by ‘plus’ and do not miscalculate you *will* answer ‘125’ if prompted ‘58 + 67?’. Only that this is not a hypothesis or prediction but expresses something like a conceptual connection. You will answer ‘125’ because if you don’t, you either did miscalculate or you did not have the relevant intention after all.¹⁰

To put this point differently: In the situation originally envisaged by Kripke, there is not really any room to do anything but answer ‘125’. If you do, that situation did not really obtain. There is no room, that is, for any *violation* of the supposed prescription. Without the possibility of violation, however, there is no prescription either – as for instance Brandom, ironically enough, points out against dispositionalist accounts of meaning. He objects to such accounts that “[n]o one ever acts incorrectly in the sense of violating his or her own dispositions. Indeed, to talk of ‘violating’ dispositions is illicitly to import normative vocabulary into a purely descriptive context” (Brandom 1994: 29). However, it looks as if Kripke’s use of “should” itself illicitly imports normative vocabulary into a context that might not be an empirical one, but nevertheless, by the very condition of violatability, is not a normative one. Kripke himself shows some awareness of this; he for instance says that under the described circumstances the speaker is “compelled” to answer ‘125’ (cf. e.g. Kripke 1982: 11). And there even is a footnote in which he refers to Wittgenstein’s idea of internal relations as paralleling his own (Kripke 1982: 25, note 19). What he does not explain is how all this is supposed to go together. I therefore suggest to leave Kripke at this point and to have a look at an interpretation that Boghossian has suggested for Kripke’s talk of the normativity of meaning.

5. Boghossian, like almost anybody else in this debate, interprets normativity in terms of the deontic modalities and argues for the normativity of meaning in the following way: “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*” (Boghossian 1989: 513).

Again, a hardly deniable fact is cited in support of the normativity thesis: A meaningful expression possesses *conditions of correct use*. This is clearly the most basic reading we can

¹⁰ Cf. Wikforss 1999.

give of the normativity thesis. Blackburn once formulated this idea thus: “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” (Blackburn 1984: 281f). And that’s it; according to Blackburn this suffices for showing that the judgment that a word is being used correctly or incorrectly is a normative judgment: “it is an essentially normative judgment that we are chasing. It is the judgment that something is correct or incorrect” (Blackburn 1984: 286f). And for Boghossian, as we have seen, the way from the ascription of meaning to the “normative truth” about the use of ‘green’ isn’t a single step longer; the “normative truth” follows immediately from the meaning. However, even this *prima facie* wonderfully simple reasoning on second sight turns out to be rather problematic. In what follows I would like to take a closer look at three of these problems.

6. All three of these problems, in one way or another, arise exactly because of the seeming simplicity and naturalness that this version of the normativity thesis possesses. Normativity here is directly identified as having conditions of correct use. Boghossian is quite explicit about this: “The normativity of meaning turns out to be, in other words, 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).

Let’s look at a truth-conditional conception of correct use first. Here, to use an expression correctly now is nothing but to use it “truly”, that is, to apply it to objects it is true of. “True” and (linguistically) correct use cannot be distinguished anymore. And this raises the first problem with this approach that I would like to draw attention to. It maybe comes out even more clearly if we put it the other way around: On this construal of correctness, an expression is used *incorrectly* iff it is applied to an object it does not (truly) apply to. Linguistic and empirical mistakes have thus come to be equated. But whatever we think of this notoriously difficult distinction, it should be clear that it must not simply be demolished. Even Davidson, surely no friend of conventional conceptions of linguistic mistake, is exercised by the spectre of having “inadvertently destroyed all chance of characterizing linguistic error” (Davidson 1992: 261) and trying hard to avert this charge. Here, we are facing the opposite danger; that of having inadvertently destroyed the very possibility of making empirical mistakes.

But have we really? That would be fatal, indeed, and we should be very clear about how we got into this scrape. The truth-conditional reading of the normativity of meaning identifies the basic *semantic* dichotomy of true and false use as determined by some norm or rule telling us what is correct. But does it follow that empirical mistake becomes impossible? I pause here, because it does *not* immediately follow. Whether this consequence ensues or not depends on how we understand the relation between the meaning determining norm and use: If we read the norm distinguishing between correct and incorrect use as a norm telling us what we have to do *in order to mean something particular by an expression*, then, I am afraid, there is no avoiding the threat. On this reading, the rule constitutive of the meaning distinguishes between types of action that do or do not have this meaning. *Only* if you use it correctly, that is, does the expression ‘green’ for instance mean *green*. Now, however, any empirical mistake has been converted into a change or loss of meaning. There are no empirical mistakes anymore. This is why Sellars says that “ordinary empirical statements can be correctly made without being true” (Sellars 1956: 166). Demolishing the distinction between linguistic and empirical correctness thus amounts to demolishing the very distinction we set out with as unassailable: that between truth and falsity. It has to be possible to use an expression incorrectly in the empirical sense without using it incorrectly in the linguistic sense – otherwise it would not have semantic conditions of correct use at all. Meaning itself would be lost.

However, we might conceive of the rule determining meaning and its relation to use in a different way: We might say that a speaker (or a community) means *green* by ‘green’ iff a rule like the following is *in force* for him:

(G) It is correct to apply ‘green’ to an object x iff x is green.¹¹

This way, it is possible to avoid the equation of linguistic and empirical mistake; “correct” use according to (G) is true use but since it is (G)’s being in force that determines meaning, ‘green’ means green whether applied correctly or not – as long as (G) is in force. Note, however, that (G) does nothing in the way of telling us what we should do; we don’t have to *follow* (G) in order to mean *green* by ‘green’. Of course, a rule like (G) could be used as a prescription to do the correct thing, but this prescriptive power would have to derive from some external, non-semantic source; it clearly cannot result from the rule’s being meaning determining. As long as we are concerned with semantic normativity, this however is exactly where the “should” in question has to derive its action-guiding force from. Accepting this

¹¹ This has been suggested by Pagin, cf. Pagin 1987. See also Glüer and Pagin 1999.

second conception of meaning determining rules or norms therefore already amounts to yielding up at least half of what the normativity thesis is usually taken to comprise.

Before we go on to the second problem with the general idea that the normativity of meaning resides in the fact that meaningful expressions have conditions of correct use, let's cast a quick look at an assertion-theoretic construal of those conditions. At first, it might look as if here, the threat of losing meaning by identifying true with correct use might be averted. It looks as if there were room for a distinction between true and justified use that would prevent the collapse of the basic distinction between truth and falsity. However, as a response to our problem, I think this is mistaken. It clearly is mistaken if we in any way identify truth with warranted assertibility. But abstaining from this does not really help, either. The problem does not depend on any particular construal of the correctness conditions.

Correctness conditions distinguish between correct and incorrect use of an expression, say 'green', with a particular meaning, say *green*, such that, if this distinction is lost, meaning is lost as well. And no matter, how these conditions are understood, identification of correct use with the use that should be made of 'green' if it is to mean *green* collapses this very distinction by turning incorrect use into change or loss of meaning. Such identification thus turns out to be self-defeating.

Spelled out in terms of justification conditions instead of truth conditions, the contrast to be maintained is that between justified and unjustified use. If, for instance, justified use of 'green' now is identified with the use that should be made of 'green' in order for it to mean *green*, any unjustified use of 'green' turns into a change or loss of meaning. Thus, it becomes impossible to make unjustified use of 'green', even though the distinction between truth and falsity might not be touched. Meaning would be lost notwithstanding; on this construal it is not truth-conditions that have to be preserved for there to be meaning but justification conditions, and there just would not be any such conditions.

7. A second problem with the assumption that the normativity of meaning consists in expressions having conditions of correct use has already been touched upon in our discussion of (G) above. The point is quite trivial but often overlooked: it is possible, as Schnädelbach once put it, "to make non-normative use of norms and norm-predicates" (Schnädelbach 1990: 133, transl. mine). In other words: That what is correct should be done does by no means follow as immediately as for instance Boghossian or Blackburn assume. Correctness cannot simply be taken for an intrinsically prescriptive notion. Of course, we can understand the meaning of an expression as a standard by which to *classify* its possible use. We can, that is,

sort this use into two different categories. But this does not necessarily mean that the standard itself is used prescriptively, that is, to specify what *should* be done. And as a result of our discussion above, it does not look as if we could get the missing prescriptive force from the rule's being meaning determining. Meaning itself, that is, does not seem to have any prescriptive force whatsoever. And in our short discussion of Kripke's understanding of normativity we saw that an intention to mean something particular by an expression does not really help here, either.

8. I should like to round this discussion off by noting a third problem with identifying correct and prescribed use. This problem besets even attempts to find an *external*, that is non-semantic source bestowing prescriptive force onto conditions of correct use. Note, however, that here, we not only give up on the specific idea that semantic rules tell us what to do in order to mean something or other but on the *semantic* nature of the normativity thesis in general.¹² Paul Horwich, for instance, has suggested in his discussion of Kripke on dispositionalism that evolution itself motivates the maxim "one ought (other things being equal) to assent to the truth" (Horwich 1990: 113).¹³ However, no matter whence we try to get the missing prescriptive power, as long as we identify true and prescribed use we will always be confronted by the following problem.

Let's take a prescription like that to apply the predicate "horse" to horses only. Now think of this familiar scenario: I am standing in front of a large meadow at dusk. In the distance, an animal is grazing that pretty clearly seems to be a horse to me. I say: "*That's* a horse". Unfortunately, it really is an especially delicate cow. In how far can we say that I have violated any prescription?

¹² It might be objected that there are semantic sources of prescriptivity not considered here, for instance the following: In order to be interpretable, a speaker has to use his words in fairly regular ways, that is, to apply them correctly at least most of the time. And if we think of interpretability as a condition on meaning, we might try to wring prescriptive force out of this semantic source. There are several things to be said about such considerations. First of all, it is not so clear what such prescriptions would amount to. What do I have to do in order to mean, for instance, *green* by 'green'? Apply it to green things most of the time? This can be taken in two ways: Either it is a prescription not to make (too many) empirical mistakes. Then, the reasoning presented in what follows in the main text as concerning external sources of prescriptivity should apply here, too.

Or it is a prescription not to *change* the meaning of 'green' so often that my hearers get too confused to understand me. Then, however, what should be done is not identified with what is correct in terms of the correctness conditions of 'green' anymore; that is, we are then concerned with a different reading of the normativity thesis. On this reading, the relevant prescriptions amount to not *changing* conditions of correct use (too often) or, on communitarian readings, to not diverging from those conditions of correct use established by communal use. Note, however, that here it is left open how these conditions are determined in the first place, by rules or otherwise. Clearly, they are not determined by the prescriptions under discussion. Hence, even if such considerations would motivate prescriptions guiding the use of linguistic expressions, a vital part of the normativity of meaning as discussed here would have been given up again.

Either way, we moreover might well wonder with Davidson what the supposed prescriptive force adds to regular use – why wouldn't fairly regular use of our words do just as well to secure interpretability without our taking any prescriptive attitude to what is correct (cf. Davidson 1994: 8)?

¹³ Horwich now is explicit that this is an external source for normativity and has nothing to do with semantic normativity; so he himself argued in a talk given at the 5. Karlovy Vary Symposium on Analytic Philosophy, Czech Republic, Sept. 1998.

The impression that we should assent to the truth is deceptive. It might be owing to a similarity to the moral maxim of sincerity. The maxim to apply the predicate “horse” to horses only demands more than sincerity, however; more precisely, it demands what is impossible. When I called the creature in the meadow a horse, to the best of my knowledge and belief I told the truth. That is, I have expressed my honest and by no means carelessly formed belief. Nevertheless, our maxim demands that I only say what in fact is true - even when I am justified in having a false belief. Here, we should remember that ought (or should) implies can. But how can I be supposed to assent to the truth if to all my knowledge what I am supposed to assent to is false? How am I even supposed to know what to assent to? This seems impossible to me and, therefore, I think that there cannot be any prescription to the effect that one ought to assent to the truth.¹⁴

Again, there is a question of what happens to the suggestion on an assertion-theoretic approach to meaning. This time, the problem is exactly the same as on a truth-conditional conception if truth is *not* identified with warranted assertibility. If it is, the epistemic gap utilized by our argument does not open up. Is it a prescription, then, that we should assent to what to the best of our belief and knowledge is true? I don’t think so. Here, the problem again is violatability. Of course, I have some freedom as to how careful I am in acquiring beliefs. Possibly, there are norms to the effect that if we want to gain knowledge we should take care to consider all the relevant evidence and accord each piece of evidence the appropriate weight etc. However, once I have gathered the evidence and accorded it the appropriate weight, I do *not* have a choice anymore as to what I believe. Think of the cow in the meadow again; I cannot be *obliged* to believe that it is a horse because given all my evidence I cannot but believe that it is a horse. Again, the relation in question is what Wittgenstein would call an “internal”, not a normative relation. If I believe that p and that q and that p and q are sufficient evidence for r, then I believe that r – I cannot simply decide not to without tampering with the evidence.¹⁵ This, however, would have to be possible in order for the supposed prescription to have any bite here.¹⁶

¹⁴ See also Wikforss 1999. Why there cannot be such a prescription becomes even clearer if we realize that the supposed norm could only motivate (or explain) my actions if it had a connection to the belief that the object in question is a horse. Independently of all relevant beliefs, however, there would be no explanatory or action-guiding relation between such a “norm” and my actions. Nevertheless, there could of course be an evaluative standard according to which true applications would in some sense be better (or worse) than false ones. Striving for such good, however, where it is beyond the best of our knowledge and belief, is equally beyond our means.

¹⁵ For this reason, I think it is misleading to apply, as McDowell so pervasively does in his *Mind and World*, the Kantian metaphor of a “realm of freedom” to what he calls the “space of concepts”. For one thing, the spontaneity of the understanding in Kant surely cannot be understood as the capacity to “decide whether or not to judge” something (McDowell 1994: 11). Quite independently of Kant exegesis, the picture suggested by the metaphor, the picture of thinking as consisting of mental acts that in any given situation are subject to decision and might accordingly be performed or not, quite as the thinker chooses, misses the specific character of the relations between beliefs.

¹⁶ This suggests that not even the basic “norms” of minimal rationality, quite independently of our ways of using linguistic expressions, are of prescriptive character. This, however, clearly is a topic for another paper.

Let me summarize. It can hardly be denied that meaningful expressions have conditions of correct use. Our considerations should have shown, however, that this alone does not yet mean that meaning is normative in the usual sense, i.e. prescriptive. Of course, this does not suffice to undermine the normativity thesis in general; among other things, there are other kinds of norms than prescriptions.¹⁷ But we have to try again to say what it consists in. And as long as we have not succeeded in finding a plausible reading for the claim that meaning is normative, the project that we started with, the project of explaining rationality by means of linguistic rules hangs in the air, too. The grocer certainly suggests that there is an interesting connection between rationality and meaning. For the time being, however, we might doubt that this connection can be illuminated by means of the concept of normativity.*

Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin/Stockholms Universitet

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¹⁷ For a taxonomy of norms, see for instance Wright 1963, Schnädelbach 1990. For a discussion whether the normativity of meaning might be of some other kind than prescriptivity, see Glüer 1999, esp. chapter 6.

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