

# The Normativity of Semantic Correctness: A Davidsonian Perspective

Maria Lasonen, Helsinki

## 1. Three Kinds of Normativity?

Kripke (1982: 37) famously contrasts norms with mere dispositions: although the manifest dispositions of a person can tell us what she thought the right way of following a rule was, they cannot point to what she should have done. This implies that to be normative, the meaning of a term must have consequences for how we *should* use it. My concern is not the sceptical problem of how there can be meaning-facts in the first place, but what sense can be made of the claim that meanings have normative consequences for use. I start by examining three cases, and asking which, if any, is analogical to speaking a language.

Imagine a person who, descending from her apartment, invents a rule for which stairs one can step on. To engage in this activity, one should try not to step on certain stairs, but even a person making mistakes can be said to be playing the game. Compare this with chess. The rules of chess are constitutive in the sense that a failure to follow them is a failure to play chess, but of course, making legitimate moves is not a sufficient condition for playing, at least not for playing well. To contrast these games with a third example, imagine that a staircase is defective so that certain stairs collapse when stepped on. If someone wants to get to the apartment on the highest floor, and there is no other way of getting there, we would say that one should not step on certain stairs, but this 'norm' is not arbitrary as in the two games: someone who moves the king like the queen is not playing chess, but we can always stipulate a new game which is defined by this move (see Wittgenstein 1974: X, 133). Compare these examples with using words. Obviously, being understood by others sets limits to the utterances we can make, but does this imply that it is a *norm* to use a word in accordance with its meaning, or that there are some further obligations to speak in ways that are 'semantically correct'?

An obvious suggestion concerning the normativity of meaning is provided by Paul Boghossian (1989: 513): it is "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*". There need not be any convention or norm dictating what particular words can be used to mean, since this condition simply requires that if, at a certain time, 'green' means *green*, it is correctly applicable only to those things that are green (*ibid.*). On this picture, then, normativity is a name for the fact that uses can be categorized into correct and incorrect ones. The problem with this account is that we can always ask why we *should* apply 'green' to green things. As Kathrin Glüer (2001: 60) remarks, it is far from clear that a condition of semantic correctness providing means for categorizing utterances into true and false, or justified and unjustified ones, has any normative consequences for the use of a term.

A conditional stating that unless I use a word correctly, it cannot have the meaning I intend, would have action-guiding force akin to the rules of chess. The following conditional might serve this purpose:

A speaker *s* can mean green by 'green' (or any other word) at *t* iff she applies 'green' only to those things that are green.

There is also a stronger picture of the normativity of language, on which words carry certain meanings and conditions of correctness with them. Roughly, the idea is that languages are governed by rules, and speaking a certain language demands grasping these rules and applying them correctly. Dummett (1986, 473–474) expresses this idea when he insists that there are conventions governing what meanings words have in a language, and these meanings are independent of the intentions of particular speakers.

Both of these views are primarily concerned with semantic rather than syntactic correctness. Semantic correctness, on the second picture, is a result of two factors. When applying a word correctly, I both apply the right word and make the right judgment about reality. But on any plausible conception of meaning, failing to apply a word correctly does not imply failing to mean something by it: I can claim that the grass outside is green when, in reality, it is yellow or brown, and still mean green by 'green' (cf. Glüer 2001: 61; Bilgrami 1993: 143). Hence, in individual cases, succeeding to apply 'green' to green things is not constitutive of being able to mean green by 'green', as castling correctly is constitutive of playing chess.

Davidson rejects the second, Dummettian picture of meaning normativity on the grounds that using words in accordance with their standard meanings is not essential for communication. Avoiding broken stairs may be necessary for getting to highest floor of an apartment building, but doing so is not constitutive of the goal: it is not as if we could *give no content* to it except in terms of the broken staircase, as we can't give content to the idea of playing chess except in terms of the rules of chess. Davidson (1994: 11) insists that the whole point of language is communication, being understood, and any philosophically interesting norm has to spring from this goal. The same critique can be extended to the weaker picture of meaning normativity: it is possible to use an expression no-one has ever used, incorrectly, and still be understood.

But just as one has to at least try not to step on certain stairs to play the stair-game, is *trying* to use words correctly, in accordance with their meaning, constitutive for meaning something by a word? It is difficult to deny that semantic correctness – whether understood in terms of truth- or justification-conditions – is constitutive of meaning: if 'green' correctly applied to objects that are green before 2005 and yellow after, it would not mean green. This need not present a problem, as long as we distinguish having a meaning and meaning something by a word. Davidson seems to think that only something constitutive of the latter could have any normative, deontological force. He offers a conditional along the following lines:

(D) A speaker *s* can mean green by 'green' at *t* iff she is justified in believing that she will be understood as

meaning green by 'green', and speaks with the intention of being so understood. (Cf. Davidson 1994: 12).<sup>1</sup>

The demand that one need merely to produce utterances that are interpretable, and be justified in believing this, is best seen as a constitutive criterion for having a language. But Davidson also gives an externalist account of conditions that must be satisfied for an individual to meet this criterion.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, he acknowledges that successful communication is grounded by numerous empirical constraints, for the speaker must be aware of a whole nexus of factors underlying the possibility of being understood in particular cases. Among these is knowledge of the literal meanings of one's words – that is, their 'normal' conditions of semantic correctness – knowledge of one's hearer or interpreter, and regularity or consistency on the part of the speaker (see Davidson 1986: 442–443). However, Davidson (2001b: 297) holds that there is nothing essentially normative about the constraints mentioned – they are perfectly analogical with the constraint of avoiding broken stairs to climb a staircase.

## 2. Conflicting Norms?

In addition to (D), Davidson is committed to the following two theses. In this section I try to resolve what at first sight seems like a tension between them and (D).

(E) It is possible to think of and refer to something, e.g. water, only against a causal history of relations to water.

(W) Consciousness of the norm between semantically correct and incorrect use is prerequisite for having a language, and it demands that one go on as before.

The tension results from the fact that, on the one hand, (D) states that semantic correctness is not a norm for meaning something by a word. Moreover, regularity or consistency in the use of a word, or going on as before, is merely an empirical constraint on understanding. On the other, (E) implies that semantic correctness – a history of correct application and awareness of the truth conditions of one's words – is constitutive of meaning water by 'water', and (W) states the necessity of going on as before. At least there is nothing *prima facie* contradictory about a situation where these two sets of norms conflict. I will argue that the contradiction is resolved by noting that (E) and (W) are built into the possibility of intending to mean green by 'green'.

Despite his commitment to (D), Davidson (1994: 10) wants to engage in the enterprise of drawing the "distinction Wittgenstein has made central to the study of meaning, the distinction between using words correctly and merely thinking one is using them correctly". The idea is that the only possible check for using a word correctly is provided by realizing that my use of an expression is similar to your use of another expression, and this, of course, demands a pattern of regularity (see Davidson 1993, 118–119). This need not conflict with the idea that using a word as before is not a norm, as long as we distinguish between a child learning her earliest, basic sentences, and adult speakers. Nevertheless, we cannot

escape the fact that according to (W), awareness of conditions of correct use is essential for meaning.

The gist of Davidson's externalism is that in basic, observational cases, what we apply a concept to – what causes us to assent to a word or utterance – determines its content. Because the relevant, content-endowing cause is individuated in a triangular situation, built in with awareness, on the part of the triangulating beings, of the shared cause, knowledge of what our words refer to in basic cases is guaranteed. Davidson most explicitly applies this idea to radical interpretation, which is possible precisely because "the situations which normally cause a belief determine the conditions in which it is true" (Davidson 2001a: 197). Essentially the same holds for first acquiring a concept. Correct application is tied together with having a concept or meaning something by a word, since "we do not first form concepts and then discover what they apply to" (Davidson 2001a: 196). But Davidson's externalism reaches beyond the earliest stages of language-acquisition: he approves Burge's idea that generally, what makes it possible for a person to mean something by 'water' while failing to apply it correctly is her history of causal relations to water (Davidson 2001a: 200). The crucial question is, if largely correct application is necessary for meaning something by a word, why does Davidson deny it is a norm?

Perhaps the trouble is in speaking of words, rather than concepts. After having acquired a first language, surely we can refer to water by numerous words, just by being told that they all mean water. Similarly, a competent speaker could use any word, intending it to mean water, and still be understood by her hearer. In a sense, I 'go on in the same way' when referring to water by 'water' and 'eau', since both words have the same conditions of semantic correctness. But this does not render semantic correctness, or awareness of its conditions, otiose: it is plausible to say that had I never managed to correctly apply 'water' to water, neither could I mean water by 'eau'<sup>3</sup>; to mean something by a word, I must be able to think of and refer to whatever the word correctly applies to.

But in fact, this is implicit in (D), which states that a speaker can mean green by 'green' only if she is justified in believing that she will be understood as meaning *green*. To see this, imagine a child who has been taught to use the word 'cow' by a person who is otherwise a competent speaker, but for some reason, completely unable to distinguish between cardboard-cows and real ones. If the child has been taught to utter 'cow' in the presence of real cows or Gettier-cows, then *that* is what her word 'cow' refers to. Let us say, in the metalanguage, that her 'cow' means cow". Strictly speaking, then, such a speaker could not believe she will be understood as meaning *cow* by an utterance she makes.

The modified suggestion concerning the normativity of semantically correct application above was that because a speaker can make mistakes and still mean cow by 'cow', it is enough that she should try to apply 'cow' to cows, or, perhaps, at least know what her words correctly apply to. But against (D), a norm stating how one can succeed to mean green by 'green' in terms of conditions of semantic correctness seems to be beset with circularity. Consider hypothetical norms of the form "To do x, one should do y". For instance, to play chess, one should make moves that are legitimate by the rules of chess. These rules are constitutive of chess, but what is common to all such

<sup>1</sup> Davidson (1994: 13) remarks that it is a necessary condition of meaning something that there are "endless cases of successful communication", which of course does not follow directly from (D). Moreover, he (*ibid.*) makes the qualification that "there must be people who would understand the speaker as he intends, and the speaker reasonably believes he is speaking to such a person".

<sup>2</sup> It seems to me that one can accept the public criterion without accepting Davidson's (partly) social views of what communication presupposes (I have in mind mainly the idea of triangulation and the intrinsically social nature of language it implies). But I will not argue for this point here.

<sup>3</sup> Someone might interpret me as speaking of water, but I couldn't intend to be understood as meaning *water*, since I wouldn't know what water is.

norms is that someone should be able to intend to or want to play chess even if not in command of these rules.<sup>4</sup> Similarly for a norm stating that to speak English, 'water' should be used to refer to water: intending to, or believing that one is speaking English, is a distinct activity from actually speaking English.

But consider intending that some word or utterance 'x' means green, or using it to mean green. Against the above discussion of Davidson's externalism, this presupposes knowing what 'x' correctly applies to, as well as a background of correctly speaking of and referring to green things. Because intending to and believing that one will be understood as meaning green by 'green' presupposes that that the speaker is aware of what it is for something to be green – the conditions of semantic correctness of her word – this cannot be a norm for meaning green by 'green'. Failing in the intention to mean green by 'green' is distinct from failing to know what it is for something to be green.

In asking what is essential for successful communication, Davidson's starting point is to examine speakers who already, to some extent, ascribe to conditions of semantic correctness. If someone were to ask what is necessary for winning a game of chess, it would not be helpful to answer "following the rules of chess", since following the rules of chess defines what a game of chess is – the rules are presupposed in the question. Trivially, following the rules correctly is a necessary condition for winning, but this is quite a different answer than saying that winning demands a sufficiently good game tactic. I have argued that if we accept (D), answering the question "What is essential or necessary for succeeding to mean green by 'green'?" by appealing to a grasp of conditions of semantic correctness is just like telling someone that to win a game of chess, he should follow the rules of chess – that is, play chess and not some other game.

## Literature

- Boghossian, P. A. 1989 "The Rule-Following Considerations", *Mind* 98, 507–549.
- Bilgrami, A. 1993 "Norms and Meaning", in Stoecker (1993), 121–145.
- Davidson, D. 1986 "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs", in LePore (1986), 433–446.
- Davidson, D. 1993 "Reply to Andreas Kemmerling", in Stoecker (1993), 117–121.
- Davidson, D. 1994 "The Social Aspect of Language", in B. McGuinness and G. Oliveri (eds.), *The Philosophy of Michael Dummett*, Dordrecht/Boston/London: Kluwer, 1–16.
- Davidson D. 2001a "Epistemology Externalized", in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 193–205.
- Davidson 2001b "Comments On Karlov Vary Papers", in Kotatko *et al.* (2001), 285–307.
- Dummett M. 1986 "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs: Some Comments on Davidson and Hacking", in LePore (1986), 459–476.
- Glüer, K. 2001 "Dreams and Nightmares: Conventions, Norms, and Meaning in Davidson's Philosophy of Language", in Kotatko *et al.* (2001), 53–74.
- Kotatko, P., Pagin, P. and Segal, G. (eds.) 2001 *Interpreting Davidson*, Stanford, California: CSLI.
- Kripke, S. 1982 *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- LePore, E. (ed.) 1986 *Truth and Interpretation – Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Stoecker, R. (ed.) 1993 *Reflecting Davidson*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- Wittgenstein, L. 1974 *Philosophical Grammar*, R. Rhees (ed.), A. Keny (transl.), Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

<sup>4</sup> Whether a person who does not know the rules of chess can fully know what chess is is another question, but such a person can still have the intention of playing chess without knowing the rules, that is, an intention to play the game that is defined by the rules of chess, whatever these rules are.