Different Kinds of Naturalistic Explanations of Linguistic Behaviour

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1. Can there be naturalistic explanations of linguistic behaviour?

"Naturalization" nowadays is often recommended to cure all kinds of philosophical worries and solve old problems. There might be an "epistemology naturalized" and a naturalized philosophy of language. But "naturalism" is understood in quite different fashions. It might be meant as a metaphysical thesis more or the less equivalent to materialism, or it concerns the way of doing things philosophically.

I will be concerned with partially explicating methodological naturalism in the philosophy of language. The essential question is

(Q1) What is meant by giving a *naturalistic explanation* of some kind of linguistic behaviour?

And assuming some answer to this question, the essential problem is

(Q2) Do these naturalistic explanations *explain* anything at all?

One could think naturalism is more about describing events than explaining them. Descriptions seem to be just the opposite of explanations. One could think, on the other hand, that naturalism in the philosophy of language employs some kind of reductionist explanations of linguistic behaviour (in terms of neurophysiology or whatever is considered as the basic science). But given the anti-reductionist arguments concerning the rule governed nature of using language (especially the *socially mastered rules* of using words to refer to something), one might suspect that these reductionist explanations are at the wrong level of theory building to explain overt linguistic behaviour (e.g., being criticized for using expression α on occasion s) at all. If we ask why we speak the way we speak, an account in terms of neurophysiology, so the argument runs, gives us no reason to understand the patterns of overt linguistic behaviour.

Naturalism is often traced back to the work of (the late) Wittgenstein. I will start with some remarks about Wittgenstein as well. With respect to his analysis in the *Philosophical Investigations* (PI) I introduce a distinction between "strong" and "weak" descriptivism (2.). Both forms of descriptivism might be seen as answering (Q1). Weak Descriptivism can accept the anti-reductionist arguments. To see whether it really explains linguistic behaviour the "division problem", originally introduced by Eli Hirsch (Hirsch 1993) in metaphysics, is given a naturalistic solution. (Q2) is considered in face of the strategical question why "to go naturalistic" in the first place (3.).

2. Strong Descriptivism and Weak Descriptivism

According to Wittgenstein philosophy is merely descriptive. There a lots of passage in the *Investigations* stressing this point, e.g.:

"It leaves everything as it is." (PI §124)[1]

"All explanation has to go, and description has to take its place." (PI §109)

"Philosophy just states things and does neither explain them nor deduce anything from them. – Since everything is laid open, there is nothing to explain." (PI §126)

Now, this claim of "descriptivism", as I call it, can be understood in two ways:[2]

(a) Strong Descriptivism

Strong Descriptivism claims that philosophy describes *mere* regularities. In its field of investigation (i.e. linguistic communities and their behaviour) there are regularities. Saying that there are rules amounts to, according to (PI §54), watching the events and extracting a law, like a law of nature is extracted from regular behaviour in other fields of scientific investigation. The very term "law of nature" is used here by Wittgenstein. Natural laws are, of course, regularities. The objects for which the law of nature holds behave as the law tells us, but these objects do not *orient* their behaviour on the law. They do not *consult* the law to confirm to it. Natural laws are not rules for the objects under these laws. They do not have to be consulted to keep in force. And the observer of such laws need not himself understand the laws or make them the laws of his behaviour. So philosophy lays open the facts that speakers naturally behave in this or that fashion. The opinion that language is a rule governed normative behaviour overlooks, according to Strong Descriptivism, that meaning and reference are fixed by our natural traits. The normative idiom (of rule following) is therefore dispensable. Philosophy *cannot* do more than clearly describe regularities of linguistic behaviour. Who does not recognise this is caught in mistaken pictures and needs therapy. (The business of reduction or giving a systematic theory of the laws involved need not be part of philosophy.)

(b) Weak Descriptivism

Weak Descriptivism originates as a restriction of the claims of Strong Descriptivism. The main weakness of Strong Descriptivism is the impossibility, which is not argued for here, but which is widely recognised, to forsake all rules of argument and speaking. The attempt to forsake all rules and normative claims (in using the intentional idiom) seems to be both selfrefutating and against some of our most embedded intuitions. Weak Descriptivism tries to combine the strength of the naturalistic, descriptivistic approach with the thesis that linguistic behaviour is rule following behaviour (i.e. that speakers orient themselves on rules or conduct their linguistic acts in a way to comply to these rules). The strong point of descriptivism is that philosophy leaves everything as it is. Nothing has to be constructed to justify some philosophical claim. The basic

[1] Translated from the German original by the author.

[2] I am not going to discuss which of the two variants is closer to Wittgenstein´s "real" opinion. There are a lot remarks congenial to Strong Descriptivism. On the other hand Wittgenstein´s insistence on reasons and the more general problems of an eliminativist view on rule following normativity in linguistic behaviour, which are also not discusses here, favour, on the Principle of Charity, that Wittgenstein himself is closer to Weak Descriptivism. See also his remarks on frameworks in *On Certainty* which point towards Weak Descriptivism.

structures of our intelligent behaviour are just read off from an exact description of our linguistic behaviour. And these structures are justified by the fact that the practise which exhibits them is successful. Alternatives (including alternative philosophical claims on intellectual standards) stand on a far less firm ground by not being entrenched in our successful way of life ("life form" as Wittgenstein might say).

And at the same time these descriptions can speak of normativity – for the simple reasons that normativity is present in the observed behaviour: If someone is to describe the linguistic behaviour of a community, she has to describe the rules/norms which govern and constitute this very behaviour. By being described norms do not cease *to be* norms! A statement referring to a norm (a statement about a norm) is true only if the norm *is* in force in just that way the statement is saying it is.[3]

Wittgenstein, for example, once and again stresses the fact that a linguistic community evaluates some behaviours as "correct" and others as "wrong". These evaluations would make no sense if the person whose behaviour was evaluated as "wrong" could not reorient her behaviour on the communal standard. For the observer of this community this means, as Peter Winch has elaborated (cf. Winch 1958), that she understands *why* somebody is criticising somebody else. The observer at last can participate in the observed behaviour. All this means that speakers orient themselves on linguistic rules which are more than mere regularities. A cat might develop a regularity responding to similar circumstances (e.g. the alarm clock went off) with similar behaviour (e.g. mowing for breakfast), but there is no intersubjective standard to which the cat´s behaviour confirms. Each new twist modifies the regularity. The description just records this factual regularity and its development over time. An intersubjective rule, in contrast, can be observed to be keep in force by evaluations of correct and incorrect behaviours.

So descriptivism in the form of Weak Descriptivism does not exclude viewing linguistic behaviour as normative. The criticism one might level against naturalism on this point does not apply here.

So how does Weak Descriptivism answer (Q1)?

If linguistic behaviour is rule governed, a systematic description of it is adequate only if the observer has understood (and included in her description) what the standards are and how the standards are enforced. And having understood the rules governing the linguistic behaviour the individual behaviour is straight forwardly *explained using these rules* as (part of the) premises.

The behaviour is explained on the level of linguistic "laws". An anti-reductionist should have nothing to complain here. Only a reductionist might complain that this is not *enough* explanation. Seen this way, Weak Descriptivism, although being a form of naturalism, is anti-reductionist!

3. A case study in Weak Descriptivism

Why should we take the attitude of Weak Descriptivism? I will consider one example: the "division problem" as thought of by Eli Hirsch. Hirsch is concerned with the idea of (natural) kinds. He introduces the thought experiment of different kinds of "strange languages". Strange languages divide reality in kinds and individuals in ways completely different from our normal languages. Strange languages seem to be bizarre, seen from the point of view of our language. They might introduce kinds disjunctively (i.e. "introduce" from the point of view of our language, in the strange language these kinds are, of course, not disjunctive, but just given). So a strange language might contain the kinds *cathouse* and *housecar*. Seen from our language they can be defined:

Cathouse(x) := x is a cat or x is a house

Housecar(x) := x is a house or x is a car

This language has the same expressive power as our own, since our ordinary kinds can be defined within this language:

$$\text{Cat}(x) := \text{Cathouse}(x) \wedge \neg \text{Housecar}(x)$$

$$\text{House}(x) := \text{Cathouse}(x) \wedge \text{Housecar}(x)$$

$$\text{Car}(x) := \text{Housecar}(x) \wedge \neg \text{Cathouse}(x)$$

Now, this strange language has *less* kinds or kind terms than our language. So this language seems to be simpler than our language. It carries less ontological commitment! For the sake of ontological simplicity we *should speak* this language, but this sounds absurd.

This is (part of) the division problem. How can it be explained that we do not speak a strange language? A non-naturalistic solution could be a (metaphysical) theory of *natural* kinds which could disqualify *cathouse* and *housecar*. This requires an ontological account of naturalness which might be no easy exercise (cf. Hirsch 1993, 53-78)! And with respect to this ontological theory there still needs to be explained why our language structure would follow naturalness, if there is such a thing in reality.

A solution could be found turning to naturalism (in the form of Weak Descriptivism):

The strange language is to be rejected since we *are* built as we are built (i.e., our language faculty is structured in some definite way). And the structures of our language faculty (especially our habits of categorizing) do not allow strange languages. We have to consider them strange. So Weak Descriptivism would describe the standards of our categorization behaviour: evaluations what speakers consider strange explain why there are *cat*, *house* etc. around, and not *cathouse*, *housecar*.

Weak Descriptivism can explain what we do according to the standards it described. It leaves the rationality of our behaviour intact. Explanation occurs *within* the framework taken for granted. The rationality of it is there – in Wittgenstein´s words in *On Certainty* – "It is there – like our life".

But is this really an explanation? Hirsch complains that the naturalist would just give us the vacant thesis that we were just that way and would give no further argument for this to be the case (cf. Hirsch 1993, 116). One might ask "Okay, but *why* are we built this way?"

This sounds a bit like (Q2).

Nevertheless, this accusation of naturalism misses the whole point of "going naturalistic". Naturalism is pursued since *a priori* arguments to solve some problem have failed. Their failure is the basic reason that only a naturalistic account – instead of a sceptic agnosticism – can answer to the problem. To go naturalistic *means* that one is referring to facts or describing facts which cannot be questioned further. Further inquiries stemming from the

[3] Much fuss about naturalistic fallacies seems to overlook this simple point.

philosophical easy chair have to be rejected in favour of systematic descriptions or empirical investigations of our linguistic faculties (e.g., in cognitive science). Strong Descriptivism might try to give an explanation of our behaviour by referring to facts outside of the way of life described. But these explanations no longer answer to the questions put within this way of speaking and acting. Seen from this perspective of participants in this way of speaking we might leave behind this kind of naturalistic investigation altogether.

A systematic description in the sense of Weak Descriptivism can amount to a "rational reconstruction" of our intuitions in the field in question. Question (Q2) itself is not as obviously relevant to the case in point (e.g., Hirsch´s devision problem) as it seems. It could rest on seeing the fact that we can ask for explanations of the framework itself from without as an insufficiency of giving reasons from within: the "why" in question (Q2) really is no further "why" of the sort answered by Weak Descriptivism, but a different "why" altogether. Knowing why we are biologically or neuro-physiologically build the way that we are build might be of no great relevance to the questions raised.

This might be the idea of PI §655:

"It isn`t a question of explaining a language-game by means of our experiences, but of noting a language-game."

A reductionist naturalism might be more successful with respect to this further investigation in the natural history or the causal antecedents of our (linguistic) behaviour than a mere description. In a wider scientific perspective on linguistic behaviour we probably might be interested in reductionist explanations.

Nevertheless Weak Descriptivism seems to be a first option.

4. What´s the distinction between kinds of descriptivism worth?

That there might be different attitudes and aims in naturalism has been noted before. The distinction made here between Strong and Weak Descriptivism is related, for example, to Strawson´s distinction between "strong naturalism" and "liberal or catholic naturalism" (cf. Strawson 1985). Nevertheless many arguments – especially those against naturalism (e.g., in the philosophy of mind) – don´t seem to see the distinction.

This is unfortunate for the following reasons:

The merits of Weak Descriptivism aren´t appreciated by conflating it with Strong Descriptivism. As a result fanciful philosophical doctrines are developed to "avoid naturalism" (e.g., a hyper-realistic doctrine of natural properties to solve the division problem).

The merits of Strong Descriptivism (contributing to a wider scientific picture of human life) aren´t appreciated by conflating it with Weak Descriptivism, and therefore sticking with just "noting" forms of life *in all contexts* of investigation.

The worth of the distinction, therefore, could lay in considering what kind of naturalism might be required or asked for when opting for a naturalistic solution seems to be the most promising option at hand.

References

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