Lexical Norms and the Epistemology of Testimony

Many philosophers agree that linguistic meaning is a normative phenomenon. Yet there is wide room for disagreement about precisely what such normativity might amount to. One dimension of such disagreement concerns the level of linguistic analysis at which the normativity obtains. It is probably safe to say that most philosophers writing today assume – implicitly or explicitly – that the relevant norms must be *lexical* norms: roughly, "use 'red' to designate red objects." Sellars was an early dissenting voice, arguing instead that the normativity of language obtains at the level of material inference. This *inferentialist* approach was further developed in Brandom (1994). Sellars also provided explicit arguments against lexical norms (or "sense meaning rules," as he would call them (1954: 332-335; see also 1949; 1953)). I share Sellars's suspicions against lexical norms, but confess to finding his arguments against them largely ineffective. Pertinently, these arguments typically take the form of *reductios* aiming to press on defenders of lexical normativity putative consequences of their views, such as the existence of pre-linguistic concepts, which they might in fact be all too happy to accept.

I think a better strategy would be to investigate the best arguments in favor of lexical norms, with the aim of showing why and how these arguments fail. Claims concerning lexical norms are often presented as conclusions of transcendental arguments drawing on largely *a priori* considerations. Yet these conclusions are often contradicted by empirical facts about the ways in which languages develop and change over time. Moreover, even when they are not so contradicted, the invocation of norms is still explanatorily inert. Quite simply, lexical norms are not fit to do the work that philosophers require of them.

To my mind, the strongest arguments for lexical norms start not from conditions for individual use (as do the much-discussed arguments from Kripke (1982) and Boghossian (1988)), but from our ability to use language for interpersonal communication and the transfer of knowledge by testimony. The most detailed such argument is due to Sanford Goldberg (2007). Drawing on Burge (1993; 1999), Goldberg observes that language use is marked by two distinctive epistemic privileges, or *entitlements*: first, I am entitled in communication to rely on intuitive comprehension, i.e., to take others' words to have the meaning they would have if I had uttered them myself (modulo indexicals and demonstratives). Second, I am entitled, in the absence of countervailing considerations, to acquire beliefs on the basis of such communication, i.e., to take what I thus comprehend as expressing knowledge. Goldberg argues that "the only *remotely* plausible account" (57) of these entitlements is that speakers and hearers share a set of semantic conventions taking the form of robust lexical norms. By

contrast, any view that took semantic cohesion among speakers merely as brutely statistical, non-normative fact would be incapable of explaining our entitlement to claim knowledge by testimony.

I will present a series of observations that I believe serve to undermine the picture of language and communication which supports this form of argument. First, this picture fails to comport with any reasonable account of how such a language as a system of lexical norms could come about in the first place. The norms, we presume, are not imposed from outside. How, then, did a group of speakers come to settle on these norms if not precisely through successful communication and sharing of knowledge? A more modest view might have it that the arguments apply only once the norms are already in place. But this would be equally undermined by facts about language change. Semantic drift is a pervasive phenomenon in language. A usage that violates norms at one time may soon enough be established as a new norm. It is more plausible to view lexical norms, such as they are, as the *product of* reliably successful communication and knowledge dissemination in language. It follows that such norms cannot be what make communication and knowledge dissemination possible.

Second, even if we granted the existence of lexical norms, it would in no way follow that speakers will actually comply with these norms, i.e., use the words in the prescribed ways. The polemical target of normativists, we saw, is any view according to which semantic cohesion among speakers is a brutely statistical, non-normative fact about use. However, a system of lexical norms that people did not generally comply with could hardly provide foundations for a reliable practice of knowledge dissemination by communication. It follows that even the normativist must invoke a further stipulation concerning speaker compliance. But once this stipulation is granted, it is unclear what extra work the norms themselves are supposed to do. If normativists were to argue that only the existence of such norms could explain why there tends to be semantic cohesion among speakers, we would be back where we started: how could such a system of lexical norms come about in the first place if not through reliably successful communication and knowledge dissemination in language?

In this way, I believe it can be shown that any appeal to lexical norms is explanatorily otiose and often presupposes a picture of language which is contradicted by what we know about language development and change. Does the demise of lexical norms lend any kind of support to the competing inferentialist account? Assessing whether this is so will require us to ask in what sense such inferential norms are appropriately thought of as *linguistic* or *semantic* norms at all. I will cautiously flag the possibility that although language may be essential to the *articulation* of these norms, the norms themselves attach primarily to concepts, and are only contingently or derivatively related to particular linguistic forms.

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