

Semantic Normativity and Supervenience

Abstract. This presentation is about a connection between the debate over semantic normativity and the issue of mind-body supervenience. Of late, it seems that the critics of semantic normativity have been on the offensive. They have been rejecting the usual arguments to the effect that linguistic expressions are inherently normative. However, the critics of semantic normativity have been assuming the truth of various supervenience claims. In particular, these critics assumed that linguistic meaning supervenes on linguistic use. Analyzing the work of select critics of semantic normativity—in particular, Paul Horwich and Assa Wikforss—I shall argue that their supervenience claims are unjustified and betray an inadequate conception of meaning and content.

In the debate over semantic normativity, we have two major positions. On the one hand, there are *prescriptivists* who argue that the meaning of an expression goes beyond the set of instances on which the expression in question has actually been used. This position emerged in particular from Kripke's interpretation of Wittgenstein. On the other hand, there are *descriptivists* who claim that the meaning of an expression is exhausted by its actual use. Accordingly, some descriptivists, for example Horwich and Wikforss, identify their view as the so-called "pure-use theory." Another way of expressing the contrast between prescriptivists and descriptivists is that the former believe that the meaning of an expression cannot be determined, unless it is said that the expression ought to be used thus and so, while the latter claim that the meaning in question would be fully specified by describing the ways it has actually been used.

However, descriptivists such as Horwich and Wikforss assume the truth of certain relation between meaning and use, or meaning and dispositions to behavior. They believe that linguistic meaning supervenes on use or dispositions. I take it that Horwich and Wikforss believe that by assuming the truth of supervenience, they avoid a reductive sort of naturalism, by admitting that meaning talk enjoys a certain degree of autonomy.

However, it can be argued that this assumption of supervenience is unwarranted. To begin with, Horwich and Wikforss do not explain how meaning gets determined by use or dispositions to use. And yet, dispositionalism was one of the targets of Kripke's argument against descriptivism. But the main problem of this proposal consists in the fact that supervenience imposes merely a purely negative constraint on meaning or content determination. In the given case, it merely implies that there can be no semantic difference without a difference in use. This says nothing about the determination of meaning, let alone about how meaning might be determined by what a speaker is disposed to do. It is useful here to notice a parallel with theories of mind-body supervenience. These were originally proposed as a solution of the mind-body problem. But it turned out that supervenience has no implication as to the question of what constitutes the mind. These theories impose only a negative constraint: no mental difference without a physical difference. But this negative constraint is compatible with a wide range of traditional solution to the mind-body problem. Similarly, the assumption concerning meaning-use supervenience tells us nothing of substance concerning the constitution of meaning.