Instrumental Norms and the Institution of Semantic Meaning

What does it mean to say that meaning is normative? It is at least to say that some item
has a semantic meaning, any semantic meaning, in a given context only if in that context
some norm is in force. This formulation is enormously broad, however, as it is silent on
which items might be meaningful, what sorts of context might be relevant, and,
especially, which kinds of norms might be necessarily involved with meaning, who or
what must be bound by those norms, and how those norms are related to particular
semantic meanings. Different contemporary views fill in this schema in different ways.
Nevertheless, there seems to be a general consensus that whatever norms might be
necessary for meaning, those norms are not instrumental. For example, Gluer and
Wikforss exclude out of hand the possibility that instrumental norms might be essential
for meaning, without even a hint at an argument: "We can … exclude the possibility that
the norms of meaning/content are instrumental: This would not at all sit well with the
idea that these norms or rules are essential to meaning." (SEP article, "The Normativity
of Meaning and Content") I think that this exclusion is a serious mistake and that a
certain type of instrumental norm for action plays a central role in the constitution of
meaningfulness. Only agents who in virtue of their ontological constitution stand under
such instrumental norms are candidates for engaging in behavior that has semantic
meaning or of having contentful mental states.

On the face of it there seem to be good reasons to be dubious concerning the role of
instrumental norms in the constitution of meaning. The sense in which the predication of
a certain term to a subject can in a given context be semantically appropriate or
inappropriate, for example, seems to be entirely independent of any possible utility of the
usage. While it might conceivably serve some speaker's ends on some occasion to assert,
for example, that the tie is blue when it is in fact green, the fact that instrumentally the
agent ought to say that 'the tie is blue' in order to reach her goals has nothing whatsoever
to do with the meaning of that sentence. Rather, it seems that what is relevant is that a
very different sort of norm appears to be in play, constitutive norms. Constitutive norms
set up 'practices', where, (in the words of John Rawls), a practice is "any form of activity
specified by a system of rules which define offices, roles, moves, penalties, defenses, and
so on, and which gives the activity its structure". And, it has been persuasively argued
(by Sellars and Brandom among others) that just as what it is to strike out, and what it is
for a player to have struck out, are normative statuses instituted by the rules of baseball,
the linguistic meanings of terms and sentences, and what it is to believe those sentences
true, are normative statuses that are instituted by some such set of constitutive rules or
norms under which it is appropriate to use those sentences or terms.

I will not contest the suggestion that constitutive norms play a central role in constituting
linguistic practices, and that the semantics of linguistic terms are to be understood as
normative statuses within the linguistic practices instituted by those constitutive norms.
Indeed, it seems to me that some such story is very likely to be correct. Instead, I am
concerned with the further foundational questions of what it is for such constitutive
norms to institute a semantic practice for the members of some community, and the
conditions under which there can be such constitutive norms. And, it seems to me, those

extant theories that emphasize the role of constitutive norms in the institution of meaning offer inadequate answers to these questions. In response I develop a view that supplements the Sellarsian position by emphasizing the importance of the role of instrumental norms in the institution of constitutive norms. Three claims are central to my view: 1. That for reasons having to do with what it is for an agent to stand under a constitutive norm, no agent or community of agents that do not stand under the norms of instrumental rationality can stand under constitutive norms; 2. That only organisms of a certain sort, rational animals, can stand under instrumental norms; and 3. That a proper understanding of the norms involved with truth and the way in which one set of constitutive semantic norms can be superior to another with regard to truth requires appeal to the role of instrumental norms. In this paper I argue in favor of the first claim.

On the persuasive Sellarsian type of view I endorsed above, linguistic expressions have meanings only within a framework established by a set of constitutive norms or rules. Such rules establish 'offices, roles, moves', etc., by instituting a set of proprieties of behavior for agents of different categories, where membership in such categories in turn is established by the constitutive rules as predicated on the agent having satisfied certain conditions. But in this paper I raise the question of what is it for a set of determinate constitutive rules to be in force within some group and for some agent to stand under the proprieties specified by such constitutive norms. For reasons made familiar by Wittgenstein and Kripke, it is highly unlikely that mere regularity of behavior among the members of some group, or dispositions to behave in certain ways by group members, or even the articulate specification of constitutive rules by (some) group members will be sufficient (or even necessary) for a set of such rules to be operative within such a community. Faced with this difficulty, Robert Brandom, following Sellars, has suggested that the constitutive rules of a group are implicit in the assessing behavior that group members display towards other members of the group, and as far as I can see this is the only plausible suggestion. "…one way to demystify norms is to understand them as *instituted* by the practical attitudes of those who acknowledge them in their practice. Apart from such practical acknowledgment – taking or treating performances as correct or incorrect by responding to them as such in practice – performances have natural properties, but not normative proprieties; they cannot be understood as correct or incorrect without reference to their assessment or acknowledgment as such by those in whose practice the norms are implicit."

But, one might well ask, 'What is it for an agent's performance to implicitly involve an assessment of another agent's performances?' The obvious answer is that agent X assesses agent Y by rewarding and punishing Y's behavior. But, I argue, because the behaviorist understanding of reward and punishment, in terms of operant conditioning, in principle cannot distinguish the actual result on the behavior of an individual of a process of training from the result of a successful process of training according to a rule, the only way to make sense of the relevant notions of reward and punishment, and thus to make sense of implicit assessments of an agent's performances, and thus to make the institution of constitutive rules intelligible, is by appealing to the desires and beliefs of the assessed and assessing agents. This, however, presents a problem for those who think that all mental content depends upon the constitutive norms that institute linguistic practices. For,

it cannot both be the case that an agent can only believe or desire if she already belongs to a community in which a linguistic practice has been established by a set of constitutive norms, and that such norms can institute such a linguistic practice only if they are established by an implicit process of assessment that presupposes that both the assessors and the assessed already have beliefs and desires.

To dissolve this circle it must be possible for some non-linguistic agents, who do not already stand under linguistically constitutive norms, to have beliefs and desires. I argue that there is in fact such a class of non-linguistic agents, instrumentally rational animals. The contents of the beliefs and desires of such agents are constituted by the roles that some of their states play in the explanation of those animals' instrumentally rational action. Since the institution of constitutive linguistic norms is only intelligible in terms of the assessment of behavior within a group, and the assessment of behavior among the members of a group is only intelligible if the group members have beliefs and desires, only such non-linguistic rational animals could come to develop and be bound by the kinds of constitutive norms that must be operative if any performance by an agent is to count as linguistically meaningful. And, since an agent can engage in instrumentally rational action only if she is responsive to the norms of instrumental rationality, an agent can engage in linguistically meaningful behavior only if she stands under the norms of instrumental rationality, but an agent can stand under such instrumental norms without standing under the constitutive norms that are in play in linguistic communities and which make such communities possible.