

MEANING ATTRIBUTION, NORMATIVITY, AND PRETENSE

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One way of exhibiting the normativity of meaning is by considering the consequences of explicit meaning attributions. In natural languages, such as English, the kind of meaning attributions that we have a grammatical means of expressing are those at the sentential level. In English this is done by employing a 'that'-clause in a claim of the form

(MA) S means that p,

in which 'S' is filled in with an expression denoting a sentence, and 'p' is filled in with an English sentence-in-use. Our linguistic and inferential (in particular, quantificational) practices with 'that'-clauses reveal what Bradley Armour-Garb and I call a *linguistic commitment* to a referential use of these expressions, as putatively denoting mind- and language-independent abstract entities. Claims of form MA thus appear to relate linguistic items to non-linguistic items, via use of the expression 'means'.

In previous work, Armour-Garb and I have argued that this kind of meaning-entity realism faces serious metaphysical and epistemological problems. It is also antithetical to the kind of naturalism that Wilfrid Sellars found attractive and that partly motivated his view of meaning attribution as functional classification, in terms of a sentence's broadly inferential role. This paper extends my work with Armour-Garb on *proposition-talk*, to sketch an account of meaning attributions that also understands such claims as attributions of inferential-role features to sentences. On this view, 'that'-clauses serve as a means of collapsing the use/mention distinction, allowing speakers to pick out and attribute use-features via a kind of deferred ostension, in which the relevant inferential role is actually engaged and on display in the embedded use of the sentence. Embedding a sentence in a 'that'-clause within a claim of form MA thus accomplishes the effect that Sellars stipulated for his “dot-quotes”, applied to sentences.

At the same time, however, the view I will sketch in this paper recognizes that treating 'that'-clause sentence nominalization as fulfilling the function of Sellars's dot-quotes in a direct and brute manner ignores and conflicts with the natural language practices that generate the referential

appearances of our use of 'that'-clauses. The present account explains and vindicates these practices, while still avoiding the problematic ontological commitments they seem to involve. The key move is to understand meaning attributions employing 'that'-clauses in terms of semantic pretense. Claims of form MA (and proposition-talk generally) is underwritten by a rule-governed make-believe, involving both stipulated pretenses and principles of generation that establish a systematic dependency between further prescribed pretenses and the real-world conditions outside of the game. This allows speakers to pick out and attribute the inferential-role features I take meaning attributions really to be about, by making *as if* to pick out and relate sentences to mind- and language-independent, abstract meaning entities.

The idea that meaning attributions invoke a rule-governed make-believe underwrites their 'ought'-involving consequences, in a way that fits with Sellars's “de-mystified” take on the normativity of meaning as a matter of conforming to linguistic rules (“ought-to-bes”) that encapsulate selectively inculcated uniformities in linguistic behavior. In his own discussion of the rule-governed nature of language, Sellars draws a distinction between “ought-to-dos” and “ought-to-bes”, and he explains how speakers' linguistic behavior can be made to conform with the latter, even if the speakers lack the relevant concepts required to explicitly express the relevant rules of criticism. This could be of use to a pretense-theorist, when she is confronted by various versions of what Armour-Garb and I call *the engagement complaint*—the challenge that not only are competent speakers employing the discourse not actively engaged in any pretending, but they typically also do not take themselves to be alluding to, or even to be aware of, any such pretense. But the rules of a make-believe could govern a speaker's language use as rules of criticism, even if the speaker lacks “pretense-awareness”.

Sellarsian views and pretense accounts thus appear to combine well. A Sellars-inspired understanding of meaning and meaning attribution can be usefully augmented by embedding it within a broader pretense-based account of proposition-talk, while a Sellarsian approach to the normativity of meaning can help a pretense account deflect a common “pretense-awareness” objection that is often launched at pretense-based analyses of not explicitly figurative fragments of discourse.