

MEANING: WELL IDENTIFIED INTENSIONS OR BIOLOGICAL ACTIONS?

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Abstract: As Henri Lauener states in “Truth and Reference” (VANDERVEKEN (Org.), *Logic, Thought and Action*, Springer, 2005), if one wants to determine the truth of a theory, it is necessary to determine the reference and the sense of terms for objects in that theory. Quine, as Lauener interprets it, contradicts himself when he sustains a physicalist realism, from an ontological point of view, and, at the same time, argues for the inscrutability of the reference of terms, as his naturalistic-behavioristic analysis shows. Moreover, Lauener argues that the notion of meaning would be related to the notion of rule, that is to say, intensions and extensions would be “fixed by the totality of the rules which prescribe the correct use of the expressions”. That notion of meaning has, so, according to Lauener, a transcendental status and is opposed to any concept of meaning that could be formulated by a naturalistic perspective. The normativity intrinsic to linguistic activity isn’t, as Lauener states, something that one could describe solely by a naturalistic and extensional discourse. I intend to question the relevance of Lauener’s criticism against the naturalistic point of view in semantics, starting from a distinction between Quine’s naturalistic-behavioristic standpoint and other possible naturalistic standpoints in semantics that wouldn’t exclude the discourse about intensions and intentions.

Key words: Logicism; intentionality; naturalism; meaning.

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1. Scheme of distinction between anti-naturalistic and naturalistic semantic positions

This paper starts from a distinction between Lauener's semantic position, which is anti-naturalistic, and the position of naturalistic philosophers such as Quine, Dretske and Millikan. For that purpose, by analyzing these positions I establish a scheme that may function as a guide in the establishment of distinctions and the assessment of those positions. Semantics could then be defined as follows:

- A. *A priori* investigation of the meanings and references of expressions through the rules of their use in language.
- B. Investigation of meanings and references through naturalized investigations that value the mental investigation of intentions and intensions and try, through a philosophy of mind, to clarify the foundations of semantics.
- C. Semantic investigation that doesn't believe in the possibility of identifying meanings and referential relations through naturalized investigations of the human mind, but values the scientific description of social behaviors, of a biological nature, that may clarify the phenomenon of the communication of meanings and referential expressions.

2. Lauener's position (A): His critique of Quine

Lauener (2005) argues that it isn't possible to clarify issues concerning truth through a description of the way in which relationships of communication are established, relationships of assent to and dissent from sentences. He suspects that Quine can't be right in negating that in observational sentences there is no determination of the reference to objects, i.e. that we are not able to determine to what objects terms in these sentences precisely refer to. This critique can be summarized in the proposal that Quine is wrong in arguing that truth precedes reference. According to Lauener, observation sentences, taken in a holophrastic way, cannot be the basis of any scientific theory since they don't present the objects of which the theory speaks. In contrast to Quine, Lauener proposes a notion of absolute external truth and an anti-physicalistic relativism in relation to ontology.

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Quoting Hintikka, Lauener (2005) contrasts the universalistic view of language with the view of language as calculus. According to him, Quine adheres to the first view, which doesn't admit the observation of the relationship between word and object from a privileged point of view of philosophical observation. Lauener adheres to the second perspective, the one that sees language as calculus, and suggests that it's possible to present interpreted symbolic systems that are instruments for different purposes in the philosophy of language, just as the theory of models does it.

When describing himself as a relativist, in contrast to Quine, as to the possibility of positing different ontological domains of variables, Lauener makes the surprising statement that Quine postulates just one universe, one single domain of quantified variables. In opposition to what he calls a "constantly evolving language-theory", Lauener argues that the intensions (meanings) of terms of a language can be fixed by axioms of a specific theory (with which we operate in a particular context) and that the meanings of observational sentences depend on the particular theory. In his words, "[...] I stress the normative aspect of semantics. Equating talk about meaning with talk about rules, I consider that intensions and extensions are fixed by the totality of the rules which prescribe the correct use of the expressions." (2005, p. 2).

Lauener's point of view is, according to his own definition, "a pragmatically relativized version of transcendental philosophy," which means that in his view the meaning of expressions depends on conventions, on the agreement of users of a community who agree with a set of rules that determine their use in a certain context (2005, p. 3). To his way of thinking, rules are systems of empirical laws that implicitly define the intension of theoretical terms, whereas extensions are fixed by the model used. Thus, if the laws and extensions of the model are altered, we have a different theory that is "semantically incommensurate" with the former one. He insists that in semantics we should restrict ourselves to the analysis of limited "contexts," instead of looking for a single language-theory, as Quine does. His position entails a concept of meaning that, as he himself explains, radically diverges from any concept framed from a naturalistic perspective. According to him, a substantial difference between his and Quine's position (as well as the position of the logical empiricists) is that observational sentences can't be the basis for testing scientific theories. There is not unity between natural language and scientific language. The term H₂O doesn't have the same intension

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of “water” in natural language. According to him, it belongs to a different language system.

In a somewhat surprising way, Lauener (2005) ascribes to Quine, in his later writings, a “realistic physicalism” that would be opposed to a relativistic view of truth and ontology. According to Lauener, Quine’s thesis of ontological relativity, derived from the impossibility of determining the “referential intentions” of the speakers by observing their linguistic behavior, showing the empirical inscrutability of the reference, is inconsistent with Quine’s physicalism. Thus Lauener challenges the plausibility of Quine’s proposal that the truth of a theory precedes the determination of the objects referred to by that theory. In his view, variation in ontology should lead to the reassessment of the truth of the statements made in a theory. Lauener thinks that there is a contradiction in Quine’s position between the defense of the truth of theories of physics (physicalistic realism) and the simultaneous proposal of ontological relativism (Platonic, Pythagorean or another empirically equivalent ontology).

Lauener opposes a semantics that merely “describes” past facts, such as the one he ascribes to Quine. Semantics should present the (conventionally fixed) rules that prescribe the use of expressions, viz. the rules that regulate linguistic actions. To him, the presentation of these rules isn’t possible only in descriptive, extensional and naturalistic terms. In his opinion, norms are related to intensions and intentions. Lauener argues, “According to my normative viewpoint, semantic questions are settled by the fact that we have accepted the rules which determine the intension and the denotation of the terms for a particular language.” (2005, p. 6). And he goes on saying, “The weakness of the naturalist’s position resides in his ignoring the trivial fact that posits presuppose positing and that intentional acts cannot be accounted for in an austere extensional language as he [Quine] wants to have it.” (2005, p. 6). Thus, Lauener thinks it isn’t possible to continue speaking, as Quine does, of reference and intentions (which posit the reference) without affirming their determinability. To his way of thinking, the determination of truth depends on the determination of the reference. In order to establish the reference, intentional acts must be intelligible.

Lauener seems to confuse the stipulation of discourse and reference rules with the presentation (description) of the way in which language actually occurs. Why would it be impossible to accept the impossibility of presenting the reference of expressions, although it’s possible to see that the same expressions are used to “make reference” to

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objects? What Quine shows is that as philosophers or linguists we don't need to know what is precisely the reference of an expression that we see being used in sentences in order to see that these sentences are true or false to certain speakers in certain situations in response to certain stimuli.

In his 1982 book on Quine (*Willard V. Quine*) Lauener already criticized Quine's position:

The meaning by stimuli of observational sentences can be univocally determined because as unstructured units the latter can be learned by conditioning. However, as soon as we refer to the more developed language on physical objects, we have to ascribe referential functions (to objects) to individual words. In contrast with Quine, I have serious doubts whether we can really understand the meaning of a sentence before reaching this stage. We are able to train animals in such a way that they respond correctly to the enunciation of simple sentences. It is well known that parrots are able to simulate rational conversations. But this doesn't make us assume that they have actually understood the sentences. Is a purely behavioristic theory like Quine's really able to clarify the meaning of language constructions?

The use of the phrase “naturalized semantics” by Lauener when talking about Quine's position refers to a specific kind of naturalism in the philosophy of language, namely a naturalism that, in Lauener's own words, “rejects both mentalistic and intensional concepts” (1982, p. 84). Quine's logicistic scruples cause him to criticize the use of intensional concepts because intensions are, according to Lauener's own listing, imprecise (lacking precise criteria of identity); impossible to use in modal contexts or in contexts of propositional attitudes; impossible to translate, which demonstrates their indeterminacy; and unnecessary for the analysis of language (1982, pp. 84-5).

3. Semantic naturalisms

In order to establish a dialog with the position proposed by Lauener, do we have to ask why we should emphasize the rules of a language system without talking about social and biological conditioning? Why should we avoid naturalism?

In fact, one can perceive – and many theoreticians have realized this – that Quine's behaviorism is limited in terms of its explanatory power, but this doesn't seem to apply to his proposal of a naturalized philosophy. The theories of Fred Dretske and Ruth Millikan constitute alternatives to Quine's naturalistic perspective. Whereas Dretske sees the foundation of an equality of intensions in the speakers' natural

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intentionality, Millikan sides with Quine in rejecting the “equality of intensions” in speakers’ minds as being necessary for communication.² In Dretske’s words,

What we are after is the power of a system to say, mean, or represent (or indeed, *take*) things as *P*, *whether or not P is the case*. That is the power of words, of beliefs, of thought —the power that *minds* have— and that, therefore, is the power we are seeking in representational systems. (1988, p. 65).

And then he goes on to say,

If a RS [representational system] has the function of indicating that *s* is *F*, then I shall refer to the proposition expressed by the sentence “*s* is *F*” as the *content* of the representation. There are always two questions that one can ask about representational contents. One can ask, first, about its reference — the object, person, or condition the representation is a representation *of*. Second, one can ask about the way what is represented is represented. What does the representation say or indicate (or, when failure occurs, what is it *supposed* to say or indicate) about what it represents? The second question is a question about what I shall call the sense or meaning of the representational content. Every representational content has both a sense and a reference, or, as I shall sometimes put it, a topic and a comment —what it says (the comment) and what it says it about (the topic). These two aspects of representational systems capture two additional strands of intentionality: the *aboutness* or *reference* of an intentional state and (when the intentional state has a propositional content) the *intensionality* (spelled with an “s”) of sentential expressions of that content. (1988, p. 70).

Dretske’s analysis of intentionality, although it may not be convincing in explaining that which is common in the representation of objects for all speakers, can help to explain the development of language and its symbolic power.

I agree with Millikan on the impossibility of identifying identical “intensions” in speakers, i.e. of reaching the foundation of mutual understanding in that which “everybody would be thinking when uttering the same sentence”. What she shows is that we can and should accept the possibility or the alternative of explaining the emergence of rules from the use of symbols by explaining social (and biological) behaviors without the need of stipulating an equivalence of intensions in the speakers minds.

In spite of this variations in naturalistic perspectives, what seems little likely, due to the simple insight that language is a social phenomenon, is the idea that language

² Despite their disagreements, both Dretske and Millikan believe that language rules originate from social conditionings (with a biological foundation).

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systems as well as their properties and rules can be explained without resorting to the description of human behavior and nature. Assuming the possibility of identifying rules of a language system without resorting to the description of social and biological behaviors may be feasible, but it doesn't actually constitute a semantic explanation of the origin of these rules, of their nature. And this perspective may prevent us from having a more precise criterion of what we are talking about. We can construct, from a logical point of view, sets of rules that we ascribe to particular language systems, or we can propose a semantic theory that affirms the possibility of the identification of meanings and references of expressions by the language philosopher, but how are we concretely going to make this identification of meanings and references? What method shall we use? It's at this point that naturalism seems to come vigorously into play: when our semantic theories are applied to the actual use of language – and this already appears in the later critique of Ludwig Wittgenstein and in John Austin's critique of logicistic semantics – they don't seem to be fully tenable. A system of language rules may be useful to understand parts of our already constituted language, but it doesn't grasp the actual constitution of the rules of a particular language.

Saying that the identification of intensions and references is necessary to explain a language is different from showing what these intensions and references are. The assumption of the possibility of identification doesn't necessarily lead to identification. The path of naturalism throws fresh light on the explanation and identification of language rules, since it tries, just as Wittgenstein and Austin, to describe how the phenomenon of meaning actually takes place. Establishing axiomatic (logical) systems of intensional relationships doesn't apprehend the temporality and contingency of language uses. Only a naturalization of semantics can reach this goal. Of course, thereby you sacrifice a deterministic perspective of semantic relationships, for even a naturalistic account such as Dretske's can't eliminate the temporal component and the variations that may occur with living beings. i.e. it has to presuppose the limitation of semantic explanation.

4. Classical philosophy of language versus naturalism

In "Cutting Philosophy of Language down to size" (2005 [2001]), Ruth Millikan takes up basic problems of the philosophy of language, such as the distinction between

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meaning and reference and, within the tradition of the so-called “conceptual analysis,” makes a distinction between two assumptions: the seed assumption and the one-to-one assumption. The “seed assumption” argues that the intentional nature of the act of making reference to has its source in the mind. The seed of the reference is in the mind. The one-to-one assumption argues that a univocal term in a public language is associated to a psychological state that is common to all competent users of the language. The basis of this assumption is found in Gottlob Frege. Both assumptions are inter-related, because it’s in the “seed of reference,” in the mind, that we find the reason for the success of referring: that which all competent users of a language share when they use a word or sentence: the *Sinn*, grasped by those who understand the words or sentences (Millikan, 2005, p. 123).

According to Millikan, these two assumptions are common to the classical tradition of contemporary philosophy of language of an analytical nature. She shows this when talking about the referential role of concepts in a language net that determines responses and inferences.

To analyze the position of the concept in the net will be to trace out central requirements on the nature of its referent. Assume, again, that these inference dispositions are acquired by internalizing the rules of a public language, and it again follows that the meanings of referential terms can be traced by conceptual analyses. The principle is the same, of course, if the rules or habits of language are conceived as governing rich ‘forms of life’ and not merely perceptual judgments and inferences. Quine, Wittgenstein, Sellars, and so forth, all look very much alike when considered in these general terms, as do nearly all contemporary psychologists studying concepts. All make both the seed assumption and the one-to-one assumption. (2005, 125).

Of course, Millikan is aware of Quine’s criticisms against the idea of “meanings in the mind,” hence the intriguing nature of her statement that Quine (along with Wittgenstein) shares the two assumptions of the methodology of conceptual analysis. One of the conclusions advanced by Millikan is that it’s impossible that there are inner psychological contents common to all those using a particular linguistic expression. That is, her naturalistic perspective leads her to deny something that is assumed both by some naturalists and some anti-naturalists. The following lesson can, however, be drawn from her analysis: in order to even discuss the issue of meaning, there seems to be no other reasonable way except the analysis of how language actually takes place, how it actually develops in social terms.

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On the basis of her naturalistic perspective, Millikan comes close to Quine's position:

If there were, indeed, something in common among the psychological states — the methods of recognition, inference patterns, or whatever— of all who understood a univocal referential term, how would these states be uniformly acquired in the course of language learning? Quine's arguments in *Word and Object* quite effectively showed, I believe, that for the most part there could not be such a thing as the inner rules of languages, the correct criteria for application or methods of recognition, the correct entailments, and so forth, that constitutes public linguistic meaning. For the most part, everyone has his own private 'sentence associations', his own private application and his own inference procedures. Each follows his own causal pathways. (2005, p. 133).

According to Millikan's position, we should hold a bio-naturalistic perspective in semantics. And this perspective, in contrast with what others (e.g. Dretske's) would possibly do, wouldn't look for meanings and mental references internal to the intentional subject. Thus her view diverges both from an anti-naturalistic perspective that conceives intentions and intensions without appealing to empirical descriptions (in a purely *a priori* manner) and from perspectives that conceive intentions and intensions from a naturalistic point of view but emphasizing the investigation of the human mind and semantic phenomena in the human mind. In this way, Millikan comes partially close to Quine's naturalism. Partially, because her proposal doesn't exclude any investigation of the human mind, but only denies that such an investigation can bring an immediate clarification of the semantic phenomenon, that it can identify "that which is common in the understanding of linguistic expressions, meanings and references."

Notice that the attempt to understand the meanings of words and the reference of thought in this way, without the seed assumption and without the one-to-one assumption, besides requiring development of certain broad aspects of realist ontology, also implicates broad issues in theoretical cognitive psychology, child development, and, indeed, the history of science. Understanding what reference is is not conceived as a wholly *a priori* project. The aim is to help create the framework for an empirical theory of human cognition. Indeed, if the nature of reference is at all as I have suggested, then to investigate any of our empirical concepts is to investigate the nature of the world, not merely of what's in our heads. (2005, pp. 136-37).

In Millikan's view, even with Saul Kripke's and Hilary Putnam's externalist theories, the view that meanings "are in the mind" was still prevalent at the end of the 20th century. As she puts it,

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The inner-seed assumption, expressed in Putnam's terms, is that the referent of a thought must always be something 'intended' by the thinker. Put this a slightly different way: It must have been a purpose of the thought to grasp that referent. Stated this second way, I believe the assumption is correct. The shift is from a purpose of the thinker, a psychological purpose, to a purpose of the thought, a biological purpose. The purposes of my thought need not be purposes of *mine*. But it is certainly understandable that classical theories of reference should have confused these two kinds of purposes. This is why thoroughly reasonable people have been led to adopt the seed assumption. (2005, p. 131).

Thus, she adopts a naturalistic-biologistic position, to which intentional purposes are part of a wider net of natural purposes. Likewise, the rules of the use of linguistic expressions are, according to Millikan, present in language as it's socially used, without being necessary, without being necessary rules of the use of expressions, without being laws that prescribe behaviors. They are conventional rules resulting from the biological purpose of communication (2005 [2003], pp. 38-9).

5. Final comments

As one relates this analysis to Lauener's anti-naturalistic view of semantics, one can say that Lauener's view seems to share the two general assumptions identified by Millikan in the analytical tradition of the philosophy of language in the 20th century. However, one difference between Lauener's position and the position of conceptual analysis that one could point out is that Lauener doesn't emphasize intentionality in his discussion of the meanings and references, but presupposes it. The philosopher's task is to identify the "rules of the use" of expressions. This partially distinguishes Lauener (A) from more recent naturalistic views, such as Dretske's (B). That is, when Lauener criticizes Quine's (C) naturalistic semantics, which has a behavioristic nature, and takes a stand against the naturalistic accounts of semantic phenomena, he is not able to completely distance himself from naturalistic views that consider, over against Quine, the possibility of talking of intentions and intensions in naturalized semantics. Thus, I conclude that, on the one hand, Lauener comes close to Dretske by affirming the need to talk of intentions and intensions in semantics and, on the other hand, distances himself from Dretske by claiming that his analysis isn't naturalized.

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Lauener's argument would be the following: We can see language(s) as already instituted entities (without taking their social and biological origin into account) that can be analyzed in terms of its (their) rules from a transcendental point of view, without reference to its (their) origin. However, this certainly doesn't mean that every naturalized semantic is anti-intensionalistic and anti-intentionalistic.

Lauener's position is distinctly logicistic and preserves the view that we can trace through analysis the rules of the use of language expressions independently of the description of how these rules "came into being," constructing interpretable systems that may function as models for the identification of intensions and references in a given language. Thus, he is aligned with the tradition started by Frege and Russell and continued by logicians such as Hintikka, among others. Therefore, Lauener gives up the attempt to describe and explain how meaningful (intentional, intensional and referential) language is constituted and evolves. What is the loss? The loss, in my view, is that in this way Lauener distances himself from the attempt to describe the real constitution and functioning of language and remains in a domain of "assumptions" about how language would function, on the basis of the observation of the restricted linguistic phenomenon, consisting only of the symbols and their relationships. He pays no attention to the origin and functions of these symbols. Such an analysis certainly doesn't lack usefulness, just as theoretical physics and pure mathematics may be applied to the explanation of physical reality, but one cannot assume that it represents the phenomenon of meaning in its actuality.

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