

Meaning as Use, Language as Behavior

Robert Kraut

ABSTRACT

Three themes are discussed in the context of Zalabardo's *Pragmatist Semantics*: (1) the possibility of a "use based" theory of meaning, given the problem of collateral information; (2) maintaining the contrast between pragmatist and representational meaning grounds; (3) the possibility of a non-representational semantics for realist semantic discourse.

KEYWORDS: *Collateral Information, Representational Semantics, Quasi-realism, Deflationism.*

RESUMEN

En el contexto de la semántica pragmatista de Zalabardo, se discuten tres temas: (1) la posibilidad de una teoría del significado «basada en el uso», dado el problema de la información colateral; (2) el mantenimiento del contraste entre los fundamentos pragmatistas y representacionales del significado; (3) la posibilidad de una semántica no representacional para el discurso semántico realista.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *información colateral, semántica representacional, cuasi realismo, deflacionismo.*

John Dewey regarded linguistic meaning as "primarily a property of behavior," thereby seeking to understand semantic content in terms of human practices and activities [Dewey (1925), p. 179]. On this picture, differences in meaning are constituted by differences in ways people behave. To sustain the picture, one needs a clear specification of *which* behavior is relevant to matters of meaning, and why; more generally, one wants to know whether such a social behaviorist model of language is preferable to the alternatives.

Two twentieth-century philosophers offer insight here. W.V. Quine provides a detailed account of language as conditioned response to stimulatory inputs — including linguistic inputs — thereby portraying meaning in terms of stimulus and response [Quine (1960)]. Given that language is,

according to Quine, a “social art,” such behavioral response is regulated by patterns of censure and encouragement sustained within the community.

Wilfrid Sellars, though less avowedly behavioristic than Quine, takes seriously Wittgenstein’s observations about meaning and use, and regards linguistic meaning in terms of “functional roles” played by expressions within a linguistic repertoire. [Sellars (1974)]. Such roles are construed in terms of positions of an expression with respect to environmental conditions, inferential licenses, and behavioral outputs. Sellars’ picture, unlike Quine’s, gives pride of place to *linguistic rules* and *normativity*; emphasis is placed on linguistic entitlement, inferential license, and prohibition, whereas Quine sees himself as engaged in behavioristic science and confines his resources to regularities and nomological generalizations. But the apparent contrast might prove illusory, insofar as canons of criticism play an explanatory role in Quine’s picture of language acquisition.

It is against this backdrop that Jose Zalabardo’s detailed and insightful book *Pragmatist Semantics* is best understood. One of the book’s many virtues is the clarity with which it sets out and adjudicates two competing models of linguistic meaning: *representationalism*, which “specifies the meaning ground of a sentence in terms of semantic relations between the sentence and the bits of the world it represents;” and *pragmatism*, which “specifies the meaning ground of a sentence in terms of how it’s used” [Zalabardo (2023), p. 13]. The meaning ground of a sentence S is the property it has by virtue of which it has the meaning it has: meaning grounds are facts which determine semantic content. Representationalism locates such grounds in world-word relations such as reference and truth; pragmatism, in contrast, locates such grounds in the uses to which sentences are put. Zalabardo’s book is a highly informative development (and validation) of the pragmatist picture.

Zalabardo’s exploration of the terrain is too rich and extensive to allow engagement with all his concerns; here I narrow focus to several areas for further exploration.

I. COLLATERAL INFORMATION

Semantic folk wisdom dictates that a speaker’s use of a declarative sentence S is a resultant of several factors: (1) the meaning of the sentence; (2) the beliefs, desires, and perceptual experiences of the speaker; (3) the collateral information available to the speaker. Add to this the

complexities of ambiguity, vagueness, open texture, and polysemy, and it might be virtually impossible to isolate aspects of linguistic usage allegedly constitutive of meaning. Such complexities aside, meaning is only one component in explanations of use; a use theory of meaning, therefore, must incorporate a mechanism for isolating sentential meaning from other factors that determine sentential use. If such a mechanism is unavailable in principle, so much the worse for the theory.

Quine articulated the problem with great force, deploying it to undermine the very notions of synonymy and analyticity. Here is one of his formulations:

...suppose it is said that a particular class Σ comprises just those stimulations each of which suffices to prompt assent to a sentence *S* outright, without benefit of collateral information. Suppose it said that the stimulations comprised in a further class Σ' , likewise sufficient to prompt assent to *S*, owe their efficacy rather to certainly widely disseminated collateral information, *C*. Now couldn't we just as well have said, instead, that on acquiring *C*, men have found it convenient implicitly to change the very "meaning" of *S*, so that the members of Σ' now suffice outright like members of Σ ? I suggest that we may say either...The distinction is illusory...as mistaken as the notion...that we can determine separately what to talk about and what to say about it [Quine (1960), p. 38].

But the problem, here illustrated in terms of Quine's notion of stimulus meaning, is not confined to semantic theories built upon that notion; Sellars' semantics, cast in terms of different notions, encounters the same difficulty. To see this, ask whether there is, corresponding to every linguistic expression, a "role" played by that expression. What precisely is the "functional role" of the word 'green'? Presumably certain aspects of its use are constitutive of its role, whereas other aspects of its use depend upon background beliefs about contingent facts. But it is difficult to see where role leaves off and other factors kick in — even when the inevitable idealizations and approximations requisite for theory construction are factored in. There may be no principled distinction between "the position of an expression in the language game" and occurrences of the expression that depend upon collateral information. If this is so, it is unclear that any systematic theory of meaning can be cast in terms of Sellars' notion of "linguistic roles" without begging questions about determinate meanings which authorize or prohibit patterns of usage.

Traditional "representational" semantic theories do not suffer this difficulty: that's because the postulated language-world representational

ties obtain as determinate realities independent of any intrusion of collateral information. If the predicate ‘ x is green’ represents the property of green-ness, that connection holds regardless of collateral beliefs/desires on the part of a speaker. But any “pragmatist” theory — which gives pride of place to linguistic usage as constitutive of meaning — must confront the problem. It would be helpful to have a better sense of how Zalabardo thinks about this cluster of issues, and how a workable notion of semantic content — sufficiently robust to do explanatory work — can be extracted from the patterns of usage he identifies.

II. SEMANTICS OF SEMANTIC DISCOURSE

Turn now to the semantics of semantic discourse: i.e., the meaning grounds of claims about meaning, reference, extension, truth, etc. We wish to know whether semantic claims (e.g., ‘ S means that T ’, “‘ a ’ refers to the Empire State Building”, “ S has truth conditions,” etc.) have a meaning grounded in some property expressed by such predicates as ‘...means that...’, ‘is true’, ‘...refers to’, ‘denotes...’, etc. The pragmatist wishes to bypass any such properties and instead talk solely about the work done by semantic claims: the use to which they are put within discursive practice.

The pragmatist does not ground the meaning of ‘means that p ’ by specifying what has to be the case for this predicate to apply to a sentence. Instead, she specifies, in terms of use, what has to be the case for someone to count as meaning by a predicate what we mean by ‘means that p ’.

But note the alleged contrast. One semantic strategy invokes properties expressed by a predicate; the other speaks only of use. Depending upon what one takes properties to be, and what one takes “the representation of a property” to be, there might not be such a wide gap between these approaches. More on this shortly.

Think of the pragmatist’s customary inquiry “What are we *doing* when we moralize (causalize, modalize, attribute rule-following, etc.)? The pragmatist extends this strategy to semantic discourse and asks “What are people *doing* when engaged in semantic interpretation? What is Jones doing when ascribing meaning to a linguistic expression?” Zalabardo sees this question as significantly distinct from “What property is expressed by the predicate ‘means that p ?’”.

It is not clear how deep the distinction runs. To see this, return to Quine's semantic strategy: he wishes to specify, in terms of patterns of linguistic behavior correlated with stimulatory conditions, circumstances under which someone qualifies as meaning something by a linguistic expression. The translator seeks a pairing of native utterances with utterances in her own idiolect that come reasonably close to playing the same role (i.e., having the same use) as the native informant's utterances. "Role" here is a matter of stimulus meaning: the use of an expression as a response to environmental situations. There are constraints governing her pairing: the translation function must be general recursive, preserve the stimulus meaning of occasion sentences, commute with truth functions, preserve stimulus analyticity, and so on.

Under what conditions should we say that a person is engaged in translation (as opposed to doing something else)? She is engaged in translation iff she is pairing some speaker's sentences with sentences in her own idiolect, and her pairing conforms to Quine's specified constraints on translation manuals: these constraints specify *what it is* for a person to be engaged in interpretation. Were she not thus constrained; she would not qualify as offering a translation map and would therefore not be engaged in linguistic interpretation.

Note that representational semantics has not yet entered the picture: only correlations between utterance types and stimulatory situations. This is a matter of use: Zalabardo's favored semantic notion. But representational semantics lurks uncomfortably close. Let $SM = \{s_1 \dots s_n\}$ be the affirmative stimulus meaning of native utterance S : viz., the class of all stimulations that would prompt the speaker's assent to S . Note that SM determines a property in extension; pending further argumentation, there seems little systematic justification for resisting the move to regarding SM as *the property represented by S* . Having made this move, the targeted discourse now qualifies as representational. Yet the only ingredients deployed are those involving uses of S across a range of stimulatory conditions. The use theory has collapsed into a representational theory.

I am not comfortable with this argument; but it turns on deep features of the contrast between representational and pragmatist semantics that should be articulated; it highlights the risk of use theories collapsing into representational theories. It would be helpful to learn Zalabardo's perspective on how the pragmatist semanticist can resist the collapse.

III. DEFLATION, QUASI-REALISM, REPRESENTING WITHOUT REPRESENTATIONALISM

There could be a fragment of discourse which is portrayed by our best semantic theory as not in the business of describing, stating facts, or representing the world, but nevertheless containing elements that strongly suggest the presence of a representational function. As a matter of phenomenology, participants in the discourse might see themselves as “getting at the facts” and “directly experiencing” properties which we, as outside interpreters, refuse to countenance, thus leading us to endorse an irrealist explanation of the relevant sentences and predicates. Suppose, e.g., a highly refined variant of moral expressivism is true, according to which the claim “Killing animals for sport is immoral” manifests a stance, articulates a commitment, or performs some other non-representational task. Yet the discourse licenses such locutions as “It’s true that killing animals for sport is immoral,” “It’s a fact that killing animals for sport is immoral,” “Even if everyone had vastly different sentiments concerning treatment of animals, killing animals for sport would still be immoral,” and so on. That is: the discourse appears realistic from within. The challenge is to say why the expressive resources of realism and representationalism appear to be present in a discourse claimed by the semantic theorist to be non-representational. We might say: moral discourse is intuitively representational — at least, to those engaged in it — despite strong theoretical pull toward treating it nonrepresentationally. Zalabardo is duly concerned with such situations.

One approach to the problem is Simon Blackburn’s “quasi-realism,” a semantic agenda that aims to earn speakers the right to deploy *prima facie* realistic idioms within discourses deemed non-representational. [Blackburn (1984), (1993)]. The strategy involves treating talk of truth, representation, description, and facts as themselves nonrepresentational devices; the challenge is then to specify precisely what work is done by these devices. But a problem emerges which Zalabardo seeks to identify and address.

The key player in this dialectic is *deflationism*. Caution is required: the term ‘deflationism’ is currently used in a variety of non-equivalent ways; arguments concerning some forms of deflationism often have no force against others. Essential to all deflationary theories is the claim that semantic discourse is nondescriptive: that is, plays a non-fact-stating role. Having made that minimal denial, there remains the task of specifying precisely what role *is* played by semantic discourse. And it is a formidable

task. In this connection, various strains of semantic deflationism have emerged: redundancy, performative, prosentential, semantic ascent, minimalist, robust, disquotational, etc., each offering an account of how semantic idioms earn their keep. Details vary considerably.

Consider a view — call it “robust deflationism” [hereafter ‘RD’] — wherein semantic discourse is regarded as playing a substantive though nondescriptive role. [Kraut 1993]. RD dictates that ‘S is descriptive’ serves to render explicit the conviction that S plays an ineliminable role in explanation; likewise, ‘predicate P represents a property’ is explained as expressing the conviction that P is an ineliminable explanatory resource. Not all declarative sentences or predicates are singled out as playing this privileged explanatory role; thus, not all sentences are candidates for treatment as truths, or all predicates candidates for treatment as expressing properties. A sentence S, to be a fitting candidate for application of the predicate ‘...has truth conditions’, must play a special role: a role not universally played by arbitrarily selected indicatives. Realist semantic discourse is thus given an irrealist semantics. Such an approach provides insight into the content of realist/irrealist disputes: e.g., the ongoing dialectic between moral realists and their opponents; for that dispute turns precisely on the extent to which moral discourse does or does not play a vital role in explanations of motivation and action.

Discussions of “deflationary” theories of semantic discourse often adopt a *redundancy* assumption: viz., that the truth predicate automatically applies to any well-formed declarative sentence. Given this assumption, if S is assertible then ‘It is true that S’ is equally assertible, insofar as the truth predicate adds nothing to the cognitive content of S; likewise, if predicate ‘Fx’ is well formed, then “‘Fx’ expresses a property” is assertible.

There are indeed deflationary theories of this form (so-called “Ramsey Redundancy Theories”); but it is no part of deflationary strategies *as such* that semantic predicates be treated as “promiscuous” in this way, indiscriminately attaching to any well-formed indicative or well-formed predicate. According to RD, a sentence S, to be a fitting candidate for application of the truth predicate, must play a special role: RD thus provides a non-promiscuous account of semantic discourse. The resulting picture, although deflationary in explaining semantic discourse in terms of an irrealist semantics, discriminates between sentences deemed representational and those not. RD thus sustains the contrast between discourses regarded as representational by their participants and those which are not; it allows a fragment of linguistic behavior to represent the world without itself having a representationalist semantic ground — a result sought by

Zalabardo. It would be helpful to hear whether this proposed semantic strategy is congenial to his pragmatist methods and doctrines.

Department of Philosophy
Ohio State University
326 University Hall
230 N Oval Mall
Columbus OH 43210 USA
E-mail: kraut.1@osu.edu

REFERENCES

- BLACKBURN, S. (1984), *Spreading the Word*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
 — (1993), *Essays in Quasi-Realism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
 DEWEY, J. (1925), *Experience and Nature*, La Salle, Ill., Open Court.
 KRAUT, R. (1993), “Robust Deflationism,” *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 102, pp. 247-263.
 QUINE, W.V.O. (1960), *Word and Object*, Cambridge, Mass., The M.I.T. Press.
 SELLARS, W. (1974), “Meaning as Functional Classification,” *Synthese* vol XXVII, pp. 417-37.
 ZALABARDO, J. L. (2023), *Pragmatist Semantics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.