

# WHY WORDS MEAN WHAT THEY DO

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## 1. Introduction

This paper concerns the prospects for a reductive, 'naturalistic' theory of meaning. I will be assuming that some words do have definite meanings: for example, Pierre's word "chien" means DOG, Paola's word "vero" means TRUE, etc. And I will be considering the question of how this sort of thing can come about. To put it another way, suppose that there are meaning-properties such as

w means DOG  
w means TRUE  
... and so on

which words possess and sometimes share with other words. One might then wonder whether these facts are reducible to (or derived from, or engendered by) underlying non-semantic, non-normative facts. Is there, for each word, some non-semantic, non-normative property that it has, in virtue of which it possesses the particular meaning-property it does? And if so, what are these meaning-constituting properties? What are the specific non-intentional, non-'ought' characteristics,  $U_1$ ,  $U_2$ , ..., such that

w means DOG  $\Leftarrow$   $U_1(w)$   
w means TRUE  $\Leftarrow$   $U_2(w)$   
... and so on? <sup>1</sup>

My aim here is not to give a detailed answer to this question, although I'll indicate the direction in which I suspect that an answer may be found. Rather, I want to examine the conditions that an adequate account must satisfy. More specifically, I will be focussing on a particular alleged requirement on a theory of meaning-property-constitution. It is one that many philosophers have imposed, at least implicitly; but my main point will be to suggest that it should not be imposed. If I am right, then -- since it has been no easy matter to find a non-semantic, non-normative analysis of

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<sup>1</sup> I shall be using the " $\Leftarrow$ " sign to stand for the relation of 'constitution' between properties, leaving it open whether this suffices for identity. Thus, when  $Sx \Leftarrow Ux$ , one may hold either that "Sx" and "Ux" express different concepts of the same property, or that these predicates stand for different properties of which one engenders the other. These alternatives seem to me to be terminological, reflecting the decision to use "property" in either a relatively course-grained sense or a relatively fine-grained sense.

meaning that could satisfy this requirement, and arguably no such account could satisfy it -- the prospects for a naturalistic reduction of meaning are much brighter than many people these days are inclined to think.

## 2. The Explanation Requirement

The adequacy condition on meaning-constitution that I want to scrutinize can be articulated schematically as the following explanation requirement:

ER            w means F  $\Leftarrow$  U(w)  
                 only if it is possible to explain  
                 (a) why this is so  
                 (b) why words with U(w) are true of fs and only fs  
                 (c) why words with U(w) ought to be applied only  
                 to fs <sup>2</sup>

where "f" is to be replaced by an arbitrary English predicate (e.g. "dog") and "F" by a name of the concept expressed by that predicate (e.g. "DOG"). To begin with, I shall concentrate on part (a) of this requirement; for, as we shall see, it is more fundamental than parts (b) or (c).

There are three alternative ways of putting ER(a). First, there is the formulation just given: namely, that the facts of meaning-property-constitution be explicable. For example, if a specific word-world nomological correlation is to be responsible for a certain word's meaning DOG, then one must be able to say why the correlation gives the word that meaning rather than a different one or none at all.

Second, this condition is equivalent to the requirement that there be a general reductive schema (or a set of reductive schemata) of the relational form

$$w \text{ means } F \quad \Leftarrow \quad P(w) \ \& \ R(w, f)$$

For if there is a set of such general theories -- invoking different relations,  $R^1, R^2, \dots, R^k$ , for different kinds of predicate (e.g. color terms, species terms, theoretical terms, etc.) and perhaps varying properties,  $P^1, P^2, \dots, P^j$ , for predicates that are co-extensive yet non-synonymous -- then we

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<sup>2</sup> In the case of non-predicative simple concepts, parts (b) and (c) of the explanation requirement would have to be formulated somewhat differently. In order for 'U(w)' to constitute 'w means K', it would require explanations of why it is (b\*) that if U(w), then "#w" is true if and only if #\*k; and (c\*) that if U(w), then "#w" ought to be accepted only if #\*k -- where "#w" is an arbitrary (non-indexical) sentence containing w, and "#\*\_ " is the English translation of "#\_ ". In order to avoid these complexities, the present discussion is restricted to predicate meanings.

will be in a position, as required by the first formulation of ER(a), to explain any particular fact of meaning-constitution, say

$$w \text{ means DOG} \Leftarrow P^3(w) \ \& \ R^1(w, \text{dog}),$$

as an instance of one of these theories; and no other form of explanation seems feasible. For example, the general schematic theory

$$w \text{ means F} \Leftarrow (y) (\text{There is a disposition to apply} \\ w \text{ to } y \leftrightarrow y \text{ is an } f)$$

has the required relational structure (where 'P' happens to be empty). And by reference to it we would be in a position to explain the particular fact that

$$w \text{ means DOG} \Leftarrow (y) (\text{There is a disposition to apply} \\ w \text{ to } y \leftrightarrow y \text{ is a dog})$$

A third variant of the requirement under discussion is that, in order for 'w means F' to reduce to 'U(w)', it must be possible, given the information that a certain word possesses the property U(w), for us to read-off from this information exactly what that word means. Such reading-off can take place if and only if 'U(w)' takes the form 'P(w) & R(w, f)', where R remains constant over a range of cases. In other words, there must be a general relational theory (or set of theories) fitting the schema, 'w means F  $\Leftarrow$  [P(w) & R(w, f)]'. And this, as we have seen, is necessary and sufficient for there to be explanations of why particular meaning-constituting properties constitute the particular meanings that they do.

Thus, part (a) of what I am calling 'the explanation requirement' has three equivalent formulations. The first is that the facts of meaning-constitution be explicable. The second is that they exhibit the relational form 'w means F  $\Leftarrow$  [P(w) & R(w, f)]'. And the third is that any meaning-constituting property be something from which the meaning-property it induces can be read-off.

### 3. Illustrations

Although the requirement ER(a) is rarely spelled out (in any of its three versions), most reductive theories of meaning to be found in the philosophical literature appear to be designed to meet it. For example, there is the so-called

'informational' approach, favored by Fodor and Stampe<sup>3</sup>, whereby roughly speaking

w means F  $\Leftarrow$  P(w) & occurrences of w (in the mind)  
are nomologically correlated with the  
presence of things that are f

There is also the 'teleological' approach, advanced by Dretske, Jacob, Millikan, and Papineau<sup>4</sup>, whereby roughly speaking

w means F  $\Leftarrow$  P(w) & the (evolutionary) function of w  
is to indicate the presence of fs

And there is the Peacockean<sup>5</sup> conceptual-role-cum-determination-theory approach, whereby

w means F  $\Leftarrow$  P(w) & those sentences (or rules)  
containing w whose acceptance is  
primitively compelling are true (or  
truth-preserving)  $\leftrightarrow$  w is true of fs and  
only fs

Despite the great differences between these theories, each of them satisfies ER(a) -- each takes the relational form

w means F  $\Leftarrow$  P(w) & R(w, f)

enabling particular cases of meaning-constitution to be explained, and enabling the meaning-property of a word to be read-off its meaning-constituting property.

A fairly explicit statement of our third version of ER(a) -- the 'reading off' formulation -- is to be found in Kripke's

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<sup>3</sup> Fodor, J. Psychosemantics, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987. Stampe, D.W. "Toward a Causal Theory of Linguistic Representation", Midwest Studies in Philosophy 2, 42-63, Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1977. Note that, both here and in the immediately following theories, alternate versions may be given, where 'P(w)' is either included or left out, depending on whether it is thought to be needed to accommodate non-synonymous co-referential terms.

<sup>4</sup> Dretske, F. Knowledge and the Flow of Information, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1981. Jacob, P. What Minds Can Do, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. Millikan, R. Language, Thought and Other Biological Categories, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1984. Papineau, D. Reality and Representation, Oxford: Blackwell, 1987.

<sup>5</sup> Peacocke, C. A Study of Concepts, MIT Press, 1992. Peacocke presents his account as a theory of concept identity, Here I have re-formulated it as a theory of meaning.

Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language.<sup>6</sup> In the course of his critique of the theory that meaning-properties may be analyzed as dispositions to verbal behavior, he says

The criterion [i.e. the reductive theory under consideration] is meant to enable us to 'read off' which function I mean by a given function symbol, from my disposition (p. 26)

And -- switching to our first version of the requirement -- one of his main objections to proposed candidates for the particular dispositional property that constitutes 'w means PLUS' is that for none of these candidates can we explain why it should engender precisely this meaning-property rather than a slightly different one -- that is, 'w means QUUS'.<sup>7</sup>

Thus it seems fair to conclude that part (a) of the explanation requirement, in one form or another, is widely presupposed.

#### 4. Motivations

But why should it seem reasonable -- indeed overwhelmingly natural -- to impose the condition ER(a) on reductive analyses of meaning-properties? Certainly not because we are inclined to impose some such condition on the reductive analysis of any sort of property. In order to establish that 'being a sample of water' is constituted by 'being made of H<sub>2</sub>O molecules', what we need to show is that the underlying property, 'being made of H<sub>2</sub>O', can explain the symptoms of the superficial property, 'being water'. But we are not required to explain why being a quantity of water reduces to being made of H<sub>2</sub>O. Indeed one might well regard such constitution facts (like facts of identity) as not susceptible to explanation. No doubt one can explain why we believe that to be water is to be made of H<sub>2</sub>O and why we believe that Hesperus is Phosphorus; but the facts themselves would seem to be explanatorily fundamental.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Kripke, S. Wittgenstein On Rules and Private Language, Oxford: Blackwell. 1982.

<sup>7</sup> Further implicit endorsement of the explanation/reading-off requirement can be found in Kripke's many commentators who take issue with one or another point in his argument but do not question his imposition of that requirement. See, for example, essays by Simon Blackburn ("The Individual Strikes Back", Synthese 10, 1984, 281-301), Crispin Wright ("Kripke's Account of the Argument Against Private Language", Journal of Philosophy, 1984, pp. 759-778), and Paul Boghossian ("The Rule Following Considerations" Mind 98, 1989, 507-550).

<sup>8</sup> Note that the argument -- (1) Water is what has superficial properties M; (2) H<sub>2</sub>O has M; therefore (3) Water is H<sub>2</sub>O -- is not an

So why does the meaning case look different? Why require explanation of the constitution fact here, but not elsewhere? I think there are two tempting lines of thought that could motivate the imposition of ER(a).

In the first place, meaning-properties such as

w means DOG

and

w means TRUE

appear to be complex: they would seem to contain the meaning-relation, 'w means x', and they would also seem to contain the things meant -- i.e. concepts such as DOG and TRUE. But we tend to think that any analysis of a complex property must derive from analyses of some (or all) of its parts. Therefore, the fact that a given underlying property constitutes a given complex property will always be something we can explain. -- For it will be explicable on the basis of how some or all of the constituents of the complex property are analyzed. In particular, the meaning-property

w means DOG

must reduce, in the first instance, to something of the form

$R^*(w, \text{DOG})$

where we have analyzed the 'w means x' component of the meaning-property. And then, in order to facilitate dealing with the concept DOG, it is tempting to suppose that the constituent

$R^*(w, x)$

will have to take the more specific form

$R(w, \text{thing that falls under } x)$

This is tempting because, if it does take that form, then

$R^*(w, \text{DOG})$

will be

$R(w, \text{thing that falls under DOG})$

reducing to

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explanation of (3) in terms of (1). Rather (and even if it is a priori), (1) may be explained by the conjunction of (2) and (3).

$R(w, \text{dog})$

from which reference to the meaning-entity, DOG, has been eliminated. Thus, the general idea is that we need to explain the constitution of each meaning-property in terms of the analysis of its parts, and that this would appear to require a general relational theory of the form ' $w$  means  $F \Leftarrow R(w, f)$ ', which is a special case of ' $w$  means  $F \Leftarrow [P(w) \ \& \ R(w, f)]$ '. That is one possible motivation for ER(a).

An alternative (and perhaps more persuasive) route to the same conclusion rests on the truth-theoretic import of meaning. In general

$w \text{ means } F \rightarrow (x)(w \text{ is true of } x \leftrightarrow fx)$

And in particular

$w \text{ means } \text{DOG} \rightarrow (x)(w \text{ is true of } x \leftrightarrow x \text{ is a dog})$

But the extensional relation ' $w$  is true of  $x$ ' is presumably reducible to some as-yet-unknown naturalistic relation or other -- call it  $wCx$ . Therefore the non-semantic property that constitutes ' $w$  means DOG' must entail ' $(x)(wCx \leftrightarrow x \text{ is a dog})$ ' -- which has the form, ' $R(w, \text{dog})$ '. Therefore the meaning-constituting property must take the form ' $P(w) \ \& \ R(w, \text{dog})$ ', where  $R$  is independent of which meaning-property is being analysed. So it would seem that the truth conditional import of meaning can be accommodated only if there is some relational theory

$w \text{ means } F \Leftarrow P(w) \ \& \ R(w, f)$

And, as we have seen, such a theory will enable explanations of particular facts of meaning-constitution, and will enable us to read-off, from a given non-semantic property of a word, which meaning (if any) it engenders.

Thus we appear to have two distinct reasons for imposing part (a) of the explanation requirement.

## 5. Critique of motivations

However, neither of these motivating considerations stands up to scrutiny. Consider the first one, which rests on the principle that the analysis of a complex property must involve the analysis of at least one of its components. One objection is that counter-examples to this principle are not hard to find:

$x$  exemplifies doggyness  $\Leftarrow x$  is a dog

The concept DOG is true of  $x \Leftarrow x$  is a dog

The dogs owned by  $x$  number 2  $\Leftarrow$

$(\exists a)(\exists b)(aDx \ \& \ bDx \ \& \ a \neq b \ \& \ (t)[tDx \rightarrow (t=a \vee t=b)])$

Thus it seems not always to be the case that the analysis of a complex property must involve the analysis of a constituent. Perhaps this is often the case. Perhaps the underlying property that best explains the symptoms of a complex superficial property is normally the product of analyses of the constituents of the property. For example, what best accounts for the symptoms of 'x is harder than glass' seems likely to be some property of the form 'x bears H to G' -- where 'xHy' underlies the 'harder than' relation and 'Gy' specifies what it is to be glass. But this sort of thing need not be so -- as in the three above examples. Moreover, the fundamental criterion of property U constituting property S -- namely that U explain the symptoms of S -- does not entail that it be so. Therefore it may well not be so for meaning-properties.

A second objection is that even if, despite these considerations, it is true that the analysis of a complex must proceed via analyses of its components, one may well question the coherence of the above motivation, based on that principle, for analyzing meaning-properties relationally. For the rationale was that 'w means F' ought to be reduced initially to 'R(w, thing that falls under F)', and thereby to 'R(w, f)'. But the last step violates the very principle of analysis that is being insisted on:-- one cannot, by analyses of the components of "thing that falls under the concept DOG", reduce it to "dog".

And a third objection is that it is fairly easy to resist the suggestion that, in order to facilitate the elimination of our reference to concepts in

$w$  means  $F$

i.e.

$R^*(w, F)$

we should reduce it to something of the form

$R(w, \text{thing that falls under } F)$

For a reasonable alternative is to analyze 'w means x' as 'w exemplifies x', and to identify the concept, F, with whatever property of a word, U-ness, is responsible for that word's meaning F. In that case

w means F

reduces to

w exemplifies U-ness

which is no more semantic than,

U(w)

Thus the principle that that complexes be analyzed via analyses of their parts is quite consistent with meaning-constituting properties that violate part (a) of the explanation requirement.

Turning to the second potential motivation for ER(a) -- namely, that it is needed in order to accommodate the truth conditional import of meaning -- the reasoning behind that idea presupposed that the relation 'w is true of x' has some naturalistic reductive analysis. For only given that presupposition does the entailment of 'w is true of dogs' by 'w means DOG' put any constraint whatsoever on what can constitute the meaning-property. But this presupposition might well be false. Indeed, from the perspective of deflationary views of truth, it definitely is false. The central idea of deflationism is to challenge the traditional assumption that our truth predicate is governed by some explicit definition (of the form 'y is true  $\equiv$  y is Q). And the same considerations undermine the idea that 'w is true of x' is explicitly definable. Moreover, on this basis it can be argued that we have no reason to expect any sort of reductive analysis of the truth-theoretic properties and relations, and that the truth-theoretic equivalence schemata are not susceptible to explanation.<sup>9</sup> But if this is right, then we have no reason to suspect that (for example) '(x)(w is true of x  $\leftrightarrow$  x is a dog)' is reducible to something of the form '(x)(wCx  $\leftrightarrow$  x is a dog)'. Consequently, we have no reason to think that whatever constitutes 'w means DOG' must take the form, 'P(w) & R(w, dog)'.<sup>10</sup>

Thus both considerations that motivate the explanation requirement on a theory of meaning-constitution are defective; so there is no reason to respect that requirement. And if we

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<sup>9</sup> See my Truth (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Oxford University Press, 1998) for a defense of this deflationary ('minimalist') position.

<sup>10</sup> One might suspect that a more plausible motivation for ER(a) -- accommodating the deflationary thesis that there is no general analysis of 'w is true of x' -- would be based on the idea that there is a variety of analyses of it for different kinds of predicate. But that idea is no less incompatible with the deflationary view that the truth schemata are explanatorily basic. See footnote 13 for further discussion.

are not bound by it, then our chances of being able to devise a decent theory are much improved.

## 6. Violating the requirement

What sort of theory might we give if we don't impose the explanation requirement? As mentioned above, an underlying property U constitutes a relatively superficial property S if and only if the co-extensiveness of U and S explains why S is manifested in the characteristic ways that it is. For example, we judge that 'being made of H<sub>2</sub>O molecules' constitutes 'being a sample of water' because, on the basis of the assumption that water is made of H<sub>2</sub>O, we can explain why water is a colorless, tasteless liquid that boils at 100 degrees Centigrade. In the same way, in order to identify how meaning-properties are constituted, we should look for underlying non-semantic properties that can explain the symptoms of those meaning-properties. But the symptom of a word's meaning is its overall use -- roughly, the collection of sentences containing it that are accepted, and the circumstances in which this is done. Moreover it is not unreasonable to conjecture that each word has a fundamental law of use, which explains, in conjunction with other facts (including the laws of use of other words), its overall deployment. Thus we might well be led to the suspicion that each word's meaning-property is constituted by some such law of use.<sup>11</sup> That is

w means DOG  $\Leftarrow$  L1(w)  
w means TRUE  $\Leftarrow$  L2(w)  
... and so on

where L1("dog") is the explanatory basis of our deployment of the word "dog", L2("true") is the explanatory basis of our deployment of the word "true", etc. For example, a strong case can be made for the thesis that

w means TRUE  $\Leftarrow$  We accept (as basic) the schema  
"<p> is w  $\leftrightarrow$  p"

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<sup>11</sup> This sort of view is proposed and defended in my Meaning (Oxford University Press, 1998), and is further elaborated in "The Use Theory of Meaning" (2001).

Note that a law of use is not a rule of use. -- So even if something like the explanation requirement should be imposed on an account of what constitutes 'following rule R', the proposed picture of meaning will not be faced with the problem of showing how that requirement might be satisfied. However, it seems to me that the difficulty of solving that problem is not especially great. We can suppose (roughly) that S implicitly follows rule R when R is a simple generalization that fits most of what S does.

on the grounds that this use-property of the truth-predicate, in conjunction with other factors that have nothing specifically to do with that word, suffices to account for its overall use.

Notice that there is no need for such reductive facts to take the relational form

$$w \text{ means } F \leftarrow P(w) \ \& \ L(w, f)$$

There is no need for a word's law of use to relate occurrences of that word to members of its extension. Thus there is no reason to expect, given some alleged meaning-constituting law of use,  $L(w)$ , that we will be able to read-off, and hence explain, which particular meaning any word possessing it would have to have.<sup>12</sup>

## 7. Truth

Affiliated with part (a) of the explanation requirement is the further idea -- part (b) -- that one must be able to explain, on the basis of a word's meaning-constituting property, what it would and would not be correct to apply the word to. That is

$$\begin{aligned} \text{ER(b)} \quad w \text{ means } F \leftarrow L(w) \\ \text{only if it is possible to explain (without assuming} \\ \text{'w means } F \leftarrow L(w)\text{' ) why words with } L(w) \text{ are true} \\ \text{of } fs \text{ and only of } fs \end{aligned}$$

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<sup>12</sup> A further objection sometimes leveled against the use theory of meaning (and arguably to be found in Kripke's discussion (op. cit.)) is that one can imagine a community of speakers whose use of (say) "plus" is exactly like ours although they mean something very slightly different by it. Of course, their overall use of "plus" could exactly parallel ours and yet be the product of a different law of use -- because of compensating variations in other explanatory factors. And this prospect would be no threat to the present version of the use theory of meaning. But suppose that what is allegedly imagined are people whose law of use for "plus" is the same as ours though they give the word a slightly different meaning. Now we can respond (turning the author of Naming and Necessity against his later self!) that this is just like trying to imagine a sample of  $H_2O$  that is not water. There is indeed such an epistemological possibility -- but the metaphysical possibility we would be entertaining is not one in which the  $H_2O$  isn't water, but rather one in which  $H_2O$  (i.e. water) fails to be a colorless, tasteless liquid, etc. Similarly, we can imagine our law of use for "plus" yielding the acceptance of very different sentences from those we actually accept (because it might be combined with different circumstantial factors). And similarly, what we must say is that in such a hypothetical situation the property of 'meaning PLUS' would not be manifested in the familiar way.

Here I have emphasized something that is merely implicit in my earlier formulation -- implicit in the fact that ER(b) appears just after ER(a) -- namely, that the required explanation not go via an unexplained premise specifying which meaning-property is engendered by L(w).

As far as I can see, the only way to make sure that this requirement is satisfied would be, first, to assume that there is some reductive theory of the form

$$w \text{ is true of } x \Leftarrow wCx$$

second, to show that

$$L(w) \rightarrow (x)(wCx \leftrightarrow fx)$$

and third to conclude that

$$L(w) \rightarrow (x)(w \text{ is true of } x \leftrightarrow fx)$$

But this strategy presupposes that the 'is true of' relation has some reductive analysis -- which, in light of deflationism, cannot be taken for granted. Thus ER(b) is misguided. We can't be expected to explain, without assuming which meaning-property is engendered by a given law of use, why any word governed by that law has the particular truth conditional import that it does.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> As already mentioned in footnote 10, it might be objected that, though the deflationist may be right that there is no general analysis of the 'is true of' relation, there could nonetheless be various restricted analyses, applying to various types of term. I.e. it could be that

$$w \text{ is a word of type } T1 \rightarrow (x)(w \text{ is true of } x \leftrightarrow wC^1x)$$

$$w \text{ is a word of type } T2 \rightarrow (x)(w \text{ is true of } x \leftrightarrow wC^2x)$$

... and so on

And, in that case, we should be expected to be able to show, for any term belonging to one of these types, how its meaning-constituting law of use engenders its extension. Thus ER(b) would appear to have some bite after all. But this is an illusion. In the first place (as mentioned above) the existence of restricted analyses would equally go against the deflationary view of truth (according to which the truth-theoretic schemata are explanatorily fundamental). And, in the second place, the only ground we might have for being tempted to accept some such restricted analysis for a range of terms, "f", "g", ..., would be the discovery that their laws of use take the form

$$P^1(w) \ \& \ (x)(wC^kx \leftrightarrow fx)$$

$$P^2(w) \ \& \ (x)(wC^kx \leftrightarrow gx)$$

... and so on

I.e. the discovery that these properties are what best explain the words' overall uses. Thus the requirement to satisfy ER(b) could not provide a substantive constraint on our search for the correct meaning-constituting properties, since the legitimacy of imposing

Notice, however, that if we are allowed to make such an assumption then things are quite different. For the following explanatory argument schema is entirely legitimate

Word, a, is governed by  $L(w)$

But:  $w$  means  $F \Leftarrow L(w)$

Therefore: a has ' $w$  means  $F$ '

But:  $w$  means  $F \rightarrow (x)(w \text{ is true of } x \leftrightarrow fx)$

Therefore:  $(x)(a \text{ is true of } x \leftrightarrow fx)$

Thus we can explain, on the basis of a word's law of use, why it has the extension it does. True, we must be allowed to employ, as an unexplained explanatory premise, an assumption regarding which meaning-property is constituted by that law of use. But, as we saw in our discussion of  $ER(a)$ , such an assumption would be entirely proper.<sup>14</sup>

## 8. Normativity

How is it possible, within the framework just sketched, to account for the normative import of meaning? How can it come about that a given non-semantic and non-normative meaning-constituting law of use determines the way in which any word conforming to that law ought and ought not to be applied? Why should it be, for example, that

$L1(w) \rightarrow (x)(w \text{ ought to be applied to } x \rightarrow x \text{ is a dog})$

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that requirement would be epistemologically posterior to our having identified those properties.

<sup>14</sup> One might say that the use of a predicate 'determines' its extension (i.e. same use implies same extension) but does not 'DETERMINE' it (i.e. enable it to be read-off). This is how I put the matter in "Meaning, Use, and Truth" (Mind, 1995).

Renunciation of  $ER(b)$  has important implications for the proper treatment of vagueness. For it is widely held that vague predicates cannot have sharp boundaries; and the main rationale for this conviction is that there would be no way of explaining, on the basis of our use of a vague predicate, why any exact boundary it might have would be located where it is rather than somewhere slightly different. But if the explanation requirement is misguided, then this argument is undermined. And so the apparent conflict between vagueness and classical logic (embodied in the sorites paradox) is dissolved. For details, see my "The Sharpness of Vague Terms", Philosophical Studies, forthcoming.

The wrong approach to this problem -- the approach implicit in ER(c) -- is to think that we can explain the normative import of a law of use without making any assumption as to which meaning that law constitutes. One way of trying to implement this wrong approach would be by first trying to explain the truth-conditional import of the meaning-constituting property. But this falls foul of deflationism, as we have just seen. Alternatively, if there were a reductive analysis, 'wC\*x', of the relation 'w ought to be applied to x', then one might hope to show, for example, that

$$L1(w) \rightarrow (x) (wC*x \leftrightarrow x \text{ is a dog})$$

and thereby to explain the normative import of L1(w). But from a deflationary perspective such a reduction is no less implausible than an analysis of truth.

The right approach, rather, is to begin by explaining why we ought to believe only what is true.-- Or, what comes to the same thing, to explain why, if a predicate means F, we ought to apply it only to fs. And it is plausible that the basis for such an account is pragmatic. For it is uncontroversial that true belief tends to facilitate successful action; indeed this fact is not hard to explain. And in that case we would have the following explanatory sequence. The non-semantic facts about w's use would constitute its having a certain meaning; that would enable us to see (as shown in the previous section) why w is true of certain things and not others; and that (given the pragmatically grounded norm of truth) would in turn account for how the word ought to be deployed.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> For further discussion see Meaning, chapter 8, and my "Norms of Truth and Meaning" in What Is Truth, edited by Richard Schantz, Gruyter: Berlin and New York, 2001.

Robert Brandom argues, in his Making It Explicit (Harvard University Press, 1994), that a word's meaning-property cannot reduce to a non-normative regularity in its use, because no such regularity could explain either (a) the extension of the word, or (b) the normative import of its meaning. But the upshot of our discussion is that point (a) is infected with inflationism, and point (b) overlooks the possibility of explaining pragmatically why one ought to apply a predicate only to things of which it is true. Thus there is no reason to conclude, with Brandom, that meanings derive from the acceptance of norms of use.

Note also that Brandom's overall position is dialectically unstable since, if his pair of arguments against 'regularism' were correct, they would tell equally well against his own positive view. For (a\*) one can read-off a meaning from norms of use no more easily than one can read them off regularities; and (b\*) insofar as there is a problematic fact-value gap between the actual use of a word and norms for its use, there is also such a gap between the meaning-constituting implicit acceptance, or adoption, of certain norms or rules for the use a given word, and the existence of certain normative facts about it (e.g. that one really ought to apply a given word only to dogs).

## 9. The 'Problem of Error'

It is often suggested that a fundamental constraint on a decent theory of meaning-constitution is that it solve the so-called 'problem of error':-- the account must provide a criterion by which we can distinguish which deployments of a term are correct and which are erroneous.

But we are now in a position to see that there are two quite different ways of construing this proposed constraint, one of which is illegitimate and the other of which is trivial.

If we take it to require that the correct-application condition for a word must be derivable from its meaning-constituting property without any assumption about which particular meaning that property constitutes, then the problem of error presupposes an inflationary view of truth; so it is a pseudo-problem.

If, on the other hand, we require that derivation, but we allow that some meaning-constitution thesis can be a premise of it, then the problem of error will place no constraint at all on a theory of meaning-constitution. For a given underlying property will enable us to solve the problem because it is meaning-constituting -- not the other way round.

## 10. Conclusion

My aim in this paper has been to focus attention on a certain alleged adequacy condition on reductive accounts of meaning-properties:-- roughly, that particular constitution facts be themselves explicable. I have tried, first, to articulate this 'explanation requirement' in various forms; second, to show that it is widely assumed; third, to lay out the reasons for assuming it; fourth, to criticize those reasons; fifth, to indicate the attractiveness of theories that violate it; and sixth, to indicate how the representational and normative import of meaning might nevertheless be accommodated.

The main moral of this story is simple. Kripke, Boghossian, Brandom, and others have made a good case for thinking that the explanation requirement cannot be satisfied by a purely naturalistic account of meaning. But instead of concluding, as they do, that no such facts can underlie what words mean, we ought to appreciate that the explanation requirement need not and should not be respected. This would open the door to a more flexible and therefore viable view of the matter (-- one which, pace Kripke, strikes me as more truly

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Wittgensteinian): the idea that meaning is engendered by non-semantic and non-normative regularities of use.