Metaphysical Naturalism, Semantic Normativity, and Meta–Semantic Irrealism*

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Semantic discourse —discourse employing notions like *meaning* and *truth*— gives rise to questions about the semantics, metaphysics, and epistemology of such notions:

> What sort of metaphysical commitments does semantic discourse (as ordinarily used) involve?

> Does such discourse commit us to the existence of semantic properties and facts?

> If so, are there such properties and facts?

> What sort of properties and facts are they?

> How (if at all) can semantic properties be detected and how can semantic facts be known?

Such questions are, of course, the analogs to standard meta–ethical questions about moral discourse, and are appropriately labeled meta–semantic questions. In this paper we pursue, in a preliminary way, these and related meta–semantic questions. We approach them from the perspective of a thoroughgoing philosophical naturalism and argue that if a particular semantic story is approximately correct, viz., a story that emphasizes the normativity and context sensitivity of semantic notions (a view we call *contextual semantics*), then that story can be used to defend a plausible version of meta–semantic irrealism.

1   Accommodation Programs

A philosophical interpretation or account of some realm of discourse (e.g., moral, semantic, aesthetic) that purports to answer meta–questions about that discourse, is usually guided by one or both of the following *desiderata*. First, one may approach the discourse in question from some broad philosophical perspective that involves very general metaphysical and epistemological commitments. These commitments reflect one's philosophical worldview, and thus guide inquiry. The aim is to *accommodate* the discourse, by construing it as comporting with the worldview. In the next section, we say more about one dominant brand of accommodation project (which guides our inquiry into semantic discourse), viz., naturalism.

One may also be guided in one's philosophical investigation into some realm of discourse by various assumptions deeply embedded in people's ordinary use of that discourse. The idea is to interpret the discourse in a manner that comports with so–called commonsense assumptions of that discourse; or, in other words, one wants to be able to *accommodate* those commonsense assumptions. So, for example, there are features of ordinary moral discourse, e.g., it is (or appears to be) fact–stating, we take there to be right answers to many moral questions, and so forth, features which should be accommodated by a plausible story about such discourse.

Although some philosophers have only concerned themselves with one or the other of these accommodation projects, ideally one should work toward satisfying the *desiderata* associated with both projects. Of course, there is no guarantee that one's efforts at accommodation will satisfy both of these aims; in some cases success with one

accommodation project can only be purchased at the expense of the other. However, in judging competing attempts at accommodation, any view that does better overall than its rivals at the total, two–part accommodation task is the more adequate view.

Our investigation here into semantic discourse engages both accommodation projects, and we argue that our meta–semantic irrealism not only comports nicely with a naturalist worldview, but that it plausibly accommodates common sense. In the next section, we explain how we understand naturalism and then clarify some of the standard philosophical options associated with the project of naturalist accommodation. In a later section, after we have presented our meta–semantic view, we turn to the project of accommodating commonsense assumptions embedded in semantic discourse.

2   Metaphysical Naturalism

We take the naturalist outlook in philosophy to be at bottom a metaphysical view about the nature of what exists. The vague, pre–theoretic idea the philosophical naturalist attempts to articulate and defend is that everything —including any particulars, events, facts, properties, etc.— is part of the natural physical world that science investigates.

Naturalist programs in philosophy are attempts to accommodate various kinds of discourse —e.g., moral discourse, mental discourse, mathematical discourse, semantical discourse— within a naturalistic worldview. These programs usually treat the vocabulary of natural science as relatively unproblematic, and various kinds of "higher–level" discourse as needing naturalistic accommodation. The generic, pre–theoretic, notion of accommodation is of course quite vague. Usually a specific naturalistic program brings with it a specific conception of what would count as adequate accommodation. (Sometimes the underlying assumptions about what would constitute adequate accommodation are fairly explicit; sometimes they are mainly implicit; sometimes some of both.)

These naturalistic accommodation programs usually include not only a metaphysical dimension, but an epistemological one as well. One seeks an approach to the relevant sort of discourse that not only incorporates it into a naturalistic metaphysical worldview, but also provides an account of how humans, qua physical organisms, can have *knowledge* pertaining to the relevant domain(s) of discourse.

Attempts at naturalistic accommodation can be broadly classified along two axes or dimensions, largely orthogonal to each another:

ontological and semantic. Along the ontological axis, a philosophical position can be either *realist* or *irrealist* vis–a–vis a given mode of discourse. Along the semantic axis, a philosophical position can either assert or deny that sentences within the given mode of discourse are synonymous with sentences whose content is overtly "naturalistic"; as we will put it here, the position can be either *semantically reductionist* or *semantically nonreductionist*. Thus, accommodation projects generally fall into just one of the four cells in this 2 × 2 table:

	Semantically Reductionist	Semantically Nonreductionist
Ontologically Realist	1A	1B
Ontologically Irrealist	2A	2B

To illustrate how various accommodation projects can be fitted into the respective cells of this table, consider various naturalistic positions in 20th century meta–ethics. Within meta–ethics, especially earlier in the century, the term 'naturalism' tended to be used narrowly, as a label for metaphysically naturalist positions of type 1A —that is, positions asserting that moral sentences are synonymous with declarative sentences in non–moral, naturalistic, vocabulary. Herbert Spencer is an example of a philosophical thinker whose position is usually cited (e.g., by Moore 1903: ch. 2) as being of this kind. Spencer evidently held that 'good' is synonymous with something like 'highly evolved'.

Cell 2A is occupied by the dominant metaphysically naturalist meta–ethical position in this century: the "non–cognitivism" of Ayer (1952), Stevenson (1946), and Hare (1952). Moral sentences are held to be synonymous with non–moral, non–declarative sentences such as imperatives. Allan Gibbard's (1990) recent "norm–expressivist" position concerning moral and epistemic discourse, a more recent version of non–cognitivism, also occupies cell 2A.

Cell 1B is occupied, for instance, by what we have elsewhere (Horgan and Timmons 1991, 1992a, 1992b) called "new–wave moral realism", as exemplified by recent meta–ethical work by philosophers like Brink (1989), Boyd (1988), Railton (1986), and Sturgeon (1984). They hold that moral sentences express facts expressible in naturalistic language; moral properties are a species of natural properties. They deny, however, that moral sentences are synonymous with naturalistic sentences. They draw heavily on relatively recent work in philosophy of language, notably Putnam's (1975) and Kripke's (1980) writings on natural kind terms.

Cell 2B is occupied, for example, by the meta–ethical position espoused by J.L. Mackie (1977). Mackie held (i) that ordinary moral statements purport to express facts of an irreducibly normative kind, involving special properties that have "to be pursuedness" built into them, but (ii) that there are no such facts or properties.

3   Semantic Normativity

Horgan (1986a, 1986b, 1991) has proposed and defended an approach to semantics, and to questions of language/world relations, that is intermediate between two prevalent orientations in recent philosophy —between (i) a position viewing truth as direct correspondence between language and the mind–independent, discourse–independent, world; and (ii) a position viewing truth as radically epistemic (as warranted assertibility, or "ideal" warranted assertibility). (The latter view often is wedded to global metaphysical irrealism, according to which there's no such thing as a discourse–independent, mind–independent, world at all.) These views might be called, respectively, *referential* semantics and *pragmatist* semantics (or, *referentialism* and *pragmatism*).

Horgan first called his proposed intermediate position "language–game semantics", later "psychologistic semantics", but no longer likes either name. Here we will call it *contextual* semantics. In briefly articulating it, and for related expository purposes throughout the paper, we will borrow from Putnam the device of capitalizing terms and phrases like 'object', 'property', and 'the world'; this makes it unambiguously clear that we mean to be talking about denizens of the *mind–independent, discourse–independent*, world —the world whose existence is denied by global irrealists.

The most fundamental theses of contextual semantics are the following: (1) Truth is *correct assertibility*. (2) Contrary to pragmatism, truth is not radically epistemic; for, correct assertibility is distinct from warranted assertibility, and even from "ideal" warranted assertibility. (3) Standards for correct assertibility are not monolithic within a language; instead they vary somewhat from one context to another, depending upon the specific purposes our discourse is serving at the time. (4) Contrary to global metaphysical irrealism, correct assertibility is ordinarily a joint product of two factors: (i) the relevant assertibility norms; and (ii) how things actually are in the WORLD. Yet (5) contrary to referentialism, our discourse often employs standards of correct assertibility under which a sentence can count as correctly assertible (i.e., as true) even if there

are no OBJECTS or PROPERTIES in the WORLD answering to the sentence's singular terms, unnegated quantifier expressions, or predicates.

On this view, there is a whole spectrum of ways that a sentence's correct assertibility can depend upon the WORLD. At one end of the spectrum are sentences whose assertibility norms, in a given context of usage, coincide with those laid down by referentialism; under these norms a sentence is true only if some unique constituent of the WORLD answers to each of its singular terms, and at least one such entity answers to each of its unnegated existential–quantifier expressions. At the other end of the spectrum are sentences whose governing assertibility norms, in a given context, are such that those sentences are sanctioned as correctly assertible *by the norms alone*, independently of how things are with the WORLD. (Sentences of pure mathematics are plausible candidates for this status.) And various intermediate positions are occupied by sentences whose correct assertibility, in a given context, does depend in part on how things are with the WORLD, but where this dependence does not consist in direct correspondence between (i) the referential apparatus of the sentence (its singular terms, quantifiers, and predicates), and (ii) OBJECTS or PROPERTIES in the WORLD.

As a plausible example of a statement that would ordinarily be governed by assertibility norms falling at an intermediate point in the spectrum just described, consider:

(B) Beethoven's fifth symphony has four movements.

The correct assertibility of (B) probably does not require that there be some ENTITY answering to the term 'Beethoven's fifth symphony', and also answering to the predicate 'has four movements'. Rather, under the operative assertibility norms, (B) is probably correctly assertible (i.e., true) by virtue of other, more indirect, connections between the sentence and the WORLD. Especially germane is the behavior by Beethoven that we could call "composing his fifth symphony". But a considerably wider range of goings–on is relevant too: in particular, Beethoven's earlier behavior in virtue of which his later behavior counts as composing his *fifth* symphony; and also a broad range of human practices in virtue of which such behavior counts as "composing a symphony" in the first place.

If contextual semantics is right, so that truth is intimately bound up with assertibility norms, then meaning too is intimately bound up with these norms. Intuitively and pre–theoretically, meaning is what combines with how the WORLD is to yield truth. Thus, if truth is correct assertibility under operative assertibility norms, then the

role of meaning is played *by the assertibility norms themselves*. So matters of meaning are matters of operative assertibility norms.

Among the advantages of this general approach to semantics are the potential resources it provides for accommodating various forms of discourse within a naturalistic worldview. In particular, it greatly expands the possibilities for accommodative positions falling within cell 2B of the above chart. Take sentences like (B), for example. Evidently, an adequate semantics for sentences like (B) should be semantically nonreductionist; for, no plausible–looking way of systematically paraphrasing such sentences ("regimenting" them, in Quine's phrase) into a more austere idiom is even remotely in sight. If the notion of truth works in the way just characterized, then even though semantic reductionism evidently won't fly, we can still accommodate symphony discourse as literally true, and can accommodate assertions like (B) as knowable, without being forced to populate the WORLD with SYMPHONY TYPES.

On the other hand, if we try construing (B) in terms of referentialism, and also accept that (B) is true, then we are forced to seek an accommodation story about symphonies that will fit into cell 1B. I.e., we must try accommodating SYMPHONY TYPES, tokenable by concrete performance–events, within a naturalistic metaphysics; and we must face the correlative task of accommodating them in a manner that allows for genuine *knowledge* about such ENTITIES. This is no small task, especially since there will be strong theoretical pressure to consign these putative, abstract, ENTITIES to Plato's non–spatio–temporal HEAVEN —which in turn will seriously exacerbate the task of giving a naturalistically acceptable account of how humans can know about them (and can refer to them).

4   Meta–Semantics

Semantic discourse, employing notions like truth and meaning, is itself philosophically problematic from the perspective of metaphysical naturalism; it is itself among the kinds of higher–level discourse that need accommodating into a naturalistic worldview. Thus, meta–semantic questions arise that are analogues of meta–ethical questions. Are there, in the WORLD, semantic FACTS and semantic PROPERTIES? If so, are they naturalistic ones? If there are such FACTS and PROPERTIES but they are not identical to naturalistic ones, can their existence really be made to square with metaphysical naturalism? Might it be that there are no semantic FACTS or PROPERTIES, but that there is a way to naturalistically ac-

commodate semantic discourse anyway? And there are issues about *epistemic* accommodation, too; we want semantic claims to turn out *knowable*, under an adequate meta–semantic account.

Moreover, if the contextual approach to semantics is right, then the similarities between meta–ethics and meta–semantics become even more striking. For, the meta–semantic questions just posed are, like meta–ethical questions, about the existence or non–existence of certain kinds of *normative* FACTS and PROPERTIES.

Our central purpose in this paper is to address these meta–semantic issues, vis–a–vis contextual semantics. The question we are asking is thus conditional: *If* contextual semantics is right, then what is the right meta–semantic position? And in particular, what is the right way to accommodate semantic discourse, within a naturalistic worldview?

So henceforth we will assume, at least for argument's sake, that contextualism is indeed right. (Timmons is agnostic about this assumption; Horgan is the true believer.) Relative to this assumption, we will articulate in a preliminary way, and defend in a preliminary way, a meta–semantic position that fits into cell 2B of the above chart: a position that is metaphysically irrealist about semantic discourse, and that also repudiates any systematic synonymy between sentences employing semantic notions and sentences eschewing semantic notions. That is, there are no semantic FACTS in the WORLD; and yet semantic discourse is in general not semantically equivalent to non–semantic discourse. (In fact, we are inclined to advocate a 2B–style accommodation position for normativity *in general* —including moral and epistemic normativity. What we say here about semantics, we think, is potentially generalizable; cf. Timmons (1993).)

Moreover, the sort of 2B–style approach we envision would not be "eliminativist". For, it would not hold either (i) that semantic notions and other normative notions are radically error–infested, or otherwise illegitimate; or (ii) that semantic and other notions are *dispensable*. In our view, semantic notions (and likewise moral and epistemic ones) are perfectly legitimate, and are quite indispensable for human life, metaphysical irrealism about normativity notwithstanding.

5   Meta–Semantic Irrealism

We will now briefly set forth some considerations favoring meta–semantic irrealism, as opposed to meta–semantic realism, as the nat-

uralistically most plausible meta–semantics to wed to contextual se-
mantics. (Analogous considerations, we think, really favor irrealism
regarding any kind of normativity, including moral and epistemic.)

First, as Mackie (1977, pp. 37-40) rightly emphasized, normative
PROPERTIES that have "to–be–pursuedness" built into them would
be metaphysically extremely queer; they would be quite unlike the
naturalistic properties that natural science talks about. T0–BE–
PURSUEDNESS, as a putative feature of the WORLD, just does
not comport well with metaphysical naturalism.

Second, if we instead opt for an ontologically realist account (ei-
ther of type 1A or of type 2A) that identifies normative PROPER-
TIES with natural properties that do *not* have to–be–pursuedness
built into them, then we thereby squeeze out the normativity itself.
The element of to–be–pursuedness, although it may not reside in the
WORLD, is crucial to the very meaning of normative notions; this
aspect of their meaning precludes the identity of normative PROP-
ERTIES with natural ones. This is the general moral of Moore's
"open question argument". (A version of the open question argu-
ment applies, we maintain, to new wave moral realism, i.e., meta–
ethical naturalism of type 1B; cf. Horgan and Timmons (1992b).
This updated open–question argument also applies to meta–*seman-
tic* naturalism of type 1B: semantic PROPERTIES could not even
be *synthetically* identical to any natural properties, because such
identities would violate the normativity of semantic notions.)

Third, it doesn't help to say that normative PROPERTIES and
FACTS are *supervenient* on naturalistic ones. For one thing, the
dilemma posed by the preceding two arguments just reappears: if the
putative supervening PROPERTIES have to–be–pursuedness built
into them, then they are metaphysically queer; and if they don't,
then normativity gets squeezed out. But in addition, a metaphys-
ical naturalist can legitimately appeal to in–the–WORLD relations
of supervenience only if those relations are themselves *explainable* in
a naturalistically satisfactory way, rather than being metaphysically
sui generis. As we have argued elsewhere (Horgan and Timmons,
1992a), it is very unlikely that this explanatory burden could be dis-
charged for supervenience relations involving *moral* PROPERTIES
and FACTS; and the argument can be extended, *mutatis mutandis*,
to putative normative PROPERTIES of any kind. (This point about
explanation, we think, is the moral of the second of Mackie's two
metaphysical "queerness" arguments against moral realism (Mackie
1977, p. 44) —the argument alleging that in–the–WORLD super-
venience of the moral on the natural would itself be metaphysically
queer.)

6   Irrealist Meta–Semantics for Contextual Semantics: Initial Prospects

The considerations of section 5 point toward the lower row of our earlier 2x2 chart: the irrealist cells 2A and 2B. Of these, 2B is the more attractive. For, *prima facie*, it is not at all plausible that sentences employing semantic terminology are synonymous with non–declarative sentences employing only non–semantic, non–normative, terminology. In assessing the prospects for an irrealist meta–semantics of type 2B, however, one must keep clearly in mind that the menu of options offered in our matrix looks much different, relative to contextual semantics, than it does relative to referential semantics. In effect, these two contrasting approaches to semantics yield another axis or dimension, so that the original 4–cell 2×2 matrix now becomes an 8–cell $2 \times 2 \times 2$ matrix. The semantically nonreductionist half of the expanded matrix is this:

	Semantically Nonreductionist	
	Referentialist	Contextualist
Ontologically Realist	1B.i	1B.ii
Ontologically Irrealist	2B.i	2B.ii

Options 1B.i and 1B.ii are not importantly different insofar as meta–semantics is concerned, since both would posit semantic PROPERTIES and FACTS. Options 2B.i and 2B.ii, however, are *very* different.

If referential semantics is right, then the associated 2B–style meta–semantic position, viz., 2B.i., has serious disadvantages. Most importantly, 2B.i is apparently committed to the view that declarative sentences employing the notions of truth and meaning are true only if they express semantic FACTS, involving TRUTH and MEANING as genuine PROPERTIES. But the result of combining this construal of semantic statements with irrealism about semantic PROPERTIES and FACTS, requires attributing massive *error* to semantic discourse; a 2B.i position entails that affirmative semantic claims are never really true at all. But an error theory of this kind, the analog of Mackie's error theory for meta–ethics, obviously falls quite far short of *full* accommodation of semantic discourse, because the commonsense objective pretensions of that discourse must be largely explained away as erroneous, rather than being legitimated. (We borrow the phrase 'objective pretensions' from Gibbard (1990).)

If contextual semantics is right, however, then the prospects for an adequate 2B–style meta–semantics become much brighter: cell

2B.ii looks considerably more promising than cell 2B.i. For, the general perspective on language/WORLD relations embodied in this semantics can now be brought to bear on semantic discourse itself. *Prima facie* at least, it seems that one can consistently maintain that semantic statements are *true*, i.e., correctly assertible, even while denying that there are any semantic PROPERTIES or FACTS in the WORLD. Although the correct assertibility of semantic sentences will indeed depend upon how things are with the WORLD, the relevant dependence need not be direct language/WORLD correspondence. Rather, the assertibility norms that govern semantic discourse, in ordinary contexts of usage, will render semantic sentences correctly assertible by virtue of considerably less direct linkages to the WORLD than the kind of linkages required under referentialism. Thus, just as

(B) Beethoven's fifth symphony has four movements

can be true (in ordinary contexts, under operative assertibility norms) even if there are no SYMPHONIES, so likewise (B') can be true (in ordinary contexts, under operative assertibility norms governing *semantic* discourse) even if there are no semantic PROPERTIES or FACTS:

(B') 'Beethoven's fifth symphony has four movements' is true.

In short, if contextual semantics is right, then the prospects look much brighter for an irrealist meta–semantics that can successfully accommodate the objective pretensions of semantic discourse. One can espouse a 2B–style position that is not an error theory.

   (We think these same remarks hold, *mutatis mutandis*, for moral discourse: If referentialism is right, then the meta–ethical options 2A and 2B both look unattractive, notwithstanding the powerful metaphysical considerations favoring meta–ethical irrealism. But a 2B–style meta–ethics looks much more attractive and plausible if one gives up referentialism in favor of contextual semantics, because now a theory of type 2B need no longer be an *error* theory. Cf. Timmons (1993).)

   Admittedly, the conceptual air now gets thin and giddifying, because of the need to apply the notion of correct assertibility, boomerang–style, to discourse *about* correct assertibility. Insofar as one espouses metaphysical irrealism about semantic normativity, one needs to be cognizant of the threat of ultimate incoherence. On one hand, one's semantical position is that truth is correct assertibility. On the other hand, one's meta–semantic position is that there is no such

PROPERTY as CORRECT ASSERTIBILITY, because there are no semantic–normative FACTS or PROPERTIES at all. The challenge is to make adequate sense of how statements of various kinds, including statements about what is correctly assertible, can themselves be correctly assertible even if there is no such thing as CORRECT AS-SERTIBILITY. Meeting this challenge is one important aspect of the task of providing a 2B–type naturalistic accommodation of semantic discourse.

Another aspect of the accommodation project, also especially demanding for a meta–semantic irrealist, is to give a satisfying account of *objectivity*. The challenge is to vindicate, either completely or at least to a large extent, the commonsense objective pretensions of semantic discourse —and to do so in a manner compatible with the denial of semantic–normative PROPERTIES or FACTS.

In the next two sections we pursue further, albeit still in a quite preliminary way, the project of providing a 2B–style naturalistic accommodation of semantic discourse.

7   Irrealist Accommodation: Pragmatic/Evolutionary Considerations

Naturalism views human beings and human societies as part of the natural order studied by science. It also views human beings, with their capacities and proclivities for certain kinds of cooperative social structures, as *evolved* creatures: products of natural selection. In part, then, the naturalistic accommodation of various modes of discourse, and of associated practices and institutions, is a matter of *situating* them within a broadly naturalistic/evolutionary picture of human nature and human society: explaining the dynamics of the discourse, and its point and purpose, in broadly naturalistic/evolutionary terms. Furthermore, if the overall accommodation project is of type 2A or 2B, then its pragmatic/evolutionary dimension must comport well with an irrealist conception of the relevant discourse.

This aspect of accommodation is obviously continuous with science itself —indeed, with various branches of science, from neurobiology through sociology. Accordingly, what philosophers *qua* philosophers have to contribute to it will usually involve a certain amount of speculation. So be it; we turn now to a few remarks in this vein, with a dual purpose in mind. First, we want to sketch a general approach to the dynamics and pragmatic rationale of normative discourse in

general, and semantic discourse in particular, which is both *prima facie* plausible and irrealist in spirit —and which thereby makes sense of correct assertibility without CORRECT ASSERTIBILITY, of semantic norms without SEMANTIC NORMS. Second, the points we make in this sketch will provide groundwork for briefly addressing (in Section 8) another aspect of the overall irrealist accommodation project: viz., vindicating semantic discourse's objective pretensions and thus squaring our semantic irrealism with commonsense presumptions embedded in the discourse.

Humans are creatures who can, and do, *coordinate* their behavior so as to achieve mutually beneficial ends and lessen the likelihood of individually or collectively harmful occurrences. Coordinative behavior, and hence the capacity and proclivity to engage in such behavior, has obvious benefit from a pragmatic/evolutionary naturalistic perspective. Now, many kinds of coordinative behavior involve these features: (i) each member of a social group adopts certain kinds of *normative stance*, toward himself and toward the others; and (ii) each member of the group behaves and judges, and is disposed to behave and judge, in ways *consistent* with his own normative stance(s). Humans very often act and judge *qua* normative stance–takers; i.e., from *within* a normative stance.

Various kinds of normative stance–taking can provide obvious pragmatic/evolutionary benefits, to creatures who are sophisticated enough to be capable of them. Our immediate concern here is *linguistic* stance–taking. This confers enormous benefits: indeed, all the benefits of language. For, there is simply no such thing as language until there is mutual, coordinated, normative–linguistic stance–taking —i.e., the mutual adaptation of *conventional norms* governing the communicative usage of verbal noises, written marks, and bodily gestures. Linguistic behavior, speaking or writing "in a language", is behavior *from within a stance*, behavior *qua* speaker of a given language. To speak the language is to act from within the relevant linguistic–normative stance.

But normative stance–taking is plausibly regarded as something humans *do*, rather than as something involving any normative PROPERTIES or FACTS in the WORLD. Accordingly, it is plausible to maintain that normative FACTS don't exist either before or after normative stance–taking has occurred. Once a stance has been adopted, however —and not before— there can be actions and judgments from *within* the stance: actions and judgements that are norm–governed.

So if contextual semantics is right, then the irrealist–spirited perspective just sketched —involving normative stance–taking, not nor-

mative FACTS or PROPERTIES —evidently applies to matters semantic. I.e., it now begins to look plausible that *semantic* FACTS and PROPERTIES don't exist, either before or after a group of people adopt a common normative stance regarding the communicative usage of certain verbal noises and written marks. Semantic normativity too can be plausibly regarded, from the pragmatic/ evolutionary naturalist perspective, as a matter of the members of human social group adopting a common linguistic–normative stance, and then acting and judging from within that stance —*not* as a matter of semantic FACTS or PROPERTIES.

In addition, there are good pragmatic/evolutionary reasons to expect semantic talk *itself*, in numerous contexts of discourse, to be correctly assertible (i.e., *true*) even if there are no semantic FACTS or PROPERTIES. For, surely one major purpose of semantic discourse is to efficiently propagate and enhance people's mastery of language, their capacity to act and judge from the linguistic–normative stance of those who, in Chomsky's phrase, are "linguistically competent". That being so, the operative assertibility norms governing semantic discourse, in a given context, will often go hand–in–glove with the assertibility norms governing the relevant object–level discourse (in that context). For example, the contextually operative norms governing the notion of *truth* will normally render all instances of Tarski's schema T correctly assertible.

These last remarks also apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to fact–talk and property–talk. Thus, just as

(B) Beethoven's fifth symphony has four movements

and

(B') 'Beethoven's fifth symphony has four movements' is true

can be true (i.e., correctly assertible, under contextually operative assertibility norms) even if there are no SYMPHONIES, so likewise (B*) can be true (in ordinary contexts, under operative assertibility norms governing fact–talk) even if there are no FACTS involving SYMPHONIES

(B*) It is a fact that Beethoven's fifth symphony has four movements.

Likewise, statements about "semantic facts" and "semantic properties" will often be correctly assertible, under contextually operative assertibility norms, even if there are no semantic FACTS or PROPERTIES. As one might put it then, reverting to the material mode

of discourse: From an evolutionary/pragmatic, naturalistic, perspective toward linguistic normativity, it is plausible that there are semantic facts and properties without semantic FACTS or PROPERTIES.

Of course, whether a sentence employing semantic notions is true or false —whether or not it states a fact (with a *small-case* 'f')— normally will depend on how things are with the WORLD, and not merely on coordinated human linguistic stance–taking; for, semantic norms alone generally do not determine which sentences are correctly assertible and which are not. But the point is that semantic normativity *itself* is plausibly regarded not as a matter of FACTS in the WORLD (not even to–be–pursuedness FACTS that are partly fixed by, or supervenient on, human conventions or human behavior), but rather as a matter of stance–taking. To employ semantic discourse is to speak (and judge) from within a specific linguistic–normative stance; it is not to predicate a PROPERTY or state a FACT.

8   Irrealist Accommodation: the Objective Pretensions of Semantic Discourse

We turn now to the second of the above–mentioned aspects of accommodation, viz., making sense of the objective pretensions of semantic discourse from an irrealist perspective. This particular accommodation project involves three steps. First, we begin with the vague idea that in some sense semantic discourse purports to be objective, and attempt to articulate those features of this mode of discourse that underlie this vague idea. Once we expose these objective presumptions of ordinary semantic discourse, the second step is to show how our irrealist semantic picture comports with these presumptions. And the third step is to explain, from the perspective of this irrealist semantic picture, *why* semantic discourse has the objective pretensions it does; this includes explaining any differences between semantic discourse and other kinds of norm–involving discourse like moral and epistemic discourse.

Two outcomes of this accommodation project are possible. First, common sense may involve certain objectivist presumptions that cannot be accommodated within one's irrealist picture. Holding on to one's irrealism, then, requires that one attribute some amount of error to ordinary thought. We have already noted in section 6 that if one takes referentialism for granted, then nonreductive irrealism about semantic discourse forces one to attribute massive error to

ordinary semantic discourse. As we shall show below, the objective pretensions of semantic discourse are indeed quite strong. But a second, more desirable outcome is possible: One's metaphysical picture of semantic discourse may not require any, or very many, revisions of common sense; the accommodation may go smoothly. To the extent that judging the overall plausibility of a metaphysical story about semantics includes seeing how well it makes sense of semantic discourse including whatever common sense objective pretensions it may possess, one would like to avoid error stories —at least error stories that would attribute massive error to ordinary thought and practice. And it is precisely on this score that we claim our semantic contextualism does well.

Although a fully adequate treatment of this aspect of accommodation is far beyond what can be accomplished here (see Gibbard (1990) who spends roughly one third of his book on just this project in connection with epistemic and moral discourse), we can at least gesture in the appropriate direction, so that our audience has some idea of how the larger project would go.

8.1   OBJECTIVE PRETENSIONS

We begin, then, with this observation. In general, ordinary normative discourse of all sorts is embedded in a complex network of assumptions and practices that typically presuppose that such discourse is, in some sense, non–arbitrary or objective. With regard to ordinary semantic discourse what are some of the more salient of these features? Here are some of the more obvious objectivist presumptions of ordinary semantic discourse.

1. Typical semantic statements, e.g., *'nauseous' means 'nauseating'*, purport to be true or false.

2. Typical semantic statements are descriptive in content; i.e., they purport to be information–conveying, without purporting to endorse or prescribe.

3. There is significant community–wide agreement in the semantic statements affirmed by competent language–users.

These objectivist features of semantic discourse seem obvious enough, but it is precisely such features that may cause one to doubt semantic irrealism. After all, our primary motivation for semantic irrealism is the idea that semantic discourse involves matters normative, and this leads us to the claim that the most plausible

metaphysical stance *vis a vis* the normative is irrealist. But ordinary semantic judgments aren't normative; they are descriptive, fact stating judgments. So don't the above features strongly suggest that, as ordinarily understood, semantic discourse should receive a realist treatment? The semantic realist can maintain that typical semantic judgments purport to be information–conveying, and they command widespread agreement because they are about semantic FACTS —FACTS that determine which judgments are true, and FACTS known by all competent speakers.

At this point, a semantic irrealist might be strongly inclined to attempt some sort of semantic reduction and construe semantic judgments that purport to be information–conveying as really disguised non–information–conveying judgments, in much the way that some moral irrealists traditionally sought to construe ordinary moral judgements. But we are not about to backslide; our commitment to a nonreductive semantic treatment of semantic discourse remains firm. (Besides, with semantic discourse the reductive move fails to have whatever initial plausibility reductivism about moral discourse may have.) So we intend to take typical semantic discourse, discourse that purports to be fact stating, at face value. Moreover, we refuse to go the error route and maintain that although such discourse *purports* to be factual, this presumption is erroneous.

8.2   OBJECTIVITY: SEMANTIC FACTS WITHOUT SEMANTIC FACTS

What we do claim is this. Although, from an irrealist perspective, there are no NORMS, i.e., no to–be–pursuedness FACTS, nevertheless there are norms; normativity is a matter of stance–taking. Consequently, although there are no semantic NORMS, there are semantic norms —once again, a matter of stance–taking. Insofar as there are linguistic–normative stances taken in the world, certain statements made *within* those stances are correctly assertible, i.e., true, and hence state facts (with a small 'f'). Among these correctly assertible statements are ones whose content involves the workings of the linguistic–normative stance itself —statements, as we say, "about the norms". If contextual semantics is right, then *semantic* statements are of this kind. These statements typically are not normative themselves: they do not endorse, prescribe, or proscribe specific uses of language. Rather, they convey information about what the norms *themselves* prescribe and proscribe by way of language use.

So contextual semantics, in tandem with meta–semantic irrealism, comports with features (1) and (2) above: semantic statements are often true or false (i.e., correctly assertible or correctly deniable), and they are typically information–conveying without being normative. This semantic/meta–semantic package also comports well with feature (3): since the speakers of a common language adopt a common linguistic–normative stance, they are bound to agree significantly in their respective understanding of the semantic workings of their shared language.

8.3   EXPLAINING SEMANTIC OBJECTIVITY

The third step in accommodating the objective pretensions of semantic discourse, is to explain, from within the perspective of contextual semantics and meta–semantic irrealism, why the discourse should embody those pretensions. Now, features (1)-(3) reflect the fact that the relevant linguistic norms possess a kind of *authority* and *validity* that can be summarized as follows:

Authority There is a widely shared system of norms that enjoy community–wide authority in the sense that the community members who share a linguistic stance share a pattern of deference to these norms for guiding semantic thought and discourse and resolving disagreements.

Validity The relevant semantic norms operative from within a linguistic stance are, for those within the stance, unconditionally valid.

These features of linguistic norms help explain, from an irrealist perspective, the objective pretensions of semantic discourse. That is, to operate from within a linguistic stance is (normally) to treat the relevant linguistic norms as having the sort of authority and validity just described. Compare the kind of status possessed by obviously non–objective remarks about, e.g., taste. With regard to judgments of taste involving our own likes and dislikes, we normally do not treat those remarks as having interpersonal authority and validity. As Gibbard puts it: "We think 'matters of taste' to be non–objective in at least this sense: if a person thinks something a matter of taste, then he does not think 'This taste would be valid even if I lacked it' " (1990: 165). From within a linguistic stance, we do judge that even if many —indeed, most— English speakers (ourselves included) believe that 'nauseous' means 'nauseated', they might still be mistaken. (Indeed, although most English speakers

evidently do believe that it means 'nauseated', they *are* mistaken; it really means 'nauseating'.)

Validity and authority, in turn, are features one would expect to be manifested by linguistic normativity, given the pragmatic/evolutionary considerations we mentioned in section 7. Language would be impossible without them.

But one might wonder about feature (2) in the above list of objectivist presumptions. Why it is that semantic discourse, although it concerns linguistic norms, typically is not normative, like moral and epistemic discourse? The explanation is not hard to find. From within a linguistic stance shared by others, we presuppose a common set of operative norms —norms taken to have authority in matters semantic. In this context, where shared norms are taken for granted, the typical point of making a semantic remark is to apprise one's audience of some semantic norm to which both we and our audience intend to adhere. Thus, semantic remarks are not normative, but instead are primarily informative. By contrast, often enough in moral discourse, we do not presume shared moral norms, and we perhaps realize that our audience positively does not share some of our moral norms. Hence, our moral judgments are not intended to apprise our audience of something they already are disposed to accept, but rather we hope to influence our audience by expressing our acceptance of some moral norms in an overtly normative manner, using such normative terms as 'ought', 'good', 'right' and the like.

The sorts of objective pretensions belonging to ordinary semantic discourse are limited in ways manifest in what we have been saying up to this point. Semantic objective pretensions are pretensions that exert their full force from the internal perspective —from the engaged perspective of linguistic stance taking. But we do recognize that there is a plurality of systems of semantic norms, different systems associated with different natural languages. Recognition of this fact leads us a partially detached perspective —an external perspective— from which semantic norms have a decidedly conventional feel about them. As pointed out in section 7, the point and purpose of a set of semantic norms is to make verbal communication possible, thus enhancing the prospects of certain forms of inter–personal coordination. Systems of norms, from an external perspective, may be evaluated in terms of how well they achieve their purpose. We realize that, judged in this way, there are many alternative, but equally satisfactory, sets of semantic normative systems. Viewed this way, systems of semantic norms are like rules of the road: for coordination purposes, it is important to have some norms in effect, it is important to adopt some linguistic stance or other, but no one system is required.

Viewing semantic discourse and associated norms from a detached perspective has the effect of limiting the objective pretensions of such discourse. This raises interesting questions about the status of semantic norms *vis a vis* other sorts of norms, like moral and epistemic norms that also purport to be objective. If Gibbard is right, we treat norms of rationality as having unqualified objectivity: we take such norms to prescribe actions, beliefs, and emotions as being rational or irrational independently of anyone accepting such norms and no matter what conflicting norms anyone else may accept. By contrast, semantic norms are treated as having qualified authority, thus making semantic discourse more like legal discourse than epistemic and moral discourse. An investigation of the similarities and differences among different types of normative system would no doubt help illuminate the nature of semantic discourse and thus be useful in carrying out the project of accommodation. But we won't delve into these matters here.

We have only scratched the surface in broaching the task of accommodating, from within an irrealist perspective, the objective pretensions of semantic discourse. We claim that, so far as we can see, there is nothing about semantic discourse and practice that would require a realist interpretation of that discourse. Meta–semantic realism, in tandem with referential semantics, represents one reading of the objectivist features of semantic discourse we listed in section 8.i; but these features can also be captured by meta–semantic irrealism in tandem with contextual semantics.

Appendix

We will now add a few further remarks, in an effort to briefly address some of the principal points made by our commentators. Our discussion will focus in part on the following three claims, each of which we have advocated here:

(1) Truth is a normative property, viz., correct assertibility.

(2) Semantic discourse is reportive; truth claims in particular, when true themselves, typically report facts about correct assertibility.

(3) There are no semantic facts or properties.

First, isn't claim (3) incompatible with claims (1) and (2)? For, if truth is a normative property, and truth claims report facts about

normative properties, then doesn't it follow that there *are* semantic facts and properties? Although it initially appears that (1)-(3) constitute an incompatible triad, we maintain that they are not really incompatible at all, when construed as we intend them. Remember: another crucial component of our position is that standards for correct assertibility are not monolithic, but instead vary from one context of discourse to another. This variability operates within philosophical discourse itself. Specifically, the standards operative when we assert claim (3) differ from those operative when we assert claims (1) and (2). We mean to be asserting (3) under those "capital–letter" assertibility norms operative from within a highly detached *metaphysical* stance; i.e., (3) makes the ontological claim that there are no semantic FACTS or PROPERTIES. On the other hand, we mean to be asserting (1) and (2) under assertibility norms more typical of property–talk and fact–talk *vis a vis* matters semantic; and we maintain that (1) and (2) are correctly assertible, under those norms, even though there are no semantic PROPERTIES or semantic FACTS.

The point of using capitalized words, of course, is to have an orthographic device that signals explicitly this change of score in the language game, rather than leaving it implicit. Statements like (1) and (2), made from within a relatively engaged stance as governed by small–case assertibility norms, are evidently required in articulating our position; for, we reject semantic reductionism, and thus we deny that such statements can be systematically translated into a more austere idiom. But large–case assertibility norms enter the scene too, when questions of ontology arise. So, since small–case talk and large–case talk both have a philosophical role to play, it becomes important to make the philosophical double talk transparent.

Second, aren't claims (1) and (2) incompatible with one another? For, if truth is a normative property, then doesn't it follow that truth–ascribing sentences themselves are principally normative, rather than reportive? It is important to appreciate that this actually doesn't follow at all. To call *sentences* of a certain kind normative, we take it, is to say that in their primary and paradigmatic uses, they are employed to perform certain kinds of norm–invoking speech acts: prescribing, commending, endorsing, and the like. Now, although truth–attributing sentences certainly *can* be used this way, such a usage does not appear to be their principal role in human discourse. Rather, as claim (2) asserts, they typically are employed *reportively*: to inform one's audience about what is in fact correctly assertible, and what is not. (In this respect, semantic discourse evidently differs from moral discourse, whose primary function is ar-

guably normative rather than descriptive.) Is there, then, anything specifically normative about truth attributions, and about semantic discourse more generally? Well, yes and no. Yes, because the facts it conveys are semantic–normative facts. No, because its primary function is reportive rather than prescriptive/commendatory.

Third, we emphasize that our meta–semantic position is just an instance, for the case of semantic discourse, of the more general approach to language/WORLD relations we call contextualist semantics. Given this generic view, there is nothing particularly special or surprising about the fact that semantic discourse is subject to contextually variable assertibility norms; the same goes for human discourse generally. Nor is there anything particularly special or surprising about the fact that double talk enters the scene when philosophical questions arise about the ontology of semantics; again, the same goes for ontology generally. Just as there is truth but no TRUTH, there are symphonies and numbers but no SYMPHONIES and NUMBERS. Just as there are semantic facts but no semantic FACTS, there are symphonic and numerical facts but no symphonic or numerical FACTS.

Fourth, let us mention a philosophical conundrum that provides further theoretical motivation, over and above the motivations we ourselves mentioned in the text, for meta–semantic irrealism: viz., the "Kripkenstein" problem about semantic determinacy. Saul Kripke (1982), offering a construal of Wittgenstein's private language argument which he himself finds quite compelling, poses a philosophical question that can be formulated this way: In virtue of what non–semantic FACTS is it the case that semantic FACTS are as they are, and not otherwise? The problem is that this question seems to have no satisfactory answer. Kripke writes:

> [T]he sceptical challenge is not really an epistemological one. It purports to show that nothing in my mental history or past behavior —not even what an omniscient God would know— could establish whether I meant plus or quus. But then it appears that there was no *fact* about me that constituted my having meant plus rather than quus.... If there was no such thing as my meaning plus rather than quus in the past, neither can there be any such thing in the present.... There can be no fact as to what I mean by 'plus', or any other word at any time. (Kripke 1982: 21)

Kripke then goes on to gesture toward a "sceptical" solution to the conundrum (as opposed to a "straight" solution). A sceptical solution, we take it, is supposed to involve (i) the repudiation of semantic FACTS, and (ii) the normative role of linguistic practices in one's

speech community. Determinate semantic correctness is supposed to be somehow genuine despite the absence of semantic FACTS, and is supposed to be somehow a matter of community linguistic behavior *qua* normative.

The general approach to semantics and meta–semantics we have set out in this paper appears to be a natural implementation of the sceptical strategy for addressing the Kripkenstein problem. (Indeed, we find it very difficult to see how else the sceptical strategy *could* be theoretically implemented.) On our view, there are no semantic FACTS; hence there is no need for such FACTS to be objectively, determinately, grounded in non–semantic FACTS. On our view, truth and meaning are indeed normative. And on our view, membership in a speech community involves participating in that community's *linguistic stance*; this norm–accepting stance makes for stance–internal, determinate, semantic facts even in the absence of objective, in–the–world, semantic FACTS. Thus, Kripke's arguments against the viability of any straight solution to the Kripkenstein problem provide support for the position we have advocated here.

Fifth, doesn't our position involve multiplying senses of the word 'true', and doesn't this lack of theoretical parsimony count against our view? We maintain, on the contrary, that the notion of truth remains theoretically unitary on our account: truth is correct assertibility. Although assertibility norms themselves do vary from one context to another, it remains the case that for any contextually operative assertibility norms, the word 'true' applies to a statement just in case it is correctly assertible (under those norms).

Sixth, can our semantic irrealism accommodate the apparent difference in objectivity between semantic statements on the one hand, and (for instance) statements expressing aesthetic judgments on the other hand? Indeed it can. For, even though our position allows for semantic facts without semantic FACTS, for mathematical facts without mathematical FACTS, and so forth, the position also provides the resources for distinguishing between statements that express "small–case" facts and statements that do not. A statement expresses a fact just in case the contextually operative semantic assertibility norms, together with the WORLD, conspire to render it correctly assertible. Numerous semantic statements, e.g.,

'Beethoven's fifth symphony has four movements' is true,

meet this condition, and hence are fact–expressing (although not FACT–expressing). On the other hand, it is plausible that for many statements, including aesthetic ones like

> Beethoven's fifth symphony is the greatest symphony ever written,

the semantic assertibility norms governing the statement's constituent vocabulary, together with the WORLD, do *not* conspire to yield a determinate assertibility status. Such statements, then, are not even fact–stating (let alone FACT–stating). So although the meta–semantic position we advocate is metaphysically irrealist with respect to matters semantic, it is "internally" realist (to adapt Putnam's expression). On the other hand, for certain kinds of discourse, such as aesthetic or moral discourse, the appropriate meta–level philosophical account might well be both metaphysically irrealist and *internally* irrealist. (On the third hand, however, 'fact'–talk might sometimes be appropriate from within a doubly engaged stance, in which one embraces (say) certain moral or aesthetic norms in addition to semantic norms. So perhaps there can be moral or aesthetic *facts* even if there are no moral or aesthetic facts.)

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