Identity of Dynamic Meanings

PAVEL ARAZIM*
Czech Academy of Sciences, Institute of Philosophy, Prague, Czech Republic

Inferentialism has brought important insights into the nature of meanings. It breaks with the representationalist tradition that sees meanings as constituted primarily by representing some extra-linguistic reality. Yet the break with tradition should be pursued further. Inferentialists still regard meanings as static, and they still do not entirely abandon the idea of fully determined meaning. Following Davidon's ideas about meanings as constituted only in the course of a specific conversation, I propose a dynamic account of what meanings are. They are described as entities belonging to the dynamic realm of Henri Bergson's duration. The inhabitants of this realm live in constant movement and development which is more essential to them than the stages that this development goes through. My account brings about a rejection of the notion of strict literal meaning and therewith also of the contrasting notions such as ambiguity. Meaning is understood as a dynamic entity that is characterized rather by its history than by its nature.

Keywords: Meaning; identity; development; rule; inferentialism; Bergson.

1. Introduction

The notions of ambiguity and vagueness belong to the usual conceptual toolkit of linguists. They surely have their justification in the usage the linguists make of them, yet they bear an understanding of linguistic meaning which I believe poses some important problems. I will indicate how our understanding of what meaning is should be modified and what understanding of vagueness and ambiguity it will bring about.

Our concern will ultimately be with the identity criteria of meaningful expressions.

Both ambiguity and vagueness are of importance also for the philosophy of language, which is documented by the attention these phenomena have been paid to in philosophical literature such as Williamson(1994), Keefe (2000) and Smith (2008). An account of ambiguity and vagueness determines what understanding one has of linguistic meaning and of language. In particular, it determines the identity criteria of meaning, i.e. the question of how you understand what the boundaries of meaning are. Where does one meaning end and another begin?

How are ambiguity and vagueness usually understood? Let us review them in order. Ambiguity means that a given expression has more than one meaning. This can obviously lead to confusion, as it can sometimes be problematic to decide which meanings are meant in a given context. Even worse, such a misunderstanding can be abused by manipulators who switch between the various meanings in the course of an argument and thus beguile the audience. If the possible confusion is considered as particularly dangerous, an obvious remedy is to disambiguate which means to keep only one of the meanings associated with the given expression and, if it is requisite, reserve different expressions for the other meanings.

Vagueness is closely related to ambiguity. A vague expression has a strongly context-dependent meaning. The adjective *high* is typically considered as vague, as it points to a different height when we speak about elephants than when we speak about rabbits. A vague expression can behave in a manner similar to that of ambiguous expressions and can pose similar threats. Nevertheless, vagueness also has many specifics which would complicate my argument too much. Therefore, I will limit my attention to ambiguity, as it is important enough.

Ambiguity can be evaluated from many perspectives. It would be a great exaggeration to claim that it is generally seen as defective. Linguists certainly do also investigate the positive aspects of these phenomena. But still, there is a tradition, quite characteristic of analytic philosophy, to regard ambiguity as problematic. Think of the widely shared ideal of Carnapian explication, as it plays a role already in Carnap (1928). Other things being equal, it is considered more or less by default as progress when a common expression is replaced by less ambiguous one. Or, in the best-case scenario, all the ambiguity vanishes. Such a view presupposes quite a strong notion of an identity of a given expression.

I will focus on the inferentialist understanding of what a meaning consists of. I will argue that this account presupposes the possibility of a fully determinate meaning in its usual understanding. I argue that this, nevertheless, is a confused idea, as meaning always leaves something open. My thesis is stronger than contextualism or pluralivaluationism which presuppose that meaning can be determined by context.

My thesis is more radical, namely that the meaning is indeterministic and the contexts in which it enters cannot be fully specified in advance. I illustrate my idea of the dynamic nature of meaning by exploiting the ideas about a dynamic reality by Henri Bergson. This changes the understanding of ambiguity and of the identity of meaning. Although my discussion is primarily focused on meaning as understood by inferentialists, it is purported to confound other accounts which presuppose the idea of a determinate meaning. Nevertheless, there is still so much I endorse in inferentialism that my view can be still seen as a variety thereof. My position could be called *dynamic inferentialism*. We begin by considering what constitutes meaning in the first place. At least for the inferentialists.

2. *Inferential relationships*

Certainly, lots of theories trying to explain what meaning consists of have been proposed, and I cannot hope to consider all of them and then choose the best. I will focus on one which I believe is particularly strong and enables an illuminating view of the identity of a given expression. I choose this view because I think it can be modified in a fruitful way to suit what I want to say about meaning here.

The approach I will start with here is inferentialism, as it was hinted at by Wittgenstein and then subsequently formulated as a doctrine by Sellars, Brandom and Peregrin.[1] What is meaning according to the inferentialists? In the first place, the meaning of a sentence is explained by the inference relations it is featured in. These function according to rules[2] that specify what can and cannot be inferred from a given set of propositions. The meaning of a sentence is constituted by what it follows from and what follows from it, possibly with further premises. Thus, the meaning of a sentence such as *Rex is a dog* is constituted by such relations as those which tell us that we can infer it from *Rex is a dachshund* and we can infer *Rex is a mammal* from it. These inferences, then, are correct due to certain general rules. For example, that every dachshund is a dog and that every dog is a mammal.

This account has been subjected to many discussions since Brandom presented it.[3] I find it quite satisfactory, yet I will not spend time going back to the old controversies, particularly about the worries as to

[1] The most relevant sources are Wittgenstein (1953), Sellars (1974), Brandom (1994) and Peregrin (2014).

[2] I should note that when speaking about *rules,* I primarily mean inference rules in the whole article. Nevertheless, it is not just for brevity that I speak of *rules* more than of *inference rules*. A deeper reason is that I consider inference rules which constitute our language as intelligible only in the context of many other rules, in the spirit of paragraph 7 of Wittgenstein(1953):´I shall also call the whole, constisting of language and the actions into which it is woven, the *language game.*´

[3] Brandom was attacked in Lepore (2007), replies to the criticism can be read for example in Peregrin (2014).

whether it might not be all too idealistic, as it makes too much depend on the rules which we institute. It has great advantages, particularly in showing how meaning is not something enshrined in our mutually inaccessible minds or platonic heaven. But here, I will focus mainly on the fact that it particularly well represents what the idea of a completely defined meaning could be. By this I mean a meaning without ambiguity. The idea is simply that of having the inference rules specified, saying exactly what sets of premises the given sentence is a consequence of and exactly which consequences it has with which further premises.

Peregrin (2014: 50) expresses the inferentialist notion of the meaning of a sentence with particular clarity and technical precision. I will not reproduce his definition in detail but the basic idea is that for any sentence A, one can determine both what it is inferable from and what can be inferred from it, possibly with further premises. So, on the one hand, there is the set S of all sets of sentences from which A can be inferred. On the other hand, for any set of premises P, what follows from P and A together is specified. Taking these two ingredients together, we have a specification of inferential behavior of A, denoted as the *inferential potential* of A, abbreviated as IP(A). And for inferentialism, this means specifying the meaning of the sentence A. One can call this the proposition which is expressed by A. Regarding subsentential expressions, they are defined by their contributions to the meanings of sentences. If we call the meanings of subsentential expressions in a slightly idiosyncratic manner *concept,* then we can say that propositions determine concepts. The basic idea is that we first get acquainted with a limited number of sentences and their inferential relations and then, using substitutions extract meanings of subsentential expressions from them, enabling us to compose a potentially unlimited number of new sentences. This is described in Peregrin (2014: 62), based on Quine (1960: 9). This means that it is legitimate in my framework to speak indifferently of meaning and cover both the meanings of sentences and words or more complex subsentential expressions, i.e., cover both propositions and concepts.

IP(A) thus formally represents what the meaning of a sentence A is for an inferentialist. When we strive for a Carnapian explication of what meaning is for inferentialists, I think IP is as good as we can get. From this perspective, I do not want to replace it by an alternative definition. I would rather want to explain why we should also look for a different kind of understanding besides Carnapian explication. My approach will underline the dynamic aspect of inference practices and therewith of meaning. I will try to show what IP could prevent us from appreciating. I can begin by noting that IP is obviously a great idealization. No single speaker of a given language can overview all the possible inferences a given sentence can feature in. Anyone can thus have access at best only to a part of IP.

But there are more reasons to become suspicious. Let us return to dogs. How exactly is the concept of a dog specified? Should I infer from Rex's being a dog that he also has lungs? What if we discover creatures that are completely like dogs yet lack lungs? Should we infer that we have discovered a new kind of dog? If we are uncertain about this particular inference, then we should look up the general rules and see if the rule that all dogs have lungs holds. Yet we are just as uncertain as with the particular case of Rex. The rule that would decide our dispute is not available in the best list of rules that we have at our disposal. Does it mean that we cannot know what the correct answer is? Such an approach would be absurd. Rather than us being ignorant about the truth of the matter, there is simply no truth to the matter. At least not yet. Of course, we can make a decree one way or another. We can decide to regard this inference as valid or as invalid. Such a decree, if accepted, will then be normative for further usage. That is, the decree will be normative if it is successful.

We see that something in the meaning of the expression *dog* and therewith also of the related expressions such as *dachshund* and *mammal* was previously not under our control. It was not explicitly stated whether dogs must have lungs and the most adequate thing to say would be that it was objectively undetermined which answer was correct. Yet even this answer is doubtful, as the actual usage might have tended to move these expressions into one of the two possible directions. In this way, the expression is not in our control and the rules have to be rendered explicit in order to get the expressions more under our control. What is not explicit remains in a shadow and possibly indefinite. The notions of being merely implicit and of being indefinite are thus closely related, even if they are not the same. The relation I am hinting at should be clearer by the end of the article when we will understand how rules work in more detail, in particular how they emerge from and interact with our normative attitudes.

But what we have seen illustrated in one suggestive example about dogs and lungs can be generalized into more systematic reasons for believing that meaning cannot generally be in this manner explicit and therewith definite. Let us get acquainted with these reasons.

3. *Arguments against definite meanings*

We will present a global and two more local arguments against the notion of definite meanings.

3.1 *Global argument – the circularity argument*

This argument can be traced back to Wittgenstein and is reiterated, among others, by Brandom. The basic idea is that if you define the meaning of a given expression, you rely on your understanding of the expressions used in that very definition. For instance, when you define,

say the expression A, then you use the expressions B, C and D to do so. These expressions must be clear as they stand. Should they be themselves unclear, we can, of course, continue by defining them by means of E, G and H and the process can go on. Yet if we never stop, then we sooner or later have to use A or some other expression from this succession A, B, C, ... anew and then we are obviously in trouble. This means that an ideal of a fully defined expression is indeed illusory.

This, however, does not entail that requirements for clarity are illegitimate and that we cannot criticize somebody for using an insufficiently defined expression. Only that the precision is always relative to a given context and can later always be found in some way partial. This might lead one to a Davidsonian view about how meaning is constituted only in a specific dialogical situation. We will return to this topic later to see to what degree we can embrace Davidson's position.

3.2 *Local argument number one*

A further argument for there being no entirely definite meanings is local in that it does not need to operate with the perspective of the whole of language or its vocabulary. It rather just focuses on the given expression and those most closely related to it, although all expressions are interrelated to some degree. Let us abstract from the fact that we always have finite equipment of possible explainers as we speak of a language with a finite vocabulary. Perhaps we can go on defining the expression A mentioned in the previous section by always new expressions. So we go beyond B, C, D, E, G, H to I and so on. Why cannot this work? The scenario with the sing-post due to Wittgenstein[4] will help us see where the problem lies.

Do we understand what a signpost instructs us to do? Well, typically we do, yet maybe we can in some contexts start doubting. Then we might get an explanation, perhaps that it is the sharp end of the arrow-shape that points in the direction we should go. But then again, we might want to get an explanation of this explanation. Obviously enough, this process would then continue, and we would embark on an infinite regress. Again, this does not mean that a request for an explanation is illegitimate. Only that there are some limits to it, in the given context it is only up to a certain stage that a request for further explanation is meaningful. As Wittgenstein (in fact, already Aristotle) also puts it, every explanation has to stop at some point. It has to stop in order to be an explanation at all.

How do we recognize this point? That is in general very difficult to tell. An answer which would suggest itself would be a point at which the explanation is already self-evident. Such an account is in a way true but needs to be specified further; otherwise, it can be more misleading than illuminating. The misleading impression that is not easy

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[4] The famous sign-post is featured in aphorism 85 of Wittgenstein (1953).

to eliminate is that the self-evident has to be such in all contexts. Yet as I read him, Wittgenstein shows us that anything can be questioned and doubted in an appropriate context. Just think of the signpost, the explanation of which may itself require an explanation.

And furthermore, think of the example with dogs and lungs, Wittgenstein's ideas on number series and of quaddition of Kripke (1982).[5] The self-evidence is therefore itself only relative to a given context. Wittgenstein shows us that the doubt stops making sense at a given point. It becomes unclear whether the person who pretends to raise the new doubt understands the expression she uses. Further explanation is not possible at some points but that does not mean that these are the points at which all indeterminacy has been eradicated. This is because the expressions that might come close to being self-evident in these contexts quickly enter new contexts where they lose this status. They prove more interesting than they seem.

3.3 *Local argument number two – new contexts*

The last argument I offer is maybe a little bit less ingenious and more straightforward but its straightforwardness leads us directly to the particular point I want to make about meaning. The point is simple – it is the very essence of any expression or concept to adapt to various new and unprecedented contexts it enters into. Every context opens up new questions and indeterminacies to which the concept has to react and develop correspondingly. Whether all dogs must have lungs usually is irrelevant and therefore undecided, yet in some situations it may well become the key question, so we have to decide and adapt our original concept in a reasonable way.

The idea of a perfectly explicit and determinate expression, all the questions of the meaning of which are decided one way or another, is also an idea of an expression that is isolated from all the contexts. If we do not want to downplay the real influence of new contexts, we have to consider them as genuinely new. This means that the rules of the given language do not in advance establish how these contexts should be accommodated. Of course, many contexts are in various ways analogous

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[5] The problem of continuing the number series is presented in paragraph 185 of Wittgenstein (1953), while the quaddition problem is introduced in Kripke (1982). Wittgenstein notes that even the most simple number series such as '2, 4, 6, 8, …' can be continued in countless ways. Besides the naturally looking continuation ´10, 12, 14, ...', one can also think, among many others, of '2, 4, 6, 8' so that we continue reiterating the quadruple. As for Kripke, he noted that everyone has learned the concept of addition by attending to a finite number of specific additions. Therefore, for everyone, there is a highest number x that one has ever added to another number. But how do we know in what way the rule for addition applies to numbers higher than x? Maybe the rule actually was that the addition of a and b equals a+b, as we are used to it, just in case both a and b are lesser or equal to x. But if a or b is larger than x, then maybe the result should rather be a+b+1 or anything else. How can we know has been meant?

to the ones we have encountered already. Therefore, it is possible to decide how we should use our language in these contexts to an important degree. We can then think of a given expression as switching between various related meanings in different contexts. This is done by plurivaluationism of Sud (2020). Nevertheless, this is not enough. The plurivaluationist account reckons only with contexts we know in advance and therewith does not appreciate sufficiently the genuinely dynamic nature of language and rules. The example with dogs and lungs gives us an idea of how the new contexts are open-ended. By the way, this does not mean that all accommodations of a new context are equally good.

Although the idea that something might remain undecided and that meanings are essentially dynamic might seem strange, the idea of an isolated meaning is quite idle and misguided and the first has to be preferred to the second. We will provide a closer description of how this dynamic element in our concepts works but for the moment we see that it cannot be explained away and that it shows how misleading the idea of a completely definite meanings is. This will also modify how we understand ambiguity and the identity of meanings. Ambiguity will become omnipresent, which will mean that a given expression has to be understood as constantly moving in partly unpredictable ways. When asking about the identity of the meaning, this movement will become a part of it. Furthermore, as the identity of meanings will have to recognized as dynamic, the same will have to happen with the identity of contexts. It is a part of the life of language that just as it is not fully clear where a given meaning ends, so it is not clear where a given context stops to apply. But now back to inferentialism, in order to prepare the stage for these ideas.

4. *Caveats in Brandom and how to get off the ground with them – normative attitudes*

Brandom himself acknowledges that meanings cannot be entirely explicit, but it is not clear how he thinks they can work even with that proviso. He brings a useful notion of normative attitude which helps us understand how rules come into life and how they exist thereafter. Normative attitudes are essential to understanding what a rule, and therewith also a meaning, is. Yet we cannot overrate them, as I will try to show.

What is a normative attitude? Primarily it is an attitude a person has towards a kind of behavior. In the most basic form of a normative attitude, the given individual simply considers the given kind of behavior as right or wrong. Thus we typically judge helping the needy as right, as well as drawing inferences according to modus ponens, though right in a different sense. On the other hand, stealing or asserting the consequent are typically deemed wrong in their own ways. Much could

be further specified and discussed as to what precisely the normative attitudes are, yet I think one particular point should not be omitted here. Namely, we should not understand normative attitudes as mental states or, at the very least, not as mere mental states which belong to the private sphere of an individual. Assuming a normative attitude should be a public affair, recognizable in one's overt behavior. Such overt behavior can take various guises, yet its basic forms are simply encouraging others to do what we consider right and discouraging them from doing the opposite by sanctions.

Having understood what normative attitudes are, we can examine what their relation to rules and thus also to meaning is. The Brandomian claim is that normative attitudes are constitutive of rules. It is simply by our holding it as such that a rule becomes valid. Just as it can become valid, it can also become invalid. Two basic points have to be emphasized at this juncture.

First, though normative attitudes constitute the rules, these same rules can undergo various developments and these typically cannot be traced back to the specific normative attitudes of given individuals in a society. Thus, the talk about rules certainly cannot be reduced to the talk about normative attitudes. The relation between rules and normative attitudes certainly is not of the straightforward form that we could translate statements about the validity of rules into statements about the normative attitudes in a given society. Yet the two domains are dependent on each other. That is, rules are dependent on normative attitudes. We can make this clearer by making a comparison to Wittgenstein's analysis of the talk of mental states. He dedicates some space to dispelling the notion of a mental state that only the subject can know and which is independent of overt behavior. Surprisingly, though, he admonishes the reader that this all should not be understood as advocacy of behaviorism (see paragraph 307 of Wittgenstein (1953)). Similarly to our case, the talk of mental states cannot be translated into the talk of behavior but it is dependent on it.

After weakening the dependency of rules on normative attitudes, we should also add that the dependency also goes in the opposite direction. Normative attitudes in their more advanced forms depend on rules that are unquestioned in the given context. Any person assumes a normative attitude, besides other reasons, due to her values and the rules she endorses. Yet, despite these caveats, we can say that normative attitudes help illuminate what rules are and how they work.

What do these observations about rules tell us? First, they are not simply here. They have to be kept alive by our normative attitudes. From this follows that they never have a completely definite shape. We have to keep them alive by our attitudes all the time. Though we speak of rules as something that holds, they are rather dynamic entities that have to be resuscitated all the time. It is also in abstraction from normative attitudes that we can petrify them and see them as static. Such

an idea probably has its role and is at least a useful fiction, yet in reality, we cannot detach the rules from normative attitudes. This entails both that they are not definite and that they are dynamic.

As far as their dynamic nature is concerned, we can say that the rules are always developing and changing. Even what can be adequately described as *remaining the same* requires our activity and does not come from itself. Every rule enters into new contexts and every application thus contributes something to its content. This does not mean that we cannot in practice, distinguish between establishing the content of a rule and its application, but from a deeper perspective, these two activities cannot really be separated. The content of the rules points to and partly determines their correct application to specific cases. But also, the application to specific cases gives the rules real content. The dependence is mutual.

This dependence of rules on normative attitudes also means that they are bound to remain indefinite, besides being dynamic. Not that we cannot disambiguate, but this can be only partial. In some sense, neither dynamicity implies indefiniteness nor the other way round. Theoretically, one could imagine both the situation that a rule would be dynamic and fully definite and the opposite, namely, a static yet indefinite rule. I, nevertheless, maintain that rules are both dynamic and indefinite.

Let us imagine a rule which would be dynamic yet definite, namely by constantly moving between some specific shapes A and B. Why does this not happen and rules are both dynamic and indefinite? Because new contexts, as I already argued in section 3.3 reveal that some of the applications have not been established yet. Just think of the example with dogs and lungs. Furthermore, there is no way to overview all the normative attitudes, which constantly might push the rule in some direction unthought-of previously. Ultimately, I claim that a completely definite rule does not make sense in a similar, though less obvious, way as the notion of a round square. Of course, some aspects of rules can return, yet in a new context, the return is then imperfect. There is something new added, and therefore we do not fully grasp the shape to which we return. Not all modifications of rules are radical, let alone interesting. But still, we cannot fully fathom where the dynamic will go in advance.

And why cannot a rule be still the same and in addition to that static and still indefinite? As I indicated, the normative attitudes appearing in new contexts just force the rule to move. This is partly because of the necessity to accommodate the attitudes, to bring them into the one flow. Furthermore, although the indeterminacy cannot be fully done away with, we often tend to remedy it. Therefore, the indeterminacy forces specifications and disambiguations that typically give birth to new generations of indeterminacies.

We see that rules are not simply and without further ado determinable and available. They have a very special *modus essendi,* and, as

such, cannot be fully identified with any formulation, we can provide. A formulation thus does not truly make the rules explicit as they are because there is no fact of the matter as to their exact shape. Rules, therefore, have a very specific, fluent identity. Questions about where one rules ends and another begins are often meaningless. Or, more cautiously put, one can with equal right say that we have replaced one rule with another, just as we can say that the same rule has developed. And if rules have this specific fluent identity, so have meanings constituted by rules of a specific kind, namely by inference rules.

This lesson about the never vanishing indeterminacy is nicely revealed by Wittgenstein in his musings on rule-following. As there is no determinate way to continue a given number series and as there is nothing to effectively bar deviant interpretations of rules such as Kripke's quaddition, the rules indeed are always in the making. Reading Wittgenstein, we may be unsure whether he speaks only of the complications of getting to know what shape the actual rules have or whether he doubts even the determinacy of the way the rules are. As should be clear, I endorse the second, stronger reading. As it is stronger, asserting it also means asserting the weaker, epistemological interpretation.

Now applying these lessons to meanings, which are constituted by inference rules, we see that they are in the same way indeterminate and dynamic. Of special help is the observation made by Jaroslav Peregrin about what we do when we describe a meaning. When we say that a given word means this and that, it is a special speech act, to use Austinian terminology. It has to capture the actual usage and in this respect it is simply descriptive, yet at the same time, it typically also endorses the very usage. By making such a statement, we encourage the others to use the expression described. This again points to the fact that meaning is never simply here.[6]

Quine and Davidson also hint at the indeterminacy of meaning. Putting aside the differences between these two authors, both radical translation and radical interpretation[7] show us that meaning remains indeterminate. The indeterminacy can be seen as irrelevant in their story of a field linguist wondering how to interpret the unknown word *gavagai,*[8] yet that would be too hasty a conclusion. The radical inter-

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[6] Peregrin presents his insight on pages 84 and 85 of Peregrin (2014). The notion of the speech act was, of course, introduced in Austin (1962).

[7] Radical translation is introduced in Quine (1960), while radical interpretation is introduced in Davidson (1973).

[8] The tale of the field linguist and gavagai is also from Quine (1960), chapter two. To remind ourselves, the linguist is trying to understand a language completely unknown to him or her. Furthermore, the language does not resemble any language the linguists has encountered so far. Therefore, she can rely only on the immediate evidence of overt behavior of the community speaking the new language. Now, suppose that the word 'gavagai' is used always in the presence of rabbits. Then it probably means rabbit. Nevertheless, Quine observes that even such a simple case cannot be made conclusively. Maybe the word means rather 'an undetached

preter cannot use other clues besides the overt behavior of community members or, to be more faithful to the scenario, the tribe. The meaning thus observed necessarily oscillates between more shapes, so that *gavagai* can be both a rabbit or merely an undetached part of a rabbit. In this specific context, these differences are immaterial and they do not prevent the interpreter from eventually starting to speak the language and thus enter the linguistic community. Yet this does not mean that the indeterminacy was a mere illusion. It should neither be overrated nor underrated. If we want to hold the meaning fast, it always glides away.

4.1 *Is there a stable core?*

Probably many would agree with seeing language as essentially dynamic, yet would be tempted by the idea that every meaning or at least some meanings must have a stable core that is not subject to change. In the inferentialist framework, this would correspond to the view that although many inferential links between statements can change, some have to remain the same. Peregrin (2014: section 3.6) comes close to this when he distinguishes between *meaning constitutive* inferences and merely accidental inferences. I believe that meanings, in general, do not have stable cores and that we also cannot make the distinction Peregrin does. Let me explain why.

What speaks in favor of reckoning with a stable core of meanings? Meanings must be, to a degree, stable because otherwise, we could not communicate. So much is true, but I believe it is enough if we allow for only relative stability. Some aspects of a given meaning are more central, and therefore the rules which constitute them would be more sorely missed. An example from logic can illustrate this. Although the law of the excluded middle is very important in logic, intuitionists have shown that it is possible to have a logical system that lacks it. Now, one might think that other laws are more fundamental, such as the elimination of conjunction, i.e., the law that states that each conjunct follows from conjunction. Would it even make sense to call an expression *conjunction* if it did not follow this rule of inference? It does not seem probable, but we cannot know all the contexts we will get into. Russell (2018) comes up with counterexamples for the elimination of conjunction. Of course, one is free to doubt the cogency of those counterexamples, but the possibilities to cast even this rule into doubt can hardly be blocked.

Speaking about the meanings of sentences, Recanati (2003: 64), considers whether we need what he calls the *minimal proposition*. His

part of a rabbit' or 'the time slice with the occurrence of rabbits' or something else, related to 'rabbit', yet different from it. It is part of Quine's point that although these alternatives are not the same and there is therefore a genuine dilemma for the linguist, the differences between them might seem as good as irrelevant for most purposes.

background philosophy is different from inferentialism, but he still speaks of a structurally similar problem, namely whether meanings must have immutable cores. And he concludes that it is not clear what positive roles they would play. He gives an example of a mother who tells her child who is crying after a minor injury, ´You are not going to die.´ Taken literally, the mother would be proclaiming the child immortal. But obviously, her utterance is not meant to mean that and this meaning typically would not even occur to the child and would play no role in their exchange.

Furthermore, drawing any such line would not only go against the way language works but would also be very arbitrary. Who is to decide what would belong to the core and what not? Such an arbitrary step should be omitted if it is not necessary. And in this case, I believe we do not need it to secure some language stability. This is because it is enough when the stability is only relative and not absolute. Although I am sympathetic with much of inferentialism, my rejection of the notion of a stable core of meaning and the emphasis on the constant development of meaning make my position differ somewhat from inferentialism of Brandom and Peregrin.

And let us not forget that meaning is inherently holistic according to (by far not only) inferentialism.[9] Meanings are what they are by their relations to other meanings and therewith to the whole of language to which they belong. Then, the same has to be the case for rules that constitute meanings. Therefore, the idea that some inference rules could be given up while others could not be is very problematic. Imagine that a sentence A would obey five inference rules a, b, c, d and e.[10] Now, let us say that, according to the core theory, we can eliminate just the rules d and e, but not a,b and c. But a,b and c are what they are also partly due to their relation with d and e. The rules a, b and c cannot play the role they normally play when they cannot be paired with d and e. And in this role consists what they do and what they are. Therefore, we cannot speak even of keeping the first three rules in such a simple manner. The identity criteria of rules, just like meanings, are very elusive and tricky.

5. *Meaning as constituted only in a particular conversation*

Davidson was led by the phenomena described or very similar ones to a conclusion that might be even more radical than mine. Let us examine his ideas and to what degree we can adopt them. After the period that he dedicated mainly to the idea of radical interpretation, Davidson turned his attention to the specifics of individual conversational situations.

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[9] And I believe that this holism is inevitable. Nevertheless, arguing why it is preferable to its possible alternatives, would go beyond the scope of this paper.

[10] From my overall treatment, it should be clear that I do not believe that it is ever possible to exactly enumerate all the rules that a given sentence obeys. This is therefore indeed just a thought experiment.

In his famous *Nice derangement of epitaphs,* Davidson pays attention to the phenomenon of malapropism. We can understand each other despite mistakes we make when speaking or writing. Such a mistake can even be systematic and never corrected by the speaker, yet still, we can manage to understand each other. So much can be readily acknowledged but Davidson seems to draw too strong a conclusion from this observation, namely that there is no such thing as a language:

> I conclude that there is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed (Davidson 1984: 446).

There are two basic ways of reading this statement. Either we can be led to conceive of communication as something that, completely *ad hoc*, happens only between specific agents here and now, and therefore there is no such thing as meaning shared in a linguistic community. Or we can choose a more careful reading, namely that meaning has a different character than is usually conceived and that the specific situations of the speakers play a much more critical role in the constitution of meaning than one might think.

I choose the second option because there is hardly an explanation of how we can understand someone committing a malapropism besides claiming that the speaker in fact *almost* conforms to the general rules. The guesswork that includes empathy and openness towards others would be hopeless if it could not be embedded into the shared practice and the rules that constitute language. Far from revealing the unimportance of general rules, our capacity to communicate despite malapropisms rather bears witness to their importance. But still, it shows that rules do work in a more sophisticated manner than one could naively suppose.

We must admit that language has to be considered differently, as something less static. A specific situation can indeed bring a lot about how we understand each other. It would be tempting to say that what is specific for a given situation does not concern meaning itself but rather how we manage to grasp it in a given context. Such a remark is not entirely illegitimate but there hardly can be a firm line between what indeed belongs to language and what only belongs to a given situation. Taking such a boundary all too seriously would ignore the lessons we learned from Quine (1951) and others a long time ago about the untenability of the firm distinction between analytic and synthetic statements and truths. Indeed, this strategy of explaining Davidson's insights away would amount to claiming that what is specific about understanding each other here and now is that we have to gain the synthetic knowledge, the lack of which might prevent us from grasping what the other person means. It would also come close to endorsing some inference rules as meaning constitutive, which is a position I have already argued against. Every inference rule is, to some degree, meaning constitutive. But every rule is also revisable. When we communicate, we understand that language is dynamic and relative stability is enough for us.

Here I again agree with Recanati (2003), who endorses contextualism as an alternative to literalism. In any real conversation, we have to heed to its specifics and thus pragmatically modulate our understanding of what is said. Meaning is thus created during the conversation. Of course, we enter every conversation somehow prepared and have some idea of which rules hold and what specific expressions typically mean. But no cogent boundary can be drawn between the pragmatic modulation and what it modulates.

The refusal of the stable core also means that the contexts are not wholly available to us in advance; we cannot evaluate the specific situation as forming a context for which we have antecedent rules. Although what we know already is an essential guide in the new context, this context is radically new and its rules have to be formed yet. In this way, the notion of ambiguity as the list of possible meanings of a given expression is not fortunate. In advance, we have a tentative list of possible meanings that are to be revised continually. And every expression is, in this sense, ambiguous that its meaning can modify. The general notion of ambiguity thus fails to delimit a specific set of expressions.

5.1 *What one means*

Davidson (1984) frames his account in terms of how we manage to guess what our interlocutor means. It would be futile to refute the obvious, namely that when speaking with someone, we try to find out what our interlocutor has in mind. It is quite common for us to ask the others what they mean and treat them as those who bear the meaning hidden inside them and are trying to convey it to us.

But caution is necessary from the very beginning of this debate. In fact, putting too much weight on what is inside a given individual renders the debates about meaning impossible. Only if we consider what the interlocutor means as somehow accessible to the others, can we rescue the intelligibility and rationality of the account. But furthermore, even if somebody can be in a specific state of mind when uttering a sentence, this does not mean that the state of mind determines what the sentence means. Not only what it means in general but even what it means in his or her mouth, in the specific situation. It is quite common that we only subsequently discover what we actually expressed when we said this and that. The meaning continues being created and formed in the course of the conversation. It would be misguided to think of it as something that was ready from the very beginning and only had to be transmitted.

The specific state of mind of the speaker certainly plays a role in a specific conversation, yet it does not determine what the specific utterances of the speaker mean. My account is thus rather far away from psychologism. Having something on one's mind and intending to say something is only a preparation to begin the linguistic interaction and therewith also to let any meaning come into play. From a certain point

of view, this is quite an obvious observation, yet identifying meaning with what one merely means contradicts this very platitude.

5.2 *Modifying meaning*

The Davidsonian insight that meaning is constituted only in a specific conversation thus has to be taken with great reserve. Yet it can help us start describing the mechanism of how meaning changes and how we can start such a change. This was undertaken by Ludlow (2014) and a very good summary can be read in Drobňák (2017). In order to initiate a change of meaning, it does not suffice to start using a given expression differently than people use it normally. You also must have a certain authority in the community and the modification you are pushing forward has to be reasonable in some ways. Typically, you should be able to provide arguments in favor of this change.

My account emphasizes the dynamic side of meaning but its stability must also be appreciated. Changing meaning is no simple affair and cannot be done by simple fiat. By far, not every conversation that people have leads to groundbreaking changes in how we use our language. Lots of changes instead need an inspiring charismatic personality to realize them. It can be a politician who starts using an old expression in an inspiring new way or coins an altogether new expression; it can be a popular singer or a genius author such as Shakespeare. Some of the changes might be seen as fortunate, others can be harmful but we will not examine how these can be distinguished. At any rate, what any such modification brings can hardly be foretold before it actually begins to function and live in the community.

6. *Elusive meaning*

Although it is very important that we can decide to change the meaning of an expression under appropriate conditions, I focus rather on a different phenomenon. Namely, that meaning that can never be fully explicit is never fully in our hands. It is always unstable and tends to change automatically as we use it. Such a spontaneous change can take a long time to happen, lots of individual dialogues it is featured in bring gradual and imperceptible modifications until we realize that a qualitative change has occurred. At least, when we succeed in making this change explicit.

The fact that meanings are never fully explicit and thus never fully in our hands should not be treated as a passing observation but as a fundamental feature. Only in this way can language live with us in the constantly changing world. This also differentiates my view of language and meaning from Ludlow (2014) and Cappelen (2020). Both these authors share my general attitude regarding language as dynamic. Nevertheless, from my point of view, they regard language as too much in our control. I, in contrast, believe and will yet illustrate

in the next section, that we in many ways do not decide what is correct and what is not and that, therefore, language is in an important way independent of us. Ludlow speaks a lot of how we negotiate the meanings of expressions in a given conversation, while Cappelen in a related manner speaks of conceptual engineering. This means that we can improve our concepts by attaching pragmatically better meanings with our expressions. I do not doubt that we negotiate about what we mean in a given situation, as I witnessed by my sympathies for Davidson who went in a similar direction. I also do not doubt that we can try to change the meanings of our expressions and have good reasons for it. But nevertheless, meaning is, in my view, dynamic even if we do not actively try to change it.

I shall illustrate this difference in the next section. I believe it can be instructive to understand language and individual expressions as living beings. A closer illustration of what this can mean is provided in the philosophy of Henri Bergson.

6.1 *Bergsonian meanings*

Before presenting how Henri Bergson can help us understand rules and meanings better, we will have to review some of the basic tenets of his overall philosophy, though very briefly. Bergson considers reality to be fundamentally dynamic and living. He considers movement as the veritable foundation of all we experience, although we tend to overlook it and consider it as secondary in an essentially stable world.[11]

According to Bergson, movement is a fundamental happening in the world and is irreducible. When observing a given object moving from point A to point B, we can describe the positions between them which it successively goes through but the movement itself is something over and above these mere positions, indeed it is even something completely different. Reducing it to these positions amounts to banishing movement from the picture altogether. When we consider one of these positions occupied or one of the stages of the movement, we in fact abstract the movement from our consideration and render the moving object stable. The temptation to do so is, among other things, an important source of Zeno's paradoxes. Concerning the arrow paradox, we indeed conceive the flying arrow as motionless when we consider it in the individual positions. By the same token, Achilles can never surpass the turtle in the race. At least when we think of the positions occupied during the movement or stages of movement rather than of the movement itself. That is, when we falsely try to reduce movement to its stages which are static phenomena.

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[11] I am only giving a sketch of these basic Bergsonian motives. A good introduction to them is Bergson's first major work, Bergson (1889).

A dynamic phenomenon that Bergson pays particular attention to is consciousness. We tend to see it as a succession of certain states, be they emotional or intellectual. Though, such a conception is a distortion, as consciousness is essentially a flow. Even what seems to be remaining in the same state is a kind of movement.[12]

We tend to take a misguided perspective on dynamic and living phenomena because we misconceive time. Science understands time as a further dimension of space and thus neutralizes it. Space is the locus of homogeneity and stability, while real, original time, which Bergson calls *durée*, is characterized by heterogeneity and a dynamic structure. It is unpredictable what will happen, and the new is bound to be radically new.

In this way, I believe, we should also consider language to be a living phenomenon. But why does it happen that we tend to disrobe reality of its dynamics? According to Bergson, it is no simple mistake, from a certain point of view it is a reasonable way of coping with reality. In this way we consider reality to be something predictable and stable and thus can much better plan our actions and predict their outcome. Such a utilitarian perspective is indispensable but should at the same time not be considered as absolute and to be the only one.

As it can render our lives more agreeable, it can also flatten and make us forget who we are and what language itself is. In the case of meaning, which is our topic, it causes us to see it as a ready, static and dead thing. But we have seen arguments as to why meaning cannot be fully explicit and thus in our control and change only if we decide to change it.

This by no means amounts to advocacy of linguistic anarchy. Clearly, there are rules and I believe inferentialism reveals much about the meaning and what it is. Yet those rules are much more fluid than they might seem and this should not be ignored or abstracted from. And the line between breaking these rules and inventing new ways in which our language can function is also very unclear and unstable. Enriching inferentialism by this Bergsonian element leads to what might be called *dynamic inferentialism*.

Bergson (1932) speaks of two ways our rules can force themselves on us, one being coercion, the other aspiration and *élan*.[13] The first force

[12] Bergson's account of consciousness thus radically differs from Hume's bundle theory of the self from Hume (1738). Bergson's position is succinctly formulated in this quote Bergson (1907: 11): "Il est commode de ne pas faire attention à ce changement ininterrompu, et de ne le remarquer que lorsqu'il devient assez gros pour imprimer au corps une nouvelle attitude, à l'attention une direction nouvelle. A ce moment précis on trouve qu'on a changé d'état. La vérité est qu'on change sans cesse, et que l'état lui même est déjà du changement." [Translation, p. 2: But it is expedient to disregard this uninterrupted change and to notice it only when it becomes sufficient to impress a new attitude on the body, a new direction on the attention. Then, and then only, we find that our state has changed. The truth is that we change without ceasing and that the state itself is nothing but change.]

[13] Bergson (1932: 53): "Dans la prèmiere, l'obligation represente la pression que les éléments de la société exercent les uns sur les autres pour maintenir la forme

mainly serves to preserve and conserve the rules we have, the other serves to give them new life. We need both these and both should be reckoned with if we want to understand how language works. Therefore, the identity of a meaning of a given expression cannot consist merely of a set of rules, although such a set is an important ingredient. The other essential ingredient is the irreducible movement. This movement does not break the identity of a given meaning, it rather necessarily belongs to it. By movement and change, we are not obliged to speak of a different meaning. The irreducibility of movement to its stages, no matter how fine grained such a reduction would be, entails that meaning of a living expressions cannot be reduced to many precise meanings. This is because the precise meaning is an illusion caused by forgetting the dynamism which is always present. My account thus differs, as I already noted, from plurivaluationism of Sud (2020) which claims that we typically speak many precise languages at the same time. Such a perspective can be useful but we also need the opposite perspective, namely that we typically speak one, though dynamic and living language.

7. *Making meanings explicit and caring about language*

Besides inferentialism, Brandom is also a proponent of the related idea of logical expressivism. As we already know, inferentialism considers inference rules as constitutive of meaning. At the same time, Brandom himself admits that these rules are often not explicit. I agree, though I argued that in a strict sense no meaning is ever fully explicit, indeed the very idea of a fully explicit meaning is misguided.

Logical expressivism claims that logic with its vocabulary is here to make the inference rules explicit. Let us come back to our example of inferring that Rex is a dog from his being a dachshund and further inferring that he is a mammal. These inferences are correct due to the rules stating that every dachshund is a dog and that every dog is a mammal. These rules are rendered explicit due to the logical vocabulary, such as the word *every*.

I believe that when Brandom considered logic as a tool for making inference rules and therewith meanings explicit, he was on the track of an important idea. But it should be added that the meaning cannot just be rendered explicit as it was because we modify it slightly by rendering it explicit. It is valuable to express the inference rules that regulate a given expression and try to express them continuously with the

du tout... Dans la seconde, il y a encore obligation, si l'on veut, mais l'obligation est la force d'une aspiration ou d'un élan, de l'élan même qui a abouti à l'espèce humaine." [Translation: In the former, obligation stands for the pressure exerted by the elements of the society on one another in order to maintain the shape of the whole... In the second, there is still obligation, if you will, but that obligation is the force of an aspiration or an impetus, of the very impetus which culminated in human species.]

actual usage. But any such expression at least stabilizes the meaning, impedes its natural movement. That is already a change of the meaning as it was before. Therefore, there is nothing as pure expression, free of any modification of what it expresses.

Indeed, logic with its vocabulary and language in general is, among other things, a force of stabilization, even rigidization. This is the light in which Bergson typically characterizes both language and logic. As institutions that not only describe the world as stable but even render it such. I am proposing to extend the Bergsonian appreciation of the dynamics of the world we live in even to language and consider it a dynamic, living entity constituted by the normative attitudes of a given community.

When we make a rule explicit, we act as if this rule was a ready and firm part of the meaning we just brought to the fore. Yet we also help to render it valid. Making rules and therewith meanings explicit is thus not just theoretical observation of the meanings and how they are but rather a specific form of interaction with them. Such an interaction is an important part of our freedom concerning language and it is correct to take advantage of that.

On the other hand, it should be acknowledged that clear-cut meanings are chimerical and that meaning is always dynamic and to some degree elusive. The search for full clarity is thus misguided and we should treat language with due respect, which also means acknowledging that it always partially escapes our control. That is the reason why it is such a fascinating thing and it would be a great pity if it were otherwise.

Let me note that classical inferentialism of Brandom or Peregrin does leave some space open for the dynamic character of meaning but it is not enough in my view. Indeed, Brandom acknowledges that meaning is partly *perspectival*.[14] Peregrin (2014: 51) notes that when someone says, "The man over there left the room with blood on his hands," then clearly, someone who believes that the person is a doctor who has just finished an operation understands this sentence differently than someone who thinks that a murder is being described. But on this view, we still have to choose from a completely firm and stable basis of inference rules and apply those that suit the given context. When a given sentence is paired with one set of premises, it enables us to judge something different than when it is paired with a different set. But this is just an illustration of the point that meanings are constituted by inference relations rather than somehow intrinsic to a given expression. This point might be seen as a good first step of inferentialism towards understanding meanings as live and dynamic but a much longer path has to be undertaken to make inferentialism indeed appreciate the true dynamics of meaning. On the view presented here, it is not only the choice of relevant inferential relations that has to be taken into account but rather the fact that these very relations change

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[14] See Brandom (1994: 594–597), where he discusses how meanings can be both perspectival and objective.

their character and develop. As I already said, the notion of inferential potential, IP, is a good model but should not be taken all too literally. IP only gives us an idea of what gets changed and modified all the time when language is used.

Conclusion

We started by considering the identity of an expression or its meaning. We did this in particular using the idea of an expression that is ambiguous concerning its meaning. This idea is naturally paired with its opposite, that is with the idea of an expression to which just one clear meaning is associated. Meaning and its identity are more complicated than expected, as should be abundantly clear from the course of my considerations. Rather than being associated with a specific set of rules or with a specific shape, the meaning is constituted by its history. Rather than being a thing, it is a happening, a process. And as such, it hardly possesses any clear criteria of identity. Maybe one could speak of dynamic criteria of identity for dynamic expressions, in line with *dynamic inferentialism*. The dynamic and indeterminate criteria of identity of meanings is mirrored by the criteria of identity of contexts, which possess the same characteristics.

Understanding an expression thus amounts not so much to readiness to give a satisfactory definition, although it can be manifested by such a readiness, but rather by the ability to participate in the very happening which it is and its history. It also amounts to taking a certain responsibility for how we use the expression and develop it in the new contexts that both we and the expression in question enter into. It should also be clear that if the notion of definite meaning has to go, then so does that of ambiguity, which is just its reversed side. Or at the least, it needs to be rethought anew.

It makes perfect sense to characterize a given expression as ambiguous, as contrasted to the tidier ones in specific cases and contexts. Sometimes, it is also meaningful to consider such expressions problematic. But this is a perspective of a more practical linguist. From a philosophical point of view, ambiguity pertains to all expressions, though in variegated ways and degrees. From my point of view, the notion of ambiguity is therefore not very useful, as it is a feature of all expressions and thus does not delimit an interesting class. However, it points to the necessity of regarding every meaning as a dynamic and living entity.

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