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Rules of use

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In the middle of the 20th century, it was a common Wittgenstein-inspired idea in philosophy that for a linguistic expression to have a meaning is for it to be governed by a rule of use. Nowadays this idea is widely taken to be mysterious, inconsistent with "truth-conditional semantics," and subject to the Frege–Geach problem. In this article, I reinvigorate the idea by sketching the *rule-governance* view of the nature of linguistic meaningfulness, showing that it is not subject to the two problems, explaining its lasting appeal to philosophers from Strawson to Kaplan, and why we should find it continually attractive.

KEYWORDS
meaning, norm, rule, semantics, use-condition

1 | INTRODUCTION

In the middle of the 20th century, it was a common Wittgenstein-inspired idea in philosophy that for a linguistic expression to have a meaning is for it to be governed by a *rule* of *use*.[1] In other words, it was widely believed that meanings are to be identified with *use-conditions*. For example, here is Peter Strawson in his "On referring" (my emphasis, here and hereafter):

> The meaning of an expression cannot be identified with the object it is used, on a particular occasion, to refer to. The meaning of a sentence cannot be identified with the assertion it is used, on a particular occasion, to make. For to talk about the meaning of an expression or sentence is not to talk about its use on a particular

[1]It is a matter of some controversy what Wittgenstein himself thought about the relation between meaning and rules of use (see Glüer & Wikforss, 2009).

> occasion, but about the *rules*, habits, conventions *governing its correct use*, on all occasions, to refer or to assert. (Strawson, 1950, p. 328).

Unfortunately, neither Strawson nor many others went much past such general remarks in developing the idea further.[2] This led other philosophers to view it as unclear and somewhat *mysterious*.

Even worse, in the 1960s and 1970s the idea that meaningfulness is a matter of being governed by rules of use came to be associated with two spurious views. On the one hand, due to Michael Dummett's employment of it in defense of his anti-realist or justification-conditional views, it came to be viewed as an alternative to, and inconsistent with mainstream realist, truth-conditional approaches (Dummett, 1991, 1993). On the other hand, it came to be seen as associated with non-cognitivist views which are subject to the so-called Frege–Geach problem with compositionality (Geach, 1960, 1965; Searle, 1962).

In 1980s and 1990s the idea that meaningfulness has to do with rules of use reappeared in work on context-sensitivity. For example, here are David Kaplan in "Demonstratives," John Perry in "Indexicals and demonstratives," and Scott Soames in *Beyond rigidity*:

> Among the pure indexicals are "I," "now," "here" (in one sense), "tomorrow" and others. The *linguistic rules which govern their use* fully determine the referent for each context. ... The linguistic rules which govern the use of the true demonstratives "that," "he," etc. are not sufficient to determine their referent in all contexts of use. (Kaplan, 1989a, pp. 490–491).
>
> *Meaning*, as I shall use the term, is a property of expressions—that is of *types* rather than tokens or utterances. Meaning is what is fixed by the *conventions for the use* of expressions that we learn when we learn a language ... To repeat, as I use the terms, *meaning* is what *the rules of language* associate with simple and complex expressions ... (Perry, 1997, p. 587)
>
> [D]ifferent indexicals typically have different meanings in the sense of being associated with *different rules governing their use* that must be grasped by the competent users of the language (Soames, 2002, p. 103).

Unfortunately, despite saying things like the above, Kaplan, Perry, and Soames did not go past such general remarks in developing the idea either and instead did descriptive semantics in terms of what they thought of as formal substitutes like *characters*, functions from contexts thought of as n-tuples to contents.[3] Again, this led other philosophers to view it as vague and mysterious. For example, here is a quote from Jason Stanley's survey article "Philosophy of language in the twentieth century" that we can take as emblematic of such an attitude:

[2]For more remarks like these, see the quotes by Gilbert Ryle, Patrick Nowell-Smith, Geoffrey Warnock, and others in the beginning of William Alston's paper "Meaning and use" (Alston, 1963). Alston's paper and Erik Stenius' "Mood and the language-game" (Stenius, 1967) are among the few attempts to develop the idea more rigorously, but unfortunately neither had much impact beyond the fact that the latter served as a source of inspiration for Lewis's influential convention-based view (Lewis, 1975, p. 7, fn. 2). Alston eventually also wrote a book on the subject in the 1970s, but only published it in 2000 (Alston, 2000).

[3]One mainstream philosopher of language who has perhaps always held the view that meaning is to be thought in terms of rules of use and use-conditions is Francois Recanati (Recanati, 1987, 1998, 2018). However, even he has not developed the view in detail.

> Whereas the notion of a *rule of use* is *vague* and *mystical*, Kaplan's notion of the character of an expression is not only clear, but set theoretically explicable in terms of fundamental semantic notions. (Stanley, 2008, p. 418).

Consequently, it is currently relatively absent from mainstream discussion.[4]

My aim in this article is to reinvigorate the idea that meaningfulness is a matter of being governed by rules of use and meanings are best thought of in terms of use-conditions. I will do this by doing three things. First, and most importantly, I will develop it into the *rule-governance* view of the nature of linguistic meaningfulness, thereby showing that it can be de-mystified. Second, I will show that the view is not by itself inconsistent with truth-conditional approaches nor subject to the Frege–Geach problem. Finally, I will explain why the idea has had a lasting appeal to philosophers from Strawson to Kaplan and why we should find it continually attractive.

I will proceed as follows. I will start by making precise the question I take our idea to be an answer to by distinguishing it from more familiar questions in descriptive semantics and foundational semantics (Section 2). Next, I will develop the idea into the rule-governance view (Sections 3 and 4). Thereafter, I will show that it is not subject to either of the two problems (Sections 5 and 6). Finally, I will explain its lasting appeal and demonstrate its attractiveness (Section 7).

2 | THE NATURE OF MEANINGFULNESS

Some propositions are true, some things are good, and some mental states represent the world as being a certain way. These pre-theoretic facts invite the paradigmatic sorts of philosophical questions:

(*Nature of truth*)	What is it for a proposition to be true?
(*Nature of goodness*)	What is it for something to be good?
(*Nature of representation*)	What is it for a mental state to represent?

Such questions are questions about the *nature* or *essence* of truth, goodness, and representation, calling for a reductive analysis of the target property in terms of something else. One can react to them in one of two ways. First, one can reject the question and claim that truth, goodness, or representation is a *primitive* property that does not admit of a reductive analysis. Second, one can try to answer the question by *reducing* them to something else.[5]

[4]Three points. First, there are notable exceptions at the margins. For example, the view is discussed and employed in David Kaplan's unpublished paper "The meaning of ouch and oops" that has been circulating for at least 20 years and that has influenced others in developing their views of the use-conditional dimension of meaning (Kaplan, n.d.; Gutzmann, 2015; Potts, 2005; Predelli, 2013). Second, the view has always been taken more seriously by those developing or discussing alternative approaches. For example, something like it has been presupposed by Robert Brandom in his development of inferentialism (Brandom, 1994). Similarly, it has been employed by Mark Schroeder in his work on expressivism and Amie Thomasson in her defense of easy ontology and a normativist view of modality (Schroeder, 2008; Thomasson, 2014, 2020). Finally, the situation insofar as meaning stands in stark contrast to speech act theory where Tim Williamson's view that the illocutionary act of *assertion* can be understood in terms of a constitutive rule is the dominant one (Williamson, 1996).

[5]For primitivism about truth see Davidson (1996). For primitivism about goodness see Moore (1903), for reductivism Finlay (2014). For discussion about primitivism about representation see Boghossian (1989); for discussion of reductivist options see Greenberg (2014).

Here is a similar pre-theoretic fact: Some strings of symbols have a meaning in a particular language whereas others do not. For example, the expression "Bertrand is British" has a meaning in English, but not in Esperanto while the mere string of symbols "*#&" does not have a meaning in either. Furthermore, some expressions have multiple meanings or are ambiguous in a language and some expressions have the same meaning as others or are synonymous with them. For example, "Bertrand went to the bank" has multiple meanings in English and "Bertrand is a doctor" is synonymous with "Bertrand is a physician." This invites an analogous philosophical question:

(*Nature of meaningfulness*) What is it for a linguistic expression to have a meaning in a language?

This is a question about the *nature* or *essence* of having meaning or meaningfulness, calling for a reductive analysis of it in terms of something else.[6]

To understand the question better, we need to say just a bit more about what we have in mind by linguistic expressions, meaning, and language.

Let us call a string of symbols something that has phonetic and/or orthographic properties. Both "Bertrand is British" and "*#&" are strings. Strings are "types" and must be distinguished from their particular *uses*, events of producing utterances or inscriptions which are standardly thought of as their "tokens."[7] A *linguistic expression* is a string of symbols that has furthermore syntactic properties and one or more meanings in some language. Expressions are therefore also types and must be distinguished from both their uses and tokens. Consequently, the above question is a question about the linguistic meanings of types, what are sometimes called their context-invariant or *standing* or timeless meanings, not about the meaning-related or "semantic" properties of uses of expressions on particular occasions and with certain intentions and so on. For example, it is a question about the meanings of the words "I," "this," and "safe" versus the related properties of their uses in the sentences "I am a philosopher," "This is nicer than this," and "The beach is safe" on particular occasions with particular intentions and so on.[8]

By an expression's *meaning* in a language I mean what fully competent speakers of the language have a grasp of in virtue of their semantic competence (Dummett, 1993; Higginbotham, 1992). It is what language-learners aim to grasp. And it is what makes it possible for the competent speakers to *use* that expression to *speak* that language and perform meaning-

[6]This question is frequently construed as a question about what it is for expressions to stand in a putative *meaning-relation* to some entities thought of as meanings (e.g., Horwich, 1998, p. 4, pp. 14–15; Schiffer, 2003). This assumes what I call the *object model* on which having a meaning is analogous to having, say, a cellphone, that is, standing in a possession-relation to an object. In my opinion implicit acceptance of this picture has done serious harm in restricting people's imagination about how to think about meaningfulness and meanings. In any case, nothing in the above question itself forces such a construal and I much prefer the *property model* on which having a meaning is analogous to having a color, that is, having a property.

[7]I use scare quotes above to indicate that I intend a non-committal reading of the type-token terminology. As I use it, it leaves open what one takes the "types" to be and how they are supposed to relate to the "tokens". The most common view, of course, is that word-types are *kinds* and tokens are their *instances*. However, one might think that words are *individuals* and their uses consist in production of physical entities that serve as their perceptible proxies or representations. Following Zoltan Szabo, I think that this can still be put in the type-token terminology, perhaps with some strain, by saying that on this view word-types are individuals and tokens are their representations (Szabo, 1999). In any case, nothing I say here should depend on the correct ontology of words.

[8]For an insightful recent discussion of how to think of the relations between the meanings of expressions qua types vis-à-vis the related properties of their uses on particular occasions see Recanati (2018).

related speech acts like saying something, asking questions, or telling someone to do something.[9] For example, the meaning of "Bertrand is British" is what competent speakers of English have a grasp of and that makes it possible for them to use that expression to speak English and to *say* that Bertrand is British. Thus, the above question is a question about what it is for expressions qua types to have the properties in a language that fully competent speakers have a grasp of, and that make it possible for them to use the expression to speak the language.

By a *language* I mean some sort of public, communal, or minimally shared entity, a sociolect rather than an idiolect. I find it natural to think of them as historically embedded, ongoing social *practices* (Dummett, 1991, Chapter 4; Jackman, 1999; Ridge, 2021).

Thus, the question about the nature of meaningfulness is a question about what it is for expressions qua types to have the properties that competent speakers have a grasp of in language like English.[10]

Now, in comparison to the questions about the nature of truth, goodness, and even representation, the question about the nature of meaningfulness is relatively neglected. This might sound absurd given all the work done in philosophy of language, but once you take a closer look, you will see that most philosophers of language either simply focus on other questions or behave as if they were primitivists about meaningfulness. Since our question could (and frequently is) mixed up with these other questions it is important to make clear how it differs from them.

Consider how Robert Stalnaker drew the standard distinction between two main types of questions in philosophy of language, those of *descriptive semantics* versus *foundational* or *metasemantics*:

> First there are questions of what I will call *descriptive semantics* ... A descriptive semantic theory assigns *semantic values* to the expressions of the language, and explains how the semantic values of the complex expressions are a function of the semantic values of their parts ... Second, there are questions, which I will call questions of *foundational semantics*, about what the facts are that give expressions their semantic values, or more generally, about *what makes it the case* that the language spoken by a particular individual or community is a language with a particular descriptive semantics. (Stalnaker, 1997, p. 535).[11]

On this, entirely standard view, to provide a descriptive semantics for an expression is to *describe* its meaning by assigning it some sort of a semantic value (e.g., a referent, a truth-condition, intension, a structured proposition, a Kaplanian character, and so on). More generally, to provide a descriptive semantics for a language is to provide a theory that *describes* the meanings of its expressions, usually by assigning some sorts of semantic values to the atomic expressions and

[9]Austin called such meaning-related speech acts like saying something, asking a question or telling someone to do something locutionary acts, distinguishing them from the further illocutionary acts that one performs *in* performing the former like asserting, conjecturing, predicting, inquiring, requesting, ordering, and so on (Austin, 1962; for some discussion and defense of the distinction see Recanati, 1987). In contrast, others like Searle and Alston would think of them as generic or determinable illocutionary acts.

[10]The question therefore presupposes that the notions of an expression, meaning, and public language are useful objects of study. For recent discussion and defense of the above perspective against Chomskyan and Davidsonian arguments see Stainton (2016). For an insightful discussion of how different notions of language can all be useful for one or other theoretical purpose in linguistics see Santana (2016).

[11]For similar distinctions see Lewis (1975, p. 19; Kaplan, 1989b, p. 573).

explaining how the semantic values of complex expressions depend on those of the atomic ones together with their syntactic structure. In contrast, to provide a foundational or a metasemantics for an expression is to say *what makes it the case* or *metaphysically determines* that it has the meaning that it does, what *grounds* its meaning.[12] More generally, to provide a foundational semantics for a language is to say what makes it the case that its expressions have the meanings they do.

Neither of these two types of questions in philosophy of language is identical to our question about the nature of meaningfulness. To do descriptive semantics is clearly not to try to answer our question. Rather, when doing descriptive semantics philosophers and linguistics usually *presuppose* something about how their preferred semantic values are related to meanings. For example, it is standardly taken for granted that there is a connection between a sentence's meaning and its truth and thus, that we get at least some information about a sentence's meaning by stating its truth-conditions.[13] However, what is presupposed might be very general and compatible with lots of different views about the nature of meaningfulness, even if it rules out some.

Of course, one would rather expect that our question is discussed under the rubric of foundational semantics. However, to ask about the determination or grounding of meaning-facts either in general or about particular expressions is not to try to answer our question about the nature of meaning either.[14] It is easiest to see this if you consider the fact that primitivism about the nature of property x is compatible with a substantive story about x-making, determination, or grounding. For example, take theories of the nature of truth and theories of truth-making. One could be a primitivist about truth yet think that there is a theory to be had as to what makes different sorts of true propositions true or what grounds the truth of propositions. Conversely, one could adopt a reductive analysis of truth without thereby settling all questions about truth-making. The same applies in the case of theories of the nature of meaningfulness and foundational semantics (= theories of meaning-making). One could be a primitivist about meaningfulness yet think that there is theory to be had as to what makes expressions in general or particular expressions mean what they do or what grounds facts about meaning. In fact, this is exactly what Paul Horwich seems to think. Horwich is a sort of deflationary *primitivist* since he thinks that meaningfulness has no nature or essence and thus no analysis of meaningfulness

[12]Unless further distinctions are drawn and use is regimented, it is natural to take the notions of making the case, metaphysical determination, and grounding to be equivalent, and inverse to the notion of in virtue of. All of these are standardly taken to be relations between facts (Audi, 2012, p. 686; Rosen, 2010). A set of facts A makes it the case that *f* obtains, it determines or grounds *f*. Inversely, *f* obtains in virtue of A.

[13]In many writings Soames states the presupposed connection as follows: "If 'S' means in L that *p* then 'S' is true-in-L iff p" (e.g., Soames, 1992, p. 17). Heim and Kratzer start their standard textbook in linguistic semantics by saying "[t]o know the meaning of a sentence is to know its truth-condition" (Heim & Kratzer, 1998, p. 1). On a different conception of orthodox frameworks in descriptive semantics they are entirely *formal* and claims like the above are a further interpretation (e.g., see the discussion of how semantic values relate to meaning in Perez Carballo, 2014, pp. 132–135; contrast Schroeder, 2015).

[14]Questions about the nature/essence and grounding were frequently talked about using the same terminology in the not-so-distant past and they were sometimes even ran together. For example, Paul Horwich says that his interest is in the nature of meaning but insists that no analysis is possible and proceeds instead to offer a theory of what determines, or, in his terms, "engenders" the meanings of particular terms (Horwich, 1998). These days it is widely acknowledged that questions about nature/essence and grounding are different sorts of questions though, of course, not unconnected (Rosen, 2010). Questions about nature/essence are usually taken to be questions about *properties* and their asymmetric, reductive analysis in terms of other properties and structure (e.g., Schroeder, 2007, Chapter 4). In contrast, questions of grounding are questions about *facts* and what other facts ground these facts. (See also fn. 15.)

is to be had, but just a story about determination (see Horwich, 1998, p. 6; for discussion see Greenberg, 2014, pp. 178–179). Conversely, one could adopt a reductive analysis of meaningfulness without thereby settling all questions about meaning-making.

The primary purpose of this section has been to introduce the question about the nature of meaningfulness and make sure it will not be mixed up with the question about meaning-making.[15] Let us proceed now to discussing the answer in terms of rules of use.

3 | RULES

To understand how having a meaning could be a matter of being governed by a rule of use we can start with the familiar parallel between games like chess and languages like English. Both are constituted by a set of intrinsically inert things that have somehow acquired some "significance." For example, chess is at least partly constituted by the inert things—the pieces of the game—that have somehow acquired what we could call their "roles" in the game. Similarly, English is at least partly constituted by inert symbols—the expressions of the language—that have somehow acquired meanings. In the case of games, it is commonplace to think that they would not exist and playing them would not be possible if their rules were not in place. Thus, it is commonly said that they are at least partly *constituted* by their rules. And the way the rules are thought to constitute the games is by giving the pieces their roles. The basic thought behind our idea as an answer to the question about the nature of meaningfulness is that, similarly, languages like English would not exist and speaking them would not be possible if *their* rules were not in place. It can therefore be said that they are also at least partly constituted by their rules. And the way the rules can be thought to do this is by giving the expressions their meanings.

This basic sketch raises several questions which need to be answered to develop the idea into an actual view:

(Q1) What is meant by a "rule," here?
(Q2) How do rules give expressions their meanings?
(Q3) How do rules constitute languages?

Let us start with the first question. There are at least three related, but different ways of using "rule" in philosophy.[16] In a very broad sense used by Wittgenstein in his discussion of rule-following, a rule is anything that can be *followed* such that (Wittgenstein, 1953):

[15]The questions are not always mixed up. Alexis Burgess and Brett Sherman distinguish between the two in the introduction to their edited volume on metasemantics by separating *basic metasemantics* which asks questions about meaning-making from what they call, following Dummett, "theory of meaning" which asks questions about the nature of meaning (Burgess & Sherman, 2014, p. 10). As evidence of relative neglect of the nature/essence question in the field I offer the fact that only one of the papers out of the 13 in their volume is centrally on the nature of linguistic meaning, namely Alejandro Perez Carballo's paper on the proper understanding of expressivism. Note that Perez Carballo also distinguishes between a nature-related question, one about interpreting descriptive semantics (the "hermeneutic" question) and the meaning-making question ("the explanatory" question) (Perez Carballo, 2014, p. 135). Mark Greenberg's two-part contribution in the volume is also on *a* nature question, but it focuses on conceptual content and not linguistic meaning (Greenberg, 2014). Importantly, like us here, Greenberg also distinguishes between nature/essence-related ("constitutive") questions and content-determination questions.
[16]I am relying here on the view developed at length in Reiland (2020).

(a) Our having, grasp or use of it can play a role in generating and explaining our action.
(b) Our actions can accord or discord with it.

Here are some of Wittgenstein's examples of rules in this sense: intentions, requests, and orders, and functions and properties used as principles for doing something. There is also a considerably narrower sense of "rule" used in ethics, practical reason, and epistemology that differs in two key respects. First, rules in this sense must be general in applying to more than one instance. Second, the accord or discord they feature is distinctively *normative* (or, even more specifically, *deontic*).

Consider a moral rule and a traffic rule:

(*No murder*) Murder is prohibited.
(*No right*) If there is a red light, turning right is prohibited.

Like rules in the broadest sense, these can be followed. However, what is different in this case is that when we break *no murder* we are not merely doing something incorrect or using a different principle, we are doing something we must not do, something that is morally prohibited. Similarly, when we break *no right*, we are doing something we must not do, something that is legally prohibited.

A "rule" in this narrower sense is something general that can be *followed* and where the accord and discord is distinctively deontic. To regiment usage, let us call such things *norms*. Norms have propositional content that attributes to some action-type A (e.g., murder, turning right) some *deontic* status D (required, prohibited, permissible) perhaps on certain general conditions C (if there is a red light). They can therefore be written down in one of the following two ways which we can think of normal forms for norms:

(N1) (If/only if/iff C), doing A is required/prohibited/permissible
(N2) $\forall a$ (a must/can't/may do A (if/only if/iff C))

The only difference between these two forms is that the latter allows us to quantify over agents and use deontic modals.

Norms are general and normative. However, there is an even narrower sense of "rule" that is central to philosophy of law, philosophy of games and sport, and us here. Rules in this sense are norms that are *man-made* in that they are *in force* due to agential activity and therefore contingently. For example, laws are rules in this sense because they are in force due to the fact that an authority has *enacted* them or put them in force. Similarly, social norms are rules in this sense because they are in force due to the fact that they are accepted as being in force in a community (Brennan et al., 2013).

To see the difference between norms that are not rules in the narrowest sense and norms that are, compare *no murder* to *no right*. Like other moral norms, *no murder* is not usually thought to be in force contingently. For it to be "in force" is just for its content to be necessarily true. In contrast, *no right* is a rule in New York City, but not in most places in Europe or in Los Angeles. This is because the relevant authority in New York City has enacted it or put it in force there, but the relevant authority in the other places has not done so. And for it to be in force is not for its content to be true, but rather for it to have been enacted and/or accepted.

Rules in the narrowest sense *have* propositional content, they are not just the bare propositional contents themselves. They can be thought of on the model of judgments and assertions. Distinguish between particular datable and locatable acts of judging and asserting from judgments and assertions in the sense of propositions as judged or asserted. We can model the latter by using Frege's use of the assertion-sign "⊢" together with "p," a variable over propositions. Every asserted proposition "⊢p" can be divided into two components: its assertive force "⊢" and its content "p." Rules are propositions that are *in force* and they allow for a similar separation between their being in force and their content. For example, the bare propositional content that murder is permitted is not in force and therefore not a rule, even though it is of the right type in attributing an action type a deontic status.

It is an interesting question what it is for rules to be in force. My own preferred view is that it is for them to be enacted and/or generally accepted (Brennan et al., 2013; Reiland, 2020). To make a rule, to *enact*, to put one in force, is not to judge or assert. To use Austin's terms, to judge and assert is to do something *constative*: It is to take a stand on how things already are and thus to do something that has a mind-to-world direction of fit. In other words, it is to do something that has to fit pre-existing reality in order to be correct. This is why judgments and assertions themselves can be said to be true or false (and not just their contents). In contrast, consider declaring a session open by the use of a sentence like "The session is open" (as opposed to using what Austin called an explicit performative like "I open the session"). To declare a session open by the use of such a sentence is to do something *performative*: It is to seek to bring into existence a truth and thus do something that lacks a mind-to-world direction of fit. In other words, it is not to report on pre-existing reality, but to seek to change it (Recanati, 1987, chapter 6). To enact is similarly to do something performative, to seek to bring into existence a normative truth. This is why enactments cannot be said to be true or false (even though their contents can).

It follows from this that sentences of the above two normal forms can be used for two different purposes when it comes to rules. They can be used to *report* rules that have already been enacted and are in force. For example, if one uses them while writing a newspaper article and reporting a recently made law. Or they can be used to *enact* rules. For example, if one uses them in making a law.

Let us also briefly discuss acceptance. Some social rules are in force not because an authority has enacted them, but because they have come to be generally *accepted*. It is quite hard to say exactly what acceptance in a community or even by a person amounts to (see Hart, 1961, chapter 5). However, a promising Hartian idea is that for a person to accept a rule is for her to have certain *normative attitudes*: to have beliefs which mirror the content of the rule, to be disposed to evaluate actions in the light of the rule, to disapprove of breakings, to let others evaluate their actions in the light of it, and so on (Brennan et al., 2013, pp. 28–31). This will suffice for us here.

4 | RULE-GOVERNANCE VIEW

Let us now proceed to the second question: How do rules of use give expressions their meanings? Consider how rules of games give pieces their roles. For example, rules of chess do this by telling us *when* it is permissible to move pieces: They specify the conditions in which it is permissible for a player to move pieces. Similarly, rules of use can be taken to tell us when it is permissible to use expressions: They specify the conditions in which it is permissible for a

speaker to use the expressions. The normal form for stating such rules is the following (using *s* for speakers, *e* for expressions and C for use-conditions):

$\forall s$ (*s* may use *e* iff C)

Then we can think of the expression's meaning as its use-condition C.

To have a toy example to work with, keeping it as simple as possible for the time being, consider the expressive "Ouch!." Plausibly, the rule governing its use in English is something like the following:

(*Ouch!*) $\forall s$ (*s* may use "Ouch!" iff *s* is in pain) (Kaplan, n.d.).

How does this rule figure in language use? The idea is that speakers that are fully competent with English have a grasp on it. When a speaker utters "Ouch!" and is speaking literally, the rule is in force for them (more on this below) and that is why they count as using the expression with its meaning and expressing pain. When they are in pain their use is correct or permissible, in accordance with the rule. When they are not in pain this does not mean that they did not use it with their meaning nor that they did not express pain! Rather, they did all of this, but just misused the expression, used it incorrectly or impermissibly, perhaps to intentionally deceive (Reiland, 2021).[17]

Let us proceed to the final question. How do rules constitute languages? What is it for rules like the *Ouch*! to be in force for speakers? This will also give us the opportunity to explore some possible differences between games and languages.

The basic idea is that rules constitute any activity by being in force (Alston, 2000; Garcia-Carpintero, 2021; Glüer & Pagin, 1999; Reiland, 2020; Williamson, 1996). Following David Lewis's view of languages, we can think of a game like chess as a set of pieces together with their roles in the game (Lewis, 1975). Of course, since intuitively most games do not cease to exist when one piece changes its role, it is more natural to think of games as evolving entities that are at each moment fully constituted by "Lewisian" games or game-stages, but that could at the next moment be fully constituted by a different one (Ridge, 2021; Williamson, 1996, p. 490). It is then the "Lewisian" games that we can think of as sets of pieces together with their roles. Now, on a rule-based view of games, a "Lewisian" game is nothing but a set of propositional contents of the right sort like:

(*Pawn*) $\forall a$ (*a* may move a pawn two squares forward only if it has not moved)

[17]Here is an objection that frequently crops up in discussion. Namely, that this cannot be the rule since what it says is false. There are situations where you are not permitted to utter "Ouch!" even if you are in pain (e.g., etiquette demands that you should be silent). And there are situations where you are permitted to utter "Ouch!" even if you are not in pain (e.g., an evil demon forces you to do it).

This objection relies on the mistaken assumption that for rules to be in force, what they say has to be true. Something like this assumption is related to what Hart saw as the basic error of those who ran law together with morality (Hart, 1961). It would entail that there cannot be any immoral laws, odious rules of games and so on.

Rather, for rules to be in force is for them to be enacted or accepted and this is of course done for reasons. But once a rule is in force, it remains in force, even if you have overwhelming reason to do the opposite in the current situation. For example, consider the traffic rule that you are not permitted to cross an intersection when a red light is on. Sometimes we have overwhelming reason to do so, for example, since there is nobody in sight or we are rushing to save a life. But the traffic rule remains in force nevertheless and you count as breaking it. Similarly, *Ouch!* can remain in force even if you have overwhelming reason to break it.

To start playing a game at a time is to take the contents and put them in force for ourselves at the time plus some further conditions like perhaps aiming to win. Thus, a game by itself is just a *mere* set of propositional contents of the right sort. However, to *play* a game at a time is to perform the relevant antecedent actions while *treating* these contents as *rules*.

In the case of games, it is natural to think that starting to play at all and which game we play is a matter of *voluntary* decision. Contrast this with Williamson's view of assertion. He conceives of asserting as a matter of *default* presumption. As he puts it: "In natural languages, the default use of declarative sentences is to make assertions" (Williamson, 1996, p. 511). The idea is that whenever we say things, the rule of assertion is in force by default. This would have to be because it is somehow generally accepted among speakers of any language. Hence, to assert you do not have to put it in force at the time of saying. Rather, you merely have to continue *accepting* it as being in force at the time of saying. You could opt out or discontinue the acceptance by indicating that you are merely saying things or rather conjecturing or guessing. For example, you could do this by using an explicit performative like "I conjecture ..." (Williamson, 1996, p. 496). However, to assert, to continue accepting the rule, you do not have to do anything beyond not opting out.

Now, we can think of "Lewisian" languages or language-stages similarly as sets of expressions together with their meanings. On the rule-governance view, a "Lewisian" language is nothing but a set of propositional contents of the right sort like *Ouch*! But should we think of speaking a particular language as being more like playing a game in being a voluntary decision or more like assertion in being a matter of default presumption?

Perhaps there is an element of both. On the rule-governance view what makes certain noises, what Austin called mere phonetic acts, into full-blown cases of speaking a particular language, is the fact that the rules are in force. Some might think it is up to the speaker to signal that they are accepting the rules. However, it might be more plausible to think that whether we speak a language at all and which language we speak is a matter of *default* presumption. For example, when I utter "Ouch!" in someone's presence, there is a *default* presumption that I am not merely practicing pronunciation, but rather using it with its meaning in English. More generally, when a competent speaker uses expressions of a language in the presence of others then there seems to be a dual default presumption. First, that one is not merely uttering the expressions, but speaking *a* language. Second, that one is speaking some particular Lewisian language that is generally spoken in the community that the conversants are part of. In other words, there is the presumption that one is speaking what Lewis called the language *of* the relevant community (Lewis, 1975).[18]

On this picture the rules of the particular Lewisian language that is the actual language of a community are in force *by default* in that community. They are in force by default because they are generally accepted in the community. Thus, if one is a competent speaker and a member of the community then to speak one does not have to enact or put the rules in force at the time of

[18]I discuss the relation between Lewis' view in terms of conventions and the view in terms of rules of use at length elsewhere. On one interpretation of Lewis, his view is a competitor to the rule-governance view which tries to get by with conventional regularities alone and in that case I think there are reasons to prefer the story in terms of rules. However, on another interpretation the views are not in tension since they are about different aspects. The rule-governance view reduces meaningfulness, something that Lewis took as a primitive, to rules of use while Lewis's basic idea is that for particular rules to be in force in a community certain conventional regularities have to hold. Compare Nic Southwood's view of laws as conventional norms which also argues that while laws are not reducible to conventions, what is it for them to be in force is for certain legal rules, the Hartian secondary ones, to be conventionally accepted because there is a presumed practice of following them (Southwood, 2019).

the use. Rather, one merely has to continue *accepting* the rules as being in force. She could opt out or discontinue the acceptance for the time when it is clear from the situation or by making it clear that she is merely practicing pronunciation or testing a microphone (defeating the default presumption that she is speaking a language). Similarly, she could opt out by making it clear that she is engaging in linguistic innovation in trying to use a familiar word with a new meaning or when she is speaking a different language which shares the same words (defeating the default presumption that she is speaking the actual language). However, to speak, to continue accepting the rules, she does not have to do anything beyond not opting out.

On the other hand, consider ambiguity. In that case it seems that the default presumption does not do the trick by itself. Rather, the speaker has authority over which of the rules they accept at the time and can voluntarily choose, subject to the usual constraints on intention-formation. For example, in uttering "Bertrand went to the bank," I accept one of the two rules and this is what makes it the case that I say one thing and not the other.

To sum up, on the rule-governance view, languages are constituted by rules of use which give expressions their use-conditions (=meanings). And to speak some particular language is for its rules to be in force for you at the time, either by default presumption or voluntary decision.

Hopefully, the above sketch suffices to convince you that the idea that meaningfulness is a matter of rules governing use can be made precise and de-mystified. Let us now proceed to the standard objections.

5 | FIRST PROBLEM: INCONSISTENT WITH TRUTH-CONDITIONAL APPROACHES

In the 1970s and later our idea came to be widely regarded as an alternative to and inconsistent with truth-conditional approaches in descriptive semantics. In this section I will show that this is based on a misunderstanding. The rule-governance view itself is completely neutral between truth-conditional approaches and alternatives, and thus entirely consistent with it.

Why would one think that our idea is inconsistent with truth-conditional approaches in the first place? To understand this, we need to know a bit more about Dummett's work. Dummett questioned and rejected Donald Davidson's view that to understand an expression is to know its evidence-transcendent truth-conditions (Davidson, 1967; Dummett, 1993). Since he was used to thinking of meanings in terms of use-conditions he instead claimed that the use-conditions for declarative sentences were anti-realist, evidence-immanent "truth"-conditions. Somehow this caused the impression that there are truth-conditional approaches on the one hand, and alternative, use-conditional, anti-realist approaches on the other. And this made it seem like these two approaches are inconsistent.

This is simply a misunderstanding. According to the rule-governance view, the meaning of a declarative sentence can be most straightforwardly described by stating the rule for its use by filling in the gap below:

'$\forall a$ (a may use "Bertrand is British" iff _____)'.

But the most common view among those who have held something like the rule-governance view is that in case of declaratives the use-conditions simply are truth-conditions! In fact, this was the view held by Alston, Stenius, Searle, and Dummett himself (he just disagreed over the nature of truth):

(1) ∀*a* (*a* may use "Bertrand is British" iff Bertrand is British) (Alston, 2000; Dummett, 1991; Searle, 1969; Stenius, 1967, p. 268)
This is by itself already enough to show that there is no inconsistency. But the view is also entirely compatible with further, broadly truth-conditional approaches that trade in intensions or structured propositions. It just analyses the claim that "Bertrand is British" expresses the proposition <Bertrand, being British> in terms of it being governed by any of the following rules which include more information about meaning while still containing the truth-conditional information:

(2) ∀*a* (*a* may use "Bertrand is British" iff *a believes* <Bertrand, being British>) (Lewis, 1975, p. 7; Schroeder, 2008)

(3) ∀*a* (*a* may use "Bertrand is British" iff *a judges* <Bertrand, being British>) (Hanks, 2015)

(4) ∀*a* (*a* may use "Bertrand is British" iff *a entertains* <Bertrand, being British>) (Davis, 2003; Soames, 2010)

All of these hypotheses about what the use-conditions of declarative sentences are involve a propositional attitude. And proponents of all these views can maintain that on their view what it is for "Bertrand is British" to *semantically express* <Bertrand, being British> is for it to have a use-condition that involves this proposition's being believed or judged to be the case or entertained. Talk of semantic expression is nothing but shorthand way of talking about use-conditions while abstracting away the extra information about the attitude.

To sum up, the rule-governance view itself qua a view about the nature of meaningfulness is not at all opposed to "truth-conditional semantics" because it is simply neutral insofar as all views in descriptive semantics. It allows for hypotheses about the meanings of declarative sentences which are consistent with "truth-conditional semantics." Of course, it also allows for hypotheses which are inconsistent with it, like, for example, expressivist views of normative language (Schroeder, 2008). But this does not discredit the view at all. Rather it is a testament to its versatility in being consistent with different possible views in descriptive semantics.

6 | SECOND PROBLEM: FREGE–GEACH?

In the 1960s and 1970s, largely due to Geach's and Searle's arguments, our idea came further to be seen as subject to the so-called Frege-Geach problem with compositionality (Geach, 1960, 1965; Searle, 1962). In this section I will show that this is also based on a misunderstanding. Again, the rule-governance view itself is neutral between views in descriptive semantics which are subject to the problem and views that are not, and it can easily allow for orthodox views not subject to the problem.

The Frege-Geach problem is most fundamentally a problem for any view of the meaning of an expression that takes it to involve something forceful or attitudinal like a speech act or a mental state such that the force or attitude is not plausibly present when the expression is embedded in certain larger expressions. To take the simplest example, suppose you think that the meaning of "Stealing is wrong" is such that its use involves expressing the attitude of moral disapproval of stealing. Considerations of compositionality and logic require that it have the same meaning in "It is not the case that stealing is wrong" or "Stealing is wrong or my parents lied to me." But the use of these sentences emphatically does not involve expressing moral disapproval of stealing.

Why would one think that thinking of meanings in terms of use-conditions is subject to the Frege-Geach problem in the first place? The primary reason is that in the 1950s it became associated with certain non-cognitivist views in descriptive semantics that are subject to the problem. For starters, take Strawson's short-lived view that "true" is not a regular predicate which is for attributing the property of being true, but rather a device for endorsing (Strawson, 1950). Strawson stated the view in terms of rules and use-conditions. On his view, the use-conditions of "true" are that you are performing the non-cognitive act of *endorsing*. Thus, when you use the sentence "That is true" you are not saying that some relevant proposition has the property of being true, but rather endorsing it. Similarly, take Hare's idea that "good" is not a regular predicate which is for attributing the property of being good, but rather a device for commending (Hare, 1952). Again, Hare stated the view in terms of rules and use-conditions. On his view, the use-conditions of "good" are that you are performing the non-cognitive act of *commending*. Thus, when you use the sentence "Bertrand is good" you are not saying that Bertrand has the property of being good, but rather commending him.

This is how the idea in terms of rules became associated with non-cognitivist views. And these views are indeed subject to the Frege–Geach problem. Take the atomic sentence "Bertrand is good." On Hare's view its use-conditions are that the speaker is commending Bertrand. However, now take the complex sentence "It is not the case that Bertrand is good." On the rule-governance view to use *it* permissibly one must use "Bertrand is good" permissibly.[19] However, it is clear that the use-conditions of "It is not the case that Bertrand is good" cannot involve the speaker's commending Bertrand. Thus, non-cognitivists have at least a prima facie problem with accounting for the *compositionality* of meaning: They attribute meanings to expressions that seem like they could not be the meanings of the same expressions when they occur as parts of certain more complex expressions.

To reiterate, the reason why the rule-governance view has been thought to be subject to the Frege–Geach problem is because it became associated with certain non-cognitivist views which are subject to the Frege–Geach problem. This generated the impression that the view itself is subject to the problem. But, again, this is a misunderstanding. The view itself qua a view about the nature of meaningfulness is neutral between different views in descriptive semantics. It is entirely consistent with the view that "true" is a regular predicate which is for ascribing the property of being true and "good" is a regular predicate which is for ascribing the property of being good. Of course, it also allows us to capture non-cognitivist views like Strawson's and Hare's which is why they used it to state them. But, again, this does not discredit it at all. Rather it is a testament to its versatility in being consistent with different possible views in descriptive semantics.

7 | UNITY OF MEANING

Let me finally explain why our idea has had a lasting appeal to philosophers from Strawson to Kaplan and why it is continually attractive.

Start by thinking briefly about the nature of properties such as meaningfulness. For anything to have a property is for it to have something in *common* with other things that have that

[19]Here is why. To use a complex expression with its compositional meaning requires using all of its parts with their meanings. However, now notice that on the *rules* view to use *any* expression permissibly one must be in its use-condition. This means that to use a complex expression with its compositional meaning *and* permissibly one must be in its use-conditions *and* the use-conditions of each of its parts.

property. Thus, for expressions to have a meaning is for each of them to have something in common with other expressions that have a meaning. This is the thing in virtue of the possession of which they count as having a meaning or being meaningful. Let us call this common feature X. However, for different expressions to have *different* meanings is for each of them to have something that it does not have common with other expressions. These are the things in virtue of the possession of which they count as having *different* meanings. Let us call these differing features Ys.

The question what it is for an expression to have a meaning can now be broken down into the question about the nature of the common element, X, and the question about the nature of the differing elements, Ys. Different views can be thought of as giving different answers to the question about the nature of X and the nature of Ys. However, we can also now state a strong condition of adequacy on acceptable answers to the question about the nature of meaningfulness which I call the *unity constraint*. Namely, that any view of meaningfulness has to tell us what the nature of the common element X is and the nature of the differing elements Ys are which is adequate for *all* the *different* types of expressions of natural language. Thus, it has to find an X which is the *same* not only in the case of names, predicates, and declarative sentences, but also in the case of indexicals and demonstratives, interrogative sentences, imperative sentences, and expressives and other similar phenomena. In general, it has to find an X which is the same in the case of all the different kinds of words, phrases, and sentences in natural language. If a view fails to do this then it makes meaningfulness a disjunctive property. And surely, such a view is unacceptable or at least in need of very serious justification. It is comparable to a view on which being red, being blue and so on are not *ways* of being colored, but rather on which to be colored just is to be red *or* blue and so on, where there is no underlying unity to what it is to be red and what it is to be blue. We would need very strong reasons to take such a disjunctive view of being colored seriously. Similarly, then, for a disjunctive view of meaningfulness.[20]

Now, consider the rule-governance view. On this view the common element X is embodied in the schema "*s* may use '_' iff _." And there is no obstacle to this being the common element in the case of indexicals and demonstratives, interrogative and imperative sentences, and interjections. After all, we can easily see how all these expressions could have use-conditions. And this, I submit, is one of the reasons why something like the rule-governance view appealed to people from Strawson to Kaplan and why we should find it continually attractive.

8 | CONCLUSION

My aim in this article was to reinvigorate the once-common idea that having a meaning is a matter of being governed by a rule of use and that meanings are to be thought of in terms of use-conditions. I did this by sketching the rule-governance view and by dispelling certain common misunderstandings. I also demonstrated its lasting appeal by showing how it can allow for

[20]This is entirely compatible with thinking that there are different aspects or dimensions of meaning that can formally treated separately or modeled with different theoretical tools. For example, in his influential unpublished paper Kaplan distinguished expressions which have meanings from those that have use-conditions and others have followed suit in distinguishing the truth-conditional and use-conditional dimension of meaning (Gutzmann, 2015; Kaplan, n.d.; Potts, 2005; Predelli, 2013). The present proposal is that all meaning is, at bottom, use-conditional. However, this does not mean that there is no semantic difference between primary, "at-issue" dimension of meaning determining what is said and secondary, "non-at-issue" dimension determining conventional implicatures, as carried by the underlined part in the sentence "Messi, who was at Barcelona, moved to PSG" (Potts, 2005).

the meaningfulness of all expressions to consist in the same kind of property. In contrast, the venerable idea that meaningfulness consists in the potential to make a contribution to truth-conditions fails in this regard since many expressions do not make such a contribution independently of context, and some do not at all.

Of course, I have only scratched the surface. For example, space did not permit me to go into how to translate the sort of compositional semantics that we have in terms of truth-conditions into use-conditions (Heim & Kratzer, 1998). Similarly, it did not permit me to fill in the details of some of the more exciting applications of the view to the semantics of mood, conditionals, slurs, and other similar phenomena. Nevertheless, I hope to have succeeded in showing that talk of rules of use does not have to be vague or mysterious, and why it should be continually attractive.

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