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# On Some Objections to the Normativity of Meaning

**Abstract:** The objective of this paper is twofold. First, it aims to contribute to the debate about the normativity of meaning not by means of providing and defending new arguments, but by analysing and reflecting on some of the presuppositions and seemingly irresolvable dialectical points of disagreement. Second, it seeks to achieve the first aim by critically engaging with some of the objections raised against semantic normativity by anti-normativists like Kathrin Glüer, Anandi Hattiangadi and Åsa Wikforss as well as discussing some of the ideas defended by normativists like Hans-Johann Glock, Severin Schroeder and Daniel Whiting. The upshot of the discussion is meant to provide a clearer representation of some of the arguments and concepts that guide the debate, though the proposed analysis, if correct, should also add some support for the normativist's case.

**Keywords:** linguistic meaning, semantic normativity, correctness, prescriptivity, rules

## 1. Introduction

The philosophical debate about the normativity of meaning reflects on one of the most fundamental questions about the nature of language: whether, and in what sense, meaning is normative. More specifically, the dispute revolves around the question whether it is a conceptual truth that semantic correctness is normative. For example, normativists maintain that '*semantically* incorrect applications do violate semantic norms; that is just analytic' (Schroeder 2020: 83), whereas according to anti-normativists, 'that *semantic* correctness is normative, is no conceptual truth' (Glüer and Wikforss 2009: 36 fn. 8).

When the disagreement reaches a point where the opposing parties end up reflecting on the dispute itself, some of the remarks seem to indicate a dialectical deadlock. For example, according to Kathrin Glüer and Åsa Wikforss,

[t]his might look like nothing but a basic clash of intuitions. According to us, semantic correctness is not a normative concept, according to the normativist, it is. Thus, the normativist might feel safe in just digging his heels in in one of two ways: he might be tempted to conclude either that we do not talk about the same topic, or that his opponent has a poor grasp of the relevant concept and that the opponent's intuitions therefore can safely be ignored. Less dogmatically, he could move on and provide what we claim is required: *further* argument. (Glüer and Wikforss 2009: 36, fn. 8)

Normativists take notice but remain unconvinced. For instance, Daniel Whiting writes:

So far, by way of objection, the anti-Normativists have only reported that ‘according to their intuitions’ (Glüer and Wikforss 2008: p. 4) that suggestion is false. Needless to say, this does not really amount to an argument against Normativism – a principled reason for thinking that it is false has not been offered. It seems, then, that either – given the appearances mentioned above – the balance is tipped in favour of Normativism or – if one is not impressed by or does not feel inclined to respect such appearances – the Normativists and their opponents have reached a stalemate. (Whiting 2009: 549)

The objective of this paper is twofold. First, it aims to contribute to the debate not by means of providing and defending new arguments, but by analysing and reflecting on some of the presuppositions and seemingly irresolvable dialectical points of disagreement. Second, it seeks to achieve the first aim by critically engaging with some of the objections raised against semantic normativity by anti-normativists like Kathrin Glüer, Anandi Hattiangadi and Åsa Wikforss as well as discussing some of the ideas defended by normativists like Hans-Johann Glock, Severin Schroeder and Daniel Whiting. The upshot of the discussion is meant to provide a clearer representation of some of the arguments and concepts that guide the debate, though the proposed analysis and, if correct, should also add some support for the normativist’s case.

## 2. Semantic Correctness and Non-Normative Uses of ‘Correct’

Some anti-normativists deny that semantic correctness is normative by proposing that ‘there *are* non-normative uses of ‘correct’, and aim to support this claim by reference to the following idea: ‘if I mean *green* by ‘green,’ then ‘green’ is true only of green things, and if I say ‘That is green’ while pointing at a red object, I have said something false’ (Glüer and Wikforss 2009: 36). However, as it will be shown later, this is not a kind of case by reference to which normativists specify the concept of *semantic* correctness. But even if one grants that it reveals there being a non-normative use of ‘correct,’ the argument is unconvincing for two reasons.

Firstly, to argue for the conceptual truth that semantic correctness is normative, one does not need to be committed to the view that there can be *no* use of ‘correct’ that is not normative. It is sufficient to argue that there exists *a* use with respect to which it *is* a conceptual truth that semantic correctness is normative, and that *this* use is the one that is relevant for the normativity of meaning.

Secondly, any linguistic term can be used in a novel way, and so it should be no surprise that *some* use, or uses, of ‘correct’ might be, in some sense to be

specified, non-normative. However, if one points out *a* use of 'correct' that can be described as non-normative, this is not sufficient to conclude that *no* use of 'correct' is normative, and thus, no good reason to deny that there are uses of 'semantic correctness' according to which it *is* conceptually true that semantic correctness is normative. In order to refute the latter claim, one would also need to show, on independent grounds, that the alleged non-normative use is the one that is relevant for semantic normativity.

The above argument follows a pattern of reasoning that can also be identified in a familiar case concerning the concept of knowledge. It is widely believed that the concept of knowledge is factive. In other words, that it is conceptually, or logically, impossible for S to know that *p* and *p* to be false. But in discussing the presumed entailment from knowledge to truth, Oswald Hanfling raises the question whether it conforms to the actual use: 'Is the claim that it does confirmed by the actual use of the word?' (2000: 100). He considers what might be thought as a counterexample to the factive analysis of the concept: namely, that 'whereas we know the earth to be round, people in former times knew it to be flat' (*ibid.*). Hanfling notes that such use is recognized and makes perfectly good sense in a wide variety of contexts. Still, it would be too rash to conclude that this case disproves the conceptual entailment from knowledge to truth. What they show, according to Hanfling, is that the word 'know' is deprived of its *distinctive* meaning, so that in *some* established uses 'to know' means 'to firmly believe.' The latter concept – that of firm belief – is certainly non-factive, but this has no bearing on the question whether the concept<sup>1</sup> of knowledge is factive. In the same way, the anti-normativists' reliance on some non-normative use of 'correct' does not, by itself, give sufficient support to the negative thesis they aim to establish.

That being said, it looks as if some responses to the anti-normativists' claim that 'correct' is sometimes used non-normatively, do not take us very far. For example, Schroeder (2020: 82) notes that 'Correct' *means*: in accordance with the norms,' which is meant to establish that the relevant concept of correctness is normative. But this conceptual truth does not seem to be what anti-normativists deny.

For instance, Hattiangadi (2006: 222) holds the view that 'one meaning of the word 'normative' is 'pertaining to a norm or a standard.' So, in this respect, she seems to agree with Schroeder that 'correct' *is* a normative notion; or, rather, that

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1 Or the relevant concept of knowledge, if one prefers to talk of two (or more) concepts that get expressed by the same term.

there is *a* sense of ‘normative,’ according to which semantic correctness can be said to be normative. However, a closer scrutiny of the dialectic indicates that one, or perhaps *the* main reason why anti-normativists are not willing to take the agreed explication of ‘correct’ to be sufficient for semantic normativity lies in the assumption that the relevant sense of ‘normative’ is *prescriptive*. This is explicit in Hattiangadi (2006: 225), who notes that ‘for meaning to be normative in the required sense, the slogan ‘meaning is normative’ must be glossed as ‘meaning is prescriptive.’ And it is even more thoroughly explained by Glüer and Wikforss:

Along with almost everyone else in this discussion, we take the relevant normativity to be *prescriptive* in nature. Prescriptions, we take it, involve genuine ‘oughts;’ their very point is to *guide* our performances. This interpretation of the normativity thesis is by no means an arbitrary choice. It is well motivated both by the debate, and the subject matter, we are addressing. Not only have those involved in the normativity debate approached the matter in terms of prescriptivity, it also is entirely natural to do so (Glüer and Wikforss 2009: 32).

Of course, one is free choose to defend the idea that there is a more general concept of semantic normativity that is not confined to the prescriptive interpretation of the notion. In other words, one could argue that there are legitimate uses of ‘correct’ that do *not* imply prescriptivity. If this were the case, anti-normativists should have no reason to disagree with such claims, since anti-normativists do not seem to be defending the idea that semantic normativity cannot be given a non-prescriptive interpretation. However, if normativity of meaning is to be construed non-prescriptively, then for the anti-normativists this would not concern the relevant sense of ‘normativity.’

Thus, the idea of prescriptivity sets an important conceptual condition for both sides of the debate: normativists are expected to argue for, and anti-normativists to deny the claim that meaning is normative *in the prescriptive sense*.

But how exactly should one understand the concept of prescriptivity? The second objection to the normativity of meaning that is to be considered next seems to hint towards one possible answer as to how the prescriptive aspect ought to be understood.

### 3. Semantic Incorrectness and Linguistic Mistakes

Another well-known objection to semantic normativity proceeds by arguing against the so-called ‘simple argument’ for the normativity of meaning, which has been defended by Paul Boghossian (1989). According to Glüer and Wikforss (2009: 35), ‘the simple argument starts from the uncontroversial claim that

meaningful expressions necessarily have conditions of correct use.' In their view, this idea can be formally expressed as follows (Glüer and Wikforss 2009: 35):

(C)  $w$  means  $F \rightarrow \forall x (w \text{ applies correctly to } x \leftrightarrow x \text{ is } F)$

It is important to note that according to Glüer and Wikforss, (C) is true, so this is not what anti-normativists deny. Rather, what gets rejected is the idea that normativity in the required (prescriptive) sense can be derived from (C) alone. In their view, 'the very point of the simple argument is to derive the normativity of meaning *directly*, that is, without the help of any further (substantive) premises, from (C)' (Glüer and Wikforss 2009: 35), and this, according to them, cannot be done.

In order to show that (C) does not give rise to the normativity of meaning, Glüer and Wikforss consider the discussed case:

If I mean *green* by 'green,' then 'green' is true only of green things, and if I say 'That is green' while pointing at a red object, I have said something false. But it does not immediately follow that I have failed to do what I ought to do – not even from a merely semantic point of view (Glüer and Wikforss 2009: 36).

But it is not obvious how this argument is supposed to negate *semantic* normativity. In fact, there are several reasons that speak against the impression that it does.

It is true that if 'green' means *green* (or if I mean *green* by 'green'), then 'green' is true only of green things. But are Glüer and Wikforss right in claiming that if one describes a red object as being green, and thus states something false, then it does not immediately follow that 'one has failed to do what one ought to do?' The answer depends on what 'failing to do what one ought to do' amounts to: what exactly is the obligation that one has presumably failed to conform to.

If one follows the common anti-normativists' suggestion that the relevant kind of obligation is that of speaking truth, then it *would* immediately follow that one has failed to do what one ought to do by speaking falsely. However, there are at least two reasons that speaking truth is *not* what the normativity of meaning requires.

First, as it has been reiterated many times, speaking meaningfully is not the same as stating truths, so any philosophical analysis of linguistic meaning must account for the fact that making a *factually false* statement does not make it *meaningless*. Second, as anti-normativists see it, the norm to speak the truth is not semantic. For example, in Hattiangadi's view (2007: 190), '[m]y obligation to say something because it is true is not a *semantic* obligation, though it might be moral, prudential, or merely contingent.' And according to Wikforss:

The liar ... violates not only a moral rule but also a linguistic one. Notice, however, that these rules are not semantic but pragmatic. The normative force of such rules derives not from meaning alone but from their role in making our linguistic interactions go smoothly. To conclude from the existence of these rules that *meaning* is an essentially normative notion is to commit a fallacy akin to Searle's well-known 'assertion fallacy, the fallacy of 'confusing the conditions for the performance of the speech act of assertion, with the analysis of the meaning of words' (Wikforss 2001: 206).

So, one should not fall prey to the temptation to derive *semantic* normativity by conflating norms of language (semantics) with other kind of norms that are involved in the practice of language use. Accordingly, in the discussed objection, the failure to do what one ought to do should concern *meaning* (semantics). Hence, in order to provide a case that would speak against semantic normativity, one should describe a scenario, which would contain a semantic or linguistic (as opposed to factual) error but would *not* have the implication that one has failed to do what one ought to do from a semantic point of view. Glüer's and Wikforss' scenario is not like this because stating something false does not imply that one has made a semantic mistake. In fact, making a false claim presupposes that *no* semantic mistake was made: it requires that the statement made would be meaningful (semantically correct) yet not true. Consequently, the proposed objection does not describe a case of failing to do what one ought to do from a semantic point of view because the indicated error is factual, not semantic.

Even though the argument is unconvincing, it provides an instructive case, which reveals an important assumption about the nature of linguistic meaning that guides Glüer's and Wikforss's argument and their anti-normativist agenda. At first, Glüer and Wikforss (2009: 36) rightly claim that 'the relevant notion of correctness in this context is that of *semantic* correctness,' but then add that 'what that precisely amounts to depends on the choice of basic semantic concept; we shall use *truth* as our example.' Some conceptual decisions might be innocuous, but there are three reasons that speak against Glüer's and Wikforss's choice.

The first one is simple, although often seems to get unnoticed: semantic normativity concerns the normativity of *meaning*, not the normativity of *truth*. Consequently, choosing *truth* as 'basic semantic concept' to unpack the relevant notion of 'semantic correctness' at least *prima facie* looks as a case of changing the topic.

Secondly, as it has been noted by both sides, the above choice has unacceptable consequence that semantically correct use of words gives rise to an obligation to tell truths. So understood, the idea of semantic normativity could not account for meaningful lies or irony.

Thirdly, one might suspect that anti-normativists' choice of 'basic semantic concept' is grounded in a philosophical conviction, or a hope, that the concept of linguistic meaning can be analysed in extensional terms like truth or reference. This is neither philosophically peculiar, nor new. In fact, it might be suggestive to note that an ideal of an extensional account of meaning has been one of the guiding principles of Davidsonian truth-conditional semantics, Davidson (1984) being one of the first to argue that any obligation to use words in a certain way must be external to semantics. Furthermore, some anti-normativists seem to be sympathetic to Davidsonian philosophy of language (e.g. Glüer 2001: 53–54), which could, at least in part, explain their preference to analyse the relevant concept of semantic correctness in extensional terms. But whatever one thinks about the prospects of such theoretical endeavours for the theory of meaning, the relevant concept of semantic correctness is conceptually linked to, and depends on, the categorical distinction between mistakes that pertain to matters of fact and mistakes that concern the meanings of words only. Reliance on this distinction is clear in the writings of some normativists. For instance, Glock (2019: 302) notes that the 'crucial difference between truth and meaning emerges when one distinguishes types of *mistakes* that people can make in using words,' and adds the following proviso:

Some uses of words are mistaken *solely* because of *what these words mean*, irrespective of any other facts, syntactic rules, or social expectations. Conversely, one can apply a word in a way which is *semantically correct* – based on a proper understanding of its meaning – without applying it correctly in the sense of saying something *true*, namely if one errs about pertinent facts (Glock 2019: 303).

The same distinction is also evident in Schroeder's response to Glüer's and Wikforss's claim that 'incorrect applications do not immediately imply that S has violated any semantic prescription' (Glüer and Wikforss 2018: 2.1.1.). In his view,

[t]hat depends on the kind of incorrectness. It is true that *factually* incorrect applications do not violate semantic norms. If, misremembering, I say 'There's beer in the fridge' when it contains only orange juice, that is evidently not a *linguistic* mistake. On the other hand, *semantically* incorrect applications do violate semantic norms; that is just analytic (Schroeder 2020: 83).

Thus, the categorical distinction between a semantic and a factual mistake appears to be what both sides of the debate should accept as part of the common ground. Otherwise, one risks to misconstrue the idea of the normativity of meaning *ab initio*.

However, if one takes a closer look at the anti-normativist position, the aforementioned distinction does not seem to be guiding numerous attempts to

explicate the concept of semantic normativity. For example, Glüer notes that in the light of any plausible account of semantic normativity, 'it has to be possible to use an expression incorrectly in the empirical sense without using it incorrectly in the linguistic sense' (Glüer 1999: 11). This is correct, and agreed on both sides. At the same time, Wikforss points out that the idea of semantic mistake is not essential for a philosophical account of linguistic meaning: 'why the possibility of making meaning errors should be essential to meaning,' she asks, and after some deliberation concludes that she is 'sceptical of the claim that meaning errors of this sort could be shown to be essential to meaning'<sup>2</sup> (Wikforss 2001: 212).

To conclude, the suggested analysis of prescriptive failure *as failure to speak the truth* relies on a misguided anti-normativists' choice to analyse the concept of semantic correctness (and linguistic meaning) in terms of truth, which obscures the distinction between semantic and factual errors. For these reasons the discussed objection misses the target.

By discussing the third objection, an alternative account of the concept of prescriptivity shall be explicated next.

#### 4. Semantic Rules and Normative Statements

One common objection to semantic normativity is based on a conjunction of two ideas: the commonly accepted distinction between normative and descriptive statements, and the assumption that normative statements tell us what to do.

How should one understand the distinction between normative and descriptive statements? Here is how the distinction guides Hattiangadi's decision to call some of the 'uncontentious examples' containing both kinds of statements:

What is a normative statement? Here are a few uncontentious examples: 'you ought to give some of your income to charity;' 'torturing innocent people is wrong;' 'keeping your promises is right.' In contrast, here are some uncontentious examples of descriptive statements: 'snow is white;' 'the earth is flat;' 'elephants never forget' (Hattiangadi 2006: 221).

She also adds an important qualification, which is supposed to differentiate normative and descriptive statements. In her view, '[w]hat seems special about normative statements, what distinguishes them from descriptive statements, is

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2 More specifically, meaning errors of the sort that 'occur when we misapply a word, not because we have made some kind of empirical error, but because we have an incomplete understanding of the meaning of our own words, of our own concepts' (Wikforss 2001: 211).



that normative statements tell us what to do, whereas non-normative statements simply describe how things are' (Hattiangadi 2006: 221). Two things should be noted at this point. First, normative statements need not contain deontic verbs. This is clear from two of the provided examples:

(NS1) Torturing innocent people is wrong.

(NS2) Keeping your promises is right.

Hattiangadi is willing to count both (NS1) and (NS2) as normative, and the reason for this is that both of these statements tell us what to do. Furthermore, even if 'correct' and 'right' are called deontic *terms*, it is clear that the prescriptive force of (NS1) and (NS2) cannot be explained by reference to deontic *verbs*: there are simply none involved.

Secondly, as it has been noted by Whiting (2007: 134), the mere presence of an evaluative or deontic term is not sufficient for a statement to be normative in the required sense. For example, the following statement is evidently descriptive even if it contains an evaluative (deontic) term:

(DS) Most people agree that keeping your promises is right.

Thus, it seems that Hattiangadi's account of the distinction between normative and descriptive statements is in agreement with Glock's (2019: 303) position, according to which 'whether a sentence expresses a norm depends not on its linguistic *form*, but on whether it has a normative *function*, either in general or on a given occasion of utterance.' However, contrary to Glock and other normativists, Hattiangadi does not subscribe to the idea that facts about meaning (or their direct implications) have a normative aspect.

Her argument appears to start from some common ground. Hattiangadi (2006: 223) introduces (R1), which she is willing to call 'a rule that specifies the correct use of a term:'

(R1)  $(x) (t \text{ applies correctly to } x \leftrightarrow x \text{ is } f)$

She also claims that (R1) 'is indeed a norm,' yet in her opinion, 'it does not make meaning normative in the appropriate sense,' the reason being that 'R1 simply *states* the correctness conditions of an expression; it does not tell me what to *do*' (ibid.). But it is hard to see why (R1) cannot be said to tell us what to do.

For one, (R1) contains 'correctly,' and so by Hattiangadi's standards, contains a deontic term. Why, then, (NS1) and (NS2) *are* normative, but (R1) is *not*? Hattiangadi claims that (R1) simply *states* the correctness conditions of a term. But (NS1) and (NS2) can also be said to state the conditions of morally right or

wrong behaviour, and yet that does not seem to negate the idea that both of them are normative in the required sense.

At this point Hattiangadi turns to the claim that 'deontic terms, such as 'correct' and 'right,' are not always normative. Sometimes, to say that something is right does *not* imply a prescription; rather it is to say that it meets a certain *standard*' (Hattiangadi 2006: 224). But the objection falls flat for two reasons.

First, if sometimes 'correct' (and 'right,' or their contraries) is not normative, it does not follow that 'correct' is not normative in (R1). Second, Hattiangadi notes that 'if I say something like 'the right action is the one that maximises overall happiness,' I mean that such actions ought to be taken even in the absence of any relevant desire' (Hattiangadi 2006: 224). So, according to Hattiangadi, 'right' here *is* normative because it means that such actions ought to be taken in the absence of any relevant desire. In other words, 'ought to be taken' is presumed to be analytic to 'the right action.' However, this does not answer the question how 'correctly' in (R1) is different; it merely assumes that, 'in the absence of any relevant desire,' (R1) does not give rise to a prescriptive statement. Last of all, it remains to be seen why the prescriptive force of *semantic* (as opposed to moral) normativity must be independent of 'any relevant desire,' and, more pertinently, what exactly does this independence requirement amount to. Is it meant to underline the assumption that semantic norms are (or must be) like moral norms for them to be genuinely prescriptive? Or does it amount to the claim that the semantic 'ought' must be derived independently of any desire?

An essentially similar kind of argument is put forward by Glüer. First, she proposes the following biconditional, which, in her view, can be called a rule (Glüer 1999: 11):

(G) It is correct to apply 'green' to an object x iff x is green

Then, similarly to Hattiangadi, Glüer claims 'that (G) does nothing in the way of telling us what we should do' (Glüer 1999: 11). However, this position, according to her, is compatible with the idea that

a rule like (G) *could be used as a prescription to do the correct thing*, but this prescriptive power would have to derive from some external, non-semantic source; it clearly cannot result from the rule's being meaning determining. As long as we are concerned with semantic normativity, this however is exactly where the 'should' in question has to derive its action-guiding force from (Glüer 1999: 11; emphasis added).

But how should one understand the idea that, on the one hand, (G) does *not* tell us what we should do, and yet (G) *could be used* as a prescription to do the correct thing? Perhaps a more accurate way of stating what is meant would be to say

that a rule like (G) could be invoked, or appealed to, when one aims to do what one *should* do. In such a case, however, according to anti-normativists, the prescriptive and action-guiding force of the 'should' in question would be derived not from (G) itself, but from some external, non-semantic source.

If that is a fair reconstruction of the anti-normativists' argument, then one could finally put to rest the quest for arguments as to why (R1) or (G) are not normative in the prescriptive sense (since anti-normativists agree that they *can* be) and tackle the question whether the prescriptive power that rules like (R1) and (G) can be seen to imply is derived from some external, non-semantic source.

## 5. The Source of Prescriptivity

The above analysis suggests that most challenging arguments against semantic normativity are rooted in the idea that the action-guiding or regulative power of semantic obligations is derived from some non-semantic source. But what exactly does it mean for prescriptivity to be derived from a non-semantic source?

Here is Hattiangadi's attempt to give a more specific content to the idea in question:

To say that meaning is intrinsically normative is to say that what you mean by a word determines how you ought to use that word, quite independently of moral, prudential, legal and other considerations, and independently of your desires or communicative intentions (Hattiangadi 2009: 54–55).

Before trying to clarify what this independence requirement and the relevant kind of determination amounts to, one should note that Hattiangadi's explication of the idea of meaning that is intrinsically normative does not exactly coincide with what some normativists are willing to defend. Hattiangadi maintains that semantic normativity implies the idea that '[w]hat someone means by a term thus determines how she ought to use it' (2006: 220) or that 'the fact that an agent means something by an expression must amount to the fact that she ought to use the expression in accordance with its meaning quite independently of what she wants to do' (ibid.: 228). But does the idea of semantic normativity, as it is defended by normativists, concern what *someone means* by a term?

A positive answer to this question would misconstrue semantic normativity; or at least the concept of it that is defended by some normativists. For despite the widespread understanding of semantic normativity as concerning *speaker's* meaning,<sup>3</sup> some normativists explicitly pointed out that the kind of semantic

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3 An interpretation that seems to be rooted in Saul Kripke's discussion of semantic

normativity they are willing to defend concerns *linguistic* or *lexical* meaning of *linguistic expressions* as opposed to what a *speaker* means by their use; this is unambiguously noted by Glock (2019: 296), Schroeder (2020: 80) and Whiting (2009: 535; 2016: 219 fn. 1, 227–228).

Some attempts to correct this misunderstanding seem to be not radical enough. For example, Boghossian claims that semantic normativity does not concern ‘a relation between meaning something by an expression at one time and meaning something by it at some later time,’ but rather ‘a relation between meaning something by it at some time and its *use at that time*’ (Boghossian 2008: 15). However, the suggested proposal still retains the idea that semantic normativity concerns meaning something by an expression (speaker’s meaning), and not what the expression means (word meaning). In response, Whiting noted that semantic normativity is to be understood as concerning ‘how a subject should use an expression given what it does mean,’ and that ‘it does not concern what an expression *should* mean, or what someone should mean by it’ (Whiting 2016: 229). Nevertheless, the widespread anti-normativist tendency to construe semantic normativity in terms of what a speaker means by an expression suggests that the attempts to eliminate some of the crucial errors concerning the subject matter of the debate have not been taken seriously enough.

Getting back to the independence requirement, here is Whiting’s suggestion on how it should be understood:

The independence from desires and the like ensures that semantic normativity is not simply a species of, say, instrumental normativity, where the relevant implication would concern what a subject is to do if she is to satisfy her contingent desires, interests, aims, etc. (Whiting 2009: 536).

In short, according to Whiting, for semantic normativity to be genuine, it must not be a species of instrumental normativity. But which norms are instrumental, and what makes them instrumental in the first place?

Typically, statements that express instrumental norms or prescriptions have a conditional structure, and for this reason are sometimes called ‘hypothetical means/end prescriptions.’ Having conditional structure, however, is not sufficient for a norm to be instrumental. As Hattiangadi notes:

Hypothetical means/end prescriptions are conditional prescriptions in which the consequent and antecedent bear relationship of means to end. An example of an

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normativity in his *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (1982) where he moves between what a *speaker* means in using an expression and what an *expression* means in the language.

ordinary hypothetical means/end prescription is this: 'If you want to get from Oxford to Cambridge by noon, you ought to take an early morning train' (Hattiangadi 2006: 228).

Thus, for a hypothetical means/end prescription to be counted as instrumental, the relation between the antecedent and the consequent of the conditional must be that of means to end.

At this point it might be useful to state the conditions that should be met for the relevant notion of meaning (or semantic correctness) to be intrinsically normative and which seem to be implicitly guiding anti-normativists' arguments and criticisms:

- (IN1) The action-guiding, regulative or prescriptive force of the 'should' in question must be derived from or determined by semantic (meaning determining) rules like (R1) or (G);
- (IN2) What is derived from rules like (R1) or (G) must not to be a species of instrumental normativity.

But how should one understand the notions of 'action-guiding,' 'regulative' or 'prescriptive force?' And what exactly is one supposed to look for when trying to identify the source that is assumed to determine this kind of force or power?

Recall that according to Glüer, 'this prescriptive power would have to derive from some external, non-semantic source; it clearly cannot result from the rule's being meaning determining' (Glüer 1999: 11). But why not?

It is not obvious what the anti-normativist would reply, but one possible response could be: because the meaning determining rule is not the *reason why* one can, should or must (not) do what the prescription requires one to do; the reason why, if there is one, must be external to semantics. If this is how the anti-normativist would respond, then the inquiry of the source of the action-guiding, regulative or prescriptive force amounts to a question about the *reasons* that would be given as answers to questions like 'Why cannot I...?,' 'Why should you...?,' 'Why may I...?,' 'Why must we...?,' and the like. It is by reference to answers given to questions *like these* that one could intelligibly aim to identify the source of the relevant kind of prescriptive force that is under consideration.

However, if that is a correct way to approach this matter, then it is not clear how exactly anti-normativists would understand the relevant question: what exactly would they take the questions about the *reasons why* to be concerned with. The case seems to be different for the normativists. In their view, the relevant questions ask for reasons that *justify* semantic prescriptions or prohibitions. In this respect, it is *justificatory reasons* that are considered to be the source of semantic prescriptivity, whatever those reasons are. If they turn out to be external to semantics, then the source of prescriptivity is non-semantic.

In such a case, the ‘should’ in question does not result from semantic rules like (R1) or (G), and linguistic meaning should not be considered to be normative in the relevant sense. Conversely, if the relevant reasons are semantic, then the prescriptive force of ‘should’ results from the relevant kind of semantic (meaning determining) rules, and linguistic meaning should be considered to have a genuinely normative aspect. But why do normativists believe that the prescriptive force results from semantic rules like (R1) or (G)?

For instance, in Glock’s view (2019: 304), statements like

(S1)<sup>4</sup> It is correct to apply ‘drake’ to x iff x is a male duck.

which are essentially like Hattiangadi’s (R1) or Glüer’s (G), support *prohibitions*, and we can (and in fact, do) *justify* statements like

(S2) You ought not to apply ‘drake’ to a female duck or a male fox.

by reference to statements like (S1). In other words, the rule expressed in (S1) is considered to be the source of a non-instrumental kind of prescriptivity that is expressed in (S2), which makes it satisfy conditions (IN1) and (IN2), thus allowing to maintain that the normativity in question is intrinsically semantic. This can also explain why for normativists like Glock, ‘constitutive rules specifying what count as ‘correct,’ such as (S1), are *ab initio* action-guiding’ (Glock 2019: 309). They are action-guiding because they provide (justificatory) reasons for action.

## 6. Two Further Objections Against Semantic Prescriptivity

Anti-normativists could insist that the real reason why prohibitions like (S2) are in force is given not by semantic rules like (S1), but by non-semantic facts: say, that doing what (S2) requires one to do is a prudential thing to do, or that it is a sensible thing to do if you want to be understood by your linguistic community. Thus, the anti-normativist could maintain that despite the initial appearances, the real justificatory reasons are non-semantic, and the prescriptions are instrumental.

The above response confuses two questions: the question *why the relevant prescription is in force*, which is to be answered by reference to semantic rules like (R1), (G) or (S1), with the question *why we should accept or follow rules like (R1), (G) or (S1)* that justify and enforce the relevant prescriptions or prohibitions.

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4 The original numbering of the quoted statements (9) and (12) from Glock’s (2019) paper has been changed to (S1) and (S2), accordingly.

It is unlikely that, when asked for a justification of a semantic prohibition like (S2), one would reply: 'Because you want to be understood by your peers' or 'Because it is a polite thing to do.' Nevertheless, such reasons could be said to provide some justification *for accepting* rules like (R1), (G) or (S1). However, this would not turn them into rules themselves: that is, into justificatory reasons why one ought (not) to apply the relevant terms. Given that the indicated reasons might amount to being good reasons *to accept* meaning constitutive rules, one could grant that semantic normativity can be said to depend on them. But it is important to keep in mind that this would only show that these non-semantic facts might strengthen semantic obligations and prohibitions by way of providing stronger grounds to accept the relevant meaning constitutive rules and to follow them. This does not imply that they *are* the reasons that determine the prescriptive force of statements like (S2). So, as long as one does not confuse the reasons to accept the rules with the rules that justify semantic obligations (in other words, the reasons to follow the rule with the rule itself), one can consistently defend the idea that the *source* of semantic normativity is, in the sense specified, independent from one's desires or other non-semantic facts, while at the same time holding to the view that it is 'trivially true that there are prudential and indeed moral reasons to co-operate with others, which requires linguistic agreement, and that is best achieved by accepting semantic conventions' (Schroeder 2020: 87).

Relatedly, one might wonder how a semantic rule concerning the correct use of a term could possibly justify prescriptions and prohibitions for the language users.<sup>5</sup> In other words, one might ask: how do prohibitions, expressed in statements like (S2), relate to meaning constitutive rules like (S1), so that the latter can be seen as justificatory reasons for the former? But the answer to this question is not that hard to find: according to the normativist, (S2) and (S1) are related conceptually, or analytically. Consequently, the concept of semantic correctness and the set of deontic concepts like may (not), ought (not) and must (not) are conceptually interdependent. Thus, if meaning constitutive statements like (S1) are held to be insufficient to justify prohibitions like (S2), then either what is actually being asked is how reasons to accept (S1) can possibly justify (S2), in which case reasons to accept the rules like (S1) are confused with reasons that justify prohibitions like (S2), or one simply does not fully grasp, or has a divergent understanding of, the concept of correctness as it is used in (S1).

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5 Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this question.

Another reason to reject semantic normativity might be rooted not so much in the denial of the idea that meaning constitutive rules can be shown to be the source of semantic prescriptivity *per se*, but in the conviction that the relevant norms, even if semantic, are of the wrong kind: more specifically, that the ‘should’ in question is not, or does not imply *categorical* prescriptions (e.g. Bilgrami 1993: 135; Hattiangadi 2006: 228). But why semantic normativity must be categorical?

One reason to insist on this might stem from the presumption that unless the prescription is categorical, it would amount to instrumental normativity. This seems to be implicit in Hattiangadi’s explanation of categorical prescription:

A *categorical* prescription ... is not contingent on an end. This distinction is not just about form: categorical prescriptions can have a conditional structure so long as the antecedent and consequent are not related as end to means. Hence, ‘If you are a moral agent, you ought to aim to maximise happiness’ is a categorical prescription: aiming to maximise happiness is not a means to being a moral agent; it is a condition of your being one (Hattiangadi 2006: 228).

Hattiangadi is right in noting that if a prescription is categorical, it is not contingent on an end; that is, if it is categorical, then it is not instrumental. But this does not show that only categorical prescriptions are non-instrumental. For as it has been pointed out by Glüer and Wikforss, some non-categorical (that is, hypothetical) prescriptions can be non-instrumental too:

Not all *hypothetical* norms are instrumental, or based on contingent means-ends relations, however. An example would be the following: If you want to castle in chess, you should (or indeed: must) move your king and one of your rooks in a certain way (Glüer and Wikforss 2018: 2.1.1.).

Furthermore, Glock argues that ‘constitutive rules, including linguistic ones, give rise to *hypothetical* imperatives’ (Glock 2019: 309) by pointing out ‘that an imperative is not categorical does not entail that it lacks normative force altogether’ (Glock 2019: 312). If, for the sake of the argument, it is assumed that meaning constitutive rules give rise to hypothetical imperatives, then such imperatives, just like in Glüer and Wikforss’ chess case, would not be instrumental, the reason being that they would still essentially depend on, and be enforced by, meaning constitutive rules. Of course, if such imperatives are to be called ‘hypothetical’,<sup>6</sup>

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6 It should be noted that it might be misleading to call such prescriptions ‘hypothetical’, as one could argue that there is nothing hypothetical with regards to their *content*. Thus, following Hanfling (1997: 537 fn. 1), one could argue that in Glüer’s and Wikforss’s chess case, the prescription is ‘you should (indeed: must) move your king and one of



they might also be said to depend on desires or goals that the speaker might have. However, it is because such imperatives are non-instrumental that their prescriptive force resides in constitutive rules on which they essentially depend, and not in the desires or goals that might provide reasons to accept such rules. Be that as it may, there seems to be no good reason to believe that semantic normativity *must* be categorical for it to be genuinely semantic. In fact, some normativists argue that semantic normativity is *not* categorical.

For example, according to Glock, ‘what disqualifies semantic prohibitions from being categorical is that they can be overridden by other rules *in certain situations*,’ moreover, this ‘arguably holds for all imperatives’ (Glock 2019: 312). Clearly, if no imperative can be truly said to be categorical, then semantic imperatives would not be categorical either. This is a radical view, but neither impossible to hold, nor necessarily damaging for the normativist. But is Glock’s reason for disqualifying semantic norms from being categorical true?

If it is to be taken as an analysis of what semantic normativity amounts to, then *this* idea has been forcefully challenged by a fellow normativist. As Schroeder points out, ‘[u]tterances that are intended as deviations from linguistic norms, say, in nonsense poetry or jokes, are not normally cases of following overriding principles’ (Schroeder 2020: 84). In his view, ‘[o]n that point Hattiangadi, Glüer and Wikforss are quite right: it can be perfectly acceptable to flout a semantic norm for no reason, without any overriding principle, just on a whim’ (Schroeder 2020: 85). Schroeder’s position does not imply that semantic prohibitions should be qualified as categorical; quite the contrary: his agreement with anti-normativists indicates that it is a mistake to think of semantic norms as giving rise to categorical or even *pro tanto* obligations. They might be said to give rise to hypothetical imperatives of non-instrumental kind, but according to Schroeder, the concept of hypothetical imperative does not shed light on the distinctively normative character of semantic obligations. In his view, the relative ‘softness’ of semantic obligations is to be accounted not by way of describing semantic norms as giving rise to *pro tanto* obligations, but by stressing out their *conventional character*, which leaves ‘the possibility of opting out of a conventional practice, partly or fully, permanently or temporarily’ (Schroeder 2020: 85). On this picture, it becomes natural to think that ‘the appropriate models for

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your rooks in a certain way’ and the antecedent of the conditional should be better read as ‘*since* you want to castle in chess,’ or ‘*given* that you want to’ rather than expressing a hypothetical statement – ‘*if* you want to’ – which modifies the imperative itself. On such a reading, the prescription itself could be considered as categorical.

semantic normativity can only be the rules of games (freely chosen) or something like the Highway Code (socially enforced)' (Schroeder 2020: 85), which are to be contrasted to the categorical character of moral norms and obligations.

One important implication that follows from this conception of semantic normativity is that it allows one to maintain that semantic norms 'have validity only for those that agree to take part in the linguistic practice to which they belong' (Schroeder 2020: 87). This does not imply that semantic normativity is derived from, or is determined by, facts that might speak in favour of such an agreement, which would be external to semantics and misconstrue semantic normativity as instrumental. Rather, the idea that the validity of semantic norms is relative highlights two facts: first, that '[f]or those who are part of such a practice, the constitutive rules have clear-cut *regulative* consequences' (Glock 2019: 310) and second, that contrary to moral (and, more broadly, categorical) normativity, semantic normativity leaves the possibility of opting out of such a practice.

The above picture of semantic normativity probably would not appeal to those wanting to insist on the categorical character of semantic norms. And one reason that could speak in favour of such a demand could be based on the assumption that semantic norms are essentially like moral norms: a conception of semantic normativity that might appear more plausible in the context of the non-conventionalist picture of language and linguistic meaning that some anti-normativists (see Glüer 2001; Wikforss 2017) find more attractive than some of their opponents (see Glock 2008a, 2008b, 2010; Schroeder 2016, 2017, 2020). If this is true, then the debate about the normativity of meaning is closely related to another foundational question about the nature of language: whether, and in what sense, natural language is conventional. For if the conventional aspect does not play a constitutive role in a philosophical analysis of natural language and linguistic meaning, then unless one subscribes to some Platonic picture of semantic norms, it might be hard to see how semantic normativity might be a genuine aspect of linguistic meaning. If, on the other hand, language and meaning are rooted in convention, one might find it hard to understand why semantic normativity is to be modelled on moral normativity, and why the normative aspect of linguistic meaning should be rejected if it proves not to live up to the character of moral norms or obligations.

## 7. Conclusion

Despite the fact that there seems to be slightly different meanings (or concepts) associated with the notion of 'semantic correctness' as it is used by the opposing sides of the debate, the relevant concept of correctness ought to be construed as

*prescriptive* (related to obligation) and *semantic* (related to semantic, as opposed to factual, correctness and error). This means that a philosophical account of semantic normativity should be based on the categorical distinction between semantic and factual mistake and explain the genuinely semantic source of the relevant kind of prescriptivity.

It has been shown that the anti-normativists' argument, which appeals to the non-normative uses of 'correct', is unconvincing, since no link between different, allegedly non-normative uses of 'correct' and the relevant notion of 'semantic correctness' has been established, and mere difference in use is not sufficient to substantiate the negative anti-normativists' thesis. The objection, which aims to reject 'the simple argument' for the normativity of meaning, misses the target for the reason that it is based on an understanding of the notion of 'semantic correctness' that does not rely on the distinction between semantic and factual mistakes. Finally, the anti-normativists' arguments aiming to show that meaning constitutive rules do not tell us what to do (and for this reason are not prescriptive) have proved to be either unsupported or, ultimately, agreeing to the idea that such rules *could* be used as prescriptions.

The most promising objections against the normativity of meaning reside in the attempts to demonstrate that semantic prescriptivity is derived from some non-semantic source. It has been shown that the explicated criteria for genuinely semantic normativity, which guide anti-normativists' arguments and criticisms, can be met if (i) it is kept in mind that semantic normativity concerns linguistic, not speaker's meaning, (ii) the idea of independence from non-semantic facts is sufficiently clarified, (iii) reasons for accepting linguistic (meaning constitutive) rules are distinguished from the rules themselves, and (iv) semantic norms and obligations are not to be modelled on moral normativity.<sup>7</sup>

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