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The problem with descriptive correctness

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Abstract

In the 1980s and early 1990s, the normativity of meaning was thought to be more-or-less 'incontestable.' But in the last 25 years, many philosophers of mind and language have contested it in several seemingly different ways. This, however, is somewhat illusory. There is an unappreciated commonality among most anti-normativist arguments, and this commonality, I argue, poses a problem for anti-normativism. The result, however, is not a wholesale rejection of anti-normativism. Rather, an insight from the anti-normativist position can be harnessed to reveal an unappreciated position in the normativity of meaning debate.

KEYWORDS
correctness, Kripke, normativity of meaning, reduction, rule, semantic normativity

1 | THE ORIGIN AND IMPORTANCE OF THE NORMATIVITY OF MEANING

In the second half of the twentieth century, naturalistic theories of meaning proliferated. But in 1982, Kripke claimed that there is a certain feature of meaning that cannot be explained by dispositional theories, and, indeed, by naturalistic theories more generally.[1] That feature is normativity.

Kripke did not so much argue that meaning is normative as he did assert it:

> *The point is* not *that if I meant addition by '+', I will* answer '125', but that, if I intend to accord with my meaning of '+', I should *answer '125'.*[2]

Though Kripke says little more than this, the idea is simple and prima facie compelling. The fact that one means *addition* by '+' does not have a descriptive relation to one's use of '+.' Rather, it has a normative relation to one's use

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[1] Kripke (1982).

[2] Kripke (1982, p. 37).

of '+.' The fact that one means *addition* by '+' does not entail that one *does* use '+' a certain way, but rather that one *ought* to use '+' a certain way, or, at minimum, that using '+' a certain way is *correct*.[3] To say that meaning is normative is not the uncontroversial claim that language use is governed by norms. Virtually all human activity is governed by norms. Rather, the claim is that, in some sense to be more precisely specified, normativity is intrinsic or essential to meaning. Normative facts of some kind follow directly, without any further substantive premises, from meaning facts.

Why does the normativity of meaning matter? It matters because it is thought that if meaning is normative, then certain naturalistic theories of meaning are doomed. Kripke originally introduces the normativity of meaning as one of several attacks on dispositional theories of meaning, which hold that the meaningful use of a linguistic expression can be explained in terms of certain facts about how the speaker is disposed to use that expression.[4] But it has seemed to many that if normativity is a problem for dispositionalism, then it also constitutes a general, a priori argument against naturalistic theories of meaning.[5] As a starting point, I will focus on the normativity of meaning specifically as it applies to dispositionalism.

2 | SOPHISTICATED ANTI-NORMATIVISM

The normativity of meaning seemed beyond dispute, at least for a time.[6] Akeel Bilgrami was among the first to challenge it, which he did by simply denying that there is any sense, inherent to meaning, in which the use of linguistic expressions is ever correct or incorrect.[7] Bilgrami grants, of course, that many uses of expressions are morally or prudentially permissible or impermissible, but he denies any such status that follows from the meaning of an expression alone.

This version of anti-normativism rejects the reality of semantic correctness facts, which seem to many to be obviously real. If a speaker uses 'green' to mean *green*, and she uses that word to describe the colour of a bright red tomato, then she has done something that is, in some sense at least, incorrect. But this early version of anti-normativism was followed by a more sophisticated version that has become much more popular.[8] This more sophisticated anti-normativism is founded on the following insight. It is possible to grant that calling a non-green thing 'green' is semantically *incorrect* while denying that one semantically *ought not* do it.[9] One can allow for what seems right about Kripke's claim while denying that this amounts to the kind of full-blown normativity that rules out dispositionalist theories of meaning.[10]

This dialectical move broke the debate about the normativity of meaning wide open and made it considerably more interesting. Fundamentally, it is a way of distinguishing two different senses in which we might think that

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[3]The difference between these last two ways of characterising the normativity of meaning will concern us for much of the following.

[4]Kripke (1982, p. 37).

[5]The clearest discussion of these issues is given by Hattiangadi (2007). Wikforss (2001, p. 203) introduces the phrase 'pure use theories' to include certain Davidsonian theories of meaning. Boghossian (1989) makes clear that Kripke's discussion of dispositionalism is best understood so as to include all of these various use-based naturalistic theories. Cf. Goldfarb (1982). Also see Whiting (2007), Verheggen (2011), Ginsborg (2012), Haddock (2012).

[6]Boghossian (1989) says the normativity of meaning is 'incontestable.' Also see Blackburn (1984).

[7]Bilgrami (1993).

[8]Papineau (1999), Wikforss (2001), Glüer and Pagin (1998), Glüer and Wikforss (2009), Horwich (2005).

[9]The qualifier 'semantically' is essential because no one denies that ways of using linguistic expressions can be in other ways correct or incorrect, or that in other senses one ought and ought not exhibit them. What we are interested in are the cases where ways of using linguistic expressions earn these labels based purely on their semantic characteristics.

[10]What this 'full-blown normativity' comes to is discussed in slightly greater detail below. But for now the phrase can be understood merely as a placeholder. Hattiangadi (2007), for instance, explicitly distinguishes between full-blown normativity, which she calls simply 'normativity,' on the one hand, and mere 'norm relativity,' on the other. Parfit (2011, pp. 144–146) and Kaplan (2017) also make distinctions that are helpful here.

meaning is normative: a full-blown sense consisting of facts about how agents *ought* to behave or what *reasons* they have and a lesser sense that is a less burdensome explanandum because it consists merely of facts about which uses of expressions are *correct*. With a distinction like this—and *only* with a distinction like this—it is possible to deny that meaning is normative in a sense damaging to dispositionalism while accepting that calling a red tomato 'green,' while using that word to mean *green*, is thereby incorrect.

It is not surprising that this commonality among anti-normativist arguments has gone unnoticed, because, with the exception of Hattiangadi, it is not typically made explicit.[11] But what I wish to emphasise is that all anti-normativists who wish to grant the reality of semantic standards of correctness *must* rely on a distinction of this sort. There is no way to acknowledge such standards of correctness and to deny that meaning is normative other than by distinguishing such standards of correctness from the normativity of meaning. So, for example, while Papineau focuses his anti-normativist argument almost entirely on the claim that meaning, or content, does not have moral or prudential normative weight, he implicitly relies on the distinction between varieties of normativity when he allows for semantic correctness.[12] Facts of semantic correctness, he claims, are merely shorthand for claims about truth. So the fact that answering '125' is semantically correct is nothing more than the fact that '68 + 57 = 125' is true. And truth is 'a descriptive property, like car-speed or celibacy.'[13] Papineau grants the reality of semantic correctness, while denying the reality of full-blown semantic normativity.[14]

3 | DESCRIPTIVE CORRECTNESS

If the sophisticated anti-normativist is going to maintain that meaning's normativity is not a constraint on our theories of meaning—that even dispositionalism can, in principle, explain the sense of which meaning is normative—then meaning must exhibit *only* the lesser variety of normativity; and this variety of normativity must have the following two characteristics: (a) it can be fully accounted for in terms of how people behave and are disposed to behave (i.e., those explanatory resources available to the dispositionalist) and (b) it does justice to the intuition that the meaning of an expression entails facts about which uses of that expression are correct or incorrect. We can call this lesser variety of normativity *descriptive correctness*.

It does not matter for our purposes whether descriptive correctness counts as 'real' normativity, whatever that might mean. What matters is only that there is a single feature of meaning with these two characteristics. It must have both in order to play the role that this particular anti-normativist needs it to play.[15] If descriptive correctness were not descriptive—i.e., if it were out of the explanatory reach of dispositionalism—then acknowledging its reality would be to accept at least some kind of normativism about meaning. Alternatively, if descriptive correctness were not a form of correctness—i.e., if it could not explain how an expression having a meaning entails that some uses of it are correct or incorrect—then sophisticated anti-normativism collapses into unsophisticated anti-normativism.[16]

[11]Hattiangadi (2007, p. 56). See also Papineau (1999), Wikforss (2001), Glüer and Pagin (1998), Glüer and Wikforss (2009), Horwich (2005).

[12]Papineau (1999).

[13]Papineau (1999, p. 20).

[14]Similarly, Wikforss (2001) thinks that the problem of error, which Kripke presented against dispositionalism, and correctness more generally, has nothing to do with normativity. This amounts to making the same distinction, though it is less explicit than Hattiangadi (2007) makes it. Rosen (2001) is a particular point of insight on this issue.

[15]It is worth noting that most anti-normativists fall into this category. The two exceptions that come to mind are Bilgrami (1993), for reasons explained above, and Hattiangadi (2007), who is not defending dispositionalism, but is merely attempting to undermine the normativity of meaning specifically as it features in a principles argument against naturalistic theories of meaning in general.

[16]By 'unsophisticated anti-normativism' I mean the version that denies that meaning entails even semantic correctness facts. Bilgrami (1993).

4 | THE PROBLEM WITH DESCRIPTIVE CORRECTNESS

The sophisticated anti-normativist needs meaning to exhibit descriptive correctness. But is descriptive correctness even coherent? The two characteristics that make up descriptive correctness appear to be in tension. It seems, at least prima facie, that correctness cannot be explained in behaviouristic and dispositional terms.

To see why this is so, consider the following example. Walking on the surface of the earth is common. Walking on the surface of the moon is uncommon. But walking on the surface of the earth is not therefore correct and walking on the moon is not incorrect. When Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin walked on the moon on July 21st 1969, they did something *uncommon*, but in no sense *incorrect*.[17]

Patterns or regularities of behaviour seem unable to explain standards of correctness. Prior to 1969, not a single human had ever walked on the moon. But even a regularity of behaviour as robust as this does not generate a standard of correctness. And adding dispositions to behave in certain ways appears to get us no closer to correctness. Say that everyone, including Armstrong and Aldrin, was disposed not to walk on the moon were they to land there. Perhaps they mistakenly think that walking there would be to their detriment, or perhaps it is just a brute fact that it never occurs to them to walk on the moon even if they found themselves sitting in a lunar lander. Such dispositions would make walking on the moon *unlikely*, but not *incorrect*. The fact that φ-ing is uncommon, even in combination with the fact that everyone is disposed not to φ, does not make φ-ing incorrect. And the fact that φ-ing is common, even in combination with the fact that everyone is disposed to φ, does not make φ-ing correct.

What this shows is only that *simple*, *first-order* regularities and dispositions are insufficient for standards of correctness. But what if we make use of a more complex arrangement of the same explanatory resources available to the dispositionalist? Can semantic correctness facts be explained by appeal to regularities of higher-order behaviour or dispositions? The answer is: maybe. I have no general argument against the possibility of such an explanation. So proposals would have to be considered on a case-by-case basis. The anti-normativist would need to offer up some specific complex arrangement of behavioural and dispositional facts and claim that they constitute, or are sufficient for the existence of, correctness facts. Normativists might then argue that the relevant behavioural and dispositional facts are not up to the task. But, historically, this is *not* how the debate about the normativity of meaning has gone. And this points to the original contribution that the present paper attempts to make. It has been generally assumed that if the normativity of meaning is a problem for any descriptive theories of meaning, then it is a problem for all of them.[18] But once we see that the appeal to descriptive correctness is shared by all sophisticated anti-normativist arguments, and once we see that descriptive correctness is in trouble, then it becomes apparent that anti-normativists need to provide arguments that are so far missing from the debate about the normativity of meaning.

Normativists have previously insisted that descriptive accounts are unable to explain semantic correctness facts.[19] Anti-normativists have previously responded that semantic correctness only seems like a troublesome explanandum because it has been confused with full-blown normativity.[20] But if descriptive correctness is troubled in the way that I have suggested in this section, then sophisticated anti-normativists will have to admit that the reality of semantic correctness rules out simple dispositionalism, and they will need to offer up some version of complex dispositionalism or some other descriptive account of meaning and argue that such an account can explain the reality of semantic correctness facts.

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[17]Sellars (1954) draws a distinction between behaviour that accords with a pattern and behaviour that follows a pattern, or between regularities and rules.

[18]Boghossian (1989), Wikforss (2001), Whiting (2007), Hattiangadi (2007), Verheggen (2011), Ginsborg (2012), Haddock (2012).

[19]Boghossian (1989), Whiting (2007, 2009), McHugh and Whiting (2014).

[20]Glüer and Pagin (1998), Papineau (1999), Wikforss (2001), Glüer and Wikforss (2009).

This new burden on the anti-normativist arises because of the tension in descriptive correctness: the simplest way of making out 'descriptive' conditions of language use is insufficient for explaining the reality of standards of correctness. The walking-on-the-moon example is meant to demonstrate precisely this. The sophisticated anti-normativist will need to make use of some richer set of explanatory resources.

5 | A NON-DESCRIPTIVE CORRECTNESS

What if the sophisticated anti-normativist is not up to the task? What if even second-order behavioural dispositions are inadequate for explaining correctness facts? The sophisticated anti-normativist attempted to introduce a middle road between (a) accepting that meaning is normative in the full-blown sense and (b) denying that there are semantic correctness facts.[21] If descriptive correctness cannot be made to work, then it might seem like we are left with only these two original options. But this, I think, is a mistake.

The sophisticated anti-normativist argument takes the following form.

1. Meaning either essentially exhibits full-blown normativity or mere descriptive correctness.
2. If it essentially exhibits mere descriptive correctness, then anti-normativism is true.
3. Meaning does not exhibit full-blown normativity.

   Therefore, anti-normativism is true.

The greater part of argumentative energy tends to be put toward motivating some version of premise (3), typically by considering several ways that meaning might exhibit full-blown normativity and rejecting each of them in turn. This is the strategy of Papineau and Wikforss, for instance.[22] But what about premise (1)? It presents what seems to me to be a false dichotomy.

To see that this is so, recall the problem with descriptive correctness from the previous section. If meaning exhibits descriptive correctness then it has two characteristics—it yields facts of semantic correctness and it can be explained dispositionally. But whether or not it can have these two characteristics simultaneously, it might very well have either of them individually. So when we lay out these two characteristics, we see that there are actually four potential answers to the question of whether and in what way meaning is normative.

A   Meaning exhibits full-blown normativity

I have been purposefully vague about what full-blown normativity is. Others have attempted to offer fuller and more satisfying characterisations, which I will not repeat because, for our purposes here, much less is needed.[23] Very roughly, we might say that any phenomenon that by itself generates reasons for action is normative in the sense that rules out dispositionalism, and plausibly other naturalistic theories as well.

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[21]This latter option, of course, is the route originally taken by Bilgrami (1993), and it remains, I think, an underexplored possibility.

[22]Papineau (1999), Wikforss (2001).

[23]See Hattiangadi (2007), Parfit (2011, pp. 144–146); Leiter (2015), Lance and O'Leary-Hawthorne (1997), Kaplan (2017), Enoch (2011, 2019), Berman (2019), McPherson and Plunkett (2017), Plunkett and Shapiro (2017). Some think about full-blown normativity as consisting of moral and prudential normativity. This seems to be what Papineau (1999) has in mind. I am not unsympathetic, though it is contentious to talk about morality and prudence in this way. Joseph Raz (1999a, 1999b) accepts a thoroughgoing pluralism about normative reasons and insists that there is no context-independent way of identifying some reasons as moral, as opposed to non-moral. Raz (2000) has a similar view about prudential or self-interested reasons. (For some opposition to Raz's view, see Wallace (2004).) But those who agree with Raz can substitute their own understanding of full-blown normativity. The aim here is not to say precisely what such normativity would be, if there were such a thing, but rather to contrast it with mere standards of correctness, which can themselves be understood independently. Also it is worth noting that several anti-normativists, including Hattiangadi (2007) and Wikforss (2001), think that if the normativity of meaning is moral or prudential, then this counts against the case that that normativity is essentially normative.

B Meaning is not normative in any sense

This is unsophisticated anti-normativism. On this view, meaning is not normative and there are no semantic standards of correctness. There is no such thing as using an expression correctly given its meaning. And there is no obstacle to dispositional explanations of meaning.

C Meaning entails standards of correctness explainable with complex dispositions

This is the route that remains available to the sophisticated anti-normativist. I have suggested that it requires more work than has been appreciated—namely, some set of complex, second-order dispositions that can explain standards of correctness needs to be suggested. I will admit that I am sceptical that such a suggestion can be made to work, but I am not in possession of a general argument showing that no such view is workable.

D Meaning entails standards of correctness explainable only with non-dispositional, but still broadly naturalistic resources

This is a middle road that will not fully satisfy traditional normativists or anti-normativists (either sophisticated or unsophisticated). According to this route, the sophisticated anti-normativist is right in thinking that standards of correctness and full-blown normativity can be distinguished.[24] It is one thing to say that '125' is the *correct* answer (and that this correctness is something that a theory of meaning must explain), and it is another thing to say that one *ought* to answer '125' (and that this altogether rules out naturalistic theories of meaning). It might be the case that meaning facts entail facts about which uses of linguistic expressions are correct and incorrect, but those facts need not be susceptible to explanation fully in terms of behaviour and dispositions to behave. This is a kind of normativity that has one of the characteristics of descriptive correctness, but not the other.

The idea behind this final route is that standards of correctness can be explained in terms of psychological states. Take, for example, the well-known Lewisian view of convention.[25] Lewis's view is fundamentally Humean. It explains certain phenomena by appeal to the resources of Humean belief-desire psychology: beliefs (in the form of expectations about the future behaviour of others) and desires (in the form of preferences concerning that future behaviour). Of course, Lewis's view has been criticised precisely for its inability to explain normativity.[26] So perhaps it cannot explain semantic correctness. But, regardless, it is an example of a view that makes use of more than dispositional resources and therefore may be better equipped to explain the kind of normativity we are after.

A more contemporary example is the Hart-inspired view of Brennan et al.[27] On this view, the existence of norms or standards of correctness is explained in terms of normative attitudes taken by individuals. For our purposes here, it does not matter what precisely these attitudes are. They may be irreducibly normative, but, crucially, *the fact that people take such attitudes* is a descriptive fact. So even though a theory of this kind makes use of more than mere patterns of behaviour or dispositions, it is still a broadly naturalistic explanation of correctness facts.

I am not here arguing that meaning is normative in this sense, or that suitable theories of meaning can be developed along the lines of these attitude-based accounts. Rather, I am pointing out that even if sophisticated anti-normativism cannot be made to work—even if semantic correctness cannot be explained in either simple or complex dispositional terms—we can still harness a central insight from sophisticated anti-normativism. We need not abandon all distinctions between full-blown normativity and some kind of standard-of-correctness-generating normativity. What makes this alternative different from that of the sophisticated anti-normativist is that it drops the 'descriptive' component of descriptive correctness. Semantic correctness is real, but it might not be explainable with purely behaviouristic and dispositional resources. If meaning is normative in the sense that it

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[24] For a similar distinction see Parfit (2011, pp. 144–146) on rule- and reason-involving normativity.

[25] Lewis (1969).

[26] See Gilbert (1989), Marmor (1996).

[27] Brennan et al. (2013).

necessarily entails standards of correctness, and if behavioural regularities and dispositions are insufficient for standards of correctness, then dispositional theories of meaning are in trouble. But other theories of meaning—even thoroughly reductive ones—may hold more promise.[28]

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[28]Kaplan (2017).

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