Grasp of Concepts:
Common Sense and Expertise
in an Inferentialist Framework

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Inferential role semantics is the idea that conceptual content is determined by its role in reasoning: a concept *C* is given by the premises we use to draw *C*, and by the conclusions we draw from *C*. This theory entails that concepts are rich and stratified, and that conceptual competence involves the mastery of a wide range of inferential transitions.

A problem shows up about the grasp of concepts. Should we conceive grasp of *C* as a *full* understanding and mastery of *C*? Should we understand grasp as an all-or-nothing problem? Should we be able to master all the inferential transitions determining *C* to grasp it? An affirmative answer to these questions would involve problems both for learning concepts and communication.

I propose, in this context, a distinction between a *common sense* version of the grasp of concepts and an *expert* one. The first idea is that grasp does not entail the mastering of all the inferences which are constitutive of *C*, but just a few. Expert grasp, on the contrary, is a full and qualified mastery of the inferential transitions involving *C*.

I present and discuss cases that support this distinction, and then try, on this basis, to shed light on the connection between common sense knowledge and specialist knowledge in terms of conceptual (inferential) matters.

1. Inferentialism and Conceptual/Linguistic Competence

According to inferential role semantics, concepts are determined by their inferential roles, the distinctive roles they play in reasoning. Such a conceptual role is identified, for the concept *C*, by the set of inferences comprehensive of the premises and conclusions where *C* is involved in the right way. A theory that directly appeals to these ideas is that of Robert Brandom (1994).[1]

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[1] Brandom provided a pragmatic account of how these inferences determine the content of speech acts within what he called the social practice of "giving and asking for reasons". This game determines what the correct

The basic idea is based on the generalization of Gentzen's style introduction and elimination rules for logical connectives to conceptual contents (and to linguistic meanings as well).[2] The circumstances of application (both linguistic and non-linguistic) of *C* play the role of introduction rules for the concept; consequences of the application of *C* will play the role of elimination rules for the concept.[3] An inferential role thus encompasses all the premises that infer *C* and all the conclusions we can draw from *C*. These inferences give substance to the wittgensteinian idea that meaning is *use*, and inferential role semantics is explicitly endorsed as our best account of use (*in reasoning*). Indeed, introduction and elimination rules – circumstances and consequences of application – play the roles of the peculiar *rules of use* for our concepts/words.

The inferences that determine content are those that Brandom and Sellars call *materially good*.[4] Their validity should not be intended just as logical (or formal), but also as material: it (also) depends on the non-logical concepts involved. For instance, if I infer from "whales are cetaceans" that "whales are mammals", the inference is valid in virtue of the content of "cetacean" and "mammal" (and not just in virtue of its logical form). Thus, the inferences responsible for the content of our concepts are *not* the standard inferences of deductive logic (this idea is entailed by default by inferential role semantics – since concepts/meanings are determined by inferences, these turn out to be good on the basis of the concepts involved).[5]

A particularly controversial aspect of this theory is its holistic structure. The content of a concept *C* is a function of the contents of other concepts (the inferences constitutive of *C*). This entailment appears to be troublesome, at least *prima facie*, since an inferentialist theorist is pressed to find out the specific criteria to *circumscribe the scope* of this conceptual holism: without the individuation and adoption of these criteria, semantic holism can be expanded as the view that the content of the concept *C* is determined by almost *all* the other concepts in the conceptual system *CS* to which *C* belongs (the linguistic counterpart of this point would involve almost an entire language *L* as determining the meaning of an expression *E*). Let us

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inferential moves are and which beliefs are correct in the light of their consequences and of the best reasons at hand (from the perspective of the participants in the practice). The score-keeping activity implicit in such a practice determines the normative statuses of our linguistic utterances and behavior: we should distinguish between "commitments" and "entitlements". This social activity is supposed to enable us to make explicit, through inference, the normative difference between undertaking a particular commitment and being entitled to something.

[2] A basic example is conjunction: given A and B, we can introduce $\wedge$, and then we have A$\wedge$B (introduction rule for $\wedge$–I$\wedge$); A$\wedge$B is the basis to infer both its conjuncts A and B by eliminating $\wedge$ (elimination rule for $\wedge$–E$\wedge$).

[3] See Casalegno (2004), Fodor and Lepore (2007), and Williamson (2003, 2007, 2012) for different kinds of criticisms of this idea. See Boghossian (2003, 2012) for a defense.

[4] See Brandom (1994: 97-105) and Sellars (1953).

[5] Material inferences also differ from standard deductive inferences because they are generally non-monotonic (new premises can affect the goodness of an inference). See Brandom (2000: 87-89, 2008: 106).

call this view SSH (strong semantic holism), which is the most radical option we can adopt to understand semantic holism. An inferentialist should weaken such a radical option to avoid a list of well-known problems, and then she must try to diminish the scope of the peculiar holism generated by the adoption of inferential semantics. Let us first have a look at the list.

2. Semantic Holism: *Prima Facie* Problems with Grasp, Learning, and Communication

The list of difficulties, highlighted especially by Fodor and Lepore (1992, 1993), Jackman (1999) and Whiting (2008), is as follows:

(Grasp of concepts)–First of all, grasping a concept *C* seems to entail the complete mastery and understanding of all the inferences (relevant for *C*). But one can go too far in following the long chain of inferences: where does the entailment in the overall language/conceptual system stop? We require the mastery and the understanding of all the other concepts to grasp *C*. This is a problem, since the conditions for grasping concepts become *very hard to meet*. Here we need an explanation of the way in which such a grasp could be accommodated holistically.

(Concept learning)–SSH also faces problems in explaining concept learning. Imagine a child learning her first concept *C*: how can it be possible to learn *C* if its conceptual content is determined by certain inferences that the child is ignoring? Our insights about learning as a *cumulative* process would be impossible to accommodate (we would in fact need to learn concepts before acquiring the preliminary conditions that allow us to learn them). If we want to preserve these insights about concept learning, then we should avoid SSH or provide a quite different account suitable to accommodate both semantic holism and concept learning.

(Content sharing and stability)–SSH faces further problems when it comes to explaining our ability to share contents. These are usually considered the biggest worries about holism:

1) (Constitutive instability)–The most controversial aspect of SSH is the underlying thesis of *instability* of meaning and of content of belief. Every form of SSH systematically generates this instability. This means that what is unacceptable in holism is that it seems obvious *that we have different beliefs* (or commitments) and, at the same time, *that we share the same contents/meanings*. SSH, in fact, entails that semantic contents vary depending on the beliefs of the speakers (Jackman, 1999). This means that holistic contents cannot be stable; rather, they *must* be something shifting depending on people's beliefs.[6] Therefore, we have reason to suppose that this instability is a feature strictly related to SSH.

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[6] See Jackman (1999: 362): "Unless two people shared *all* their beliefs, they wouldn't share *any* of them. For instance, if Peter believes that elephants are afraid of mice, and Mary doesn't, then what may have initially appeared to be shared beliefs – both claim 'elephants are big animals'–would turn out to have different contents in virtue of the two believers meaning different things by 'elephant'". See also Whiting (2008) for different examples.

2) (Communication)–If we endorse SSH, the inferences and beliefs that we take to be constitutive of the concept *C* are often different, and this entails, not only that *C* can be *slightly* different for you and me but, in principle, but also that it can turn out to be *radically* different. This entailment of SSH no longer seems enough to warrant successful communication between speakers (there is, in fact, the possibility of meaning different things by using the same words). Here again, to explain communication, we would need to avoid SSH or to provide a theory of how it can be possible to explain communication holistically.[7]

3. Grasp of Concepts. An Anti-Individualist Suggestion

Grasp of concepts is the special problem on the list that will be the focus of this paper. At least in a sense, it seems to have consequences for all the other problems related to SSH. In fact, the peculiar holism entailed by inferentialism seems to depend strongly on the preliminary conception of grasp that one endorses.

A further problem is that inferentialism lacks an official account of which inferences are constitutive of conceptual contents. If we cannot say which these inferences are, we find ourselves pressed to admit, somehow, that *all* are constitutive. This point is quite sloppy for our main theme, since content constitutiveness widely overlaps with the grasp of concepts: it is a prima facie reasonable view that to grasp a concept *C* we have to know the inferences which are constitutive of *C*. Otherwise, our grasp will be at best partial and incomplete.

This becomes even more evident as one thinks of the grasp of concepts as an *all-or-nothing* matter: since to grasp a concept, one has to master its *complete* inferential role, grasp will entail the kind of holism that is conceptually disastrous (everything being constitutive). Thus, this conception of grasp (together with inferential semantics and the missing story about which inferences are content constitutive) seems to lead to the holism we should avoid in semantics. Should we understand grasp of *C* as a *full* understanding and mastering of *C*? Should we conceive grasp as an all-or-nothing problem? Should we be required to master all the inferential transitions determining *C* to grasp *C*?

This line of reasoning can already be undermined by proposing a conception of grasp that does not commit us to these holistic entailments (but without answering the "which inferences determine content" question). I believe, and it seems to me that I am supported by good

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[7] Brandom developed a personal holistic account of communication and claimed that communicating would be better understood in terms of "cooperating in joint activity" and that it should involve "coordinating social perspectives by keeping deontic score [the argumentative score between discussants] according to common practices" (Brandom, 1994: 479).

evidence on this, that grasp is *not* (and cannot be) an all-or-nothing matter; rather, it is a matter of degree. It seems actually sound and coherent to distinguish between at least these two basic (anti-individualist)[8] levels of grasp:

1. "Minimum grasp", regarding a neophyte's possession and use of concepts, does not require the mastery of inferential roles, but just a few inferences.
2. "Full grasp" is equivalent to expertise; here, the expert has a qualified mastery of the inferential transitions involving a concept.

We should also consider a medium level of grasp, (it does not matter how vague), exemplified by those who are working to become experts (like graduate students). A first example, which is worth discussing to defend such a distinction, is the following: while it is strongly plausible that *linguistic* children are people we can talk with, we do *not* consider them experts. We presuppose *in practice* that grasp is a matter of degree, since there are radical cases where our interlocutors are not experts (in any controversial sense of "expert"). But that alone amounts to admitting that one can understand us *without* having a full grasp of the relevant concepts. A first moral tells us that *speakers need not be experts to communicate* (and to understand) *with each other*.

A second example worthy of a little discussion is slightly different and involves the very idea of inferential roles. If we think about the inferential roles of many descriptive or technical concepts, we easily realize that we do not master all the constitutive inferences, but just a few, and, to know more about these, we have to ask experts (think about legal, clinical, physical, and biological concepts and so on and so forth).[9] Thus, *common sense* grasp and expertise are different things, since *we can grasp concepts without being experts*; grasp, then, concerns the first basic judgments and inferences we learn to perform with certain words (and *not* the whole framework of implications).[10]

Another feature of this suggestion is that our common sense mastery of inferential roles then has to be understood as *minimum* grasp. We should not (and actually do not) require expertise about anything to attribute linguistic/conceptual competence to speakers, and so minimum

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[8] See Burge (1979) for an introduction to the very idea of anti-individualism, and Putnam (1975) for the ground-breaking idea of "division of linguistic labor". Very roughly, the idea is that common speakers do not entirely master the concepts they use, and that in case of doubt and controversy, they "defer to experts" (who actually master the relevant concepts). See Salis (2012) for a different route relating inferentialism and anti-individualism.

[9] In the same way, someone who is not a doctor can even come to think that "arthritis" can concern one's thigh. See Burge (1979).

[10] Brandom seems to explicitly endorse this kind of view, even if maybe a little bit quickly, in (2000: 64), where he talks about grasping concepts: "the metallurgist understands the concept *tellurium* better than I do, for training has made her master of the inferential intricacies of its employment in a way that I can only crudely approximate."

grasp is *enough for language users*. Speakers need not be experts to be decent language users (by ordinary standards). This default competence is also the degree zero, the a priori condition, for eventually becoming an expert about certain conceptual systems/items. Think about the concept "copper": we can have a *common sense* inferential competence about it, but then we can, over a further period of time, become *experts* about the peculiar physical properties of copper (and so we can become competent with regards to all the relevant specialist inferences involving "copper").

This is a coherent account about which inferences constitute common sense grasp: it is not an account of particular inferences, but rather a matter of statistics about the things we know (there are merely things that most of us know *as* common speakers). Vice versa, there is a set of specialist inferences that most of us ignore *as* common speakers. Far from being a brute fact about knowledge, this is something related to our (common, actual) practices, the relevant epistemic and cultural context, the effective way in which we learn language. If this is our conception of grasp, then the only version *relevant to common speakers* will be, from a semantic perspective, the minimal one. Grasp is *minimum* grasp.

Grasp of concepts and common sense knowledge seem to be somehow intertwined by this view: the inferential roles mastered by the layman and those mastered by the expert reveal, in fact, *two distinct* realms of knowledge. Somehow, the criteria adopted to circumscribe minimal grasp of concepts are helpful in trying to spell out what common sense knowledge amounts to. From an inferentialist point of view, common sense knowledge appears to be a certain amount of information that every one of us possesses and shares *as a simple speaker*, *as a mere user of a natural language*. This is the generic amount of information that comes together with learning and using a language. This does not mean that all people have the exact same amount of information: there is a *core* of information (and indeed of inferences) that is shared by, and distributed throughout, a community of speakers and that is mastered in an *approximate* and *flexible* way. Common speakers do not equally possess the information they share (possession of knowledge/information, as obvious as it may be, admits degrees).

Another important dimension that distinguishes common sense knowledge is that it is not perfectly explicit and transparent to its *users and owners* (it is not a form of *knowledge that*). This is perfectly fine with Brandom when he says that language is a social *practice* where norms are implicit; speakers, as participants in the practice, have only *implicit* knowledge of the peculiar rules they obey when talking with each other. The explicit dimension requires meta-vocabularies, hence theory, and this is a genuine property of expertise (though experts may

represent this dimension in many different ways, and not just as a set of inferences – theories are many).

On the contrary, specialist knowledge amounts to a wide set of specialist inferences that are, in a more general and generous way, the inferences that experts are trained to master by their education and work (the specific epistemic profile, which is not included in common sense knowledge). Even for expertise, we can develop an analogue point about the possession of this specialist core of knowledge within a community of experts. Again, there are in fact degrees of knowledge (otherwise, the very assessment of scientific work would simply be impossible).[11] Finally, this kind of knowledge possesses the explicit dimension of theory by default; this aspect could, in principle, be developed in a further inferentialist direction. The core discursive practice of "giving and asking for reasons" is, in fact, the basic practice that can put simple speakers – trying to cope with other speakers and with reality – on the trail of the explicit specialist dimension: disagreement in argument and curiosity often work together in pressing us to improve our basic common sense knowledge and understanding of the issue(s) at stake.

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[11] Furthermore, there is a *constructive* section to these practices: vocabularies and skills that tend to expand knowledge in new directions, the realm of new hypotheses and the growth of the amount of empirical data.

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