

## Inferentialism without Normativity

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**ABSTRACT:** In this paper we argue that inferentialist approach to meaning does not, by itself, show that meaning is normative in a prescriptive sense, and that the constitutive rules argument is especially troubling for this position. To show that, we present the proto-inferentialist theory developed by Ajdukiewicz and claim that despite the differences between his theory and contemporary inferentialism rules of language in both theories function more like classificatory devices than prescriptions. Inferentialists can respond by claiming that in their theory meaning is essentially social and hence normative, but we claim that then semantic normativity becomes derivative of social normativity.

**KEYWORDS:** Ajdukiewicz – Brandom – inferentialism – normativity of meaning.

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## 1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to show that the argument from constitutive rules provides a substantial challenge for the idea that inferentialist theory of meaning implies prescriptive normativity of meaning. The constitutive rules argument was formulated as a general objection to the thesis that there is a prescriptive normativity involved in meaning ascriptions. Our goal is to show that this argument is especially problematic for the adherents of inferentialist account of meaning, who usually subscribe to the normativist position in the normativity of meaning debate. In order to show that, we will present Ajdukiewicz's theory of meaning, which, as we believe, provides a useful, albeit slightly simplified model of how defining meaning in terms of inferences leads to the conclusion that the putative semantic norms are constitutive (and henceforth non-prescriptive). Finally, we present a way in which an inferentialist may refute this argument and claim that it works only if we assume that normativity of meaning is derivative of social normativity.

## 2. Inferentialism and normativity of meaning

Inferentialism is a variant of the broadly conceived inferential/conceptual role semantics. In the most general sense, inferential/conceptual role semantics is a doctrine saying that the meaning of an expression depends on the function this expression has in inferences (Whiting 2015). Thus understood, inferential role semantics is a subspecies of functional role semantics, which connects the notion of meaning of a term with the function this term plays in a language.

Inferentialism, when properly conceived, has its roots in the theory of Sellars (see his 1954, 1973, 1974). Currently, perhaps the most influential proponent of inferentialism is Robert Brandom (1994, 2000), but several other thinkers espouse some sort of affinity towards this theory – among them there are Michael Williams (2013), Matthew Chrisman (2010), Alexis Burgess (2015), and Jaroslav Peregrin (2012, 2014).

The claim that meaning is normative is often seen as an essential feature of inferentialism. This claim is made by both: proponents of inferentialism (Brandom 1994, Peregrin 2012, Shapiro 2004) and critics of this approach

(see e.g. Hattiangadi 2003). According to Brandom “the propositional contents (...) are conferred on expressions, performances, attitudes, and statuses by their playing a suitable role in a system of discursive normative social practices” (Brandom 1994, 63-64).

Recently, Peregrin (2014, 8-9) has stated that the claim of normativity of meaning is a defining feature of inferentialism, as accepting the normative character of rules distinguishes inferentialism from inferential role semantics. According to the causal version of inferential role semantics (see Boghossian 1993), what determines meaning is a network of actual dispositions for making inferences that users of a symbol possess. Inferentialists, on the other hand, tend to see the inferences which define the meaning of an expression as inferences which are *correct* and which the users *should* make.

This is closely related to the second aspect that differentiates inferentialism from inferential role semantics, namely the inferentialists’ claim that meanings are constituted on a social level. These two aspects of inferentialism – treating linguistic rules as normative and meanings as social – are logically independent but they seem to go together quite naturally: if one is keen to claim that meaning is a set of correct inferences, then one would be tempted to say that the correctness is somehow determined by societal standards.

It might then seem that we have a clear distinction between two kinds of inferential-based semantics – one is individualistic and dispositional, hence descriptive, and the other – inferentialism – social and normative. However, this clear picture could be undermined if it were possible to show that meaning defined on the grounds of the inferentialist theory does not have to be a normative notion. In what follows, we should try to construe an argument to the effect that – despite what inferentialists officially proclaim – it is not easy to claim that meaning does not have to be normative in their theoretical framework, at least in the sense of “normativity” that many inferentialists have assumed.

The question whether meaning is normative has been a subject of ongoing controversy during the last three decades (see Glüer & Wikforss 2016 for an overview). Initially, the normativist position gained widespread acceptance (Kripke 1982, McDowell 1984, Boghossian 1989). Later, the anti-normativist position started to undermine the initial normativist consensus (Glüer & Pagin 1998, Wikforss 2001, Hattiangadi 2007),

although many philosophers still defend normativism (Glock 2005, Whiting 2007).

The normivist stance was initially based on the observation that people normally assess their own and other people's utterances as correct or incorrect (see e.g. Kripke 1982). This fact is usually taken to be uncontroversial and nearly all participants in the normativity of meaning debate (with the possible exception of Davidson 2005) seem to accept the premise that there is a sense in which utterances can be characterized as semantically correct or not.

What is contested by the anti-normativists, however, is the fact that this correctness amounts to "genuine normativity". This is, for example, clarified as a claim that the normativity involved in meaning is not "genuinely prescriptive" – we can say that a certain way of speaking is "semantically correct" but this does not provide anyone with any reason to act with accordance to the relevant semantic rule (see e.g. Hattiangadi 2007).

The difference between prescriptive and other kind of rules has been widely acknowledged in the literature on normativity of meaning (see e.g. Whiting 2007). It is uncontroversial that it is admissible to characterize certain linguistic behaviour as correct or not. However it is usually claimed that there is a logical difference between the claim that there are certain norms which allow us to say that something is correct or not, and the logically stronger claim that one ought to act the correct way. Let us consider a trivial example: there might be norms that state that an infant of six months of age has a "correct" weight only if it weighs between 6 and 11 kilograms. Still, one would not say that a child should weigh between 6 and 11, in the sense that there is an obligation of any sort for the child to have the appropriate weight.

Normativists sometimes respond with the observation that the way we use normative vocabulary in linguistic context is perfectly valid from the folk point of view (see e.g. Glock 2005). In response to that, anti-normativists claim that meaning is not normative in the prescriptive sense of the term. They also claim that the fact that it might be described in normative vocabulary, is not, in itself, a "philosophically interesting" thesis. Boghossian (2005), for example, stresses the point that the normativity of meaning claim might be true on certain reading, but this reading makes the claim trivial; if the claim were to be interesting it must show that meaning is normative in genuinely prescriptive sense. Anti-normativists might claim

that the sense in which meaning can be normative is of no use when we consider the question of naturalization of meaning (this seems to be the guiding idea of Hattiangadi's 2007). In a similar vein, Miller (2010, 2012) argues that classical arguments for ethical anti-realism do not apply in the semantic case, as the normativity in the semantic case is distinct from the ethical one.

The proponents of the strong version of normativity of meaning thesis state that not only can we claim that some uses of certain expressions are correct or not but that this observation warrants the claim that users ought to use these expressions in a way that is semantically correct (Whiting 2007). So, according to the strong normativist stance, there is a straightforward connection between the fact that meaning comes along with correctness conditions and the claim that meaning entails prescription.

Anti-normativists deny this. A crucial element of the anti-normativist strategy is to explain this “non-interesting” sense of “correctness” which can be applied to semantic claims. There are several ways in which this can be done. In what follows, we are going to focus on a strategy which uses the notion of constitutive rules, because we believe it is the most potent one in the context of inferentialist approach to meaning.

### **3. Constitutive rules challenge**

The constitutive rules strategy, developed by, among others, Glüer and Pagin (1998) and Wikforss (2001), amounts to the claim that statements that express the putative norms of semantic correctness are not genuinely prescriptive rules, as they are just constitutive rules. The notion of constitutive rule has been popularized by Searle (1969), according to whom we should distinguish between two basic kinds of rules. Prescriptive rules regulate already preexisting behaviours, whilst constitutive rules constitute new ones, in the sense that certain physical actions become classified as some institutional ones. Constitutive rules are those which define what kinds of behaviours count as kinds of doings in certain contexts: for Searle the canonical form of constitutive rule is “Action A counts as doing B in context C”. This means that a rule of constitutive kind is used to say which actions one should undertake, if one wants to perform certain institutionally or socially defined deed. A primary example here are the rules of chess,

especially such rules which define what kind of move count as, say, castling.

Constitutive rules are not prescriptive in any meaningful sense. The rules of chess do not dictate which moves one should make in certain situations nor that one should play chess at all (one might easily use the same pieces to play an entirely different game or just throw them idly). What constitutive rules do is that they specify what kinds of doings would count as playing a game of chess and making specific moves in that game. Needless to say, there are many rules which prescribe the right moves in the right situations. Apart from constitutive rules, there are rules which teach the players to play chess well (as opposed to teaching them how to play chess at all).

Should semantic rules be indeed constitutive, it would mean that they do not provide any prescriptions concerning the use of words. Rather, semantic rules should be taken to constitute the meanings. As Wikforss puts it:

According to this picture, there is a constitutive relation between use and meaning such that in order to mean horse by “horse” you must use (be disposed to use) your words in certain ways. The ‘must’ here, again, is not an ‘ought’ in disguise; it is not the ‘must’ of a prescription. (Wikforss 2001, 218)

One might wonder, however, why there is a conflict between semantic rules being prescriptive and semantic rules being constitutive. Glüer and Pagin answer this question by pointing out that constitutive rules do not explain action in a relevant way. A constitutive rule, as standardly conceived, “does not occupy a motivational position in the practical argument. It occupies a doxastic position, that is, it functions just as an ordinary belief in effecting a theoretical transition from one pro-attitude to another” (Glüer & Pagin 1998, 218).

According to a standard philosophical story, an intentional explanation of action (the so-called practical syllogism) necessarily involves two “premises” – one which is motivational (a desire to achieve X) and the other which is factual/descriptive (action A will result in achieving X). According to the Humean story of the normative (see e.g. Smith 1994), normative statements enter the reason-based explanations in the motivational

position. This is one of the main sources of the problem with treating normative statements as descriptive.

Why constitutive rules cannot enter the motivational role? The answer Glüer and Pagin provide is quite convincing. If the content of a constitutive rule is given by the formula “Action A counts as doing B in context C”, this is by no means motivating for anyone to do A. What is needed is an additional motivational premise that one should aim for doing B in context C – this motivational premise can be a simple desire or it can be some normative premise stating that one should aim to do B in context C (for, say, moral reasons).

The contrast between constitutive and prescriptive rules might be illustrated by looking at social norms. There are certainly social norms which are constitutive in character, like the norms which specify what kind of things needs to be done in order to marry (like signing an appropriate documents). Other social norms might be prescriptive, like the norms of etiquette, which might state that the wedding couple should dress formally. The difference between the two kinds of rules is best seen if we look at what happens when they are violated. If one does not sign the appropriate documents then there is no marriage ceremony; however, if the couple attends their own wedding in old Nirvana t-shirts, this does not invalidate the marriage (although it might be deemed inappropriate).

Games also contain “constitutive rules”. Instead of differentiating between valuable and invaluable moves, they help us decide if actions are to be classified as belonging to the game. Apart from good and bad moves in chess, there are also invalid moves. Even though from the physical point of view the player can make illegal moves, she cannot, as it were, make them in the game, because they will be instantly classified as not belonging to the game.

Morality, on the other hand, is usually thought to consist of prescriptive rules. Moreover, it is also claimed that moral rules are “objectively prescriptive” – in the sense that they provide prescriptions which are independent of any contextual factors and individual desires (see e.g. Boghossian 2005). If morality is objectively prescriptive, whilst semantic norms are constitutive, then it might be said that the normativity of linguistic norms is different from the normativity enjoyed by the moral.

Thus, the constitutive rules argument may be summarized as follows:

- First premise: semantic rules are constitutive rules;  
Second premise: constitutive rules are not genuine prescriptive rules;  
Conclusion: semantic rules are not genuine prescriptive rules.

Again, it is important to note that this argument does not aim to show that semantic rules are not normative in any sense. Rather it shows that it is not normative in the technical sense, assumed in many debates in contemporary metaethics.

Inferentialists seem to have a tendency to downplay the importance of the argument from constitutive rules. The opinion voiced by Peregrin seems to be characteristic of this approach: “The fact that the rules constitute meanings does not rob them of their normativity” (Peregrin 2012, 96). The offshoot of Peregrin's discussion on the constitutive rule argument seems to be that for many inferentialists there is nothing inconsistent in the thesis that semantic rules can be constitutive and genuinely normative at the same time.

In what follows, we aim to restate the constitutive rules argument in such a way as to show that it is indeed especially pressing for inferentialists and that on their account of meaning it is extremely difficult to maintain the claim that meaning is genuinely prescriptive.

#### **4. Ajdukiewicz's theory and constitutive normativity**

In order to show that defining meaning in terms of inferential relations might quite easily lead to the conclusion that meaning is normative only in the constitutive sense, we will present the theory of meaning developed by Ajdukiewicz in the 1930s. Although this theory certainly differs in many respects from contemporary inferentialism, it shares many important affinities with the way Sellars conceptualizes meaning. These affinities are deep enough to make Ajdukiewicz theory a useful, albeit simplified model on how the idea of defining meaning in terms of inferential relations can lead to the conclusion that the only norms of meaning are constitutive ones. Ajdukiewicz theory differs from contemporary approaches because it deals with language understood as a strictly defined formal system, however, basic inferential ideas are already present in his system.

Ajdukiewicz developed his theory in two papers (Ajdukiewicz 1978a and 1978b). The crucial observation behind the theory is the question of how speakers of a given language settle semantic disputes. Ajdukiewicz pointed out that every now and then people start to suspect that their interlocutors do not use words the same way they do. What happens next is that the users retreat to a number of platitudes that every speaker of the language have to accept if they are to be counted as a speaker of this particular language. Prescriptions which point out sentences users have to accept in given circumstances are called “meaning directives”.

In general, directives can be described as rules which instruct the user to accept a specific sentence in specific circumstances. Depending on the circumstances presented in a given directive, Ajdukiewicz differentiated between three types of directives: axiomatic, deductive, and empirical. To understand how they work within the theory, it is probably best to start with deductive directives. Consider a standard example of a Modus Ponens rule. A deductive directive associated with this rule is a prescription which states that whenever the users accepts a conjunction of an implication and its antecedent, they cannot refrain from accepting the consequent. If they fail to follow this rule, they will not be taken seriously by the community. They will either be seen as joking, provoking, or simply as someone who does not understand the meaning of the expressions they use. This example seems to be fairly intuitive because this is more or less how we normally learn logical connectives and test their understanding. Ajdukiewicz’s ingenious idea was that similar rules enforce meanings of every non-compound expression in a language. In other words – if a language user wishes to be treated as a competent user of a given word, they have to act in accordance with the directives connected with this specific word and if they want to be treated as a competent language user they have to follow rules associated with a great deal (admittedly unspecified) number of words.

The other two types of directives are: axiomatic directives, which instruct the user to accept a sentence in every situation, and empirical directives, which instruct them to accept a sentence if they happen to have a certain sensory experience. A good example of an axiomatic directive is the rule which states that identity sentences such as  $a=a$  are to be accepted in every circumstance. An illustration of an empirical directive proposed by Ajdukiewicz is a rather graphic example of a patient who should accept a sentence “It hurts!” when his tooth nerve is touched.

The theory does not tell us anything about whether the person “understands” the rule. Their task is only to act in accordance with it. It is also crucial to point out that the theory expects the users to react accordingly to directives whenever they are challenged by other community members. A user who accepts certain sentences does not have to follow every inferential pattern that exists in the language or inform the community about their every feeling or sensation. They only have to be disposed to do it whenever they are asked to. The way Ajdukiewicz’s theory defines meaning of an expression is that it identifies it with the distribution or placement of this expression within the structure of all directives that contain it.

One very strong consequence of these definitions is that they connect meanings of expressions with the structure of the language they are part of. After all, the notion of a “distribution” or a “place” in the structure makes sense only if the structure in question is fixed. There is no sense in saying that two expressions have “the same place” if the structures in which they are embedded are different. The result of this is very counter-intuitive: because the meaning of every expression is tied strictly to the structure of the meaning directives, it changes whenever the structure changes. But the structure of language changes whenever a new term is introduced to the language. It is so because if the term is to have any meaning, it has to come bundled with some new meaning directives which fix this meaning. But once we add new meaning directives to a language, we inevitably change the structure of directives.

Ajdukiewicz himself was not concerned by this problem because he restricted his semantics to a very special type of languages which he called “connected and closed”. The notion of “connectedness” of a language is rather easy to grasp. What it means is that the language does not contain any isolated parts, that is, every expression within it connects to every other expression via a chain of meaning directives.

The property of being “closed” is definitely much more contentious. In a nutshell, a closed language is a language which cannot be further semantically expanded – it is impossible to add new meanings to it. The reason why it is impossible is that all possible connections in the network of directives are already exhausted so the language achieves its full semantic potential. Because of this, every attempt to expand it with a new term ends up with the term either becoming synonymous with one of the existing expressions (as its meaning directives repeat some of the existing directives)

or the new language becoming disconnected (when the new term does not use any connections with older directives). A language which is not yet closed is called an “open language”.

The most significant question, from our point of view, is whether meaning in Ajdukiewicz’s theory can be seen as a normative notion. Superficially, it might seem so as there are semantic “rules”, which might be violated. Upon deeper reflection, however, it turns out that the normativity in question is of a strictly constitutive kind.

The main question to be asked is that whether there is any sort of prescription involved in the notion of directive? From our perspective the answer is a flat no. This is because there is little room in Ajdukiewicz’s framework for a notion of violating a meaning-directive. If we focus on the situation in which we are dealing with a closed language, there is little sense in which one can break a semantic rule. If one uses a certain expression in a way which cannot be accounted for in terms of the meaning directives, then the consequence for the speaker is just that they would be considered using the expression in question with a different meaning in the sense that they would use the expression with a different set of associated directives. This is a characteristic feature of constitutive rules: in a way it is impossible to violate them: when one signs the inappropriate form on the marriage ceremony, it is not that the marriage was started badly; there is no marriage at all.

Applying Ajdukiewicz’s semi-formal apparatus to the situation, it might be said that a mere rejection of or a change in one directive from the set of directives associated with a given expression changes the structure of directives, and thus changes the meaning of the said expression. Moreover, as we are dealing with a closed language here, such a change results in a change of language.

Such a conclusion might seem very counter-intuitive, but it is worth bearing in mind that the concept of language Ajdukiewicz deals with is not folk but a highly technical one, which is chosen for specific theoretical purposes. If this notion is adopted, then it must be said, however strange it would sound, that there is nothing like a semantic mistake. When a speaker starts to violate the semantic directives, they simply start to use a different language (in Ajdukiewicz’s sense of the term). Perhaps there are some situations in which a person does not speak any language – if their behaviour is impossible to be made consistent with any possible set of directives.

The principal problem here is whether users have any prescriptive reason to prefer one language to any other. Let us say that violating a certain directive would result in me ceasing to speak  $Lx$  and starting to speak  $Ly$ . Is there any prescription to follow  $Lx$ ? It seems not – the change in meaning, in itself, has no normative import (some other users would for example stare at me, but this is not a semantic phenomenon according to Ajdukiewicz, but merely a pragmatic one).

The conclusion is that in Ajdukiewicz's theory directives play a distinctively constitutive role. A language is an abstract entity which is constituted by the totality of the meaning directives of all the expressions of this language. Semantic rules play the role, as it were, of classificatory devices, which allow us to say to which language a certain expression in a certain context belongs to (and, henceforth, which language the user is using). They are not semantic rules which are to be "followed" in a strong sense – they are not usually intentionally adopted and, more importantly, they do not create any genuine obligations for the users.

To sum up, Ajdukiewicz's theory gives an example of how one can treat meaning in inferential, anti-representational terms, and, at the same time, how one can treat semantic rules as purely constitutive ones, without claiming that there is any prescriptivity to it.

## 5. Contemporary inferentialism and constitutive rules

Contemporary inferentialism is obviously a very different theory than that of Ajdukiewicz. The main source of difference is the fact that, contrary to Ajdukiewicz, contemporary inferentialists aim at creating a theory which could be realistically applied to natural languages.

If one wants to create a feasible theory of meaning for natural language, then the concept of closed languages is of no use. This is because it is extremely implausible from the point of view of natural language analysis that a single change in one inferential rule, which co-defines meaning of one word, is enough to change the whole language. We naturally think of language as a dynamic system in which quite significant changes are possible. Thus, a concept of meaning that would have similar consequences to the Ajdukiewicz's theory would be blatantly inadequate.

However, the rejection of the idea of closed languages leads to a difficult question: how to combine, on the one hand, the idea that a meaning of an expression is somehow constituted by the assorted rules of material inferences and, on the other, the insistence that it's possible to change those rules while speaking the same language.

According to inferentialists, the central notion in this context is the notion of "similarity of meaning". This is especially important for Sellars (see e.g. 1973 and 1974). Sellars rejects the idea that we can talk about sameness of meaning in the strict sense, and, consequently, that the so-called conceptual change normally results in a complete change of meaning of terms involved in such a change (this is especially important in his discussion of theoretical terms). Williams summarizes his position:

Since inferential engagements change over time and vary between persons, sameness of meaning is similarity of meaning, as Sellars is well aware. But similarity is always sufficient similarity for particular purposes. (Williams 2016, 250)

Since similarity of meaning is context-sensitive and not strictly defined, the inferentialist can allow for a slight change in meaning understood as set of inferential norms, without having to resort to the idea that each time such a change arises we deal with an entirely different concept. What we deal with is the same term with a slightly-different-yet-similar meaning.

The problem, however, remains, whether this change of focus – from sameness of meaning to similarity of meaning – weighs substantially on the relation between constitutive character of meaning and its alleged normativity. We believe it does not, and we are about to argue for this presently.

The main offshoot of our discussion of Ajdukiewicz's conception was that within its framework there is no such thing as genuine normativity of meaning. As rules of meaning are conceived in strongly constitutive sense, the result of "violating" meaning directives is that the speaker ceases to speak a given language  $L_x$  and starts to speak some other, albeit similar, language  $L_y$ . As languages are considered to be abstract systems of directives, there seems to be no prescriptive reason to prefer one language over another.

The question that arises now concerns the consequence of violating the inferential rule which is constitutive of meaning of a certain expression within the framework of contemporary inferentialism. Certainly, it is not the case that each time we violate an inferential rule we change the language – the framework of contemporary inferentialism allows us to violate the inferential rule and still speak the same language as before.

There are two possibilities of rule-violation: first is a simple, inadvertent mistake, like a slip of the tongue. The second is an intentional flout, when one deliberately violates the inferential rules of language.

Let us consider the second, theoretically more interesting option. Take a user of language who is fully aware that a certain inferential pattern is definitive of meaning of a certain expression and deliberately violates the norm (say, by stubbornly refusing to accept certain material inference). This, of course, is a thing that might actually happen, but, according to the strongly normativist view of semantic rules, we should be entitled to say that this person should not have done this; if the prescriptive account of semantic rules is on the right track, there is a sense in which this person should have used the word in accordance to the inferential rules that define the meaning of this word.

However, there is a strong worry that the inferentialist cannot really endorse such prescriptive claims. On the inferentialist account, what happens when a speaker uses an expression with a slightly different set of inferential patterns than we do, what we should really say is that this person uses this expression with a similar-yet-slightly-different meaning.

Is there anything “wrong” with using words with a similar-yet-slightly-different meaning? It does not seem that an inferentialist has any resources to make such a claim. Obviously, the behaviour of such a person could (and most likely would) be subject to some form of verbal correction from other members of the community, but the question is whether there is a prescriptive reason for the speaker to use the word according to communal standards. The mere fact that other people would have a tendency to correct the user provides in itself no prescriptive reason for the user in question to avoid behaviour leading to such a correction (this is stressed by Hattiangadi 2003 and Kaluzinski 2016). As Kaluzinski notes, grounding a notion of meaning in the idea of practice of making corrections might be easily taken to be a form of dispositionalism about meaning.

Such a dispositionalism – according to us – is by no means a normativist position. Rather, it is similar to what Kripke (1982) called “social dispositionalism” and rightly rejected as an inadequate solution to the problem of normativity of meaning.

This observation can be strengthened if we consider the problem in terms of practical reasoning. If we try to reconstruct the reasoning of a subject in such a social-dispositionalist framework, it would most probably look like this:

1. I want to avoid correction by the community;
2. In order to avoid correction by the community, I need to follow the socially accepted inferential rules associated with the expression I am using;
3. I should follow the socially accepted inferential rules associated with the expression I am using.

In such a reasoning, meaning does not play any prescriptive role – it only serves to delimit the options which are available to me, given the fact that I want to avoid correction. Should I, however, have no problem with being corrected, then – on the purely dispositionalist social account, I would have no genuine reason not to modify the existing inferential patterns and use the expressions with slightly-different-yet-similar meanings.

A similar diagnosis can be given in a situation where a subject makes an involuntary mistake, a semantic equivalent of a slip of the tongue. It might be truly said of such a person that they used the expression incorrectly, but it does not mean that there is any prescriptive semantic normativity involved. Again, if we tried to reconstruct the potential practical reasoning of the subject involved, it would have the following form:

1. I want to use the expressions the same way as the community;
2. In order to use the expressions the same way as the community, I need to follow the socially accepted inferential rules associated with the expression I am using;
3. I should follow the socially accepted inferential rules associated with the expression I am using.

Thus, when users who want to be faithful to socially accepted inferential norms find themselves making an unintentional mistake, there is a sense in which they should not have done so. However, this is contingent on their intention to follow socially accepted inferential patterns of use. Should they want to deviate from them, there would seem to be no reason for them to do so (apart from the previously discussed motivation to avoid correction).

To sum up, although there are important differences between the way contemporary inferentialists and Ajdukiewicz conceptualized meaning, these differences seem to have very little impact on the problem of normativity of meaning. There seems to be no way in which the change from the strict idea of closed languages to the liberal idea of similarity of meaning can contribute to the debate on prescriptivity of language. It seems that even within the liberal framework, the language rules serve simply as classificatory devices and not as prescriptive norms.

We think that what makes the inferential approach especially susceptible to the argument from constitutive rules is the fact that if one decides to define meaning in terms of a “correct” inferential relation between expressions, it might follow quite naturally that these inferences play meaning-constitutive role. Once one admits this, then it is quite hard to argue that there is a way in which prescriptivity can be read into meaning ascriptions.

It might be said that the line of reasoning presented in last two paragraphs is not convincing as it might be generalized too easily – is it not the case that any set of rules can be presented as an abstract set and thus it would seem as not normative?<sup>2</sup> We believe that this is not the case; Ajdukiewicz’s framework indeed could be used to semi-formalize other systems of constitutive rules (although the usefulness of such a formalization is debatable). However, there is little reason to think that we could use Ajdukiewicz’s model to show that systems of rules which is intuitively prescriptive would turn out to be constitutive. There seems to be little room to present e.g. rules of social etiquette or morality as rules of Ajdukiewicz-style system of directives.

To see this contrast, consider a following example. Picture a speaker at a funeral. In situation A she violates a semantic rule. There are different

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<sup>2</sup> We are grateful to an anonymous referee for drawing our attention to this point.

ways in which her utterance could be explained (it may for example be seen as a result of her emotional state) but she will not be seen as “really saying” what she appears to be saying. We could say that her move in a language game will be cancelled because it will be ignored by the community. In situation B she violates an etiquette rule by using a curse word. Even though the psychological explanation used by the listeners to explain her violation may be the same, her act will not be cancelled or ignored. She will be accounted for making a bad (as opposed to impossible or wrong) move in a language game.

## 6. Possible reply

We believe there is a way in which an inferentialist can try to refute this argument. In the framework of contemporary inferentialism, meaning is treated as an essentially social phenomenon (see e.g. Brandom 1994, Pergrin 2012), and this social aspect of language is treated by far more seriously than in Ajdukiewicz’s proto-inferentialism. For contemporary inferentialists, the fact that languages are social phenomena is crucial to the proper understanding of meaning.

For most contemporary inferentialists, the way of thinking about the social aspect of language, which we have presented above, namely the social dispositionalist, is thoroughly inadequate. The social dispositionalists see linguistic interactions from an impersonal, third-person, naturalistic perspective, in which the process of mutual corrections is described in purely non-normative terms. Such an outlook is obviously inadequate when it comes to explaining the normative aspect of language.

Instead of adopting a social-dispositionalist account, the inferentialists describe the social aspect of meaning in irreducibly normative terms. This allows them to look at the process of attributing correctness and incorrectness of linguistic utterances in normative terms from the very start.

How this connects with the problem of practical reasoning posed by Glüer and Pagin? In the social-normativist framework the proper account of the practical reasoning should look more or less like that:

1. I ought to use the expressions the same way as the community;

2. In order to use the expressions the same way as the community, I need to follow the socially accepted inferential rules associated with the expression I am using;
3. I should follow the socially accepted inferential rules associated with the expression I am using.

The first premise of such a reasoning has an explicitly prescriptive character, as the ought here is not taken to be an “ought” derivative of some practical interest, but rather as an expression of genuine social obligation. Thus, on such a construal, we might claim that meaning-ascriptions are “genuinely normative”.

The question now arises, however, whether this normativity is a purely semantic one. We believe it is not. The first normative premise is not inherently tied with meaning taken as an abstract semantic notion, but with the social aspect of language. The first premise in this reasoning can be justified only if one accepts the premise stating that there is some prescription involved in the fact that the community uses a language in a certain way.

Such a thesis might be justified by resorting to some social norm – like the norm of solidarity or positive conformism – which dictates that a certain form of linguistic behaviour is to be normatively preferred to the other, namely, the behaviour which conforms to the inferential patterns accepted by the community should be preferred to the one which deviates from the socially accepted forms of use. Obviously, this is a *prima facie* defeasible norm – there are many reasons which could justify breaking actually existing linguistic rules (Whiting 2007 stresses the importance of the fact that semantic norms are *prima facie* in character). There might be moral, aesthetic, or pragmatic reasons for using a different set of inferential rules than the ones which are communally accepted. Nonetheless, the norm in question still holds, even if other norms can override it.

The point of contention between our account and the one which seems to be endorsed by inferentialists is that for us it is incorrect to say that the normativity we are dealing with here is a distinctively and exclusively semantic one. There is a sense in which prescriptive normativity enters semantic discourse, as envisaged by inferentialists, but this is a social normativity and not a distinctively semantic one.

The most important lesson from the discussion of Ajdukiewicz's theory is that it is possible to adopt a sterilized version of inferentialist theory of meaning, one that abstracts from the socio-normative aspect of language. In such a framework, meaning is "normative" in a purely constitutive sense. Only when we adopt a social-normative outlook do the ascriptions of meaning become saturated with prescriptive normativity.

This diagnosis explains, in our opinion, two things. First, it shows why proponents of inferentialism treat the thesis of semantic normativity as something which is uncontroversial within their theory: this is because for them the socio-normativist account of linguistic practice is something that goes without saying. It also explains why the idea that inferentialism leads to normativism might be easily challenged: what makes meaning normative is not the fact that it should be defined in terms of material inferences but the fact that language is a social phenomenon and this social aspect of language should be accounted for in normative terms.

Such a theory of sources of normativity of meaning also provides a convincing reply to an old challenge to the idea of semantic normativity posed by Davidson (2005), who complained that the proponents of normativity of meaning make an absurd claim that people might be "obligated to a language" (Davidson 2005, 118). In the socio-normative model, there are no obligations to a language understood as a system of abstractly conceived rules but there are indeed obligations towards a community which uses words according to certain inferential patterns and these obligations do not boil down to mere pragmatic interests (like the need for a smooth communication).

To sum up: in the framework of contemporary inferentialism, meaning is indeed a normative notion but only when we look at language from a socio-normative perspective. If we take meaning to be determined solely by abstractly understood inferential norms, then the normativity of meaning is of a purely constitutive kind.

This conclusion might seem slightly catholic, but it has potentially important consequences. On our take, semantic normativity is derivative of social norms. If this is actually the case, then one cannot hope to ground social normativity in the semantic one – and such hope seems to be implicit in some inferentialist writings. However, if our reasoning is correct this cannot be achieved.

## 7. Conclusion

Ajdukiewicz's theory provides a useful model of how one could build a theory of meaning that would define the notion in terms of inferential relations and abstract from prescriptive social normativity. Although language might be described in normative terms the norms in question are constitutive rules. In this respect abstractly conceived semantics resembles chess more than ethics. This shows that the very idea of defining meaning in terms of inferential relations does not lead in itself to any form of strong normativist approach to meaning. If one accepts Peregrin's idea that normativity of meaning is definitional of inferentialism, such a conclusion might look like a *reductio ad absurdum*. However, this is not the case – the right conclusion is that the normativity of meaning which is in play in inferentialism need not be of the strong, “objectively prescriptive” variety, even though most of inferentialists have seemingly assumed it to be such.

Still, the strongly normativist approach to meaning might be justified within the inferentialist framework, but only when the social aspect of language is taken into account, and this social aspect of language is accounted for in normative terms from the very start. This shows that within the framework of contemporary inferentialism, prescriptive normativity of meaning should be treated as derivative of prescriptive social normativity, and thus semantic normativity cannot be treated as basic and grounding other forms of normativity.

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