Expressive Completeness in Brandom's
Making It Explicit[1]

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I focus on the notion of expressive completeness in Robert Brandom's *Making It Explicit*. For Brandom as a normative pragmatist, a theory of meaning is expressively complete if it specifies a human practice that is sufficient to confer on expressions conceptual contents so rich that the very conferring practice can be described by means of these expressions. I put the notion of expressive completeness in contrast with the related, but non-identical notion of self-referentiality of a semantic theory. Further, I examine the position of the concept in Brandom's philosophical project: I assess the justification Brandom provides for his claim of expressive completeness of the presented theory, and I outline the consequences he can draw for his overall project provided that expressive completeness is achieved. Whether it is actually achieved, remains however an open question.

KEYWORDS: Expressive completeness – normative pragmatism – Robert Brandom – self-referentiality – theory of meaning.

1. Introduction

In philosophizing about language meaning, one condition on a successful theory of meaning suggests itself quite naturally: the condition of self-referentiality, or the theory's meaningfulness according to its own standards. More specifically, the theory should correctly account (whatever that might involve) for meaning of all those expressions by means of which it is formulated. Probably the most famous failure in this respect is Wittgenstein's: the penultimate remark of *Tractatus* openly reflects the paradoxical character of the presented theory, namely that it appears senseless when measured by the very standards it puts forth.[2] Self-referentiality is certainly not the only criterion of assessing theories of meaning. For pragmatic reasons we might prefer, e.g., one that lacks self-referentiality but assigns meanings to a broad range of expressions, to a self-referential theory with poor coverage of other expressions than those employed in its own formulation. Still, there is a clear theoretical appeal to self-referentiality: unless a theory of meaning satisfies this condition, it is in principle always in need of *another* theory of meaning (cf. Scharp 2010, 265).

Robert Brandom in his *Making It Explicit* (henceforth *MIE*; see Brandom 1998) sets himself the ambitious goal of developing his theory of meaning up to the point at which something called *expressive completeness* is reached. Although this notion, I think, despite some misleading formulations does not coincide with that of self-referentiality, it is closely related. In comparison with the seemingly more straightforward ideal of self-referentiality, I here intend to clarify the notion of expressive completeness (section 2) and its position in Brandom's philosophical project (sections 3 and 4).[3] In the latter, my focus will be on how Brandom hopes to justify the claim of expressive completeness of his theory, what he uses it as a premise for, and whether expressive completeness, as opposed to genuine self-referentiality, suffices for his aims. Concerned primarily with the significance of expressive completeness for Brandom, I will not provide a verdict on whether expressive completeness is actually achieved in his book. I will

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[2]   Garver (1996) argues that the later Wittgenstein's philosophy, unlike *Tractatus*, is a success in this respect. I object to this claim elsewhere – see Ocelák (forthcoming).

[3]   That is, the project of *Making It Explicit*. In the present paper, Brandom's more recent work (see Brandom 2008, in the first place) and its possible relevance to the issues at hand are left aside.

indicate, though, how much still needs to be shown in order to provide the answer, at any rate an affirmative one.

2. Expressive completeness

Brandom is a normative pragmatist. His theory of meaning thus comes in the form of a (normative) specification of human practices that are, purportedly, sufficient to confer appropriate conceptual content on various expressions engaged in these practices. (Brandom is also a rationalist who endorses a most intimate relation between thought and speech. Where many others would talk about the *meaning* of an expression, Brandom prefers to characterize it semantically through determining its *conceptual content*, something which is at the same time attributable to certain intentional states and performances.) In Brandom's view, the most explanatory account of an expression's meaning consists in a refined specification of how a practice is normatively structured so that it employs that expression in the particular role it does.

The official ambition, then, is to have the theory elaborated up to the point where it becomes expressively complete (see Brandom 1998, xx, xxii, 641). This is achieved when the practice the theory specifies is sufficient to confer on expressions conceptual contents so rich that the very conferring practice can be described by their means.

Some of Brandom's formulations suggest that this aim is (at least in his pragmatic setting) identical to what I called a theory's self-referentiality above. (As a matter of fact he even talks about "self-referential expressive completeness"; see Brandom 1998, xxii.) For instance: "[...] they [i.e., the participants of the specified practice] will be able to express the theory offered here. [...] the project eats its own tail [...] presenting an explanation of what it is to say something that is powerful enough to explain what it itself is saying" (Brandom 1998, xx).[4] But these two ideals need not involve the same, and I want to argue that they do not in Brandom's case. What we primarily ascribe expressive completeness to seems to be a vocabulary rela-

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[4]   Cf. Laurier (2005, 142), too: "[...] it should be expressively complete, in the sense of including an account of the conceptual resources that are needed in order to formulate this very account of conceptual content." Also, Scharp (2010, 265): "Hence, the entire theory of meaning [...] can be formulated by the members of the extended practice."

tive to its instituting practice.[5] But it is of course not necessary that this practice will be specified in terms of the vocabulary it institutes. We can specify a practice (calling this specification our theory of meaning) that confers conceptual content such that the resulting idiom is powerful enough to describe the practice, while being quite distinct from our own expressive resources (which we have employed in our theory). Such a theory will have achieved the goal of expressive completeness. (That is to say that the *vocabulary* instituted by the described practice will be expressively complete. In a derived sense though, we may ascribe expressive completeness also to the theory.) However, the theory is not truly self-referential, for it does not directly account for the meaning of all of its own expressions. Let me call this feature *weak* self-referentiality.

I believe that this, and not genuine self-referentiality, should be seen as the ambition of *MIE*, or in any case is a more realistic one. The focus should be on the content, rather than on the formulation, of our theory of meaning: the instituted vocabulary should suffice to specify the same practice our theory specifies, be it in different terms. Even the *MIE*'s expression I quoted above (cf. Brandom 1998, xx) can be perhaps read in this content-focused manner, since *to say something* is ambiguous between emphasis on the expression and on the content. Also other formulations allow the interpretation in favor of stating the theory's content rather than the theory itself:[6] "[...] the theory should specify practices sufficient to confer on the various locutions considered all the *kinds of* content required to state the theory itself" (Brandom 1998, 116). Elsewhere: "[...] the scorekeeping practices that confer conceptual content on the *fundamental sorts of* explicitating vocabulary used in stating the theory [...]" (Brandom 1998, 641). In these quotations, I italicized the qualifications which indicate that the practice need not confer content on the actual terms employed in our theory, but rather on something with an analogical function.

The two most obvious options are that the instituted vocabulary is completely distinct from the theory's language, or that the former is a reduced version of the latter. The second is in my opinion the case with *MIE*, and only in this sense can Brandom reasonably aspire to expressive

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[5]   Illustrated by, e.g.: "What is being claimed is the expressive completeness of the regimented ascriptional idiom, over a certain domain" (see Brandom 1998, 613).

[6]   Where stating the theory's content precisely amounts to describing the content-conferring practice.

completeness. On the seven hundred pages of *MIE*, incomparably richer vocabulary is made use of than that which is explicitly introduced via specifying the instituting practices. It is only the weak self-referentiality that is meaningfully in question in *MIE*. (That is fortunate: I doubt anyone would be willing to read a book as thick as *MIE*, composed exclusively of *if… then…*, *believes that*, *is entitled to* and a handful of other regimented locutions that are explicitly introduced by Brandom.)

Maybe we could seek evidence in *MIE* for a position slightly closer to genuine self-referentiality, characterized by an implicit claim that the instituted vocabulary is about as powerful as the book's own idiom in general, not only with respect to specification of the instituting practice (cf. the quotations from Brandom 1998, 116, and 641). But given how tremendously richer the actual language of *MIE* is, this position would be hard to defend. In the following I will try to show that for Brandom's purposes even weak self-referentiality can do well; although it is yet another question whether it is actually achieved in *MIE*.

3. Justification for the claim of expressive completeness

What is Brandom's justification for the claim that his theory of meaning is expressively complete, in the sense of weak self-referentiality as defined above? According to the picture presented in *MIE*, a full discursive practice consists of two layers. First, the basic assertional practice, which confers conceptual content on the non-logical vocabulary, and second, the practice whereby broadly logical expressions are introduced, which is that of making explicit the features and proprieties of the basic practice. This logical superstructure is what makes "merely rational" participants of the basic practice, who are already in possession of simple conceptual content, into "logical creatures", who are able to express their discursive acting in speech, dragging it thus in the space of reasons. Henceforth, I will talk about the *basic practice* instituting the *basic vocabulary*, and about the *full vocabulary* (consisting of both the basic and the logical vocabulary) being instituted by the *full (discursive) practice*.[7]

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[7] Brandom's layered picture of discursive practice, mainly in the formulation of the more recent book *Between Saying and Doing*, is outlined in more detail and criticized in Lauer (2012).

Now, this assumed picture involves that participants of the full discursive practice have at their disposal means for making explicit, or specifying, the *basic* practice. But for expressive completeness it is necessary that a practice establishes vocabulary in terms of which that practice *itself* can be specified. By the same assumption, participants of merely the basic practice are not capable of such specification. Brandom therefore needs to show that the conceptual resources instituted by the full discursive practice are rich enough to make explicit this very practice, not just the basic one. Scharp in Scharp (2010, 264) draws attention to this as the point of Brandom's appeal to the notion of *expressive equilibrium*, traced back to Frege's *Begriffsschrift*, which is somewhat hidden in the body of *MIE*.[8]

According to Brandom (1998, 114; cf. also Scharp 2010, 264), an expression is in an expressive equilibrium if the appropriate inferences instituting its content can be made explicit by use of that very expression. The idea seems to be that the practice which institutes, e.g., the conditional *if… then* as explicitating some proprieties of the basic assertional practice itself needs nothing more involved than this conditional to be made explicit. (Note that no harmful circle is involved: the conditional-instituting practice does not presuppose an explicit introduction; it can go on even without ever being made explicit.) The practice conferring the conceptual content on conditionals could be, for instance, made explicit as follows: "Asserting 'if A, then B' amounts to undertaking such a commitment *if* the commitment to A is added, *then* B is undertaken as well." Of course, nothing at all can be made explicit *solely* by means of *if… then*. So the condition for expressive equilibrium should be specified to the effect that it should be possible to explicitate the instituting practice using only the involved expression itself, *together with* some other limited vocabulary; and in Brandom's layered picture it seems natural to appoint the whole (broadly) logical vocabulary to this role.[9] After all, such interrelatedness of logical locutions would correspond with his need to have *all* of his logical expressions in an expressive equilibrium. Less will not do, for then there would be a logical expression (i.e. an expression needed in making the basic practice explicit) whose instituting practice is not subject to specification by partici-

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[8]   Otherwise, questions of expressive completeness are primarily discussed in the preface and the conclusion chapter of Brandom (1998).

[9]   The normative expression *commitment*, which I used in the specification above, is also understood as logical in Brandom (1998).

pants of the full discursive practice, and expressive completeness would thus be lost.

Brandom quite clearly subscribes to the need of expressive equilibrium for the whole logical vocabulary, but unfortunately the matter is not explicitly discussed when various logical locutions are introduced further in the book. So it is hard to see, and would require a properly detailed discussion to determine, to what extent expressive equilibrium, as a necessary condition for expressive completeness of the proposed theory of meaning, is satisfied in *MIE*. Just as it would require a proper discussion to say – another condition, not independent though – how correct Brandom's treatment of logical expressions is as such, regardless of the ideal of expressive equilibrium. Needless to say, such a broad assessment cannot be supplied in this short essay.[10]

Apart from possible critique from within the two-layered picture, there is a serious challenge to this very conception, labelled *the Layer Cake Picture*, by Lauer (2012), who develops an argument introduced by Laurier (2005). Lauer argues, still rather internally to Brandom's overall project, against the claim that the basic, pre-logical practice assumed in *MIE* can be regarded as autonomously discursive. The core of his reasoning is the following. Agents of the basic practice, without any (broadly) logical vocabulary, conceived as discursive scorekeepers, *a fortiori* lack attitude-ascriptional locutions. But these are necessary in order for them to be capable of attributing discursive *attitudes*, rather than merely *statuses*, to other agents. (By Brandom's own commitment in Brandom 1998, 639–640, an agent cannot implicitly attribute a scorekeeping attitude unless she is able to explicitly ascribe that attitude.) And without the ability to keep "double books" on a single agent, to distinguish between what that other agent *acknowledges* commitment to and what he *is* in fact committed to, one lacks a grasp of the objective character of conceptual content. However, the objective, or representational, aspect of conceptual content is taken as a necessary condition for discursivity in *MIE*. It follows that the basic, pre-logical

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10   The main contribution of Scharp (2010) is a particular argument against expressive completeness of Brandom's theory, building on his treatment of the predicate "true" and his commitment to a Kripkean approach to the Liar's paradox. Brandom (2010) accepts the critique, but claims his account of truth in Brandom (1998, Ch. 5) not to be a proper part of his theory of meaning. The notion of truth is not a logical notion appealed to in making explicit the basic practice, he says, so chapter 5 could be left out of *MIE*, with the rest of the project still aspiring for expressive completeness.

practice is also pre-discursive, even if it can stand on its own, and that an autonomous *discursive* practice presupposes at least some of the locutions that are regarded as (broadly) logical by Brandom.

This deconstruction of the layered picture of discursive practice seems convincing to me, and makes Brandom's claim for expressive completeness again more obscure. On one hand, disrupting the neat inner structure does not imply that the full discursive "cake" cannot be expressively complete as a whole. On the other, it is now harder to substantiate why it should be. As I have just shown, in *MIE* the ambition depends on the accessibility of the expressive equilibrium for the introduced logical vocabulary. But even Brandom's notion of the logical is undermined now. More specifically, it cannot be the case any more that there is a layer of expressions which only serve to make explicit the implicitly present proprieties of an independently conceivable practice so that a fully discursive practice is set up. For the implicitly present proprieties of a practice that lacks objectivity of content are insufficient, even when made explicit.[11] Once we accept Laurier's and Lauer's attack on the layered picture, the way to expressive completeness via expressive equilibrium, which was at least sketched in *MIE*, is further blurred for us. First we need to define the logical anew, only then we can claim expressive equilibrium for it.

4. The role of expressive completeness

Detached from the question, whether and how expressive completeness can be achieved, it remains for us to see the significance of this ideal for Brandom's project; to see for what purpose expressive completeness even in the sense of weak self-referentiality can serve Brandom well. While expressive completeness presupposes the expressive equilibrium in *MIE*, it itself appears to be a prerequisite for another equilibrium, the *interpretive*, introduced on the last pages of *MIE*'s Conclusion. Or rather for one particular case of it. Interpretive equilibrium is achieved when members of a community are able to attribute to one another the same attitudes they are adopting themselves (cf. Brandom 1998, 642). In the basic practice, as conceived

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[11]   Lauer (2012) finally suggests a version of expressivism about logical expressions void of the Layer Cake Picture, under the head of *dialectical expressivism*. But the idea is rather vague and I do not think it can help with the issue of expressive completeness.

in *MIE*, this is not the case, because there the agents adopt scorekeeping attitudes towards others, themselves unable to attribute to them further scorekeeping attitudes above "mere" statuses. On the contrary, the full discursive practitioners are capable of explicit (even iterative) embedding of attributions, and they can therefore attribute any attitude they adopt (cf. Brandom 1998, 642-643).

Admittedly, this last case of interpretive equilibrium does not depend on expressive completeness. But a different case does. The claimed expressive completeness of his theory enables Brandom's glamorous (or disappointing – cf. Rosen 1997, 168) move at the end of *MIE*, a punchline of the whole story. It allows him to let the external and internal interpreting perspective on a fully discursive community coincide. With expressive completeness, discursive practitioners are themselves capable of specifying the practice by which their conceptual resources are instituted; that is, capable of making explicit the implicit proprieties of the instituting practice. So, they are capable of attributing to each other all the statuses and attitudes that *we* (external interpreters who formulate our theory of meaning *qua* specification of the full discursive practice) are capable of attributing to them. In this interpretive equilibrium between them and us, "[e]xternal interpretation collapses into internal scorekeeping. [...] It is recognizing them as us" (Brandom 1998, 644).

And this collapse is a most welcome thing for Brandom, the rationalist. It saves the irreducible normativity of any discursive practice by referring it to our own norms, which cannot be stated once for good. "There is never any final answer as to what is correct; everything, including our assessments of such correctness, is itself a subject for conversation and further assessment, challenge, defense, and correction" (Brandom 1998, 647). Also, the collapse of perspectives seems sufficient to mitigate a particular unease we might have, as external interpreters of a community, concerning the objectivity of their content. Namely, does any genuine objectivity arise on the basis of the distinction between one's acknowledged and "real" commitments, given that this distinction is always made from a particular scorekeeping perspective and is therefore just a matter of two different *attitudes* of the scorekeeper? That is how Brandom's story goes. But once we recognize our interpreting perspective as internal to the community, there is no point for us in denying "real" objectivity: it is *us* (among others), who are to make the distinction, and we are bound to hold *our* commitments dear.

Note, finally, that all it takes to achieve this ultimate goal, the collapse of the external and the internal perspective, is a theory of meaning that is expressively complete in the sense of weak self-referentiality. For this purpose, a central one indeed, it does not matter that the more intuitive desideratum of full self-referentiality is not met. The agents of the specified practice need not talk the same language as we do. Yet they form with us, as long as an interpretive equilibrium is in place, an important "we": that of rational and logical creatures.

I hope to have clarified what good news expressive completeness of the theory presented in *MIE* would mean – if only after having shown how far such news is from being confirmed.

5. Summary

I have contrasted the ideal of full self-referentiality of a theory of meaning with the notion of theory's expressive completeness, for which full self-referentiality is not required, and I have argued that it is only the latter, or a weak self-referentiality, that can be reasonably seen as the ambition of Brandom's *Making It Explicit*. I have shown that Brandom's claim for expressive completeness is based on the idea of an expressive equilibrium, which he hopes to have achieved for his broadly logical vocabulary. However, such an achievement is by no means evident in *MIE*. Moreover, a recent serious challenge to Brandom's underlying picture of discursive practice makes it even more unclear how expressive completeness could be reached by way of an expressive equilibrium. Whether or not it is achieved in *MIE*, I have shown what a desired goal expressive completeness is for Brandom's overall pragmatist and rationalist project, allowing the ultimate coincidence of the external and the internal interpreting perspective on a discursive community.

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