

## Semantic Normativity and Supervenience

ECAP 7: Philosophy of Language

*Abstract.* This presentation is about a connection between the dispute over semantic normativity and the issue of mind-body supervenience. Of late, it seems that the critics of semantic normativity have been on the offensive (for a survey of arguments, see Hattiangadi 2007). They have been rejecting the usual arguments to the effect that the meaning of linguistic expressions is inherently normative. Prescriptivists can choose to keep on defending their position by refining the sense of normativity involved in language against the descriptivist denials. Alternatively, descriptivists can choose to go on the offensive of their own. One way of going on the offensive is for them to attack certain assumptions in the descriptivist position. For instance, the descriptivist critics of semantic normativity have been assuming the truth of various supervenience claims. In particular, these critics assumed that linguistic meaning supervenes on linguistic use. Analyzing the work of select critics of semantic normativity—in particular, Paul Horwich and Assa Wikforss—I shall argue that their supervenience claims are unjustified and betray an inadequate conception of meaning and content.

In the debate over semantic normativity, we have two major positions. On the one hand, there are *prescriptivists* who argue that meaning is normative in the sense that it is not exhausted by an actual usage of a given expression. This position emerged in particular from Kripke's interpretation of Wittgenstein (Kripke 1982). On the other hand, there are *descriptivists* who claim that meaning is fully determined by the set of instances on which an expression has been used. Accordingly, some descriptivists, for example Horwich and Wikforss, identify their view as the so-called "pure-use theory" (Horwich 1998 and 2005, Wikforss 2001). Another way of expressing the contrast between prescriptivists and descriptivists is that the former believe that the meaning of an expression cannot be specified, unless it is said that the expression ought to be used thus and so, while the latter claim that the meaning in question would be fully specified by describing the ways it has actually been used.

However, descriptivists such as Horwich and Wikforss assume the truth of certain relation between meaning and use, or meaning and dispositions to behavior. They believe that linguistic meaning supervenes on use or dispositions. I take it that Horwich and Wikforss believe that by assuming the truth of supervenience, they avoid a reductive sort of naturalism, by admitting that meaning talk enjoys a certain degree of autonomy. Not all descriptivists have these hang-ups about the autonomy of meaning talk; some are unabashedly reductionist (Dretske 2000).

However, it can be argued that Horwich's and Wikforss's assumption of supervenience is unwarranted. To begin with, Horwich and Wikforss do not explain how meaning gets determined by use, or dispositions to use. And yet, dispositionalism was one of the targets of Kripke's argument against descriptivism. But the main problem of this proposal consists in the fact that supervenience

imposes merely a purely negative constraint on meaning or content determination. In the given case, it merely implies that there can be no semantic difference without a difference in use. This says nothing about the determination of meaning, let alone about how meaning might be determined by what a speaker is disposed to do.

Furthermore, it is useful to explore the parallels between the meaning-use supervenience and the mind-body supervenience. The latter was originally proposed in philosophy of mind, as a solution of the venerable mind-body problem. Some materialists, who saw all sorts of problems with positing the relation of identity between mental events and physical events, hoped that a weaker relation of supervenience might avoid these problems, yet satisfy the requirements of materialism. But it turned out that supervenience has no implication as to the question of what constitutes the mind. The concept of mind-body supervenience imposes only a negative constraint: no mental difference without a physical difference. However, this negative constraint is compatible with a wide range of traditional solutions to the mind-body problem—it is even compatible with dualism, which is a formulation of this very problem, rather than its solution. And similarly, the assumption of meaning-use supervenience tells us nothing of substance about the way linguistic meaning is constituted.

## References

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