

## Explicating Conceptual Norms: Wilfrid Sellars's Early Essays and the Idea of a Naturalistic Pragmatics

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I find it helpful to think of the eight years between 1946 and 1954 as the 'foundational phase' of Wilfrid Sellars's philosophy. It is during these years that Sellars's overarching metaphilosophical and methodological commitments take their final shape. As I see it, one of the most significant achievements of this early period of Sellars's philosophical work is the development of what I shall call a *Pure Naturalistic Pragmatics* (PNP). Sellars's PNP provides a general conceptual and methodological framework for the explication of the norms, roles and functions constitutive of our language use (in short: it is an *explicative meta-theory*). Thus, it complements an alternative approach to the norm-structure of language which was predominant in Sellars's earliest four essays up to 1948. In this talk, I'm going to introduce the concept of a PNP and look into some of the systematic constraints and motivations which led Sellars to work out this explicative meta-theory during the 'foundational phase'.

From his earliest writings on, an unwavering commitment to a clear-cut demarcation between philosophy and empirical science is a recurring theme in Sellars's work. For Sellars, the philosopher and the empirical scientist pursue quite different objectives. According to Sellars's non-factualistic conception of philosophy, the task of the philosopher is to get clear about language *as norm*, i.e. language as a system of conceptual norms, roles and functions which serves as a regulative ideal for our imperfect and untidy factual linguistic behavior. In his earliest essays, Sellars refers to the general conceptual framework in which the explicative enterprise of the philosopher is set as *Pure Pragmatics*. Empirical science, on the other hand, addresses the task of describing and explaining factual linguistic behavior. In the catchy terminology of Sellars's first three essays, the empirical scientist is not concerned with language *as norm*, but with language *as fact*. Unlike the philosopher, it is a *Descriptive Pragmatics* that she is after. Let us call a full-fledged psychological-sociological-historical account of languages as natural phenomena a *Descriptive Naturalistic Pragmatics* (DNP), and note in passing that such a DNP will be cast in the naturalistic object-language of the empirical scientist.

In a series of essays written between 1946 and the summer of 1948, Sellars explores a variant of *Pure Pragmatics* which takes the existing conceptual resources of syntactic and semantic metalanguages as its point of departure. Following a terminology introduced by Sellars in his 1950 essay *Quotation Marks, Sentences, and Propositions*, we shall characterize this approach as a “phenomenology of linguistic functions” and, accordingly, refer to it as *Pure Phenomenological Pragmatics* (PPP). For Sellars, the phenomenological route to language as norm relies on “the exhibitory use of syntactic or semantic MLs”. The practitioner of this approach tries to get at the norm-structure of language through the classifications afforded by her own dispositions for metalinguistic behavior. Taken in isolation, PPP has at least two serious disadvantages. However masterfully undertaken, the reach of PPP is still limited in principle by the fineness of the distinctions inherent in our metalinguistic behavior. In addition to that, as a consequence of its reliance on the resources of a semantic metalanguage, PPP may seem to encourage a misleading conception of what language actually is. Hence, it could help to sustain an erroneous belief in what Sellars calls “rationalistic pseudo-psychologies”.

In the fall of 1948, Sellars begins to develop an alternative approach to language *as norm* which absorbs insights from the scientific study of language, thus steering a middle course between PPP and DNP. The adoption of a *Pure Naturalistic Pragmatics* enables Sellars to go beyond the distinctions and classifications offered by syntactic and semantic metalanguages and to arrive at a finer-grained account of the norm-structure of language. The central element of PNP is the construction of simplified models of rule-governed behavior. These “language games” are supposed to capture the norms which govern our factual linguistic behavior. The model-language in which language games are constructed is the naturalistic object-language of the empirical scientist. Thus, PNP can avoid some of the shortcomings of PPP. Although PPP is, in principle, reducible to PNP, these two routes to language *as norm* should be seen as complementary rather than mutually exclusive.