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SEMANTIC INFERENTIALISM: MAIN IDEAS*

For a very long time a theory of meaning has been developed as one of the main domains of the philosophy of language, especially of the analytic philosophy of language. The goal of a theory of meaning is to find an answer to the question what the meaning of linguistic expressions is. Such a theory also tries to explain how linguistic expressions acquire their meaning. The inferential theory of meaning is one of such theories. Its author, Robert B. Brandom is an American philosopher and logician who teaches in the Faculty of Philosophy at The University of Pittsburgh (USA). He presented his theory in a substantial monograph entitled *Making It Explicit. Reasoning, Representing and Discursive Commitment* (1994/1998) and also in a shorter work *Articulating Reasons. An Introduction to Inferentialism* (2000/2001).[1] Inferentialism is extensively discussed.[2]

I. PRAGMATIC, NORMATIVE AND HOLISTIC
ASPECTS OF MEANING

In inferentialism the pragmatic and normative dimensions are fundamental ones. The pragmatic dimension consists in emphasising a social, linguistic, cognitive practice etc. Expressions acquire their meaning in the course of a social interaction between language users.[3]

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[1] BRANDOM 1997, 2002a, 2008, 2015.

[2] STEKELER-WEITHOFER 2005; WANDERER 2008; WEISS, WANDERER 2010; GUROVA 2012; PEREGRIN 2014; BERAN, KOLMAN, KOREN 2018; LOEFFLER 2018; WISCHIN 2019. See also SZUBKA 2012; ZARĘBSKI 2013; KUBLIKOWSKI 2019.

[3] BRANDOM 2002b.

A social usage of a language reveals its normative dimension. Normativity, present in practice, appears in many ways. The basis of normativity is distinguishing what was done and what ought to be done. Apart from that, the normative dimension reveals itself in evaluating actions as correct and incorrect. A social, linguistic-cognitive practice of giving and asking for reasons, in other words, using of inferences[4] has to fulfil the conditions of correctness. Such practice is evaluated on the basis of the conditions. Normativity reveals itself also in asserting, in searching for entitlement and in various commitments.

A normative aspect of a social, linguistic and cognitive practice reveals itself also through rule-following. The problem is how to evaluate the value of an action in accordance with a rule and how to evaluate an applied rule. Acting in accordance with a rule is not automatically classified as correct. For example, maltreating animals, dog fighting etc., even if it is done in accordance with a rule, is evaluated as a negative behaviour.

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1997) in *Philosophical Investigations* used a metaphor of a game and expressed his belief that we learn how to act in accordance with a rule in the course of a game when we observe other players. A rule is a kind of a habit or a custom. Acting in accordance with a rule is similar to obeying a command. In Wittgenstein's opinion, circularity in justifying an action in accordance with a rule can be avoided if someone teaches someone how to act according to a rule by presenting many various examples and exercises. Regress *ad infinitum* in justifying a rule with another rule can be avoided by applying a kind of a "sensitivity" in the process of learning.

Wittgenstein — in Brandom's opinion — did not give any conception of an action according to a rule. This is why Brandom distinguished regulism in which norms are expressed *explicite* in rules. Regulism is criticised for this reason that it is not free from circularity or regress *ad infinitum*. A standpoint which pretends to be free from such objections is called "regularism." According to it, norms are first present *implicite* in regularities of social practices and next they are expressed *explicite* in rules. But regularism is questioned because of a possibility of gerrymandering, which means, a possibility of manipulating what to acknowledge and what not to acknowledge as a regularity. Brandom believes that a social, normative, linguistic, cognitive and discursive practice is fundamentally a game of giving and asking for

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[4] Brandom applies the Wilfrid Sellars' (1956) concept: "the space of reason."

reasons which supports our beliefs. Rules are explicated in such practice. The goal of it is to get a network (system) of beliefs.

Inferentialism is a meaning holism.[5] According to Brandom a natural, fundamental disposition — which enables us to use a language and to cognise — is a reliable differential responsive disposition. It is a disposition which makes it possible for somebody, for example, to say "It is blue" if such a person sees a blue car etc. This disposition is a basis for a linguistic and cognitive game of giving and asking for reasons. Such a disposition is developed by learning how to use a language in accordance with rules. As a result, we obtain new, interconnected claims which establish a dynamic, changeable network (system).

II. INFERENTIAL DIMENSION OF MEANING

Meaning and inference are the main concepts in inferentialism. Inference is a linguistic and cognitive activity consisting of premises and a conclusion. According to the key claim of inferentialism, the meaning of expressions is explicated by the usage of these expressions in inferences.

The meaning of a premise-sentence is characterised by its inferential relations with other sentences. Meaningful sentences, which play a role of premises or conclusions, are interrelated with other sentences. A consequence is a special inter-sentential relation and it is expressed by a conditional. The meaning of intra-sentential expressions, which are the elements of premises or conclusions, is characterised by their intra-sentential relations with other expressions.

It seems that expressions need to have an initial, meaningful content to further play a role in an inference. A user of a language has to understand an initial meaning of an expression to apply it in an inference. Of course, a subsequent, inferential usage of the expression refines its meaning.

In a natural language there are inferences which are difficult to express by means of a formal language. Brandom — inspired by the ideas of Sellars[6] — called them "material inferences". Such inferences — fundamental in semantic inferentialism — are opposed to formal inferences which are correct (infallible) only on the basis of their logical form. In contrast, the correct-

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[5] See AJDUKIEWICZ 1975, 1985. See also MACIASZEK 2007.
[6] SELLARS 1953/2007.

ness of a material inference depends not only on its logical form, but mainly on the understanding of the content (meaning) of a nonlogical vocabulary which is used in such an inference. Brandom challenges the existing theory of inference in which a logical form is acknowledged as a basis of correctness of an inference. In his opinion, material inferences are not just enthymemes which — after explicating hidden premises — become usual formal inferences. The essential condition in the case of a material inference is the understanding of contents of expressions in such an inference which inform not only about the formal relations but mainly about the non-formal (material) ones. Without such understanding of the meaning (content) of a non-logical vocabulary a material inference would be impossible.

III. CONDITIONS OF CORRECTNESS OF INFERENCE

One of the signs of normativity of a language is the possibility to estimate reasoning according to the conditions of correctness. There are formal and material conditions. The main formal condition is fulfilled if a consequence follows from a reason. This happens if there is a specific relation between a reason and a consequence, in other words, if acceptance of a consequence on the basis of a reason is justified.

Formal conditions of a correctness of an inference are not sufficient. In an inference there are not only formal relations, but also non-formal ones. That is why the key condition of a correctness of an inference is such a non-formal condition which requires of premises and a conclusion to be true sentences (propositions).

A distinction: a formal and a material inference is not identical with a traditional distinction of formal and non-formal (material) conditions of correctness of an inference. A formal as well as a material inference are codified by both conditions.

Formal correctness of a formal inference (a deduction) is mainly based on a logical consequence relation between premises and a conclusion. In the case of a material inference such a condition of formal correctness is fulfilled if there is a consequence relation between premises and a conclusion, but it is not a relation which can be expressed only by a logical vocabulary. Both types of inferences have to fulfil the main condition of material correctness: premises have to be true and a true conclusion has to follow from such premises.

The concepts of inference, especially, of a material inference are essential in semantic inferentialism. Let us imagine a situation when we are carefully reading a precise, well-structured text. We are analysing it to see claims, we see that they are true and we are grasping that conclusions follow from premises. In the course of reasoning we do not place — in our thoughts — premises and conclusions in correct schemes of reasoning. We rather grasp and evaluate the truth of a conclusion on the basis of true premises. The understanding of contents of premises and their truthfulness seem to be more important — in evaluating a conclusion as a true one — than the correct scheme of reasoning.

Generally speaking, the formal conditions of correctness of reasoning are based on formal relations (a consequence relation etc.). It seems that such conditions — and formal relations — depend on non-formal (material) conditions of correctness (the truth of sentences which are premises or a conclusion etc.). These conditions are based on non-formal relations such as: the relationship between a sentence and a state of affairs which the sentence refers to (a reference of a sentence). Other non-formal relationships are the following ones: causality (a cause is relevant to a reason and a result is relevant to a consequence), a timesequence, spatial relationships and normative relationships etc.

Truth understood as correspondence is controversial. There is a problem of recognising the truth-value of sentences (the problem of a truth criterion). Brandom proposes an anaphoric theory of truth and of reference — based on the prosentential theory of truth[7] — as a solution to this problem.

According to an anaphoric definition of truth, an expression "... is true" refers to another, initial sentence and is a substitute for it. But an initial sentence is also checked as to whether it describes the relevant state of affairs in a true or false way. An expression "true" is a metalinguistic name used in a metasentence.

An anaphoric theory of truth and reference are interrelated. An expression "true" is used in a following sentence: "This is true". In such a sentence the expression "this" refers to an initial sentence. For example, an initial sentence "Cracow was a capital of Poland" is substituted by an anaphoric sentence "This is true."

The Brandomian anaphoric theory of reference can be supported by a causal--historical-sociolinguistic theory of reference of Hilary Putnam.[8] Showing

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[7] Dorothy L. Grover, Joseph L. Camp and Nuel D. Belnap (1975) are the authors of this theory.
[8] PUTNAM 1981, 1983, 1988, 1994, 2013.

some similarities and differences in these theories provides an opportunity
for a deeper understanding of these theories and for a more adequate eva-
luation of how they describe and explain the process of meaning acquisition
of linguistic expressions.

Brandom accents inference more than reference. Of course, it is possible
to apply such a strategy. But sooner or later a reference has to be also taken
into consideration. Brandom accepts a reference, but he understands it in an
anaphoric way. Putnam emphasises a reference understood as a relation
which connects linguistic expressions and an extra-linguistic (empirical) rea-
lity. Brandom and Putnam describe the same process of meaning acquisition.
But they explain this process in different ways. Brandom talks about two
orders of an explanation how expressions get a meaning. Let us call these
two orders as the Brandomian and the Putnamian ones. At the starting point
of language acquisition Brandom stresses that complex and simple sentences
play an essential role of premises or conclusions in inferences in which
names are their infra-sentential elements. Names are used with an intention
of talking and thinking about objects. In contrast, Putnam stresses the role
of names which — as linguistic signs ("labels") — are referred to objects
which are cases of natural kinds (classes). Simple and complex names are
used in simple or complex sentences.

So Brandom and Putnam accept a reference, but it is understood in dif-
ferent ways. Brandom prefers an anaphoric reference and Putnam — a causal
reference. Brandom does not deny that there is a linguistic and cognitive
connection with reality, but he does not emphasise it. Putnam — in an op-
position — highlights it, but he is also conscious of various cognitive limi-
tations.

If we accent the idea of common division of labour and the idea of prag-
matic cooperation between experts and average users of a language, then the
Putnamian theory seems to be similar to the Brandomian theory of social,
pragmatic, linguistic and cognitive game of giving and asking of reasons for
asserted sentences. The enrichment of semantic inferentialism and of non-
inferential, empirical descriptions by Putnamian conceptual "machinery" of
a theory of meaning may help to explain better how we initiate our linguistic
and cognitive "touch" with reality.

Brandom tries to include the issue of this "connection" in his concept of
ascription of propositional attitudes *de dicto* (about words) and *de re* (about
things). Such ascription concerns a user of a language who expresses various
claims. The *de dicto* ascription concerns claims (e.g. John claims *that*

Władysław Reymont is the classic of Polish literature). The *de re* ascription is a linguistic expression which refers to an extralinguistic dimension (e.g. John claims *about* Władysław Reymont that he is a classic of Polish literature).

An objection towards the anaphoric concept of truth and reference is that Brandom seems to marginalise the fact that demonstratives — like "he" or "this" etc. — demonstrate, in other words, refer to various aspects of reality.[9] Brandom tries to defend his view in the following way. Let us analyse the example: a biologist discovers a new species of an owl. He designates it using a name which he chooses and adds a description of the owl. Next, the biologist passes his knowledge to other users of a language. But it is important — according to Brandom — to emphasise that even in such a case the biologist does what he does in the framework of a discursive (inferential) game of giving and asking for reasons for the claims.

Brandom accents an inference more than a reference and this is why he claims that even in the case of non-inferential (empirical, observational) descriptions an inference is needed, namely the inference from empirical data — expressed in sentences (propositions) in certain circumstances of applying the sentences — to inferential consequences of such sentences.[10]

A question remains whether Brandomian theory of material inference, his anaphoric theory of truth and reference or the concept of the *de re* ascription of a propositional attitude explain in a sufficient way how linguistic expressions acquire an empirical meaning. And this is a matter of fact that they acquire such a meaning because we use an empirical language and on this basis we successfully act.

IV. ASSERTION, ENTITLEMENT AND COMMITMENT

Recognising truthfulness of sentences is complicated. That is why Brandom — in his normative pragmatics — proposes to emphasise pragmatic and normative aspects which are linked to an assertion,[11] an entitlement and a commitment. An assertion is a linguistic and cognitive activity which consists in acknowledging a sentence (its meaning) as true. An assertion is also connected with a premise or a conclusion of an inference which is entitlement-preserving, commitment-preserving and which does not allow for

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[9] Michael Kremer (2010) emphasises this aspect.
[10] Brandom refers to the view of Michael Dummett (1973).
[11] See for example GOLDBERG 2015.

incompatibility entailment. Asserting is not a chaotic action but a rational one because it requires an entitlement, in other words, it requires reasons for asserted claims. Reasons are acquired in a pragmatic, normative, linguistic, cognitive, discursive game of giving and asking for reasons. In normative pragmatics such a game is treated as "scorekeeping"[12] in various speech acts which change someone's entitlements and commitments for claims. An assertion and an entitlement are results of antecedent commitments. An entitled assertion also causes undertaking a commitment by someone for an asserted sentence.

A commitment is undertaken in certain circumstances and it produces some consequences. Undertaking a commitment is different from ascribing an entitlement or a commitment to someone or to a claim. Another kind of ascribing is when a feature is ascribed to a thing.

Asserting, undertaking or ascribing an entitlement or a commitment, in other words, applying a normative vocabulary — play a specifically understood expressive role which consists in explicating an implicit meaning of used expressions. A conditional plays an essential role in the process of explication. A conditional helps to express claims (and concepts) in the form of networks of inferences. For example, if somebody claims that owls are birds and birds are vertebrates, then such a person ascribes to owls the features of being birds and vertebrates. In addition, he or she undertakes a commitment to further steps, namely, she undertakes a commitment to an assertion that if owls are vertebrates and vertebrates are animals, then owls are animals etc. If someone endorses an opinion that maltreating animals is not allowed or forbidden, then such a move means ascribing a certain entitlement to owls and undertaking a further commitment to the claim that maltreating owls is not allowed, that it is forbidden. Such a claim is not compatible with the claim that maltreating is allowed etc.

CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, semantic inferentialism is an important standpoint in contemporary, analytic philosophy of language. The core of inferentialism is a pragmatic, normative and holistic claim that meanings of expressions are characterised by their roles played in inferences.

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[12] Brandom takes the concept of "scorekeeping" from David Lewis (1983).

Inferentialism — in Brandom's opinion — is a meaning holism. I explicated this standpoint by applying of Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz's meaning holism and I showed that a moderate holism can be accepted in the case of empirical knowledge.

According to the main idea of inferentialism a person is a competent user of an expression — he or she knows its meaning and understands it — if he or she knows the circumstances and consequences of its usage. In other words, the centre of semantic inferentialism is the idea that if someone thinks something, then in fact such a person does not exactly know what he or she thinks and what he or she thinks about unless he or she expresses, analyses, explicates, applies his or her thoughts as premises or conclusions in inferences and discusses his or her thoughts (even with himself or herself) etc. Then a person's thought — initially unclear (implicit) — may become a thought which is clear (explicit), well understood and useful in actions. Understanding a thought — and making it a basis for a useful action — is a target of the linguistic and cognitive process of explication, also by means of reasoning.

A material reasoning — according to Brandom — is a central element of the semantic inferentialism. But his concept of it is not clear. This is why I explicated and illustrated what it means that a material reasoning is correct mainly on the basis of understanding the meaning of non-logical vocabulary.

It may seem that ideas presented by inferentialism are not novel as concepts of a premise, a conclusion, a consequence, an inference and its correctness have been known at least since traditional Aristotelian logic. But working out the relations between meaning and inference is the original advantage of the inferential theory of meaning. Its positive aspect is emphasising the fact that the meaning of expressions, especially of sentences, is refined if they play roles of premises or conclusions in inferences. However, its disadvantage would be overestimating this inferential aspect of meaning and underestimating the referential aspect where a reference is understood not only in an anaphoric way but also in a representational one. I tried to develop Brandom's view applying Putnam's theory of meaning.

The importance of inferentialism is perhaps symptomatic in contemporary philosophy. Maybe the period dominated by the method of analysis in the twentieth century has transformed — in the twenty first century — in the period of synthesis, of pursuing consistency, contextuality or an interdisciplinary approach etc. The reason for this is not that analysis has become unimportant. The reason is that that overestimating analysis may lead to mental, intellectual, theoretical, conceptual idleness and a linguistic purism.

On the other hand, a synthetic, holistic, inferential approach may be interesting and creative by stimulating new ideas and discovering new research aspects or conceptions.[13]

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[13] For the inspiring comments I am very grateful — among others — to Prof. Robert B. Brandom (University of Pittsburgh), Prof. Henry Jackman (York University, Toronto), Prof. Mark Lance (Georgetown University), Prof. John MacFarlane (University of California, Berkeley), Prof. Kevin Scharp (University of St Andrews) and Prof. Michael Kremer (University of Chicago). I also express my gratitude to Prof. Patricia Blanchette (University of Notre Dame), Prof. Paweł Kawalec (KUL, Lublin), Prof. Piotr Kulicki (KUL, Lublin), Prof. Marek Lechniak (KUL, Lublin), Prof. Agnieszka Lekka-Kowalik (KUL, Lublin), Prof. Janusz Maciaszek (University of Łódź), Prof. Barry Smith (SUNY, Buffalo), Prof. Tadeusz Szubka (University of Szczecin), Prof. Monika Walczak (KUL, Lublin), and Prof. Tomasz Zarębski (University of Lower Silesia).

[14] A more extensive bibliography concerning inferentialism see in KUBLIKOWSKI 2019.

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