

Week 12 Notes
Discursive Practice and Semantic and Pragmatic Theory

Plan:

1. Two halves of the book:
 - a) Part I: Lay out general principles, the approach, and a *framework*.
 - b) Part II: Explain how to introduce *locutions playing various central expressive roles* into that framework.

2. First perspective: Aim at **expressive completeness**.

We can ask: *which* expressive roles should we introduce locutions for, in (1b)?

Can get a canonical list of topics that have traditionally been of interest to philosophers of language—e.g. from Frege, or Quine, or Dummett. (Both Quine and Dummett are basically getting theirs from Frege.) Or look at the literature and get a list there. (That would include proper names in the ‘80s, and epistemic modals now.)

Or can ask: what locutions do we need to articulate (make explicit) the framework in (1a)? In effect, these will be categorial metaconcepts.

That is what we do.

We can not only introduce the locutions below, but the *concepts* of the locutions below: specify what expressive role a locution needs to play to *be*, e.g., and identity locution or a proper name.

They include:

- a) (Declarative) *sentences*.
- b) Logical vocabulary: conditionals and negation.
- c) Modal vocabulary (expressing ranges of subjunctive robustness).
- d) Normative vocabulary (expressing commitment to propriety of patterns of practical reasoning, and capable of being used observationally).
- e) Singular terms and predicates. Identity locutions.
- f) Observational vs. theoretical terms.
- g) Indexicals, demonstratives, and anaphoric dependents.
- h) Proper names and descriptions.
- i) Complex predicates permitting generation of indefinitely many novel sentences.
- j) Semantic vocabulary (‘true’ and ‘refers’, also ‘of’ and ‘about’).
- k) Arbitrarily complex propositional attitude ascriptions, so: *intentional* vocabulary.

3. Second perspective: **Collapse of levels**.

- a) The two levels that have been kept distinct throughout the book are

- i) The *interpreter*, who is looking on from the outside, anthropologically, at the antics of some practitioners, specifying what they do in *normative* vocabulary, and trying to give nec or suf conditions for the applicability of various sorts of *intentional* or *semantic* vocabulary. This is to see them as *saying* something, in the sense of *claiming*; as *referring* to objects, and *predicating* properties of them; saying of each other *that* they are saying and claiming things and *what* they are saying and claiming; using *semantic* vocabulary about their own utterances; using identity locutions, demonstratives, quantifiers, personal pronouns, and so on.
- ii) The practitioners, and the practices that are being attributed to them.
- b) The collapse of levels occurs when the practices being *attributed to* the practitioners by the interpreter are sufficiently close to those being *exercised by* the interpreter that the interpreter becomes, in effect, just one more practitioner, and each practitioner is intelligible as an interpreter. (Obviously propositional attitude ascriptions are the key locution here, along with being able to talk about singular term use, demonstrative use, and so on.)
- c) One big issue here is the *normative* vocabulary the interpreter uses to attribute implicitly normative practices that can then be seen—if they exhibit the theoretically specified structures—as specifically *discursive* practices.
We can ask: can we specify in *non-normative* terms sufficient conditions for the behavior of the practitioners to be *correctly* specified also in the *normative* terms used by the interpreter as the *input* to his enterprise of saying what structure is nec or suf for interpreting the practices attributed as *discursive* practices? [Will pursue this question below.]

4. Third perspective: **Theoretically matching Interpretational practice.**

Intentional vocabulary is what we use to ascribe propositional attitudes: paradigmatically beliefs (doxastic commitments), intentions (practical commitments), desires or preferences (commitment to the propriety of patterns of practical inference). These are distinguished by having *propositional contents*, specified by declarative sentences and that-clauses.

The overall question concerns necessary and sufficient conditions for communal practices (or individual abilities) to be appropriately specified in these terms.

Note that we *could* apply the stance to the table: explaining its behavior of sitting still as sufficient to warrant its desire to sit still and its belief that by not moving it will sit still. But we get no surplus intelligibility from doing so.

Dennett’s “intentional stance” offers one answer to this question: what is the best way to predict and explain the behavior, described in non-intentional terms.

5. Three substantial steps and questions:

- a) Suppose, with the interpretivists, that the standard for applying *intentional or semantic vocabulary* to a practice is practical interpretability, in the sense of mapping that practice onto our own in a way that permits conversation. This is treating them as one of us, collapsing the levels.
- b) Can we specify in vocabulary that uses *normative* terms, but *not* intentional or semantic ones, conditions that are either necessary or sufficient for practical interpretability and hence the proper applicability of *intentional* and *semantic* vocabulary?
- c) What can we say about the relations between
 - i. Behavior specified in *non-normative* (and non-intentional, non-semantic) terms and
 - ii. Behavior specified in normative terms?

This last is the issue of *normativity* and *naturalism*.

It concerns the *input* providing raw materials for the explanation asked for in (b).

6. **Interpretivism and Interpretability:**

- a) Can agree with Quine and Davidson that fluency of dialog is the measure of understanding. Consider being given a translation manual for a foreign language that is sentence by sentence. Use it to transform one's own practical capacity to speak English into the capacity to speak Martian.
This is using one's own practical capacity as a *participant* (McD "participant perspective." Gary Ebbs and others have taken this to be absolutely central to McD's thought.) as a *measuring device* for linguisticality.
Rorty in "The World Well Lost," on incoherence of idea that butterfly wing-angles are a language, but we can't translate it.
- b) Davidsonian interpretivism:
 - Must attribute simultaneously propositional attitudes and linguistic meanings.

This is move beyond realizing:

- Pragmatists thought they could infer beliefs from actions.

It was then realized that they were taking desires or preferences for granted. Need to simultaneously attribute (based on behavior to be made intelligible, described in nonintentional vocabulary) beliefs *and* desires. Rational choice theory does this, based on choice behavior.

- DD realizes in the '50s that one must *also* simultaneously assign *meanings* to linguistic utterances. Rats take this for granted, in specification of *options* and *outcomes*. That is why rational choice theory is not a good candidate for a theory of rationality on which one can base a *semantics*.

[Rant about what's confused about slogan: "Failure is not an option."]

- Davidsonian Interpretivism claims: what it *means* for someone's utterances to *mean that p* is that that utterance is mapped onto *our* (an interpreter's) sentence *p* by the best overall interpretation of the utterer's behavior.

The concepts of meaning and belief are to be understood in terms of interpretation.

7. Some issues about interpretability:

a) Describe use of sentence-by-sentence translation manual:

You decide what you want to say: p .

You look up your sentence in the book, and find the alien equivalent: Θ .

You utter that alien sentence Θ .

Interlocutor responds to Θ , decides they want to say: Δ .

You look up Δ , get equivalent q .

Treat them as having responded to your p with q .

Repeat.

b) This is using your own mastery of discursive practice as a base, which the translation manual leverages into a different capacity: the capacity to speak the alien language.

c) Now suppose there is a quite different translation manual, assigning different p,q to Θ,Δ .

d) Indeed, suppose they are incompatible, in that in Manual A the English assigned to Θ, p , is incompatible with the English Manual B assigns to $\Theta: r$. This is a case of Quine's Indeterminacy of Translation thesis, from Chapter 2 of *Word and Object*. He claims that given any one adequate translation scheme—adequate in that it permits smooth communication of the kind in (a)—there will always be another, incompatible one that is consistent with everything the aliens do or are disposed to do. That is, when their "behavior" is specified in a suitably impoverished vocabulary: nonintentional and nonnormative.

Q: Why should one think that is true?

A: John Wallace's scheme will give the flavor. (He is DFW's father.) Assign each physical object the congruent space-time region 5 feet to the East of it, and assign each predicate, say, "red" or "horse" to apply to a s-t region just in case the region 5 feet to its West is red or a horse.

e) Davidson on a model of interpretivism:

Use the sentences of *your* language to *measure* the other language. This is assigning a label to each alien sentence that helps you understand its use (behavior), because you know how to manipulate (use) the labels.

This is using your capacity to use sentences in *your* language as the basis that is leveraged by the translation manual into the capacity to use alien sentences.

f) Compare assigning numbers to objects on the basis of their weights. Might assign "1" or "2.2" to the same objects, depending on whether you are using Manual A (kilograms) or Manual B (pounds). Those are different numbers, but work equally well as measures. Just so with sentences, DD thinks.

g) Q: How different could the sentences be? If A assigns p to Θ and B assigns q , could p be a sentence with observational uses ("This ball is red") and q a standing sentence ("There have been black dogs.")? Could one be a question and the other not?

h) Indeterminacy of translation: Could it be that there are *two* such manuals, that are *different* in the strong sense that in manual A what corresponds to Martian Θ is p and in manual B what corresponds to Martian Θ is q and i) p and q are incompatible? ii) what about if ii) p is “That ball is red,” and q is “There have been black dogs,”? Clearly there are *some* constraints: sentences with observational uses must *sometimes* match up with sentences that have observational uses.

8. Goal: Give theoretical conditions for practical interpretability.

The aim here is to use the conditions elaborated in Parts I and II of *MIE* to give conditions necessary and sufficient for practices to count as discursive, in the sense that any practices that satisfy that *theory* will in fact permit the collapse of levels that is *interpretability*, in the sense of being mappable onto our own practices in a way that permits fluent dialog.

The question is whether any practices specified in *non-intentional* vocabulary can be sufficient to warrant the application to them of *intentional* vocabulary, where that latter is understood according to the criterion of adequacy supplied by interpretability in the sense of mappability onto our *own* practices that permits fluent dialog: treating *them* as ones of *us*.

9. Pragmatism:

- a) To say that this *cannot* be done is a kind of **pragmatism**. It is a kind of Wittgensteinian anti-theoretical pragmatism, common to LW, Rorty, Bert Dreyfus, and McD. It denies *in principle* that specifically *discursive* practices can be theoretically codified at all. To think otherwise they see as a kind of *scientism*. This underwrites a fundamental methodological distinction (beware of its becoming a dualism!) between hermeneutic *Verstehen* and scientific *Erklärung* (Dilthey’s terminology). This was strenuously denied by Unity-of-Science Vienna Circle folks.
- b) Issue is whether there are fundamentally two kinds of *understanding*: one appropriate to *texts*, and one to *non-discursive* goings-on. But one can accept that—as I do—and still claim that a theory of the applicability of *intentional* vocabulary is possible, using *normative* vocabulary but *not* intentional vocabulary.
- c) Participant perspective pragmatism: explanation bottoms out in our discursive practice, which does not itself admit theoretical explanation. Heidegger, LW, Davidson, Rorty, Dreyfus, McD. **Discursive practice participant-perspective pragmatism** claims that ADPs are *irreducible* and in a sense *inexplicable*. There is in principle no specification of practices in *non-intentional* vocabulary that suffices to make *intentional* vocabulary applicable to them—in the sense operationalized by Davidsonian interpretability.
- d) DD can be thought of as arguing for this as part of the anomalism of the mental in “Mental Events.” He appeals to the incommensurability of the space of laws and the space of reasons. McD endorses this. But need it follow that we cannot explicate

discursive practice in a nonintentional but normative vocabulary? We must use our concepts to specify the use of that vocabulary, but can we avoid using intentional or semantic vocabulary, while still specifying uses that would confer meaning, and so make appropriate the applicability of intentional and semantic vocabulary? That is what I aim to do in *MIE*.

e) The McD position might be that no such theory is possible. Cf. debate with Dummett over “modest” vs. “robust” meaning theories—note the contrast Dummett enforces between theories of meaning and meaning theories. They argue over meaning theories (Davidsonian recursive specifications of truth conditions), but the real issue, I would claim, is about whether theories of meaning in either sense of *necessary* or of *sufficient* conditions are in principle possible.

This view of McD relates to his:

- α) quietism and
- β) modest theories of meaning and
- γ) vehiclelessness of intentional states meaning.

10. A Strategy Contra Discursive Practice Participant-Perspective Pragmatism (DP4):

a) Aim to give a *theoretical* account that will specify practices that could pass the *interpretational* test.

b) There are two readings of this:

i. Aim to give *necessary* theoretical conditions for interpretability.

There are various steps to stripping down to a core of necessary conditions:

- 1) On pragmatic side, need two normative statuses: commitment and entitlement.
- 2) Need two deontic attitudes: acknowledging and attributing.
- 3) Derived: Can define on semantic side three key broadly inferential notions:
 - commitment-preserving inferences,
 - entitlement-preserving inferences, and
 - incompatibility (which allows definition of incompatibility-entailments, so counts as broadly inferential).
- 4) Derived: Can define on pragmatic side three crucial sorts of practices, within the overall framework of a default-and-challenge structure of entitlement to commitments:
 - Testimonial inheritance of entitlement to commitments,
 - Language entries, understood in terms of the reliability inference (translating subjunctively robust modal conditions into normative, so conceptual ones)
 - Language exits.
- 5) All this corresponds to having the only the I part of ISA semantics. Leave out subsentential structure and occasion-specific vocabulary except maybe at sentential level. (Can still distinguish observational from non-observational uses.)

So one cannot refer to objects, or predicate properties. Only state facts. Without substitution, cannot form complex predicates.

That means one does not have the full *compositional* capacity to generate arbitrarily many novel sentences.

So a *lot* of expressive power is being foregone.

- 6) Leave out logical vocabulary (including modal), making explicit semantic relations.
- 7) Leave out ascriptional (including normative) vocabulary, making explicit pragmatic properties.

These last are losing two kinds of *self-consciousness*: ability to make explicit what is implicit in what one is doing, semantogenic properties and practices.

We can ask: what would discursive practices look like for which these *necessary* conditions are *sufficient*?

ii. Aim to give *sufficient* theoretical conditions for interpretability.

Basic argument for conditions that are *sufficient* is to add back all the stuff from Part II of *MIE* that we showed can be introduced on the basis of the stuff in (i), and which was left out there: Full ISA, logic, modal, normative, ascriptional vocab.

What results is, I claim, evidently a *discursive* practice. McDowell denies this.

It has full compositional, projectible open-ended extensibility,

Singular terms, including names and descriptions, predicates and sortals (since we have identity),

Demonstratives, indexicals, anaphoric expressions,

Logical, modal, normative vocabulary,

Arbitrarily complex mixed, iterated *de dicto* and *de re* ascriptions (so, intentional vocabulary).

11. Some of the most important issues raised in Ch. 9 have to do with **normativity** and the relation between non-normatively specified behavior and the attribution of implicitly normative practices, specified using normative vocabulary.

They include:

- a) Relation between non-normative specifications of behavior of practitioners and the implicitly normative practices the interpreter attributes to the practitioners in normative vocabulary, of how it is *appropriate* and *inappropriate* (according to the ascribed practices) for them to behave, what they are *committed* and *entitled* to.

This is a question about the *justification* for the use of the normative vocabulary that is the *input* to the main work of *MIE*, which is taking us from specifications in *normative* terms to specifications in *intentional* terms.

Here we want to remember the lesson of the two senses of “intentional explanation”: one predictive and one normative (requiring a substantive rationality assumption to get to predictions of behavior in non-normative terms).

Note that we have (in *MIE* Chapter 4) an account of the expressive role characteristic of normative vocabulary: its use *codifies proprieties of practical reasoning* (commitment to the goodness of patterns of practical reasoning, both committive and permissive). That, of course, is just what is needed for intentional explanation: it makes what the practitioners do intelligible by attributing sample pieces of practical reasoning.

But that story does not tell us when it is appropriate to (when one is entitled to) apply such expressions.

Doing that is taking up a normative stance towards the one to whom one applies such terms.

b) Lance and Kukla: In saying what someone *means* one is not *describing* them. One is taking up a *normative stance* toward them.

c) So the question is: When is it appropriate to take up a *normative stance* to the practitioners?

A: Doing that *is* treating them as *one of us*—as members of *our* community, the community of speakers to which the interpreter belongs. That is the “collapse of levels.” The propriety of adopting such a stance is *not* happily assimilated to the having of *sufficient evidence* to make an empirical claim. It has some respects of similarity and some respects of dissimilarity.

d) A basic more or less empirical issue is whether or not they are *interpretable*.

If they are not, the question becomes pointless. (Cf. Rorty in “World Well Lost.”)

If they are, is there something like a *moral obligation* to *talk to them*? Is it immoral to refuse to talk to someone (some kind of folk) to whom one *could* talk—in the face of that possibility nonetheless to refuse to treat them as *one of us* in the most basic sense?

The idea of communicational ethics (Habermas, but it is a Kantian idea) is that this is the very paradigm of immorality. In Kant’s terms, it is refusing to *respect the dignity* of another rational being.

But **rationality** is not a property just like other empirical properties.

Cf. Sellars (quasi-quote): In treating something as an episode of knowing one is not describing it. One is putting it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify.

Note that *this* sense of “rationality” is quite distinct from that invoked by the substantive rationality assumption that takes one from normative intentional interpretation to prediction.

And quite different again from the maximizing of expected utility version of rational choice theory.

12. So we find ourselves returning, here at the end, to the issue with which we began: the normativity of intentionality or discursiveness. *MIE* offers one path from normativity to rationality (in the sense of sapience, discursiveness).

We can talk about whether that layer-cake project is feasible. Perhaps *all* normativity is *already* discursive. That is what Kant, Hegel, and McDowell think (which is pretty serious credentials). And we can take issue at a number of places with the particulars of the account of how to do that offered in *MIE*.

But we can also ask about the starting-point: normativity.

After all, the Kant-Hegel-McDowell thesis that all normativity is discursive normativity can be read as a thesis about normativity.

13. Some substantive theories, two accounts of normativity: **social** and **selectional**.

- a) *MIE* 1: normativity (the appropriateness of adopting a normative stance by employing normative vocabulary) is an emergent property. It emerges from social interactions among participants. [Note that this is not the whole story.]
- b) Two important pieces of the *MIE* story, both from Chapter 4:
 - i. Say what the expressive role characteristic of normative vocabulary is: codifying commitment to the propriety of patterns of practical reasoning (in acknowledging or attributing it).
 - ii. Explain how it is possible to *observe* normative states of affairs *directly* (noninferentially). This makes the “*naturalness*” of *normative facts* much easier to accept.
- c) Selectional 1: **Classical pragmatism**. Noting the structure common to *evolution* and *learning*. Sees norms as emerging from such selectional processes. Peirce on laws of physics as emergent in this way.
- d) Selectional 2: **Teleosemantic**. Selectional processes as distinguishing intensions from extensionally equivalent properties. The sieve sorts by size not color, selecting small marbles, not black ones, even if all the small marbles are black and all the large marbles are white.
- e) Selectional 3: **Millikan** on Proper Functions.

14. **McDowell’s** relaxed or expansive “**naturalism of second nature**.” Natural sciences not given authority to determine the boundaries of nature.

15. Price: **subject naturalism vs. object naturalism**.

Instead of looking for naturalistic story about the objects we are talking about, representing, or referring to, ask for a naturalistic story about our activities of talking about, representing, or referring to them. If we can tell such a story, the claim is, that is naturalism enough.

Subject naturalism about *numbers*: it is not mysterious how we learn to use numerals to count, and then on that basis to do arithmetic. So the practices of talking about numbers are not mysterious from a naturalistic point of view.

Wittgenstein as subject naturalist.

Note that one can be a subject-naturalist either in a reductive sense (which seems to be what Price himself has in mind), or in a way that allows *normative* characterization of the subject's behavior as "naturalistic" in a broad sense, perhaps for McDowellian reasons, or because one has a social or selectional account of norms.

16. *MIE* 2: Collapse of levels. Adopting the normative stance is deciding who *we* are. This is having participants satisfy theory (on attribution of implicitly normative practices) and so justifying intentional attribution, so adoption of intentional stance, *after* attributing implicitly normative practices. Justifying that initial step is another issue. (As is exactly which norms one attributes--triangulation.). Interpretability matters.
17. In effect, *MIE*'s answer to the natural vocab → normative vocab question is to run it together with the normative vocab → intentional vocab question. One is justified in attributing implicitly normative social practices to a community *if* on that basis one can ascribe commitments and contents that make possible practical interpretation supporting fluid dialog, *then* one is justified in attributing the norms.

18. Side note on relations to Kant (to be discussed at some point in this story):

The most important metaconcepts Kant employs to synthesize the Rationalist and Empiricist traditions he inherited are intuition and concept.

We can ask: how does this way of dividing the discursive labor relate and compare to the ISA (inference, substitution, anaphora) metaconceptual apparatus?

We require dividing the intuition/concept distinction into three orthogonal ones:

- i. What contributes the *matter* (content) and what contributes the *form* (normative form) of thought. In *MIE* material relations of *implication* and *incompatibility* articulate matter, and the form is not a semantic but a pragmatic matter of the practical significance of speech acts.

MIE does not propound a *hylomorphic* theory.

The closest it comes is in treating the *reliability inference* as codifying *alethic modal* relations in *normative* form.

But *BSD* does have a *bimodal hylomorphic conceptual realism* relating alethic modal and deontic normative vocabularies

- ii. What is expressed by *singular terms* and *predicates* (general terms). These are representations of particularity and representations of generality, in Kant's terms.
- iii. What is expressed by *unrepeatable* ("token reflexive") elements of anaphoric tokening-repeatability structures and what is expressed by *repeatable* elements of

cotypical tokening-repeatability structures. These are particular representings and general representings, in Kant's terms.

Note that he is fierce about not confusing representations of relations and relations of representations, but runs together particularity of representations and representations of particularity.

Could add:

iv. Receptivity vs. Spontaneity