

COMMENTS ON SALLY PARKER-RYAN'S "THE ORDINARY LANGUAGE ARGUMENT AND NORMS OF MEANING"

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Sally Parker-Ryan writes that "the Ordinary Language philosopher is interested ... *not* in *words* or *expressions* alone ... but in their *uses*"(44). She admits that use-theories have not been satisfactorily spelled out but that "the most essential feature of this view about language use is that we should conceive of expressions as kinds of *tools* which have various uses in the general purpose of *saying things*"(44). Just as one can successfully use a hammer or misuse a hammer one can successfully use an expression or misuse an expression.

So the question she asks, then, is "What counts as having used some term or expression to say something *successfully*?" She writes that unsuccessful uses of language are those uses where something goes wrong (49). Such expressions are not used in the way that they are normally used. In fact, in her presentation, she claimed that "*non-ordinary* uses of language are non-ordinary *because* they are *unsuccessful* uses of language, i.e. *incorrect* uses of language." There is an identification here between successful and correct uses on one hand and ordinary uses on the other. But it is still not clear what she means by an incorrect usage, for at one point in her presentation she asserted, "if you don't use an expression correctly, it will not 'mean something' properly - it might fail to mean anything, or it might mean something other than it was supposed to mean." So, apparently, incorrect uses *can* be used to say something (just as long as what's said is different from what the expression is ordinarily used to express). But she also said that "if an expression is unsuccessful, then it cannot say *anything*" and also that "if an expression is unsuccessful - that is, used incorrectly - then it cannot say *anything*." So there is a lingering question over whether incorrect uses of expression can or cannot express something. This ambiguity makes it difficult to assess this particular presentation of use-theories of meaning. She gives some examples of ordinary vs. non-ordinary uses of expressions but this does not help resolve the ambiguity. For example, there are non-ordinary referential uses, she writes, "I can use the term 'dog' to refer not to *actual* dogs, but only to my *thoughts* about

dogs" (47). But would such a case be an incorrect use of 'dog'? If so, should we say that such a use fails to express anything at all? If so, how am I saying something about dog-thoughts if I am really not saying anything at all? Or, if I can succeed in expressing something about dog-thoughts even though my use of the expression is incorrect then there is a disconnect between successful uses of expressions and incorrect uses of expressions, which apparently would spell disaster for the view. So either way, here problems loom.

She also gives examples of expressions that have *no* ordinary use, such as "I see something totally invisible" (47). If there is no ordinary use of this expression then, apparently, there is no correct use of this expression, which, on the view, means such an expression says nothing and is therefore meaningless. But such a position is implausible since, certainly, the sentence doesn't appear meaningless. For example, I understand the sentence. Doesn't this entail that the sentence has a meaning? Furthermore, the sentence is surely false in any context of utterance, for in what context can anyone see something invisible. But how can a sentence be *false* and yet be meaningless? In fact this suggests a constraint on any theory of meaning: if a sentence is true (or false) then that sentence has a meaning.

Other peculiarities accompany the view. An argument attributed to Norman Malcolm concludes no expression used in its ordinary way can turn out to be *necessarily false*. But isn't 'grass is both green and not green' used in the ordinary way necessarily false. We may suppose 'grass is both green and not green' is completely meaningless, but it is implausible to say that it is meaningless in the same sense as 'cow purple the cow' is meaningless. I know the first sentence is false and therefore, surely, I *understand* what the first sentence is saying. But I have no understanding of what 'cow purple the cow' means.

The problems here lie ultimately in the ambiguity of the correct/incorrect use distinction. Can incorrect uses of expressions succeed in saying something? If they can then we can make sense, for example, of how incorrectly using 'dog' to refer to dog-thoughts can actually succeed to say something about dog-thoughts. But in this case, there is a disconnect between the correct use of an expression and the successful use of an expression. But if incorrect uses of expressions cannot succeed in saying anything, then there is no way to account for non-standard uses of expressions *ever* being meaningful. We cannot account for incorrectly using 'dog' to succeed in actually saying something about dog-thoughts. This ambiguity in the crucial correct/incorrect distinction makes what is said in the rest of the paper hard to assess.

But I do sympathize with much of what is said in this paper. I agree with the point that “if we want to mean, or express, some particular thing to our fellows, we are not free to choose *any expression whatsoever* to communicate that thing. In other words, there somehow has to be a *limit*, or constraint, on what expressions can be used to mean, if public communication is to take place” (51). That said, I wonder why these normative constraints cannot be spelled out pragmatically. Nevertheless, it is surely the case that we cannot mean *anything* we choose by our words. So I agree with her when she says that “an ordinary use of an expression is *normative* for the use of that expression (and the terms in it); it provides a standard by which the *limits* on what the expression can be used to mean, or express, can be given” (51). I also agree with her conclusion: “if there is no norm, there is nothing to count as a deviation from a norm – and if this were the case for language, then we could use *any* utterance of *any* expression to mean *anything* at all, with no way of making our meaning determinate” (51). But it is one thing to say that norms of usage *help determine which truth conditions are associated with which sentences*; it is another to say that those norms of usage *constitute* the meanings of such sentences.

She correctly writes that the core of a truth-conditional view is that the meaning of an expression (or sentence) is its truth condition. What role, then, can ordinary and non-ordinary uses of expressions play in determining the meaning of a sentence? In her presentation, she claimed that “typically, truth-conditional views reject a distinction between ordinary and non-ordinary *uses* of expressions as playing a role in the ‘properly’ semantic aspects of linguistic meaning – i.e. uses do not effect the core, sentence meaning.” However, this still allows for ordinary and non-ordinary uses of expressions to play a *pragmatic* role in *determining* sentence meaning. What the truth-conditional theorist will say, presumably, is that pragmatic effects, such as how the sentences are ordinarily and non-ordinarily used, can affect *which sentences are associated with which truth conditions* but that the semantic meaning of a sentence still is simply the condition under which that sentence is true. We can say that ordinary uses of expressions are ones that *associate* sentences and the truth conditions that they normally have, while non-ordinary uses of expressions either end up associating a different truth condition with the sentence from the one it ordinarily has or no truth condition at all. This will require more development, since on the present use-theory non-ordinary uses of expressions either succeed in expressing non-standard truth-conditions, in which case there is an apparent disconnect between successful uses and

correct uses, or do not succeed in expressing any truth-conditions, in which case expressions used non-ordinarily would be meaningless.

She states that the main problem with the truth-conditional theory of meaning is that it cannot say what counts as breaching a norm. Now, as stated before, it is not clear that her use-theory of meaning can account for all such breaches either. Apparently any breach of a norm of usage would involve an *incorrect* use of an expression, and it might turn out, when the view is clarified, that all incorrect uses of expressions *say nothing*, so all breaches of norms of usage may be cases where nothing is said, which does not distinguish them from gibberish where also nothing is said. However, to breach a norm of usage is to use an expression meaningfully but in a non-standard way, whereas uttering gibberish is just that.

Now, can the truth-conditional account handle non-ordinary, or incorrect uses of expressions? In her presentation, she asserted that non-ordinary uses are “characterized as utterances where something goes wrong, [where] there is some infelicity or failure to *express* something” – a claim I am sympathetic to despite its underlying ambiguity. But then she said the following, which I find hard to understand. She claimed, “the basic truth-conditional view simply does not seem to have a category for such expressions. Such utterances may be well-formed, where all of their constituents have references, and yet they still fail to properly express something.” She claimed that this “failure to express something cannot be relegated to the ‘merely’ pragmatic aspects of language use since *some* well-formed, truth-apt or bivalent expressions *can* nevertheless be ‘unsuccessful’ attempts to *say something*.” Setting aside the issue of whether such failures can or cannot be relegated to pragmatic aspects of language, why does she think that an expression can be both truth-apt, meaning it can actually be true or false, *and* not succeed in saying something at the same time? How can a sentence be true (or false) and at the same time say nothing whatsoever?

The problem here, she claimed,

...is that we have no way of characterising what it is to *violate a norm* – to step outside of the constraints of meaning – and as we’ve seen, constraints there must be. If the truth-condition is the norm for an expression, what can possibly count, now, as a *breach of the norm*? The norm for the expression ‘there is a dog’ is that there be a dog in the vicinity external to my mind, presumably. My unusual way of using the sentence (i.e. to refer to dog-thoughts of mine) can only count as false. But then, my claiming that there is a dog when in fact, it turns out it was a cat in the vicinity, is false too. What

identifies one utterance as breaching a norm, but the other not?

Why not say that the use of 'there is a dog' breaches a norm of usage in the first case since that sentence is pragmatically associated with a non-standard truth condition, namely that there are dog-thoughts in the vicinity? And the use of 'there is a dog' in the second case breaches no norm of usage since in that case the sentence is associated with its normal truth condition, that there are dogs in the vicinity. In this case the sentence is used in a standard way, but is false.

Ryan rightly argues this move cannot cover all non-standard uses of expressions. She said,

...but non-ordinary uses of expressions go beyond non-ordinary referential uses. Expressions which are norm-breaching cannot simply be explained as utterances of sentences with which the wrong truth-condition has been associated (whatever that means). These are not utterances of expressions which breach *their own* truth-conditions. But what *other* truth-condition is the utterance of some sentence to be taken to breach, if it is a norm breaching utterance?

In this case, why not still say that the association of truth conditions is a pragmatic affair? Here we might say that such sentences as 'I see something invisible' have no ordinary use and as such there is no pragmatic association of *any* truth condition to the sentence. I prefer to say that sentences such as 'I see something invisible' do express something, they are meaningful, they are truth-apt, but are, in any context, false. In any case, it appears non-ordinary uses can account for the pragmatic association of truth conditions to sentences they would not ordinarily have. It can even account for why some sentences might have no truth conditions whatsoever, despite appearances.

She concludes, "acknowledging a distinction between the ordinary and non-ordinary uses of terms and expressions frees the use-theorist to explain norm-breaching uses of expressions in a way that is not available to the truth-conditional theorist" (57). I agree that the distinction, once clarified, can free the use-theorist to explain norm-breaching use, but it is not clear why the same distinction is not available to the truth-conditional theorist – pitched at the level of pragmatics. She did say the following, "the truth-conditional theorist cannot here argue that this is to confuse the semantics and the pragmatics: norms are to constrain what can be said in the use of expressions, and thus normative constraints on the uses of expressions is intrinsic to their

semantics. Linguistic norms affect *meaning* as much as they affect *use*, but semantics cannot account for these normative affects." But norms of usage can constrain what is said in using an expression by pragmatically helping to determine which truth conditions, if any, are associated with which sentences. In this way linguistic norms do affect meaning, in that they affect which truth conditions are associated with which sentences, but such norms do not *constitute* sentence meaning, since only truth conditions play that kind of constitutive role.

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