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Setting up a novel framework for theorizing about the meaning of normative 'ought'

My presentation is based on a bold and controversial assumption that all extant

semantic theories of the meaning of normative 'ought' fail (Kratzer's possible world

semantics, Wedgwood's conceptual role semantics, Chrisman's inferentialism, Finlay

ans Snedegar' contrastivism, Silk's discourse contextualism, etc.). The reason why

they all fail is that they do not account for the meaning of normative 'ought' as this

word is used in everyday discourse. I claim that normative 'ought', as a quick analysis

of ordinary communicative exchanges shows, has a substantive meaning that all

above-mentioned theories failed to recognize. The substantive and inferentially

relevant meaning of normative 'ought' is not norm-relative, as modal semantic of

'ought' indicates, but metanormative conception-driven, or doxastic-based in the

sense that it captures the nature of normativity expressed by live utterances. I argue

that the extant theories of meaning of normative 'ought' face four challenges:

(1) metasemantic challenge: if theory of meaning is expected to tell us what the conventional meaning of a piece of linguistic item is, knowing the meaning of a term should guide the interpretative processes of language users, but in case of the discourse-relevant sense of 'ought', it does not.

(2) semantic challenge: the idea of linguistic compositionality is a cornerstone assumption in formal linguistics and philosophical theories of meaning, according to which we can successfully account for the meaning of a sentence only if two conditions are met: (i) we know the meanings of each lexical item, and (ii) we recognize the semantic significance of the particular arrangement of the linguistic units in the sentence. But CS, as it stands, seems to fail to account for the meaning of normative 'ought' as used in ordinary conversations.

(3) semiotic challenge: 'ought' treated as a necessity modal captures the 'static', or the descriptive sense of the normative requirement, the sense on which normative 'ought' claims are used to express propositions about what one is called upon to do, and fails to capture the 'dynamic' and relevant sense of normative requirement;

(4) extant theories of meaning of normative 'ought' cannot make sense of semantic disagreement.

My presentation is programmatic: I hold that we need a novel concept of normative

ought that captures better our central, practices-anchored intuitions about the meaning

of normative ought. To mark a distinction between the 'old' way of thinking about

the concept of normative ought, as of permeating to norms, or rules, and my proposal, on which the concept of ought is to be understood as a concept accounting for our workaday use, I posit a novel category of concepts, which I couch 'discourse anchored concepts' (DS-concepts for short), and I claim that the little word 'ought' construed as a normative word expresses a DS-concept of normative ought. Importantly, on my proposal the DS-normative ought and normative ought are different concepts of normative ought. The discourse-anchored concept of normative ought is the concept we posit to exist to capture the essence of normativity associated with use of 'ought' claims in ordinary communicative exchanges. On the other hand, the concept of normative ought is evoked by 'ought' sentences and is analysed, according to the general pattern of the possible worlds semantics. If we assume my hypothesis that the central normative concept that our ought-thought expresses is DSought, a couple of fundamental questions arise. The following ones are central: (1) What is the evidence speaking in favour of dropping our well-homed concept of normative ought, and replacing it by a DS-concept of normative ought? (limits of the modal semantics for normative 'ought' construed as a workaday normative word), (2) What is the substantive sense of normative 'ought' that standard modal semantics and its friendly theories like Broome's proposal cannot accommodate? (metanormative theory, semantics and metasemantics of normative 'ought'), (3) How do we acquire this DS-concept of normative ought, and how is it linguistically represented, if DSought lacks its own lexical representation? (epistemology of normative concepts and epistemology of the semantics of normative expressions)

In my presentation, I will sketchily argue for the following claims that taken together make up for a novel approach to the analysis of the meaning of normative language. I call this novel approach 'substantive semantics' (normative 'ought' sentences are taken to be a test for the programme with ambition to generalise to all normative thought and language):

(i) we have no single and clear concept of normativity, and if we lack a clear concept of normativity, we also lack a clear concept of normativity

associated with the ordinary use of the word 'ought';

(ii) the content of normative ought-thought is essentially un(der)specified ('we do not know what we think when we think through normative ought')

(iii) normative 'ought' sentences usually convey multiple propositions, and the relevant normative meaning of an 'ought' claim is encoded in the discourse-anchored logical form of the sentence;

(iv)'ought' construed as a modal term is unable to capture the normative sense of that term as it figures in ordinary communicative exchanges (in fact, modality and normativity 'that matters' come apart);
(v) the lexem 'ought' has no substantive and truly informative meaning on its own, which implies that standard compositional semantics for 'ought' (in all its contextualist variety) fails to account for the meaning of 'normative ought' as used by ordinary speakers;

(vi)the well-homed view that semantics of normative language is a 'neutral' business is mistaken, any available theory of the meaning of normative 'ought' is grounded in some substantive conception regarding what all normativity is all about. The question that remains to be answered is: which conception of normativity is the best one. In a slogan: semantics for normative language builds upon a substantive decision in metanormative theory;

(vii) semantic disagreement about the meaning of normative 'ought' is possible.