

# Semantic Oughts and Moral Oughts

## Abstract

1000 words

There is a class of statements that play a central role in communicative practices, statements of the form “ $t$  means  $M$ ”, where  $t$  is a linguistic expression or a meaningful symbol, and  $M$  is its public, standard meaning. These are two examples:

- (1) “Hund” means *dog*.
- (2) “+” means *the addition function*.

Let me call statements like (1) and (2) *semantic statements* (O’Shea (2007) and (2016)). I side with some philosophers (Kiesselbach (2014), Peregrin (2014 and 2016), Sellars (1974), Whiting (2013), Zalabardo (2012)) who argue that semantic statements have normative consequences on the linguistic behavior of speakers: if (2) holds, it is *correct* for a speaker to apply “+” to the triple {68, 57, 125}; thus, she *ought to* or *should* answer “125” to the query “68 + 57 = ?”. This intrinsic connection between meaning and oughts is the core idea of *semantic normativism*.

Some philosophers attempt to reject normativism, arguing either that the normativity of meaning consists in the mere hypotheticality of semantic oughts (Hattiangadi (2009), Glüer and Wikforss (2015)) or that the idea that meaning is normative relies on a false assumption, namely, that the notion of semantic correctness is normative (Glüer and Wikforss (2015)). They say that semantic oughts are hypothetical because they are in force for speakers *only if* they want to tell the truth. Secondly, they hold that the notion of semantic correctness is not genuinely normative: its function is just to distinguish between correct and incorrect applications of expressions – but, they argue, from this distinction nothing about semantic oughts follow. Therefore, they argue, the notion of semantic correctness is a *placeholder*, to be replaced by the (non-normative) notion of *truth*: claims of correctness (like (3)) should be replaced by claims of truth (like (4)) lacking normative force:

- (3) It is correct to apply “Hund” to  $x$  iff  $x$  is a dog.

(4) An application of “Hund” to  $x$  is true iff  $x$  is a dog.

Normativists (especially Whiting (2013) and Peregrin (2014 and 2016) have sought to rebut these objections. They argue that semantic oughts are not hypothetical: they are *pro tanto* oughts. Moreover, Whiting argues that the notion of semantically correct application (of “Hund” to  $x$ ) may be substituted by the notion of true application (of “Hund” to  $x$ ) *salva veritate*, but not *salva intensione*. I shall show how these approaches against the objections are problematic and then provide alternative solutions that appeal to some observations on the notion of (semantic) correctness and the nature of semantic and moral obligations.

Let me start with the second objection. Whiting’s solution should be strengthened employing Rosen’s (2001) higher-order notion of correctness. Rosen introduces a distinction between the notion of correctness (a normative one) and the *correct-making feature*, i.e., the non-normative property that something must have in order to count as correct. The correct-making feature of your performance of a sonata is the fact that certain notes are played in a certain order. The claim that your performance is correct is to be regarded as a *higher order claim* that your performance possesses the feature that makes for correctness in performances of that kind. Similarly, to say that your application of “Hund” to a dog is semantically correct is not just to say that the correct-making feature for that kind of application is in place; rather it is to make the higher order claim that your application possesses the feature that makes for correctness in applications of that kind. To say that this application is semantically correct is to say that it has a certain *non-normative* property (the property of true application) but it is also to make the higher order statement that such application possesses the feature that makes it correct in a *normative* sense. Even though the basic world-word relation is non-normative, it does not follow that the notion of semantic correctness does not have a normative dimension.

However, it may be difficult to see how Rosens’s notion of correctness is a higher-order notion: it is one and the same performance or action (my applying “Hund” to something) that both has the correct-making feature and is correct. As Glüer and Wikforss (2015) observe, Rosen’s notion of correctness is a first-order, second-level property, to use the terminology of Russell’s theory of types. I shall sketch an alternative account according to which the notion of correctness is *extensionally identical* with the notion of “what one ought to do/perform.”. Both in human actions and in linguistic behavior, to do correctly something is to do something in the way (or in one of the ways) in which one ought to/should do it or to do something according to the relevant rule. The difference between the moral and the

linguistic cases lies in what makes it the case that one should do that something. Here I turn to the first objection.

To rebut it, I shall argue that both normativists and anti-normativists are wrong in the way they conceive the very notion of semantic normativity. The problem of the hypotheticality of semantic oughts arises because they think of semantic normativity as if it were some sort of *moral* normativity. But this is completely wrong. The main difference between semantic and moral oughts lies in what makes it the case that there are semantic and moral oughts that give rise to semantic and moral obligations. Linguistic meanings and the correspondent semantic oughts are conventionally stipulated and accepted by speakers, whereas moral obligations cannot be produced this way. The very sources of the normativity of semantics and moral show the differences between the two corresponding types of oughts. In my view, semantic norms are not merely hypothetical nor *pro tanto*, though they are quite softer than moral norms, but this is due to the fact that semantic norms, being conventionally stipulated, can be overridden by the will of not adhering to a certain convention. The same cannot be said of moral norms: some of them may be merely hypothetical or *pro tanto*, because they can be overridden by other norms.

## References

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