The Constitutive Role of Trust in Semantics

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1. *Introduction*

What is the role of trust, if any, in the philosophy of language? If we look for a place for the notion of trust in the theory of meaning, we are likely to be disappointed by traditional analyses. Of course, the absence of trust in the theory of meaning is not problematic *per se*. Maybe trust is just not a semantic notion after all. There are some facts, however, that may suggest that this situation could be a symptom of a more serious condition – they do, at least, to someone who is already dissatisfied with the traditional approach in semantics.

The first fact is that trust is an attitude that we have towards other people and that can be discussed only in a framework where social relations are taken into account. The problem is that social relations are traditionally considered to be really involved not as much in the theory of meaning as in the theory of communication. So, even if trust has a role to play in semantics, the traditional approach could risk to overlook it. The second fact is that there is at least one non-traditional theory of meaning – namely, normative inferentialism – in which the notion of trust plays a crucial role. So, there could be something worth saying about trust in the philosophy of language anyway.

In order to provide a satisfactory answer to the question about the role of trust in semantics, facts like these must be investigated. That requires some analytical work, which is what I intend to do in this paper. I will begin in Section 2 by discussing what a theory of meaning consists in and whether the traditional representationalist approach is sufficient to satisfactorily account for it all. I will suggest that it isn't and that the down-

playing of the social dimension in semantics might turn out to be in effect problematic. In Section 3 I will introduce the framework of normative inferentialism and then eventually, in Section 4, I will present the role that the semantic notion of trust plays in it.

2. *Three Components of a Theory of Meaning*

Semantics is a multifarious investigation, whose aspects are seldom distinguished with the proper care. These aspects are the semantic analysis, the theory of semantic content, and the theory of semantic purport. Together, they make up a theory of meaning. It is important to approach the present inquiry by having them clearly and distinctively in view. In order to do so, I am going to present them initially in the context of the representationalist approach to semantics, which is presumably the most familiar one to the majority of us. However, these components belong to any theory of meaning and in fact the representationalist framework is not even the easiest one in which to recognize them all – in particular, as we will see, this is true for the theory of semantic purport.

So, to begin with, semantic analysis consists in the systematic assignment of interpretants to the expressions of a language. In model-theoretic semantics, for instance, expressions are interpreted by assigning to them elements in a model (typically a set-theoretic object). With respect to such an interpretation it is then possible to specify which sentences are valid in the model. Model theory is the standard approach to semantic analysis at the moment, and with good reason. Indeed, there are several substantial alternatives – as e.g. proof-theoretic semantics or game-theoretic semantics – but they are not yet as encompassing, flexible and easy-to-use as model theory[1]. The importance of semantic analysis for the philosophy of language does not stand in need of vindication: it is essential in order to shed some light on the structural properties that explain how the systematicity and productivity of languages can be exploited to express and understand contents. And yet, semantic analysis does not take us very deep into

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[1]   Model-theory is usually conceived as integral to the representationalist approach to semantics, but this is a misconception. Incompatibility Semantics (Brandom 2008), for instance, employs a model-theoretic semantics within an inferentialist approach. In fact, model-theoretic semantics *per se* is neutral with respect to the theory of semantic content. Appearance to the contrary mostly depends on overlooking just the distinction between semantic analysis and the theory of semantic content.

the understanding of the notion of meaning. The reason is that it is possible *in principle* for one to know which interpretant is assigned to an expression in semantic analysis without knowing what the expression means[2]. In order to see why, consider a very simple example: the model-theoretic analysis of the sentence "Tina is a cat" in truth-conditional semantics. The standard way to proceed is to define an interpretation assigning an object *in the model* to the name "Tina" and a set of objects *in the model* to the predicate "is a cat". According to such an interpretation, then, the sentence "Tina is a cat" is deemed to be valid in the model if and only if the object assigned to the name "Tina" belongs to the set assigned to the predicate "is a cat" *in the model*. This information characterizes the role that the name "Tina", the predicate "is a cat" and the sentence "Tina is a cat" play with respect to the given interpretation of the language, but it is not enough by itself for one to know what the name, the predicate or the sentence mean. In fact, another account is required in order to explain what such role has to do with their meaning.

Against this observation it is sometimes objected that one can do semantic analysis only if one already knows the metalanguage in which it is done. What people have in mind when raising this objection is that, in effect, semantic analysis is never performed *in the void*, so to speak. In particular, as far as model-theoretic semantic analysis is concerned, since the approach is typically rooted in Tarski's truth definition, the interpretants assigned to the expressions are usually conceived as their *referents* and the validity of a sentence in a model as its *truth*. In this sense, one would like to be allowed to say that model-theoretic semantic analysis gives us the meanings of names, predicates and sentences by giving us their referents and their truth conditions, so that one cannot be in the position of knowing what the name "Tina" and the predicate "is a cat" refer to in the model, and what the truth-conditions of the sentence "Tina is a cat" are in the model, without also knowing what the name, the predicate and the sentence mean. Indeed, all of this is quite correct. Yet, of course, the objection begs the question, for what has to be explained is precisely what the knowledge of the semantic metalanguage really amounts to. And this knowledge is just what cannot be provided by semantic analysis alone.

The second aspect of semantics to be considered, then, is the theory of semantic content. This is an account of how meanings are determined and

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[2] This point was originally noticed by Michael Dummett (1975). And in fact it is the very same one also made by Donald Davidson (1973) about translation manuals.

what understanding them consists in. The standard approach to the theory of content is grounded on a venerable and intuitive representationalist doctrine, according to which for something to have meaning is for it to represent things in the world. In this approach, meaning is essentially construed as a relation between a represent*ing* and a represent*ed*. In virtue of this relation the former is attributed with a representational content, whose correctness is determined with respect to the latter. Traditionally, this idea is better understood in terms of the metaphor of the image. An image is some *thing* which represents some *thing* else: it has a representational content that is correct of some things and incorrect of some others. The notion of truth, as is applied in representational theories of meaning, captures this notion of correctness. Thus, a sentence is *true* if things are as it represents them to be and its representational content can be conceived in terms of the conditions for it to represent things correctly – i.e. in terms of its truth-conditions. If meaning is representational content, then knowledge of a sentence's meaning is knowledge of its truth-conditions. A famous Wittgensteinian adage distills this idea by saying: «To understand a proposition means to know what is the case if it is true» (4.012).

Albeit representationalism is definitely the most traditional and common theory of content, it is not the only game in town. As far as the topic of this paper is concerned, it is also worth mentioning here the inferentialist approach at least. Inferentialism is a much less popular theory of content, which however can be credited with its own tradition, spanning back to Michael Dummett and Gottlob Frege, Dag Prawitz and Gerhard Gentzen, and possibly even much farther in the past (cf. Brandom 2002). According to the inferentialist, for something to have meaning is for it to play a role in reasoning (Sellars 1956; Sellars 1975). The inferential role that something acquires by being part of a net of inferential relations can be determined in terms of the premises from which it can be inferred and the consequences which can be inferred from it. In this approach, only that which can be given as a reason and that which reasons can be asked for is conceived as meaningful. Of course, the nature of the objects that can fit this characterization depends on how inference is construed. Thus, typically, inferentialists consider sentences or propositions to be primarily meaningful. The ontological analysis of inferences, however, is not as much interesting as the normative one. In fact, while inferences can be expressed in terms of relations between sentences, they essentially are linguistic *moves*, whose correctness is determined according to the rules of a linguistic practice. Several authors, from Wittgenstein to Sellars and Brandom, have suggested

that linguistic practices can be fruitfully conceived as norm-governed practices or games, whose rules determine what is a reason for what and thus, ultimately, the meaning of the expressions used to perform linguistic moves. In this sense, for the inferentialist, knowing the meaning of a linguistic expression consists in knowing how to play language games.

Representationalism and inferentialism support antagonist theories of content precisely because they give different answers to the same question about how meaning is determined. There is however another question which semantics should be concerned with, but can't be answered either by a semantic analysis or by a theory of content. It is not a question about which semantic values have to be assigned to the expressions of a language, nor about what determines the meanings that such values express. Rather, it is the question about how something comes to have meaning in the first place. Such a question has to be answered by a theory of semantic purport.

The idea that this is a compelling question to ask – and therefore that the theory of semantic purport is an essential component of a theory of meaning – is not always fully acknowledged. It is of course a well-worn observation that words do not mean anything by themselves and that it is us who mean something with them (Strawson 1950). This is almost platitudinous, but it is also often accompanied by the misconception that meaning something with words just amounts to arbitrarily stipulating words to have objectively determined meanings. From this point of view, the problem of semantic purport simply becomes a philosophical nobrainer. I reckon that this misconception is generated by a slippage due to a certain irreflective assimilation of the representationalist idea. In order to see why, the metaphor of the image comes in handy once again. An image has a representational content in virtue of its *form*. No matter how abstract a notion of form we are willing to consider, still the reason why an image can represent something is because it has the same form of what it represents. But since an image cannot have no form, it must represent something too. Hence the idea that an image has an intrinsic representational purport. Similarly, in the representationalist approach, it is the form of a sentence that confers a representational content to it. Of course, it is up to us to stipulate what the component expressions of the sentence refer to. Indeed, this is what allows the determination of the representational content of the sentence, i.e. the specification of its truth-conditions. The stipulation of the references determines *which* state of affairs (among those sharing the same form) a sentence represents, but it is just in virtue of its form that the sentence

can represent it. And since the form of a sentence is intrinsic to it, so it is thought to be the possibility of having a determinate representational content. In this sense, there would be no question about representational purport. That this is a misconception can be easily realized by noticing that the identity of form is not sufficient to establish a relation of representation between a represent*ing* and a represent*ed*. For something to be an image of something else it must be *treated* as such. Of course, there are certain ways to establish representational relations that we are all more familiar with. Thus, for instance, photographs or portraits are easy to use as images. On the contrary, abstract paintings often require a certain expertise to be interpreted. And it may take years for a mathematician to prove an isomorphism between two different algebraic structures. Form imposes restrictions on what *can* be represented by what, but it does not grant representational relations *per se*. While form is intrinsic to an image, representational purport is not.

The same of course holds for propositions[3]. Just like for an object to be an image of something else it must be treated as such, so for a sentence to have representational content it has to be treated as having it. Sentences, however, are not objects like the others. According to another venerable tradition they express thoughts, which are in turn intrinsically contentful. How then should the question about what it is to treat words as meaningful make any sense at all? In the representationalist approach, therefore, the problem of semantic purport is often stipulated away, so to speak, just by establishing referential relations. As a matter of fact, representationalists usually take semantic purport for granted or pass the buck to other non-semantic disciplines. The inferentialist, on the other hand, is not in the position of adopting the same strategy, because her account of semantic content is itself hinged on the analysis of the practices whose rules establish how linguistic expressions have to be treated. An inferentialist has to explain what is it that one has to do in order to properly engage in those practices, or, in other words, how those practices are constituted.

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[3]   Wittgenstein himself addressed this point in the *Tractatus*. After establishing that a thought is «a logical picture of facts» (3), he stressed that propositions are endowed with sense (i.e. representational content) only to the extent that they are projected on states of affairs (3.12), and that «[t]he method of projection is to think of the sense of the proposition» (3.11).

3. *Normative Inferentialism*

Representationalism is an essentially *non-social* theory of meaning, in the sense that social relations do not play a necessary role in the account of any component of a representationalist theory of meaning[4]. Since trust is a social attitude, it is not really surprising that it has no crucial role to play in this framework. Indeed, it is important to acknowledge that trust involves a *normative* attitude. An essential part of what it is to trust someone on something is to ascribe some responsibility to him or her. When A trusts B, A ascribes a normative status to B. Having a normative status is for B to be *entitled* to do some things and to be *committed* to do some others. This sort of normativity can only be established in a social dimension. Thus, it is hard to see how trust could play any role as a semantic notion in an essentially non-social theory of meaning like representationalism.

The social dimension could be a serious blind-spot in semantic investigation, if representationalism is conceived not only as the standard theory of meaning, but also as the only reasonable one. In order to prevent this risk, other approaches are very much worth exploring. As far as our present purposes are concerned, in particular, normative inferentialism is a sensible alternative to consider, because it actually includes an interesting account of trust as part of a theory of semantic purport.

Normative inferentialism has principally been developed by Robert

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[4]   One could argue that the place for the social dimension in a representationalist theory of content comes to light by drawing a distinction between content application and content determination. The former is the context in which speakers apply previously determined contents, while the latter is the process through which contents are determined. Thus, while content application is indeed essentially non-social, content determination might be taken to involve the confrontation of the different perspectives of the speakers who belong to the same linguistic community. There are at least two problems with this view. The first one is that, while content determination can be thought as happening in a social context, still, in a representationalist theory of meaning, content determination has to do with the specification of representational contents and these have nothing to do with social relations. The second problem is that this view could wrongly suggest that the account of content determination is in fact a theory of semantic purport. That it isn't so can easily be seen as soon as one realizes that they answer different questions. The question about content determination is a question about what makes it the case that something comes to have the specific determinate content that it has. The question about semantic purport, instead, is a question about what makes it the case that something comes to be treated as having a content in the first place. Semantic purport is a normative notion and therefore its theory has to essentially involve the social dimension. To the contrary, the process of content determination doesn't have to be necessarily a social one. In fact, representationalist theories of content typically outsource the account of content determination not only to sociolinguistics, but also to epistemology or even cognitive sciences.

Brandom, as the foundation of his philosophy of language (Brandom 1994; Brandom 2000; Brandom 2008). It can be useful to think of it just in terms of a basic architectural structure consisting in two pillars and an architrave that connects them (Turbanti 2017). The two pillars are an inferential semantics and a normative pragmatics. As it was briefly explained already in Section 2, an inferential semantics is an analysis of contents in terms of inferential roles. In this approach, for instance, the content of "feline" is determined with relation to other contents like "cat" and "mammal", because the inferences "Tina is a cat, therefore Tina is a feline" and "Tina is a feline, therefore Tina is a mammal" are materially valid ones. Inferential semantics can also accommodate the analysis of singular terms. Suppose, for instance, that the inferences "Tina is hungry, therefore my girlfriend's cat is hungry" and "My girlfriend's cat is hungry, therefore Tina is hungry" are materially valid. Here the conclusions follow from the premises by substituting the expression "my girlfriend's cat" for "Tina" and *viceversa*. The substitutional inferences of this sort involving singular terms are characteristically symmetric: hence, the inferential role of a singular term can be defined in function of the materially valid symmetric substitutional inferences in which it is involved.

Notice that these inferences have been qualified as *materially* valid. Indeed, they are not valid in virtue of their logical form. But how are they valid then? Answering questions of this sort is one of the tasks of normative pragmatics. This is a normative analysis of discursive practices, which is purported to account for the determination of the *pragmatic significance* of the linguistic moves that inferential semantics specifies in terms of the inferential role of the expressions used to perform them. The very basic idea of a normative analysis of linguistic practices traces back to the Sellarsian elaboration of Wittgenstein's reflections on rule following in language games (cf. in particular Sellars 1954). This idea is in some respects deeper than what it is sometimes conceived as amounting to. On the one hand, it is the idea that linguistic performances are subject to correctness criteria and that language is a norm-governed practice rather than a merely regular behavior. On the other hand, it is the idea that, since linguistic moves are performed in reason of the norms that govern language games – i.e. they require and provide justifications – then the game positions one finds oneself in by making such moves are rational positions, positions in a game of reasoning. This is why the pragmatic significance of a move in a language game defines its role in reasoning and normative pragmatics can be conceived as a theory of content.

According to Brandom's analysis, everyone who engages in discursive practices acquires a normative status, which consists in a score of commitments and entitlements indicating the moves she is committed and entitled to. The responsibility involved in the endorsement of a commitment, Brandom argues, is a responsibility to do something: specifically, making moves to justify one's entitlement to it. It is this sort of justificatory responsibility that vindicates the idea that the kernel of discursive practices is a rational game of giving and asking for reasons. Brandom sees assertion as the basic move in such a game, because it is the minimal linguistic performance that can be used to give and ask for reasons. Therefore, assertion is also the minimal unit of pragmatic significance in discursive practices.

The score of commitments and entitlements identifies the position occupied in the game by a discursive practitioner. The pragmatic significance of a move in the game consists in the potential that it has to alter one's score. Understanding such pragmatic significance has to do with the ability of keeping the score of commitments and entitlements, therefore Brandom refers to those who engage in the game of giving and asking for reasons as "discursive scorekeepers". Depending on the rules of the game, the endorsement of certain commitments may require further commitments and the acquisition of certain entitlements may bring further entitlements. It may also be the case that the commitment to certain moves prevents the entitlement to certain others: in this case, Brandom notices, the moves are incompatible. So, for instance, if I were to assert "Tina is a cat", on the one hand, I would endorse not only the commitment to "Tina is a cat", but also to "Tina is a feline". On the other hand, I would also acquire the entitlement to, say, "Tina is agile". And, of course, I would lose the entitlement to "Tina is a dog", because the commitment to "Tina is a cat" is incompatible with it. Relations between commitments and entitlements form a net of normative relations in function of which the pragmatic significance can be defined of a move in the practice. It is these normative relations between linguistic moves that can be expressed in terms of inferential relations between propositions: commitment-preserving relations typically support deductive inferences, while entitlement-preserving relations may be expressed in the terms of various forms of inductive or abductive inferences.

Indeed, the inferentialist semantic analysis and the normative theory of pragmatic significance are the two pillars supporting normative inferentialism. The architrave, so to speak, that connects them is a form of *rational* expressivism (bearing no kinship with meta-ethical expressivism). Rational expressivism is the thesis that the application of contents is essentially a

process of expression, which consists in making explicit what is implicit in discursive practices, in the sense of transforming something that can only be *done* in something that can also be *said*. There is an example of this sort of expressivism which is particularly important for our investigation. It has to do with Brandom's analysis of belief ascriptions.

The semantics of the sentences that contain ascriptions of propositional attitudes is an old chestnut in the philosophy of language. The problem with these sentences is that there are two perspectives in which the propositional content, object of the attitude, can be specified: the perspective of the ascriber and the perspective of the ascribee. This is usually put by saying that propositional attitude contexts are *intensional*, precisely to highlight the fact that what matters for their meaning is not their extensional content but the way in which the content is specified. The most puzzling cases involve situations in which the two perspectives are incompatible, so that, if propositional contents are specified from the point of view of the ascriber, then the attribution may be false and, if they are specified from the point of view of the ascribee, then she may turn out to be illogical. A very traditional tool for discriminating between different ways to specify propositional contents in this sort of cases is the *de dicto/de re* distinction. Thus, consider for instance a simple belief ascription, like "Ilaria believes that Tina is hungry". This sentence is usually construed as having two readings. On the one hand, it can be read *de dicto* as saying that there is a sentence (*dictum*), "Tina is hungry", which Ilaria believes. On the other hand, it can be read *de re* as saying that there is a thing (*res*), Tina, of whom Ilaria believes that she is hungry. In the first case, the content is specified in Ilaria's perspective and in fact, if one were to substitute the name "Tina" with another identifying expression of Tina not acknowledged by Ilaria, then the ascription would be false. In the second case, on the contrary, the substitution is legitimate, because the content is specified in the ascriber's perspective (as far as the identification of Tina is concerned, at least).

It is sometimes maintained that one can have intrinsically *de dicto* beliefs and intrinsically *de re* beliefs. Brandom however considers the distinction *de dicto/de re* neither as a distinction between different readings of belief ascriptions, nor as a distinction between belief contents themselves, but as a distinction between two ways in which belief ascriptions can be performed. The idea is that when someone ascribes a belief *de dicto*, as opposed to *de re*, she adopts the perspective of the ascribee by sharing with her the commitments to the same substitutional inferences. In this sense, the ascriber *de dicto* ascribes to the ascribee the same commitments that

she would herself acknowledge by asserting the proposition which speci-
fies the content that she ascribes to her. So, again, I am entitled to assert
"Ilaria believes *that* Tina is hungry" only if Ilaria acknowledges my same
commitments to the substitutional inferences about "Tina". If, on the con-
trary, Ilaria's substitutional commitments are different from mine, I am on-
ly entitled to a *de re* ascription and to assert "Ilaria believes *of* Tina *that*
she is hungry"[5].

What is important for us to notice is that, in this sense, the practice of
scorekeeping is essentially perspectival. Differentiating between normative
perspectives is something that discursive practitioners can implicitly do by
treating each other as endorsing different substitutional inferences. How-
ever, once they are equipped with the expressive resources to deploy dif-
ferent styles of belief ascription, then they can *say* that the substitutional
inferences they endorse are different.

4. *The Constitution of Discursive Practices*

It is now time to take one last step and introduce a theory of semantic
purport that can be consistent with the framework of normative inferential-
ism[6]. As it was already emphasized, a theory of semantic purport must ex-
plain how the expressions of a language come to have meaning. And there
seems to be an obvious way to articulate an answer to this question in the
framework of normative inferentialism: linguistic expressions are meaning-
ful because they are deployed by discursive practitioners to give and ask
for reasons. Unfortunately, this does not amount to an explanation yet, al-
though it is definitely on the right track. What is missing, of course, is an
account of what it is to be a discursive practitioner who is able to engage

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[5]   This particular regimentation of the form of the sentences used to perform *de dicto* and
de re ascriptions is to be considered for illustrative purposes only. There is nothing essential to
the distinction in this formulation, except the possibility to explicitly mark which parts of the
content are specified in which perspective.

[6]   A caveat is worth noting here. Brandom discusses this topic with relation to his reading
of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. For the sake of exposition, however, we will not follow him
down that path. This choice may be controversial, but there are good reasons to argue that *A
Spirit of Trust* (Brandom 2019) gives a substantial contribution to the completion of the definition
of normative inferentialism, by answering some of the questions that had been raised by his pre-
vious works in the philosophy of language. The answers to these questions can be, if not properly
justified, at least clearly specified independently of any direct evaluation of Brandom's reading of
Hegel.

in the game of giving and asking for reasons. Providing such an account to its full extent is a frightfully difficult task, one that largely exceeds the domain of semantics (possibly, of philosophy too) and that, therefore, will not be pursued here. A more reasonable enterprise is accounting for what it is *for a discursive practitioner* to be engaged in the game of giving and asking for reasons – that is to say, assuming that a subject is provided with all the cognitive, emotional, etc. capacities and the social, epistemic, etc. contexts necessary to be able to engage in the game of giving and asking for reasons, accounting for what such an engagement consists in[7]. Such an account can be provided within a theory of meaning, since it does not concern rationality in general, but rather what makes it the case that a certain piece of linguistic behavior counts as a move in a language game.

According to Brandom, this is not a matter to be decided on empirical grounds, because the qualification of "discursive practitioner" is a normative one. In other words, there is no description that one must satisfy in order to be properly qualified as a discursive practitioner: one has to be treated or recognized as such. This is what in *Making it Explicit* Brandom calls the "discursive scorekeeping stance" and it consists precisely in «treating others as producers and consumers of propositionally contentful speech acts» (Brandom 1994: 628-629). Again, we will not dwell here with the non-semantic problem of when adopting the discursive scorekeeping stance is justified: as Brandom notices, from within discursive practices, treating others as discursive practitioners is always worthy, because increasing the number of semantic perspectives, when logical expressive resources are available, improves the process of content determination. We will rather focus on what adopting such a stance consists in. Clearly, recognizing someone as a discursive practitioner is adopting a certain normative attitude towards her. In *A Spirit of Trust*, Brandom suggests that such an attitude could be characterized just as a form of *trust* (Brandom 2019). The last part of the present investigation, then, must be an analysis of how the normative attitudes of speakers who trust each other may constitute com-

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[7]   Waving McDowell's notion of "second nature" (McDowell 1994) at this point in order to support a quietist approach to these issues would be a twofold mistake. Firstly, it would be a mistake because it would be a wrong interpretation of McDowell: the appeal to second nature is originally intended to play a specific role in epistemology, rather than in semantics. Secondly, it would be a mistake because it would blur the distinction between the two tasks: the quietist who could successfully refuse to consider an account of the first sort to be the philosopher's business, should still provide an argument to support an equivalent refusal concerning an account of the second sort.

munities bound by norms that can ground semantic contents. On the one hand, such an analysis must explain on what speakers have to trust each other. This is necessary to characterize the right sort of normative statuses that constitute linguistic communities. On the other hand, it must explain how the relations of responsibility established by trust can be reciprocal. This is necessary to characterize the right sort of normativity to ground the objectivity of contents.

Let us begin by addressing the first issue and ask: what does it mean to be part of the same linguistic community? In the framework of normative inferentialism the answer to this question is quite straightforward: it means playing the game of giving and asking for reasons by the same rules. Discursive practitioners, whose linguistic performances are governed by the same normative relations, apply the same contents and can thus be said to be part of the same linguistic community. This natural characterization, however, seems to be at the odds with the fact that norms are established by discursive practitioners themselves, who keep the score of each other's normative statuses from different perspectives. So, how could two discursive practitioners be part of the same linguistic community ever? It must be kept in mind that, according to Brandom, content determination is a process of making explicit what is implicitly done by applying contents themselves in linguistic performances. In this sense linguistic communities are not constituted as much by the fact that discursive scorekeepers apply contents in the same way, as by the fact that they contribute to the same process of content determination. Let us consider one of our examples again. When I apply the content of "cat", I do it according to certain normative relations that I take to determine it. Were I to think that cats are demons, my scorekeeping of the uses of the expression "cat" would be considered deranged in our linguistic community. However, there are two senses in which I could be taken to be *wrong* in this case: in a first sense, the other discursive practitioners could take me to apply the content of "cat" wrongly, in another sense they could take me to apply a wrong concept or no concept at all. Of course, it is only in the first sense that I would still be taken to abide by our same norms and thus to be part of our same linguistic community. So, now the question becomes: What does it mean to take a discursive practitioner to be wrong in *this* sense?

According to Brandom this is an expressivist task, which consists in offering «a rational reconstruction of a tradition to which the concept-application in question belongs, in which it figures as an expressively progressive episode» (Brandom 2019: 601). In our example, a discursive

practitioner should recollect the applications of the content "cat" in such a way that mine could still count as an attempt to apply it and a contribution to the process of its determination. Brandom has in mind common law as a model. Common law is a case law, a jurisprudential body consisting of court decisions. These precedents can be thought as particular applications of legal concepts, which are determinately instituted entirely in the tradition of their applications. Every time a judge makes a decision, she applies the contents that she has inherited through this tradition. By doing so, she has the authority to treat certain cases as precedents, i.e. as correct applications of the contents in the tradition. On the other hand, however, she is responsible towards the other judges for applying the contents correctly herself, because they will be in the position of treating her decision as part of the tradition or not. This is the sort of rational reconstruction that one has to produce in order to treat a discursive practitioner as a member of one's own community. This is what discursive practitioners trust each other on, when they make moves in the game of giving and asking for reasons: they trust each other on recognizing their performances as governed by the same norms and therefore as (possibly wrong) applications of the same contents. And, of course, this is how the expressions that they use in their performances acquire semantic purport.

However, there seems to be a risk with this account of semantic purport. It is the risk that grounding semantic purport on relations of trust that constitute discursive communities might jeopardize the objectivity of contents. Here is why. Trust is not a symmetric relation: it could be the case that A trusts B, while B does not trust A back. Now, suppose that in fact A trusts B on offering a rational recollection of content applications in which her assertions could fit, but that B does not trust A on doing the same for hers. In this situation, B is responsible to A for including her into the linguistic community, but A has no reciprocal responsibility to B. As a consequence, A seems to have a privileged recognitive status, while the only chance for B to be included in the linguistic community and for her linguistic performances to be treated as meaningful would be to comply with A's content applications. The risk, then, is that such an asymmetric recognition between A and B would engender privileged semantic perspectives in the process of determination of contents that could put their objectivity in jeopardy.

This is a serious worry, which, however, can be appeased by a more thorough analysis of the structure of the normative relations involved in

semantic trust. While it is true that, by trusting B, A makes B responsible to her, it is also true that by trusting B on offering a rational reconstruction to include her content applications, A makes herself responsible to B as for the meaningfulness of her linguistic performances. A's responsibility to B is administered by B herself, who has the authority to decide whether or not to treat her performances as applications of certain contents. B's responsibility to A is administered not (only) by A, but (also) by the other discursive practitioners who B trusts on the recognition of her own content applications[8]. In this sense, semantic trust does not engender asymmetric normative relations and the theory of semantic purport that is grounded on it does not jeopardize the objectivity of contents, because no semantic perspective actually results to be privileged.

It is important to stress that the fact that the objectivity of contents in normative inferentialism requires that no privilege is assigned to any *semantic* perspective does not mean that there could not be privileged *epistemic* perspectives. The fact that contents are functionally defined in terms of normative relations in the game of giving and asking for reasons does not mean that all reasons are equal from an epistemic point of view. Biologists, for instance, have better justifications than me for their assertions about cats, just like direct observers are usually reliable in standard contexts. However, the epistemic trust, that is reasonably due in cases like these, has nothing to do with the structure of normative relations that determines contents.

It is also important to insist that, while semantic trust is what constitutes linguistic communities, it does not guarantee that linguistic communities will be constituted. Trust is a normative attitude that might not adopted. It allows to establish norms that might not be abided by. However, just like for the adoption of the discursive scorekeeping stance, honoring semantic trust and offering rational reconstruction of the other practitioners' content applications is essential to the process of the determination of objective contents.

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[8]   Notice that in the model of the judge at common law the ostensible asymmetry of the normative relation presents itself the other way around. It is more evident that the present judge has the authority to treat the decisions of the other judges as precedents. And it is only by noticing that she is also responsible to them for the rational reconstruction of their applications of the law, that the actual symmetry of the normative relation comes to the fore.

5. *Conclusions*

The reason why trust has been considered as having a marginal role in semantics depends not so much on how trust itself, but on how the theory of meaning has traditionally been construed. If trust has a role to play in the theory of meaning, it reasonably does with respect to the account of the normativity that makes it possible for content applications to have criteria of correctness. This is the account that has to be provided by a theory of semantic purport. Representationalism, however, does not really make an issue of semantic purport and does not offer a theory of it. The representationalist framework, therefore, is unsuitable for appreciating the role of trust in semantics. Semantic trust takes pride of place, instead, in a theory of meaning like Robert Brandom's normative inferentialism, which grounds the determination of contents on the normative relations established by the attitudes of discursive practitioners. Here, in fact, trust is essential to explain how the linguistic communities are constituted that make it possible for those normative relations to be established. Of course, normative inferentialism has its share of problems, especially with the account of content objectivity. Nonetheless, the analysis of semantic trust that it offers deserves credit for putting into focus the normative problem of semantic purport that is too often ignored in semantics.

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to characterize the semantic notion of trust, as it has been introduced by Robert Brandom. Traditionally, the concept of trust does not play any central role in semantics. This, I suggest, depends on the fact that the very social dimension plays a rather marginal role in the traditional representationalist theory of meaning. In Brandom's normative inferentialism, instead, trust is essential to the constitution of the discursive communities, whose rules are taken to define contents.

Keywords: Inferentialism; Semantic trust; Language games; Normative pragmatics.

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