

The Modal Bond of Analytic Pragmatism

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ABSTRACT

In his recent *John Locke Lectures*, Robert Brandom defends a view of pragmatism as an extension of the classical project of semantic analysis powerful enough as to incorporate not only relations among meanings, but also, and more fundamentally, relations among meaning and use. The paper explores one of the core aspects of this project – the relation between modal, normative, and empirical vocabularies.

Brandom's focus on a general semantics for non-logical vocabularies intends to meet and answer the empiricist concerns about the intelligibility of modal concepts, which are themselves couched in a modal metavocabulary. Brandom's purpose is to show that, in using ordinary empirical vocabulary, «in order to be able to talk at all, to make claims and inferences, one must already know how to do everything necessary in principle to deploy modal and normative vocabulary». This is the so-called «Kant-Sellars thesis».

In the first part, I present the general framework of analytic pragmatism, the rationale for that project, and its normative foundation. Although the project is in continuity with the goal, pursued in *Making It Explicit*, of explaining inferential semantics in terms of a normative pragmatics, more structure is added, which clarifies the foundation of the overall enterprise. In the second part, I focus on some objections to the complementary structure of normative and modal vocabularies, and defend a different interpretation of its foundational structure. The goal is to show the modal vocabulary underlies the conceivability and the very inferential practices in which normative vocabulary is involved.

1. Introduction

The primary concern with any philosopher trained in the Wittgensteinian legacy is to offer a view of language in terms of its use. The label that «meaning is use» is generic enough to disclose alternative explanations of the relation between what is said and the practice of saying. According to a radical pragmatic reading, semantics collapses into pragmatics and the nexus simply disappears. According to moderate reading, the semantic and pragmatic levels are descriptively autonomous, but meanings can be explained only in terms of a correlative practice of using meaningful linguistic expressions. Semantics can stand on its own as a system of interpreted signs that can be combined to form sentences having a truth-value, but the relation between truth-values and their objects is not primi-

tive, but rather depends on a more basic relationship between sentences and speakers within a linguistic practice¹. Semantics does not dissolve into pragmatics, but the latter is needed in order to explain how is it possible for linguistic expressions to be in accord with the world. Instead of explaining truth away, pragmatics in this guise articulates a triadic relationship between sentences, speakers, and objects, in which reference is the resultant of a process involving a social dimension.

In his recent *John Locke Lectures*², Robert Brandom defends a view of pragmatism as an extension of the classical project of semantic analysis as developed within the tradition of analytic philosophy of language. Analytic pragmatism, as Brandom labels it, is a moderate pragmatic theory in the sense I have specified: it amounts to a synthesis between the semantic concern with the nature of truth, and the pragmatist view of meaning in terms of relations between meaning and use. Instead of rebutting the classical project of semantic analysis, Brandom's goal is to embrace it within a more fundamental theory in which a meta-level is introduced to explain relations between propositional language and linguistic practices. A pragmatic meta-level is not a model-theoretic tool to define truth, but rather conceives of truth concepts as dependent on truth-talk. This is not a way of dismissing the concept of truth as meaningful, but to qualify that concept in terms of what is needed in order to possess it at all. The pragmatic meta-level has a specific pragmatic function. Such function is expressive: pragmatic metavocabularies exhibit the conceptual requirements implicit in the use of ordinary language. The goal of analytic pragmatism is to make explicit such requirements and show how they are presupposed in the practice of ordinary language (paradigmatically, in the usage of empirical vocabulary).

My goal in this essay is to focus on the foundational aspects of analytic pragmatism and assess the merits of this project on its own basis, i.e. the capacity to incorporate relations among meanings within a more fundamental relation between meaning and use. I will address what I think is the core aspect of the project: the relations between modal, normative, and empirical vocabularies. Relations among vocabularies are in fact essential to make sense of a pragmatic meta-level where theses relations are made explicit and explained. If the pragmatic meta-level, taken as an hypothesis, is consistent with the language practices it is supposed to explain, analytic pragmatism could rightly vindicate

¹ The classical distinction between semantics and pragmatics is in Morris (1938): he distinguishes between semantics, which deals with the relation of signs to objects, and pragmatics, which deals with the relation of signs to their interpreters. For an overview of the debate see Bach (2002), but also his "The Semantics-Pragmatics Distinction: What It Is and Why It Matters" at: <http://userwww.sfsu.edu/~kbach/semprag.html>

² Brandom (2008).

Brandom's claim that "concerns and considerations at the heart of the pragmatist critique of semantic analysis can be seen to have been implicitly at work within the analytic tradition all along"³.

I will discuss the paradigmatic case of semantic relations among vocabularies: the pragmatic analysis of a colour-vocabulary. Vindicating analytic pragmatism on its own ground implies a full explanatory power of the whole range of colour-vocabulary.

The phenomenal vocabulary of colours is explained in terms of a pragmatic meta-level that makes explicit the modal and normative concepts that competent speakers master in order to make and assess judgments about colours correctly. Here the focus is on what Brandom calls the «Kant-Sellars thesis»: the idea here is that modal and normative concepts are built within the exercise of basic phenomenal cognitive processes (for instance, identification and recognition of coloured objects), and are eventually expressed in the form of judgments once suitable expressive tools are introduced.

2. Semantic relations between empirical, modal and normative vocabularies

Brandom's focus on a general semantics for non-logical vocabularies intends to meet and answer the empiricist concerns about the intelligibility of modal concepts, which are themselves couched in a modal metavocabulary. Brandom's purpose is to show that, in using ordinary empirical vocabulary, (indeed «in order to be able to talk at all, to make claims and inferences»), one must already know how to do everything necessary in principle to deploy modal and normative vocabulary⁴. The strategy of analytic pragmatism is then to explain empirical vocabulary in terms of modal and normative vocabularies jointly combined in a suitable pragmatic framework which includes also the correlative practices of employing those vocabularies⁵. More specifically, modal and normative vocabulary are combined to result into an overarching pragmatic metavocabulary, which is the specific *explanans* for the empirical vocabulary.

³ Brandom (2008), lecture I.

⁴ Ivi

⁵ Brandom (2008), Lecture I. Discursive practices can be autonomous or non autonomous, depending on whether they sufficiently rich as to express both conditions of correctness for material inferences, and for properties of objects described by empirical vocabulary. For a critical overview of Brandom's notion of an autonomous discursive practice, see Giovagnoli (2008).

2.1. *Practices and vocabularies*

According to Brandom, there are three fundamental relations between vocabularies and practices. He calls the resultant of these relations a Meaning-Use Relation (MUR). Here is how Brandom presents the basic terms involved in MUR:

(i) The relation between practices-or-abilities and a vocabulary sufficient to *deploy* a vocabulary (*PV-sufficiency*):

«I am going to call this kind of relation [practices or practical abilities and vocabularies] “practice-vocabulary sufficiency”—or usually, “PV-sufficiency,” for short. It obtains when engaging in a specified set of practices or exercising a specified set of abilities is sufficient for someone to count as deploying a specified vocabulary». [Brandom (2008), lecture I]

(ii) The relation between two vocabularies sufficient to *specify* a set of practices-or-abilities (*VP-sufficiency*):

«[T]alk of practices-or-abilities has a definite sense only insofar as it is relativized to the vocabulary in which those practices-or-abilities are specified. And that means that besides PV-sufficiency, we should admit a second basic meaning-use relation: “vocabulary-practice sufficiency,” or just “VP-sufficiency,” is the relation that holds between a vocabulary and a set of practices-or-abilities when that vocabulary is sufficient to specify those practices-or-abilities. Specifying PV-sufficient practices is saying what one must do in order to count as saying something, deploying a vocabulary. VP-sufficient vocabularies let one say what it is one must do to be engaging in those practices or exercising those abilities». [Brandom (2008), lecture I]

(iii) The *pragmatically mediated semantic relation* (VV-relations), *which* results from the composition of VP-sufficiency and PV-sufficiency (VV relation is the one holding between normative and modal vocabulary):

«In terms of those basic relations, we can define a more complex relation: the relation that holds between vocabulary V' and vocabulary V when V' is VP-sufficient to specify practices- or-abilities P that are PV-sufficient to deploy vocabulary V. This VV-relation is the composition of the two basic MURs. When

it obtains I will say that V' is a pragmatic metavocabulary for V . It allows one to say what one must do in order to count as saying the things expressed by vocabulary V » [Brandom (2008), lecture I]

Here is Brandom's diagram for the pragmatic metavocabulary:

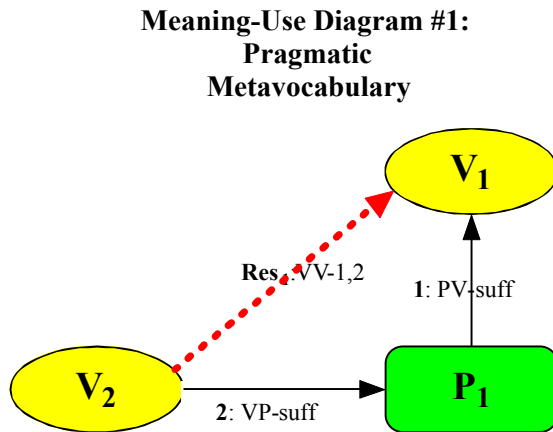


Fig.1. Brandom's basic Meaning- Use Diagram for pragmatic analysis. From: Brandom (2008), Lecture 1.

The reason for construing a pragmatic metavocabulary is to show that the empiricist challenge that only empirical vocabulary is needed to explain meaning *presupposes* what the empiricist claims to be dispensable: modal and normative concepts. The pragmatic metavocabulary is then an analytical tool to provide a semantic explanation of empirical concepts in terms of the practice of using them, and of what is already implicit in those practices. The strategy is already known to those familiar with the language use model exploited in *Making It Explicit*: Knowing that a term expresses a concept is knowing how to treat those inferences in which the term figures as (part of) its premises or conclusions. Making inferences is a practice, and knowing how to make them correctly is an ability that agents exhibits when they grasp the relevant concept. What is new is the analytic machinery at work: it is the dependence of vocabularies on their correlative practices which is distinctive of pragmatism in analytic flavour:

«To broaden the classical project of analysis in the light of the pragmatists' insistence on the centrality of pragmatics we can focus on this fundamental relation between use and meaning, between practices or practical abilities and vocabularies. We must look at what it is to use locutions as expressing meanings—

that is, at what one must *do* in order to count as saying what the vocabulary lets practitioners express». [Brandom (2008), lecture I]

Keeping in mind the general framework synthesized in the Meaning-Use Diagram above (Fig.1), I want now show how the theory works with perhaps the most basic empirical vocabulary: the phenomenal vocabulary of colours⁶. I will proceed by showing how expressing relations among colour-terms requires appealing to a practice of employing those terms. Next, I will show how the practice of colour-terms presupposes a modal ability to discriminate between incompatible properties of colours. Then, I will explain how the ability of detecting modal incompatibilities reflects a complementary ability of acknowledging commitments to the inferences employing colour-terms. Such ability is properly normative, that is is governed by inferential norms. Finally, I will explain how, in order to see why modal and normative abilities are complementary, we need to express these abilities in terms of a metavocabulary which must be sufficiently powerful to express relations among them. If the story I'm going to tell were sound, then we would have all what we need for a semantic explanation of empirical vocabulary of colours. But I think that some wheels in the analytical machinery gets stuck at one point, so the story cannot be sound as it is. The second part of the paper will open the machine to see where those broken wheels are.

2.2. *The empirical vocabulary of colour terms*

Assume that an epistemic agent is introduced for the first time to such basic phenomenal vocabulary⁷ [V_E], and assume also that he is endowed with normal cognitive capacities to understand basic relations within [V_E]. We can also assume that this agent is a competent speaker in his own language, and he is learning the colour-vocabulary in a new language, very distant from his native tongue. The agent is *presented* with two sample of coloured objects. The trainer

⁶ We can even think of this agent as being introduced to the colour-vocabulary in a language that he masters only partially, where the basic colour-terms do not correspond to the same terms in his own language, so that he cannot make inferences on the basis of a vocabulary that he already masters.

⁷ I follow Brandom in this essay in using the notion of vocabulary in a general way as «what is expressed by any sort of language fragment or meaningful expression-type. In this usage, logically atomic sentences, semantic discourse, indexical and observational tokenings all count as vocabularies» (Brandom (2008), lecture I).

indicates that one of the two samples is called «red»⁸, while saying nothing about the other. The agent will be ready to assert in $[V_E]$, if asked:

[1] «This object looks red».

Asserting [1] implies the following conclusion concerning the other sample of unnamed colour:

[1a] «This other object does not look red»⁹.

According to pragmatic analysis, mastering the term «red» is, among other things, to be able to draw [1a] as an inferential conclusion of [1]. In drawing the conclusion [1a] and [1], the agent is employing a property expressed by the term «red», i.e. what looking red is *incompatible with*. However, employing a concept does not mean being able to say it. In order to express incompatibility relations in the form of contentful propositions, one has to enrich the colour vocabulary.

Imagine then that the two samples of coloured things are taken away and the agent is presented with another sample, that the trainer indicates as called «green». The new sample has the same colour of the sample left unnamed above. The agent will offer a response of this kind, if asked:

[1b] «This other object does not look red; it looks green».

At this point, the agent can see the two objects in front of him, but not connect them in a meaningful expression. He can only juxtaposes the two sentences as above. Now, the trainer introduces a novel relation among the terms by means of a further expressive tool:

[1c] «If this object looks red, then it does not look green»

⁸ In the following, I will use double brackets to express terms and assertions in the target colour-vocabulary, square brackets to express terms and relations among terms within the modal and normative vocabulary, and parentheses express properties of objects. So, for instance, «red» and «This looks red» belong to the colour-vocabulary;

[(looking red) is incompatible with (looking green)] belongs to the modal/normative vocabulary;

(looking red) and (looking green) refer to the properties of objects looking red or green.

The way the brackets are employed will become clear along the essay.

⁹ Of course, we are also assuming that the agent masters the concept involved by using the verb «look» and the use of the indexicals, but a discussion of knowing how using «look» and indexicals is beyond the scope of this essay.

Remind what I have said above: the agent is endowed with all what is need for him to understand the meaning of the conditional. Now, expressing [1c] is no more than making explicit in the form of an indicative conditional what is already implicit in the practice of discriminating red from green¹⁰. Therefore, the agent is now in the position to derive [1c] as a material inference from depending on the meaning of «green» and «red» that he has already learned (plus the circumstances of applications of those terms). In short: the statement [1c] expresses in the form of a conditional what one already knows in making the inference from [1] & [1a] to [1b]¹¹.

Finally, once we have introduced the conditional, we can also express the bi-conditional in the following way. Given the same circumstances of ostensive teaching, the trainer focuses on the green coloured object, in such a way to elicit the following sentence:

[1c*] «If this object looks green, then it does not look red».

Now, combining [1c] and [1c*], we obtain:

[1d] «this object looks red *iff* this object does not look green»,

which can be expressed in [V_E] as a general equivalence scheme:

[V_E]: [*if* (p looks x), *then* (p does not look y)]

2.3. Modal vocabulary

Once we have introduced the conditional, we can see how incompatibilities are made explicit in cases of actual circumstances of application of a concept. While

¹⁰ The conditional is introduced on the model of Gentzen's logic of natural deduction, i.e. considering logic as a codification of reasoning which expresses the practice of inference making, instead of basing itself on the notion of truth Van Dalen (2004), p.30.

¹¹ One may claim that this is a form of enthymematic reasoning. But enthymematic reasoning is based on truth-functional semantics. The idea that, while logical reasoning can be shortened, all steps must be in place in order to derive the conclusion. So, if we want to explain cognitive performances of agents deriving conclusions from some hidden premises, we must assume that he acknowledges the formal validity of the Modus Ponens before saying anything about the content of the inference. But, it is hard to say in what sense an inference can be unconscious in this sense. A pragmatic approach is not based on model-theoretic or truth-functional semantics. It is rather a constructive model for the meaning of logical connectives. See Van Dalen (2004), p. 30; Brandom (1994), pp. 246-247, which is also a criticism of Davidson's theory of practical reasoning (See his "Actions, Reasons, and Causes" in Davidson (1980)).

saying «this looks red» contains implicitly an incompatibility, asserting «if this looks red, then it does not look green», says that looking red is incompatible with looking green, does not just applies an incompatibility relation. Also, we can see that, the inference from [1] to [1a] cannot be expressed in the form of a conditional: at that stage, the agent knows what «red» refers to, but does not know yet *how* to use it concept, lacking another term for *comparison*. The obstensive reference does not count yet here as a circumstance of application, since there is nothing that «red» is not. Only when «green» is introduced, the problem of applying the original term in the right circumstances arises. Therefore, we cannot really say that a simple act of ostension is sufficient to grant even a partial mastery of the term¹². Let's now turn to the case presented in [1c]. We might say that, once the conditional is introduced, we have all what we need to express relations among terms in the vocabulary we are analysing¹³. We would have just to repeat the same sequence for each new color entry: each color term would then be defined by what that colour is not. Call this a disjunctive definition of colour-terms¹⁴. For instance, take the seven colours of the rainbow. The matrix of their disjunctions is:

I f, the n	R ed	O r- ang e	Y el- low	G reen	B lue	I n- digo	V iolet
R ed		N ot	N ot	N ot	N ot	N ot	N ot
O r- ang	N ot		N ot	N ot	N ot	N ot	N ot

¹² This I take to be Wittgenstein's idea in the first sections of the *Investigations*, §§ 2 *passim* (Wittgenstein (2001)).

¹³ Brandom takes the conditional to be the primary form inferential competence, but it is not clear to me whether the conditional is just necessary or also sufficient for expressing all kinds of material inferences. See Brandom (1994), pp. 108-110.

¹⁴ For disjunctive analysis of properties, see Armstrong (1986), and Stalnaker (1976).

e							
Y el- low	ot	N ot	N ot		N ot	N ot	N ot
G reen	ot	N ot	N ot	N ot		N ot	N ot
B lue	ot	N ot	N ot	N ot	N ot		N ot
I n- digo	ot	N ot	N ot	N ot	N ot	N ot	N ot
V iolet	ot	N ot	N ot	N ot	N ot	N ot	

Fig. 2. The disjunctive definition of colour-terms. The outcome in the box applies to the second term of the conditional: «If this is Red, then it is Not Orange».

However, a vocabulary of colours is far richer than the one just outlined: a complete description should include all possible colours belonging to the colour-wheel. At a finer-grained look, such a description might be even infinite. But, let's assume here that the list is finite: a competent epistemic agent would be able, after appropriate training, to discriminate all kinds of shades of colours, name them accordingly and define each color-term by means of disjunctions. The question is if this would be sufficient to make a competent master of colour vocabulary. Remind that here the issue is what is sufficient in practice to deploy the mastery of a vocabulary. I showed that isolated cases of ostensive definition are not sufficient to introduce the conditional, which is the minimal requirement for mastering colour-terms: epistemic agents need to be able to apply conditionals in inferential practices in order to be able to say what colours there are; and, in order to apply conditionals, they need specific circumstances of application for

those terms: they have to comparative circumstances. But, one might ask, what would happen in cases of weird colour-properties, such as if he faced a Goodmanian colour? As the name suggests, a Goodmanian colour is a chromatic phenomenon of this kind: a objects looks «green» until a certain time t_0 , then it changes suddenly into «red». Let's call this colour «gred»¹⁵. What would be required for an epistemic agent, in practice or as an ability, in order for him to deploy «gred» as a term in his vocabulary? The matrix of colours wouldn't help us. In fact, the ability to define a term by means of disjunction would not be sufficient to model a case involving paradoxical identities. Now, we could try first to accommodate the use of «gred» by revising the meaning of «looking coloured». Such revision would involve adding a temporal index to the phenomenal properties of coloured objects. If we do so, we would also need to generalize such temporal specification to all colour-properties. But this move would render unfeasible any practice of making inferences with these revised color-terms: the circumstances of application of colour-terms would not offer a stable ground to define colours in terms of disjunctive properties. What we want to do is rather to dismiss this move altogether. Now, reflect on what is presupposed by such dismissal: «gred» cannot be a consistent colour-term in any vocabulary, since there *cannot* not be a practice involving inferences containing «gred» That is, in order to rule out «gred» as a *possible* term in a consistent vocabulary, one must be able to say that «gred» is an *impossible* term: Resources available to the agent so far do not warrant this claim. The agent's vocabulary is expressively too weak to express modal impossibilities.

In order to avoid this case, we need to specify that colour-terms are mutually disjunctive and necessarily so. We are in the position at this point to introduce the modal operators for possibility and necessity in the agent's vocabulary.

[1e] Necessarily «this object looks red *iff* this object does not look green»,

[V_M] standing for modal vocabulary, we can express [1e] in [V_M] as an equivalence scheme:

[V_M] : Necessarily [(p looks x), *iff* (p does not look y)]¹⁶

¹⁵ As in Goodman's famous example in his *Facts, Fiction, and Forecast* (1956). See Goodman (2006).

¹⁶ Equivalent to: [M $\hat{\Delta}$ V] For any object p and colour-terms x and y : Not possible: [(p looks x) \wedge (p looks y)], which is easily derivable from [M_V]. Notice that here we don't use brackets, but parenthesis. As I have remarked above, the reason is that, while I use brackets for assertions, I use parenthesis for the property of looking x or y -coloured.

I will call *incompatible* any pair of terms which are mutually and necessarily disjunct. So, $[V_M]$ is equivalent to:

$[V_{Inc}]$ For any object p and colour-terms x and y : $(p \text{ looks } x)$ is *incompatible with* $(p \text{ looks } y)$.

According to inferential analysis, $[V_{Inc}]$ expresses a constraint on what is required for a proper mastery of colour vocabulary: saying that something looks red *means* that it is incompatible with looking blue, green, but also ‘gred’. Inferential analysis makes it depend the meaning of colour-terms on the proper mastery of colour-vocabulary: the reason is that this mastery is an practical ability for discrimination that articulates the semantic content of colour-terms; it is, indeed, a semantic capacity. What an agent can do once modal incompatibilities are introduced is not only to say two colours are incompatible in actual circumstances of application, but to specify the structure of incompatibility and entailment for each colour in any possible circumstance of application. In the jargon of possible world semantics, mastering the modal incompatibilities of a colour term means to be able to discriminate between worlds in which possible shades of colours are compatible, and worlds in which this is not the case. As a consequence, modal incompatibilities express also an important feature of inferential reasoning: counterfactual analysis. Such expressive resources are not available to empirical vocabulary, in which, knowing how to apply colour-concepts causally depend on merely actual episodes of empirical encounters. Instead, counterfactual reasoning allows the agent to determine what incompatibilities would follow if the circumstances of application were different from the actual ones¹⁷.

For a different account of the bi-conditional as an equivalence scheme for a definition of colour-concepts, see Stroud (2000), p. 121-133.

¹⁷ Newton Garver has shown that, within Wittgenstein’s picture of language in his later thought, the meaning of words forming a semantic set, such as color words, can be explained (at least) in part, by reference to one another. He writes: “This reference will sometimes be contrastive and sometimes be inclusive”: “scarlet” and “puce” stand in semantic contrast with one another, but they both refer to shades of “red”. These words are not simply semantic markers, but they reflect incompatibilities and entailments that hold between propositions. “X is puce” is incompatible with “X is scarlet”, and it entails “X is red”, provided it is the same X that we are talking about. It is these incompatibilities and entailments that are the basis for the structure of the lexicon of the language”. N. Garver, (1996), p.143. A similar approach is also in Brandom, (2000), chapter 1.

Before the next step, I want to reassure the reader that the story I have been telling so far can be made less cryptic than this. For those interested in a visual example of how the recognition and consequent mastery of colours proceed from basic to more complex circumstances of application, they should read the appendix at the end of this essay.

2.4. *Normative vocabulary*

So far, I have described the gradual path leading from merely phenomenal to modal vocabulary, and showed how the practice of employing the former presupposes the mastery of the latter. However, little I have said about the nature of this mastery, the conceptual competence required to acknowledge incompatible properties of colours. In this section I want to show the complementary structure of semantic norms in which such mastery consists.

I said that normative and modal structures of empirical vocabulary are complementary. To put it clearly, this means that, in order for an agent to be a competent master of colour-terms, modal incompatibilities need to be backed up by normative constraints. And normative constraints, at the same time, reflect the structural modal features of the empirical world.

According to the framework of normative pragmatics, normative constraints are expressible in the form of inferential commitments a speaker undertakes once he makes assertions containing colour-terms. Commitments are undertaken implicitly, but can emerge to the propositional surface -so to speak- by making explicit the illocutionary act associated with it. What a competent speaker does is to *acknowledge* those commitments. However, while modal incompatibilities articulate objective properties of the objects of experience, commitments belong to the proper discursive dimension which expresses performances of epistemic recognition.

However, although modal and normative structures are complementary, they do not coincide. In fact, one can fail to recognize the inference from the assertion about an object «looking red» to the assertion about an object «looking green», while the property of (being red) still remain necessarily incompatible with the property of (being green)¹⁸. In this sense, fallibilism appears as an inher-

¹⁸ Consider again the list of assertions we have analysed before, once the inferential commitments are made explicit: [1] «This object looks red»
[1a] «This other object does not look red»
[1b] «This other object does not look red; it looks green»
[1c] «If this object looks red, then it does not look green»
[1d] «this object looks red *iff* this object does not look green»

ent feature of any language, and I have taken it into account by using the predicate «look» rather than «is» so far. But, now the problem is how these two dimensions can be reconciled: that is, how it is possible to sew - at least in principle - the space left open to possible failure, and reconcile subjective cognition and objective features of the world.

Of course here the stake for pragmatism is high: one of main goals of pragmatism is to explain how a semantics is possible without presupposing a prior concept of truth. If pragmatic analysis were not able to explain the distance between the subjective perspective of «looking red» and the objective features of 'being red' of empirical objects, truth-functional semantics would be the only ones left on the table. We need then to offer a plausible account of how the subjective and objective dimensions of empirical vocabulary (perfectly exemplified by the most ambiguous among the empirical vocabularies, the colours) are complemented.

Brandom's idea is that, if we want to understand such complementarity, we need to think of the subjective normative and objective modal dimensions as poles of the same intentional domain:

«The features of discursive practice from which the normative vocabulary of commitment and entitlement is elaborated and which it makes explicit are dif-

A speaker asserting [1] commits to the validity of the whole set of inferential conclusions derivable from it. Surely enough, one can fail to acknowledge the validity of some inferences. For instance, one might not accept the conclusion of the following Modus Ponens:

- [1] «This object looks red»
 [1c] «If this object looks red, then it does not look green»
 [1e] «This object does not look green»,

but he would be ready to acknowledge the validity of the conclusion, once he is able to see that [1d] is valid as well. This can happen for a variety of philosophical paradoxes. For instance, the speaker might be affected by the notorious tortoise's impairment, described by Lewis Carroll (1895); or he might be a Goodmanian skeptic, dealing with some weird property such as «gruity». He might, finally, be entrapped in some Kripkean paradox about the fact that justifies making a step according to a rule. In other, more serious cases, the impairment is not in logical capacities, but cognitive. Take the case of a colorblind person. In the most cases of colorblindness, affected people are not able to distinguish between hues of red and green. Although they are able to understand and apply correctly the norms governing modal incompatibilities for any other hue of colour, they get systematically confused when it comes to compare red and green. In this case, they systematically fail to draw correct inferences from assertions containing those two colour-terms, because they fail to acknowledge the commitments associated with the inferential role of the assertion.

ferent from those from which the modal vocabulary of necessity and possibility are elaborated and made explicit. But they are intimately related. What I want to claim now is that those features correspond, respectively, to the subjective and the objective poles of intentional relations [...] The basic idea is that normative vocabulary makes explicit important features of what knowing and acting subjects do when they deploy a vocabulary, when they use expressions so as to say something. And modal vocabulary makes explicit important features both of what is said and of the objective world that is talked about. Put another way, normative and modal vocabulary, each in its own way, articulate commitments. But normative vocabulary addresses in the first instance acts of committing oneself, while modal vocabulary addresses in the first instance the contents one thereby commits oneself to—not in the sense of what other doings committing oneself to a claim commits one to, but in the sense of how one has committed oneself to the world being, how one has represented it as being» [Brandom (2008), Lecture VI]

In drawing an inference correctly, a speaker must *both* be able to:

-recognize valid material inferences. Here, commitments to the validity of an inference are established within a discursive practice. The source of validity of material inferences is the community within which those commitments are expressed and articulated;

-be a reliable epistemic agent, i.e. he must be able to conform to the objective properties of the objects of experience.

The capacity of revising subjective commitments and acknowledge how to respond correctly to the empirical world. We can express the normative requirement of inferential commitments in the following way:

[V_N] For any object looking coloured x , and for a vocabulary V containing a finite number of discrete colour-terms, an epistemic agent is a proper master of V *iff* he is able to apply V according to the structure of modal incompatibilities [M_{Inc}] for each colour-term belonging to V ¹⁹.

Brandom's idea is that the conceptual spaces delimited by the modal and normative requirements can be construed as vocabularies. According Brandom's

¹⁹ That is, if the agent is able to identify the set of all incompatible properties for each term within a given vocabulary. Here is a formal definition of a consistent vocabulary V .

$V =_{df}$ V is a set of elements such that $\forall x, \forall y, (x,y) \in V$ *iff* $\mathfrak{R}: Inc(x,y)$. \mathfrak{R} is an incompatibility relation between x and y , such that, for any x and for any y , x belongs to V if and only if: i) $x \Rightarrow \neg y$; ii) $y \Rightarrow \neg x$.

analysis, modal and normative vocabularies are required in order to explain how colour reports can be expressed in the form of sentences which stand in correct inferential relations to other sentences within the relevant discursive practice of talking about colours.

Let's see first how normative and modal vocabulary are related to each other. According to $[V_N]$, modal incompatibilities need to be tracked by the mastery of colour-terms and the correlative inferential consequences. In other words, $[V_N]$ implies $[V_{Inc}]$ in normative order of semantic explanation. At the same time, incompatible properties of colours are conceivable only as properties of colour-concepts, that is as properties conceivable only as part of an intentional activity. But, since the intentional activity that distinguishes humans from other animals is inherently conceptual, properties of incompatibility implicit in color-concepts are properties that can be grasped only within conceptual engagement with a world of experience. This leads Brandom to establish a relation between modal and normative vocabulary in the other direction, i.e. The modal order of semantic explanation: $[V_{Inc}]$ implies $[V_N]$.

Following Brandom, I call this the complementarity thesis about modal and normative vocabularies. The complementarity thesis establish in what a semantic explanation consists:

$[[V^M]]$: Given an empirical vocabulary $[V]$, an explanation of the semantic competence of V

(i) satisfying $[N]$ requires acknowledgment of $[M_{Inc}]$

(ii) acknowledgment of $[M_{Inc}]$ requires rectification of one's own commitments according to $[N]$

$[[V^M]]$ is a metavocabulary within which relations among modal and normative vocabularies can be expressed²⁰. However, although they exhibit complementary structures, normative and modal vocabularies remain still distinct: $[[MV]]$ states a complementarity between modal and normative vocabularies, but *not* an equivalence between them. The reason is that $[N]$ makes explicit a quite different kind of inferential competence: a *norm* governing the use of colour-vocabulary, and not the articulation of phenomenal properties. $[V_N]$ establish what commitments *ought* to be acknowledge in order to master properly col-

²⁰ Double square brackets are used here to distinguish the metavocabulary in which the structure of complementarity is expressed, from the modal and normative vocabularies that figure as content of the thesis. Although Brandom's conceives of $[[C]]$ as a *pragmatic* metavocabulary whose mastery depends on the same practice of making inferences which is shared with modal and normative vocabularies, it is still a *metavocabulary* which express relations among vocabularies which are not expressible in none of the three vocabularies employed by speakers.

our-concepts. Instead $[V_{\text{inc}}]$ expresses incompatibility relations that define the meanings of colour-terms.

Both modal and normative vocabularies are therefore necessary to express colour terms because they express two fundamental conceptual constraints for an any epistemic agent to master the colour-vocabulary.

I have so far sketched how the relation between a sample of empirical vocabulary (the vocabulary of colours) and two other vocabularies, the modal and the normative. We can think of modal and normative vocabularies as expressing conceptual capacities that rational beings must possess in order to be: (i) reliable epistemic agents; (ii) understanding the meaning of empirical vocabulary and be able to employ it accordingly.

3. *Expressibility relations and the transposition thesis*

One of the core aspects of Brandom's analysis is that the semantic relations between empirical/descriptive, modal, and normative vocabularies are complementary but not symmetrical: empirical vocabulary in fact is expressively weaker than modal and normative vocabularies, and by itself, it is unable to count as an autonomous discursive practice. Put in other words, empirical vocabulary is not self-sufficient to express the relations of incompatibility and the inferential commitments that are implicit in the practice of using it. Empirical vocabulary is indeed unintelligible without presupposing a discursive practice in which also modal and normative constraints are at work. Here the test-bed for analytic pragmatism is to defend the intelligibility of modal concepts against the reductionist arguments of empiricism.

According to Brandom, there are two distinctive yet complementary kinds of *semantic* relations. The Kant-Sellars thesis about modality defines the conditions for the relation between the empirical and the modal vocabulary

«a) In using ordinary empirical vocabulary, one already knows how to do everything one needs to know how to do in order to introduce and deploy modal vocabulary;

b) the expressive role characteristic of alethic modal vocabulary is to make explicit semantic, conceptual connections and commitments that are already implicit in the use of ordinary empirical vocabulary»²¹.

In the language of Meaning-Use-Relations, the «Kant-Sellars thesis about

²¹ Brandom (2008), lecture 4.

modality» claims that *using* empirical vocabulary is *sufficient* to specify those aspects of the practices that are *necessary* to introduce and deploy *modal* vocabulary.

A parallel relation between the empirical and the normative vocabulary is defined in analogy with the modal case (this is the «normative Kant-Sellars thesis»): *using* empirical vocabulary is *sufficient* to specify those aspects of the practices that are *necessary* to introduce and deploy *normative* vocabulary²².

Both the modal and the normative Kant-Sellars theses result in a more fundamental meta-relation, a *pragmatically mediated semantic relation*. This relation shows that modal and normative vocabularies are *complementary*: one cannot be given without the other; and that both are sufficient to explain the intentional vocabulary in use within any autonomous discursive practice. In this section I want to assess the merits of the general pragmatic strategy and cast some doubts about the normative order of explanation envisaged by analytic pragmatism.

Although Brandom claims that the modal and normative vocabularies are complementary, he also undertakes a stronger Sellarsian position, the idea «the language of modality is a *transposed* language of norms»²³. The Sellarsian dictum is reformulated in the language of the theory by saying that that normative vocabulary is *explicative* of inferential practices involving the use of modal vocabulary, and therefore is prior to it²⁴.

As Brandom puts it:

«Coming to understand both modal and normative vocabulary as standing in the complex resultant pragmatically mediated semantic relation of being LX to—elaborated from and explicating of—practices integral to every autonomous discursive practice will turn out also to be the key to understanding a deep and illuminating feature of the relation of these two vocabularies, not just to vocabulary use in general, but also to each other. It supplies the raw materials for filling out and developing Sellars' suggestive claim that modal vocabulary is a 'transposed' language of norms. [...] I will begin to explore the relations between normative and modal vocabulary, showing how normative vocabulary can serve both as a pragmatic metavocabulary for modal vocabulary and as the basis for a directly modal formal semantics for ordinary empirical vocabulary that does not appeal in any way to a notion of truth» [Brandom (2008), lecture IV]

And, in another passage, he claims:

²² *Ibid.*

²³ See Sellars (1963) (p. 21 of the reprint in Scharp, Brandom (2008)).

²⁴ More exactly, normative vocabulary is *elaborated* from and *explicative* of inferential practices involving the use of modal vocabulary, and indeed for all autonomous vocabularies (the LX-relation in Brandom's terminology).

«When Sellars says “the language of modality is...a ‘transposed’ language of norms,” he is saying in our terms that normative vocabulary codifying rules of inference is a pragmatic metavocabulary for modal vocabulary». [Brandom (2008), lecture IV]

The corresponding Meaning-Use Relation for the transposition thesis is:

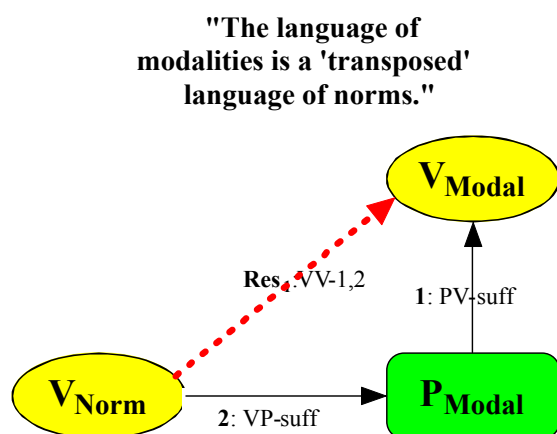


Fig. 3: Meaning Use Relation for Sellars' thesis about modality. From Brandom (2008), Lecture IV.

This claim clearly diverges from the complementarity view presented in the core part of Brandom's theory. I suggest that this should be avoided either by revising the interpretation of the transposition thesis, or abandoning it altogether.

The argument that I will present can be sketched as follow: in order to claim that the vocabulary of modalities can be transposed into the vocabulary of norms, and then elaborate a pragmatic metavocabulary in terms on the language of norms, Brandom needs to:

(i) define a relation of relative expressively strength among the normative and the modal vocabulary and show that the former is expressively stronger than the latter;

(ii) exclude that modal vocabulary is surreptitiously presupposed in deploying normative vocabulary.

In this section I will show why (i) is required in order to make sense of the transposition thesis. In the next section I will show that (ii) is unwarranted, and that the contrary is the case.

In order to see why the transposition thesis requires relations of expressibility, we need to analysis the phenomenon of *expressive bootstrapping*, i.e. that se-

mantic phenomenon when an expressively stronger vocabulary is a sufficient pragmatic metavocabulary for an expressively weaker one. Here is Brandom's view about expressive bootstrapping:

«We are familiar with this sort of phenomenon in ordinary semantics, where sometimes a semantic metalanguage differs substantially in expressive power from its object language — for instance, where we can produce an extensional metalanguage for intensional languages, as in the case of possible worlds semantics for modality. But in the case of semantic metalanguages, as Tarski forcibly reminds us, we typically need a metalanguage that is more expressively powerful than the object language to which it is addressed. One example of a claim of this shape in the case of pragmatically mediated semantic relations —though of course it is not expressed in terms of the machinery I have been introducing — is Huw Price's pragmatic normative naturalism.

Price argues, in effect, that although normative vocabulary is not reducible to naturalistic vocabulary, it is possible to say in wholly naturalistic vocabulary what one must do in order thereby to be using normative vocabulary. If such a claim about the existence of an expressively bootstrapping naturalistic pragmatic metavocabulary for normative vocabulary could be made out, it would evidently be an important chapter in the development of the naturalist core program of the classical project of philosophical analysis. It would be a paradigm of the sort of payoff we could expect from extending that analytic project by including pragmatically mediated semantic relations»²⁵. [Brandom (2008), lecture I]

The expressive bootstrapping is an important feature for semantic explanation, and we should avoid explanations that do not meet this requirement. However, if we accept the transposition thesis, the priority of the normative over the modal vocabulary undermines the complementarity view. Indeed, it would make the whole project of showing why normative and modal concepts are necessary for explaining empirical vocabulary *superfluous*. Instead of elaborating a pragmatic metavocabulary, pragmatism would collapse into some version of model-theoretic semantics, which establish a precise expressive relation between target-languages and meta-languages. In other words, we could still talk of a meta-vocabulary, but not of a *pragmatic* meta-vocabulary.

Let me elaborate a bit on this. I will provide a definition of expressibility and show that transposition depends on relative strength of expressibility among vocabularies.

Given two vocabularies V and V^* ,

²⁵ Brandom's reference here is to Hugh Price's «Naturalism without Representationalism», in De Caro, Maccarthur (2004), pp. 71-90.

V^* is expressively stronger than V ($V^* \succ^e V$) iff

for a given domain \mathbf{D} of expressibility containing x and y , and for a given domain \mathbf{D}^* containing p and r , :

1. For $\forall x \in \mathbf{D}$: $Vx \Rightarrow V^*x$ (if x is expressible in V , then x is expressible in V^*)
2. For $\exists p, \exists r / V^*(p,r \text{ Rel}(p,r))$: $V(p,r), \neg V(\text{Rel}(p,r))$
3. For a domain $\mathbf{D}^* / \{\mathbf{D}^* \cap \mathbf{D}\} = \emptyset, \forall y \in \mathbf{D}^*$: $V^*y, \neg Vy$
4. $\forall y \in \mathbf{D}^*, \forall x \in \mathbf{D}$: $V^*(\text{Rel}(y,x)), \neg V(\text{Rel}(y,x))$

Comment: whatever is expressible in V , is expressible in V^* , and not everything that is expressible in V^* is expressible in V . Relations among expressibles in V can be expressed in V^* , but not in V . Besides, relations among vocabularies are transitive, but not symmetric: $\dots V^{***} \succ^e V^{**} \succ^e V^* \succ^e V$.

The series: $V^{***} \succ^e V^{**} \succ^e V^* \succ^e V$ generalizes relations of transitivity between vocabularies according to their relative expressive strength. As I said, expressibility relations among vocabularies are transitive, but are not symmetrical. However, vocabularies can be self-expressive. Rules for the use of the vocabulary can be stated in the same vocabulary, but the vocabulary has to be sufficiently powerful to include terms and relations for expressing the internal use for the use of terms.

Self-reflexivity turns out to be essential for comparability among vocabularies with different expressive strength. According to (4), relations among expressibles belonging to different vocabularies can be expressed within the more powerful vocabulary V^* . Therefore V^* must be able to say something about itself in order to allow comparisons with a weaker vocabulary. Now, self-reflexivity is not just an assumption suitable made to allow comparability, but it is actually a feature of natural languages. Natural languages are able to express both the rules of their own grammar, and meaning-relations of translatability. So, for instance, the relation « x in $V(L)$ means y in $V^*(L^*)$ » is construed as a relation between an expressible x and an expressible y in L^* .

Now, I think that the best way to define *transposability* is the following:

Given V and V^* , V is *transposable* in V^* iff:

- (a) $V^* \succ^e V$ (i.e., V^* is expressively stronger than V)
- (b) V^* specifies the rules for the use of V
- (c) mastery of V presupposes mastery of V^*

I want to concentrate here on (a)²⁶. According to the first condition, transposition depends on expressibility.²⁷ In fact, the only way a vocabulary can be compared to another is by correlating terms of V and terms of V^* . By hypothesis, an expressively stronger vocabulary V^* is sufficiently powerful to act as a metalanguage for an expressively weaker vocabulary V , and by so establishing a correlation between vocabularies.

Expressive strength and transposability are necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for expressive bootstrapping V into V^* . When expressive bootstrapping obtains, V is thrown away as superfluous. But, if it is so, then a pragmatic metavocabulary will just count as a standard meta-language: a normative vocabulary [V_N] (in which commissive, entitlements-, and incompatibility relations hold, is expressively strong enough as to bootstrap a vocabulary [V_M] (in which only incompatibility relations hold) if and only if whatever is expressible in L , is also transposable in L^* .

Therefore, if the analytic pragmatist claims that a pragmatic metavocabulary requires both expressibility relations and transposability, then the resulting expressive bootstrapping will result *fatal* for his pragmatic strategy, and the very idea of a complementarity relation among modal and normative vocabularies will be undermined. He would be forced into some version of model-theoretical semantics as such: degrees of expressibility reflects levels of languages. Therefore, if V^* is powerful enough to express V , then L^* is a metalanguage for L .

4. *Two kinds of incompatibilities: impossibility, and inconceivability*

I think that answering to this objection is crucial for saving pragmatism from the semanticist slope. In this section, I suggest a way to recast the semantics-

²⁶ According to (b), transposition presupposes that V^* possesses expressive resources to state the rules governing V . Notice that this condition matches the requirement of model-theoretical semantic for a definition of truth. According to (c), transposition requires the ability of employing both V and V^* in practice. Such condition matches the pragmatic requirement that mastery of vocabularies depends on the practice of employing them in practice. I will leave aside in this essay a discussion of these two conditions.

²⁷ On the assumption that the two vocabularies are comparable.

pragmatics nexus in terms of modality within the analytical pragmatist project.

Brandom argues that modal and normative vocabularies are necessary and sufficient to explain the features of intentionality (as directedness to objects). The focus here is on the nexus between modal incompatibilities (which articulate disjunctive properties of the objects of experience) and material incompatibilities (which articulate commitments and entitlements to assertions about objects of experience). Whereas normative vocabulary makes explicit subjective undertaking and acknowledgments of inferential commitments and entitlements, modal vocabulary makes explicit features of the world, which are indifferent to subjective inferring and acknowledgments. Both vocabularies (and their correlative practices) share the property of «repelling» incompatible properties or assertions. However, this leaves unanswered the question of what kind of relation holds between modal and deontic incompatibilities. If we accept the transposition thesis and the bootstrapping, we should conclude that the capacity of mastering incompatibilities presupposes the capacity of inferring.

Contrary to Brandom, I argue that the reverse is the case: the modal properties of objects *repel* not only *incompatible properties*, but also *impossible arrangements* of properties. The distinction between *impermissible* and *inconceivable* inferences (consider the case of a «round circle») presupposes a prior mastery of modalities. The priority of modal vocabulary can be proven by appealing at the conceptual resources required in order to account for practices of empirical discrimination among objects. This is an indication that the modal constraint on empirical experience is what *ipso facto* binds our intentional capacities²⁸.

The argument offered above, if successful, tells us something important about the modal bond of any pragmatist view of language as use. It tells us that we can provide an interpretation of the pragmatically mediated metavocabulary that explains why we should reject the ‘transposition’ thesis, but not the expressive bootstrapping: the range of expressibility of modal vocabulary is ampliative compared with the range of expressibility of normative one, and that this is consistent with the expressive bootstrapping condition, which is something we should welcome. But, in this case, the expressive relation is not from the modal to the normative vocabulary, but rather the other way round. Normative relations presuppose, and are not presupposed by modal relations. A pragmatically mediated metavocabulary couched in modal terms explains how the content of an empirical assertion *excludes* some inferences as impermissible (but still feasible), or altogether inconceivable, rather dictating what inferences *ought to be* un-

²⁸ We can envisage a transcendental spin in the argument, which is enlightened by the systematic failure the opponent would incur in by trying to show that modally impossible arrangements are indeed conceivable.

dertaken. Expressions involving reference to modally impossible properties of the objects of experience would not indeed be unpronounceable, but would be merely «vocal», rather than «verbal» expressions²⁹. I maintain that this is the right way we should interpret Kant's dictum «Ought implies Can»: any inference that can be made explicit in terms of normative attitudes (commitments and entitlements) presupposes indeed a basic modal articulation between things that can possibly exist, and those that are impossible.

5. Conclusion

Brandom's project puts forward an analysis of the relations between meaning and use (vocabularies and practices) in terms of an overarching metavocabulary expressed in modal alethic-deontic terms. I said that the pragmatic metavocabulary exhibits a structure of complementarity. However, this is not the end of the story. In discussing Sellars' claim ("the language of modality is a transposed language of norms"), Brandom defends a stronger thesis, that a universal metavocabulary whose target is to explain intentional discursive practices, must be formulated in normative terms. Against this argument, I suggested a different solution: that the transcendental unity of intentionality³⁰ can be captured in a pragmatist framework by making explicit those *modal* (rather than *normative*) incompatibilities common both to the objects of experience and to our inferential practices. This is even more clear when we analyse in details how a pragmatic explanation functions. Here, the universal metavocabulary that explains the intentionality of discursive practices is expressed in modal terms: in fact, the PV and VP relations are *sufficiency* and *necessity* relations which are essential modal notions.

This is not bad news for analytic pragmatism: from the point of view of semantic analysis, an incompatibility semantics based on modal pragmatics is ampliative compared with one based on normative pragmatics. An important consequence of this view is that, although it may appear a less demanding version of pragmatism, it explains important features of the space of reasons, for instance how conceptual change is possible.

²⁹ According to the original Sellarsian distinction exploited by Brandom. See Brandom [1994], [2000]

³⁰ Brandom (2008), Lecture V.

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