

# Structuralism Revisited: A Comparison Between Robert Brandom and Jacques Lacan on the Nature of Meaning

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Kevät 2017

TAMPEREEN YLIOPISTO

Yhteiskunta- ja kulttuuritieteiden yksikkö

JAAKKO REINIKAINEN: Structuralism Revisited: A Comparison Between Robert Brandom and Jacques Lacan on the Nature of Meaning

Pro Gradu -tutkielma, 76 s.

Filosofia

Kevät 2017

In this work I compare select aspects of two philosophical systems of thinking in an effort to disclose unexpected and theoretically fruitful connections, resemblances and ideas. The systems in question belong to the authors Robert Brandom and Jacques Lacan. The tradition I believe them to share could be called semantic structuralism. Roughly speaking this could be defined as the idea that in order to explain the phenomenon of linguistic meaning, our main recourse should be to the structures inherent in language, and not only or in the first place to relations transcending language.

The task ahead is built on the three substantial middle chapters. Chapter 1 begins by providing initial motivation for the work's major aims, as well as specifying those aims. In Chapter 2 I lay the groundwork for the comparison between Brandom and Lacan, which involves explicating two fundamental approaches possible for semantic theory. In Chapter 3 I expound on Brandom's side of the matter, especially on his inferentialist theory of meaning, which could be rightly called structuralist in orientation. In Chapter 4 I switch over to Lacan, arguing first how his general views on language share decisive similarities with Brandom's, second what those similarities in closer inspection consists of. Lastly, Chapter 5 offers conclusions and possible routes for further study on the subject.

Asiasanat: Jacques Lacan, Robert Brandom, structuralism, language, semantics, semantic theory, inferentialism, psychoanalysis, semantic structuralism.

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# Chapter I

## 1.1. Introduction

The basic purpose of this work is at the outset deceptively simple: to compare two famous authors in an effort to see whether some proliferant connection might be thus instituted between them. The authors in question are Robert Brandom (1950–) and Jacques Lacan (1901–1981). It is not often that these two are mentioned in the same sentence or context, and even less common it is to see them under any sort of comparison. The most extensive example I know of comes from Henrik Jøker Bjerre, who in his paper “Original Linguistic Accumulation” claims to attempt “a Lacanian intervention into one of the finest (relatively) recent products of the analytic tradition, Robert Brandom’s *Making It Explicit*” (Bjerre 2008, 538).

Not much will be made of Bjerre’s case in this work, for although it does contain some intriguing and novel insights, his interest ultimately lays in a more general comparison of “analytic” and “continental” traditions of philosophy<sup>1</sup>. In that scheme Lacan and Brandom serve mostly as pawns, whereas I would here endeavour to elevate them to kings. Although this means they would still find each other on the opposite sides of the board, at least their existence on it could not end in unilateral displacement.

The structure of this work will centre around the three middle Chapters. In the second one I shall, with the help of Jaroslav Peregrin, present two fundamental approaches to language and meaning, starting with the core question of what meaning in the first place is and ending with two radically different answers. The so called “semiotic” view takes it that meaning should be understood as a certain relation between an expression and an entity of a different order which constitutes its meaning. Roughly speaking these entities of different order can be located in three distinct categories: the realm of the mental, the external world, or that of abstraction. The so called “structuralist” view, on the contrary, denies meaning to be fundamentally explainable as a relation between two different kinds of entities, but rather takes it that all we require is an account of the structure of language to explain meaning.

Starting in the second Chapter and continuing into the third, it will be shown how Brandom’s work on language can thus be termed as a form of “structuralism”, or “analytic structuralism” as Peregrin calls it. Similarity of names notwithstanding, the structuralism as defined by Peregrin, in his mind at least, has little to do with the historical movement known as French structuralism. However, as will be argued in Chapter 4, such a stark separation may well be

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<sup>1</sup> Bjerre argues that the so called analytic tradition, Brandom included, tends to neglect existential questions, or “lack the lack” as he puts it (Bjerre 2008, 538). I do not find this to be quite true. *Making It Explicit* does not shy away from existential questions so long as one knows how to look for them.

unwarranted, for read in the correct light certain aspects of Lacan's ideas about language can be fruitfully reflected with Brandom's, along with some other "analytic" authors.

Before any of this takes place, however, a few select words must be said about the manner in which Lacan has been apprehended here. That it is definitely him that should be so deserving of special attention right from the start will become clear in the process. Two issues must be noted about his inclusion prior to its execution.

First, like Charles Shepherdson has noted, despite his extensive engagement with philosophers both contemporary and classic, Jacques Lacan's ultimate commitments always lay in clinical ends of psychoanalysis as a form of psychological treatment. Whether he adopted concepts from Hegel or offered a reading of Plato, he always approached the material as a psychoanalyst, his interest guided by the requirements of his own field, which he never intended to completely merge with that of philosophy. (Shepherdson 2003, 116-118)

Likewise (although in reverse), my interest in Lacan is largely dictated, not by the psychoanalytic field, but by philosophy, namely the branch of theory most intimately associated with the work of Brandom. When all's said and done, what I wish to achieve is a reading of Lacan through a (more or less) Brandomian lens, with a wish and a belief that such a study could offer valuable, unexpected insights and fuel for further development in that landscape. What is thus required in reading Lacan is a certain translation of his fundamentally psychoanalytic concepts into contemporary semantic terminology.

The most concrete effect this choice of viewpoint entails is that my treatment of Lacanian corpus cannot help but end up unfaithful. The treatment of history and context of the several texts I shall use remains absent, as does reflection of the overall theory from which I handpick ideas most suitable for my purposes. For this reason, what eventually will be sketched as a relation between Lacan and Brandom is likely to be marked by an overemphasis on similarities, despite my attempts to also clarify the major differences between the two.

The second issue touches on a more pragmatic aspect of Lacan's work. The major difficulty for any attempt at approaching Lacan at the level of primary literature is the vastness of the material available. The fifty year history of Lacan's thinking is rife with fusions of traditions and syntheses of previous theories with consecutive ones, all tied together with a style renowned for the extended patience it demands from the reader.

Like Adrian Johnston has observed, the Lacanian corpus itself can be roughly divided into three stages abiding to his so called register theory. His career begins in the 1930's and 40's with the work done on the imaginary register, continues in the fifties with a structuralist shift to the symbolic, followed by growing emphasis on the real towards the end of his life. (Johnston 2014) However, the symbolic register continues exerting strong influences all the way until Lacan's death in 1981, as it is ultimately via the symbolic how one of Lacan's most important contributions to psychoanalysis – unconscious as structured like a language – should be understood.

In the light of his history's weight, some sort of bibliographical delineation is unavoidable. By no means should the illusion be entertained that this work would take into account Lacan's oeuvre as a whole. Rather, at my focus will be Lacan's characteristically most structuralist phase, starting approximately from his renowned "Rome Discourse" of 1953 (encapsulated in the paper *The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis*) and ending roughly in the seminar of *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* in 1964.

It is indeed in virtue of his structuralist insights that I find Lacan's work worth investigating in the first place. For while it is true that in order to understand the man one cannot just read the conveniently interesting bits, it also holds that if any meaningful dialogue between him and thinkers coming from other traditions is to commence, one must start from somewhere in particular – not everywhere at once.

One last thing must pave the way to actual argumentation. An attentive reader will note Chapter 4 to be unusually rife with direct citations, some of which are quite lengthy. I have no defense against the excessive quotations save what can be stolen from John Allan Rajchman. Lacan's style, it must be repeated, is extraordinary. Paraphrasing him stretches the page count and imagination alike, which is why I have seen it fit to rely more on the original material (albeit translated) even at the risk of becoming a parrot. I believe Rajchman figuratively speaking nails it when he writes that "[t]o understand mechanics, we don't have to read Newton; but to understand Lacan we would always have to refer to his écrits" (Rajchman 1985, 4).

## Chapter 2

### 2.1. Defining Structuralism

As far as defining isms goes, one interested in structuralism starts right from the deep end. Even as sympathetic and extensive of an account as produced by François Dosse, in his *History of Structuralism: The rising sign, 1945-1966* (1991), characterizes the movement's history as "particularly vague" and closely tied to the persons (Claude Lévi-Strauss, Louis Althusser, Jacques Lacan etc.) implicated in its folds. In a summary of sorts he writes that "Structuralism was the *koine* of an entire intellectual generation, even if there is no doctrinal solidarity and even less a school or a battle among its various representatives". (Dosse 1991, xxiv)

A somewhat less sympathetic view by Edmund Leach has it that "structuralism is neither a theory, nor a method, but rather 'a way to see things'" (Leach 1973, 37). A grade more hostile a portrayal labels the movement a catchphrase of an epoch, a dusty slogan with little substantial meaning save a way to thinly glue together some mismatch French thinkers from the halfway of 20th century.

Whether structuralism is metaphorically identified as the lingua franca of an age or, slightly more concretely, as the phantasmatic title of that era, plays little relevance here. The focus is instead riveted to a much narrower definition than what can be gleaned from the historical movement. Following Jaroslav Peregrin, a trail can perhaps be opened to "salvage" certain structuralist ideas and appropriate them for the benefit of a more "analytically" minded semantic theory. According to Peregrin, the original work of one of structuralism's forefathers, Ferdinand de Saussure, occupies a central place in this project – the later French structuralist development remarkably less so. (Peregrin 2001, 8-9)

Fundamentally I approve of Peregrin's purpose to conjoin the slightly neglected legacy of de Saussure with contemporary analytic philosophy, more specifically with the works of Wilfrid Sellars, W.V.O. Quine, and Robert Brandom. However, to altogether and without further ado abandon the additions, however improbably relevant at first sight, of the later French company represents a step I would consider to merit more deliberation than Peregrin affords it<sup>2</sup>. This work in part funds the reasons for the stand.

Peregrin's explicit goal to build "analytical structuralism" in semantics is elaborated by him as a contrast between two constitutional approaches to language and meaning, termed by him as the "semiotic" and the structuralist views. These views can be comprehended by considering two types of relations, the respective explanatory privileging of which then decides between the two approaches. The relations are called "horizontal" and "vertical".

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<sup>2</sup> At least in *Meaning and Structure* Peregrin relates quite coolly to French structuralism. His "abandonment" of the tradition is more akin to delineation of a research project than principal, doctrinal rejection.

After explicating their place in Peregrin, this section paves the way to an issue common to structuralism of all shapes and sizes, holism, which continues to play a major part in the next chapter.

## 2.2. Horizontal and Vertical Relations of Language

In terms of very broad strokes, at stake in the controversy between semiotic and structuralist views is the relation of a linguistic expression to its meaning. Rather intuitively we can fence the set of linguistic expressions from that of mere noises as those that have distinct *meanings*. A classic philosophical question then follows: what is this “meaning” in virtue of which the noises I make signify something to those around me? And how is it that a certain expression has a certain relation to a certain meaning?

One way to think about the relation between an expression and its meaning is a kind of *correspondence* between two different kinds of entities. This is what could be called the heart of the semiotic view’s understanding of language: the idea that fundamentally speaking language is a collection of *signs*, i.e. linguistic units (paradigmatically words) paired with their meanings. Following Peregrin, what I shall show in this section is how a vast range of semantic theories can be included within the parameters of this picture of language as a collection of signs, and how a completely different angle can be juxtaposed with it.

To begin with, what is a linguistic sign<sup>3</sup>? Following de Saussure’s classic definition, a sign is composed of two necessary and sufficient parts: the signifier and the signified. The signifier stands for the material support of the sign, the sound emitted by a speaker or a mark on paper, while the signified stands for “the concept” or the “meaning” to which the signifier somehow “points to”, to which it corresponds (de Saussure 1959, 66-67). In this instance I shall not go deeper into the nature of this “correspondence”, of how precisely it should be understood. Instead I shall offer two aspects of the linguistic sign which the semiotic view takes to be pertinent:

- (i) the signified is ontologically speaking a different kind of entity than the signifier is, and
- (ii) the correspondence relation internal to a linguistic sign is independent of other similar relations internal to other linguistic signs.

Affirming these two points together suffices to identify the semiotic view in its raw, undifferentiated form; denying them suffices to identify the opposite position, here called “structuralism”. I shall now examine three different kinds of semiotics views, after which I will conclude by juxtaposing all of them with the structuralist stance. The deciding factor will then be a decision of explanatory privileging between the so called horizontal and vertical relations of language, the definitions of which will be cleared in the process.

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<sup>3</sup> Not all signs are linguistic in nature, but I will not touch on those cases here. The main question is whether the semiotic view’s notion of language as a collection of signs is a tenable one.



The first type of semiotic approach can be found from St. Augustine, who attempted to explain language as “a set of labels stuck to things” (Peregrin 2001, 32). The rudimentary picture thus presented takes it that every word has a *referent* due to which it means what it means, and that the best example of these referents are concrete objects, for which words function like names. Ludwig Wittgenstein famously criticized Augustine for this stance (Wittgenstein 1958, §1, §32). Augustine’s theory is more refined than how I present it here, which is one of the reasons I refrain from engaging in its evaluation. The important point is that Augustine thought a simple reference to objects is all we need to satisfy the basic needs of a semantic theory.

It is taken as self-evident nowadays, mostly thanks to Gottlob Frege, that theory of reference stands distinct from theory of meaning. What is interesting from our perspective is that even theories that acknowledge the distinction between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung* can be termed semiotic in the sense used here, because they affirm the conditions (i) and (ii) above. In Peregrin’s words they stumble on what W.V.O. Quine called the “Museum myth” of language, which is the false idea that “‘real’ semantics is a matter not of the (linguistic) behavior of speakers, but rather of an interconnection between words and things somewhere within the minds of the users of language”. Semantics for Quine, explains Peregrin, is not about the business of pairing the (mental) signifieds with (linguistic) signifiers. (Peregrin 2001, 33)

To take another category of theory subsuming under the semiotic view, we could indeed conceive the signified, not as a thing in the real world, but as a mental entity. This branch of theory is what Peregrin calls “psychologico-semiotics”, because according to it “our overt language is meaningful because it expresses the covert language of thought, whereas the language of thought is meaningful somehow inherently.” Jerry Fodor in particular has distinguished himself as a prominent advocate of the language of thought theory. (Peregrin 2001, 22)

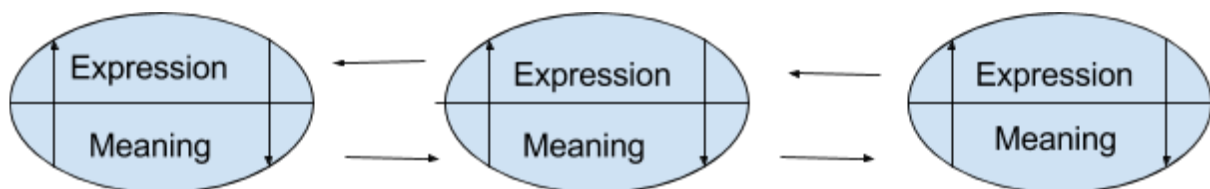
It makes no difference for raw, undifferentiated psychologico-semiotics how the mental content and “language of thought” are consequently conceived so long as they can be used to explain the meaningfulness of linguistic expressions. Meaning could well turn out to be decipherable on a purely material, neurological level, or alternatively in some dualist setting. A large number of options also exist as to how to construe the relation the realm of mental shares with that of expressions. The important point is that these relations are (i) understood to move between tokens of two distinct *kinds* of entities (noises and mental contents), and (ii) that the correspondence relation of one linguistic sign is in principle independent of other similar relations internal to other linguistic signs.

“To be independent of” above should be understood as follows. Suppose the meaning of my expression was determined by one of my thoughts, which was thus deemed to be its content, i.e. *what* was expressed in expressing the expression. Overall we could say something like “the meaning of sentence x was determined by the speaker’s *intention* y”. Regardless of how precisely we construe the emphasized term “intention”, it is easy to agree that this way of putting things does not in any way require us to consider other similar relations between the same speaker’s other expressions and intentions (e.g. the expression

z and intention q). Broadly speaking we need only to regard one expression-intention pair at a time to make sense of them, because there is no pre-given need for psychologico-semiotics to assume essential interconnectedness among the pairs.

To uphold the conditions (i) and (ii) it is not necessary to consider meaning, the signified, just as a mental entity: meaning could also be conceived as an abstract entity of sorts, say a set or a Platonic idea. The third category of semiotic views is thus termed by Peregrin “ontologico-semiotics” (Peregrin 2001, 27). What is important to observe is that, although there are crucial differences in theories construing meaning as mental content or as an abstract object, they can both be seen to accept the conditions (i) and (ii). The key perspective remains focused on meaning as a different kind of entity from the expressions with which it is associated, and that these associations as such can be deemed to be independent of each other just like labels in a museum exhibit are independent of each other.

A completely different way exists to start a semantic theory; one that denies both (i) and (ii). To showcase the distinction we can now elaborate on the concept of vertical and horizontal relations of language, which Peregrin borrows from de Saussure. Simply put, the two kinds of relations reign between two different kinds of entities. Vertical relations exist between units of language, the most important species of which here are expressions, and non-linguistic entities. Horizontal relations on the other hand exist between linguistic entities only, by which here are meant expressions. The classic Saussurean diagram of sign’s relations to other signs, slightly modified by Peregrin, renders the following picture<sup>4</sup> (the upright arrows are vertical relations, the parallel arrows horizontal ones):



What kind of “relations” are we talking about here? In the case of vertical relations, the kind which associates a given expression with its meaning conceived as an ontologically different kind of entity. The nature of this “association” is here left open, for a great number of alternatives exist as to how it should be specified, depending in the first place what we deem the meaning to consist of; e.g. of a mental state or an abstract object. Also in the case of horizontal relations I refrain from specifying the details for now. At stake at this point is the articulation of an explanatory priority between the two kinds of relations, hence the semiotic and the structuralist visions of meaning.

The semiotic view claims that the vertical relations are primary in establishing language and meaning. The story begins with relations of correspondence between individual expressions (paradigmatically singular words) and the signifieds (mental content, abstract objects) somehow associated with these expressions. A sufficient aggregate whole of these relations

<sup>4</sup> The picture here is an identical copy in terms of meaning, if not of graphic form. (Peregrin 2001, 38)

yields a natural language. Relations between expressions logically depend on the relations between expressions and other things, which are the meanings of those expressions, the reason they are distinguished from mere noises and thus together constitute language. (Peregrin 2001, 38)

The structuralist view claims the opposite: the horizontal relations, regardless of what is being deemed as the relevant signified thing, are dependent on vertical, linguistically internal relations between expressions. In short, according to this “structuralism”, the meaning of expressions is not determined by anything fundamentally non-linguistic (mental content or abstract objects). (Peregrin 2001, 38) *The structure of expressions determines the meaning of expressions*. A slightly peculiar way to put this would be to say that, in theory, all language needs to work is more language: not something beyond language.

It exerts no great toll on imagination to fathom that if this was the end of the tale, it would be a very roundabout one. If the meaning of expressions is determined by nothing but other expressions, are we not immediately lead to a vicious regress? Everyone knows the meaning of words is in the dictionary, which presents us but with more words. This might satisfy our everyday needs, but theory and science demand more. This “more” is precisely what the next sections intend to supply.

### 2.3. Language: A Game of Chess?

The metaphor of language as a game is familiar to all, dear to some and repelling for others. A more particular iteration of the comparison has it that language shares some essential features with chess. The idea’s advocates number Saussure and Wittgenstein, while sharp dissent has been voiced by Fodor. As a widespread sidetrack in contemporary philosophy of language, the analogy grants a convenient detour to approach the subject of structuralist versus semiotic views of meaning. In the course of the discussion the nature of the aforementioned horizontal relations will be elaborated more thoroughly.

What is so inviting in the chess-comparison for the structuralist is the idea of language as a self-sufficient system, completely governed by its own laws and nothing else. “Language is a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others,” wrote Saussure (*Course*, 110). Key emphasis is laid on the word “value”. Via analogy, the “meaning” of a pawn in chess is fully determined by the rules of chess, and making a move with a knight can only take place in the context of a game. Moreover, ultimately it is the rules that define chess as a game: to determine whether two players play chess or some other game it makes no difference what shape or material the actual pawns are so long as the players are moving them correctly. Essentially speaking, chess is constituted by something immaterial: its rules.

Likewise, a natural language can be thought of first of all not as a compilation of words (distinct sounds with distinct meanings) but as a compilation of rules. Naturally, everyone recognizes the existence of various grammars. But a more specifically structuralist claim has is that the phenomenon of meaning itself can be modeled, not as a representation, but as a

rule and, better, as a sort of value. So, tentatively speaking, while a semiotic view would claim that the basic relation of an expression to its meaning is that of representation, a structuralist (as the word is used here) would instead say, as Peregrin does, that “the meaning of an expression is ... something as a *value* of the expression, a value which has to do with the position of the expression within the system of language” (Peregrin 2001, 38).

How does meaning as “value” differ from meaning as “representation”? Again, the comparison to chess proves its value. Suppose a pawn stood for a word of natural language. For the structuralist, to determine the word’s meaning it would be misplaced to look at the pawn’s factual properties, its shape, color, material, history etc. It would be just as wrong to postulate to it some abstract properties that would explain its “meaning”: the property of “being movable on a chessboard like a knight” for example. Rather, all one needs to do to determine the pawn’s significance is to look at the board set it belongs to<sup>5</sup>. The meaning of the pawn is its position on the board. The position is distinct from representation in that meaning thus defined is not conceived as a different sort of entity, but simply as the relation of a piece to the total set of relations to which it belongs. Meaning is the relation of a part to a whole. Plainly speaking, this is what it means to call it structural.

Several questions can be raised about the relationship of an expression to its value. In what follows I shall offer, first, a summary of the fundamental horizontal relations, starting as values. The examination proceeds to “Brandom’s structuralism” and how the elementary relations between horizontal relations can be modeled on the basis of a substitution mechanism.

## 2.4. Meaning as an Inferential Role

As Peregrin shows, de Saussure’s term “value” can easily be understood in terms of equivalence. Like chess pieces, linguistic expressions can be variedly used. What makes two pawns count as the same type is just their equivalent function: a coin and a stone, when used as knights, are equivalents for the knight. Similarly, linguistic expressions, when they make the same contribution to the same whole, can be considered to be equivalent, i.e. to have the same value. (Peregrin 2001, 42)

The relation between an expression and its value can be usefully compared to the relation between an expression and its meaning postulated by the various semiotic traditions. It was postulated by the two basic semiotic commitments that meaning precedes and is independent of the expression associated with it. Precisely the reverse is true of the relationship of value and expression. At least with natural languages, it is not that we first have values and then assign them to a compilation of ready-made expressions. The values

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<sup>5</sup> It follows that outside a given game a pawn has neither value nor meaning. But couldn’t we still imagine e.g. a knight to have meaning in the pattern of permissible moves one can make with it, even if no token of a knight is currently employed in a game? De Saussure famously used this observation to help distinguish between synchronic and diachronic perspectives on language (*Course*, 79-81). In our context we could simply say that like the pawn, a word has no meaning outside use, i.e. employment on a board, but it still has potential use, thus potential meaning. The issue is more complicated and interesting than that but won’t be discussed further here.

do not *cause* the equivalence of two expressions. Rather, the value can be seen as a “materialization” of the equivalence which logically precedes it. (Peregrin 2001, 42)

However, it is neither the case, at least for de Saussure, that we first have a compilation of expressions, minimal units like words, and the values somehow sprout from their relations. Everything in language is constituted as relations of equivalence, including the “minimal elements”, the identification of which is a non-trivial task from a theoretical point of view. The very identity of a linguistic unit can be understood as its value, its equivalence relations, which set it apart and in opposition with other units.<sup>6</sup> All there then essentially exists in language are these relations of identities and oppositions: in short, the structures. (Peregrin 2001, 43-44)

Moving forward, we can identify a match between the concept of value as used here and the notion of “inferential role” as deployed by Brandom. In the case of both, the basic idea is that the contents of linguistic expressions (paradigmatically propositional contents) can be defined as sort of functions or, to use a less mathematically charged term, roles. For theoretical purposes these roles can be conceived as a type of abstract objects, namely sets. For the structuralist, then, meaning eventually boils down to the set of inferential relations an expression can enter in<sup>7</sup>.

In the first paragraph of this section it was mentioned that two units have the same value in case they make the same contribution to the same whole. The idea is effortlessly grasped when under study are non-linguistic units, say trains. Two physically different trains can be in abstract identified as the same if they both, in different days, occupy the position of “8:25 train from Geneva to Paris”. The whole in this example is the system of railway schedules, while the parts are represented by individual, physical trains. Equivalences of “train-values” are born of allocation of similar schedules to different trains. The analogy clearly shows how abstract objects like “the 8:25 train from Geneva to Paris” are dependent on a system of interdependent rules: that a certain train occupies the position of the 8:25 train in principle has nothing to do with the actual properties of the train, and “existence” of the 8:25 train is not dependent on the existence of any one real train.

When all's said and done, the structuralist project aims at treating meaning like railway officials treat trains. The major question is of how to keep the project on the right tracks despite the obvious, massive differences between trains and language. To begin trace those tracks it pays to visit a more finessed example of how to construe meaning as an abstract set of inferential relations: the connective conjunction, more familiarly know as “and” or ( $\wedge$ ).

As everyone knows, the meaning of conjunction can be laid out as its truth-conditions, i.e. the circumstances where it is correctly used in a formal sentence. Taking sentences  $S_1$  and

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<sup>6</sup> It should be borne in mind that for de Saussure, the value of a linguistic unit encapsulates much more than just its meaning, contrary to what is, for simplicity's sake, presumed here.

<sup>7</sup> As Peregrin notes, it poses no contradiction for structuralism to consider meaning as an abstract object so long as the relation of this object and its expression is not that of representation (Peregrin 2001, 186). This stance becomes more understandable as we get clear about what sorts of things inferential roles actually are.

$S_2$  and designating truth with (T) and falsehood with (F), the following, common table can be produced:

**Table A**

$S_1$	$S_2$	$S_1 \wedge S_2$
T	T	T
T	F	F
F	T	F
F	F	F

Certain simple inferential rules underlie this table. These can be formulated as follows:

If and only if  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  are true,  $S_1 \wedge S_2$  is true.

If  $S_1 \wedge S_2$  is true,  $S_1$  is true.

If  $S_1 \wedge S_2$  is true,  $S_2$  is true.

If either  $S_1$  or  $S_2$  is false,  $S_1 \wedge S_2$  is false.

There is nothing revolutionary in Peregrin's notion that the meaning of the connective "and" can be completely articulated in the set of ordered pairs of truth-values presented in the table A. (Peregrin 2001, 187) The connective just is its inferential role, that is, the rules of its correct application in formal sentences, numbered above. Any logician or semanticist could accept this. However, what makes the structuralist attitude towards the sample special is the following claim that the meaning of *all* the words in *natural language* could in principle (if not in practice) be modeled in a similar vein, as the set of inferential relations it can enter into. Moreover, the particularly inferentialist claim is that conceptual contents and meaning are essentially thus inferentially articulated.

The radicalness of these ambitions should be noted before testing them. For while it is easy to accept that the meaning of a formal term like conjunction could be satisfactorily emptied by a truth-table, can we even imagine what the same would imply with a word picked from everyday usage? Take the word *and*, which in English has several other meanings than simply joining two expressions together. And what about words like *pony*, the knowledge of meaning of which crucially involves the ability to commit such *acts* as to point out to an object of the world and correctly call it a pony. Capability to ostensive definitions is a key part of many a word's meaning. But an ability to act, to employ a word ostensively, is not usually considered a part of the classic, formal inference – thus it would seem inferentialism is unable to explain this essential side of our concepts.

Tackling these issues is tricky, but as Brandom has shown, not impossible. Next up I shall show how all concepts worthy of the name not only can be, but indeed must be, inferentially

articulated<sup>8</sup>. This includes giving an account of their “worldly” dimension. Again, my purpose is not to solve or even to point to all the problems Brandom encounters on the way. By first of all showing how analytic structuralism can be a tenable option in modern semantics it becomes easier to compare it with the more continental kind recoverable from Lacan.

## 2.5. Inferentialism I: The Primacy of the Propositional

What does it mean to claim, as Brandom does, that “concepts are essentially inferentially articulated?” (Brandom 1994, 89) Briefly put, this implies that specifically conceptual contents demand from their wielder a kind of *understanding* that using concepts means dealing with *reasons* for what *should* or should not follow from what. A concrete way to illustrate these abstractly loaded terms is by contrasting them with an example in which they are absent. It is here that Brandom’s parrot enters the stage.

To use concepts, it has been widely agreed, means to classify particular things in universal classes. A word like *cow* encompasses all entities that can correctly be thus termed, not just one of them. But this can hardly be the whole story of the conceptual, for there exists a variety of classification which we would not necessarily wish to categorize as conceptual.

Take a parrot capable of voicing some words, for example the word *red*. Furthermore, whenever it sees something red, it has been taught to make the sound *red* or even *That’s red*. Hypothetically, we can imagine, the parrot is unmistakable in perceiving and reporting red things. In this it is just as failsafe as a working thermometer is in measuring temperature. Both the parrot and the thermometer showcase what Brandom calls “regular differential responsive disposition” systems (RDRDs for short) (Brandom 1994, 88). They regularly respond to the same type of external stimuli with a distinguished type of response. A seminal question can now be raised: is there any principal difference in between RDRD’s use of the expression *That’s red* and the respective human response?

Clearly there is, for the parrot or the thermometer does not *understand* what it says, i.e. what it *means* to call something red, whereas a human does. In absence of understanding, RDRD’s noises are meaningless for the systems themselves, although these noises can well mean something for the people around. The key point is that “meaning something” must be understood inferentially. The claim “That’s red” means what it does because it stands in certain inferential relations to some other claims for which it serves as a premise. A human who reports an object to be red, or hears the same from a RDRD system, can *infer* that the object is colored, that it exists, that it is not green etc. A simple RDRD system can do nothing of the sort. As Brandom encapsulates:

“What makes classification deserve to be called *conceptual* classification is its *inferential* role. It is practical mastery of the inferential involvements of a response,

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<sup>8</sup> Contrary to what the conjunction example might have hinted, this does not mean all words in a natural language could be accorded a truth table (even in theory) according to Brandom. The table is an ideal example of the inferential articulation of concepts due to its formality, but it should not be taken as explanatorily sufficient by itself.

the responder's understanding it in this sense, that makes the response an intentional state of performance—one having content for the one whose state or performance it is, and not merely for those using it as an indicator.” (Brandom 1994, 89)

Following Gottlob Frege, Brandom argues that the minimal unit in which conceptual contents can appear is in the propositional form. These forms are distinguished as those contents which can have a) truth conditions and b) enter into inferential relations with other propositions. The words *That's red*, while propositionally fit in the syntactic sense, convey propositional contents in the speaker's mouth only insofar as that speaker is capable both of giving reasons for the claim and also to treat it as a reason for other claims. Referring to Kantian vocabulary, according to Brandom only in a human mouth does *That's red* express a *judgement*, which is deemed the paradigm of conceptual contentfulness.<sup>9</sup> (Brandom 1994, 80-81)

The primacy of propositional contents is made explicit in the early works of Frege, namely in *Begriffsschrift*. This is where Brandom locates the mechanism of substitution as decisive in discerning conceptual contents inferentially, ultimately all the way down to singular terms. The concept of inferential role presented in Section 4 becomes thus specified: “Two claims have the same conceptual content if and only if they have the same inferential role: a good inference is never turned into a bad one by substituting one for the other” (Brandom 1994, 96).

About this mechanism of substitution then. From the discussion about value above we recall that two different units can share in the same value by being equivalent, *qua* some relevant feature, in respect to the same whole. Two physically different trains can in turns serve as the same 8:25 train from Geneva to Paris. Now, if we consider the units in question to be claims (i.e. propositional contents), the relevant preserved feature to be correctness of inference, and the same whole to be an inference, we can see that the two claims

The Greeks defeated the Persians at Platea

and

the Persians were defeated by the Greeks at Platea

express the same conceptual content, over and above their lexical differences. Exchanging one for the other in the context of any good inference they can enter in makes no difference to the correctness of the inference. Everything that can be inferred from one can be inferred from the other. The claims in this sense have the same value, the same meaning, although as Frege observed, “slight difference of sense is discernible” between them. But what is

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<sup>9</sup> The reason Brandom favours the propositional over other forms of content is the former's “pragmatic priority”, the unique capacity of propositional judgements to have “pragmatic force”. (Brandom 1994, 83) The reasons why the pragmatic dimension should gain so much weight in the first place will not be discussed here for reasons of space.



crucial is their equivalence in the eyes of inferential relations. (Brandom 1994, 95, Frege quoted by Brandom)

There are two pressing problems this form of semantic explanatory strategy faces which I shall address to conclude the review of inferentialism. First, although the propositional form of conceptual contents is privileged as the primary one, grounds exist for a need to account for the contentfulness of singular terms also. Second, as was already mentioned, inferentialism must also explain the ostensive dimension of our concepts, how knowledge of their meaning in many cases essentially involves correct reference to worldly objects.<sup>10</sup>

## 2.6. Inferentialism II: Lumpy Concepts

Inferentialism posits that our concepts are essentially inferentially articulated, which means that their contentfulness is to be essentially explained by their playing a part in relations between expressions, or word-word relations, as they are sometimes called. Such an account faces problems because our discursive practices also include two other types of relations: world-word and word-world relations, respectively known as language entry and language exit moves. Because these types of relations do not reign solely between expressions but include worldly objects and states of affair, it seems that inferentialism is incapable of explaining them. In this section I examine Brandom's answer to the dilemma.

The concepts word-word, world-word and word-world relations are due to Sellars, who uses them to elaborate on Wittgenstein's notion of language game in *Some Reflections on Language Games* (1954). In another seminal paper (*Empiricism and Philosophy of Mind*, 1963) Sellars argued that language games that only involve observational reports (i.e. world-word relations) owe their existence to language games composed only of inferential moves, i.e. word-word relations. The kind of empiricism Sellars criticizes, according to Brandom, takes it that "a) each fact can not only be noninferentially known to be the case but presupposes no other knowledge either of particular matter of fact, or of general truths, and b) the noninferential knowledge of facts belonging to this structure constitutes the ultimate court of appeals for all factual claims—particular and general—about the world" (Brandom 1994, 216). In other words, inferential relations for Sellars and Brandom must be in the forefront of explaining language, not in the backseat.

This issue ties to the example of the parrot discussed above. The claim Sellars and Brandom advance is that, for humans and birds alike, for a simple observational report to specifically count as (a claim to) conceptually contentful *knowledge* in the mouth of a speaker presupposes mastery of *some* inferential relations in that speaker. In other words, even in the case of a human, if all they could speak was observational reports of the kind "That's red" or "There goes my favourite pony", the token-utterances would not count as expressions of knowledge. It is not that these types of claims could not be made

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<sup>10</sup> A third major conundrum exists for the inferentialism project thus far ignored here: how to explain the representational dimension of our concepts, the fact that they purport to represent objective states of affair. Since this question connects to a bigger one tied with the comparison to Lacan it will be discussed separately in Chapter 3.

noninferentially, but that to count as claims they must, like all other claims, work as reasons for other claims, which is to say one must be able to infer something from them to understand them. (Brandom 1994, 217)

The case of language entry moves is about what it is to be an epistemological subject, a knower, from inferentialism's perspective. The case of language exit moves on the other hand settles what it is to be a rational actor. Again, the basic claim is that like world-word relations, word-world relations also build on word-word, inferential relations. It should come as no surprise then that in tandem with his theory of rationality Brandom adopts a linguistic account of intentionality, of our ability to have thoughts and express utterances which are *about* something.

For Brandom intentionality crucially involves our linguistic capacities, which means that no sense can be made of beliefs without reference to speech acts which express them. However, Brandom does not wish to reduce what in common philosophical parlance are known as beliefs to speech acts: the latter neither can be understood without the former. Both overt linguistic acts and covert doxastic states are thus required. This account of intentionality is nonetheless rightly called linguistic because explanatory priority is ultimately vested on linguistic expressions, which shows in that Brandom strives to explain how our "capacity for practical reasoning incorporates and depends upon a conceptually prior capacity to give reasons for claims, rather than for actions." (Brandom 1994, 230-231)

As it can be almost universally agreed, rational agency means that one is capable of giving and asking for reasons for their actions. An act without a reason is mere behavior, whereas an act that goes against reason can be termed irrational. The claim Brandom sets to pursue is that the capacity to rational behavior thus defined presupposes the capacity to give and ask reasons for claims, i.e. the more fundamental ability to draw inferences. Such dependency shows in two places. First, practical reasoning demands doxastic commitments as premises; second, the conditions of success of practical commitments demand specifically propositional contents, which are essentially inferentially articulated. (Brandom 1994, 243). As was mentioned, to act rationally means acting for reasons, which means one is responsible to justify their actions. These reasons for actions can be thought of as the premises of a practical inference. The conclusion of the inference, then, is the act that fulfils some intention of the actor.

An example of the simpler sort of practical reasoning could be the following inference:

Only opening my umbrella will keep me dry, so I shall open my umbrella.

The term "shall" is used by Brandom technically as a sign for acknowledging a commitment to act (Brandom 1994, 245). Having arrived at the commitment, i.e. the intention, the rational subject would proceed by opening their umbrella. There is more to be said about how Brandom constructs the relation between beliefs, intentions, preferences and actions, but what matters most here is that the story is based on a more fundamental notion of inferential relations, with reasons standing behind intentional actions.

Returning to the analogy dear to many structuralists, we find that Brandom in fact explicitly opposes the likening of language to chess. Because our discursive practices incorporate nonlinguistic entities in the distinct language-entry and exit moves they are different from a purely formal game like chess, where the material dimension of the board and pieces is contingent. As opposed to chess, language as a game, due to its “lumpiness” as Brandom puts it, is closer to e.g. baseball, which can only be played on a field of certain size, with a ball of certain weight etc. (Brandom 1994, 632)

This section was meant to offer the broad lines in which inferentialism can accommodate an account of the worldly dimension of our concept use, i.e. our ability to perform not only intralinguistic, word-word moves but also extralinguistic world-word and word-world moves. Next up I shall go over the case of subsentential expressions and how inferentialism can account for their contentfulness.

## 2.7. Inferentialism III: Subsential Expressions

That Brandom’s approach in the field of modern semantics is rather queer becomes quite clear while reflecting on his views on singular terms and their place in natural language. To claim that propositional contents have primary meaning seems to miss the obvious point that these contents are always compositional in nature<sup>11</sup>. Most intuitively we want to say they are made of words, the recombinations of which can produce an indefinite number of novel sentences. A *bottom-up* semantic approach would thus claim that original meaning rested on these subsentential expressions, singular terms and predicates, and consequently conceive the meaning of propositional sentences as constituted by (and thus as secondary to) them. Contrary to this, the *top-down* approach of Brandom, as was seen above, takes the propositional contents as primary, and attempts to explain how subsentential expressions, singular terms and predicates, have the contents they do only derivatively. So Brandom does not deny singular terms have meaning, but only that they would have primary meaning.

<sup>12</sup>

In *Making It Explicit* there is a particularly remarkable chapter titled *Substitution: What Are Singular Terms, and Why Are There Any?* to which I would now like to draw attention. It begins by recasting an old distinction in new terminology. Frege famously recognized that a propositional expression (paradigmatically sentences) can have two distinct kinds of content, depending whether they appear alone or as a part of a compound sentence. Following Michael Dummett, the first kind can be called “freestanding sense” and the latter “ingredient sense”. For Dummett, explains Brandom, the difference between the two is that only sentences with freestanding sense have pragmatic, assertoric force. Ingredient sense lack

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<sup>11</sup> Compositionality of meaning is the widely accepted reason for the fact that speakers can regularly utter completely novel sentences and inferences. Like Brandom writes, “The idea that there is a difference between correct and incorrect uses of sentences one has not yet used involves some sort of projection” (Brandom 1994, 365).

<sup>12</sup> Of course, like W.V.O. Quine notes in *Pursuit of Truth*, the question whether words or sentences have the primary meaning was familiar already to ancient Indian philosophers (Quine 1992, 37). What in philosophy goes around also often comes around.

such force, but can still contribute to the *contents* of the compound expression.<sup>13</sup> (Brandom 1994, 339)

To showcase the distinction, consider the sentence

[1] Rainbow Dash is the best pony

which has freestanding sense. To utter such a claim has some pragmatic significance, which in Brandom's (as of yet undiscussed) terminology means that one can be treated to have become "committed" and "entitled" to certain other claims. What matters here is that if instead one utters the sentence

[2] If Rainbow Dash is the best pony, then Fluttershy is the second best

one does *not* become committed to the sentence [1], because as an embedded part of sentence [2] it only has ingredient sense. The sentence [2] then has certain freestanding sense and pragmatic force different from [1].

What is at stake in distinguishing between the two sorts of sentential contents in some respects resembles the Saussurean concept of value. Here the compound sentences (with freestanding sense) are the contexts, the wholes, in which component sentences (with ingredient sense) can be exchanged one for the other, supposing some central feature of the compound remains the same through the exchange. But what is that relevant feature? It is here that Brandom and Frege split ways.

For Frege, explains Brandom, what is preserved by a good inference is truth-value understood in the extensional sense, as the reference of the expression to some state of the world that would make it true. Consequently Frege would probably consider sentences [1] and [2] to lack truth-values altogether, because they referred to objects that did not in fact exist, namely to some fictive characters and their supposed qualities. Alternatively it might be thought, should extensional truth-values be taken as the relevant property that must be preserved by good inferences, that the sentences [1] and [2] were false, because in their proper logical form they in fact claimed something akin to: "There exists such an object as Rainbow Dash and it has the property of 'being the best pony'", which would make it false.

Brandom tinkers with the substitution mechanism in that he does not consider extensional truth-value to be the relevant property that must be preserved by a good inference. Rather, as was mentioned, correctness of inference is the relevant feature for him<sup>14</sup>. "The main adjustment required for this analogy", he writes, "is that inference must be treated as a kind of context in which sentences can appear embedded, as premises and conclusions, and

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<sup>13</sup> Although the topic will be touched upon in Chapter 3, I shall not in this instance go over Brandom's pragmatic theory, of what it means for an expression to have assertional, pragmatic force, for more than the quick example below.

<sup>14</sup> A whole different story exists for Brandom as to how this "inferential correctness" should be understood. Surprisingly, it is not simply logical, formal correctness but pragmatic, "material" correctness.

which as a whole is accessible according to its correctness" (Brandom 1994, 349). Hence, so long as the (pragmatic) correctness is preserved at the level of the compound sentence in the process of substituting one component sentence in that context with another, the two component sentences belong to the same component equivalence class, i.e. have the same conceptual content, the same value.

Subsentential expressions enter the inferentialist picture with the claim that, like propositional contents, they too are inferentially articulated, although indirectly so. In other words, the meaning of subsentential expressions is derived from the *places* they occupy in the sentences they appear in. This idea of meaning engendered through positions follows the same basic frame of substitution as was sketched above. As with the connective "and", the meaning of all singular terms can be conceived as equivalence sets relative to some sentential context that preserves pragmatic correctness. The grammatical identity of subsentential expressions is likewise secured by substitution preserving, not correctness, but sentencehood as such. (Brandom 1994, 368)

Brandom names two kinds of roles subsentential expressions can play and in virtue of which they become distinguished, in the more familiar philosophical terminology, as subjects and predicates. An expression can be "substituted for" or "substituted in". Substituting for means replacing or being replaced by another expression as a component of a compound expression. Substituting in means an expression serves as a compound expression in the context of which an expression can be substituted for. Finally, by "substitution frames" Brandom means substituted-in expressions that are substitutional variants of each other. (Brandom 1994, 368)

A brief example should illuminate these concepts. How would the inferentialist explain the meaning of the proper name "Benjamin Franklin"? Because in question is a singular term, it has no propositional meaning: it means nothing to say, without any special context, "Benjamin Franklin". Nothing can be inferred from the utterance itself (although something can of course be inferred from the *fact* that someone uttered "Benjamin Franklin"). Nonetheless we have good reason to believe the word has some meaning, even if it is not propositional meaning. One such reason is that a person can understand a novel sentence containing the word "Benjamin Franklin". To "understand a word" means, as was seen with the parrot example, the ability to draw inferences in which the word is used correctly. An exemplary case could be the sentence

[3] Benjamin Franklin invented bifocals

from which we could draw the conclusion

[4] The first postmaster general of United States invented bifocals,

because Benjamin Franklin was the first postmaster general of United States. Sentence [3], serving as a premise, in this case is substituted in. To yield the conclusion [4], a singular term is substituted for another. The inference from [3] to [4] is true because Benjamin Franklin did invent bifocals and was the first postmaster general of the United States. The

inference also represents what Brandom calls a “simple material inferential-substitutional commitment”, or SMSIC for short. (Brandom 1994, 374) These will be discussed more in a moment.

Only subjects, or singular terms that can be substituted for, can enter *necessarily* symmetric substitution inferences, where the conclusion and the premise are reversible while preserving material inferential correctness. Sentence [4] could be turned into a premise with [3] as the conclusion without infringing inferential correctness. However, although predicates too can enter substitutional inferences, the order of their appearance as premises and conclusions is not *necessarily* reversible. From the sentence

[5] Benjamin Franklin walked

we can infer that

[6] Benjamin Franklin moved

but not vice versa. This means that only subjects, singular terms, are necessarily distributed into substitutional equivalence classes, while predicates in general are not so distributable. (Brandom 1994, 370-371) On other hand, only from substitutable-in predicates can we gather substitution frames. The sentences [5] and [6], as substituted-in expressions, differ in regards to their substituted for terms, which are interchangeable with others belonging to the same substitutional inferential set (the inventor of bifocals, the first postmaster general of USA etc.). This set is in turn intersubstitutable with other SMSIC sets, which yields us the general formula

If a walked, a moved

or in other words, a substitution frame where different SMSIC sets can appear in. (Brandom 1994, 368)

Substitutional inferences involving singular terms and other subsentential expressions (predicates most importantly) have many other interesting qualities, but what matters most here is that ultimately their meaning becomes modeled, as with propositional contents, as sets of inferential relations, or as an “equivalence class of intersubstitutable terms” that “stands for an object”. By contrast, predicates which are not thus distributed into equivalence classes do not purport to refer to objects. They are still as much inferentially articulated due to their positions in substitutional frames. (Brandom 1994, 375)

Singular terms gain their meaning inferentially because that meaning just is the set of other singular terms that are interchangeable with them in certain sentential contexts. The “position” or “location” thus conceived is a certain relation of interchangeability between singular terms that belong to the same SMSIC set. It pays to note that nothing has here been said about how the first simple material substitution-inferential commitments come about, or how people learn to speak. What this summary of Brandom’s treatment of singular terms purports to show is how inferentialism can make sense of subsentential

contentfulness. More importantly, an effort has been made to support the structuralist project to model meaning as resting primarily on horizontal relations as opposed to vertical ones.

The single most important factor in this project is the mechanism of substitution. As Brandom notes, “there is an intimate relationship between the notion of *semantic content* and the concept of *substitution*” (1994, 354). As it turns out, sense can be made of meaning by seeing it engendered solely by relations between expressions governed by inferential rules. In Chapter 4 I shall return to the topic substitution in order to study what kind of a shape and function it occupies in Lacan’s work. Anterior to that, in the next Chapter more needs to be said about Brandom, especially about the normative, social dimension of language which he identifies as essential in explaining meaning. In addition, understanding of the mechanism of substitution will be further developed there by seeing how it is employed in practice in many elementary linguistic contexts. Lastly, the holistic and social perspectival nature of meaning will be progressed there.

## Chapter 3

### 3.1. Defining Social Practice: Two Commitments

What is it for a practice to be appropriately called social? In the course of providing an answer Brandom establishes a major distinction between what he calls the “I–thou” and “I–we” approaches to the concept of social practice. Only the former view, not the latter, he argues, fits the bill. The issue is crucial, for it is based on this difference that Brandom later argues how the content of our beliefs and utterances (in his terms our doxastic commitments and assertions), and ultimately meaning itself, are essentially social-perspectival in nature.

Prior to establishing the comparison between I–thou and I–we approaches Brandom undertakes two other anchoring commitments for his theory of social practice. Both of them have to do with the place norms have in such practices. The commitments are:

1. To have any explicit social norms, we must first have some implicit ones.
2. The implicit norms are instituted in the social practice, not as non-normative dispositions to regular behavior, but as normative attitudes the members of a community take on each other.

Together these two commitments strive to resolve the question of what social norms in the first place are. A classic answer, already proposed by Immanuel Kant, was that norms just are rules of conduct. When faced with the question whether a certain performance is correct we must consult the rules, laws, conventions, degrees or other such *explicit* statutes governing the action in question. How to appropriately drive a car is completely determined by the traffic rules and other legislation of the country in which the car is being driven. Should there be no such rules in force, driving a car could not be considered a normative affair to begin with, which is to say there was no right or wrong way to go about it. “This view,” writes Brandom, “that proprieties of *practice* are always and everywhere to be conceived as expressions of the bindingness of underlying principles, may be called *regulism* about norms.” (Brandom 1994, 19-20) Regulism does not suppose that all rules must be formally legalistic or even written down: all they need to be is explicitly expressed.

The major problem this view faces, and which Kant himself readily acknowledged<sup>15</sup>, is brought to the fore by Ludwig Wittgenstein’s regress of rules argument. For every explicit social rule there are cases to which it applies either correctly or incorrectly. To determine whether a person is eligible to vote would be an incorrect application of traffic rules. However, not all cases of rule-application are so obviously wrong – how to come by a foolproof way to settle every similar issue? By way of interpretation of course, which reveals

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<sup>15</sup> In a footnote of *Making It Explicit* Brandom proves this by appropriately quoting *Critique of Pure Reason* (Brandom 1994, 657).



something essential about specifically social rules: that they need interpretation before application. For regulism this interpretation can only mean another explicit rule. The regress this generates is due to the fact that rules determining the application of other rules also require interpretation, i.e. more explicit rules. "The rule says how to do one thing correctly only on the assumption that one can do something else correctly, namely apply the rule." (Brandom 1994, 21)

There are two high lessons stemming from regulism's decisive fault. The first one is that social rules can be wronged in either of two ways: either by breaking them (i.e. following them incorrectly or not following them when one should) or by misinterpreting their application (i.e. following a rule correctly in a wrong context). The second lesson is that, although patently some social rules are explicit, not all of them can be – to follow some rules explicitly presupposes not only doing something else correctly, but also doing it, in the last place, implicitly.

The idea of the necessity of implicit rules is picked up by Sellars, for whom "A rule is lived, not described." With finite beings the interpretation of rule application must end somewhere, and for Sellars (as for Wittgenstein) that somewhere was practice. The key question then becomes of "how to understand proprieties of practice without appealing to rules, interpretations, justifications, or other explicit claims that something is appropriate." Moreover, how can the norms implicit in practice become explicitly describable principles? In privileging the pragmatic form of questioning Brandom sets in place the continental blocks of his explanation of meaning: a theory of contents, or of "knowing-that", presupposes a theory of practice, or of "knowing-how". (Brandom 1994, 25-26; Sellars quoted by Brandom)

We thus require a theory of norms in practice. This leads us to the commitment number two, which stated that the norms implicit in practice must be explained as instituted by normative attitudes rather than dispositions to exercise regular behavior. Whereas above Brandom's opposition was termed regulism (on norms), here the corresponding stance is *regularism*. These types of theories come in two flavours: simple and not simple (or complex). A simple regularist theory retains the regulist idea that norms just are explicit rules. To break the looming regress it suffices to drop the requirement that the subjects who follow social rules themselves be able to fully explicate their behavior. An outsider observing the behavior of an individual or a group could determine what rules they are following by simply recording recurring patterns in their observable behavior. (Brandom 1994, 27)

To take the example of driving, if one regularly showcased a tendency to stop at red lights and continue with green ones, a rational alien monitoring the driver, even without any interaction between the parties, could (according to regularism) determine that the driver was in fact following a rule. A disposition to stop at red lights and continue with green ones while driving could be imputed on them. This view avoids the regression because in theory the driver could be completely oblivious of the rule he supposedly follows, i.e. unable to explicitly acknowledge following it. He does not need to be able to explicitly apply the rule *himself* to be counted as following it.

The issue arising from this way to conceive things is the inability to distinguish between rule-following and plain physical laws. Physical beings partake in all sorts of regularities of behavior, not all of which intuitively strikes us as rule-following. The driver regularly breathes air in and out of his lungs and blinks more than ten times a day. As a simple regularist the alien observer could not but consider all of this as rule-following, simply because it is regular behavior of which the subject needs not be aware himself.

It is worthy to note that things could be taken quite far into this direction. A hardcore materialist would recognize nothing but physical cause and effect, regularity and scientific law, in the universe, the social reality included. Social norms would then be reducible to behavioral dispositions. Brandom's route is quite the opposite. Normativity is an equally essential part of reality as humans are, for humans are essentially normative beings, in two distinct senses which are worth mentioning briefly. Thus far we have only spoken of generic social norms and their nature, although at core Brandom's interest in them (at least in the context of *Making It Explicit*) is much narrower:

“The normative house has many mansions. The particular norms of concern in this work [*Making It Explicit*] are *discursive* normative statuses, the sort of commitment and entitlement that the use of concepts involves.” (Brandom 1994, 55)

Concept-use, language, and meaning – these are all essentially normative phenomena for Brandom. And as was already implied, they are not normative in the sense of dispositional regularities of behavior. To have a mind and to know a language set as apart from the rest of the universe of material existence, because we are the ones “subject to the peculiar force of better reason”<sup>16</sup> (Brandom 1994, 5).

Where does simple regularism go wrong then? Once more the (sketch of an) answer comes from Wittgenstein. Since regularism understands norms implicit in practice just as regular behavior, violating a norm comes down to showcasing irregular behavior. If the driver one time drives through red lights, they break the pattern of behavior the alien had previously imputed on them. However, unless it is specified *which* pattern of behavior is being referred to, there is no way of telling whether a given performance of an individual deviates from the set of performances preceding it. Then again, which pattern of behavior *should* then be counted as the correct one? Perhaps the one which the driver *should* be deemed to have followed?

The point was particularly appreciated by Saul Kripke, whose arithmetical example in *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (1982) showed that any given set of behavior always exhibits an indefinite number of regularities. The idea is widely known as the gerrymandering problem. Like Brandom puts it: “A performance can be denominated ‘irregular’ only with respect to a specified regularity, not *tout court*” (Brandom 1994, 28). Naturally, the decision which regularity *should* be taken into consideration in a given case is a normative affair, because it is impossible to find anything on the level of actual patterns to

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<sup>16</sup> On this much at least, we can rest assured, Lacan would agree with Brandom. In *Seminar II* he writes that men are not moons insofar as they speak (Lacan 1988, 243-244), i.e. simple physical objects governed by physical laws.

determine which elevates itself above the others as the *correct* one, the one which the subject *should* have been following.

What gerrymandering means is not that all behavior becomes undecipherable for the alien regularist. It only means that the line between correct and incorrect behavior loses its meaning. Since any finite set of behavior can be accounted for by some pattern, in case we witness a deviation, we cannot conclude a mistake has been made except on the observer's part: the subject was merely showcasing a *different* set of patterned behavior than previously thought.

But as Brandom emphasises, a central feature of our social norms is that they in fact can be disobeyed, broken (in both senses of the term), and misunderstood by the subjects themselves. Especially our use of concepts is thus characterisable: no one has their own sets of concepts between which they can juggle as pleases them without the possibility of being objectively wrong. That concept-usage is objectively correct or incorrect is one of Brandom's major arguments in *Making It Explicit*, as will be shown later on. Now we shall move on to discuss the difference between I-we and I-thou versions of sociality.

### 3.2. The Eye of the Beholder: I-we and I-thou Sociality

If social norms cannot be accounted for by merely regular behavior, what then? According to Brandom they are instituted in practice by the *attitudes* of the participants: a term I shall elaborate more on later. In an important sense social norms exist, at least at the outset, "in the eye of the beholder". To have any social norms we must first have participants behaving as if there were norms, and reacting to the behavior of others accordingly. In this way Brandom joins with the tradition of thinking on norms most characteristic of Enlightenment: normative evaluations do not belong to the natural furniture of the world, but only emerge with the people who populate it. (Brandom 1994, 47)

Taking attitudes of subjects to be decisive in application of rules neatly circumvents the gerrymandering problem. If one insists on driving against red lights, one is consecutively *judged* to have broken the traffic rules and punished accordingly<sup>17</sup>. The norms are assessed, not in the first hand through some measurable reality (behavior), but through interpretation, i.e. the attitudes of officials in this instance. Being subject to a norm essentially involves being taken to be thus subjected.

However, although normative attitudes are crucial in the birth of normative statuses<sup>18</sup>, the latter cannot be completely reduced to the former – at least not in the case of specifically

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<sup>17</sup> This punishment itself can then be conceived normatively or non-normatively. A normative punishment would consist of removing the offender some rights they had prior to the offense, e.g. their license to drive. A non-normative punishment would not alter the subject's normative status, but would instead employ negatively reinforcing sanctions to change the offender's behavior. These means could include incarceration or – and this is Brandom's choice example – beating with a stick. (Brandom 1994, 33-34)

<sup>18</sup> "Normative status" is the state, attributed by a scorekeeper, of being either correct or incorrect, applicable to performances both linguistic and non-linguistic alike.

discursive and linguistic norms, towards which we are now gradually shifting our study. Like Brandom puts it: “The status of correctness of a performance according to a rule does not collapse into the attitude of assessing that performance as correct” (Brandom 1994, 52). Whether one drives a car correctly is not decided solely by whether one takes oneself to drive the car correctly. The important distinction which thus arises, already mentioned above, is a characteristic feature of social norms: one can both fail to perform the correct action or perform an action correctly in a wrong context. In other words, both following and applying a social rule demands interpretation.

But does anything change when we slide from considering only individual attitudes to those of the whole community? Indeed it does, and this is where the road parts between I-we and I-thou sociality. Let us term the claim that normative statuses are reducible to normative attitudes the reductivist position, and the claim that the statuses are not thus reducible the non-reductivist one<sup>19</sup>. Authors like Crispin Wright support the non-reductivist claim in case of individual attitudes and the reductivist one in case of communal attitudes. This means that while the correctness of a performance and its assessment as correct cannot be reduced to any single individual’s attitude, the status of being in/correct can be reduced to the attitude of the whole community to which the performer of the action belongs. In other words, for Wright individuals can err about the norms they follow and assess, but the whole community cannot. (Wright 1980)

As Brandom notes, the idea that the community as a whole is the final measure that decides between correct and incorrect application of a social rule is a widespread one. The picture of sociality thus created is called by Brandom I-we sociality because the central axis of explanation is set between individuals and the aggregate whole, the community at large. The normative status of individual performances is then determined by the set of all performances produced by the community members. I-we approaches are a developed (i.e. not simple) form of regularist theories, in that “where the theories previously considered look to regularities of appraisal by individuals, the approach now on the table looks to regularities of appraisals by the community as a whole.” (Brandom 1994, 37)

Clearly there are social norms to which the I-we, regularist account applies. As Brandom writes:

“Whatever the Kwakiutl treat as an appropriate greeting gesture for their tribe, or a correctly constructed ceremonial hut, is one [correct application]; it makes no sense to suppose that they could collectively be wrong about this sort of thing.” (Brandom 1994, 53)

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<sup>19</sup> Brandom presents two subtly distinct forms in which the reduction may occur, couched in terms of supervenience: “all the facts specifiable in *nonnormative* vocabulary settles all the facts specifiable in *normative vocabulary*”, and “settling all the facts concerning *normative attitudes* settles all the facts concerning *normative statuses*” (Brandom 1994, 47). An argument could be raised whether this is a sufficient definition of reduction, but it will not be done here since the supervenience claims succeeds to represent the I-we sociality adequately in either case.

Where the I-we account goes wrong according to Brandom is in trying to extend the theory to explain specifically conceptual norms. For example Wright pursues such a course. But that would mean abandoning the objective nature of conceptual norms at the level of community, to consider a particular community of speakers as the final measure of their conceptual corrigibility. Brandom's stance is against this outcome:

“It is a fundamental feature of our understanding of our concepts that they incorporate *objective* commitments. Thus, our sense of the term ‘mass’ is such that the facts settle whether the mass of the universe is large enough that it will eventually suffer gravitational collapse, independently of what we, even all of us forever, take those facts to be.” (Brandom 1994, 53)

Brandom points out two other shortcomings of the I-we account. Firstly he argues that no sense can be made of the notion of “community’s appraisal” of individual performances; secondly that the theory, despite its revision, stumbles on the same gerrymandering issues its simple precursor did.

On the first point: as Brandom shows, Kripke, as a representative of I-we account’s supporters, often writes about community’s “accepting”, “endorsing” and “regarding as right” particular linguistic performances. Yet nowhere does he specify how such “endorsements” come to be, through what kind of speech acts, performances etc. Brandom writes: “Some communities have meetings, authorized representatives, or other ways of officially settling on a communal view or act, for instance of disapproval or endorsement.” Although instances of formal collective agency casting its judgement on linguistic performances could be envisaged, Brandom continues, such institutions could hardly stand at the bottom of explanation of linguistic normativity. (Brandom 1994, 38)

Brandom concludes the first point by recognizing that at stake in “community’s attitude” is something close to a metaphor, or a “*façon de parler*”, whereby individual capacities to performances (endorsement, repudiation) are imputed on a collective. One way to try and cash out this metaphor is to consider the collective endorsement as an aggregate of individual ones. Collective assessments could be “built” out of individual ones by simply numbering them. “But,” asks Brandom, “universal agreement is too much to ask, and how is it to be decided what less ought to count?” (Brandom 1994, 39).

On the second point: even if the collective assessment could somehow be construed from individual ones, how do I-we theories determine who in the first place belongs to a community of speakers, and thus whose assessments should be counted? Because regularist theories take norms implicit in practice to just be regular behavioral dispositions, a temptation arises to only include those who follow the same patterns of behavior. The gerrymandering problem resurfaces here, for as we remember, all sets of behavior (including linguistic behavior) always exhibit several different possible patterns. Two finite sets of individual behavior might be identical in terms of their physical performances, yet differ in the patterns underlying these sets. Rule-following, thus membership in a community, cannot be accounted for by purely dispositionalist account. Rather, community membership is itself a

normative issue: “Being a member of a community is rather being one who *ought* to conform to the norms implicit in the practices of the community.” (Brandom 1994, 39)

So it is the individual attitudes, the I-thou relations, rather than the aggregate attitudes of the whole community (which Brandom calls fiction) represented by the I-we relations which we must consider as “the fundamental social structure”. The only normative attitudes that exist are those of individuals, and insofar as specifically discursive and linguistic norms are concerned, every attitude of taking a performance to be in/correct is itself liable to be taken in/correct. In effect, we could all be wrong about some of our concepts, i.e. of their correct meaning and application<sup>20</sup>.

Thus far we have mostly addressed the genus of generic normative attitudes, taking something to be in/correct, from which normative statuses arise. Second, specifically discursive and linguistic norms have not been singled out except by reference to their objectivity, the independence of their normative status from any normative attitude. I shall now move on to the next section, which adds a semantic layer to the story, with an emphasis on the perspectival nature of those semantics, i.e. contents of normative commitments. Finally, in the last sections I shall elaborate how Brandom resolves an apparent conflict in his theory, in between on the one hand social perspectival and on the other objective meaning.

### 3.3. The Scorekeeping Game

On many scales *Making It Explicit* is an exceptional piece of contemporary philosophical work. For one, in Jeremy Wanderer’s words, “unlike many works rooted in the analytic tradition, Brandom’s masterwork is a self-aware attempt at metaphysical system-building” (Wanderer 2008, 1). Starting from a detailed depiction of social practice, Brandom strives to lay the groundworks for a model to explain virtually our whole linguistic existence. At the centre of this enterprise lays the language game to explain all further language games: the scorekeeping practice<sup>21</sup>.

The scorekeeping model is founded first on two different sorts of norms, then on two different sorts of perspectives from which these norms govern the score of interlocutors. On the side of norms the main couple is *commitment* and *entitlement*. On the side of perspectives these norms can then either be *attributed* or *undertaken*.

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<sup>20</sup> Brandom does not say whether we could be wrong about all of our concepts at once, or what is the status of e.g. social construct concepts. Could we all be mistaken about what the word “woman” means? As far as I understand him, this is the conclusion Brandom is willing to draw.

<sup>21</sup> It is worthy of note that Brandom does not himself fancy calling the scorekeeping model a game, but rather a practice. Nonetheless, I agree with Wanderer’s choice to call it a game, because the word captures better an “undifferentiated notion of appropriateness” – an appropriateness not preemptively wedded to rational, semantic, or intentional appropriateness. The “generic propriety” is important, because the more specific kinds are something the model strives to explain; thus it cannot include them in its basic vocabulary. (Wanderer 2008, 39)

The deontic primitive called commitment has an ancestor in the more familiar term “obligation”, and that of entitlement in “permission”. Brandom eschews the older vocabulary because of its connotations of relationships of superior to subordinate, which have nothing to do with commitments and entitlements. These are normative relations that reign between equals and unequals alike. (Brandom 1994, 160)

Another difference between the terminologies is that, unlike obligations and permissions, commitments and entitlements are not defined in relation to each other. Using formal negation, we can define obligation as not being permitted not to do something, and permission as not being obliged not to do it. But because in the big picture of Brandom’s theory formal logic is dependent on a more primal “material” understanding of semantic content, he wishes to avoid adopting logical connectives at the level of his primal vocabulary (Brandom 1994, xix). Thus commitment and entitlement are not defined via each other, but together they can define material negation, i.e. incompatibility relations between commitments: “Two claims are incompatible with each other if commitment to one precludes entitlement to the other” (Brandom 1994, 160).

Both commitments and entitlements are not part of the “natural furniture” of the world. Rather they originate from people’s attitudes towards each other, that is to say from their attributions of commitments and entitlements. The simplest case of attributing an entitlement just is to license someone to do something which they could not have done before. A doorman who accepts my ticket to the movies entitles me to enter the theatre. (Brandom 1994, 161)

A similar example of simple commitment would be the 18th century British practice of recruiting illiterate soldiers by offering them the queen’s shilling. Any person accepting the coin would simultaneously enlist for the army, with or without their knowledge. Should they consequently fail to fulfil their newly acquired obligations, the recruiting officers would be entitled to punish them. In this case, the deontic status of the individual, the commitment they have undertaken, is solely determined by the attitudes of those attributing to them the commitment. (Brandom 1994, 162)

To spell out this paramount trait of deontic scorekeeping norms explicitly: one can freely choose which commitments one undertakes, but not the contents of those norms. This rule, already appreciated by Kant in his understanding of freedom, applies to all norms, not just to discursive ones.

The examples of checking tickets and recruiting illiterates both describe non-linguistic social practices, where the relevant performances do not consist of speech acts. Before including these linguistic moves into the model, some basic terminology about the norms and perspectives on them must be set in place.

The normative status of an interlocutor is the combined “score” of their undertaken commitments and entitlements. What determines the normative status are the deontic attitudes other interlocutors have towards them, called deontic attributions. These are made by “scorekeepers”: a term which simply denotes an interlocutor having a deontic attitude on another interlocutor. Scorekeepers also keep score on themselves, on their own

commitments and entitlements as they grasp them. But their perspective on their score, what commitments they have undertaken and which commitments they are entitled to, is no more privileged than anyone else's attitude on them.

The social practice of promising offers a natural bridge to apprehend entitlements and commitments in a properly linguistic environment. To treat an assertive speech act as a promise can be understood as treating the interlocutor committed to the claim they expressed with the assertion. However, simply treating an assertion as a promise does not make it so; a genuine definition of a promise is that it *entitles* other interlocutors to hold one committed to the claim. It is only *acknowledged* promises that one can be held responsible for. (Brandom 1994, 165) In other words, making a promise is a normative affair, and so is counting one to have promised something – one can be wrong about both.

In order to continue elaborating the above model on a more characteristically linguistic level, a new form of commitment can be added: assertional commitment. This term answers the question of what it is to make a claim: it is to undertake an assertional commitment. At once it must be noted that to undertake an assertional commitment is not the same thing as performing a speech act. Different tokens of the same type of act can, depending on the context, express different commitments, and different types of speech acts can effectively express the same commitment.

For example, to say "This is a dog" while pointing to a cat does not express the same assertional commitment as saying the same sentence while pointing to a cow. In the first case the commitment would be "X claims this cat to be a dog", in the second "X claims this cow to be a dog". On the other hand, "The Persians were defeated by the Greeks at Plataea" expresses the same commitment as "The Greeks defeated the Persians at Plataea" although in question are two lexically different types of speech acts.

Why do they nonetheless express the same commitment? Because the two sentences about the battle of Platea both have the same propositional content, which Brandom, following Frege, defines as the equivalence of the set of possible inferences that can correctly be drawn from the two sentences, as was seen in the Section 2.5. In other words, their inferential roles are the same. The inferential role of an assertion is ultimately what determines not only its content (the set of possible inferences that can be drawn from it), but also its very identity as an assertion. An assertion is essentially something which can serve as a reason, and for which reasons can be asked (Brandom 1994, 167).

It should be borne in mind that the truth about who is committed and entitled to what is always a matter of perspective. Each scorekeeper has their own two sets of books for every other interlocutor: the commitments and entitlements the interlocutor (according to the scorekeeper) thinks they themselves have undertaken, plus the commitments and entitlements the scorekeeper thinks they *should* have undertaken. Moreover, because Brandom does not recognize any perspectives above individual ones, all points of view on deontic statuses are formally on equal level, and there is no privileged perspective from which to tell someone's "actual" score. In a sense all the scores are equally actual. The



score is kept for each interlocutor and by each interlocutor differently. Hence “[l]inguistic scorekeeping practice is *doubly* perspectival” (Brandom 1994, 185).

As a consequence the scores of singular interlocutors can vary immensely depending on the point of view. For not only is it a matter of perspective which speech acts represent what commitments, it is also relative what inferential consequences (i.e. what content) a certain commitment has. As was mentioned above, one is free to undertake any commitments, but not to choose the contents of those commitments, by which Brandom means whatever can correctly be inferred from the commitment. Therefore, as Wanderer explains, each scorekeeper keeps two records on each other interlocutor: one for the commitments they *would* acknowledge being committed to, and another for the commitments they *should* (according to the scorekeeper) acknowledge commitment to (Wanderer 2008, 42).

Similar rules apply for entitlements, with the exception that while a commitment may be undertaken directly, entitlement can only be undertaken indirectly, as a consequence of undertaking a commitment. Scorekeepers can disagree in their scores on who is entitled to what, and what entitlements are the consequences of which commitments. Furthermore, undertaking new commitments can, in the eyes of the scorekeeper, remove an interlocutor’s entitlements to some other commitments. Likewise, new undertaken commitments can add entitlement to previously unentitled commitments, and a commitment undertaken by someone else can serve as an entitlement for me to undertake the same commitment. (Wanderer 2008, 44)

All this (and more) the interlocutors can do implicitly, that is to say without being able to say (or consciously think) what they are doing in doing it. To keep score is to implicitly take disapproving and approving attitudes towards the linguistic performances of others. An approved move is one the scorekeeper treats the interlocutor as entitled to. The “bold conjecture” Brandom makes is that the game he describes contains all the essential elements of a rudimentary linguistic practice, in which the interlocutors assess not just any performances but specifically *assertions*. (Wanderer 2008, 53)

### 3.4. Brandom’s Holism

Brandom’s ambitions are grand, and so are the theoretical controversies he has stirred. What precious little this pale sketch of mine reveals of his work purports to articulate but one such problem. The dispute at issue is semantic holism, the generic form of which Brandom inherits from W.V.O. Quine, whose footprints he in many places follows and continues. Stated formally, the semantic holism specific to Brandom stems from the following commitments:

1. The meaning of a claim is what must be grasped to understand it, and
2. what is understood must at least determine the inferential significance of endorsing what is understood, but

3. what follows from a claim depends on what other claims are available as auxiliary hypotheses, so
4. any difference in collateral commitments means a difference in inferential significance, hence meaning. (Brandom 1994, 478)

“Inferential significance” means precisely the effects certain commitment has on the score as kept by a certain scorekeeper: what other claims follow from it, what other commitments it entails and entitles one to. Whereas Quine, according to Brandom, “waffled on” the question whether holism thus conceived applied to a given community of speakers or to every individual speaker, Brandom opts squarely for the latter choice, which makes his holism about as radical as can be imagined (Brandom 1994, 478).

It would be natural to think that many of us share at least some amount of doxastic commitments (there have been black dogs, the moon is not made out of cheese etc.), and consequently there would be significant overlap between our respective doxastic scores. However, occupying different bodies, all of us have commitments we have acquired noninferentially (through perception) which are not shared by anyone else. Therefore none of us shares exactly the same sets of doxastic commitments or beliefs<sup>22</sup> (Brandom 1994, 185).

And because the inferential significance of a doxastic commitment is determined by the *total* set of concomitant commitments undertaken by an interlocutor, since these sets differ from interlocutor to interlocutor, strictly speaking none of us shares *any* beliefs or doxastic commitments in terms of inferential significance. A scorekeeper might of course in theory attribute the exact same sets of commitments for two other interlocutors and so take their beliefs to be identical. But since no one in fact shares their total sets of commitments, the scorekeeper in that case would be wrong<sup>23</sup>.

It is evident that Brandom’s semantic holism wreaks havoc on many intuitive ideas of communication where the conveyance of beliefs is understood as the paradigm description. Especially the Lockean idea of communication as disclosing ideas becomes foreclosed, along with all other avenues which take communication to essentially involve sharing some (mental) content, which itself would stay the same in the process of transmission. Brandom’s scorekeeping practice, and the holism it includes, precludes such sharing in principle:

“Given the relativity of the inferential significance of a claim to the context of concomitant commitments available to serve as auxiliary premises, it follows that

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<sup>22</sup> Brandom’s reason for preferring “doxastic commitments” over “beliefs” is the latter’s equivocality between content one is ready to acknowledge and content one is not ready to acknowledge but which follows from other beliefs one has. Brandom stands with the latter version: “Believing that Pittsburgh is to the West of Philadelphia *is* believing that Philadelphia is to the East of Pittsburgh, whether one knows it or not” (Brandom 1994, 195).

<sup>23</sup> In any case, thinks Brandom, should two interlocutors in fact share all their commitments/beliefs and desires in common, communication between them would be superfluous (Brandom 1994, 510). This is not quite true, for hypothetical doxastic identity notwithstanding the two individuals could still learn something new from each other, namely what the other knows.

inferential significance is not preserved in communication—is not conveyed or transported from producer to consumer of communicational performances.”  
(Brandom 1994, 480)

Communication is by no means the only problem related to semantic holism as radical as Brandom’s, but it is one which, together with the case of objectivity of norms, displays qualities of his work which reflect the light shed by that of Lacan, as will be seen in Chapter 4. For now we must see how Brandom resolves the qualms about his holism.

### 3.5. Objectivity of Linguistic Norms and Conceptual Content

The problem of Brandom about to be addressed could be formulated as a clash of two contradictory requirements. On the one hand Brandom supports the I-thou account of social norms, according to which norms, including conceptual norms, must be explainable in terms of individual deontic attitudes and statuses, i.e. commitments and entitlements. On the other hand he insists that specifically conceptual norms must be considered objective in the sense that a given conceptual norm can be misapprehended from any doxastic perspective, and that doxastic statuses are not reducible to doxastic attitudes in that all interlocutors of a community could be mistaken about the meaning of any concept. Discursive norms must be both social and objective<sup>24</sup> in a sense that renders them independent of all individual attitudes in the society. The problem of semantic holism framed above ties into the issue, which ultimately comes down to how communication and intersubjectivity should be understood according to the deontic scorekeeping practice.

Earlier it was shown how Brandom’s semantic holism radically relativises the inferential significance of claims to their respective background doxastic score. This lead to the demand to specify how communication is possible in such seeming semantic anarchy. The trick is to complement the position of “inferential holism” with that of “social holism”: to approach semantic content not just as relations between propositions, but also as relations between interlocutors (Brandom 1994, 478). The bones of the solution come with the realization that while no perspective can be objective as such, the system and structure of those perspectives can be.

The first step in resolving the problem is to realize that the interlocutors themselves are – at least implicitly – aware of the perspectivity of their concepts. Indeed, an essential requirement for being capable of having commitments, more familiarly beliefs, is that one grasps the possibility of being in error in regards to even their most basic beliefs. Brandom quotes Donald Davidson from his essay “Thought and Talk”:

“Someone cannot have a belief unless he understands the possibility of being mistaken, and this requires grasping the contrast between truth and error – true belief and false belief. But this contrast, I have argued, can emerge only in the context of

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<sup>24</sup> Brandom refers to John McDowell’s critique of Wright and other I-we sociality theorists to back up the requirement for objectivity of conceptual norms and why, contra Wright, it should not be relinquished (Brandom 1994, 40).

interpretation, which alone forces us to the idea of an objective, public truth.”  
(Davidson 1984, 169-170)

The idea Brandom picks from Davidson is that all linguistic communication, even when it takes place between two native speakers of a language, requires interpretation. The important addition Brandom makes concerns what is meant by interpretation. As Ian Hacking has pointed out, if by “interpretation” we mean explicit formulation of hypotheses, since the application of a rule also requires interpretation (which produces another explicit hypotheses), we are led to a vicious cycle where interpretation has no end and communication becomes virtually impossible (Hacking 1986).

The general course of Brandom’s solution was already discussed in the first section of this Chapter, where the regress of rules argument of Wittgenstein was deployed against regulism. Communication as interpretation leads to a regress only if by interpretation is meant solely explicit formulation of rules. An implicit account of interpretation avoids such quarrels, and this is precisely what Brandom’s deontic practice provides. Communication as Brandom theorizes it demands an implicit – even an unconscious – ability to navigate between the doxastic perspectives, to understand that an expression in one’s mouth has different inferential significance in another’s. Nonetheless they can both count as expressing the same claim; to *grasp* the same *content*. (Brandom 1994, 509) How this can be despite the fact that the content strictly speaking varies according to different inferential significance will be elaborated on later.

In *Making It Explicit* Brandom offers four phenomena of linguistic practice where the aforementioned kind of implicit interpretation plays a vital role. These are: personal pronouns, demonstratives, speaker’s reference and *de re* ascriptions. In each of them the mechanism of substitution plays an ineliminable role. Successful communication involves substituting an expression of a claim by an interlocutor to another expression by a different interlocutor expressing the same claim. The key here is that the doxastic perspectives, albeit fundamentally different, can incorporate each other. In short, the Brandomian players can have perspectives on each other’s perspectives, and this is something they can explicitly express as claims about claims – that is what “making it explicit” means.

### 3.6. Implicit Interpretation

The case of personal pronouns offers a paradigmatic, elementary case of interpretation which essentially involves implicit substitution of an expression of a claim for another:

“When someone else says, ‘I’m talking’, for a member of the audience to draw inferences from that remark and check out what would be evidence for it and what it would be evidence for, that auditor must be able (no doubt without thinking about it and smoothly, as a matter of unconscious skill) to substitute ‘you’ or ‘he’ or ‘John’ for ‘I’.” (Brandom 1994, 510)

Everyday phenomenon as this is, it already encompasses a form of interpretation, by that token understanding. Drawing from Wittgenstein, Brandom argues that the above example showcases interpretation in that it requires implicitly substituting an expression of a rule for another. In the case of personal pronouns, what is substituted are not expressions of rules but expressions of claims. The expression “I am talking” and “John is talking” express the same claim in different interlocutor’s mouths.

The case of demonstratives is very much alike to personal pronouns. A token of the expression “This is blue” does not necessarily refer to the same object in two different interlocutors’ mouths. To secure the reference beyond the immediate context of the utterance a substitution of the demonstrative token “this” must be substituted for a token of a pronoun, e.g. “it”. So when John says “This is blue,” to make the reference work in communication across time and place another interlocutor must be able to say something like “No, it is yellow”. (Brandom 1994, 511)

### 3.7. From Dialogical to Monological Reasoning

What goes without saying is that the sort of skills depicted above are a prerequisite for understanding language. Where Brandom treads deeper waters is with the claim that language usage, even the whole faculty of consciousness, essentially consists in such an ability of substitution, which the scorekeeping practice explicates:

“The claim here is that consciousness in an important sense *consist in* the capacity to keep score, make substitutions, and so on. So on pain of infinite regress, these must be things that can be done without conscious deliberation or rehearsal.” (Brandom 1994, 702, footnote)

This could be translated into the broader notion that being aware of oneself necessarily means being aware of others. Since consciousness for Brandom consists in the capacity to keep score, and since scorekeeping by definitions presumes other “players” on which the score is being kept, it follows that consciousness for him necessarily involves being conscious of others. It can be seen this has major repercussions for example how rationality should be understood in Brandom’s theory. Discursive, rational capacities must according to him be social (in the I-thou sense) in nature. The basic structure of his argument, elaborated fully in the second half of *Making It Explicit*, is fourfold:

1. Conceptual contents are essentially propositional.
2. Propositional contents (i.e. contents that can be asserted) have an essential representational dimension; they are essentially *about* something.
3. The representational dimension is essentially social in the I-thou perspectival sense.
4. Therefore conceptual contents are essentially social-perspectival.

Brandom characterizes the conclusion (4.) as follows:

“[T]he conceptual contents employed in *monological* reasoning, in which all the premises and conclusions are potential commitments of one individual, are parasitic on and intelligible only in terms of the sort of content conferred by *dialogical* reasoning, in which the issue of what follows from what essentially involves assessments from the different social perspectives of scorekeeping interlocutors with different background commitments” (Brandom 1994, 590)

Of the four claims above only last two (3. and 4.) will be discussed here, first because they are arguably the most controversial of the group, and second because I believe they offer the most fruitful points of comparison to Lacan later on.

### 3.8. *De Dicto* and *De Re* Ascriptions

Like most everyone agrees, propositional contents always *purport* to be *about* something: they purport to *represent*. For many this aboutness explains why they are contentful in the first place: because they (at minimum aim to) represent the world, i.e. its objects and states of affair. This is where the representational paradigm in semantics begins; with world-word, vertical relations, by taking representational relations between linguistic expressions and the world as semantic primitives. Brandom’s course is the reverse: he begins with word-word, inferential horizontal relations as his primitives, then moves on to explain the world-word (and word-world) relations through them. At the same time Brandom advances the issue of communication, and how the “navigation” between different doxastic perspectives becomes feasible.

From previous sections we recall the two deontic social roles of scorekeeper and speaker, and the attitudes of undertaking and attributing. As was mentioned, although at first the players of the deontic practice can only play the game implicitly, they can learn to play it explicitly. The shift can be considered a game changer, for afterwards the previously plainly pragmatic game gains a new feature in the guise of a properly semantic dimension.

For although the “implicit game” strictly speaking has a semantic dimension, which is to say the commitments attributed and undertaken therein have content (in the form of inferential significance, relative to a set of background commitments), these contents themselves could not be made explicit; they could not be involved in the game as such.

In the “explicit game” this changes, and the contents of commitments themselves, their relative inferential significance, can be brought to the fore. To do that means *ascribing* a commitment to someone. In scorekeeping terms an ascription is an explicit attribution, or an attribution put in words.

Ascriptions come in two kinds. *De dicto* ascription concerns the way *how* a given interlocutor refers to something, and *de re* ascription concerns *what* is thus being referred to by the interlocutor. To follow the example Brandom uses, the sentence

Voltaire believed the man from whom Napoleon learned the most about the relations between war and diplomacy was a philosopher-prince

is either true or false depending on how it is read. In either case it ascribes a certain belief (a doxastic commitment) to a certain individual. In *de dicto* sense the ascription is false. Voltaire could not have believed this because when Voltaire died in 1778, Napoleon, the future emperor of France, was nine years old. But, ascribed in *de re* form, the sentence says that Voltaire believed *of* the individual who fits the definite description “the man from whom Napoleon learned the most about the relations between war and diplomacy” *that* he was a philosopher-prince. And indeed we have good reason to believe Voltaire did think Fredrick the Great was a philosopher-prince. (Brandom 1994, 501)

*De re* and *de dicto* ascriptions for Brandom are two ways to describe the content of a doxastic commitment, coinciding with the two doxastic perspectives from which such content can be apprehended. *De re* ascriptions express the commitment the interlocutor whom the commitment is ascribed to, according to the ascribing scorekeeper, *should* acknowledge. *De dicto* ascriptions express the commitment the interlocutor whom the commitment is ascribed to, according to the ascribing scorekeeper, *would* acknowledge. Stated differently, *de re* compares the attributed commitment to the background commitments the scorekeeper undertakes herself (i.e. the truth as she sees it), and *de dicto* compares the attributed commitment to the background commitments the scorekeeper attributes to the target interlocutor. The two perspectives on content are thus sensitive to the two different contexts of inferential significance, which they voice explicitly. (Brandom 1994, 503-504)

*De re* and *de dicto* ascriptions make explicit the implicit feature of the scorekeeping practice without which we could not understand each other, which is apprehending the other’s perspective. Since for Brandom a proposition’s content, in implicit form its inferential significance, is tied to the set of background commitments one has, without the ability to understand that different perspectives exist, one is left to compare every new commitment/proposition to only their own set of background commitments. So in case I hear a shaman tell me that

The seventh god graces us with his presence,

I will not be able to understand him, since I do not have any inferences involving the term “seventh god”. To make sense of the shaman I must be able to interpret him, i.e. substitute his expression of this claim with one of my own. Should I take the seventh god to refer to the sun and his presence to its shining, I could thus form the *de re* ascription

The shaman claims *of* the sun *that* it is shining. (Brandom 1994, 514)

At stake in *de re* ascriptions is nothing but the truth, which must be understood as inferential correctness – whose commitments are entitled, and by what grounds. The ascriptions are first and foremost a device to track and compare the *responsibility* interlocutors have for claims they make; which of them belong to the scorekeeper, which to the target of the

ascription. Brandom does not think of truth as a property of propositions (much less of commitments). Rather, the truth which *de re* ascriptions purport to make explicit is strictly speaking an *evaluation* of the named commitment; that it *should* be taken as true, i.e. correct. So despite their surface syntactic form, *de re* locutions do not reflect or describe the world but the social scorekeeping practice itself; who thinks being committed to what, and to what they are *really* committed to. The representational dimension of propositional contents thus reflects the social-perspectival nature of those contents. (Brandom 1994, 516-517)

### 3.9. Objectivity of Norms

The objectivity of concepts, which conceptual commitments ultimately decide the correctness of our words, is not determined by any one perspective, not even the fictive one of whole community. What decides it then?

Brandom's treatment of "truth", thinly discussed so far, is somewhat idiosyncratic. As we remember, each scorekeeper has their own set of undertaken commitments, which compose the set of claims they take to be true. These can vary from arithmetical exercises to religious matters. All such sets can be questioned as to the truth of their contents; all perspectives can err in some or all of their beliefs. There is a temptation then to say that the *real* truths are those commitments which are *correctly* taken to be true. But since there is no perspective privileged in this sense, there is no way to tell these apart from the rest based on the perspectives themselves. As was mentioned above, any given perspective can only stand for commitments which *should* be taken as true – not which are *correctly* taken to be true. After all, as we remember, every scorekeeper's attribution of correctness is itself liable to be evaluated as correct or incorrect. So what determines *the* truth, by that token objectivity of conceptual norms?

A natural answer would be the facts: "Traditional philosophy says that beliefs are many, but the truth is one; the same point arises here in the contrast between scorekeeping perspectives, which are many, and the world, which is one." The correctly undertaken commitments are those which correctly represent the world. Brandom however refuses such a choice, for that would make his theory of truth dependent on a representational, vertical notion of language, the opposition of which is one of the key motives for his project. Stipulating non-normative facts as the rock-bottom of his fundamentally normative approach would toll a rapid death blow for the scorekeeping practice's fundamental aims. Rather, "the distinction between claims or applications of concepts that are objectively correct and those that are merely taken to be correct is a structural feature of each scorekeeping perspective". (Brandom 1994, 594-595)

Emphasis should be laid on the "structural feature" of the practice. For every scorekeeper two sets of books open before her: the commitments the other has undertaken, and the commitments she herself has acknowledged. This latter book is what she considers the true one; the second what appears true for the other<sup>25</sup>. However, "What appears to the

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<sup>25</sup> Of course every scorekeeper acknowledges the *possibility* that they might be mistaken about some or all of their beliefs and attributions of belief. As was seen in Section 3.5., Brandom shares with



scorekeeper as the distinction between what is objectively correct and what is merely taken to be or treated as correct appears to us as the distinction between what is acknowledged by the scorekeeper attributing a commitment and what is acknowledged by the one to whom it is attributed.” (Brandom 1994, 597) Every “true book” is only one of appearances from the point of view of another, and there is always another point of view. In the scorekeeping game, the correct truth is always somewhere else.

“On this account, objectivity is a structural aspect of the social-perspectival *form of conceptual contents*” (Brandom 1994, 597). Objectivity of conceptual norms for Brandom is a question of form, not content. In this manner, it could be argued, objectivity and truth part ways. Should we insist on conceiving truth as a property of propositions or the commitments they stand for (e.g. as correct representation of facts), we find no such properties in the scorekeeping practice. No interlocutor can be said to correctly hold the truths they undertake. Conceptual objectivity is thus understood not as the truth, but rather as a *purported relation* to truth, or as belief’s aim for the truth. Our conceptual norms, taken as a whole, are objective precisely because any one of them can be apprehended incorrectly. It is the conditions of their correctness which make them objective, not their being correct per se. Brandom writes:

“What is shared by all discursive perspectives is *that* there is a difference between what is objectively correct in the way of concept application and what is merely taken to be so, not *what* it is—the structure, not the content.” (Brandom 1994, 600)

Conceptual contents are not shared directly but indirectly. To use a metaphor Brandom is fond of animating through his work, conceptual contents are not transparent to the eyes of their subjects like e.g. Cartesian semantics takes them to be. Conceptual mastery is not an all-or-nothing affair: we do not either understand the concept fully or not at all. A reading of Frege guides Brandom to a more “tactile” picture of concepts, where different interlocutors can all have the same “grasp” of a concept, each from their own doxastic perspective, with none of them fully grasping the whole. Yet the concept as they seize it is nonetheless shared objectively (Brandom 1994, 632).

Having discussed Brandom’s views on language for the length of two Chapters now, the time has come to shift the perspective onto a completely different ground. In Chapter 4 I shall first of all establish the fundamental base on which Lacan and Brandom can be conceived to share in the same semantic tradition, broadly speaking, and consequently attempt to solidify the footing with select textual evidence accompanied by suitable cross-tradition translations.

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Davidson the idea that this condition, acknowledgment of being mistaken, is an important condition for having any beliefs, to be a believer in the first place.

## Chapter 4

### 4.1. Lacan's Structuralism

While asking whether Lacan belongs to the tradition of French (post)structuralism raises a moot point, it is not as self-evident whether his teachings can be accommodated into the frame of "analytic structuralism" presented in Chapter 2. As we recall, the general condition for a structuralist semantic theory set there was to consider the horizontal relations of language to be primary and capable of adequately explaining the vertical ones. That meaning is explicable solely in terms of structural connections between linguistic expressions can be reasonably considered as the minimal semantic structuralist commitment. A simple question posable to Lacan then is if he can share at least this much with Brandom and the so called analytic structuralism: does Lacan a) consider the horizontal relations primary and if so, b) how does he model these relations?

The first question earns the more or less straightforward answer "yes". Although the concepts of horizontal and vertical relations as such are a rare sight in his writings, Lacan's appropriation of de Saussure's teachings shows he worked with the same structuralist framework. The main purpose of this section is to prove that. Secondly, I shall offer a suggestion as to how Lacan understood the nature of the primary horizontal relations.

We can begin by observing two telling semantic commitments in Lacan's work:

1. Meaning is *holistic*, and
2. linguistic expressions are not primarily meaningful because they *represent* states and objects of the world or thoughts.

Together these commitments suffice to establish a minimal shared ground on which certain comparisons can be performed between Lacan and Brandom under the generic name of structuralism. However, alone the bridge the commitments intend to form would be left a stump, for although they succeed in excluding a handsome number of theoretical approaches to meaning, ample room is spared to entertain disparate views. Thus, beyond these broad parallels, a more detailed story will have to wait to unfold another time.

That Lacan is committed to a form of semantic holism is displayed by a few choice quotes from his Seminars. In Seminar I for example he sets out to review Freud's concept of transference, initially defined as the revelation of unconscious discourse through ordinary discourse in the analytic setting. In the course of the examination Lacan says:

"What we discover manifested in [transference] is this fundamental principle of semantics, that every semanteme refers to the whole of the semantic system, to the polyvalence of its usages. Moreover, for everything which properly speaking pertains

to language, in as much as it is human, that is to say utilisable in speech, the symbol is never univocal. Every semanteme always has several meanings.” (Lacan 1988a, 247)

Two separate claims can be gleaned from this excerpt. The first one is that every semanteme’s “reference” is to the whole system it appears in, the second that every such semanteme itself always has multiple meanings. What is also noteworthy, but which will not be made much of here, is that Lacan thinks these principle apply both to ordinary discourse *and* the unconscious discourse, the latter being famously “structured like a language”.

The first two claims are essentially the same ones that were discussed respectively in the context of Brandom’s holism and inferential semantics. As we saw in Section 4 of Chapter 3, “The whole of the semantic system” for Brandom is the idiom of an individual speaker, the total set of their doxastic commitments, against which all singular commitments gain their meaning. On the other hand, in Section 7 of Chapter 2 we saw how Brandom models the contentfulness of subsentential expressions (singular terms and predicates) as SMSIC sets. Their meaning is always dependent on a larger whole, in the last instance on the doxastic score of the person who uses them in a sentence. For the same reason they always have multiple meanings. Since semantemes by definition are singular terms, there is no *prima facie* reason not to interpret the more generic holism Lacan deploys above along the more specific lines Brandom establishes.

That should wrap up commitment number 1. The commitment number two, which stated that linguistic expressions are not primarily meaningful because they represent either worldly states of affair and objects or some mental content, can likewise be found from Lacan. For example in Seminar III he says:

“The system of language, at whatever point you take hold of it, never results in an index finger directly indicating a point of reality; it’s the whole of reality that is covered by the entire network of language. You can never say that this is what is being designated, for even were you to succeed you would never know what I am designating in this table – for example, the colour, the thickness, the table as object, or whatever else it might be” (Lacan 1993, 32).

The paragraph resembles Wittgenstein’s critique, in *Philosophical Investigations*, of ostensive definitions as primary origins of meaning. The gesture of pointing to an object while uttering a certain word is more ambiguous than not, for any object always has several properties that could function as the word’s reference. The ability to distinguish between these presupposes an understanding of different grammatical categories, which makes it difficult to conceive how ostensive learning could get started in the first place<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, as Quine famously argued, “There is nothing in linguistic meaning beyond what is to be gleaned from overt behavior in the observable circumstances” (Quine 1992, 38). Ostension, i.e. pointing to objects while uttering words, seems empirically speaking to be the *only* way a child *can* learn a language. The problem is real, but will not be discussed further here.

However, critique of ostension does not necessarily translate into critique of representation. For that another quote is in order:

“The signified is not the things in their raw state, already there, given in an order open to meaning. Meaning is human discourse insofar as it always refers to another meaning.” (Lacan 1993, 199)

What these quotes aim at is first of all not to pretend to solve the problems they raise, but initially to translate Lacan’s idiosyncratic formulations into more familiar terminology, and to situate him in that terminology. By denying that the “signified” (of which more will be said below) was constituted by the “things in their raw state” Lacan resists the notion, already elaborate by Saussure, that words would be but labels of objects. The signified is never a thing for Lacan. What it precisely is is a complicated issue, the clarification of which will be attempted later on.

Before that we must address the possibility that some form of mental content is what accounts for the meaning and signified for Lacan. On this point at least Lacan was remarkably transparent:

“The opposition between signifier and signified isn’t a simple substitute for the famous and no less inextricable opposition between idea, or thought, and word. Someone, an outstanding grammarian, has written a remarkable work in which there is only one fault, its unfortunate subtitle, *Words for thought*<sup>27</sup>. This way of putting it is, I hope, no longer sustainable for any of you.” (Lacan 1993, 222)

I have now showcased reasons to think that Lacan at the very least rejects two major contenders of structuralism, namely the two varieties of the semiotic view of language. But nowhere yet has the positive claim been pursued that he should be included in the company of analytic structuralism, the essential condition of entry being the primacy of horizontal relations. This is what is to be found next in the line of discussion.

## 4.2. Two Birds with One Definition

Continuing the comparison between Brandom and Lacan, there is an interesting similarity in how they draw the distinction between human and animal realms of meaning. Recall Brandom’s parrot from 5.2. The lesson there was that while the parrot had mastered a certain language entry move in that it could reliably report the presence of red things, it could not be considered to know the meaning of the word because it lacked all capacity to intralinguistic moves, i.e. the capacity to draw inferences, which should be considered the deciding factor. So to be specific, it is not that the parrot did not understand what it was saying, but that it was not *saying* anything in the first place – it only showcased a certain regular differential responsive disposition.

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<sup>27</sup> “*Des mots à la pensée*”: the subtitle of Damourette and Pichon, *Essai de grammaire*. Translator’s footnote.

Now Lacan too evokes an example involving a bird attached to the colour red: the robin redbreast, for whom the namesake shade of its fellow animal has “this captivating value,” the sight of which cause in it “a series of actions or henceforth unitary behaviour that links the bearer of this sign to its perceiver”. The colour of the bird serves as sort of a signal for its mate, constituting what Lacan calls its “natural meaning” or a natural sign (Lacan 1993, 167). The cases of the parrot and the robin redbreast in a sense merge, for they both exhibit a regular differential responsive disposition in regards to the colour red. For the parrot this is a signal to emit the sound “That’s red”, and for the redbreast it is a warning that a territorial limit will be defended if trespassed on.

Lacan’s reasons for why natural meaning is not linguistic, human meaning have some intriguing similarities with Brandom. These also reflect their shared commitment to the primacy of horizontal relations. After characterising the natural sign as having a unitary relation to certain behavior from the bird’s part, Lacan draws attention to what at first seems a related phenomenon in humans. In Daniel Defoe’s famed novel, the stranded Robinson Crusoe one day finds a trace of a footprint on the shore of his desert island. Consequently he effaces the trace and leaves a marker in its place – a wooden cross. In the context of the example Lacan writes:

“The distinction between sign and object is quite clear here, since the trace is precisely what the object leaves behind once it has gone off somewhere else. Objectively there is no need for any subject to recognise a sign for it to be there – a trace exists even if there is nobody to look at it.” (Lacan 1993, 167)

A trace is different from an object: it marks the absence of the object. A trace can also be seen as distinct from a natural sign like the red of the robin redbreast, which also can be considered as an object. Properly speaking, the colour red for the robin does not *mean* anything: its significance for the animal is in the *reaction* it induces. Likewise with Brandom’s parrot, which does not see the objects it reports to *represent* anything. Natural signs/objects are separable from the rest of reality solely by the reactions they stir in the respective RDRD systems, although the objects could in principle exist without the systems that react to them.

Moreover, a trace is different from the sign in that it includes a *relation* between two objects, with one of them somehow intrinsically referring to the other by announcing its absence. A footprint in the sand is a trace of an absent human. What the trace and the sign share in common is that both can exist objectively, i.e. without anyone recognizing them as what they are. Red things and footprints could exist even if there was no single RDRD system to perceive them.

The third term in the series Lacan identifies is the signifier, distinct from a sign and a trace alike. “[T]he signifier,” he writes,

“is a sign that doesn’t refer to any object, not even to one in the form of a trace, even though the trace nevertheless heralds the signifier’s essential feature. It, too, is the sign of an absence. But insofar as it forms part of language, the signifier is a sign

which refers to another sign, which is as such structured to signify the absence of another sign, in other words, to be opposed to it in a couple.” (Lacan 1993, 167)

Signifiers are not, like words in Gulliver’s tales, only names for things which are more convenient to carry around than the things themselves<sup>28</sup>. In other words, a signifier is not just a trace in that its relation to meaning would be the intrinsic relation of absence to past presence. Rather, the signifier can be termed “a sign which refers to another sign”, “to be opposed to it in a couple”. The reference is to de Saussure’s dictum, discussed in Chapter 2, that all there is in language are identities and oppositions between these identities, from phonemic minimal pairs to semantic binary oppositions like “night and day”, “black and white”, “up and down” etc. Like the oft-repeated phrase of Lacan goes, “every signification only ever refers back [*renvoyer*] to another signification<sup>29</sup>” (Lacan 1993, 247).

The cross Crusoe leaves in the stead of the footprint encapsulates the three central tenets of signifiers everywhere. First, the material token serving as the marker is arbitrary: any object which would stand out from the sand would do, there is no intrinsic connection with the cross and what it signifies like there is between a trace and a sign, or between a sign and an RDRD system which is always somehow wired to react to certain stimuli in a certain way. Second, the signifier is purely relational in its existence: it is not the cross or the trace but the cross *replacing* the trace that makes a signifier.

Thirdly, the meaning of a signifier does not exist objectively: it takes someone, a subject, to interpret something as a signifier for it to have meaning. Interpretation means understanding a) that the signifier (itself but a relation) has a relation to the system of other signifiers, and b) that some other subject *used* the signifiers to express something. According to one of Lacan’s central definitions of the signifier, it is “what represents a subject to another signifier”. In *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* Lacan illuminates the definition with an example:

“In order to illustrate this axiom, suppose that in the desert you find a stone covered with hieroglyphics. You do not doubt for a moment that, behind them, there was a subject who wrote them. But it is an error to believe that each signifier is addressed to you – this is proved by the fact that you cannot understand any of it. On the other hand you define them as signifiers, by the fact that you are sure each of these signifiers is related to each of the others.” (Lacan 1977, 199)

It is noteworthy that to recognize something as a signifier does not demand a subject to understand the meaning it has, but only that it has a meaning – a meaning distinguished from that of a trace or a sign by its ambiguity and extrinsic relation to the letters that convey it. The ambiguity of an expression in relation to its meaning is another characteristic mark of the signifier. That this ambiguity in significant parts stems from the fact that one can use the signifiers to express something else than their standard meaning poses a salient aspect of language, of which Lacan was not unaware of: “What this structure of the signifying chain

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<sup>28</sup> See Other Internet Sources: Jonathan Swift: *Gulliver’s Tales*.

<sup>29</sup> The French term *sens* which Lacan often uses has been variedly translated as *sense*, *signification*, or *meaning*.

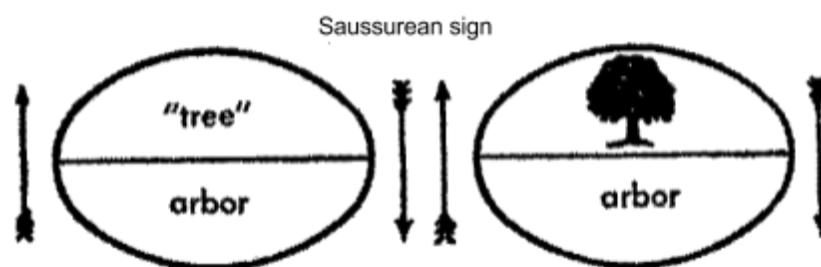
discloses is the possibility I have ... to use it to signify *something altogether different* from what it says". Idioms are a case in point: the word *arbre*, tree in French, when used in the expression *grimper à l'arbre*, means something completely different than literally climbing to a tree, namely to be tricked (Lacan 2006, 421).

Relations between signifiers are another name for the primary horizontal relations that structuralism takes as primary. In inferentialism these relations are ultimately understood as inferential roles, objectifiable as sets<sup>30</sup>. Can we uncover a related theory from Lacan, one which would specify how the primary horizontal relations are structured? Does Lacan offer a resolution to what meaning at bottom is? It will be the job of the following sections to seek the answers to these questions.

### 4.3. Signifier and Signified

To ask what meaning is for Lacan seems to lead to the question of how he understands the relations between signifier and signified. The signified is where de Saussure located meaning, after all, and since Lacan adopted his vocabulary, it would be natural to think it is a good place to start looking for answers. However, Lacan notoriously radically reworked de Saussure's teachings, especially the concept pair signifier and signified. Most often it is said he changed their relative importance: while de Saussure considered the sign's essential parts to be equal, Lacan raised the signifier over the signified, claiming the former determined the latter.

The issue of signifier's and signified's relationship is crucial because it essentially reflects the more familiar distinction between an expression and its meaning. Put another way then, Lacan's claim that the signifier determines the signified can be translated into the claim that the structure of expressions engenders meaning, which is the claim that the horizontal relations between expressions account for the vertical relations between expressions and meaning. In this section I shall first summarise de Saussure's idea of the relation between signifier and signified, then go over the modulations Lacan added.



The familiar picture above comes with the following simple definitions. The word "Tree" below, as the signifier, stands for a "sound-image". Its essential properties were already

<sup>30</sup> Of course it should be borne in mind that the inferential roles as explicated by semantic theory must be accounted for in Brandom by pragmatic theory, or a theory of use. So more correctly we should say that while meaning for Brandom can be *modelled* as inferential roles and sets, it ultimately *is* use like Wittgenstein entertained.

discussed in the previous section: relational, arbitrary, and dependent on an interpreting subject<sup>31</sup>. Together they form the linguistic sign as a “two-sided psychological entity”, the halves of which are “united in the brain by an associative bond”. The picture of the tree in the top half stands for the signified, or the “concept”. (de Saussure 1959, 66-67)

A certain discrepancy exist in de Saussure’s teachings, in the form they have survived for the posterity, concerning the nature of the signified. Despite his claims that “in language there are only differences without positive term,” that “language is a form and not a substance”, he treats the sign as some sort of a psychic phenomenon dependent on “association” of a signifier with its signified. Moreover, while depicting the process of communication de Saussure writes:

“Suppose that the opening of the circuit is in A’s brain, where mental facts (concepts) are associated with representations of the linguistic sounds (sound-images) that are used for their expression. A given concept unlocks a corresponding sound-image in the brain; this purely *psychological* phenomenon is followed in turn by a *physiological* process: the brain transmits an impulse corresponding to the image to the organs used in producing sounds. Then the sound waves travel from the mouth of A to the ear of B: a purely *physical* process.” (de Saussure 1959, 11-12)

Like Peregrin notes, while it is true that this particular chapter finds no support in de Saussure’s authentic material<sup>32</sup>, there are other similar parts where the sign and the signified in particular are described, not just as a structural product of oppositions, but as distinct mental *substances*, which clearly goes against de Saussure’s overall structuralist framework. If meaning is understood as mental content somehow attached to an expression in a psychological process, then clearly it goes beyond what pure structure of expressions can explain. Modelling meaning as a value, while more or less implicit in the *Course*, is thus never fleshed out in its full implications. (Peregrin 2001, 45, 47)

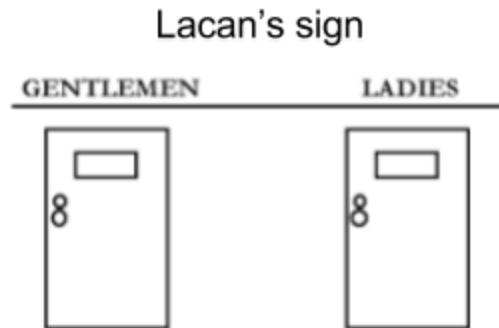
These discrepancies, along with some other properties of the sign, become abandoned in Lacan. In the famous paper *The Instance of the Letter, or Reasons since Freud*, Lacan brings forth his appropriation of the Saussurean picture of the sign. As we can see it bears little resemblance with the original:

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<sup>31</sup> It is unclear whether this last point can be ascribed for de Saussure. Either way it makes no great difference in this context.

<sup>32</sup> De Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics* is in fact a later reconstruction, published posthumously and based on the notes of two Saussure’s student who attended his lectures.





Three major differences strike one at first sight. First, the order of the signifier (words “Gentlemen” and “Ladies”) has been lifted above the order of the signified, the two doors. This relates to the emphasis Lacan weights on the signifier. Second, the circle fencing the two parts in unbreakable unity is removed, leaving only a bar “resisting signification”. Third, whereas with Saussure we had one signifier joined with one signified, here we have two signifiers joined with what seems like two tokens of the same type of signified.<sup>33</sup> (Lacan 2006, 416)

The point of the third difference is precisely to show how the signifier crosses the bar and induces effects on the signified, determining it. For although the doors are completely identical, a difference emerges in their meaning in virtue of the different signifiers they are ascribed: one loo is reserved for men, the other for women. There is nothing on the level of the signifieds, regardless of whether these are understood as concrete doors or as thoughts about doors, that could explain the difference in meaning – this is brought upon by the signifier alone. The idea that “the signifier serves [*repond a*] the function of representing the signified, or better, that the signifier has to justify [*repondre de*] its existence in terms of any signification whatsoever” must be abandoned. (Lacan 2006, 416)

With Brandom the question of what meaning is can be roughly summed up in the concept of inferential role combined with a theory of use. In that picture there is no such thing as the realm of meaning, because meaning just basically is a value an expression can have in the context of a social deontic practice. Nowhere, not in a Platonic heaven or in the mind, are there some meaning-entities waiting to be paired with expressions. Can we say the same about the story Lacan recounts? After all, although he is strict about signifier determining the signified, as such this does not tell us whether meaning can be considered as an entity, either abstract or mental.

An answer of sorts might rest in the second difference mentioned above, more specifically in the barrier resisting signification between two distinct orders. While responding to some erroneous interpretations of this barrier, Lacan wrote that it should be read as a “real border, that is to say for leaping, between the floating signifier and the flowing signified” (Dany

<sup>33</sup> The fourth difference is that Lacan uses “signifier” quite freely and vaguely to refer to any physically distinct object that can be considered a part of a system of signifiers. These include unconscious manifestations like dreams, slips of tongue, involuntary gestures etc. Even when in question are specifically lexical terms Lacan rarely distinguished between different linguistic categories while speaking of the signifier. In this work I shall use “signifier” to refer to lexical terms and linguistic expressions, specified as need be.

Nobus 2003, 52). This characterisation, together with Lacan's insistence through his works to speak of two distinct orders, the signifier's and the signified's, hints that the signified is at the very least not eliminated by, perhaps not even reducible to, the signifier.

What is certain is that Lacan was not interested in meaning like a philosopher is, i.e. for purely abstract and theoretical reasons or idle curiosity. As was brought out in the Introduction, his purposes always remained in the clinical ends of psychoanalysis as a form of psychological treatment. In that sphere, one particularly pressing issue for Lacan was the breakdown of meaning that occurs in psychotic, e.g. paranoid, delusion. In *Seminar III* Lacan writes:

“What is the subject ultimately saying, specially at a certain period of his delusion? That there is meaning. What meaning he doesn't know, but it comes to the foreground, it asserts itself, and for him it's perfectly understandable. And it's precisely because it's situated at the level of understanding as an incomprehensible phenomenon, as it were, that paranoia is so difficult for us to grasp and, also, of such great interest.” (Lacan 1993, 22)

Lacan's attention was drawn to the fascinating effect meaning has for us, its phenomenal appearance in our subjective awareness, especially in psychotic delusion. The psychotic patient appears to see meaning where others do not; they even strive to share this meaning with us. It is not obvious what precisely Lacan means by situating the delusion “on the level of understanding”, but it is clear enough that he thinks it is here that the psychotic phenomenon's symptoms should be located. The question why psychosis is such a tricky topic to grasp then boils down to not an absence but a paradox of understanding: the delusion seems to be at the same time understandable (for the psychotic) and incomprehensible (for others).

In his so called “register theory” Lacan distinguished between the imaginary and the symbolic registers: the former could loosely be identified with our experienced, lived consciousness, the latter with the unconscious structures. What intrigued him especially in the period inaugurated by the Rome Discourse is how the symbolic register exerts effects in the imaginary, somewhat corresponding to how the signifier determines the signified:

“There's no doubt that meaning is by nature imaginary. Meaning is, like the imaginary, always in the end evanescent, for it is tightly bound to what interests you, that is, to that in which you are ensnared. You would know that hunger and love are the same thing, you would be like any animal, truly motivated. But owing to the existence of the signifier your personal little meaning – which is also absolutely heart-breakingly generic, human all too human – leads you much further. Since there is this damned system of the signifier, such that you have not yet been able to understand either how it came to be there, how it came to exist, what purpose it serves, or where it is leading you, it is what leads you away.” (Lacan 1993, 54)

Here (and elsewhere) Lacan seems to be saying that animal and man do not categorically differ *qua* their psychologies, or their *experience of meaning* as such, but in virtue of the signifier which organizes the experience and lived meaning of the second.

Returning to the barrier, what it eventually resists, it could be argued, is not the effects signifier has on the signified, but rather our ability keep track of these effects. One way to read the barrier's meaning would then be something like "there is no signification on *how* signification comes about", only that it does come about. In more specific terms I would say that there is no way to tell how a certain expression, a certain signifier, comes to be attached to certain lived experience, subjective awareness of its meaning.

This deserves a bit more clarification. Earlier I mentioned how Lacan does not treat semantic holism as problematic in and on itself. He does, however, at least once reply to the query that, if signification always refers back to signification, where does it eventually end?

"I don't want to give an overly philosophical discourse here but want to show you for example what I mean when I tell you that discourse is essentially directed at something for which we have no other term than *being*. I ask you, then, to think about this for a moment. You are at the close of a stormy and tiring day, you regard the darkness that is beginning to fall upon your surroundings, and something comes to mind, embodied in the expression, *the peace of the evening*." (Lacan 1993, 138)

The follow-up question is, "What link is there between the expression *the peace of the evening* and what you experience?" In the short discussion that follows, Lacan observes that "something quite different happens according to whether we, who have called up this peace of the evening ourselves, have formulated this expression before uttering it, or whether it takes us by surprise or interrupts us, calming the movement of agitation that dwelled within us." If the expression comes to us as a completely novel, uninvited phrase, it "assumes its full value". The expression and the lived moment come close here, but the deeper one probes into their connection, the more distant it grows. Ultimately there is nothing else we can say about the relation of this particular expression and this particular experience other than that it occurred:

"We have now come to the limit at which discourse, if it opens onto anything beyond meaning, opens onto the signifier in the real. We shall never know, in the perfect ambiguity in which it dwells, what it owes its marriage with discourse." (Lacan 1993, 139)

One way to interpret Lacan on the relation between signifiers and signifieds could well follow the lines of *Philosophical Investigations*, which doubts the capacities of semantic theories to model meaning theoretically. Pairing words with their meanings seems dubious for Wittgenstein, to the point where he seems to make mockery of such efforts:

"You say: the point isn't the word, but its meaning, and you think of the meaning as a thing of the same kind as the word, though also different from the word. Here the

word, there the meaning. The money, and the cow that you can buy with it. (But contrast: money, and its use.)” (Wittgenstein 1958, §120)

However, although it might be futile also in Lacan’s mind to try and pair expressions with meanings as they are lived, it is far from vain that we can try to model the relations between signifiers and how they *in toto* come to engender meaning. As we shall see, as with Brandom, the mechanism of substitution, albeit in a different form, does major explanatory work for Lacan too.

#### 4.4. Effacement as Substitution

Earlier we briefly touched Robinson Crusoe in his island, facing something disturbing – an unknown footprint in the virgin sand. The example was used to throw light on the distinctions between a sign, a trace, and the signifier. The signifier, we remember, appeared when Crusoe replaced the trace with a cross, thus creating a relation between an object and a trace. Now, what must be specified is that Crusoe did not merely replace the trace with the cross: he “effaced” it. In Seminar IV, where Lacan returns to Crusoe’s situation, he lays stark stress on the operation of effacement as the inauguration of the order of the signifier:

“I spoke to you about Robinson Crusoe and about the footstep, the trace of Friday’s footprint, and we dwelt a little while on the following: is this already the signifier, and I told you that the signifier begins, not with the trace, but with whatever effaces the trace, and it is not the effaced trace which constitutes the signifier, it is something which poses itself as being able to be effaced, which inaugurates the signifier. In other words, Robinson Crusoe effaces the trace of Friday’s footprint, but what does he put in its place? If he wants to preserve the place of Friday’s footprint, he needs at least a cross, namely a bar and another bar across it. This is the specific signifier. The specific signifier is something which presents itself as being itself able to be effaced and which subsists precisely in this operation of effacing as such. I mean that the effaced signifier already presents itself as such with the properties proper to the unsaid. In so far as I cancel the signifier with the bar, I perpetuate it as such indefinitely, I inaugurate the dimension of the signifier as such.” (S VI, 3; see Other Internet Sources)

The capacity of being effacable and of “subsisting precisely in this operation of effacing as such” should not be understood as yet new properties of the signifier, but rather as specifications of the old ones. They specify the signifier’s essentially relational, holistic existence, its nature as a part relating not only to a whole but to other signifiers. In this section an argument will be pursued, following Owen Hewitson<sup>34</sup>, that the capacity of being effacable which Lacan attributes to the signifier should be read as the capacity of being substitutable.

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<sup>34</sup> See Other Internet Sources, Hewitson 2010.

Subsisting in effacement is essential for being a signifier, that much is clear. When I argue that effacement should be understood as substitution, I mean it should be understood in the lines of the notion of value discussed in Chapter 2, according to which two units have the same value in case they are interchangeable in the context of some whole while preserving some relevant feature of that whole. But the purpose is not just to identify effacement with value, for as Lacan explicitly says, effacement is what inaugurates the signifier, hence value. The more profound topic now is how the value of linguistic units, via substitution, alias effacement, emerges in the first place.

Substitution demands that something remains the same through a change. What is it that remains the same in effacement of the signifier? Lacan's answer is the "place" of the signifier. However, it is not just that the place remains the same through change, but that through this change, this effacement, the "placeness" of the place emerges as such. Returning to the example of Crusoe staring at the trace of the footprint, before he effaces the trace, there is no such thing as the "place of the trace" – it has no position in a given system of signifiers. There is merely the trace, which intrinsically refers to a man, and not yet a signifier.

As we recall, the trace is an absence, or a lack, that refers to a presence that once must have been there, having made the imprint in the sand. A signifier on the other hand refers not to an absent presence but to a lack which was never preceded by any presence. In the example the cross refers to the footprint, i.e. a lack. So while both the trace and the signifier in a sense are lacks, the signifier is special in that its lack is not based on a prior presence but on another lack, the trace of the footprint. The mistake of the semiotic view would consequently be to think that, since the signifier refers to the trace and the trace refers to man, the signifier would transitively also refer to the man. But it does not *because the trace was effaced*, wiped away, thus losing its ability to refer intrinsically to anything. What remains of it is the place, which, as a place, is nothing: the cross as a token is completely arbitrary, replaceable, in this place, which refers to its position in a system. Lacan writes:

“[I]n fact there again what we rediscover, is that just as after it is effaced, what remains, if there is a text, namely if this signifier is inscribed among other signifiers, what remains, is the place where it has been effaced, and it is indeed this place also which sustains the transmission, which is this essential thing thanks to which that which succeeds it in the passage takes on the consistency of something that can be trusted.” (S V, 8-10; see Other Internet Sources)

Why does not the cross, as the signifier, transitively refer to the man? Because “[t]he signifier does not designate what is not there, it engenders it” (Seminar XIV, 8; see Other Internet Sources). This does not mean the cross somehow engenders the man. Rather it engenders the place in the context of which the cross can ultimately refer to the man<sup>35</sup>. By effacing the trace Crusoe cancels its intrinsic ability to refer to the man, and in the process

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<sup>35</sup> Like Brandom, Lacan is not claiming that signifiers cannot at all refer to objects or their properties – that would be quite stupid. The issue is whether reference to objects should be considered the primary faculty of signifiers/expressions in virtue of which they become meaningful. Both Brandom and Lacan would affirm a negative response.

“universalizes” this ability, which then becomes a structural, extrinsic property of whatever object is placed in its place. To return to the vocabulary of value, in this instance, the whole that is preserved by substituting an item for another is the function of referring to the man. Not only is the function preserved, but it becomes generalized too, now distributable to an indefinite number of objects.

Is that the whole story? If it was, it would seem a bit controversial to say the least, for ultimately what appears to take place in the example is that the intrinsic referential ability of the trace is universalized via substitution onto another object as its extrinsic property. But if that was the case, wouldn't the signifier then be secondary and logically dependent on the trace and its “intrinsic” relation to the man? Clearly more needs to be said about this “intrinsic” ability of the trace to refer to an object, for otherwise a backdoor is left open for the semiotic view to squeeze in and ruin the story.

Like most all philosophical examples, the one used above is illuminating in some respects, confusing in others. A possible solution to the threat of semiotic view's return could be found from closely examining the supposed “intrinsic” relation of the footprint and the man who left it. For the word “intrinsic” to make any difference here it would have to be read as somehow “natural”, as both distinct and primary in relation to the signifier. Indeed, it is intuitive to think a footprint has a natural connection to a man, because it takes a man to leave one. Does it really require the signifier to establish such a simple connection?

It does. In the example, the trace already functions as a signifier for the man before he effaces it. As a speaking being man no longer has access to the “natural meaning” of a RDRD system: all his signs have effectively turned into signifiers. In another context Lacan returns to this crucial difference:

“I'm at sea, the captain of a small ship. I see things moving about in the night, in a way that gives me cause to think that there may be a sign there. How shall I react? If I'm not yet a human being, I shall react with all sorts of displays, as the say – modeled, motor, and emotional. I satisfy the descriptions of psychologists, I understand something, in fact I do everything I'm telling you that you must know how not to do. If on the other hand I am a human being, I write in my log book – *At such and such a time, at such and such a degree of latitude and longitude, we noticed this and that.*” (Lacan 1993, 188)

What distinguishes the signifier is that “I make a note of the sign as such.” In other words, I note its status as a sign of something else. What Lacan surreptitiously stresses is that in the realm of the signifier, the sign becomes infected, losing the intrinsic, uniform, natural value it has for animals as RDRD systems. This shows in that the sign's “intrinsic” meaning for a human like Robinson is actually not natural, but on closer inspection can be explained by already familiar terminology. The two sentences, “There's a footprint,” followed by “So there was a man,” together form a Brandomian material inference. Beyond this inference the footprint's meaning is vague, even oppressively so: in the novel *Crusoe* is for some time driven close to madness as he cannot figure out if the trace was left by himself or some other human being.

In truth the trace of the footprint already served as a signifier for Crusoe before he empirically effaced it and replaced it with a cross. That he could perform the action, indeed saw it necessary to do it, was that he was already a speaking being who could, upon seeing the footprint, infer something about it. So the threat of semiotic view's return is superficial, based solely on abusing the limitations of the example. It goes to show once more how the problem of the actual inauguration of language – a problem termed by Donald Davidson as the “infinitely difficult one” (Davidson 1985, 259) – is tricky for us to grasp on a conceptual level, because everything we can say about it is presumed by it.

What I have attempted to provide in this section is not how the trick of the signifier's inauguration is done but what counts as doing it. Thus it has been argued that Lacan's term “effacement”, what he considers an essential aspect of the signifier, can be identified as a generic form of substitution. In the next section I shall try to hone that form to a more accurate one.

## 4.5. Metonymy and Metaphor

*The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious* is an important paper in Lacan's oeuvre for great many reasons, one of which includes the premier presentation of his theory of metaphor and metonymy. Initially these linguistic terms are introduced as reinterpretations of Freud's concepts “condensation” and “displacement”, these being the central mechanisms of dreams as unconscious symptoms heralded by *The Interpretations of Dreams*. They also model the primary horizontal relations in Lacan, and how they engender meaning.

Whereas Brandom's choice term for the horizontal relations are inferential relations and roles, a correlate concept in Lacan would be “signifier chains” or “chains of signifiers”. The twofold essence of the chains repeats the already articulated conditions of the signifier: they must be a) reducible to ultimate differential, oppositional elements which are b) combinable “according to the laws of a closed order” (Lacan 2006, 418). The bottom signifiers are of course phonemes, their structure of minimal pairs forming the necessary base of natural language.

The signifier as studied by linguistics is what Lacan termed “the letter”, “the material medium [*support*] that concrete discourse borrows from language” or “the essentially localized structure of the signifier”. (Lacan 2006, 413, 418)

It is noteworthy that although we can dissect the letter in this manner, the same cannot be done to the signified:

“It's essential to the phenomenon of meaning that the signifier be indivisible. One can't section a piece of signifier like one can section the tape of a tape-recorder. If you cut the tape of a tape-recorder the sentence breaks off, but the effect of the sentence doesn't come to a halt at the same point.” (Lacan 1993, 210)

“I ask you to take the sentence as a whole because there is no sentence that can be detached from the fulness of its meaning.” (Lacan 1993, 275)

“The sentence only exists as completed and its sense comes to it retroactively.”  
(Lacan 1993, 262)

What Lacan is here saying among other things reminds us of the principle Brandom elaborated as the primacy of propositional meaning. Unlike the letter, or the structure of phonemes, the signified is not built bottom-up: it is only as a completed whole that a sentence gains its meaning. The point is only emphasised in the act of interrupting sentences. Lacan agrees that abrupt sentence like “I’ll never...” or “The fact remains...” “make sense”, but that “that sense is all the more oppressive in that it is content to make us wait for it.” Hence Lacan claims that “it is in the chain of the signifier that meaning *insists*, but that none of the chain's elements *consists* in the signification it can provide at that very moment.” (Lacan 2006, 419)

What this means is that Lacan thinks meaning, the signified, is essentially a process-like phenomenon. It never halts, but keeps “incessantly sliding” under the signifier, referring to yet further signification. A characteristic phrase Lacan sometimes uses of the products of the workings of the signifier is “signifying effects”. This could be understood along the lines of the “peace of the evening” example discussed in the previous section. The meaning of the expressions, in certain conditions, comes to us uninvited, but as we set to specify what that meaning precisely is we find ourselves sliding to but further signifiers and the signifieds they engender.

What matters in this section is how the operations of the signifier chain produces signifying effects. In this the terms metonymy and metaphor are indispensable. Lacan picked them from Roman Jakobson, who had used them in his 1956 paper “Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances.” However, as Russell Grigg has shown, Lacan ended up redefining the concepts somewhat. With the help of Grigg I shall first go over Jakobson’s usage, then Lacan’s revisions.

Jakobson’s article’s point is first of all to argue how distinctions from linguistics are seminal in distinguishing between different kinds of speech impairments eminent in aphasia. To do this he established a relation between language and speech according to which speech involves “the double operation of the selection of linguistic units from a paradigmatically related series and their syntagmatic combination into units of a higher degree of complexity.” The isolation of units from a paradigmatic set of intersubstitutable terms is the metaphoric pole of language, the metonymic one being the combination of units into larger wholes. (Grigg 2008, 152)

According to Jakobson aphasia can be classified into two main types depending on whether the speech impairment affects the faculty of selection or that of combination. In Seminar III Lacan uses the term “sensory aphasia” to refer to the selection impairment, “motor aphasia” to refer to the combinatory one, in direct correlation with Jakobson. A sensory aphasic, while capable of “an abundance and ease of articulation and expression of sentences,” faces the



inability to “metaphrase,” to give definitions and synonyms to words or to repeat the same sentence twice. On the other side of the spectrum, motor aphasia renders the patient unable to articulate in a compound sentence what they are nevertheless able to name correctly: “They retain the nominative capacity, but lose the propositional capacity. They are unable to construct propositions.” (Lacan 1993, 223-224) In the paradigmatic cases the patient loses either the ability to combine words into sentences, or the ability to give definitions of words and name objects presented to them. So a sensory aphasic patient, when presented with the task of naming an everyday object like a fork, might struggle to find its name although they can fluently express something contextual about, e.g. what it’s used for.

Moving on from the clinical cases: Jacobson added two aspects to the two fundamental linguistic operations, reflecting their syntactic and semantic sides. “Positional similarity” is defined as the capacity of two words to replace one another, preserving syntactic correctness, and “positional contiguity” is defined as the capacity of two words to combine with one another, preserving syntactic correctness. However, as Grigg points out, it is less clear how on the semantic side “semantic similarity” and “semantic contiguity”, which reflect the more vital distinction between metonymy and metaphor, should be defined. For although Jacobson’s examples yield an intuitive difference, he never put it down as an exclusive principle. (Grigg 2008, 153)

The intuitive difference is shown in examples of the following nature: exchanging “crown” for “king” or “country”, in the expression “to serve the crown”, is a metonym, while “Whatever stirs this mortal frame,” exchanging “frame” for “body”, is a metaphor. For Jacobson, while both metonymy and metaphor presume positional (or syntactic) similarity, metonymy is supposedly semantically contiguous, but metaphor is semantically similar. Although both, in the example above, operate on substitution of syntactically equivalent terms, there is a difference according to Jacobson in their semantic properties, although he does not spell out explicitly what that is. (Grigg 2008, 154)

Let us move on to *The Instance* for a moment and see how Lacan draws the distinction. His choice example for metonymy is exchanging “ship” for “sail” in the context of a given expression, say “The fleet harbored thirty sails.” Now, some theories of metonymy would explain the trope by the fact that ships have a *real* or *natural* (i.e. non-linguistic) attachment to sails. To the contrary, what both Lacan and Jacobson claim is that the metonymic connection does not derive from extralinguistic facts, but rather from the workings of language alone: it is a “*word-to-word*” connection like Lacan put it. (Lacan 2006, 421) Indeed, the expression “thirty sails” refers to thirty ships regardless of how many actual sails, if any, there are between them. Moreover, not all part-whole relations, which form one type of metonymic relations, that appear in reality or naturally make for metonymic relations.

For an example of metaphor Lacan picks a verse from Victor Hugo’s *Booz endormi*: “His sheaf was neither miserly nor hateful” exchanges the proper name Booz for “His sheaf”, attributing to it properties which are fit for the man and not the bundle of wheat. But how is this operation decisively different from “thirty sails”? Clearly enough both demand positional, syntactic similarity, for substituting e.g. an adjective in place of “Booz” would not produce a metaphor but nonsense. So what is the specific semantic factor that decides the difference?

Before answering that I wish to elaborate on the explanatory relation metonymy and metaphor strive to fulfil in Lacan. The kernel of his approach is summed in the claim that

“Metaphor's creative spark does not spring forth from the juxtaposition of two images, that is, of two equally actualized signifiers. It flashes between two signifiers, one of which has replaced the other by taking the other's place in the signifying chain, the occulted signifier remaining present by virtue of its (metonymic) connection to the rest of the chain.” (Lacan 2006, 422)

For a metaphor to be created, the manifest term (A) must not completely annihilate the memory of the latent term (B) – the latter must somehow remain latent. Lacan's answer to how this happens is that while the term B is replaced (or “occulted”), its *place* in, or the connection to, the chain persists. It is this place which A sets in.

Not any substitution of positionally similar terms produces a metaphor. Replacing “Booze” in Hugo's verse with “Rainbow Dash” or “A black kettle” is not metaphoric in the slightest – those are just new sentences. In Seminar V, where Lacan decided to unravel the terse theses of *The Instance*, he says:

“It is here that we rediscover the substitutive level, because substitution is the articulation, the signifying means in which the act of metaphor is established. But this does not mean that substitution is metaphor. If I teach you here to go along every path in an articulated fashion, it is not precisely in order that you should continually indulge in abuses of language. I tell you that the metaphor is produced within the level of substitution, that means that substitution is a way in which the signifier can be articulated, and that metaphor operates there with its function as creator of the signified at that place where substitution may be produced. They are two different things. Likewise metonymy and combination are two different things.” (S V, 25; see Other Internet Sources)

Metaphor and metonymy are vital for Lacan's theory of meaning, as is testified by his claim that “the only meaning that exists is metaphorical, a meaning that only arises from the substitution of a signifier for another signifier in the symbolic chain” (S V, 5). There is no specially metaphoric meaning, but meaning itself is “metaphorical”. Metaphor as Lacan uses the term then involves a special case of substitution: an exchange of positionally similar terms which preserves the latent term's semantic relation to the chain in which it was replaced. To unravel this notion, what is first needed is the difference between metonymy and metaphor, between semantic contiguity and semantic similarity, between “Thirty sails” and “His sheaf”.

## 4.6. Metonymy

What in the first place drew Lacan to the concept of metonymy was that he recognized in it an analogy for, if not the very structure of, human desire. In the field of psychoanalytic theory

the notion of desire as metonymy represented an offensive against desire understood as an object relation, an approach coined by Melanie Klein's object relation theory. Trimming the details, the object relations theory posits the infant's relation to the mother as a sort of primal object, based on which all the child's further desire relations would be consequently modeled. But for Lacan there is no such thing as the original, lost object – the phallus is not the lost object, it is the *original lack of the object*. So whereas Klein would say it is the mother the child ultimately desires, Lacan stressed that it is rather the mother's desire the child desires, man's desire always being the desire of the other's desire.<sup>36</sup>

Metonymy is a good model for a theory of desire that conceives it as essentially intersubjective and dynamic as opposed to subjective and static, because metonymy just is the continuous combination of signifying units into strings, or chains as Lacan likes to call them. The idea of an elementary combinatorial dimension of speech production is present already in de Saussure, whose name for it was *in praesentia* (Saussure 1959, 123). What is of interest in this section is how these contiguous connections are understood to be constituted in Lacan.

Returning to Jakobson, this question was asked in querying after the difference between semantic contiguity and similarity. Where Jakobson failed to provide an explicit principle, Grigg has suggested three distinctive traits of metonymic colour. These are: 1.) the specifically semantic relations between the substituted words, 2.) semantic metonymy only operates via substitution, and 3.) all metonyms are substantives.

There is a semantic connection between the word pairs "king-crown" and "ship-sail" in virtue of which they are metonyms. The answer Grigg gathers from Jakobson is a part-whole relationship: crown is a part of a king like a sail is a part of a ship. Other similar affiliations exist: these include the relations of cause to effect, container to contained, a thing to its owner etc. What makes Jakobson's account radical is that he models these affiliative relations as internal to language, and not simply as being projected from relations between things into language: "The 'natural' contiguity in space and time between ship and sail no more founds metonymy than, as David Hume saw, constant conjunction founds causality." (Grigg 2008, 155, 161)

Second, unlike metaphors, all metonyms operate via substitution. For example Lacan's original metaphor "Love is a pebble laughing in the sun" is a metaphor although it involves no substitution – it is what Grigg calls an "appositive metaphor". But imposing an appositive form to a metonym yields not an appositive metonym but a simple genitive. For example the metonym "sail" for "ship", turned into an appositive, produces the genitive expression "the sail of the ship". The contrast to an appositive metaphor like "wave of nausea" is stark, for "in 'the wave of nausea,' the nausea is a wave, but in 'the sail of the ship,' the sail is not the ship." (Grigg 2008, 158)

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<sup>36</sup> Later on in his career Lacan shifted away from identifying desire as metonymy by locating its ultimate aim in the real of the register theory (Zupančič 2003, 175). The psychoanalytic import of metonymy is here left slim on purpose, because it is not there where interest of this paper lays. Still, it should always be borne in mind where Lacan's own interest is to be found with these concepts.

The third difference is the simplest, because of all grammatical categories only substantives can enter the kind of semantic relations metonymy demands, i.e. part-whole, causal, container-contained etc. relations. Metaphors on the other hand “extend to all parts of speech” (Grigg 2008, 157). That is partly what makes metaphor a trickier animal to pin down. Another, more noteworthy reason why metaphor is more complicated is that metonym can in fact be considered a subspecies of substitution metaphor where there exists an already established semantic relation between the latent and manifest terms. Moreover, this is precisely how Grigg claims Lacan treats metaphor and metonymy, with the second being a special case of the latter (Grigg 2008, 160).

Although I believe this formulation to be correct, it is somewhat misleading to call metonymy a special case of metaphor, because for Lacan metonymy is the logically and developmentally primary operation which enables the metaphor to appear. Moreover, metonymy and metaphor for Lacan belong to “different levels”:

“When one reads the rhetoricians, one realizes that they never get to an entirely satisfactory definition of metaphor, or of metonymy. This results in, for example, the formula that metonymy is an impoverished metaphor. One might say that the thing is to be taken in exactly the opposite sense – metonymy exists from the beginning and makes metaphor possible. But metaphor belongs to a different level than metonymy.” (Lacan 1993, 227)

The different level seems naturally beckon to the the level of the signified. However, metaphor is not completely immersed there, but rather works as a sort of median between the signifier and the signified, as we shall see later on.

Before that we must make plain metonymy’s relation to concepts very close to it, like that of the “letter” mentioned in the first section. As we remember, what Lacan calls the letter encompasses the twofold elementary condition of language: division into ultimate oppositional elements with distinct combinatory rules. The level of the letter is purely syntactic. Thus metonymy, which is a semantic operation, must built on it but remain distinct from it. Indeed, in *The Instance* Lacan designates metonymy as “the first aspect of the actual field the signifier constitutes, so that meaning may assume place there” (Lacan 2006, 421).

Metonymy signals the first intrusion of semantics into the network of the letter in that it allows for synonymy to emerge between words. Referring to a famous passage from *The Interpretation of Dreams* where Freud recounts the sleeptalking of his infant daughter Anna<sup>37</sup>, Lacan writes:

“Anna Freud asleep – things are, you see, in their pure state – she talks in her sleep – *Big strawberries, raspberries, cakes, porridge*. There’s something here that looks like the signified in its pure state. And it’s the most schematic, the most fundamental form of metonymy. There’s no doubt that she desires these strawberries, these raspberries. But it isn’t self-evident that these objects should be all there together.

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<sup>37</sup> *Standard Edition*, Volume 4, 130.

The fact that they are there, juxtaposed, coordinated in this articulated naming is due to the positional function that places them in a situation of equivalence. That is the essential phenomenon.” (Lacan 1993, 227)

It appears as if Lacan is stretching the definition of metonymy, for there would seem to be no classic metonymic relation (part-whole, container-contained, cause-effect etc.) between the delicacies Anna dreams of. The only connection seems to be that she desires them. That is what Lacan stresses: the equivalence relation, the metonymic relation, is based on her infant desire. So although in question is not classic metonymy, Lacan is convinced that the mechanism at the level of a child learning to speak is the same: sorting words into equivalence classes (e.g. as delicacies), according them the same semantic value, is already metonymy.

In the same context Lacan expanded on the notion that metonymy precedes metaphor in the child’s linguistic development. True to his style, he tells a little story of someone who had confided to him what his boy, aged two and a half, had said to his mother one day: “*My big girl full of bottom and muscle.*” Lacan explains that this is not a metaphor but metonymy:

“This language is obviously not the same as that of *His sheaf was neither miserly nor spiteful*. The child doesn’t do that yet. Nor does he say that *love is a pebble laughing in the sun*. We are told that children understand surrealist and abstract poetry, which would be a return to childhood. This is stupid – children detest surrealist poetry and find repugnant certain stages of Picasso’s painting. Why? Because they’re not yet up to metaphor, but only metonymy. And when they do appreciate certain things in Picasso’s paintings, it’s because metonymy is involved.”

The child’s sentence “My big girl full of bottom and muscle” is essentially babble: the child does not mean anything by it. If asked to paraphrase what he had just said, he would probably utter something unrelated and equally arbitrary. In this sense the child’s case is comparable to sensory aphasia, where the patient is not able to metaphrase. Motor aphasia signals “the dissolution of the link between intentional meaning and the apparatus of the signifiers,” who “fails to master it in relation to his intention” (Lacan 1993, 224). A third example in the series would be a random sentence generator capable of producing syntactically correct but semantically arbitrary sentences.

What all these examples lack is “intention”, which should be read as the capacity to use the signifier to “express something other than what it says,” i.e. its standard meaning. So in other words, while the sensory aphasic and the child obviously *know* language, their ability to *use* it is not fully developed. All this and more give reason to believe that while metonymy is more characteristically a phenomenon of the signifier pure and simple, metaphor, as closer to the signified, is rather a question of the use of the signifier. This would explain the different levels they according to Lacan inhabit. It is still far from the whole story.

It has come the time to summarize a bit. By “letter” Lacan refers to the syntactic level of language, composed of the twofold requirement for phonetic minimal pairs and their combinatory rules. By “metonymy” Lacan refers to signifier chains which showcase tentative

semantic properties, make some sense, but are not fully developed – examples include motor aphasia and children learning to speak. The “tentative semantic properties” involve above all incorporation of already existing equivalence classes between singular terms based on relations of what Jakobson called semantic contiguity, which “involves substitution for something that has to be named – we are in fact at the level of the name. One thing is named by another that is its container, or its part, or that is connected to it” (Lacan 1993, 221). At times Lacan seems to be stretching the field of what “being connected to” covers, as with Anna’s example, but for the most part the concept remains clear.

The third term we have been dealing with mostly in this chapter is metaphor, which now has been linked on the one hand to the signified and to usage of the signifier, on the other to substitution of signifier for another. I shall now look closer to Lacan’s theory of metaphor.

## 4.7. Metaphor

Contrary to some other theories of metaphor, Lacan denied they are simply covert comparisons, i.e. similes. “His sheaf was neither miserly nor hateful” cannot be explained as *actually* saying something like “*just* as the sheaf was willingly dispersed among the needy, so our character was neither miserly nor spiteful.” The metaphor is “not a comparison but an identification.” (Lacan 1993, 218) Donald Davidson would agree: in his famous essay on metaphors he argues that the simile explanation renders metaphors too trivial, neglecting their aim at conveying something else than the obvious (Davidson 1978, 39).

Another important idea Davidson has about metaphors is that they do not conceal any special meaning or carry some hidden message which an accurate interpretation could uncover. Contra Max Black, Davidson writes:

“We must give up the idea that a metaphor carries a message, that it has a content or meaning (except, of course, its literal meaning). The various theories we have been considering mistake their goal. Where they think they provide a method for deciphering an encoded content, they actually tell us (or try to tell us) something about the *effects* metaphors have on us.” (Davidson 1978, 45)

I think it is fair to say Lacan would agree with this notion that metaphors do not have any “special” meaning. However, as we have seen, he would put a much different emphasis on the *effects* metaphors have on us, for if there is no specially metaphoric meaning for Lacan, it is because *all* meaning for him is metaphorical. However, on the point of the meaning effects metaphors induce in us, Grigg has made an important distinction between the types of metaphors, which I shall now visit.

Grigg distinguishes between three kinds of metaphor, two of which have already been implicitly discussed. Substitution metaphor is the one Lacan uses the most, and which he in fact considers the only type of metaphor. But Grigg sees it necessary to also hold onto apposition and extension metaphors, for their meaning effects differ according to him from the substitution metaphor.

By extension metaphor Grigg means expressions in which “the meaning of a term is extended or enlarged so that the term applies to objects to which it would not normally apply (‘the mouth of the river’). The meaning effect of an extension metaphor is thus “the creation of new meaning, which will eventually make its way into dictionary entries.” (Grigg 2008, 163) What characterises extensions metaphors is the relative lucidity, even commonplaceness, of their meaning, to the point where we can in fact paraphrase them: “mouth of the river” refers to the place where it sets into a larger body of water.

Appositive metaphors for Grigg are metaphors lacking latent terms, for example “Love is war” or “Silence is gold.”<sup>38</sup> Davidson’s point about metaphors having no concealed message applies best to this kind. Like Grigg puts it: “We have in ‘Love is war’ two themes that we can develop and elaborate indefinitely, without ever arriving at a completed paraphrase.” However, Lacan considered “Love is a pebble laughing in the sun” to be a substitution metaphor, although Grigg deems it an appositive one. (Grigg 2008, 163, 164) I shall return to this controversy at the end of the section.

Lastly, substitution metaphor, where a latent terms remains effective due to its metonymic relation to the signifier chain it was replaced in, is clearly most important for Lacan. It alone accounts for the meaning effects for him. Lacan would probably regard the extension metaphor as a dead metaphor, since it has lost all of its novelty and effectively turned into secondary meaning of a word. So the unification of the metaphoric field for Lacan depends on whether the appositive cases are reducible to substitution metaphors.

Grigg sees it necessary to distinguish between three kinds of metaphor because what can be said of one of them does not always fit the others. For example substitution theories have

“come to grief on the appositive metaphor because attempts to account for it as a case of substitution metaphor have led to trying to replace the metaphor with the literal words that have supposedly been supplanted. But this is to confuse exegesis or explication of an appositive metaphor with the eliciting of the latent term in a substitution metaphor.” (Grigg 2008, 157)

Chaim Perelman is one who has tried this together with Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca in *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation* (1969). Taking an example from Berkeley, Perelman tries to treat “an ocean of false learning” like Aristotle treats “evening of life”, that is to say say as a condensed analogy: old age is to life as evening is to day. The familiar relation is projected onto a new context, thus producing an analogy.

Let us unpack the Aristotelian metaphor first. Following Grigg, if we mark the four terms of the analogy with letters in the following manner

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<sup>38</sup> In English a careful distinction must be made between appositive and genitive form of “of” preposition. “Wave of nostalgia” is an appositive metaphor, but “The scales of justice” is a substitution metaphor because “of” is used as a genitive therein. (Grigg 2008, 156)

$$\frac{(A) \textit{Evening}}{(C) \textit{Old age}} \text{ of } \frac{(B) \textit{Day}}{(D) \textit{Life}}$$

We get two possible schemas:

$$\frac{A}{C} \text{ of } \frac{D}{B}, \frac{C}{A} \text{ of } \frac{B}{D}$$

Respectively spelled as “evening of life” and “old age of day”. (Grigg 2008, 167-168)

Perelman claims that “ocean of false learning” can be treated along the same lines as “evening of life” above, with the exception that, since it lacks the two implicit terms (it is not clear what the terms B and D are in “ocean of false learning”), its form is the simple A of C. It is up to the reader to supply the missing terms, which makes the metaphor richer than Aristotle’s, says Perelman. For example, if we join “ocean” with “solid ground” and “false learning” with “truth”, we get “false learning is to truth like ocean is to solid ground”. (Grigg 2008, 168) Even if this paraphrase is not crystal clear, it makes more sense than “ocean of false learning” alone would, which is Perelman’s main point.

Lacan thinks Perelman is right to consider metaphor as a four term operation, but as we have seen, he denies that “ocean of false learning” is an analogy (Lacan 2006, 755). Grigg agrees with him: the fact that we can stipulate different couples in place of the missing terms B and D does not imply that the metaphor itself has anything to do with any of them, i.e. that it would be a super-condensed analogy. Grigg is happy to treat “ocean of false learning” as an appositive metaphor, where the ocean consists of false learning. (Grigg 2008, 168). Other than the literal statement, the metaphor does not carry a special message, and is not any poorer for that.

On Lacan’s end, however, things get mysterious. While he denies “ocean of false learning” to be an analogy, he takes it to involve a substitution operation among four terms, just like any other metaphor does for him. Grigg does not explain why Lacan insists on this, and the man’s own explanations appear thin. His definition of metaphor leads us to believe, however, that at stake is a fundamental operation for him:

“There are, as it were, four terms in metaphor, but their heterogeneity involves a dividing line—three against one—and is tantamount to the dividing line between the signifier and the signified.” (Lacan 2006, 756)

I shall now briefly illustrate the structure of substitution metaphor Lacan takes to be necessary and sufficient to cover all metaphors, even appositive ones. While I cannot say it produces incorrect results like Grigg says, neither am I convinced of how it works. Either way it seems credible to me that Lacan considered the substitution mechanism to be vital for explaining the phenomenon of meaning as such.

In his response to Perelman, Lacan offers the following schema for metaphor:



$$\frac{S}{S'_1} \cdot \frac{S'_2}{x} \rightarrow S \left( \frac{1}{s''} \right)$$

It is, he says, an expansion on the formula he delivers in *The Instance*, and which has not been touched on here. (Lacan 2006, 756) I would interpret the terms as follows: the *S* in the top left corner is the manifest signifier, which has replaced *S'*<sub>1</sub> below it. *S'*<sub>1</sub> and *S'*<sub>2</sub> are part of the same metonymical chain. Since *S'*<sub>1</sub> is in the schema still part of the chain, the metaphor works, because as we remember for Lacan metaphoric meaning effect strikes not between two signifiers but between the metonymic place of the latent signifier and the manifest one. Next up, the *x* below *S'*<sub>2</sub> retains its familiar use from mathematics as the unknown variable. Finally, the arrow leads to the extended algorithm for the relationship of signifier and signified, originally written as:

$$\frac{S}{s}$$

with the capitalized signifier determining the decapitalized signified.

Introducing “Ocean of false learning” into the schema Lacan delivers is tricky, because it seems to only contain two manifest terms: “ocean” and “false learning”, which is why Grigg classifies it as an appositive metaphor. Nothing seems to be “occulted” in the metaphor. So how is it that Lacan yields the following schema:

$$\frac{\text{an ocean}}{\text{learning}} \text{ of } \frac{\text{false}}{x} \rightarrow \text{an ocean } \left( \frac{1}{?} \right)$$

Are we not faced with a stupefyingly straightforward blunder here? How can the term “false learning” split into double, to alone fill the place of the metonymic chain? And what is the purpose of the question mark in place of the signified?

The first two questions remain as of now opaque to me. Lacan is certainly less than guileless in “Metaphor of the Subject,” where the refutation of Perelman takes place. To the third question, however, Lacan does provide an answer, in his usually lofty style:

“What is produced ... at the place of the question mark in the second part of my formula is a new species in signification: a falseness that disputation cannot fathom, for it is unsoundable—the wave and depth of the imaginary’s ἀπειρος; in which any vessel is swallowed up should it seek to draw forth something.” (Lacan 2006, 757)

Lacan does not claim, like Perelman does, that the metaphor would contain some hidden meaning in the form of a packed analogy. Rather metaphor for Lacan produces meaning, indefinitely and in no certain terms. The fourth term in the operation, the variable  $x$ , is left open, and whatever the famous meaning effect, or “a new species in signification” (the question mark), ultimately consist of depends on whatever one places in the stead of the variable.

Returning to the metaphor Lacan started with, “His sheaf was neither miserly nor hateful,” we can see how that too can be modeled as a four term operation, despite seemingly including only two terms (“His sheaf” and “Booz”). The third term, reveals Lacan in “Metaphor of the Subject,” is the “phallus”:

“This is what the metaphor I chose in the above mentioned article—namely, Victor Hugo's ‘His sheaf was neither miserly nor spiteful,’ from ‘Booz Sleeping’ (*Booz endormi*)—plays on, and it does not idly evoke the link that, in rich people, unites the position of having with the refusal inscribed in their being. For this is the impasse of love. And its very negation would do no more here, as we know, than posit it, if the metaphor introduced by the substitution of ‘his sheaf’ for the subject did not bring forth the only object the having of which necessitates the failure to be it—the phallus—around which the whole poem revolves right down to its last twist.” (Lacan 2006, 757-758)

The “phallus,” says Lacan, is implicated in *Booz endormi* through and through, including the metaphor under discussion. It helps understanding this allusion none that Lacan, while seemingly discussing a linguistic affair, mixes in aspects of his overall psychoanalytic theory. The line about “rich people” refers most likely to the obsessive neurotic psychic type, although it is unclear how this is supposed to aid in understanding the “phallus” and its inclusion in the metaphor.

In Seminar III Lacan returns once more to Hugo’s metaphor. Especially the last last two lines appear interesting from our perspective:

“The mainspring of the metaphor isn’t the meaning, which is supposed to be transposed from Booz onto the sheaf. I readily admit that someone might object to me that Booz’s sheaf is metonymic, not metaphorical, and that underlying this magnificent poetry, and never named directly, there is Booz’s royal penis. But that isn’t what gives this sheaf its metaphorical quality, it’s that the metaphor is placed in the position of the subject, in Booz’s place. It’s a phenomenon signifiers that is involved.” (Lacan 1993, 225)

What Lacan says is that it is the metaphor that is placed on the place of the subject Booz, the metaphor of course being the identification between “His sheaf” and the “phallus” as a penis, which as objects share a physical resemblance. But Lacan denies that it would be this likening as such that would drive the metaphor, but rather the fact that this first metaphor is inserted into another. Appropriating the schema above, we might thus tentatively write it as follows:

$$\frac{\textit{His sheaf}}{\textit{Phallus}} \bullet \frac{\textit{Booz}}{x}$$

The metaphor “His sheaf” for “Phallus” takes the place of Booz, displacing him. The reason why the first metaphor (“His sheaf” for “Phallus”) is more than just a resemblance between two physical objects is that, while the first part clearly symbolizes the faculty of having, the second symbolizes the faculty of being, thus placing Booz somewhere in between “having” and “being”. The juxtaposition of these two fundamental poles would seem to be implied in the line quoted above: “the substitution of ‘his sheaf’ for the subject did not bring forth the only object *the having of which necessitates the failure to be it*—the phallus.”

Although these existentialist undertones harbour interest in their own right, they do not aid much in understanding the technical workings of the schema for substitution metaphor. It then remains to be decided how Lacan can claim all meaning to be metaphoric, based on this substitution mechanism.

In this chapter I first set out to show how Lacan can be classified under the framework of analytic structuralism in virtue of his commitment to the primacy of horizontal relations of language. Secondly I have attempted to show how the defining mechanisms of these relations (called by Lacan signifier chains) operate on metonymy and metaphor. While it is relatively clear what function Lacan ascribes to metonymy, his intentions and results with metaphor, although discussed here, have been left more or less in the dark. To finish the chapter, I shall offer a brief comparison of Lacan’s perspective on language with Brandom’s and Davidson’s.

## 4.8. Comparisons

In one of his essays Davidson paid attention to a linguistic phenomenon related to metaphors: malapropisms, or confusing two phonetically similar but semantically distinct words with one another either intentionally or unintentionally (the essay’s title “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs” is a case in point). Why malaprops are interesting for Davidson is because the listeners usually have no trouble understanding the speaker despite their mangled language (Davidson 1985, 252). Similarly, Lacan considered the fact that language usually works fine despite somehow going awry a highly pivotal factor in explaining it:

“[H]ow does it happen that language is at its most effective when it manages to say something by saying something else? It’s enthralling indeed, and it’s even thought that this is the way to the crux of the phenomenon of language, in opposition to the naive notion. The naive notion has it that there is a superimposition, like tracing, of the order of things onto the order of words.” (Lacan 1993, 224)

Davidson and Lacan differ in that Lacan envisages in metaphors a much grander function than Davidson ever did. As was seen in a quote from previous section, in Seminar V Lacan explicitly claims that “the only meaning that exists is metaphorical”. How should such a queer

thought be regarded? Is Lacan really implying all meaningful expressions are in fact metaphors? Or do all meaningful expressions somehow owe their meaning to metaphoric operations? As is, my current interpretation leans towards the latter reading: substitution metaphor is an essential operation at the level of the signifier for engendering meaning, the signified, and its principle extends to a wider range of expressions than is covered by the intuitive count of metaphors. In this mechanism, substitution plays a central role. In referring to the substitution metaphor of Hugo in Seminar V, Lacan says:

“This is quite a general function, I would even say that it is in this way, that it is in this possibility of substitution that there can be conceived the very generation one might say, of the world, of meaning, that the whole history of the tongue, namely the changes in function by means of which a tongue is constituted, that it is here and not elsewhere that we must grasp it[.]” (S V, 19; see Other Internet Sources)

This can be contrasted with Brandom’s reflections on substitution in *Making It Explicit*, where he writes that “there is an intimate relationship between the notion of *semantic content* and the concept of *substitution*” (Brandom 1994, 354). Indeed, an essential portion of inferentialism revolves around the idea that all we require to model meaning is a finely enough crafted an account of substitution of expressions for one another on different levels of language, from inferential relations all the way down to subsentential expressions. In an important sense this is what it means to say conceptual contents are products of structures: that they are essentially substitutable or, like Lacan might say, effacable.

What else might Brandom and Lacan have in common in the face of the enigma meaning poses for us?

In the previous sections we discussed Lacan’s claim that all meaning is metaphoric meaning. Naturally this implies there is no specially metaphoric meaning, just meaning. Again we must return to the question of what *is* this meaning for Lacan? Can it for theoretical purposes be considered as an object, e.g. as a set of inferential roles like inferentialism does?

It is quite clear to me that meaning as Lacan speaks about it cannot be modeled as an object. Rather, he thinks it is something like a process, signification always referring to further signification. Whether Lacan chose to repeat this characterization because he saw it as the only viable one or simply because he was not interested in providing the sort of classic semantic theory which would settle the meanings of individual expressions is unclear. Either way, the issue of whether meaning can be modeled as a set or not is secondary in relation to the issue of whether it can be modeled as structural or not: Lacan and Brandom might disagree on the first point while agreeing (as I have argued they do) on the second.

Unraveling the notion of meaning as a process, it might be useful to revisit Lacan’s term “meaning effects”. Meaning effects occur in metaphoric substitution: it is the “poetic spark” to which our fascination with them is due. A metaphor like “Love is a pebble laughing in the sun” seems to be simultaneously spilling and draining of meaning. It is clear that it cannot be paraphrased, yet it does have some sense, by which at minimum we should say, following

Davidson, that it “intimates”, inspires us with all sorts of meanings. In the same way, “The poor are the blacks of Europe” seems to involve usage of the word “black” which does not quite correspond to any other meaning – it cannot be pinpointed what the metaphor in fact says. All we get is meaning effects.

Now an immediate counterargument strikes us: most metaphors with their meaning effects are vague, but the meaning of an expression like “Pass the salt please” seems blatant enough. Would Lacan really claim that the meaning we trade and deal in our everyday life is somehow metaphorical, i.e. vague and indefinite? Intuitively the idea seems far-fetched.

This is where the notion of the holistic nature of meaning becomes topical. “Pass the salt,” ordinary as it is, has certain conceptual content, and is as such inferentially articulated. In Brandomese, what the phrase means varies from doxastic perspective to another, according to the different background commitments and entitlement one is attributed by a scorekeeper. Thus from a theoretical point of view the expression’s meaning is more disparate than our immediate experience would gather.

Is this picture, delivered to us by inferentialism, in some ways significantly different from the way Lacan conceives things? It certainly is. But as I have argued here, the two approaches also bear some intriguing resemblances. To deploy one last example of this, I would like to conclude with a little story Lacan uses in Seminar II to depict everyday communication. Surprisingly, it involves three scientists who, upon travelling to Mars, encounter an alien whose speech they are stunned to find themselves understanding. Later they discuss the message they have heard:

“One says – *He told me that he was doing some research on electronic physics.* The other says – *Yes, he told me that he was working on what constitutes the essence of solid bodies.* And the third one says – *He told me that he was working on metre poetry and the function of rhyme.* That is what happens every time we engage in private or public discourse.” (Lacan 1988b, 281)

Despite receiving the same message, all three men understand it completely differently. Have they then really understood the message? To answer the question fully would require an extensive study of the view Lacan has of communication (and which I believe to also make a fruitful comparison to Brandom’s respective views). A brief reply would send us to another, older story from India involving three blind men and an elephant. Each man, feeling only a part of the animal (the trunk, legs, tusks), ends up vastly differing in their descriptions of it. Yet they have all grasped the same creature. So have they understood anything?

An answer that I think Brandom and Lacan would favour is yes. The case of elephant especially reminds us of the tactile conception of concepts which Brandom attributed to Frege. Despite relating to our shared concepts from different doxastic perspectives, their contents can be rightly called objective, for although no one grasps the whole of it, we each hold on to the same realm of concepts. Similarly, the three scientists can be seen to have arrived at different conclusions because of their differing dispositions to understand the message. Yet it is the same message they have understood all the same. The point for

Lacan and Brandom is that what happens with the elephant and the martian happens with all of our concepts, no matter how everyday or ordinary the situation happens to be.

## Chapter 5.

### 5.1. Conclusions

Aside from everything else my reader might think of the arguments I have raised to support the comparison between Lacan and Brandom, one observation of similarity ought not to raise any objections – without a doubt both excel in pristine originality. I believe the statement applies regardless of what its targets might think of it.

Take Brandom, who in the Preface of *Making It Explicit* notes, quite modestly I should think, that neither the book's "basic building blocks" nor its "motivating insights, commitments, and strategies" deserve to be called "novel or original" (Brandom 1994, xi). And did not Lacan at every opportunity declare his groundbreaking reworking of psychoanalysis merely as a return to Freud's original teachings?

Everyone knows we all stand on the shoulders of giants, but by itself that is no reason to call oneself a dwarf.

That being said, although Brandom is loath to take on himself the mantle of a pioneer, he has recognized the uniqueness of his stance among contemporary philosophers. In *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism* he observes the ubiquity of the representational paradigm in modern semantics:

"For a representational paradigm reigns not only in the whole spectrum of analytically pursued semantics, from model-theoretic, through possible worlds, directly counterfactual, and informational approaches to teleosemantic ones, but also in structuralism inheriting the broad outlines of Saussure's semantics, and even in those later continental thinkers whose poststructuralism is still so far mired in the representational paradigm that it can see no other alternative to understanding meaning in terms of signifiers standing for signifieds than to understand it in terms of signifiers standing for other signifiers." (Brandom 2000, 10)

In the private email exchange I have enjoyed the honour of having with him, Brandom revealed that at the time he wrote the last line of the quote he was thinking of Jacques Derrida. Whether the characterisation of him as "mired in" representationalism is warranted or not, I retain my judgement of. But should the characterisation be extended to Lacan, I would have to voice my dissent, of which the present work is the leading embodiment. Whatever value it contains must be implied in the suggestion that, when all's said and done, perhaps Brandom stands not as alone with his project of resisting the representational paradigm as he has thought.

What I have strived to show in this work is that the so called analytic structuralism might find a surprising ally in its notorious twin, a representative of which Jacques Lacan here serves

as. The case began in Chapter 2 with a delineation of structuralism provided by Jaroslav Peregrin. Prior to making any conjectures about the nature of meaning as an entity we can ask whether the phenomenon is to be entified in the first place. Following de Saussure, an alternative account can be found in the function of value, with suitable modifications. This is where inferentialism entered the picture. The story of meaning as inferential role, definable via substitution mechanism, extended to Chapter 3, where it was conjoined with a wider understanding of sociality, normativity, holism and the perspectival nature of meaning in Brandom.

Finally, in Chapter 4, we encountered Lacan if not in flesh nor spirit, then at least in select quotations. I first strove to show that if such a thing as analytic structuralism exists, Lacan should be counted among that camp, which is to say he considers the horizontal relations of language to be primary in explaining language. I also examined how these relations, called signifier chains, operate on metaphor and metonymy. The tale turned out to be somewhat unending, for Lacan's theory of metaphor, wrapped in metaphors and curvy style, has shown to require further study. Nonetheless, it was shown that despite the dim details, substitution metaphor does occupy a central place in Lacan's work, at least during the period from which I have mostly drawn here.

The major argument in Chapter 4 was that Lacan's work on language pursues the same fundamental argument as Brandom's inferentialism. To explain semantic content we do not primarily need to refer to extralinguistic entities, for the structure of expressions alone can form the basis for a semantic theory. Thus both theories can be rightly called structuralist semantic theories.

Beyond this common title, however, I stand uncertain on the question of how intimate Brandom and Lacan can in the end become. After all, the two do draw from vastly different theoretical backgrounds, Brandom with his pragmatist roots and Lacan with Freud. Not that they would not share any historical figures in common. In this work Wittgenstein in particular has found his place by both authors' side. Hegel too should be considered to merit attention from either one. Lastly, even as the great distance that separates Lacan and Brandom is openly recognized, it is also true that should there be found any points of convergence between their ideas, they would be all the more interesting for that.



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