

# What Could and What Should Be Said? On Semantic Correctness and Semantic Prescriptions

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## 1. Introduction

The thesis that meaning is normative is the claim that there is an essential normative component in meaning. This essential component has been linked with the intuitive classification of language use in terms of correct and incorrect applications; an English speaker does something correct when she uses the word “apple” to refer to apples and something incorrect when she uses the word “orange” to refer to apples.<sup>1</sup> While the claim that meaning is normative used to be taken as trivial, in the last two decades this thesis has garnered a significant amount of criticism. Anti-normativists—as they are sometimes referred to in the literature—claim that while the notion of semantic correctness is necessarily tied to meaning, normativity is not. While both sides of the debate agree on the existence of the semantic correctness conditions, defenders of the normativity thesis see this classification of actions as a normative feature of meaning while the opponents claim that semantic correctness is not normative, arguing that it does not tell the speaker what she ought to do.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the relationship between semantic correctness and the normativity of meaning understood here in terms of prescriptions, which tell speakers what they ought to do in certain circumstances. I will distinguish two questions: (1) Can semantic correctness be accounted for without also providing an account of semantic prescriptions? (2) Can semantic prescriptions be derived from correctness? I will attempt to elucidate how these two questions relate to each other, by distinguishing two construals of the thesis: the metasemantic construal and the metametasemantic construal, the first of which is a thesis about meaning, second is a thesis about theories of meaning. A negative answer to question (1) corresponds to the metametasemantic construal; all theories of meaning must provide some kind of account for both semantic correctness and semantic prescriptions. An affirmative answer in turn implies the failure of the metametasemantic construal; at least some account of meaning can be provided without semantic prescriptions.

However, the failure of the metametasemantic construal of the thesis does not imply the failure of the metasemantic one. For semantic correctness to be prescriptive in the metasemantic sense, it suffices that at least some plausible theories of meaning can treat semantic correctness as prescriptive. In contrast, the negative answer to the second question is the antithesis of the metametasemantic thesis; all plausible theories of meaning must reject semantic prescriptions. The crucial difference between these two readings is that the metametasemantic thesis must be decided without making assumptions about the nature of meaning that go beyond the pretheoretic concept of meaning. The metasemantic

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<sup>1</sup> I will use quotation marks to signify words and italics to refer to semantic content. E.g., “green” (word) means *green* (semantic content) and refers to green things (entities). The italics could be compared to David Kaplan’s meaning marks. (D. Kaplan 1968, 186; Kripke 1982, 10, footnote 8).

thesis, on the other hand, can more freely invoke more substantial assumptions about the nature of meaning.

Kathrin Glüer and Åsa Wikforss have argued that the answer to (1) is affirmative. They argue that since correctness can be understood non-prescriptively, semantic correctness does not entail semantic prescriptions (Glüer and Wikforss 2009; 2015). Similarly, Anandi Hattiangadi has argued that semantic prescriptions require speakers to speak the truth and thus cannot be semantic in nature. Only plausible “oughts” derivable from semantic correctness are dependent on the speaker’s desire to speak the truth or to communicate and as such are merely hypothetical prescriptions, which fail to show that meaning is normative. (Hattiangadi 2006; 2007; 2009) If this is correct and no plausible prescriptions can be derived from the semantic correctness conditions, the answer to question (2) must be negative.

Some of the normativists reject these arguments while others only disagree with some of the anti-normativists’ claims. Daniel Whiting has argued that if correctness is taken as a higher-order feature, the anti-normativists arguments fail to show that semantic correctness can be understood non-prescriptively. He also argues that the problems of semantic prescriptions can be circumvented by reformulating prescriptions by using “may” rather than “ought” and by relying on the idea that an agent’s obligations can be overridden by other obligations. (Whiting 2007; 2009; 2016.) Claudine Verheggen, on the other hand, agrees with Hattiangadi that semantic prescriptions are contingent on the speaker’s desires but argues that they are still essential to meaning (Verheggen 2011). Finally, Alan Millar distinguishes two notions of semantic correctness and argues that while one of these is prescriptive, the other is not (Millar 2002; 2004; see also Buleandra 2008; Reiland 2023).

In this paper, I will argue against the normativity of meaning, both as a claim concerning meaning and as a claim concerning theories of meaning. I will first defend the claim that semantic correctness can be understood non-prescriptively. This shows that the normativity of meaning cannot act as a criterion of adequacy for plausible theories of meaning. However, the failure of the metametaseantic thesis does not settle the question of whether correctness can also be understood prescriptively. In the latter part of the paper, I will discuss the problems faced by possible formulations of semantic prescriptions and argue that these problems diminish the plausibility of normative theories of meaning that do interpret semantic correctness as prescriptive.

I will argue that the semantic prescriptions, advocated by Whiting, demand speakers to use expressions that are unsuitable for expressing what they want to express. The fact that these prescriptions ignore speakers’ communicative intentions this way shows that they cannot be semantic in nature. Furthermore, a plausible candidate for semantic prescriptions would depend on what speaker’s communicative intentions are, and therefore cannot be derived from the commonly accepted notion of semantic correctness alone.

While the considerations above might suggest that it is the non-prescriptivity of correctness that acts as a criterion of adequacy for theories of meaning, I will refrain from drawing a conclusion this strong, since the possibility of plausible candidates for semantic prescriptions, cannot be entirely ruled out on the basis of this paper alone. A further study of alternative notions of semantic correctness advocated by Millar and others would be required before the reversal of the metametaseantic claim can be accepted. However, even if a plausible set of prescriptions could be found, non-prescriptive theories might still be overall preferable. The appropriateness of expressions for communicative intentions might be better captured by identifying what the expression can be used for without taking a stance on what it may or may not be used for.

I will begin in section 2 by characterizing the notion of semantic correctness and discuss how it relates to the normativity of meaning and discussions concerning the

naturalizability of meaning. In section 3, I will turn to the discussion on whether the general notion of correctness can be understood non-prescriptively. The next two sections concern which prescriptions could be the semantic prescriptions if semantic correctness is assumed to be prescriptive. In section 4, I will show that Whiting's formulations, which do follow from the assumption that semantic correctness is prescriptive, are in conflict with speakers' communicative intentions and sketch an anti-normativist account of what it is to act according to communicative intentions based on what can be done not what should be done. In the section 5, I will consider some normativist alternatives which aim to take what speakers want to express into account. In particular, I will focus on proposals by Claudine Verheggen (2011; 2015) and Alan Millar (2002; 2004). I will argue that these would be better understood in terms of non-semantic prescriptions as well.

## **2. Semantic correctness, normativity, and naturalism**

Following Kripke's (1982) discussion on the rule-following, many philosophers were keen to adopt the slogan "meaning is normative." It was generally agreed that normativity played a key role in Kripke's arguments against various theories of meaning and in particular the naturalized ones.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, rather than being a feature ascribed to meaning by some theories of meaning, the slogan was taken to capture a pretheoretical criterion of adequacy for the theories of meaning. In other words, the normativity of meaning is a metametaseantic thesis about what kind of theories can be acceptable theories of meaning. Although this distinction is not always made explicit, this is how the claim is typically formulated in the debate (e.g., Glüer and Wikforss 2015, 64; Hattiangadi 2006, 220; Verheggen 2011, 553; Whiting 2009, 553).

The early advocates of the normativity thesis remained divided on how exactly the normativity should be understood. Paul Boghossian (1989) critically discussed many of these early reactions to Kripke as well as presented one of the most influential interpretations of the normativity of meaning in terms of semantic correctness conditions. The normativity of meaning, according to Boghossian, is just the uncontroversial claim that the world "green" applies correctly to green and only green things. While virtually nothing in philosophy is entirely free of controversy, Boghossian's understanding of normativity is of special interest, since today many anti-normativists are willing to accept the claim that meaningful expressions have correctness conditions (Hattiangadi 2006, 222; Glüer and Wikforss 2015, 66).

What anti-normativists deny, however, is that the semantic correctness conditions do anything beyond categorizing utterances into correct and incorrect ones. The existence of such categorizations is not sufficient to show that meaning is normative at least in the sense that threatens naturalized theories of meaning.<sup>3</sup> (Hattiangadi 2006, 222; see also Glüer and Wikforss 2015, 66.) Suppose we accept that Kripke's considerations show that some naturalized theories, namely dispositionalist theories of meaning, which identify meaning facts in terms of speakers' dispositions to use expressions in certain ways, fail to establish the correctness conditions of expressions. It is less clear, however, that the same arguments can be applied to more sophisticated versions of dispositionalism or theories

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<sup>2</sup> The role of normativity in Kripke's arguments has also been questioned (Kusch 2006). Although I don't intend to endorse it, I will sometimes use a normativist reading of Kripke to elucidate the supposed intuitive link between normativity of meaning and correctness.

<sup>3</sup> Like normativity, naturalism is a notoriously ambiguous notion. To borrow Papineau's (2006) rough characterization, naturalized theories explain concepts like meaning without extending the methods and ontology of the natural sciences.

relying on facts beyond dispositions such as speaker's causal history or biological functions to identify the meaning facts.

Anti-normativists argue that a further assumption is needed to show that semantic correctness also presents a problem for the more sophisticated theories. Semantic correctness must also be shown to be prescriptive. Only then it could be argued that naturalized theories of meaning illegitimately derive "ought" statements from "is" statements. (Hattiangadi 2006, 222–24; 2007, 35, 37; Glüer and Wikforss 2009, 32.) Intuitively dispositionalism merely describes how a speaker uses expressions and not how they should be used. Perhaps the situation is similar with the other naturalist theories of meaning. After all, describing what is the case is the aim of scientific inquiry, not prescribing what should be the case. Even if, say, the speaker's causal history with the concept "green" can offer a candidate classification of utterances into correct and incorrect ones, it will ultimately fail to explain the entailed semantic prescriptions.

It is worth stressing that anti-normativists do not argue that normativity in general is naturalizable. Nor is the goal to offer a naturalistic analysis of semantic normativity. Rather anti-normativists argue that there is no semantic normativity to be naturalized beyond perhaps the trivial correctness which any theory can account for. If no prescriptions follow from semantic correctness, there are no normative truths for a theory of meaning to explain. Therefore, normativity does not justify extending the scope of Kripke's argument beyond simple dispositionalism regardless of whether normativity can be naturalized or not.

Not everyone agrees with this evaluation, however. Claudine Verheggen claims that the core problem for the semantic naturalist is not explaining the prescriptions implied by semantic correctness. Rather the core problem of naturalization, according to her, is to explain semantic correctness itself (Verheggen 2011, 556). Likewise, Jeffrey Kaplan has argued that even if semantic correctness was not prescriptive, this would not mean that it has to be descriptive (J. Kaplan 2020).<sup>4</sup> Additionally, correctness might have some other normative implications beyond prescriptions. If there are some non-prescriptive, but still normative implications, showing that no prescriptions follow from correctness may not be enough to show that semantic correctness is not normative; only that semantic correctness is not prescriptive.

Going through all possible normative implications of semantic correctness would be beyond the scope of this paper. I will therefore limit the study to prescriptions and accordingly shift the terminology from normativity to prescriptivity. Given that ought is a central normative term, failing to imply semantic prescriptions could still reflect deeper issues with the normativity of meaning. Nevertheless, the categorical conclusion that meaning is not normative cannot be drawn based on this paper alone.

### **3. Is correctness necessarily prescriptive?**

Before discussing the notion of semantic correctness, it is worthwhile to examine the relationship between prescriptivity and the general notion of correctness. Whiting and Jaroslav Peregrin take "correct" to be a part of the basic normative vocabulary among "ought," "may," "obligation," and "permission" (Whiting 2009, 538; Peregrin 2012, 84). They argue that since correctness is an intrinsically normative notion, prescriptions do follow from correctness. Why then anti-normativists reject this intuition?

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<sup>4</sup> If a theory has problems accounting for correctness itself these may simply be symptoms of a more substantial issue with the theory. That is, the theory fails to account for correctness because it fails to give a plausible account of meaning and not the other way around. (Honkasalo 2022.)

Glüer and Wikforss give two reasons to think that semantic correctness is not necessarily a prescriptive notion. First, they suggest that given that semantic correctness is a technical philosophical concept, the facts about natural language usage of the word “correct” offer only limited philosophical import. Instead, “correctness” should be understood as a placeholder term to be replaced by the basic concept of the semantic theory, such as truth, which need not be normative. Second, they contend that the word “correct” does have some non-normative uses, namely, conforming to a standard, which need not entail prescriptions. They conclude that, unless there is an additional argument to support the normativist claim, semantic correctness can be understood merely as a categorization of applications into correct and incorrect without prescriptive implications. While applying the word “green” to a red entity does not conform to the correctness conditions of the word “green,” this does not straightforwardly imply that the applications should be corrected or frowned upon. (Glüer and Wikforss 2015, 68; see also Hattiangadi 2006, 222.)

However, Whiting claims that by treating the correctness as a placeholder, anti-normativists fail to recognize the distinction between the concept of correctness and the correctness-making feature. Relying on a distinction highlighted by Gideon Rosen, he argues that while the fact that the object to which the expression “green” is applied is a purely descriptive fact, this fact is merely the correctness-making feature that must obtain for the application to be considered correct. Claiming that an application of “green” is correct, on the other hand, is a higher-order claim that the application possesses the features required for it to be correct. (Whiting 2009, 538–39; Rosen 2001, 619–29.)<sup>5</sup>

However, pointing out the distinction only serves to move the question of normativity of correctness to a higher level, the fact of which Rosen is keenly aware. In order to argue that correctness is prescriptive, it is not enough to show that notions of correctness and correct-making feature are distinct (Rosen 2001, 620–21).<sup>6</sup> While Rosen is sympathetic to the idea explicitly endorsed by Whiting and Peregrin that “correctness” in some sense could be counted amongst the normative vocabulary, according to him, correctness differs in one crucial way from typically normative terms like “ought,” namely it lacks the “internal connection” with reasons for action.<sup>7</sup> According to Rosen, it is not enough to recognize that it is correct to play the note B in the second bar of the Piano sonata to motivate a (rational) person to play it (Rosen 2001, 620–21). Perhaps the player wishes to amuse the audience by intentionally playing the piece incorrectly or maybe she does not wish to play Mozart in the first place. The fact that a correct rendition of

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<sup>5</sup> Glüer and Wikforss claim that this would merely make it possible for the normativist to accept that the basic semantic concept is non-prescriptive, but maintain that correctness could still be prescriptive. This would not however be enough to show that correctness must be understood prescriptively in the higher-order sense. (Glüer and Wikforss 2015, 71.)

<sup>6</sup> In (2001) Rosen is concerned with the normativity of belief rather than meaning. Regarding the relationship between correct and true belief, he writes: “it is not enough [...] that correctness and truth should be distinct. It remains to show that correctness is normative feature.” It is however clear that the point is applicable to the case of meaning as well.

<sup>7</sup> Rosen, however, points out that in another sense correctness has more in common with normative vocabulary. Namely, in a sense that while we cannot say that one ought to play a musical piece correctly, we can in principle say from any recital whether the piece was played correctly or not regardless of what goals or desires a player may have. (Rosen 2001, 621.) However, since the aim of this paper is not to show that any conception of the normativity of meaning is untenable, only that semantic prescriptions cannot be derived from semantic correctness, I will leave this problem aside.

Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata is an incorrect recital of Mozart's Sonata does not mean that playing Beethoven should be avoided.<sup>8</sup>

What does this disconnect with reasons mean for the prescriptivity of correctness? Using the terminology favoured in the debate so far, this means that prescriptions implied by the correctness conditions are at most merely hypothetical prescriptions, which might also be called "technical norms," or "means-to-end prescriptions," that tell what an agent ought to do to achieve a goal. In contrast, categorical prescriptions tell an agent what to do regardless of what goals an agent takes to be worthy of accomplishing. If semantic correctness necessarily entails such categorical prescriptions, theories of meaning that fail to account for them would indeed provide an incomplete picture of meaning, but if correctness only implies prescriptions that are contingent on speaker's goals or desires such a conclusion would be too hastily drawn.

To begin with, hypothetical prescriptions might only look like prescriptions, but instead, be equivalent to descriptive claims. The mere appearance of the word "ought" is not enough to guarantee that these are really prescriptions, since the word also appears in descriptive statements like "it ought to rain soon," which predicts rather than prescribes. Likewise, hypothetical prescriptions have been suggested to be merely descriptive claims in prescriptive disguise. According to R.M. Hare, the statement "If you want to go to the largest grocer in Oxford, [you ought to<sup>9</sup>] go to Grimbley Hughes" says nothing more than the statement: "Grimbley Hughes is the largest grocer in Oxford" (Hare 1952, chap. 3; see also Hattiangadi 2006, 228). More generally, hypothetical prescriptions could be interpreted as directions or recipes which describe which actions are sufficient for achieving a certain goal, instead of prescribing that those actions ought to be taken or saying anything about whether the goal is worth achieving.

However, it would also be too hasty to conclude that hypothetical prescriptions are necessarily just rephrased descriptive claims. Although he shared Hare's reservations about calling them prescriptive, von Wright was hesitant to identify hypothetical prescriptions with descriptive statements, since the descriptive claim about the largest grocer says nothing about anyone's mental states (von Wright 1963, 9–10). It is also important to note that even Hare treats *want* as a "logical term" in his analysis rather than as an ordinary term relating to mental states such as desires. According to him, if we instead interpreted the *want* to signify a mental state, the hypothetical prescription does say more than the descriptive claim—namely that if you have a desire, or you have adopted a goal, you really ought to go act on your desire or a goal (Hare 1952). In this case, the *ought* is no different from categorical prescriptions; it is merely conditional on mental facts.

However, interpreting means-to-end prescriptions as conditional prescriptions would also produce a problem: we would ought to act on any desire or a goal and undertake the means, however immoral, in pursuing them (Hattiangadi 2006, 228). If I want to get an inheritance no matter the cost, should I serve arsenic at dinner in order to kill a rich relative? Moral conflicts aside, it has also been questioned whether anything truly normative could really be conditional on the adoption of a goal or a desire since this seems to make *oughts* too easy to come by (e.g., Bratman 1981; Broome 2013).

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<sup>8</sup> One might question whether the correctness conditions of Mozart's Sonata should be applicable to a rendition of Beethoven's sonata. However, if the further notion of applicability is needed then the notion of correctness is not in itself sufficient to provide reasons for action. Furthermore, what source for the appropriateness there is other than players desire to play the piece or some extramusical obligation (such as a promise) to play it? For discussion on the notion of applicability in the context of the normativity of meaning debate, see Reinikainen 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Hare discusses imperatives rather than prescriptions and hence the original says only "go to." I have changed the imperative to an "ought"-statement to better suit the argumentation of this paper. The addition of "ought" in this case does not distort the intent of the original passage.

Fortunately for the purposes of this paper, we can leave these difficult questions open as well as leave various important issues unaddressed,<sup>10</sup> since regardless of the way we account for the means-to-end prescriptions, the normative status of correctness is left unaffected. If these prescriptions are interpreted as descriptions in disguise, they obviously provide no reason to think correctness is prescriptive. If, as von Wright suggests, they are not descriptive, but not prescriptive either, then we arrive at the same conclusion. Even if there is something genuinely prescriptive about means-to-end prescriptions, nevertheless correctness only determines the means and not the oughts of the prescriptions. They merely identify the notes which satisfy the goal of playing Mozart correctly, but something else prescribes that those notes ought to be played. This is because whatever prescribes a player to undertake the musical means to the musical ends must be what makes any means-to-end prescriptions prescriptive, most of which have nothing to do with Mozart or music in general.

What this means is that we can accept that if something is semantically correct, there is always a corresponding hypothetical prescription. We can even accept that these prescriptions are somehow genuinely normative, but still maintain that semantic correctness is not the source of normativity. In other words, if a speaker intends to use expressions correctly, she may be required to apply “green” only to green things but meaning requires no such thing. Assuming non-naturalism about normativity, the hypothetical *oughts* might themselves pose a problem for the naturalist philosopher, but this does not affect the naturalization of meaning. The only thing about these prescriptions a theory of meaning needs to explain is how to behave semantically correctly and not that one should behave so. The latter would be like requiring toxicology to explain not only that arsenic is poisonous, but also why one ought not to feed it to one’s guests.

Based on the considerations presented in this section, it seems that the notion of semantic correctness itself does not provide a straightforward argument for the metametaseantic thesis. The normativity of meaning cannot be a criterion of adequacy for plausible theories of meaning based on semantic correctness alone, since correctness can be understood non-prescriptively. An advocate of a naturalized theory of meaning can accept that there are correctness conditions but deny that they generate any special semantic prescriptions to be accounted for.

Of course, the fact that meaning can be understood non-normatively does not imply that it cannot be understood normatively. Neither does the failure of the metametaseantic thesis settle the question of whether meaning is actually normative, since the thesis concerns only which theories manage to capture pretheoretical constraints, not which theory is true. If meaning is actually normative, the fact that a naturalist reductionist theory of meaning captures pretheoretical intuitions is an uninteresting consolation prize. Additionally, out of all plausible theories of meaning, it might be the case that the best theories of meaning do imply that semantic correctness is prescriptive.

In the next section I will shift the attention to the question of whether semantic correctness can be understood prescriptively. To assess this matter we must take a closer look at what prescriptions could be said to follow from semantic correctness. I will argue that semantic correctness cannot plausibly determine what a speaker ought to do purely from the point of view of meaning. While this may not be sufficient for establishing the reversal of the metametaseantic thesis—i.e., it may not be sufficient to show that all plausible theories of meaning must interpret semantic correctness non-prescriptively—it nonetheless suggests that the non-prescriptive alternative is preferable since it avoids these

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<sup>10</sup> Including issues such as: Do means-to-end prescriptions require actions to be performed or merely intended? Should I intend what I believe to be the means or which actually are the means?

issues simply by leaving the question of what a speaker should do with words to be determined by something other than meaning.

#### 4. Should you speak correctly?

If we suppose that semantic correctness does entail semantic prescriptions, how should these correctness conditions and prescriptions be formulated? Hattiangadi (2006) formulates the correctness conditions of application in the following manner. Let  $t$  be a term,  $F$  be a meaning, and  $f$  be a feature or collection of features that make it the case that  $F$  applies:

(CA)  $t$  means  $F \rightarrow (\forall x)(t \text{ applies correctly to } x \leftrightarrow x \text{ is } f)$ .

The expression “green” means *green* which applies to entities that are green, therefore the expression “green” applies correctly to green entities and incorrectly to non-green ones. A straightforward way to capture the intuition that semantic correctness is prescriptive is to require speakers to use expressions correctly. To represent this we can modify our prescription schema by replacing the phrase “ $S$  applies correctly” with “ $S$  ought to apply,” where  $S$  is a speaker.

(SP1)  $t$  means  $F \rightarrow (\forall x)(S \text{ ought to apply } t \text{ to } x \leftrightarrow x \text{ is } f)$ .

As Hattiangadi points out, (SP1) requires too much from the speaker. Suppose that there is a dog on Mars. It follows then that a speaker ought to call it a dog regardless of whether she is aware of its existence. (Hattiangadi 2006, 226–27.) Moreover, since (SP1) is formulated schematically, a speaker ought to apply a proper name to its bearer and state every property it instantiates. (SP1) then clearly violates the principle of *ought implies can*.

However, (SP1) is not the only possible option to capture the prescriptivity of correctness. Peregrin and Whiting suggest that switching “ought” to “may” better captures the idea (Whiting 2009, 544–45; Peregrin 2012, 87–88). After all, moving a bishop diagonally is a correct move, but this does not imply that this move ought to be made, since one can also make another correct move. Similarly, perhaps the semantic prescriptions are best captured by the schema:

(SP2)  $t$  means  $F \rightarrow (\forall x)(S \text{ may apply } t \text{ to } x \leftrightarrow x \text{ is } f)$ .

(SP2) is no longer in a straightforward conflict with the principle of *ought implies can*. If there is a dog on Mars, a speaker may apply “dog” to it, but it no longer follows that she ought to do so. One might be concerned whether *may* is strong enough to constrain speakers’ actions for us to consider (SP2) as a genuine prescription? This, however, is not an issue, since in addition to telling speakers what may be done (SP2) also implies what the speaker ought not to do, namely, she ought to refrain from applying “dog” to non-dogs. (SP2) is, therefore, more accurately called prohibition rather than permission.

While (SP2) no longer contradicts the *ought implies can* principle, Hattiangadi points out it may nonetheless contradict other obligations a speaker may have. Sometimes a speaker may be morally obligated to lie and therefore speaker ought to apply  $t$  to  $x$  and she also ought not to apply  $t$  to  $x$ .



Whiting does not see such a contradiction as a serious problem. He accepts that some other normative obligations (moral, epistemic, or prudential) can be in conflict with speakers' semantic obligations. For meaning to be normative it suffices that meaning provides a reason for not applying  $t$  to  $x$ , even if there are weightier reasons for applying  $t$  to  $x$ . In other words, (SP2) is a *prima facie* prescription or a prescription that can be overridden by other obligations. Another way of putting this is to say that the fact that  $t$  means  $F$  is a *pro tanto* reason for applying  $t$  to only things that are  $f$ 's even if all reasons considered one ought to apply  $t$  to an entity that is not  $f$ . To characterize Whiting's view of normativity more informally: if there are no weightier reasons to do otherwise, a speaker ought to refrain from applying "dog" to non-dogs. (Whiting 2009, 546.)<sup>11</sup>

In an anticipation of this kind of defense, Hattiangadi claims that while *prima facie* obligations can only be overridden by other obligations, semantic prescriptions like (SP2) seem to be overridable by mere desires (Hattiangadi 2006, 232). Namely, if a speaker has no interest in telling the truth and instead wishes to tell a lie or a fictional story, there does not seem to be a semantic reason to criticize her linguistic behaviour. Therefore (SP2) cannot be regarded even as a *prima facie* prescription, since if all that is needed for excusing speaker's apparent transgressions is the fact that she just did not feel like abiding by it, then there was no transgression to begin with. The only other option is to maintain that the prescription is a hypothetical prescription and contingent on the desire to speak the truth, which—as we saw in the previous section—is not sufficient for Whiting's goals.

Whiting still maintains that even if a speaker had no desire to speak the truth, her behaviour may still be criticizable from a semantic perspective. A speaker does have a semantic reason not to apply dog to non-dogs and that reason does not cease to be a reason even if she has no desire to tell the truth. (Whiting 2009, 548–49) He, however, stresses that the fact that the speaker's behaviour is criticizable does not mean that her transgressions are particularly grievous. Semantic offenses are not on par with moral or epistemic offenses. He suspects that, at least partly, the source of anti-normativist apprehension towards the thesis is in taking the thesis to be stronger than it needs to be. Recognizing "the bearable lightness of meaning" can bring the thesis into a more favourable light. (Whiting 2009, 550–51; see also 2007, 139)

Hattiangadi claims however that even if there are no reasons to act otherwise, (SP2) is still contingent on the desire to communicate. If a speaker has no intention to communicate at all, what reason is there to criticize her behaviour? (Hattiangadi 2006, 232) However, I do not think that this is the core issue with (SP2). First, if a speaker lacks the desire to communicate, then we could reasonably question whether the speaker simply does not speak English or any other language.<sup>12</sup> Since (SP2) does not generate obligations for those who are not using language, if the speaker ceases to speak English, it would indicate that Hattiangadi's proposed counterexample does not have a bearing on the plausibility of (SP2) which must be assessed by keeping the meaning condition fixed.

Secondly, if Jane calls a cat "dog" just because she felt like lying, she must have had a desire to communicate. Namely, she has a desire to communicate a false proposition that

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<sup>11</sup> Peregrin raises a similar point by distinguishing defeasible/indefeasible obligations. However, the core issue is the same: how to explain conflicting obligations (Peregrin 2012, 80). Therefore, I take it that Peregrin's objection can be formulated in terms of *prima facie* obligations or *pro tanto* reasons as well.

<sup>12</sup> This response assumes that one might simply by forsaking any desires to communicate cease to speak English while making sounds that bear striking resemblance to English words. It is of course a non-trivial assumption that one might simply decide to opt-out of speaking a public language. Nevertheless, since the question whether or not the speaker speaks English can only affect the meaning condition in (SP2), it does not have a bearing on the question of what should be done in the case "dog" means *dog* for the speaker and therefore the choice does not have direct impact on the plausibility of (SP2). For discussion on public language, see (Reiland 2021).

a cat is a dog. Therefore the lack of desire to communicate does not affect whether or not (SP2) is in force for her. However, recognizing her intentions to communicate seems to indicate that despite her use being semantically incorrect, Jane did something right since she used precisely the right word given her communicative intentions and, therefore, in an accordance with the meaning of the word “dog.”<sup>13</sup> While Whiting claims that since her application was semantically incorrect, she must have done something semantically criticizable if her choice of words corresponds with what she wanted to say, why should we take her application to be criticizable on semantic grounds? In contrast, if she applies “cat” to a cat, then she used a word that did not suit her intentions. If anything is criticizable on semantic grounds here, then should it not be this application even if it was the correct one?

One might try to argue that speakers’ communicative intentions when lying should be regarded as a special case because lying is somehow parasitic on truth-telling,<sup>14</sup> but (SP2), taken as a semantic prescription, is not even contingent on speaker’s desire to speak the truth. Suppose John wants to tell the truth, but mistakes a cat for a dog and therefore calls it “dog.” While refraining from applying “dog” to a non-dog would be required to fulfill his desire to speak the truth, the proposition he intended to express was not the truth, but rather what he believed to be the truth. So it seems that John had two intentions, to speak the truth and to call an entity a dog. While his choice of words failed to satisfy the first intention, they reflected the latter intention adequately. Only the latter intention is relevant to assess whether he used “dog” in accordance with its meaning and therefore it should also be relevant when assessing if his behaviour warrants criticism from purely semantic perspective.<sup>15</sup>

Even though they might have done what their communicative intentions require, Whiting denies that Jane and John did something they *semantically* ought to have done. Instead, what makes their word choices successful is just the appropriateness for their communicative intentions. Any requirements Jane and John may have fulfilled are therefore contingent on their intentions and should be accounted for in terms of means-to-end prescriptions which, as seen in section 3, do not generate *oughts* of semantic kind (Whiting 2016, 229). While I agree with Whiting’s assessment, the question remains whether he can also maintain that Jane and John also did something that from the *semantic* perspective they should not have done, since they failed to use words in an accordance with the correctness conditions.

He invites us to consider an analogy to chess where mistaking a rook for a bishop might explain why a player moved a piece diagonally, but even though the epistemic mistake might explain player’s actions it does not change the fact that the move was against the rules of chess. Whiting maintains that similarly, John’s failure to recognize a cat as a non-dog does not change the fact that (I) what he did was *semantically* incorrect and therefore (II) what he *semantically* ought not to have done (Whiting 2016, 232). Furthermore, Whiting stresses that (III) even if our account of meaning fails to recognize semantic mistakes as semantically forbidden, that does not mean this notion escapes the analysis. Just as in chess, where we can distinguish violations of the rule which are explained by player’s mistake about the rule or which piece is which and cases in which a player intentionally breaks the rules, we can distinguish epistemic mistakes about the

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<sup>13</sup> Perhaps her use can be characterized even as semantically correct in Millar’s sense (2004). For now, however, I will focus on Whiting’s preferred notion of correctness as captured by (CA) and return to Millar’s formulation in the next section.

<sup>14</sup> Hattiangadi considers this option in (Hattiangadi 2006, 230–31).

<sup>15</sup> Wikforss argues similarly that semantic prescriptions are ill-equipped to deal with reporting false beliefs (Wikforss 2001, 205–6).

species of an observed animal from semantic mistakes about the meaning of the word “dog.” Recognizing these type of semantic mistakes does not warrant the acceptance of additional semantic prescriptions, which forbid semantic mistakes. (Whiting 2016, 233–34.)

I agree with Whiting on points (I) and (III), but I am still inclined to deny (II). In the case of chess players’ mental states like desires, beliefs, or intentions do not factor into deciding which moves are correct and incorrect or how pieces may or may not be moved.<sup>16</sup> While the same can be said about semantic correctness, the same cannot be said about the alleged semantic prescriptions. If there are semantic prescriptions at all, then what proposition the speaker wants to express should have a bearing on what she semantically ought to do. While the phenomenon of semantic mistake can be accounted for without invoking semantic prescriptions, the prescriptions which treat actions that are not semantic mistakes as semantically forbidden should also be regarded as non-semantic.

Whiting might contest this intuition and maintain that the prohibitions against incorrect speech are essential to meaning whereas semantic mistakes, despite their name, are at heart still factual mistakes, that is, mistakes about the true meaning of a word (Whiting 2016, 233–34). However, if we understand semantic mistakes as failing to use an appropriate expression for what speaker wants to express, this does not itself depend on speaker’s beliefs. Mary might know the meaning of a word “dog” and recognize the animal, but by the slip of a tongue call it “log.” The appropriateness analysis of a semantic mistake therefore does not necessarily involve a factual mistake and this is what counts in favour of adopting it. However, even if the analysis fails to capture the distinction the examples of Jane, John, and Mary are nevertheless categorized respecting pretheoretical intuitions of semantic mistakes which is itself sufficient to favour theories that reject semantic prescriptions which altogether ignore speakers’ intentions. Perhaps we could go as far as to claim that these theories should fail to be adequate theories of meaning themselves.

## 5. What is it that you want to say?

The moral of the last section was that (SP2) ignores what speakers want to express by their utterances and by doing so it permits some actions intuitively characterized as mistakes such as mistakenly telling the truth when attempting to lie, and forbids some actions which do not seem to call for semantic criticism, such as reporting false beliefs. Even if the last section is enough to justify rejection of some candidate prescriptions, the question remains whether some other prescriptions could fare better?

A worry might arise that in invoking the notion of semantic mistake, we ended up introducing another normative term that might imply semantic prescriptions. However, in the last section the mistakes were identified in terms of a mismatch between what the speaker wants to express and with which expressions she attempts to achieve these goals. What is left for the theory of meaning is to explain which expressions are suitable for the speaker’s communicative intentions. Explaining what expression a speaker ought to use is and indeed should be regarded as something beyond its scope. To put this concisely, a theory of meaning must explain how expressions can be used, not how they ought to be used.

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<sup>16</sup> One might object that whether or not you ought to follow rules of chess is contingent on the desire to play chess. I will not discuss this issue here, since if rules of chess generate merely hypothetical prescriptions, the analogy would support the anti-normativist rather than the normativist conclusion.

Crucially, a prescription candidate which would better capture our intuitions on semantic mistakes cannot be derived from semantic correctness, as it is formulated in (CA). After all, the categorization of correct and incorrect applications does not coincide with cases that can intuitively be characterized as mistakes. Therefore, a more adequate prescription would need to deem some correct uses as ones to be avoided and some incorrect uses to be accepted. No simple argument is available which shows that (CA) entails such alternative prescriptions. Indeed, it is not easy to see what argument could show that semantic correctness is prescriptive notion, but sometimes you ought to behave correctly and other times incorrectly. Since this is essentially what it takes to capture the semantic intuitions, then no alternative schemas can fair any better.

Nevertheless, before calling semantic correctness non-prescriptive I need to address some counterpoints. Normativists have at least two ways of countering the reasoning above. First, it could be argued that the criteria of prescriptivity should be relaxed. Although Whiting is ready to accept the anti-normativist claim that categorical prescriptions are what is needed for meaning to be genuinely normative, some, such as Verheggen, are not so quick to dismiss hypothetical prescriptions. Secondly, it has been argued that (CA) does not capture the intended semantic correctness and that the right formulation of semantic correctness could imply categorical prescriptions (Buleandra 2008; Millar 2004; Reiland 2023).

Verheggen accepts that no categorical prescriptions can be derived from correctness conditions since whether a speaker ought to apply a word to an entity or not depends on how she wishes to employ it. However, correctness conditions prescribe how to employ the words when you want to be sincere, nonsincere, or humorous. She, however, claims that while this makes the prescriptions hypothetical, they are not analogous to means-to-end prescriptions which can arise from any fact, because these prescriptions are essential to meaning. She points out that facts about rain and umbrellas are just the same whether I want to stay dry or not. If I do not mind getting wet, then these facts simply become irrelevant for considering what to do. She argues that, while prescriptions implied by semantic correctness are dependent on the speaker's desires, they do not become irrelevant even if those desires change. This is because regardless of what the speaker wants to say, correctness conditions imply what they ought to do in that circumstance. If the correctness conditions of the word "dog" become irrelevant for the speaker, it can only be because she does not mean anything by "dog." (Verheggen 2011, 562–63)

I agree that the hypothetical prescriptions are entangled with meaning facts, but I disagree that this would show that there is a disanalogy with the means-to-end prescriptions. All this entanglement amounts to is that meaning determines the means regardless of what ends speakers have, and this does not make the "oughts" essential to meaning. According to the picture I have advocated here, the reason for this entanglement is that meaning of an expression determines what can be expressed with it and this is naturally tied with what actions are required for attaining the speakers' intentions. In other words, even if the semantic correctness conditions of the word are necessary to determine the means-to-end prescriptions associated with that word, this does not mean that semantic correctness is also sufficient to entail those means ought to be undertaken. Something else must be the source of the "oughts" and the source must be common to all means-to-end prescriptions regardless of whether or not they have anything to do with meaning.

Moving on to the worry concerning the proper formulation of semantic correctness. Note that the problems of semantic prescriptions discussed so far stem from the close relationship between (CA) and truth. Therefore, it is no wonder that prescriptions do not condone false uses. Alan Millar recognizes this and distinguishes the correctness of application which corresponds to (CA) from the correctness of use. According to him,

while the correctness conditions of applications do not in themselves prescribe actions in the sense that speakers' would be required or allowed only to utter correctly, they determine the conditions of correct use or use in an accordance with meaning.<sup>17</sup> (Millar 2004, 166–67.)

In which conditions the speakers' uses accord with meaning? Without overly simplifying Millar's account we can characterize it in terms of absence of semantic mistakes. However, if mistakes are identified in terms of mismatch between what the speaker is intending to say and what expressions she uses, respecting correctness conditions of application just ends up implying hypothetical prescriptions and therefore the alternative notion of correctness offers no improvement compared to (CA).<sup>18</sup> Indeed Millar recognizes an alternative picture where prescriptions to use "dog" in certain ways might be contingent on speakers' intentions. However, he argues that this alternative would still have to assume that there is a background practice of meaning *dog* by "dog." Since practices are inherently normative for Millar, the prescriptions relating to correct use are in fact intrinsic to meaning, because the source of those prescriptions is in the practice of meaning. (Millar 2004, 167, 172.) However, the practice of meaning *dog* by "dog" itself could be accounted for in terms of "dog" being used to mean *dog*. This analysis, on the face of it, requires no additional prescriptions beyond the hypothetical ones.

Nevertheless, even if prescriptions are not required by the analysis does not mean they cannot in force. That is, in addition to the means-to-end prescription there might also be a semantic prescription with identical requirements. These semantic prescriptions may not go against the pretheoretical intuition on the nature of meaning and therefore, pending a more detailed analysis of Millar's account, we cannot conclude the reversal of the metametaseantic claim—that meaning is not and cannot be normative—should be adopted. However, while there is nothing inherently wrong with having normative redundancy, these semantic prescriptions appear to offer no further insight into meaning, because their content is already captured by the means-to-end prescriptions. Theories that reject these prescriptions (*ceteris paribus*) would be simpler and therefore at least in some sense preferable.

## 6. Concluding remarks: What is wrong with the normativity of meaning?

In this paper, the claim that semantic correctness is prescriptive was given two readings: metametaseantic and metaseantic. According to the metametaseantic reading, all plausible theories of meaning must interpret semantic correctness prescriptively. According to the metaseantic reading, semantic correctness is prescriptive, but this does not imply that all theories of meaning denying this automatically failed to capture the pretheoretical concept of meaning. A defense of the metaseantic claim can therefore depend on some substantial assumptions about meaning that go beyond the pretheoretical notion. In section 3, I defended the anti-normativist claim that since the general notion of correctness is not automatically prescriptive, the semantic correctness can be understood non-prescriptively. Because semantic correctness can also be interpreted non-

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<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Reiland distinguishes referential correctness (which corresponds to the correctness of application) from linguistic correctness which is use in accordance with meaning. However, he claims that the notion of use in an accordance with meaning admits to both normativist and anti-normativist construal (Reiland 2023, **8, footnote 7**). Ruling out the possibility of normativist construal Reiland has in mind would require a more detailed treatment of his views. Such treatment is better offered in the context of a different paper.

<sup>18</sup> Whiting also argues that correctness of use implies merely hypothetical prescriptions (Whiting 2016, 229–30).

prescriptively, anti-normativists are free to reject any prospective semantic prescriptions while maintaining that semantic correctness itself is essential to meaning.

In sections 4 and 5, I argued that semantic correctness in its most widely accepted form (CA) cannot be prescriptive. If it were, some uses which intuitively warrant no semantic criticism would nonetheless be semantically forbidden. The only way to maintain that semantic correctness is essentially prescriptive is to argue that some alternative notion of correctness is prescriptive. Even if this alternative notion of semantic correctness produces a plausible theory of meaning, which presupposes semantic prescriptions, this would not mean that the theory should be preferred over the ones which require no semantic prescriptions.

The problem with deriving semantic prescriptions from semantic correctness is not, as Glüer, Hattiangadi, and Wikforss have argued, that the implied prescriptions are contingent on the desire to tell the truth or desire to communicate. The crux of the problem is that meaning seems to only determine what can be expressed by an expression whereas alleged semantic prescriptions concern what should be expressed. If a theory of meaning manages to explain the relationship between words and world, it can explain what speakers can do with meaningful expressions. If the word “dog” means *dog*, then it can be used in expressing propositions like *a dog wears a hat*, but it is entirely another question whether this proposition should be expressed.

Traditionally, it has not been the task of a theory of meaning to explain what people should do with words, and it is unclear why such a thing would be a good idea. Semantics provides a toolbox of meaningful expressions for speakers to use, not a script to be followed. Formulating prescriptions as prohibitions would only produce a script with a little room for improvisation, but it would still be a script nonetheless. It would be perhaps too far to suggest that the normativist had mistaken what *can be done* to what *may be done*, but perhaps they have failed to appreciate how many of the intuitions relating to the latter can equally well be captured by the former.

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