

Rule-dependence and -independence in Meaning Constituting Rules

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Introduction

- ▶ At least from early 20th century onward it has been quite popular to compare language to games and especially chess. (E.g. Saussure, Russell, Sellars, and Wittgenstein)
 - ▶ "Without the rules of chess it is only possible to move pieces of wood around a checkered board, but with the rules of chess these acts become capturing peaces, checkmating etc."
 - ▶ "Similarly, without the rules of language it is only possible to make sounds, but only with those rules those sounds can have meaning."
- ▶ In the philosophical jargon: the rules of chess and the rules of language are constitutive rules.
 - ▶ I will highlight a problem relating to the relationship between these rule-independent actions and the rule dependent actions.

Meaning constitution and determination

- ▶ The claim that meaning is constituted by rules would appear to be a metasemantic claim. That is it seeks to answer the questions like:
 - ▶ In virtue of what, In German, "Gift"¹ means *poison*²?
 - ▶ Answer: "Gift" means *poison* in virtue of the rules of German
- ▶ A successful answer to the in-virtue-of question, should also provide answer two "first order" semantic questions, one lexical and one more philosophical.

¹"Gift" will refer to German word, and "gift" to the English word.

²I use *italics* to refer to the semantic content (e.g. concept, proposition). 

Meaning constitution and determination

- ▶ Why does a specific semantic content is attached to specific lexical item?
 - ▶ Why does German expression "Gift" mean *poison* while the English expression "gift" means *present*?
 - ▶ Possible answers: causal history, speaker intention, community, rules...
- ▶ What is it for an lexical item to mean *poison*:
 - ▶ What do the German expression "Gift" and the English expression "poison" have in common?
 - ▶ Possible answers: concepts, truth conditions, rules...

Against meaning constituting rules

- ▶ Aim is to argue that rule-candidates fail to address either of these questions and hence fail to offer a plausible answer to the in-virtue-of question.
 - ▶ Rules that only manage to determine the rule-independent means to express semantic content fail to determine what that content is.
 - ▶ Rules that could determine the what that content is fail to determine the rule-independent means of expressing it.

Outline of the argument

1. Three forms of constitutive rules
2. XY-rules cannot determine the content
3. YZ-rules fail to determine the means of expressing content
4. XZ-rules require a rule-independent means of establishing type/token distraction
5. Combining XY- and YZ-rules fails to address the order of priority

Conclusion

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XY-Rules

- ▶ Perhaps most discussed rule-type in the literature are rules of the form: X counts as Y [Searle, 1969],
 - X designates a rule independent act, object or an event and Y designates a rule dependent object, event or act.
- ▶ "Moving king two moves towards a rook and placing the rook on the other side of the king counts as castling"
- ▶ Meaning constitutive rule of the XY-type:

XY1 Uttering [gift]³ counts as expressing the concept *poison*

³I use square brackets to designate sounds

YZ-rules

- ▶ However, not all rules of games follow the XY-formula.
 - ▶ Being **Y** comes with deontic consequences **Z**
[Searle, 1969, Ransdell, 1971]
- ▶ YZ-rules: **Y** is permitted/forbidden/required if (and only if) Condition **C** obtains [Reiland, 2020]
 - ▶ **Castling** is permitted iff **four conditions** obtain.⁴
- ▶ Potential meaning constituting YZ-rule:

YZ1 Expressing the content *poison* is permitted iff speaker is **thinking about poison**.⁵

⁴No prior movement, clear path, no check, safe passage

⁵The precise condition does not matter for the argument. For candidates see e.g.: [Dummett, 1994, Brandom, 2001, Peregrin, 2014, Reiland, 2023].

XZ-rules

- ▶ Some have questioned the significance of Y-terms [Ransdell, 1971] and instead suggested that the deontic consequences Z could be attached directly to X-terms.
- ▶ XZ-rules: X is permitted/forbidden/required If (and only if) Condition C obtains.
 - ▶ "Moving king two moves towards a rook and placing the rook on the other side of the king is permitted iff four conditions obtain..."

XZ1 Uttering [gift] is permitted iff speaker is thinking about poison.

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Attaching content to utterances

- ▶ Recall the question a metasemantic account should be able to answer:
 - ▶ Why does Hannah utterance [gift] mean *poison* and John's utterance [gift] mean *present*?
 - ▶ XY-rules seems to offer a neat explanations to this fact. Different rules are in force for them
 - ▶ XY1 is in force for Hannah, while for rule:
- XY2 Uttering [gift] counts as expressing the concept *present*.
is in force for John.

Determining the content

- ▶ Why does Hannah's utterance [gift] mean the same as John's utterance [poison]?
 - ▶ The utterances obviously are not governed by the same rule, because they have different *X*-terms.
- ▶ We could perhaps look at what they share, i.e. the *Y*-terms.
 - ▶ But this can only be helpful if we already know what it is to express a concept *poison*.
- ▶ XY-rules could at best only determine the means of expressing *poison* but not the content of that expression.

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From conditions to content

- ▶ Prima facie, YZ-rules appear to be in a better position to answer the second question.
 - ▶ "Hanna's [gift] and John's [present] have the same meaning, because YZ1 is in force for both of them."
- ▶ On the other hand, YZ-rules have trouble answering the first question.
 - ▶ If both Hannah and John is governed by the rule YZ1, the why [gift] uttered by Hannah means *poison* while John means *present?* by [gift]?

Attaching content to utterances

- ▶ While the conditions of permissibility for expressing the concept *poison* could perhaps determine what that concept is, YZ1 governs only rule-dependent acts and not rule-independent acts like uttering.
 - ▶ YZ1 cannot determine that Hannah whether Hannah utterance is permitted or not.
 - ▶ Thus it cannot determine what that utterance expresses.
 - ▶ Thus, despite the initial promise, YZ1 fails to answer the even the first question.

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Cut out the middle-man?

- ▶ Attaching permissibility conditions directly to utterances, could be seen as a promising way around this problem.
 - ▶ If conditions of permissibility can determine what it means to express a concept, maybe it can also determine the meaning of utterances.
- ▶ Arguably the fact that the conditions of permissibility of uttering [gift] differ for Hannah and John explains why they mean different things by [gift].
- ▶ Moreover the fact that Hannah's [gift] and John's [poison] share the permissibility conditions, means that the utterances have the same meaning.

From "false friends" to homonyms

- ▶ Why does Hannah's utterance [bank] sometimes means *bench* and other time *financial institution*?
- ▶ If in German the use of [bank] (i.a.) is governed by the following XZ-rules:

XZ3 Uttering [bank] is permitted iff speaker is **thinking about benches**.

XZ4 Uttering [bank] is permitted iff speaker is **thinking about financial institutions**.

Hannah utterances of [bank] will either mean something other than *bank* or *bench* or one of these rules cannot be in force for her.

Making sounds and using words

- ▶ One way to avoid the previous conclusion would modify the rules to govern word-types rather than utterances.⁶
 - ▶ Utterances of "Bank₁" and "Bank₂" may sound the same, but they are tokens of different lexical items.

XZ3' Using "Bank₁" is permitted iff speaker is thinking about benches.

XZ4' Using "Bank₂" is permitted iff speaker is thinking about financial institutions.

⁶This move was inspired by [Reiland, 2023].

YZ-rules in disguise

- ▶ However, while the fact that an utterance is a token of expression type implies its physical features, the fact that an utterance sounds like [bank] does not determine if it is a token of "Bank₁" or "Bank₂".
 - ▶ the type/token distinction has similar form to the "XY-rules": [bank] counts as a token of "Bank₁".
- ▶ Thus XZ3' and XZ4' are really YZ-rules in disguise and suffer from the same issues:
 - ▶ Whether or not individual utterance [bank] is permitted depends on whether it is token of "Bank₁" or "Bank₂", but rules fail to determine that.

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Best of both worlds?

- ▶ If YZ-rules can determine the content of the Y-term and the XY-rules can determine which rule-independent X-terms that counts as those Y-terms, could we combine the approaches?
- ▶ Let's assume that in virtue of the rule XY1 is in force, an utterance [gift] expresses the concept *poison*.
- ▶ However, if this assumption holds, XY-rule would determine that [gift] means *poison*,
 - ▶ Otherwise [gift] would not counts as something regulated by YZ1.
 - ▶ Since the meaning of [gift] is already determined there is nothing left for YZ1 to explain.
- ▶ More generally: if YZ-rule can only govern acts that have a specific semantic content and something else determines that an act has that content, there is nothing left for YZ-rule to determine.

Possible fix: Utterances count as expressions?

- ▶ Could the issue be avoided by adopting XY-rules which determine that an **utterances** counts as **words**? and XZ3' (a YZ-rule in disguise) determines its content?

XY3 **[bank]** counts as "**Bank₁**"

XZ3' Using "**Bank₁**" is permitted iff speaker **is thinking about benches**.

The fix leads to a vicious circle

- ▶ While the fact that an utterance is a token of an expression type may not need to determine the meaning of that expressions, counting two utterances as tokens of the same type involves at minimum counting them as expressions with the same meaning.
 - ▶ The fact that two utterances of [bank] mean the same is due to their meaning either *bank* or *bench* and as such depends on their semantic content.
 - ▶ The semantic content was to be determined by the rules XZ3' or XZ4'.
 - ▶ Thus determining that a [bank] is "Bank₁" type would depend on which rule regulates its use, which in turn depends on which token the utterance is.

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- ▶ To Summarize: Constitutive rules discussed in the literature: XY, YZ and XZ, where X is an rule-independent, Y rule-dependent and Z is deontic consequences.
 - ▶ XY-rules cannot determine what it is for an lexical item to have a specific meaning.
 - ▶ YZ-rules cannot govern actions unless they are already meaningful.
 - ▶ XZ-rules assign wrong meaning for homonyms or are really YZ-rules in disguise.
 - ▶ Combining XY- and YZ-rules leads to circularity since both require the other to determine meaning to do their part.

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