

[Revised July 1993 - Additions and substitutions in square brackets]

*Conceptual Analysis 2 - Linguistic Rules and their Classification*

*Linguistic Rules*

In the previous lecture I suggested that conceptual analysis is concerned with elucidating the semantic rules governing the words and expressions that comprise a natural language, and discussed the question whether and to what extent this investigation is an empirical scientific one. In this lecture before proceeding to discuss the specific techniques which have been used by philosophers for elucidating these semantic rules, something more needs to be said (a) about the concept of a '*linguistic rule*' which is being employed here and (b) about the traditional classification of linguistic rules into *pragmatic, semantic and syntactic* rules which is implied by the description of the linguistic rules with which conceptual analysis is concerned as 'semantic rules'.

*Rules as imperatives*

A rule, in the original and primitive sense of that term, may be defined as a *universal imperative*, where an imperative stands to the class of synonymous utterances in the imperative mood as a proposition stands to a class of synonymous utterances in the indicative mood. Some imperatives like that expressed by the sentence *Shut the door!* are particular, others like that expressed by the sentence *Always shut the door behind you when you come into a room!* are universal and constitute a rule. Rules in this sense can be said to exist only in so far as they are explicitly formulated and promulgated by some one or by some group of people. There are, however, rules in this sense which are formulated by an individual solely for his own guidance. These we may call 'self-directed universal imperatives' or 'reflexive rules'.

Rules in this basic sense are not propositions and cannot be said to be true or false. Nevertheless it is often possible to restate a rule in such a way that it becomes a proposition to which the notion of truth and falsity apply. This can be done by replacing the imperative form of the verb by the gerund 'should' or 'ought' and adding a conditional cause, which specifies some objective to be achieved by performing the action one

is ordered, requested or advised to perform, and which thus provides the individual to who the imperative is addressed with an incentive for its performance. Thus instead of saying, *Always shut the door behind you when you enter a room!* you can say: *If you don't want to upset other people, you should always close the door behind you when you enter a room.* It now becomes possible to raise the question whether the rule when stated in this form is true or false. However, what is at issue when the question of its truth or falsity is raised, is simply, whether or not the action in question will secure the objective specified in the conditional clause. The proposition *If you don't want to upset other people, you should always shut the door behind you on entering the room* could only be false if [leaving the door open did not in fact upset the speaker and/or those in whose name she speaks]; but since there would be no point in issuing the imperative, if this were the case, the truth and falsity of such a proposition is unlikely to be at issue. Indeed to raise questions about its truth and falsity is really to miss the point of the conditional clause, which is not primarily to convert the imperative into a proposition, but to provide the person or persons to whom [the] order is addressed with a reason or incentive for complying with it.

Kant (1785/1948), who was the first philosopher to recognise the imperative nature of rules, drew a distinction between *hypothetical imperatives*, or imperatives which are naturally expressed by means of a gerund combined with a conditional clause, i.e.: *You should do A if you want to achieve O*; but which have a universal claim on the obedience of the person or persons to whom the imperative is addressed, which does not depend on the addition of a conditional clause specifying the reason or incentive for compliance. For Kant it is only moral judgements that are categorical imperatives in this sense. Moral judgements, *qua* categorical imperatives, are to be distinguished from simple commands like *Shut the door!* which likewise require no conditional or hypothetical clause to provide an incentive for complying with them

- (a) by the fact that they imply, if they do not state, a universal imperative or rule (compare: 'shut the door' with 'you ought to shut the door' or 'you ought to have shut the door'), and
- (b) by the fact that they are propositions which are true or false as well as being imperatives; whereas *Shut the door!* is purely an imperative and cannot be true or false.

As I see it, the propositional character of moral judgements can only be satisfactorily explained on the assumption that they, like Kant's hypothetical imperative, imply a conditional clause specifying the

objective to be achieved by conforming to the rule in question, but that this conditional clause normally remains unstated, because the objective, that of participating in the social life of the people with whom one is interacting on the basis of rules which both you and they accept and understand, is so basic to any human interaction as not to require explicit formulation. This suggests that any rule will be expressible as a proposition using the gerund 'should' or 'ought', without requiring the addition of a conditional clause specifying the objective to be achieved thereby, whenever the individual is already committed to the objective in question. Thus when the boxing coach tells the boxer that he ought to attack his opponent with the left hand, he is not making a moral judgement; nevertheless his imperative is categorical rather than hypothetical, since any specification of the objective as that of winning the fight is redundant, in that the boxer is committed to that objective by his very presence in the ring. The same principle would apply in the case of linguistic rules where the speaker is committed by the very act of speaking to the objective of being understood by his audience.

### *Linguistic Rules*

We have already noted that linguistic rules differ in at least one important respect from the rules in the primary sense which we have been considering, in that they are normally *implicit* and unstated. On the account which we have given of rules as imperatives, the notion of an unstated imperative, let alone a whole complex system of logically interconnected imperatives which are never explicitly stated, is exceedingly paradoxical. How do you comply with an order that is never expressed either in words or, indeed, in any other form of sign or signal? The answer seems to be that in the strict and primary sense of the word 'rule' there are no linguistic rules. The notion of a linguistic rule is a convenient fiction which we invent in order to explain the observed regularities of linguistic behaviour. People when they talk behave *as if* they were obeying and occasionally disobeying rules, though in fact there are no rules laid down for them to obey, and in so far as the rules *are* written down in the grammar books and in dictionaries, they are written down *ex post facto* in order to describe regularities that are observed in the linguistic behaviour of native speakers who do not have to consult the grammar book in order to learn how to talk.

There is thus an important sense in which linguistic rules stand to rules in the strict sense in the same sort of relation of metaphorical extension as do laws of nature to laws in the strict and primary sense as the term is used by lawyers and politicians. Rules and laws in the strict and primary sense are both universal imperatives which must be formulated and expressed in linguistic form and understood by those to whom they are addressed before they can be obeyed or complied with. Linguistic rules and laws of nature, by contrast, are not so much imperatives as propositions describing regularities observed in nature which are formulated, in so far as they are formulated at all, *ex post facto* in giving an account of the way things go in the world. Nevertheless there are important differences between linguistic rules and laws of nature which make linguistic rules much more like rules and laws in the strict sense than are laws of nature:

- (1) linguistic rules resemble rules and laws in the strict sense in that they only have application to the behaviour of human beings, whereas laws of nature apply to anything that exists, occurs or is as a matter of fact the case;
- (2) linguistic rules, like laws and rules in the strict sense and unlike laws of nature can be and often are *broken*;
- (3) linguistic rules, like laws and rules in the strict sense, have to be learned or acquired;
- (4) linguistic rules, like rules and laws in the strict sense, require sanctions and incentives to ensure that they are complied with; laws of nature do not;
- (5) linguistic rules, like rules and laws in the strict sense, can change over time and can vary from one social group to another; laws of nature cannot.

We can characterise the kind of behaviour which is described and explained by saying that it is subject to an implicit rule of the type to which linguistic rules belong in terms of the conceptual framework of Skinner's (1953) "radical behaviorism."<sup>1</sup> In these terms behaviour that is subject to an implicit rule may be defined as a recurrent pattern of learned operant behaviour acquired and maintained by positive social reinforcement,

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<sup>1</sup> [ Skinner (1966/1969) introduces the concepts of "rule" and "rule-governed behavior" into his 'An operant analysis of problem-solving'; but his rules are rules in what I take to be [the] original and literal sense of a verbal formula in the form of a conditional statement or universal imperative. Following an implicit rule is a case of what Skinner in this paper refers to as "contingency-shaped behavior." I have contrasted Skinner's concept of "rule-governed behavior" with Wittgenstein's concept of "following a rule" in my 'Skinner's distinction between rule-governed and contingency-shaped behaviour' (Place 1988).]

such as an expression of approval, in so far as the individual's behaviour conforms to it and by negative social reinforcement, such as the avoidance of socially conditioned and socially administered aversive stimulation (disapproval), incurred by failure to conform to the pattern. In other words an implicit rule in Skinner's terms is 'a contingency of social reinforcement.' In the case of linguistic behaviour the kind of social reinforcement which serves to maintain conformity to the rules [varies according to the type of speech act involved. Thus statements of opinion are reinforced by expressions of agreement and the avoidance of disagreement, instructions by expressions of comprehension and the avoidance of expressions of incomprehension, information supplied on request by expressions of gratitude and the avoidance of disapproval, news-telling by expressions of interest and surprise and the avoidance of the tell-tale signs of boredom, joke-telling by laughter and the avoidance of the joke 'falling flat', and what Jefferson (1980/1988) calls "troubles talk" by expressions of sympathy and the avoidance of those of irritated impatience. There is reason to suppose that the failure to respond appropriately to these subtle forms of social reinforcement is an important factor in producing] the disturbances of thought and language which are characteristic of schizophrenia.

#### *Pragmatic, semantic and syntactic rules*

According to Charles Morris (1938) from whom the distinction derives, semiotic, or the theory of signs of which linguistics is a subdivision dealing with one particular variety of sign, may be divided into three subdivisions:

- (1) *pragmatics*, which deals with the effect on the listener or reader which the signaller or speaker produces or intends to produce when using a sign in a particular context,
- (2) *semantics* which deals with the relation [or 'pseudo-relation'<sup>2</sup>] between the sign and what it signifies,

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<sup>2</sup> [Brentano (1911/1973) makes the point that there cannot be a genuine relation between a sign and the object towards which it orientates the behaviour of the listener, since in many cases there is no such object and in no case can the 'intentional object' be identified with whatever object actually exists at that point in space/time. The intentional object has only those properties of the actual object with which it needs to be endowed by the speaker in order to ensure correct identification of the object by the listener. Since even in the best case the actual object has properties which the intentional object lacks, the two cannot, by Leibniz's Law, be one and the same object. However, since an intentional object can only be said to exist in so far there exists an actual object corresponding to it, that fact that two objects are not identical means that, strictly speaking, it follows that in *no* case does an intentional object exist. But since, as Brentano points out, you cannot have a genuine relation between something that exists and something that doesn't, it also follows that there is no genuine relation between a speaker or thinker and that about which he or she is talking or thinking. There is, of course, a genuine

- (3) *syntactics*, which is concerned with the relations between the different units which go to make up the system of signs that is being employed.

Extrapolating from this distinction between different branches of linguistics and the theory of signs in general, it has been suggested, e.g., by Miller (1951), that linguistic rules may likewise be classified as pragmatic in so far as they govern the effect produced by the speaker on his audience, semantic in so far as they are rules governing the relation between words and sentences and the things they actually or potentially refer to, and syntactic in so far as they are rules governing the interrelationship between the various linguistic units such as phonemes, morphemes, words and sentences.

[*The implicit character of Grice's pragmatic rules*]

Since linguistic rules are implicit, and since you cannot formulate a rule without thereby making it explicit, any such formulation is to that extent a misrepresentation. A case in point is the set of pragmatic rules proposed by Paul Grice (1967/1989) in the shape of his conversational maxims:

The Maxim of Quantity (*Say as much, but no more than is necessary*),

The Maxim of Quality (*Speak the truth; avoid unsubstantiated claims*),

The Maxim of Relation (*Be relevant*),

The Maxim of Manner (*Be clear and concise*).

These are principles to which speakers have presumably been conforming for as long the art of conversation has been practised by human beings. Yet no one would seriously maintain that, when they do so, conversational participants are conforming to rules which they have explicitly instructed to obey by others, nor, unless you believe in Fodor's (1975) "language of thought," as they have uttered them reflexively to themselves. With the possible exception of the Maxim of Quality, there is no reason to think that these rules

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relation between the speaker or thinker and what Frege (1892/1960) calls the *Bedeutung* (usually translated 'referent') of an expression, where the referent of an expression is the actual object which exists at the point in space/time specified by the utterance. It is worth pointing out, however, that this relation, so far from being the fundamental semantic relation, as the advocates of the theory of 'direct reference' would have us believe, is wholly parasitical on the pseudo-relation between the speaker/thinker and the intentional object, and the genuine causal relation between [the] speaker's utterance and the dispositional reorientation it produces in the listener's behaviour.]

had ever been put into words before Grice did so. It is true that listeners sometimes respond to deviations from these maxims by saying such things as:

*But there's surely more to be said than that.* (Quantity)

*No need to go on about it.* (Quantity)

*That's a lie.* (Quality)

*You can't possibly know that.* (Quality)

*That's beside the point.* (Relation)

*I don't know what you mean.* (Manner)

*You've lost me.* (Manner)

But these utterances are not instructions to the listener as to what do in future, as a genuine rule or maxim would be. They are punishments inflicted on the previous speaker for deviating from the 'strait and narrow' in ways which are never explicitly prescribed in advance. As such they shape future behaviour in exactly the same way as do other aversive or punishing consequences such as that of having one's utterance ignored by the intended listener.

#### *The implicit character of syntactic rules*

Similar difficulties arise in relation to the attempt to formulate the rules of syntax. In this case, explicit formulations of some syntactic rules have a time-honoured place in learning a second language, as it is conducted in more traditional educational establishments. But for the first language learner who must learn to understand the language *before* she can understand the rule, all such learning has to be implicit, contingency-shaped by the aversive social consequences of failing to conform to the hitherto unwritten norms of intelligible sentence construction. An intelligent and linguistically sensitive native speaker can often formulate the syntactic rule to which she conforms, but only by reflecting on what she finds it natural and unnatural to say. In its explicit form the rule plays no part in controlling what is said.

#### *The impermeability of the semantic relation*

In the case of semantic rules there is a further problem. In this case it is not just that the explicit form of the rule does not in fact determine what the native speaker says; there is a sense in which semantic rules can *never* be made explicit. The problem is that there is no way of talking *de re* about the particular or kind of thing to which a word or expression refers without *using* either the same word or expression or one synonymous with it. One alternative is to adopt a rule such as Tarski's (1930-1/1936/1956)

*"It is snowing' is a true statement if and only if it is snowing"*

which is saved from being an empty tautology only by the device of putting quotation marks around the target sentence *It is snowing* when it is being *mentioned* and omitting them when it is being *used*. The other alternative is a dictionary type definition, such as *A bachelor is an unmarried man*, which formulates the semantic relation in terms of the syntactic relation of synonymy between the expressions *bachelor* and *unmarried man*. Unlike Tarski's formula which, as applied to natural language sentences, has no practical use whatsoever, such a definition does have a use in explaining the meaning of *bachelor* to someone who is ignorant of its meaning, provided of course that she *does* already understand the meaning of the synonymous expression. In neither case do we succeed in breaking out of the linguistically impermeable barrier which separates words and expressions from the extra-linguistic reality to which they are used to refer.]

#### *Semantic rules and ostensive definition*

It is sometimes suggested that we can break through this apparently impermeable barrier that separates words from the things that they signify, at least in the case of those concepts which we use in referring to empirically observable features of the world, by what has been misleadingly called 'ostensive definition'. This is the procedure by which we explain the meaning of a word or expression by physically pointing at features of the common environment that the speaker share with his audience to which the word or expression in question applies.

But, as Quine has pointed out in *Word and Object* (1960), the context of any such ostensive procedure is always so complex that we can never be certain, from a single act of pointing, which particular aspect or feature of the total complex situation is being picked out by such an act of pointing. Moreover, as I myself have argued elsewhere (Place 1971),



"To call this 'ostensive definition' is misleading because it suggests that the object or phenomenon to which the teacher points is part of the meaning of the term 'bowler hat' in the way that 'being a hard hat' is part of the meaning of the term 'bowler hat' in a formal verbal definition. That this is not the case is shown by the fact that if instead of pointing physically at an instance, we explain the meaning of a word by giving an instance referred to by a singular referring expression, the singular referring expression that refers to the instance will not be part of the meaning of the word whose meaning it is used to explain. Thus if instead of pointing at a bowler hat, we explain the meaning of the term to a child by saying that it is the sort of hat Uncle George wears when he goes to the office, it is clearly a matter of contingent fact and not a necessary truth that the hat Uncle George habitually wears when he goes to the office is a bowler, from which it follows that being the sort of hat Uncle George habitually wears to the office is not part of the meaning of 'bowler hat'.

"There are two morals that I wish to draw from this example. The first is that no conclusions about the meaning of a word or expression can be drawn from a single instance to which attention is drawn in explaining its meaning. Thus if Uncle George's bowler happened to be black, a child could as readily conclude from this example that the word 'bowler' was a synonym of 'black' as that it meant a hat of a certain shape and solidity. My second moral is that the function of the so-called ostensive definition is simply to draw the pupil's attention to an instance of something to which the word in question applies. It is only by repeatedly drawing the pupil's attention to a number of such instances in a variety of different settings that the pupil can, by the learning processes known to the psychologists as generalisation and discrimination, gradually learn to understand what the word means, at least to the extent of being able to identify what it is that someone is referring to when he uses the word in question."

### *Semantic rules and operational definitions*

Another way, which has been suggested for breaking through the barrier separating the word from its object and stating the semantic rules governing the relationship between them is by means of what has been called (Bridgman 1928) an *operational definition* in which the meaning of a word or expression is

characterised by specifying the procedure that is or would have to be used in order to verify a proposition expressed by a sentence in which the word or expression in question occurs. We shall have occasion to discuss operational definitions in greater detail in a later lecture. For the moment suffice it to say that our operational definition in so far as it specifies the observation statements which have to be true in order for the proposition in question to be confirmed or verified is stating some of the propositions which are entailed by the proposition which is being defined and is therefore stating a rule which quite properly belongs to the logical aspects of syntactics; while in so far as it mentions the procedure for using particular instruments or measurement techniques it deals with matters which are in no intelligible sense part of the meanings of any words other than those used to describe such instruments and measurement techniques.

#### *The classification of syntactic rules*

[It thus appears that every attempt to characterise the semantic rules governing the relation between words and expressions and the things they ‘stand for’ turns out, when examined in detail, to collapse into a set of syntactic rules governing the relations between one word or expression and another. However, the syntactic rules that are invoked by the various attempts that have been made to characterise the semantic relation and which are studied by the procedure known as ‘conceptual analysis’ go far beyond the simple relation of synonymy between one word or expression and another which is invoked by the typical dictionary definition. In order to proceed, therefore, we need to focus on these] syntactic rules and to classify them into their different types.

Syntactic rules, I suggest, need to be classified into three divisions:

- (1) rules such as the rules of phonetics and orthography which govern the way in which sounds or phonemes are put together so as to form the component words of a given natural language
- (2) rules such as the rules of grammar which govern the way in which words are put together to form meaningful sentences, and
- (3) rules such as the rules of logic which govern the relationships of entailment and contradiction between the propositions expressed by different sentences, or the rules of pragmatics which govern the relation between one utterance and the next in a conversational exchange.

The rules governing the way words are put together to form sentences can be further subdivided into

- (a) *grammatical rules* proper which regulate the different parts of speech which can legitimately occupy the different positions within the sequence of words constituting a sentence e.g.; the rule that an article must always precede the noun to which it belongs separated from it only by a qualifying adjective or adjectival phrase;
- [(b) *syntactic-semantic rules* as we may call the rules governing those features of sentence structure which reflect the kind of situation that is being depicted by the sentence,
- (c) *syntactic-pragmatic rules*, as we may call the rules governing those aspects of sentence construction which determine what Frege (1918/1956) calls the "force" (*Kraft*) of a sentence (i.e., gives it the force of a declarative, an imperative, an interrogative or an optative,]
- (d) the *rules of logic* in so far as they apply within sentences rather than between sentences. These include the rules which make the propositions or would-be propositions expressed by certain sentences self-contradictory and the propositions expressed by other sentences analytic. These are also, in an important sense, semantic rules, since it is the sense of the words and expressions involved which make them self-contradictory or analytic. Also included here are the rules of sentence construction governing the use of logical words like 'if' and 'not' and quantifiers like 'some', ['none'], 'all', ['every' and 'any'] which determine the logical relations such as entailment or mutual contradiction holding between the proposition expressed by the sentence in question and other propositions.

In the light of the distinction drawn in lecture 2 between the 'sense' and the 'use' of a sentence we may further subdivide the syntactic-semantic class of rules in to

- (b1) *rules of use*, the rules whereby the referent of word or expression changes with occasion on which it is uttered as in the case of pronouns and the distinction between the past, present and future tense of verbs, and
- (b2) *rules of sense* whereby certain grammatical forms are only used when referring to things belonging to particular existential categories as in the case of the use of the continuous verb aspect (She is  $\varphi$ -

ing or engaged in  $\phi$ -ing at this moment, etc.) which are only used when referring to processes or activities.

### *Conceptual Analysis and the classification of syntactic rules*

The techniques of conceptual analysis which I shall be discussing in the following two lectures are techniques which have been distilled from the practice of philosophers in the linguistic tradition, particularly from the work of Ryle (1949). They have not been worked out from first principles through a consideration of the nature of concepts and the nature of the linguistic rules in terms of which concepts are defined. Nevertheless it is not difficult to locate the three techniques I shall be discussing - *sentence frame analysis*, *definition-in-use* and *operational analysis* - in terms of the classification of syntactic rules presented above. Thus in what I call 'sentence frame analysis' we are concerned with syntactic-semantic rules governing such things as the permissible transformation of a word from one part of speech to another e.g., the nominalisation of a verb, the permissible variations of case in the case of a noun or tense in the case of a verb, the permissible combinations of adjective or adjectival phrase with a given noun, or adverb or adverbial phrase with a given verb, and the types of direct and indirect object which are taken by the active form of a verb. Since, for our present purposes, we are concerned with finding out the kind or category of entity to which a given word or expression is used to refer rather than with specifying the content or occasion on which certain forms of sentence are appropriate, we shall be concerned in this connection more with what I have called the rules of sense than with the rules of use.

In talking about definitions-in-use we move outside the context of the sentence and the rules governing the way words and expressions fit into sentences, and examine the syntactic-logical rules which hold between propositions containing a given concept and other propositions which they are said to entail. However we shall also be concerned in this connection with intra-sentential logical features whereby some sentences fail to express propositions because of an internal self-contradiction, while others express propositions which are true necessarily and analytically.

The operational or verificational analysis of concepts leads itself perhaps rather less readily to this classificatory system. We have already seen that the immediate observation statements, such as the statement

*The glass broke when the stone hit it*, which confirm or verify a dispositional statement, such as the statement *The glass was brittle*, are entailed by the statement which is subject to operational analysis. On the other hand the instructions which the operational definition may contain as to how one should, for example, project a stone onto a piece of glass in order to test its brittleness are in no sense part of the meaning of the statement or of the semantic rules relating the sign to what it signifies. Such instructions have the same kind of role and status in elucidating the meaning of a word or expression as has the pointing in the case of ostensive definition or an example of correct use in the case of the verbal counterpart of pointing. However since, as we have seen, the semantic rules themselves can never be stated in words, any device which helps to clarify elucidate these rules, including illustration, has its role to play in a semantic or conceptual analysis.

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