Putting Brandom on His Feet: A Realist Interpretation of Inferentialism

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In Brandom's pragmatic semantics (also known as inferentialism) linguistic meaning is assumed to be created by social practices of giving and asking for reasons. This goes along with the rejection of extralinguistic referential relations. This article gets semantic realism back on board by identifying some elements of inferentialism that lend themselves to a realist interpretation. This interpretation is supported by a comparison with causal theories of reference and by appealing to the notion of social triangulation. The resulting semantics combines realism about reference (and truth) with the non-reductive account of normativity that is so characteristic of Brandom.

1. Inference and Representation

The view that the meaning of a word or sentence is identical to its *use* in language, and that language is primarily a social practice, is mainly associated with the name of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1958, §§ 30 and 43). It is opposed to semantic theories that construe meanings as abstract entities (for example, propositions) or as somehow determined by mental entities (for example, intentions). As is well known, however, Wittgenstein left it to others to develop a systematic "use theory" of meaning. One of these "others" is Robert Brandom, whose thoughts about meaning, language, and social practices in general, have attracted much attention in the past two decades, more precisely, since the publication of his book *Making It Explicit* in 1994.

Brandom's use theory, which he also calls "semantic pragmatism" and "pragmatic semantics," sticks out among other approaches of this sort because of its sheer size and richness of details. It is part of a comprehensive system that also deals with normativity, truth, and intentionality, to mention just three important themes.[1] The core of Brandom's semantics is the assumption that the meaning (or propositional content) of an assertion depends on its inferential role, that is, on its function as a premise or conclusion in inferences.[2] One understands an assertion if one is able to draw the relevant inferences. Brandom emphasizes that drawing inferences is a kind of knowing-how, a practical activity or capacity, rather than some kind of theoretical knowledge.

Furthermore, Brandom also leaves no doubt that the main opponent of inferentialism is "representationalism," which is his term for approaches that start with the concept of representation and use this for defining the concept of inference. A representationalist theory would typically describe how words and sentences refer to things and facts in the world, how the truth value of a sentence depends on the reference of the words appearing in the sentence, and finally, how true conclusions can be inferred from true premises.

Brandom turns this explanatory strategy upside down. For him, the basic notion is that of inference.[3] Inferences between sentences determine the meanings of these sentences and of the words contained in them. There are "good" inferences and "bad" ones. Roughly speaking, neglecting a lot of details, we may say that the good inferences are those which are endorsed by the community. "Truth" is introduced into the theory only at a later stage, being defined as that which is preserved in the transition from premises to conclusions in good inferences.

As to semantic *reference*, this is not a relation between language and the world, such as between the word "dog" and a class of hairy animals. It is rather a relation between the word and another part of discourse. Imagine, for example, a dialogue about someone's *pet*. At some point in this dialogue, the pet would perhaps be specified as a "dog," which would establish a semantic relation between the word "dog" and previous occurrences of the word "pet" in the same dialogue. Brandom calls this an *anaphoric* account of "refers." Anaphoric reference is intralinguistic reference and is not to be confused with extra-linguistic reference, which does not exist in Brandom's system. The purpose is "to show how an analysis in terms of anaphoric mechanisms can provide the resources for a purely intralinguistic account of the use of the English sentences by means of which philosophers make assertions about extralinguistic referential relations." (Brandom 1994, 306)

In order to better understand this "anti-representationalist" treatment of representational concepts, it may be useful to distinguish three kinds of representationalism: In a *first* sense, a theory can be said to be representation-alist if it uses representational concepts such as "reference" at all, whether these figure as basic or as derived concepts and however they may be defined within the theory. This is obviously a very weak condition, and Brandom's inferential-ism does fulfill it. Brandom is a representationalist of the first kind.

This is not true, however, for the second and the third kinds of representa-tionalism. In the *second*, "realist" sense, a representationalist theory also acknowledges the existence of semantic relations between language and extra-linguistic reality. The *third* sense concerns the direction of explanation: a representationalist theory of this kind employs representationalist concepts in order to explain the concept of inference. Such a theory may explain "truth" by means of extralinguistic reference, and "inference" as a truth-preserving transition from premises to conclusions. It is clear that Brandom rejects both realist and explanatory representationalism.