

1 Introduction

The basic explanatory concept in much semantic theorizing has been that of truth. Semantic theories for natural language assign truth-conditions or truth-values to sentences, and they assign semantic values to subsentential expressions that account for their contribution to the determination of the truth-conditions of the sentences in which they appear. This is not a mere choice of convenience. The focus on truth is motivated by the very general hypothesis that language use is basically a representational activity—“basically” in a sense I will explain shortly.

If one thought that language use was basically some other kind of activity, one would couch one’s semantic theories in terms of a different fundamental concept. That is precisely what proponents of so-called “dynamic” semantic theories do, building on the initial work by Heim (1982) and Kamp (2002). On this approach, language use is seen as at bottom a conversational phenomenon, and semantic theories built on this hypothesis do not assign representational properties to sentences, but the potential to influence the conversation in certain ways, updates for short. The theories are dynamic insofar as the semantic value of a sentence is a potential to change certain aspects of a conversation. To contrast with this dynamic approach, representational theories are usually called “static.”

In this paper, I explore a dynamic semantic theory that is not usually discussed in this context: the semantic proposal Robert Brandom makes in his *Making It Explicit* (1994). In so doing, I pursue several aims. One is to throw into sharper relief just how Brandom’s semantic theory relates to other, more widely accepted ones, focusing on both continuities and discontinuities. This will allow us to evaluate some of his arguments concerning holism about meaning, the role of norms in semantics, and the difference between humans and animals in a much clearer light. As it turns out, comparing Brandom’s theory with more standard dynamic semantics will be particularly illuminating. I further aim to point out ways in which Brandom’s semantic theory may be separated from other aspects of his overall project, thereby insulating the semantics from some of the most forceful criticisms of that project while still yielding interesting conclusions. These aspects of the discussion will be largely interpretive and constructive.

I will end on a more critical note: once we focus on the semantic theory as a separate aspect of Brandom’s theory, we need to look at those of his arguments that are directly aimed at establishing it, and I’ll focus on one of them, the argument from anaphora. I’ll suggest that this argument is wanting. The overall upshot of the discussion is therefore conditional. The semantic theory by itself is an interesting and potentially fruitful research program, and *if* it can be established, many important implications follow.

The plan of the paper is as follows. §2 introduces semantic theories as occupying a certain position in an overall theory of language use. Doing so will allow me to frame the disagreement between Brandom and proponents of other semantic frameworks as substantive rather than merely verbal. It will also allow me to explain what it means to say that language use is “basically” representational, an implication of adopting a static semantic framework. §3 introduces a simple dynamic alternative, which I’ll call informational dynamics. This lays the groundwork for the discussion of Brandom’s theory—which I’ll call normative dynamics—in §4. I begin with an exposition of the basic theory, focusing on the similarities and contrasts between informational and normative dynamics (§4.1). I then develop the basic framework to take account of a few more phenomena than Brandom does (§4.2), and finally draw out the implications of that development for some foundational issues about language (§4.3). The paper ends with a discussion of arguments for normative dynamics that turn on anaphora (§5).

2 Semantics and Language Use

There are various ways to focus on a particular phenomenon or range of phenomena as constituting the subject matter of semantics. Here I want to distinguish three. The first goes via the notion of truth: semantics investigates the truth-conditions of sentences and the contribution a subsentential expression makes to the truth-conditions of sentences in which it appears.¹ Another anchoring begins with a hypothesis about how the semantic value of, say, a sentence, is arrived at. On this usage, semantics concerns the domain of narrowly linguistic and unbendable rules, pragmatics everything else. Semantic

¹This seems to be the dominant usage, for example, in some of the debates about how semantics and pragmatics interact. See, e.g., Bach (1994); Perry (1998); Recanati (2002, 2004); Stanley (2000); Stanley and Szabo (2000).

values are arrived at by applying these rules to the linguistic objects whose semantic values we're trying to determine. Usually, it is part of this conception of semantics that semantic values are arrived at compositionally.² The third and final way to pick out the semantic phenomena focuses on the role of semantics in an overall theory of language and language use. This is the conception of semantics that I will employ here, since it allows us to see debates between theories that assign different semantic values to sentences as debates about what kind of theory best serves this role in the overall theoretical edifice. It also allows us to treat as a substantive question whether the feature of sentences that is most relevant to explaining their role in communication specifically and language use generally is determined compositionally (an issue I'll return to in §4.3).

Begin, then, with an observation. We can do very many things with words: we can assert, question, command, promise, imply, insult, cheer, hire, fire, and lots more. For many of these speech acts, the words we use in the course of performing them are important insofar as which words we use determines in part which act we performed. In fact, I said that the keys are on the counter. Had I used (suitably) different words, I would have said that the keys are in the closet. Using different words still, I might have asked where the keys are, or asked my interlocutor to get them for me. However, the relationship between the words we use and the speech act we perform is complex. Depending on the attendant circumstances, almost any bit of language can be used to perform almost any speech act.

Given that the phenomenon of language use is this complex, one might simply think that a systematic theory of language and language use is impossible. This is certainly the attitude of some anti-formalist philosophers who follow Austin (1975).³ However, one might also hold that though the phenomena themselves are complex and varied, they are the result of an interaction of relatively independent factors, at least some of which are sufficiently simple to be amenable to systematic theorizing. An analogy: imagine throwing a handful of leaves off a tall building. Each of the leaves will follow a particular course, and there will be just about no generalization about their flight-paths

²This is the dominant way of focusing on semantics in the work of Davidson. See, e.g., the seminal papers Davidson (1984a,b). For further particularly clear statements of this idea, see Higginbotham (1985, 1989); Szabo (2000).

³See, e.g., Cappelen and Lepore (2005); Travis (1985, 2000).

if we just consider them *qua* flight-paths. However, we may well be able to arrive at theoretically tractable generalizations by focusing on the forces that conspire to produce the flight-paths, rather than the flight-paths themselves. For example, generalizations about the force of gravity are tractable, while some of the turbulences at the surface of a leaf might simply resist systematic description.

We can take a similar approach to theorizing about language use. Doing so takes what speech act is performed to be the result of an interaction between the meaning of the linguistic material used and the context in which it is used. The general strategy is to try to explain many speech acts in terms of performing some basic ones in the right kind of context. Insulting might be asserting something in a certain context, and so on.⁴ The best known systematic application of this idea is Grice's. He wanted to explain how speakers can convey information in a situation by the use of a sentence that fails to communicate that information in other contexts, and he did so by providing a general mechanism of how a basic speech act—"saying" in the technical sense he introduced in his Grice (1991)—can interact with the conversational situation to convey something else.

This strategy will not result in a single basic speech act. Rather, we're likely to be left with a number of speech acts that cannot be reduced one to another, such as asking and asserting. Asking a question does not consist in making an assertion in the right kind of context. These mutually irreducible basic speech acts are usually marked by distinctive linguistic forms, such as the use of interrogatives as opposed to indicatives, and at this point we can still try to forge explanatory connections by explaining the meaning of one kind of sentence, such as interrogatives, in terms of the meaning of another kind of sentence, such as assertoric ones. The meaning of a question might be analyzed in terms of its possible answers, to take one example.⁵ In one way or another, one arrives at a basic speech act in which one uses sentences with a basic kind of meaning. For all of the contemporary semantic theories I'll discuss here, that basic speech act is assertion, and the sentence with the basic meaning is the assertoric sentence.

⁴This is one of the crucial ideas motivating Lewis' discussion of performatives in Lewis (1983).

⁵This is the basic strategy pursued by many different formal semantic treatments of interrogatives. The basic idea stems from Hamblin (1958, 1973); Karttunen (1977). For a recent survey, see Groenendijk and Stokhof (1997).

Semantics thus enters the picture as a theory about what the content of an assertorically used sentence is, and the theory is successful to the extent that the content assigned to such a sentence can then be used in a larger theory to explain further linguistic phenomena, for example, what the context has to be like in order for an assertion of a sentence with a particular content to be, say, an act of praising or warning. On this way of marking out the domain of semantics, it is an open question what these contents are. One possibility, though not the only one, is to say that the content of a sentence should be identified with a set of truth-conditions, or perhaps with a more complex object that determines a set of truth-conditions, such as a Fregean or Russellian proposition.

If it turns out that our best semantic theory assigns such a representational content to assertoric sentences, we can also draw a conclusion about the basic nature of assertion. To assert, it would turn out, is to represent the world as being a certain way. Given the foundational role of assertion, it is also appropriate to say that language use is “basically” representational—it is not to say that all language use is representational, but it is to say that the most basic such use is, and that in one form or another, all other uses are explained in terms of it.

Let me introduce a terminological convention. I’ll say that the content of a sentence is whatever is assigned to that sentence by a semantic theory. Propositions are, by definition, things that are or determine truth-conditions. Thus, everybody agrees—at least everybody who believes that semantics is possible—that sentences have contents, and it is a substantive claim that contents are propositions. It is a claim that’s rejected by dynamic theories, my next topic.

3 Informational Dynamics

I now want to highlight the core features of common dynamic semantic theories, particularly with an eye to explaining how far Brandom travels alongside them and where his theory ultimately diverges.⁶ I’ll begin with an informal motivation of the view and then give a more precise statement.

⁶In addition to the early texts I mentioned in the beginning, some of the core expositions are provided by Chierchia (1995); Groenendijk and Stokhof (1991); Kamp and Reyle (1993); Veltman (1996).

In an idealized conversation, the participants talk to each other in order to achieve a common goal, and in the course of doing so, they need to exchange information. Suppose, for example, that Bert is looking for his keys, and Alice says “the keys are on the kitchen counter.” Suppose also that Bert accepts what Alice just said. In that case, we can note two features of Alice’s assertion. It is true or false, as the case may be, and it altered the state of the conversation in a particular way. Before Alice’s assertion (and Bert’s accepting it), it would have been odd for Bert to ask Alice to get him the keys, because for all that Bert knew then, Alice might not have been in a position to fulfill the request. But once she made the assertion, that request became reasonable.

That the assertion has these two features is uncontroversial. Moreover, it seems extremely plausible that we can explain why it has one in terms of the other: we can explain why it altered the state of conversation in the way it did by appealing to its representational features. In order to do that, we need a way of talking about the relevant features of a conversation in such a way that we can easily describe effects of asserting a proposition. One way to do that is to think of (at least one theoretically important aspect of) a conversation in terms of information available to all of its participants. As the conversation progresses and information is exchanged, information previously available only to some of the speakers becomes available to all, and what speakers can do at any one point in the conversation, e.g., which requests speakers can reasonably make of each other, depends on that commonly available information. We can thus represent any stage of the conversation simply by pointing to the commonly available information, which we may call the common ground. An assertion of a proposition then alters the state of the conversation by adding that proposition to the common ground. This is a way of explaining the conversational effects of an assertion in terms of its representational contents.⁷

However, we can in principle reverse the order of explanation. To see the basic idea, it may help to consider a very different kind of activity, playing baseball, focusing on the notion of a strike as an illustrative example.⁸ One could try to say what makes something a strike by focusing on an area on a playing field (“the strike zone”) and saying that a strike occurs when somebody throws a ball through that area—under the right conditions. But an

⁷This way of thinking about conversations, as well as the notion of shared information and the terminology of common ground, is due to Stalnaker. See his (1999a; 1999b; 2002).

⁸This example is due to Lewis (1983). It is useful insofar as Brandom deploys it, as well.

alternative, and indeed better, option is available. We can describe any given stage of a baseball game by talking about a very specific set of features, the *score*. They include the runs each team has, the current half-inning, the baserunners (if any), as well as the number of balls, strikes, and outs. Obviously, a description that tells us only about these features of a game leaves out a lot of information we might find interesting: what the attendance is, what the weather is like, and whether any of the players are playing particularly well or poorly that day. But for some theoretical purposes, such as determining a winner, a description of a game in terms of the score is all we need. And in fact, once we focus on the score as a description, we can give a very nice explanation of what a strike is. It is an event that has a certain effect on the score. What that effect is depends on the score prior to the strike: if there are fewer than two strikes, the number of strikes increases by one. If there are two strikes, the number of outs increases by one, and the number of balls and strikes is set to zero, unless there were two outs, in which case we go to the next half inning. That's what it means to say that what makes something a strike is just that it has a certain effect on the score. This explanation has some palpable benefits. It makes it easy to say what is common to all strikes even when the strike zone is adjusted over time, or what it takes for the ball to be in play, to give just two examples.

Likewise, we could take the basic feature of an assertion to not be its propositional content, but its effect on any given conversation, should it be accepted. We could then define its representational features, to the extent that it has any, by abstracting from features of the change an assertion of that sentence imposes on the conversation. To remain with our example, the conversational effect of asserting "the keys are on the kitchen counter" is to alter the information that is common ground when the assertion is accepted. Its representational features, in virtue of which it is correctly classifiable as true or false, just consist of the information added assuming that the assertion is accepted. Here then, we take the effect on a conversation as basic and we can explain the representational features in terms of these effects.

Dynamic semantics, just like static varieties, depend on a semantics/pragmatics distinction. In a static framework, the semantic value of a sentence as used on a particular occasion should not be all of the information conveyed by the use of that sentence. If that was the case, we wouldn't be able to arrive

at a systematic theory. Likewise, in a dynamic framework, the content of an assertion shouldn't be identified with all of the effects an assertion has on the context. As in the static framework, we focus on some effects and try to explain other effects—such as the addition of information that is usually considered to be implicated rather than asserted—in terms of the interaction between the initial assertion and the context.

For simple examples such as the ones I've used so far, there is a trivial equivalence between the two directions of explanation. Given a representational content for a particular sentence, we can immediately define the effect its accepted assertion has on the common ground. And given the effect on the common ground of asserting it, we can define its representational content in terms of the increment of information. The two approaches cease to be intertranslatable when we consider more complex sentences whose effect on the common ground cannot be identified with an incremental increase of information.

To see how this works, it will be useful to have a more formally explicit statement of a dynamic semantic view of sentences. I'll assume that we're working with a relatively simple language: it has a finite number of individual constants a, b, c , and a finite number of one-place predicates F, G, H . The atomic sentences of the language are just what you would expect. It also has three sentential operators: \neg , \wedge , and \diamond , which obey the obvious rules. \diamond is interpreted as an epistemic possibility modal, *it might be the case that*. Given individual objects as extensions for the constants and sets as extensions of the predicates relative to a world, we can give the following semantic rules.

[INFORMATIONAL DYNAMICS] Let C be a context, identified as a set of worlds (informally, the set of worlds compatible with what is presupposed in a conversation at a particular stage). Then the semantic value of a sentence σ , $\llbracket \sigma \rrbracket$, is the result of updating C with σ , written $C[\sigma]$.

If σ is an atomic sentence of the form $\Phi(a)$,

$$\text{then } C[\sigma] = C \cap \{w : \llbracket a \rrbracket \in \llbracket \Phi \rrbracket^w\}.$$

If σ is of the form $\neg\tau$, then $C[\sigma] = C/C[\tau]$.

If σ is of the form $\tau \wedge \mu$, then $C[\sigma] = C[\tau][\mu]$.

$$\text{If } \sigma \text{ is of the form } \diamond\tau, \text{ then } C[\sigma] = \begin{cases} C & \text{if } C[\tau] \neq \emptyset \\ \emptyset & \text{if } C[\tau] = \emptyset \end{cases}.$$

In other words, we identify the semantic value of a sentence as a function from contexts to contexts, informally, as a function from contexts prior to the assertion of the sentence to contexts after the assertion and acceptance of the sentence. Such a function is an update-function. For atomic sentences, the update is a simple intersection of the worlds in the context with the worlds in which the subject of the sentence has the property predicated in the sentence. Negation is interpreted by first updating the context with the negated sentence and then removing the so-updated context from the original one. Conjunction is simply a successive update of the conjuncts. Since we're not dealing with phenomena of anaphora or presupposition, the dynamic semantics so far are simply translatable to static semantics.⁹ However, the present rule for interpreting epistemic possibility cannot be simply translated, since it performs a test on the whole context. The context passes the test if it contains at least one world that is a τ -world, and the context fails the test otherwise. If the context passes the test, it is returned unchanged. If the context fails, the context crashes.¹⁰ Informally, the point of saying that it might be the case that p is to ensure that everybody takes it as a live possibility that it is true that p .¹¹

I call this semantic theory *informational dynamics* because the contexts that are updated by assertions are states of information. The emphasis on information sets these standard dynamic semantics apart from Brandom's semantic theory, as I argue now.

4 Brandom's Normative Dynamics

This section is devoted to working through some key passages and theses of *Making It Explicit*, developing some of its ideas, and drawing out some of its implications. On the interpretive side, I'll argue that Brandom's theory is best understood as a kind of dynamic semantic theory. Both take the content of a sentence to be an update of the context. They differ in their conception of

⁹For an introduction to the problems that presupposition raises, see Kadmon (2001). For a thorough introduction to how presupposition is accounted for in dynamic semantics, see Beaver (2001).

¹⁰In general, the important formal result that determines whether a dynamic system can be translated into a static system is contained in van Benthem (1986). The issue turns on whether all updates can be defined in terms of a certain set of basic operations.

¹¹I put this theory forward for illustrative purposes only, not to suggest that it is the true theory of epistemic modals.

that context: whereas informational dynamics take contexts to be states of information, Brandom takes them to be constellations of reasons for action and belief (§4.1). I then develop the account further, using arguments about semantic holism to motivate the development (§4.2) and finally use the development to give more precise content to and new arguments for two theses concerning the connection of meaning and norms and the relation between humans and animals (§4.3). The subsequent sections develop the basic idea further and draw out the implications of these developments (§§4.2-4.3).

4.1 *The Position in Making It Explicit*

Brandom begins his account by highlighting the importance of assertion to a theory of language and, specifically, linguistic communication.

The fundamental sort of move in the game of giving and asking for reasons is making a *claim*—producing a performance that is propositionally contentful in that it can be the offering of a reason, and reasons can be demanded for it. Other theoretically important concepts are defined in terms of this one.¹²

These remarks coincide with the picture of semantics I elaborated in §2: there is a fundamental speech act with a fundamental kind of content. This basic speech act is assertion, or as Brandom calls it, “making a claim.” All other aspects of language use are ultimately reducible to the basic speech act and/or the basic kind of content. This includes drawing a semantics/pragmatics distinction, or in Brandom’s words,

[t]he model [of assertion] is intended to serve as the core of a layered account of linguistic practice. [...] For instance, the model appeals only to semantic inferences, that is, inferences involving what is *claimed*. Pragmatic inferences such as Gricean implicatures have to do rather with the antecedents and consequents of the performance of *claiming* it. These pragmatic practices form a shell around the more basic semantic ones, which they presuppose.¹³

¹²Brandom (1994, 141).

¹³Brandom (1994, 158-9), emphasis in the original.

The question, then, is what the basic kind of content is. In the passage I quoted initially, Brandom says that assertions are “propositionally” contentful, which suggests that he takes content to be representational. However, other aspects of Brandom’s view militate taking “proposition” in his terminology to mean “representational content.” Rather, “propositional” serves to contrast a kind of content that can be used in the course of making an assertion with the contents that can be used in such acts as referring to an object or picking out a property. Support for this reading of what propositional contentfulness amounts to comes from how Brandom goes on to characterize assertions.

Speech acts, paradigmatically assertions, alter the deontic score, they change what commitments and entitlements it is appropriate to attribute, not only to the one producing the speech act, but also to those to whom it is addressed.¹⁴

And again:

Social practices are games in which each participant exhibits various deontic statuses—that is, commitments and entitlements—and each practically significant performance alters those statuses in some way. The significance of the performance is how it alters the deontic statuses of the practitioners.¹⁵

Two points in these quotations deserve emphasis. First, Brandom embraces a dynamic paradigm in that he says that the significance of a performance “is how it alters the deontic statuses of the practitioners.” Second, he gives voice to a distinctive conception of what is updated by an assertion. As he puts it, it is a deontic score, defined in terms of the central notions of commitments and entitlements. We can initially define the two notions in terms of epistemic coherence. An agent is committed to the proposition that p iff she would be epistemically incoherent were she not to believe that p . An agent is entitled to the proposition that p iff she would be epistemically coherent were she to believe that p .

As part of his larger project, Brandom wants to give further analyses of the notions of commitment and entitlement. In the first instance, he wants

¹⁴Brandom (1994, 142).

¹⁵Brandom (1994, 166).

to analyze epistemic incoherence in terms of being open to a suitable kind of rational criticism. One may well worry about whether it's possible to focus on the right kind of criticism without taking for granted that it is criticism *for being epistemically incoherent*. After all, it seems reasonable to criticize people for being factually mistaken in their beliefs, but that cannot be the kind of criticism at issue in the analysis of commitment and entitlement.

Second, being open to criticism is a normative notion, since Brandom does not simply want to analyse it in terms of a disposition to criticize that various speakers may have. Instead, being open to criticism means roughly that the person who is open deserves the criticism, or even more clearly, that it is normatively appropriate to criticize that person. And Brandom wants to give an informative analysis of norms, as well. This attempted reduction is one of the aspects of his project that has come in for the most severe and sustained criticism.¹⁶ I want to emphasize that both of these further ideas—the reduction of epistemic coherence to an openness to a certain kind of criticism, and the reduction of norms to something non-normative—are strictly optional from the present perspective. The developments of Brandom's position that I will offer in the remainder of this paper are quite explicitly designed to be independent of one's position on these ideas. This is the first way in which we can detach Brandom's semantic project from some other aspects of the overall project.

Summarizing: on Brandom's view, the aspect of a conversation we need to keep track of for the purposes of giving a semantic theory that can be part of a systematic theory of language use are the commitments and entitlements of the participants to the conversation, what he calls the deontic score. Assertions are updates of the deontic score, and the semantic value of a sentence is the potential to update the deontic score in a certain way, a potential that is realized when the assertion is accepted.

4.2 *Objective Probabilities and Semantic Holism*

I now want to develop this picture further in order to take into account less than fully conclusive evidential relations. The benefit of doing so is to tighten the connection between the semantic theory and semantic holism. Let me begin by showing that such tightening is desirable given Brandom's overall

¹⁶See, e.g., Gibbard (1996); Rosen (1997); Rosenberg (1997); Rumfitt (1997).

argumentative aims, since his own argument does not succeed.

One might be a holist with respect to at least two different features of language, semantics and metaseantics, so let me introduce that distinction first.¹⁷ When confronted with a bearer of content, such as an expression or a belief, we can always ask two questions. What is its content, and in virtue of what does it have the content it does? An answer to the first question gives the semantics of the content-bearer, an answer to the second gives its metaseantics. Let me illustrate the contrast with the familiar example of proper names. Causal theories like Kripke's hold that the semantic value of a name is its bearer, and they hold that the fact in virtue of which the name has the semantic value it does, i.e., has the bearer it does, is the fact that a certain causal connection holds.

Metaseantic holism then, is a metaphysical thesis. It is the claim that the facts in virtue of which one content-bearer has the content it does are relational, and among these relations are ones to all other content-bearers (in a suitable class, such as the expressions in a given language or the beliefs of a single agent). The opposite of metaseantic holism, which we may call metaseantic atomism, is the claim that the facts in virtue of which a content-bearer has the content it does do not include relations to any other content-bearer. Intermediate between the two is what Fodor and Lepore (1992/1993) call anatomism, the view that among the facts in virtue of which a content-bearer has the content it does are relations to at least some other content-bearer. These metaseantic alternatives are the ones most commonly discussed when theorists talk about holism about mental or linguistic content. Indeed, Fodor and Lepore simply call this semantic holism.

However, a thesis specifically about the nature of the contents of a content-bearer, rather than the facts in virtue of which it has the content it has, can also be formulated. Thus, semantic atomism is the view that the content of a content-bearer does not make reference to the contents of any other content-bearer. Correspondingly, semantic holism is this claim.

[SEMANTIC HOLISM] The content of a given content-bearer in a representational system makes reference to the contents of all other content-bearers in that system.

¹⁷The terminology comes from Kaplan (1989).

Importantly, SEMANTIC HOLISM implies metasemantic holism, but not *vice versa*. First, metasemantic atomism and holism are compatible with semantic atomism, as the theory Peacocke develops in his (1992) shows. On his view, what fixes the semantic content of, say, a predicate or a mental item that corresponds to a predicate, is the role that predicate plays in a number of inferences involving it. But for all that, the semantic value of a predicate is a property or relation of the appropriate adicity.¹⁸ By contrast, SEMANTIC HOLISM directly implies metasemantic holism.

SEMANTIC HOLISM is a thesis about content-bearers in a particular representational system, such as a particular natural language or a given speaker's system of mental representation. Thus, it is at least conceptually possible for one system of representation to be characterized by semantic holism while another system of representation is semantically atomistic. In particular, semantic holism about natural language is compatible with semantic atomism about mental representation. I make this point here because semantic holism about language is a less controversial thesis than semantic holism about mental content.¹⁹ For example, the main arguments against Brandom's holistic theses mounted in Fodor and Lepore (1992/1993, 2002) are objections to holism about mental content. These arguments are to the point *qua* criticisms of Brandom, since he wants to argue that if semantic holism about language is true, so is semantic holism about mental content. But that conditional itself turns on extremely substantive views about the relation between linguistic and mental content, and once again, these commitments are completely optional from the perspective of the present discussion. This is a second dimension along which we can separate Brandom's semantic views from (even) more controversial aspects of the overall project.

For this reason, I want to focus quite specifically on Brandom's argument for semantic holism about language, leaving to the side Brandom's various metasemantic commitments which, though holistic, also do not entail semantic holism. He presents that argument as a series of claims.

- the meaning of a claim is what must be grasped to understand

¹⁸Peacocke's view is not fully holistic, but it is atomistic. Moreover, there are no obstacles in principle to the coherence—and hence possibility—of a theory that differs from Peacocke's only in being fully holistic.

¹⁹Note, in this context, that Fodor himself considers the combination of semantic holism about language and semantic atomism about mental content a live option—see his (1994).

it, and

- what is understood must at least determine the inferential significance of endorsing what is understood, but
- what follows from a claim depends on what other claims are available as auxiliary hypotheses, so
- any difference in collateral commitments means a difference in inferential significance, hence meaning.

The fact that the inferential significance of endorsements is always and in principle relative to collateral commitments available as auxiliary hypotheses shows just what Quine wants it to, and thereby gives a definite sense to the claim that “the unit of meaning” is the whole theory or set of commitments.²⁰

As it stands, this argument does not establish SEMANTIC HOLISM. Reconstructing it to show that it begins with Brandom’s normative semantic theory may be helpful to explain why. According to the normative dynamics, the semantic value of a sentence must determine a deontic score as output, given another deontic score as input. It is also true that what output is generated depends on the input. But SEMANTIC HOLISM does not follow. Transposing the point to an informational dynamic theory makes this clear.

Proponents of INFORMATIONAL DYNAMICS (p. 9, above) are free to be semantic atomists, since on their view, the semantic value of a sentence is a function from contexts to contexts, and they can specify that function in completely general terms. And Brandom himself seems to accept that this is a weakness in the argument. He considers the possibility that

in the inferential case [i.e., the semantics of sentences of a language] one might treat the inferential content expressed by a sentence tokening as a function, assigning each repertoire of concomitant commitments an inferential significance. Such significances could be (crudely) thought of as ordered pairs of circumstances and consequences of application [i.e., antecedent and resultant deontic scores]. [...] inferential *contents* could then be thought of as *functions*.²¹

²⁰Brandom (1994, 478).

²¹Brandom (1994, 482), emphases in the original.

In other words, we should think of the semantic value of a sentence as a function from contexts to contexts, and Brandom agrees that this avoids semantic holism. He suggests, however, that such a functional conception is untenable, since we are no closer to being able to answer the following question.

What is it for an expression to be so used as to have associated with it one rather than another intension determining a function from doxastic context to inferential significance?²²

That is to say, if we think of the semantic value of a sentence as a set of pairs, where each pair consists of an antecedent deontic score—the “doxastic context” in the passage just quoted—and intuitively the result of updating that context in light of an assertion of that sentence, that semantic value would contain very many pairs. If we accept that sentences have the semantic values they do in virtue of how speakers use them (in the widest possible sense of “use”), we still need to say what determines one such set of pairs as the semantic value of the sentence.

The generic difficulty with answers to this question stems from the very feature that make an intensional response attractive in the first place. For functions of the sort in question are individuated so finely that it is hard to see how the use of an expression could determine that one rather than a slightly different one should be associated with it.²³

The concern Brandom raises here is that whatever determines the semantic value of a sentence underdetermines which function from antecedent to updated deontic score should be that semantic value. Several such functions are all equally good candidates.²⁴ Hence, we should reject the view of semantic values as functions from antecedent to updated deontic scores, and since this is the best way of avoiding semantic holism, we should also accept semantic holism.

This argument is not convincing, however. The conclusion does not follow from the premises, nor does the conclusion speak to the problem at hand.

²²Brandom (1994, 483).

²³Brandom (1994, 483).

²⁴That is, Brandom is voicing the same kind of concern as Kripke does about *plus* and *quus* in his (1982).

Let's take these issues in turn. If observations about underdetermination undermine the functional conception of semantic values, that is only because these considerations count against assigning *any* semantic values to sentences that reflect how a context, however it is described for theoretical purposes, is updated. And that means that the argument shows only that the semantic value of a sentence should not be committed on these matters. It does not show anything about how we should represent these semantic values where they are so committed.

It is, in any event, awkward for Brandom to claim that we should not think of the semantic value of a sentence in terms of a function from contexts to contexts. The only alternative to doing so, and perhaps this is what Brandom is driving at in the arguments I just presented, is to adopt the view that the semantic value of a sentence, on a particular occasion on which it is used to make an assertion, is the particular change in the deontic score it brings about. The claim here is not the widely accepted one that certain expressions are context-sensitive, and that sentences containing such context-sensitive expressions can have different semantic values when evaluated with respect to different contexts, depending on how the context-sensitive expressions are interpreted in the context. That position is compatible, and indeed is usually conjoined with, the claim that the effect of asserting the semantic value of a sentence, of asserting a proposition, can be considered in different contexts.²⁵

The alternative to viewing semantic values as functions is the far more

²⁵I want to emphasize that Brandom's position on this issue is also incompatible with that of Lewis in his (1998). Lewis there considers the possibility that a theoretically adequate account of language use can make do without positing propositions. The idea is the following.

Sentences as used on a particular occasion are true or false. We can then distinguish two ways of assigning a truth-value to a sentence in a context. On the first, the mechanism contains two steps. Initially, the sentence is semantically evaluated with respect to a context, yielding a proposition as content. Subsequently, the proposition is evaluated with respect to the world and/or time of the context to determine a truth-value. This mechanism posits a proposition as an abstract object that plays an intermediate role in interpretation. (This is the basic view of interpretation that stands behind Kaplan's distinction between character and content in his (1989)). But one could in principle collapse the two steps, evaluating a sentence with respect to a context and a world, thus doing without propositions.

Analogously, one might think that one can do without update functions as the semantic values of sentences by evaluating a given sentence with respect to an ordered pair of contexts, where the first member of the pair serves to fix the interpretation of context-sensitive elements and the second tells us which context is updated.

But this strategy won't help Brandom because it doesn't do without update functions—on this strategy, they are simply more complex functions. And there is good justification for this formal fact. It is simply the observation that sentences have standing meanings, and that grasping the standing meaning of a sentence is an important part of how speakers make sense of assertions. The view I'm discussing on Brandom's behalf in the main text denies this basic observation.

radical position of denying that there is any content to a sentence that whose effect on contexts other than the one in which it is asserted can even be coherently considered. Once Brandom takes this position, it is completely unclear how he can motivate a semantics/pragmatics distinction. I already observed that he cannot take the domain of semantics to be defined as the set of factors that determine the truth-conditions of sentences, since he thinks that to the extent that sentences have truth-conditions, these conditions aren't the semantic values of sentences. Nor can he take the domain of semantics to be defined as the set of features that are determined by distinctively linguistic rules, and in particular as the set of features that obey compositionality, since he accepts semantic holism, and semantic holism is incompatible with compositionality about semantic values. For that reason, I suggested in §2 that semantics be identified as concerned with a set of features that form a core of language-use and, importantly, language comprehension.²⁶ One central reason for thinking that there is such a core phenomenon is that it provides an excellent account of how speakers can be reasonably sure that their speech acts will be taken up in the way they were intended: the audience grasps a context-invariant meaning and works its way out from there to the full significance of the speech act, relying on rules and generalizations about the interaction of that meaning with the context. But if Brandom denies that there is any context-invariant meaning at all, that motivation for a semantics/pragmatics distinction goes by the boards and he is left with a completely unanchored notion of semantics.²⁷

Thus, if Brandom wants to make sense of semantics as an inquiry into a set of phenomena that falls short of the full panoply of language use, he should accept that the semantic value of a sentence is a function from deontic scores to deontic scores. The arguments he adduces, and which I've just reviewed, show at most that the function might not be total, i.e., that it might not have every possible deontic score in its domain. Informally, such a partial function would reflect the hypothesis that for some contexts and some assertions, our

²⁶Compare also Brandom's remarks about semantics forming a core around which pragmatics forms a shell at Brandom (1994, 158-9), quoted on p. 11, above, where he explicitly endorses this picture.

²⁷Finally, simply as a matter of textual coherence, it is surprising for Brandom to cite the form of argument I just reviewed, one that focuses on the difficulties of explaining how our language use can determine which of several very finely grained semantic values a content bearer in fact has. That's because one of the central arguments Brandom gives in favor of using normative notions in metasemantics is precisely that it allows for a solution to the concerns raised by these kinds of rule following considerations (see Brandom, 1994, chp. 1).

actual language use does not determine how we should expect the deontic score of the context to be updated.

Once we accept that in Brandom's normative dynamic framework, semantic values are identified with possibly partial functions from deontic scores to deontic scores, the question of SEMANTIC HOLISM turns not on whether we should think of semantic values in terms of such functions, but on what these functions are like. What matters is whether we can represent such a function in terms of a systematic contribution the assertion makes without making reference to the distinguishing features of particular contexts in the domain of the function. The function that informational dynamics identifies as the semantic value of a sentence clearly meets this condition. And none of the considerations Brandom marshals speak to that issue.

However, we can generate the resources to mount an argument for SEMANTIC HOLISM that takes as its premise simply the core idea of normative dynamic semantics. The argument depends on the observation that normative relations among contents, in particular evidential relations, come in degrees. To work out that argument, I'll pretend that we're taking propositions (sets of worlds) as basic aspects of our theorizing, since this is the way that the framework in which I want to model these evidential relations is usually presented. But once the framework is on the table, I'll translate it into the dynamic setting to exhibit how it leads to holism.

While some propositions offer conclusive evidence for others, many provide some evidence while falling short of being conclusive. Thus, when we think about how asserting and accepting a content alters the commitments and entitlements of a speaker, we need to focus not just on relations of entailment and compatibility—or their normative surrogates—but on evidential relations more generally. To represent evidential relations that include non-conclusive ones, I'll conduct the subsequent discussion by appealing to one reasonably well-understood and transparent framework for describing them, one that makes use of probabilities.

Suppose that we start out with a subject that has a certain body of evidence. That body of evidence E makes it normatively appropriate to invest certain amounts of confidence in any given proposition. The more E evidentially supports a proposition, the higher the normatively appropriate level of confidence in that proposition is given E . Formally, we can represent this

situation by assigning a value between 0 and 1 to every proposition, with 0 representing maximally certain denial, 1 maximally certain endorsement, and numbers in between representing intermediate attitudes. Moreover, the normatively appropriate attitudes will stand in certain relations to one another. On some conceptions, the normatively appropriate attitudes, given an evidential base E conspire to make it the case that the assignment of values to functions conforms to the probability calculus.²⁸ Within the same framework, we can also represent how new evidence affects the normatively appropriate attitudes of a subject acquiring it. Once we have assigned all of the relevant probabilities, we can define conditional probabilities. We can think of them as commitments, prior to learning a proposition, on how the doxastic state should change were the proposition learned. Once that proposition is learned, and nothing else, the new updated doxastic state is such that for each proposition, the new credence is the prior conditional credence, given the newly learned proposition. Posterior probabilities are arrived at by conditionalizing on prior ones.

Simply using the probability calculus as an account of the dynamics of rational belief does not imply anything one way or the other about SEMANTIC HOLISM. The update itself is holistic in the sense that in order to determine how a probability distribution evolves under the impact of new evidence E , we need to look at the conditional probabilities of all other propositions given E . But that does not imply anything about the semantic value of a sentence that can be used to introduce the evidence into the common ground, since we could simply combine the probabilistic dynamics with a static semantic theory: the sentence expresses the proposition that E obtains, and the beliefs are updated using that proposition as input.

Once we also add the hypothesis that the correct semantic theory for a natural language is a normative dynamics, we do arrive at SEMANTIC HOLISM. That's because the normative dynamic theory holds that the update from an earlier state to a later state *just is* the semantic value of a sentence, and that means that we cannot represent the update as a function whose input is the semantic value of the sentence.

In these arguments, the details of the objective probabilistic framework I've

²⁸I'm thus treating probabilities as an objective measure of normative relations, rather than a representation of the subjective states of a particular subject.

used to represent normatively appropriate attitudes are incidental. What matters to the argument is just the claim that evidential relations are holistic in the strong sense that we cannot factor the update function from one evidential state to another which we use to represent the semantic value of a sentence into two, independently specifiable components. That means, for example, that we need not be committed to representing a normatively appropriate credal state with a single probability function, implying that normatively appropriate credences are maximally precise. We also need not accept that all updates make use of conditionalization. And perhaps most significantly, we need not assume that all normatively relevant relations are evidential. The argument I've presented depends only on the claim that evidential relations are always among the normatively relevant ones when performing updates.

4.3 *Further Implications*

I've so far argued that we can detach Brandom's semantic theory from other aspects of his project and that, once we develop the theory on its own terms, it furnishes the raw materials for an argument for SEMANTIC HOLISM. In fact, that development yields the resources to give precise content to, and an argument for, two further theses Brandom is very concerned to investigate: that meaning and norms are closely connected, and that there is an important difference between humans and animals.

Meaning and Norms Unless one denies that there are any norms governing action and behavior at all, it is hard to deny that there are norms governing our linguistic behavior. It is therefore obvious that there is *some* relation between meaning and norms. However, some theorists have suggested that certain norms are more closely connected to some aspect of our language use than this very general principle suggests.

One way of forging a relatively tight connection goes via the concept of assertion. One might hold that the act of assertion is related to some constitutive norms, that nothing counts as an assertion unless it was governed by a certain norm. Perhaps the relevant norm is one of knowledge, so that an assertion is governed by the constitutive norm that one should only assert what one knows.²⁹ Alternatively, the relevant norm might be one of reasonable belief

²⁹This view is defended, for example, by Williamson (1996)

or of truth.³⁰

Crucially, a view that holds that assertion is governed by a constitutive norm is compatible with a view on which the basic concept of semantic theorizing is not intrinsically normative. Indeed, most theorists who defend such a constitutive norm account of assertion combine it with a truth-conditional account of the semantics of assertoric sentences. So on these accounts, norms are more intimately connected to the use of sentences, but not to meaning itself.

Brandom, however, seems to want a tighter connection between meaning and norms than this. On his view, norms aren't just connected to language in virtue of the claim that the basic speech act of assertion is at least in part governed by constitutive norms.

Semantics must answer to pragmatics. The theoretical point of attributing semantic content to intentional states, attitudes, and performances is to determine the pragmatic significance of their occurrence in various contexts. This means settling how linguistic expressions of those contents are properly or correctly used, under what circumstances it is appropriate to acquire states and attitudes with those contents, and how one then ought to or is obliged to go on to behave.³¹

Brandom suggests that it is the semantics themselves, and specifically the semantic values ascribed to sentences, that must settle which norms are applicable to a particular speech act. At least *prima facie*, this is an incredibly strong claim, one that is deeply implausible on the face of it, and incompatible with some basic tenets about the role of semantic theory that Brandom himself accepts. For it looks as if Brandom says that, once we know the semantic value of a sentence, every normative question about every use of that sentence is settled. To see how strong this is, note that it entails that given a sentence *S*, we only need to know the semantics of *S* to determine whether *S* is appropriately asserted in a particular context. But in general, many factors influence the appropriateness of an assertion, including the implicatures of the assertion, and what those implicatures are simply does not follow from

³⁰For a version and defense of the truth-rule, see Weiner (2005). For a version of the reasonable-belief rule, see Lackey (2007).

³¹Brandom (1994, 83).

the semantics alone. That semantics by itself does not determine appropriateness of use is something that Brandom accepts, as well, since he too embraces a semantics/pragmatics distinction (cf. §4.1, above).

The normative dynamics I have offered here allow us to steer a middle-ground between the extreme view that Brandom seems to consider in the passage just quoted, and the non-normative semantics compatible with normative accounts of assertion. On the one hand, the semantic values themselves are intrinsically connected to norms, specifically, norms of coherent belief and norms of the dynamics of belief. Thus, we have a tighter connection than on the norms-of-assertion picture, on which there are norms that are intrinsically connected to the act of the assertion, but only extrinsically related to the content asserted. However, we can also stop short of saying that the norms intrinsically connected to the semantic value of an asserted sentence are thereby the norms that alone determine the *ultima facie* normative status of a speaker making the assertion, or of an audience at whom the assertion is directed. As always, both can exploit features of the context to determine how they *appropriately* respond to the assertion: whether to strengthen the assertion by updating their beliefs in ways that go beyond the update proposed by the assertion, or perhaps whether to update in some alternative way altogether—as when we treat an assertion sarcastically or ironically, conveying what we’d intuitively call the opposite of what is directly asserted.

Humans and Animals, Sapience and Sentience This observation about the connection between semantic content and norms is directly relevant to another Brandomian theme, the thought that the linguistic acts of rational agents are in some important respects different from representational acts of non-rational agents, or the representational properties of inanimate things. In general, Brandom would like to distinguish what he terms ‘sapience’ and ‘sentience.’

Picking us out by our capacity for reason and understanding expresses a commitment to take *sapience*, rather than *sentience* as the constellation of characteristics that distinguishes us. Sentience is what we share with non-verbal animals such as cats.³²

³²Brandom (1994, 5). See also Brandom (2003, 48-9).

Since we are mainly concerned with outward performances that have content, let me focus on Brandom's idea regarding specifically the difference between the linguistic behavior of rational human agents and the communicative behavior of inanimate or animate non-human things.

What are the salient differences between a measuring instrument, such as a thermometer or spectrophotometer, and an observer who noninferentially acquires beliefs or makes claims about environing temperatures and colors? [...]

what is at issue is a kind of *understanding*. The reporter's response is meaningful—not just, as in the case of the measuring instrument or the parrot, to others, but to the responding reporter personally. [...]

The leading idea of the approach to content and understanding to be developed here is [...] that the key element missing from the parrot and the measuring instrument—the difference between merely *responsive* classification and *conceptual* classification—is their mastery of the practices of giving and asking for *reasons*, in which their responses can play a *justifying* role. [...] The parrot does not treat "That's red" as incompatible with "That's green," nor as following from "That's scarlet" and entailing "That's colored."³³

One way to elaborate these programmatic remarks into a substantive thesis is to start out with a theory of sentience and see how much of what Brandom says here can be reconstructed in terms of that theory. To fix ideas, I'll consider the theory of Stalnaker (1984). Stalnaker there presents a theory of content and the role of content in action and inquiry that is explicitly designed to focus on what is common to humans and animals. We can say in exactly the same sense that the dog looked for the bone under the tree because she thought it was there as that Alex looked for her keys in the kitchen because she thought they were there. One aspect of that theory is a commitment to seeing representational content as distinguishing among possibilities, i.e., to characterize representational contents as sets of possible worlds. Having such a relatively coarse conception of content makes it plausible that animals can represent the

³³Brandom (1994, 88-9).

world in exactly the same way as we do. Everybody distinguishes among ways the world might be.

But that theory has a crucial second aspect. Suppose we start out with a space of possible worlds, and we want to characterize a creature's representational state by saying that it distinguishes among the worlds in that space. What makes it the case that the creature locates herself on one side of the divide among the possible worlds rather than the other? That is, suppose we divide the set of worlds into the worlds in which it is the case that p , and those in which it is not the case that p . What makes it the case that the creature thinks that she's in a p -world, rather than a *not- p* -world? To say that she believes that p rather than *not- p* is obviously not an answer to the question, since we're asking just what about the creature makes it the case that she believes that p rather than that *not- p* .

Stalnaker answers this question in terms of the role the mental state whose content we're characterizing plays in causing the creature's behavior.³⁴ As Stalnaker puts it,

Belief and desire [...] are correlative dispositional states of a potentially rational agent. To desire that P is to be disposed to act in ways that would tend to bring it about that P in a world in which one's beliefs, whatever they are, were true. To believe that P is to be disposed to act in ways that would tend to satisfy one's desires, whatever they are, in a world in which P (together with one's other beliefs) were true.³⁵

The remark that belief and desire are states of a "potentially rational agent" is not idle in this account. An agent's beliefs and desires have to interact to cause behavior in a basically instrumentally rational way. The tendency of the actions one takes on the strength of one's beliefs and desires to be crowned with satisfied desires cannot just be underwritten by a helpful deity who brings happiness no matter what the agent does. Rather, it is underwritten by the agent's acting in such a way that the satisfaction of her desires is likely, given what she takes the world to be like. Thus, what makes it the case that a creature locates herself on one side of the divide among possibilities rather than

³⁴This is why Stalnaker calls the picture of intentionality he develops broadly 'pragmatic' (1984, 5). I don't use that label in the text because Brandom also calls his view 'pragmatist,' although the theoretical commitments each of the two theorists label with that word are very, very different.

³⁵Stalnaker (1984, 15).

another is that, *when that creature acts in accordance with means-ends rationality*, she is likely to satisfy her desires if the actual world is on that side rather than the other. That kind of rationality crucially involves at least a limited coherence in the creature's representational states.

With all of this in mind, let me return to Brandom's remarks about human and animal representation. As he put it there, one of the things that distinguish the parrot from a human agent, both of whom say 'that's red' in the presence of red things, is that the parrot doesn't understand what it's saying. That is certainly true, but presumably that's an artifact of the parrot's producing a response that isn't part of the parrot's communicative system. More to the point is a comparison between a creature's signaling that there's a predator around so its kin can fly away and a human's ability to report on the environment. If Brandom's thesis that only the human understands the report she makes—in some relevant sense of 'understand'—is to be of interest, it should apply to that comparison, as well.

One of the hints that Brandom gives us about what it takes to understand in the relevant sense for interpreting his thesis is that a creature understands the representational states she's in only if these representational states stand in semantic relations to other representational states—relations such as compatibility, incompatibility, and entailment. In order to make this a plausible constraint, it must be possible for a creature to appreciate that her representations stand in these relations even if she doesn't have the concepts of entailment or compatibility. That is to say, it must be possible for her to appreciate that these relations hold implicitly.³⁶ What such implicit appreciation amounts to is that there is some regularity in the creature's representational states, i.e., that the creature tends to believe the logical consequences of things she believes and that she tends not to believe anything incompatible with what she believes.

As we've just seen in discussing Stalnaker's proposal, such implicit appreciation of semantic relations among contentful states is plausibly a precondition on ascribing representational content to anything, including non-linguistic animals. Notice, for example, that it would be extremely hard to attribute a belief that there is something dangerous in the vicinity to a creature that was habitually both in the kind of state that tends to cause warning behavior and the state that tends to cause behavior that exposes the creature

³⁶This is a constraint that Brandom, too, accepts (see Brandom, 1994, 18-30; *passim*).

to predation. So the initial hint, that what sets humans apart is an implicit appreciation of semantic relations, cannot be cashed out into a more fully articulated thesis that distinguishes sapience and sentience.

However, we can use the normative dynamic semantic theory I've developed on Brandom's behalf to give more content to the idea that there is a significant difference between animal signaling and human language use, even if we adopt the hypothesis that animal signaling is a matter of performing acts with representational properties. The hint we pick up on is not so much that there is a distinctive kind of understanding, itself understood in terms of an appreciation of semantic relations, but that norms enter into the representational activity of humans differently than they do into the representational activity of non-humans. It is just the idea that while non-human signaling is, in the first place, a representational activity that aims at showing something about the world, human language use is in the first place a communicative activity that aims at influencing the normative states of others. Put in theoretically loaded terms, truth-conditional semantics furnish the correct semantic framework for animal signaling but not for human discourse.

The informal interpretation of the formal difference between the representational semantics appropriate to animal signaling (or inanimate indication) and the normative dynamics of human communication is that we're capable of using language in ways that animals are not. And this brings me to a point that I have postponed until now.

5 The Argument from Anaphora

The arguments I have presented so far have been basically conditional in character. *If* we can argue for Brandom's normative dynamics, *then* a number of interesting theses follow. Moreover, if we could argue for the normative dynamics on grounds that are independent of the larger project, we could thereby establish these theses without appeal to an argumentative strategy that has been criticized very widely. Arguing for the normative dynamics and going on from there thus provides an alternative path into some distinctively Brandomian positions.

I now want to consider one of the ways that Brandom tries to discharge the antecedent of that conditional, his arguments about anaphora. The argument

is roughly that some phenomena connected to anaphora are such that we can accommodate them only if we adopt a normative dynamic theory.³⁷ The argument in outline is that sentences containing expressions like proper names and demonstratives can figure in reasoning, and that their role in reasoning can only be explained within a normative dynamic semantic theory. However, I'll suggest that this argument is not convincing.

Informally, we can distinguish at least two different uses of pronouns, deictic ones and anaphoric ones. When a pronoun is used deictically, its interpretation works in much the same way as a demonstrative. A speaker might say 'she is tall,' relying on the context to furnish a particular person as the referent of 'she.' The speaker might accomplish this by pointing at a person or by exploiting the referent's salience in some way. When a pronoun is used anaphorically, its interpretation depends in some systematic way on the interpretation of another expression, usually one earlier in the sentence or the discourse. For example, in 'every student loves her teacher,' 'her' might be used in such a way as to convey that for each student x , x loves x 's teacher. In that case, the pronoun doesn't refer at all, and hence cannot refer by exploiting some relevant feature of the context. Rather, its interpretation depends on the interpretation of the preceding quantified expression 'every student.' In such a case, we can say that 'every teacher' is the *antecedent* of the pronoun, and that the pronoun occurs anaphorically on that quantificational expression.

Consider now the following two arguments.

(A-i) Jane is tall.

(A-ii) She is young.

∴ (A-iii) Somebody is young and tall.

(D-i) [POINTING AT JANE] She is tall.

(D-ii) [POINTING AT JANE] She is young.

∴ (D-iii) Somebody is young and tall.

Assume that the occurrence of 'she' in the A-argument is anaphoric on 'Jane.'

³⁷Brandom (1997) highlights an alternative argumentative strategy that focuses on anaphora-like phenomena via what he calls the prosentential theory of truth, building on work by Grover (1992); Grover et al. (1975).

In that case, the argument is assured to be valid, and a speaker can know that the argument is valid simply in virtue of understanding how the expressions are used in the premises and conclusion (A-i)-(A-iii). Hence, a speaker need know nothing else about the argument aside from the fact that the premises are true in order to reasonably endorse the conclusion. Assume that in the D-argument, the pronouns occur deictically. They are used as demonstratives together with a pointing gesture as indicated in (D-i) and (D-ii). In that case, a speaker can know how the expressions are used—i.e., that they are used deictically—and still be in doubt about whether the argument is valid. In order for her to reasonably accept the conclusion on the basis of her knowledge that the premises are true, she needs to stand in an epistemically favorable relation to the proposition that the premises are about the same person. Let's defer what exactly the relevant epistemically favorable relation is. Perhaps it's knowledge, perhaps it's reasonable belief, perhaps it's a default presumption, perhaps she need not even believe the proposition but merely be entitled to it.

Brandom wants to argue that, unless we endorse a normative dynamic semantic theory, we have to treat the A- and D-arguments on a par, and neither argument is such that warrant is transmitted from the premises to the conclusion. The argument proceeds by endorsing the following conditional claims. If we accept a static semantic theory, then we have to analyze the anaphoric relation between 'she' in (A-ii) and its antecedent in (A-i) in terms of co-reference. If we do that, we either make empirically unacceptable predictions or we cannot account for the transmission of warrant from the premises to the conclusion of the A-argument. Moreover, if we don't accept a static semantic theory, then we should accept a normative dynamic theory.

Obviously, the argument does not take into account the option of informational dynamics, but if the argument manages to rule out static semantic theories, that will already be a major accomplishment. It may well be the case that in that situation, the argument can be extended to attack informational dynamics, as well. I don't want to address that question, however, since I'm going to argue now that the argument doesn't manage to rule out a static semantic theory. Before doing so, I want to set aside one issue. Brandom presents his argument as having two stages. It consists first of an argument that deixis presupposes anaphora, and then a further argument that anaphora cannot be analyzed in referential terms while preserving its role in allow-

ing speakers to make a warranted transition from accepting the premises of a valid argument to accepting its conclusion.³⁸ For our purposes, only the second step of the argument is relevant. The first step is a transcendental argument that seeks to establish that there cannot exist a representational system used for communication—in some suitable sense of ‘cannot’—if warrant cannot be transmitted from premises to conclusions, and hence that there cannot be a language that consists only of demonstrative reports. What this claim means, exactly, and whether it is true need not detain us. We can take it for granted that human languages quite generally make use of anaphora—we need not also show that any language must make use of it.

I said that Brandom’s argument essentially turns on arguing for two conditionals: that if we accept a static framework, then the anaphoric relation between (A-i) and (A-ii) must be analyzed as relations of co-reference, and that if we do that, then we have to treat the A- and D-arguments as on a par. The first of these conditionals is obviously true, so the argument stands and falls with the second of these conditionals. And there, the question is how the co-reference is established. Specifically, we need to ask whether the co-reference is established in such a way as to explain the transmission of warrant in the A-argument that fails in the D-argument.

As a first step, let me try to get clearer on what exactly the problem is with the D-argument. Here are some of Brandom’s remarks that bear on the matter.

Even where repeated demonstration is possible, it results simply in the production of another unrepeatable tokening, one that can be seen not to have the significance of a recurrence of the original by the fact that there is always the possibility that, unbeknownst to its author, it in fact picks out a different object.³⁹

To say that a tokening of an expression, such as ‘she’ in (A-ii), has the significance of a recurrence is just to say that the tokening stands in a relation to some other expression, the one it is a recurrence *of*, and that this relation has whatever feature ‘she’ in (A-ii) has that allows warrant to be transmitted from the premises to the conclusion of the A-argument. Thus, the real explanatory

³⁸See, e.g., the discussion at the bottom of Brandom (1994, 463).

³⁹Brandom (1994, 462).

force of this passage is in telling us when a tokening fails to have this significance. And Brandom suggests that this is the case whenever it's possible that two tokenings do not corefer.⁴⁰ The notion of possibility employed here is extremely thin. There are many situations in which (D-i)-(D-iii) might be tokened, such as looking at Jane and uttering (D-i) and (D-ii) in quick succession, and in which it is simply not a live option that the referent of the two tokenings changes. But I take it that Brandom's thought is that it's not in virtue of how the language is used, by itself, that a speaker may disregard the possibility of a change in reference. Rather, it's a proposition about the situation in which the tokenings have occurred. Thus, what wants to be explained, according to Brandom, is really how it's possible for the rules of language to ensure that the inference from (A-i) and (A-ii) to (A-iii) to be valid. In a static framework, that would have to work by making it the case that the anaphorically used pronoun corefers, and that reference is established in some way that eliminates the kind of possibility Brandom is concerned to point out in the D-argument and avoid in the A-argument.

Here is Brandom's argument for thinking that this cannot be accomplished.

One idea would be to assimilate the relation between an anaphoric dependent and its antecedent to the relation between a demonstrative and what is demonstrated. Anaphoric dependents would be understood as indexical tokenings that referred to their antecedents. In a tokening /Hegel understood Kant's argument, but he did not refute it/_{*i*}, the token /it/_{*i*} would be understood as meaning what a token /that/ would mean, if it could be arranged that what was demonstrated was the antecedent tokening /Kant's argument/_{*i*}.

But as it stands this cannot be how such a story would go. For in that case the tokening /it/_{*i*} would be conceived of as inter-substitutable, not with other tokenings co-identified with /Kant's argument/_{*i*}, but with tokenings that (presystematically) would be said to refer to the *tokening* /Kant's argument/_{*i*}—such as /the

⁴⁰For ease of exposition, I'll speak as if our metatheory is static, i.e., I'll analyze validity in terms of truth-preservation and the crucial condition that the A- and D-arguments have to satisfy in order to be valid as coreference. If we adopt a Brandomian theory of language and language use, these notions need to be reconstructed in non-referential terms, but for now, sticking with these analyses simplifies matters greatly.

very tokening of type ⟨Kant's argument⟩ that was just uttered (or tagged with the index *i*)/. That is not what Hegel understood but failed to refute, for he never heard of that tokening.⁴¹

That is, Brandom suggests that we could enforce grammatically ensured coreference by interpreting the anaphorically used pronoun 'she' in (A-ii) as a demonstrative that makes use of the linguistic material the pronoun is anaphoric on. The specific suggestion Brandom offers on behalf of his opponent is an obvious no-go. To remain with the example he gives in the quoted passage, 'it' as it occurs is interpreted as referring to a bit of linguistic material, the particular words written on the page in the passage I just quoted. But these words aren't the right kind of thing to be understood. What can be understood (or failed to be understood) is what these words refer to. The point is even more obvious in the example I've worked with. The proposal Brandom considers here amounts to saying that 'she' refers to 'Jane' in (A-i), not the person but the name. And in that case, we don't even have coreference, let alone grammatically ensured coreference.

A slightly more promising option is to interpret the anaphorically used pronoun as short for the demonstrative expression 'what that [POINTING AT THE ANTECEDENT] refers to.' Brandom offers arguments in another part of the book that seek to establish that we cannot make sense of the 'refers' locution independently of his preferred normative dynamics. However, these arguments are extremely involved and I want to forego them. I'll grant Brandom for now that an explicit mentioning of the reference relation is unacceptable. For quite independently of considerations of using the locution 'refers,' we can offer a much more promising theory.

Recall that the crucial problem with the D-argument is that, though the two deictically used expressions in fact refer to the same thing, the way in which their reference is fixed is such as to allow for the possibility that they refer to different things. That means that we can avoid the problem if we can find a way of fixing the reference of an expression that eliminates this possibility. That's what I propose to do now. As Lewis (1983) points out, there are many ways for an object to be salient in such a way as to make it eligible to be the referent of a deictically used expression. One way is for the object to be sufficiently strange that it comes with built-in salience, at least in

⁴¹Brandom (1994, 463-4).

the context of the conversation—think of a goat walking into a lecture hall. A speaker might also make it salient by pointing. But finally, a speaker might make it salient by mentioning it. Thus, in the A-argument, the utterance of the first premise makes Jane salient by mentioning her, while the utterance of the second premise exploits that salience to fix the reference of the second pronoun.⁴²

To be sure, there is a very large literature on whether static semantic theories can handle all cases of anaphora, including donkey-sentences, cross-sentential anaphora, and a host of others. It is an open question whether static semantics really cannot deal with these phenomena.⁴³ Even if it turns out that static semantic theories have problems with these phenomena, it is a further open question whether a proponent of Brandom's normative dynamic semantics can marshal arguments against her informational rivals. For now, I just want to conclude that the basic phenomenon of anaphora as it is exhibited in sentences like (A-ii) does not pose any special problems for a static conception and does not offer any particular support for a normative dynamic one.

6 Conclusion

I have tried to show that we can detach significant Brandomian themes about language from other—and in my view harder to defend—theses about content in general. More importantly, I've also tried to show that the foundational theses about language, especially the central conception of a semantics based on keeping score of normative relations, is a theory that can in principle be argued for on empirical grounds. That is to say, there potentially are particular linguistic phenomena that speak in favor of a normative dynamic theory over its static or informational dynamic rivals. However, this is a double-edged sword, since it means that a proponent of a normative dynamics needs to show that her preferred semantic theory can in fact account for the phenomena that her opponents point to in support of their alternatives. Thus, the following remark probably cannot be maintained.

⁴²For a fuller discussion of this strategy, as well as some of its limitations, Heim (1982) is a great starting point.

⁴³See for example the recent discussion in Elbourne (2005).

[The account] does not pretend to address the questions about anaphora that linguists and cognitive psychologists have been most concerned with—namely, when it is *correct* to [...] treat one expression rather than another as the anaphoric antecedent of another, what *lexical* or *syntactic cues* there are for adopting this attitude, or how audiences *in fact* go about deciding which of various possible readings to adopt. The question of interest here is what it is to do the trick—what counts as doing the trick—rather than when it is called for or how it can be brought off.⁴⁴

It's true that semantic theories generally do not offer accounts of anaphora-resolution, i.e., of how speakers decide which of several different interpretations is the one at issue in a conversation. However, they do offer competing accounts of what readings are available—one of the important areas of disagreement in the debate between static and informational dynamic semantics is precisely over that question. It is thus up to the proponent of a normative dynamics to show that her preferred semantic theory can account for all of the relevant semantic phenomena.

⁴⁴Brandom (1994, 457), emphasis in the original.

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