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## Semantic Deflationism, Public Language Meaning and Contextual Standards of Correctness<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract** The paper aims at providing an argument for a deflationary treatment of the notion of public language meaning. The argument is based on the notion of standards of correctness; I will try to show that as correctness assessments are context-involving, the notion of public language meaning cannot be treated as an explanatory one. An elaboration of the argument, using the notion of ground is provided. Finally, I will consider some limitations of the reasoning presented.

**Keywords** deflationism, meaning, public language, grounding

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### Introduction

The aim of this paper is to provide an argument for the idea that the notion of public language meaning should be treated in a deflationary fashion. The argument is based on the notion of contextual standards of correctness. The argument is also intended as a partial response to the recent objection to deflationism raised by Stephen Schiffer.

First, I am going to provide a working definition of deflationism as applied to semantic notions in general, and elucidate the notion of public language meaning. Then, I am going to present Schiffer's objection to deflationism. After that I'll introduce the notion of standards of correctness, which plays

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a central role in the debates on normativity of meaning. This notion will be crucial in the argument for deflationism. Afterwards, I am going to present an elaboration of my argument, which is based on Kit Fine's notion of ground. The next part will be devoted to an attempt to extend the line of argumentation to a broader range of phenomena, namely actions based on understanding public language expressions. In the final part of the paper I will show some limitations to the line of reasoning presented and an objection to it.

## 1. Definition of deflationism

“Deflationism” is a term that has come to stand for a great variety of philosophical views in different areas of inquiry. In the present paper I shall be interested in deflationism understood as a theory concerning the status of semantic notions. The paradigmatic case here is truth – most of the early versions of deflationary theories were created as theories of this concept. However, nowadays it is not uncommon to see deflationism applied to other semantic notions, like meaning or reference (many examples of such approaches and their criticisms are discussed in a collection of essays in Gross & Tebben & Williams, 2015).

In what follows I will treat deflationism as a generic position, in principle acceptable to any semantic notion. I will also assume (although it might be controversial) that one can be semantic deflationist locally – i.e. only with respect to one of the semantic notions, while adopting a substantial theory to other such notions, or remaining neutral with respect to them.

Traditionally, deflationism about “S” was understood as the idea that there is no such property as S-hood; in the paradigmatic case of truth deflationism has been for a long time defined as a theory which simply denied that there is such property as being true (see e.g. Strawson, 1950).

This definition however, has led to some serious theoretical difficulties. The critics pointed out that it is not feasible to claim that “true” does not refer to a property. If there is no such property as being true, the argument goes, then it would seem that the predicate “is true” would have an empty extension (see e.g. Wright, 1992). But this would amount to the claim that there are no true sentences whatsoever. Such a preposterous claim has never been intended to be made by deflationists, who clearly have not intended to develop a version of error theory concerning truth: i.e. a position which would claim that every sentence ascribing a value of truth to another sentence is

false. Such a radical theory would most likely be inconsistent. Moreover, an error theory about truth is irreconcilable with our folk intuitions about the truth predicate (as the folk clearly believe that there are indeed true sentences), and most deflationists have been keen on trying to preserve our commonsense intuitions about the truth predicate.

This argument seems to generalize other semantic notions. It would be quite bizarre to claim that there is no such property as reference, if this thesis were to be interpreted as the claim that nothing ever referred to anything. Again, this purely hypothetical position could be accused of inconsistency and it goes without saying that our everyday beliefs about reference defy it.

Considerations of these sorts have led most deflationists to the admission that “being true” indeed is a property, albeit only in minimal sense (see e.g. Horwich, 1998a). But once deflationists agree that there is such a property as “truth”, they owe us a clear conception of what makes their theory different from substantial theories of truth, which also claim that truth is a property.

The standard move here is to claim that what is characteristic to deflationism is the claim that although “truth” (or other semantic notion) denotes a property, the property in question is not a substantive one. This idea forces the deflationist to propose a criterion for distinguishing between substantive and non-substantive properties. This distinction is usually explicated in terms of explanatory relevance (see e.g. Horwich, 1998a, Edwards, 2013): substantive properties are thought to be those which are relevant in explanations of phenomena. Conversely, if a certain property is not relevant in explanatory practice then we should treat it as non-substantive.

Generalizing the conclusion from the previous paragraph, we might say that the point of controversy between a deflationist and a proponent of substantial theory concerning a given semantic term “S” is whether one should treat the property S as explanatory relevant. The deflationist is the one who claims that although we might say that there is something like property S, and that the predicate “S” has a non-empty extension, there is no deep theoretical job for the property; we might use it as a purely logical device, but that is about it. The anti-deflationist, on the other hand, argues that the notion in question is needed for theoretical purposes and that invoking the property in question helps us to genuinely explain important phenomena.

## 2. Public language meaning and deflationism

The semantic notion I wish to focus on is public language meaning. I do not intend to provide a formal definition of this notion, but only an informal elucidation, which I hope would be sufficient for the purposes of the paper. The basic idea is that when we ask about a meaning of an expression, we might distinguish between an idiolectal meaning, which is specific to a single user, and a meaning which is bestowed upon an expression by a wider community. A well-worn example of that distinction is that of malapropisms: in one's idiolect it might be well true that "eventually" has the same meaning as "actually", whereas in standard public English of the educated Anglo-American population these two words have clearly different meanings.

It is important to note that the distinction between idiolectal and public language meaning is different from the well-known distinction between a speaker's meaning and semantic meaning (see Kripke, 1977). The speaker's meaning is the meaning of an expression as used by a speaker in a given context. Both idiolectal meaning and public language meaning are subspecies of semantic meaning, i.e. both are meanings which are systematically attributable to the expression, rather than being properties of individual use. The difference between them lies in the fact that while idiolectal use traces patterns of use of a single individual, the public one traces the patterns of use of a wider community.

Deflationism about public language meaning is, then, a position according to which public language meaning is a non-substantive notion, which means that public language meaning should not be treated as relevant in explanations of any interesting phenomena.

Such a position has already been presented in the literature as the minimalist interpretation of the so-called "sceptical solution" of the sceptical problem presented by Saul Kripke in his reading of Wittgenstein remarks of following a rule. As it is well known the "Kripkensteinian" sceptic questioned whether there is any fact that determines the meaning of any expression (Kripke, 1982). In the most famous example, the sceptic claimed that nothing determines whether the symbol "+" means "plus", as there is no way of excluding the possibility that this symbol denotes some other function, say *quus*, i.e. a function which yields the same results as plus when the arguments are lower than an arbitrary number, and yields 5 in other cases.

Kripke presents his own answer to this challenge and dubs it the "sceptical solution". Its basic claim is that there indeed are no facts deter-

mining meaning of an expression, but nonetheless there is room for claiming that certain semantic attributions are correct (according to the communal standards of correctness). Moreover, Kripke (1982, p. 86) claims that redundancy theory of truth can be applied to such semantic attributions. Some authors have claimed that these remarks are best understood as putting forward a deflationary account of meaning (see e.g. Byrne, 1996, Kusch, 2006, Wilson, 1998). According to them, what Kripkenstein really denies is the existence of robust/substantial semantic fact, but his sceptical solution allows for the existence of deflationary/minimal semantic facts.

In my paper I am not going to engage in exegesis of Kripke's notoriously vague arguments. Instead, I am about to provide a new argument for the deflationary approach to public language meaning. Although this argument is not intended to be an interpretation of Kripke, it draws some inspiration from his work. But before I do that, I shall look at Stephen Schiffer's recent critique of deflationism, which, I believe, provides an important dialectical setting for the discussion.

But before we proceed, it is important to note that the definition of deflationism about public language meaning presented in this paper is distinct from the perhaps more well known version of deflationism about meaning, namely the one promoted by Paul Horwich. The basic tenet of Horwich's theory is that we should explain meaning in terms of a basic acceptance property, which in turns allows us to claim that the primary meaning of an expression is a concept expressed by it (Horwich, 1998b, p. 45–46). Such a theory allows him to describe meanings in terms of biconditionals like “dog” means DOG, where DOG is a concept.

The difference between the approaches preferred by Horwich and the one I want to pursue here, stems, in my opinion, from the fact that I am primarily interested in the metaphysical status of the putative meaning-property, i.e. in a meta-semantic problem, while Horwich wants to provide a (first-order) theory of meaning. In my opinion causal relevance is a plausible candidate for a test to distinguish between those properties which are to be treated in a deflationary manner and those properties which are to be treated in a strongly realist fashion. Thus, focusing on a question of whether public language meaning is causally relevant is the best way to answer the meta-semantic question whether we are dealing with a “substantial property” here.

Paradoxically enough, on my definition Horwich's theory turns out to be a non-deflationary one, as he admits that there are indeed such things as meaning-properties; moreover, these properties have an underlying nature

and those “underlying natures of meaning-properties are basic regularities of use, explanatorily fundamental generalizations about the circumstances in which words occur” (Horwich, 1995, p. 356). The complaint that Horwich’s theory of meaning is not in fact deflationary was raised by Huw Price (1998, p. 111). Price claimed that Horwich’s use of “deflationism” is significantly different when it is applied to “meaning” and not to “truth”.

Horwich seems to be mostly interested in providing a philosophical account of meaning and less with its metaphysical implications. I have no intention of providing such an account. Hence, I will not try to engage in the debate, whether, for example, it is possible to characterize meaning of an expression using a biconditional modeled on the T-schema of Tarski (see Horwich, 1998b, p. 14). On my take, deflationism is a negative meta-semantic thesis and is not inherently tied to any account of meaning. I think adopting such definition of public language deflationism, although it might differ from other accounts of that position, is theoretically fruitful, as it takes public meaning deflationism a special case of a generic position. This position deserves critical attention, especially in the light of the recent Schiffer’s critique.

### **3. Schiffer’s worry**

In his *Deflationist Theories of Truth, Meaning, and Content* (forthcoming) Stephen Schiffer argues against the idea that semantic notions should be given deflationary treatment. He opposes “radical deflationism” – a strictly defined, globally applicable, hypothetical position (based, to an extent, on Harty Field’s views). So, my defense of a modest, local, deflationism about public language meaning is not in direct opposition to Schiffer’s work.

However, Schiffer’s arguments provide, in my opinion, a substantial challenge to all forms of deflationism – even those more locally focused. The line of argumentation provided in his paper is fairly intricate, but a quite simple, yet powerful argument can be extracted from it, and it is a one that all deflationists should take seriously.

According to Schiffer, the deflationists claim that it is possible to explain human language-related behaviour without referring to any semantic properties. But for Schiffer such a project is unrealistic. In everyday practice it is perfectly normal to explain human behaviour by resorting to semantic properties of the expressions used. And there is no principled reason to treat such explanations as defective (apart from general worries about causal exclusion, which Schiffer dismisses). The other worry is that deflationism

provides us with no workable alternative to the common practice; in those cases when we normally appeal to semantic properties, we do not have any practically applicable methods of explaining human behaviour other than the ones that we actually employ, and these are laden with semantic properties.

In my paper I am going to focus on the first part of the challenge. At first glance, the Schiffer's worry might look as a pretty weak argument, as it relies on description of *de facto* existing explanatory practices (and who can be sure that our actual, pre-scientific ways of explaining phenomena are above criticism?). But I think this is indeed quite a powerful argument. It aims to show that deflationism is an under-motivated position, as it provides no reason to think that appeals to the semantic in explanatory practice are defective. And that the alternative – namely substantial theories of the semantic – have had the advantage of already being tried in working practice.

To counter this line of reasoning, a deflationist must present an argument which would provide motivation for their position. In what follows I am going to provide an argument which aims to counter the intuitions Schiffer's argument wanted to induce. At the heart of Schiffer's argument seems to be that we must treat meaning as substantial as it plays an important causal-explanatory role in psychological explanations. So, my argument would aim to show that, appearances to the contrary, the notion of public language meaning plays no important role in causally explaining human-language related behaviour. This argument will be based on the notion of standards of correctness, which is central to the contemporary debates about normativity of meaning.

#### **4. Standards of correctness**

The idea that expressions of public language have conditions of correct use is central to the debates on normativity of meaning. The claim that meaning is normative, once considered obvious (see e.g. Kripke, 1982, McDowell, 1984), has been subject to many criticisms more recently (see e.g. Hattiangadi, 2006, Glüer & Pagin, 1999). At the heart of the debate lies the question whether meaning is normative in a “strong” or “philosophically interesting” sense. There are, of course, many ways one might precisify the normativity claim and different arguments has been waged for and against the normativist thesis (for a recent defense of normativism see e.g. Whiting, 2007).

What is curious about the debate is that both sides of it seem to agree on a basic intuition that there is something like correct and incorrect use of language. (The only prominent philosopher who had qualms about this

thesis was probably Davidson (2005)). The basic idea is quite straightforward: when a user of a public language uses a certain expression, we, as other users of the same language are entitled to judge this use as correct or incorrect, according to the semantic norms of the language in question. This shared assumption is central to the argument that I am going to present.

This fact might well be regarded as constitutive of notion of public language meaning. It is only possible to claim that the phenomenon we are dealing with is indeed a public language if there are standards of correct use associated with it. (This might, at least partially, explain why Davidson ended up claiming that there is no such thing as language (Davidson, 2005) – as he denied that there is such a thing as standards of correct use).

The observation that there are standards of correctness might seem relatively trivial and not particularly relevant to the deflationism debate. But in my opinion this is a crucial fact. I claim that standards of correctness of any public language are context-involving, in the sense that they include factors external to the current, internal state of the speaker. In order to appraise someone's use of language we must look beyond what is, at the moment of an utterance, going on in the head of the speaker.

I should try to argue for this claim by way of analogy. It is widely accepted in the literature on normativity of meaning that semantic norms can be compared to institutional ones (this is accepted by normativist and anti-normativists alike). Hattiangadi (2006, p. 63) made an analogy with a theme park where there is a rule stating that only kids of a certain height can go on the ride. This example serves Hattiangadi to criticize normativism; she focuses her attention on the observation that in this case the height of a child is a purely naturalistic characteristic of her/him.

Still, this example can be used to highlight a different aspect of the correctness condition thesis. If we look only at the purely internal characteristic of the child then we are in no position to judge whether she or he is of the "right height" – we might only be able to provide with a purely physical description of the child. In order to get to know whether we are dealing with a case that is "correct" according to the rules that are in force, we must look at other factors than the subject itself (in this case we must, obviously, look at the regulations of the theme park).

I think this observation generalizes to all cases of institutional correctness. Whenever there are some institutional rules in force (no matter whether trivial or serious) that allow us to judge certain actions as correct or not, the judgment must be based on comparing an agent's actions with the rules in question. These rules must refer to at least some factors external to the

agents which are being judged as acting correctly or not. This is crucial because otherwise it would be impossible for one to act incorrectly. And this very possibility of incorrectness is something which makes the very assessment possible. For if it were impossible for one to act incorrectly, the very notion of correctness in this context would have no sense. Wittgenstein has famously described such a situation as the one in which “whatever is going to seem right to me is right. And that only means that here we can’t talk about «right»” (Wittgenstein, 1953, § 258).

So, if we agree that language rules are akin to institutional rules, then we should also admit that the linguistic norms are in a way external to the speakers. This observation seems obvious for every proponent of externalist theories of meaning. According to externalism the facts that determine correctness conditions for language use are external to the speaker, as they include either social facts (as social externalist, of the type of Burge proposed) or facts about the kinds of things that are in the physical surroundings of the language user (as natural-kind externalists of the Putnamian kind assert).

But for internalists the thesis that standards of semantic correctness are context involving might not be that obvious. For the theorist of internalist inclination wants to explain meaning purely in terms of psychological states of the speakers. However, in my opinion, even someone who believes that language meaning is determined by purely psychological factors must admit that some factors, which are relevant to the assessment of expressions, are in a way external to the agent using language in a certain situation. This is due to the fact that even an internalist wants to maintain the distinction between correct and incorrect use.

Therefore, what such a theorist needs is a distinction between the psychological state of the user while making an utterance and a psychological state, which determines the correctness conditions for the use. I think that this distinction is implicit in most internalistic theories of meaning. Usually, it is introduced by postulating a time difference between the act of use (and associated psychological states) and meaning-determining psychological states. Put simply, the internalist usually claims that meaning is determined by meaning-intentions, which are made previous to the acts of use. What serves as the standards of correctness for my current use are the meaning intentions which I have made in the past. And this time difference allows for that correct/incorrect distinction. For I might presently act in a different manner than I intended in the past.

This time distinction lies at the heart of many of the examples Kripke offers in his discussion on rule-following. Even the most famous “plus” –

“quus” example plays on the fact that my present use of the symbol “+” might deviate from my previous intention: what makes the putative subject, and who uses the symbol in a quus-like way err in the fact that she is unfaithful to her previous intention to use the symbol in a “standard” way.

The general picture of meaning which I am going to presuppose in the next sections of the paper might be then described as broadly externalist. This broad conception of externalism includes many conceptions of what might have been traditionally described as internalist. The position I am putting forward is to a great extent a schematic one – it insists only on the claim that whenever we want to ascribe a public meaning to a certain expression we must implicitly accept that there is something external to the occurrent psycho-functional state of the speaker which is to be taken as a standard of correctness. But this schematic theory remains neutral to the question of what these standards of correctness are in particular cases. Even on a more general level the conception presupposed in this paper remains neutral to the question whether say, Kripke’s conception of natural kind term is the correct theory of reference for terms like “gold” or “water”. So, the phrase “contextual standards of correctness” should be treated as a sort of theoretical place-holder, whereby various externalist theories of meaning might fill in different ways.

It might also be useful to distinguish between two general kinds of broadly externalist approaches<sup>3</sup>: according to the first it is the standards of correctness that are external to the speaker. In the other what is external to the speaker are the norms stating what contextual elements are to be taken into consideration when assessing a certain utterance. My position is obviously externalist in the first sense; I claim that for each language use there is something “outside the head” of the speaker with which his use is to be compared. The second sort of externalism claims that the norms of correctness are constituted externally – for example by the societal agreement. This version of externalism seems to be plausible when we theorize about public language, but, as I want to stress, this is not an assumption which is needed in order for the argument of the next section to be sound.

## 5. The argument

In this section I am going to provide an argument to the effect that public language meaning should be given a deflationary treatment, which is based on the premise that meaning involves contextual standards of correctness.

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<sup>3</sup>I am grateful to an anonymous referee for drawing my attention to this point.

First, let me introduce some definitions. I will use “*E*” to denote an expression fact, i.e. the fact that a particular language user used a given expression at a particular occasion. “*M*” will be used to denote the fact (or the totality of facts) that determines the public language meaning of the expression used in *E*.

This description of “*M*” is deliberately vague, as I want to be as non-committal as possible with regard to the different theories of meaning. I shall not argue that either of the numerous theories of meaning is correct or not. Rather, I should use “*M*” as a sort of place-holder, which denotes states postulated by whichever theory of meaning comes out right.

I should understand “*P*” as a psychological-functional state that is causally responsible for the agent’s utterance in *E*. This again is a vague description, as the exact description of what is the character of states that are causally responsible for linguistic utterances is still largely unknown. Still, even if *P* and *M* are only vaguely characterized, I think it is possible to try to establish certain truths about relations between them.

My hypotheses concerning the relations between these two kinds of facts are the following:

First and foremost, *M* cannot be identified with *P*. This is because, as the second claim goes, *P* is doing all the causal-explanatory work, and *M* does none.

The transition from the second thesis to the first one is fairly straightforward. If two putative facts differ when it comes to their causal-explanatory role, then we might safely assume that we are indeed dealing with two different facts and any attempt to identify them would be mistaken.

So, the crucial task is to justify the second thesis that it is *P* that is relevant in providing causal explanation to the *Es*, while *M* is not. Again the first part of the task seems relatively easy: *Ps* are causally relevant to the linguistic production by definition. So, what needs to be justified is the claim that *Ms* are not.

This can be supported by an observation that in a given situation we can keep *P* fixed, while *M* changes – a subject can be in the same current, internal state (and thus produce the same expressions) and mean different things, depending on context.

Let us consider the plus vs. quus example. Kripke (1982, p. 8) invites us to consider a counterfactual situation in which the “+” sign really means quus not plus. In such a situation a subject might have used the sign “+” in a way as we actually use it: namely, as if the symbol denoted addition. Such a person would commit an error according to the standards which are in

force in her public language, but it is quite possible that her internal psycho-functional state at the time of making the utterance would be identical with someone's from our linguistic community which would perform a standard addition.

So, there is a possibility of there being two persons who are identical with respect to their linguistic behaviour and psycho-functional causes of it, but whose expressions in the relevant situations have different meanings. This is obviously a direct consequence of the claim that the standards of correctness are contextually determined. In this case these contextual factors might include community agreement, previous intentions or objective mathematical facts.

Examples might be multiplied. The famed Burge's thought experiment of arthritis can be used to prove a similar point – depending on the contextual factors, the patient who classifies any pain in the thigh as “arthritis” (Burge, 1979) might be treated as using the word correctly or not. In our actual community this is of course an incorrect use, but it is not hard to imagine a different community, in which “arthritis” is used in a way the discussed subject uses it. In all such cases it is not the psycho-functional state of the speaker that influences the meaning, but rather external, contextual factors.

Now, the converse situation is also possible. We might easily imagine two subjects whose utterances have the same meanings (so we have identical *Ms*), while their *Ps* are different. This is because, once we allow for the possibility of error, we must admit that the psycho-functional which lead to correct and erroneous linguistic use are indeed quite different (the psycho-functional state which leads one to use “+” as a quus-denoting symbol is obviously rather different from one which leads the “normal” user who uses “+” to simply add). But we must admit that when we have two uses of the same expressions made in the context of the same public language then they have the same meaning, even though one of the uses is incorrect. So, in the example discussed, the fact that someone uses the “+” symbol incorrectly does not (in a normal situation) change the public language meaning of the symbol. It still means plus, even if an erratic user uses it in a quus-like pattern.

This is important, because the whole idea of meaning involving correctness conditions leads inevitably to the conclusion that even wildly erring usage does not change the meaning of the expression used. If this was not so, we would lose the possibility of error: if deviation from the standards of correctness led to the alteration of meaning of expressions then it would be impossible to use linguistic expressions incorrectly.

These considerations prove that there are two kinds of possible situations. In the first type, there are two possible subjects, who share the same *P*-state, but their expressions have different meanings. In the situation of the second type, there are possible subjects who use the same expression with the same meaning but their psycho-functional states differ. So, it is possible to have the same *Ps* with different *Ms* and *vice versa*. But, what is crucial, in both of the situations it is the change in *Ps* which causes the change in behaviour. Change of meaning, which is not accompanied by the change in the psycho-functional state of the user, has, in itself, no causal impact on linguistic behaviour. Additionally, in order to cause the change in the use, the change in psycho-functional state does not need to be accompanied by a change in meaning.

This shows clearly, in my opinion, that we should take psycho-functional states rather than public language meanings of the expressions to be the causes of linguistic behaviour. But, this conclusion seems enough to justify a deflationary approach to public language meaning (as defined in section 2).

It is important to note that the argument presented is not a straightforward variant of the causal-exclusion argument, which has been extensively discussed in the philosophy of mind. I do not intend to claim that only physical or “basic” properties are causally relevant. On the contrary, I am open to the possibility that psycho-functional characteristics might not be reducible to the physical ones. The contrast between the psycho-functional properties and the semantic ones is not the contrast between “ontological levels”. It is rather a matter of granularity of descriptions. When we describe expressions as correct and incorrect, we describe them taking a broader context into account, while description of psycho-functional states abstracts from the contextual elements.

## 6. Elaboration

In this section, I am going to present a simple metaphysical model which is an elaboration of the argument presented above and which would aim at explaining two things. Firstly, why we should treat public language meaning in a deflationary way, and secondly, why we treat public language meaning as explanatory in our everyday practice.

The model will use Kit Fine’s notion of ground (Fine, 2001). According to Fine, the relation of grounding is a basic metaphysical one: if *A* grounds *B*, then *B* obtains in virtue of *A*. This relation eschews a straightforward definition as it is metaphysically basic. Still, it can illuminate the ques-

tion of realism. According to Fine, we should treat certain propositions in a realist fashion when they are either metaphysically basic and factual (Fine, 2001, p. 17) or are grounded in some basic and factual propositions. But if there are no real grounds for certain propositions then we might claim that these are not factual propositions. It is an important feature of Fine's proposal that it makes room for grounding relation between non-factual elements as well (Fine, 2001, p. 17). So, when we are dealing with a non-factual proposition we might make hypotheses about which constitutive elements of a given proposition make it non-factual.

Let us try to apply the notion of ground to the phenomena discussed in this paper. My hypothesis is that  $P$  (a psycho-functional state of the speaker) is a partial ground for  $M$  (the meaning of the expression used). But it is important to bear in mind that it is only partial ground. The other fact that partially grounds  $M$ -facts concerns the contextual factors which serve as correctness conditions.

Both  $P$ -facts and contextual factors might be treated as factual. Yet I claim that  $M$ s are non-factual, even though they are grounded in  $P$ s and contextual factors, which are both factual. So, in order to support the claim that  $M$ s are non-factual, it is necessary to postulate a non-factual element which also grounds them.

In my opinion such a non-factual element is the relation between  $E$  and, by extension,  $P$  and the contextual standards of correctness. This is a relation of "being a standard of correctness for". Even if we take that the terms of said relation to be perfectly factual in Fine's sense, there seems to be little motivation to take the relation itself to be factual. That a certain element of the context is taken to provide the benchmark of correct use of a given expression seems to be an utterly conventional matter. Moreover, this relation seems to have no causal-explanatory import.

Such relations might be taken to be grounding the putative meaning-facts. The fact that a certain expression means something is rooted in the relation which binds the expression to the standard of correctness; that my utterance of the symbol "+" in a given context, means plus, is grounded by the relation of this utterance to the standard of correctness (say, my previous meaning-intention). Should this relation be different, the meaning of my utterance would be different as well.

This model, in my opinion, allows us to elevate the worry presented by Schiffer. The question was: Why do we treat public language meaning as explanatory, when it is not, at least according to the deflationists? And the answer is: Because public language meaning is partially grounded by

something that really plays the causal explanatory work – namely the psycho-functional states of the speakers. And it seems to be quite normal that in everyday explanations we treat “broader” facts as explanations, especially in the situations when we lack access to the “fine-grained” facts. We do not normally know anything about the psycho-functional states of ourselves and fellow language users, so we resort to explanations in terms of public language meaning. In doing so, we tacitly assume that these meaning facts are somehow rooted in “something in the head” of the speaker, which is the genuine cause of their behaviour.

Schiffer might be perfectly right that we have no realistic alternative to meaning-based explanations, which could be used in everyday practice. Explanations resorting to the psycho-functional states might be practically unattainable. However, I do not think this is a fatal objection to deflationism, as it is meant to be a metaphysical position regarding the nature of semantic predicates, not a practically applicable theory.

## **7. Understanding and action: remaining problems**

The arguments presented in this paper might be easily attacked for not being general enough. They might be said to show that public language meaning is not relevant in providing causal explanations of linguistic production. But this is not the only possible use of meaning in explaining human behaviour. To my knowledge, none of the existing inflationist theorists of meaning have treated the role of meaning in explaining linguistic production as the main reason for treating the public language meaning in substantial fashion. But, I believe, the argument I presented against treating public language meaning as explanatory in the context of language production can be applied to other cases, where one might want to treat this concept as relevant in causal psychological explanation.

For Schiffer the central observation speaking in favour of treating the semantic properties as substantial was that we explain action by reference to the fact that a person understands a certain expression in a certain way. When applied to the problem of status of public language meaning, Schiffer’s insight might be understood as follows: the fact of understanding, which explains some action of some objects, stems from the fact that the expressions mean something in a given public language. Thus, public language meaning plays an important role in explaining behaviour.

This might sound terribly complicated, but the phenomenon is in fact quite easy and commonplace. For example, when we want to know why

the children in the classroom sat down it is perfectly legitimate to say that they did so because the teacher said to them “*asseyez vous*” and this phrase means “please sit down” in French.

Meaning can thus enter the explanation of action differently than by explaining linguistic production. But if this kind of explanation is a legitimate one, then deflationism about public language meaning is in serious trouble, because it turns out that meaning is actually needed in explanation of some language-related phenomena.

The question then arises whether the argument presented in the previous sections of this paper can also be generalized as to cover the cases in which meaning is used to explain actions which stem from understanding expressions of public language. In what follows I will try to formulate such an argument.

The reasoning will be similar in spirit to the one presented in section 6, and it will also be based on the notion of standards of correctness. This is because understanding public language expressions is subject to the assessment in terms of correctness, in a similar way linguistic production is. A subject might understand a certain public language expression correctly or not, and this observation seems to be central to the notion of a public language meaning.

The possibility of error is clearly visible when we focus on understanding expressions made in a foreign public language – it is quite common for people who are not native speakers to misunderstand expressions of a given language. But even within our own native language there is always the possibility of understanding an expression differently than in a way prescribed by standards of correctness operating in said public language.

In such situations we should distinguish between the meaning of the public expression used and the act of understanding, which is a psycho-functional state of the speaker. Again, I should argue that these two facts must be considered as distinct. Moreover, it is the psycho-functional state of understanding that is causally responsible for the actions of the users. I shall try to prove this using an example.

Take Tom, a native English user who is quite ignorant of the vernacular used to denote different kinds of seafood. He sees “*crayfish*” on a restaurant menu and understands this expression as a name of a kind of fish dish. As he strongly dislikes fish, he decides not to order. However, he is a great fan of seafood, and if he were to believe that the dish is a kind of seafood he would most likely order it. But misinterpreting the expression of his own public language prevented him from acting on his preferences.

Again, the examples might be multiplied, but I guess it is not necessary. It is quite easy to note that the fact that misunderstandings are possible leads to the conclusion that the subjective act of understanding must be taken to be distinct from the public language meaning and whatever constitutes it. And when it comes to its relevance in causal explanations it is the subjective act of understanding which might reasonably claim priority; in the situations when one misunderstands the expressions the subject will act on her subjective psycho-functional state.

A public language meaning that is not mediated by the act of subjective understanding seems to have no direct influence on the actions of the subject. Therefore, the deflationary position concerning this notion seems justified, even if we take into account the phenomenon of actions based on understanding expressions of public language.

## **8. The over-generalization challenge**

The argument presented in this paper can be also attacked for being, as it were, too general. The problem is that the line of argumentation presented in section 6 can be quite easily extended to other domains, in which the conclusion might seem implausible<sup>4</sup>.

The basic idea of the argument, to put it briefly, was that meaning is, at least partly, determined by contextual factors. And given this fact, we might observe that meaning cannot be thought to be causally responsible for actions of language users. This is because the mere change in contextual factors does not, by itself, change the behaviour. The change in linguistic action is brought upon by the change in the functional-internal state of the speaker. And this state cannot be identified with meaning.

The worry is that a similar argument can be produced in all contexts of institutional norms. Every fact that an institutional norm is in force is analogous to linguistic meaning in that respect that it involves a relation of the subject whose behaviour is governed by a given norm to some contextual standard of correctness. Let us take a standard example of institutional norms – road traffic rules. When we say that someone acted incorrectly according to the traffic rules, we compare the subject's behaviour with some contextual standard. The same behaviour can be described as correct or not depending on the context in which the assessment is made (driving on the left is correct in the UK but wrong in continental Europe and so on).

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<sup>4</sup>I am very grateful to an anonymous referee for raising this point.

Again, as in the case of meaning, the change in context does not, by itself, change behaviour. This leads to the conclusion that institutional rules are not explanatorily relevant (when contrasted with psycho-functional states of the subjects). Consequently, we should claim that all institutional rules are to be treated in a deflationary fashion. But this might seem counterintuitive: it would mean that institutional rules do not have any impact on the actions of people.

There are two possible ways to answer this challenge. The first would be a direct rebuke to show that the analogy does not hold – that there is a deep theoretical difference between the way language operates and the way other institutional discourses and facts do. This would be a strategy of containment of deflationism to the linguistic realm. Unfortunately, I do not see how this could be done. The argument presented above in no way is based on peculiar characteristics of language. The argument relied only on the fact that the norms of language are institutional ones. So, if the argument is correct it should indeed be generalized to all forms of institutional rules. Thus, I must bite the bullet and say that my argument leads to global deflationism about the institutional.

This is certainly an implausible conclusion for many theorists, but it might be noted that a deflationary approach to institutional and legal fact would not be an entirely groundless position and there are philosophers who seem to endorse it. One recent example of such an approach might be found in Thomasson (2013). For her, deflationism about the institutional and the legal is a welcome consequence of her globally deflationary approach to metaphysics. In the context of the philosophy of law, James Coleman (1995) argued that Dworkin's views could be viewed as a form of deflationism.

Of course, the question whether the deflationary account of the legal and the institutional in general is an acceptable one is extremely puzzling, and answering it would require a separate paper. But I want to stress that even though deflationism in these areas might seem intuitively implausible, it seems to be a real option on the theoretical level.

## 9. Conclusions

The fact that the notion of public language meaning essentially involves standards of correctness allowed me to present an argument to the effect that public language meaning is not causally explanatory, even though in everyday use we might treat it as it actually were. This reasoning applies both to explanations of linguistic production and actions based on understanding,

which we would normally make using the notion of public language meaning. This conclusion gives us a strong reason to accept the deflationary account of public language meaning, as the point of contention between deflationists, as defined in this paper, and proponents of a substantial theory regarding a given semantic notion is whether the notion in question is relevant in causal explanations of the phenomena.

However, the line of argumentation presented in this paper has some serious limitations. Firstly, it might well be the case that there are some other ways in which the notion of public language meaning comes into explanatory practice, and the kind of argument which has been developed above has no application to them. So, the argument might be, at best, treated as a shift of burden of proof. The adherent of substantial theory of public language meaning must, in response to it, show which phenomena need explanation in terms of this notion.

The other limitation of the argument is that it is, in a way, a local one. It does not extend to semantic notions other than public language meaning, which leaves open the question of whether, for example, idiolectal meaning or semantic properties of propositional attitudes should not be treated in a substantive fashion. Moreover, the line of reasoning presented here relies on the notion of an internal psycho-functional state which is assumed to explain the language-related behaviour. But nothing in what has been argued for suggests that this kind of state cannot have semantic properties. But if this is so, the only upshot of this paper would be that substantial semantic properties must be located on the psychological level and not on the level of public language meaning.

This might seem too modest a conclusion for a deflationist, as it leaves room for a substantial account of at least some semantic properties. So, we are left with the question; is it possible to mount a more general argument which would show that semantic properties are not substantial ones? This is an extremely complicated issue and I will not try to resolve it in the present paper. Still, I believe that even a partially applicable argument can shed some light on the immensely intricate problem of deflationism.

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