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What is a validity claim?

Abstract  Even though the concept of a 'validity claim' is central to Habermas's theory of communicative action, he has never given a precise definition of the term. He has stated only that truth is a type of validity claim, and that rightness and sincerity are analogous to truth. This paper explores the basis of this analogy, arguing that rightness and sincerity must share at least two characteristics with the truth predicate: each must be the designated value in an appropriate system of logic, and each must serve as the 'central notion' in a theory of meaning for some corresponding class of speech acts. It is these two characteristics that establish the internal connection between understanding and justification that Habermas's more general project requires. However, there is an unnoticed tension between these two characteristics, since the relative autonomy of linguistic meaning from specific contexts of use appears to require that speech acts be governed by a uniform logic, and thus by a single validity claim.

Key words  communicative action · Habermas · pragmatics · speech act theory · truth · validity claim

The concept of a 'validity claim' plays a central role in Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action, because it provides the connecting link between his philosophy of language and his general theory of action. In Habermas's view, anyone who produces an utterance with propositional content thereby raises a validity claim. Making such a claim amounts to incurring a commitment to provide reasons for the acceptability of the utterance. However, this commitment is not just conventionally bound up with the speech act; understanding of the speech act, on behalf of the hearer, consists of knowledge of the type of reasons that could be offered in support of it. Thus speech acts are intelligible only to hearers who understand what validity claim is being raised, and how it could be redeemed in argumentation. Accordingly, Habermas claims that different types of speech act raise different primary types of validity claim. In...
particular, he argues that assertions, imperatives and expressives raise primary claims to truth, rightness and sincerity respectively.

This feature of language is important because, in Habermas's view, it means that communication, as a form of social action, has a built-in structure of accountability, i.e. participants must be committed to defending their speech acts with reasons. Without such a commitment, there could be no such thing as meaningful speech. He then argues that this structure of accountability is inherited by any form of social action that relies upon language as a coordination mechanism (so-called 'communicative action'). This is because social interactions are governed by shared norms and expectations, and these are communicated to agents through the use of imperatives. Since the intelligibility of these imperatives is secured through agents' commitment to defend them with reasons, the success of social coordination rests upon agents' commitment to justifying the rules that govern their interactions. This means that any linguistically organized social practice is in principle open to discursive critique and revision.

The concept of a 'validity claim' plays an important role in this argument at two points. The first involves the claim that understanding the meaning of an expression consists of knowing how it could be justified. This is what secures the accountability of speech acts. The second is the claim that imperative speech acts raise rightness claims that are analogous to the truth claims raised by assertions. This is what provides the mechanism through which the accountability basis of speech acts is generalized to secure the accountability of communicative action. Unfortunately, Habermas does not provide a straightforward argument in defense of either of these views. As a result, he fails to notice a significant tension between them, viz. that given the relative autonomy of linguistic meaning from specific contexts of use, it is difficult to reconcile the idea that the meaning of a speech act is given by its validity conditions with the view that different speech acts raise different types of validity claims. In this paper, I would like first to elaborate a more precise specification of the role that 'validity claims' play in Habermas's philosophy of language, and then to show how this tension can be sharpened up in such a way as to cast serious doubt upon the integrity of his more general position.

1 The analogy with truth

Throughout Habermas's discussion of validity claims, it is clear that he takes truth as the paradigmatic instance of a validity claim. The other claims, he argues, are introduced through analogy with truth. However, he does not specify what the basis of this analogy is, i.e. which characteristics rightness and sincerity share with truth that other predicates do not. On the surface, 'is true' appears to be just an ordinary predicate, used to attribute a property to an object. When we say 'The cow is brown', we are saying, of an object, the cow, that it possesses some property, being-brown. When we say 'The cow is brown' is true, we are also saying, of an object (in this case a sentence) 'The cow is brown', that it possesses some property, viz. being-true. The fact that truth is a predicate that applies to sentences is nothing special, since many predicates are of this type. The sentence 'The cow is brown' may satisfy the predicate 'is true', but it also satisfies the predicate 'appears in the first section of my paper'. So what is so special about truth?

In order for there to be an interesting analogy between rightness, sincerity and truth, given Habermas's programmatic ambitions, the former must share at least two significant characteristics of the truth predicate. These are: (1) being able to serve as a designated value in a system of logic or inference (broadly conceived); and (2) being able to serve as what Michael Dummett refers to as the 'central notion' in a theory of meaning. The reason for regarding these two characteristics of the truth predicate as the essential basis of any interesting analogy between truth and rightness or sincerity is that these two characteristics are the ones that secure the internal connection between meaning and validity, or between understanding and justification, that is essential to Habermas's project. The exact nature of this connection should become clearer as the discussion proceeds.

1 Designatedness. One of the most important characteristics of the truth predicate is that it ascribes a property to sentences that is preserved through valid inference. Whatever property of sentences it is that truth identifies, it is a property that any inferential consequence of these sentences must also possess. This is not true of, say, the property of being in the first section of my paper. Thus truth appears to have a special, internal relationship to logic, inference and argumentation.

This is clearly one of the properties of truth that Habermas has in mind when he introduces rightness and sincerity as parallel validity claims. In his view, each of the validity claims has a matching form of discourse, in which they are tested and redeemed or dismissed. Truth claims, in this view, are subject to testing in theoretical discourse, just as rightness claims are tested in practical discourse. These discourses are distinguished, not by differences in topic, but by differences in structure. There is no generic form of discourse, applied as the case may be to questions of how the world is, or what should be done. Instead, there are (at least) three different types of discourse, governed by different rules of inference corresponding to the type of claim being redeemed. The fact that these rules of inference are valid in a given discourse coincides with the fact that they preserve the appropriate validity claim, e.g.
induction, which belongs to the logic of assertions, preserves truth, while universalization, which belongs to the logic of norms, preserves rightness.  

Outside of classical two-valued logic, the property of sentences that is preserved through valid inference is sometimes referred to as designatedness, and truth regarded simply as one type of designated value.  

If rightness and sincerity are thought of as other types of designated values, each governing non-classical systems of logic, this provides a natural way of interpreting Habermas's contention that each validity claim is 'redeemed' in a corresponding form of discourse.

However, it should be kept in mind that the exact significance of the truth-preserving character of classical logic is itself subject to controversy. According to what I will call the 'inflationary' view, the fact that valid inferences preserve truth is precisely what makes them valid. Truth is treated as more basic than inference, which is what allows the theorist to define the latter in terms of the former. This is the interpretation that underlies the standard use of truth-tables to define the logical connectives in propositional logic. However, there is also room for a weaker interpretation, in which truth is simply defined in such a way that it will be a property of sentences preserved through valid inference. On this deflationary analysis, inference would be taken as basic, and truth would be defined relative to inference.

In order to see the difference between the inflationary and deflationary analysis, consider the significance of Tarski's Schema T, which the truth predicate is normally taken to satisfy:

\[(T) \text{ 'p'} \text{ is true } \leftrightarrow p.\]

It is a logical consequence of Schema T that \((p \rightarrow q) \leftrightarrow ('p' \text{ is true } \rightarrow 'q' \text{ is true})\). Thus it follows quite directly from Schema T that truth will be preserved through valid inference. It is possible to regard this feature of Schema T as the expression of a substantive fact about truth. One would then want to impose, following Tarski, the 'material adequacy condition' on any proposed theory of truth: that it generate, for every sentence of the language, a suitably instantiated version of the T schema. On the other hand, the T schema, or some variant thereof, can just as easily be regarded as a definition of truth, i.e. as providing necessary and sufficient conditions for the ascription of the predicate 'is true' to sentences. Under this interpretation, the fact that valid inferences preserve truth will be trivial, i.e. guaranteed by definition.

To summarize, it is clearly important for Habermas's position that one of the characteristics a predicate must possess in order to be categorized as a validity claim is that it be able to serve as a designated value in some appropriate form of logic (here logic should be understood in a very broad sense, as some specification of what follows from what). This captures the formal relationship between raising a validity claim and redeeming it in discourse. However, it is unclear how significant this characteristic of the truth predicate should be taken to be, since it is subject to both inflationary and deflationary interpretations.

2 Central notion in theory of meaning. Apart from its role in inference, the truth predicate is also often thought to bear an important relationship to the meaning of linguistic expressions. The central problem here is to explain how agents are capable of understanding 'new' symbolic expressions, i.e. ones they have not encountered before. The dominant view, since Frege, has been that the compositional structure of language is what makes this possible. Agents are able to understand new expressions because they understand the subential components, i.e. the words, and how they are put together, i.e. the structure. An analysis of this type allows the theorist to explain an infinite capacity while ascribing to the agent only knowledge of a finite set of semantic primitives and combinatorial rules.

When the meaning of logically complex expressions is analyzed in this way, a striking parallel emerges between the way that its meaning and the way that its truth-conditions are determined. This is because the truth-conditions of logically complex expressions are a function of the truth-conditions of their constituent sentences along with the way they are combined using logical connectives. This has led many theorists to identify knowing the meaning of a sentence with knowing its truth-conditions, and thus to use truth as the 'central notion' in the theory of meaning. (In this view, the meaning of subential components can be handled by defining some recursive function, like satisfaction, that specifies how the truth conditions of logically simple sentences are determined by the relationship between objects, predicates, relations, etc.)

This is clearly a second property of truth that Habermas has in mind when he introduces rightness and sincerity by analogy. It is precisely because truth is well suited to serve as the central notion in a compositional theory of meaning that the understanding of a sentence can be thought to consist of knowing the conditions under which its associated validity claim is fulfilled. It is the relationship between understanding the validity claim and grasping the compositional structure of the sentence that establishes the intrinsic, rather than conventional, association between sentence meaning and the speaker's commitment to justify the utterance.

However, the role of truth in a theory of meaning will be more or less significant depending upon whether it is given an inflationary or a deflationary interpretation. On the one hand, if truth is taken to be a substantive property of sentences, such as a correspondence relationship...
between the sentence and some state of affairs in the world, then ascribing knowledge of truth-conditions to an agent will go a long way toward explaining the nature of that agent’s linguistic capacities. On the other hand, the same compositional semantics provided by truth-conditions can also be supplied by the standard rules of inference. Knowing the meaning of a sentence could consist in knowing how to prove it, since the construction of a proof for a logically complex sentence is given by the introduction rules for logical connectives, along with the proofs for its component sentences.\(^\text{10}\) If the truth-predicate is defined by the \(T\) schema, knowing how to prove a sentence will then translate directly into knowledge of its truth-conditions. But knowledge of the latter will be trivial.

In the end, we have two characteristics that appear central to Habermas’s concept of a validity claim, viz. that the predicates in question be able to serve as designated values in a logic, and that knowledge of the conditions under which these claims are satisfied constitutes a grasp of sentence meaning. These two qualities establish the required relationship between meaning and validity, since it is precisely the relationship between inference and truth that makes the latter capable of providing a compositional semantics for natural language. Thus these two characteristics are required if the validity claims are to connect up understanding with justification in the way that Habermas requires. In order to demonstrate this, in the next section I will outline an interpretation of Habermas’s speech act theory in which these two characteristics are not shared, and show that it is unable to provide the foundations for a general theory of communicative action.

However, even if it is granted that rightness and sincerity must share these two characteristics with truth, we have also seen that these characteristics of the truth predicate are subject to both inflationary and deflationary interpretations. Unfortunately, Habermas does not commit himself to one or the other interpretation. His more Peircean formulations, which attempt to analyze truth and rightness in terms of a projected ideal consensus, suggest an inflationary reading.\(^\text{11}\) However, his illocutionary-act analysis of validity claims, along with his suggestion that truth is a form of warranted assertibility, lean in the deflationary direction.\(^\text{12}\) In any case, neither interpretation is compatible with the full range of his theoretical commitments, as I will attempt to show in sections 3 and 4.

2 The early view

I would like to begin by rejecting an interpretation of Habermas’s speech act theory that fails to provide a significant analogy between truth, rightness and sincerity. This version, which dominates his early writings, in particular ‘What is Universal Pragmatics?’, unfortunately serves as the basis for the most common interpretation of his views. It is suggested by formulations such as the following:

\[\text{[A participant in communication] claims truth for a propositional content or for the existential presuppositions of a mentioned propositional content. He claims rightness (or appropriateness) for norms (or values), which, in a given context, justify an interpersonal relation that is to be performatively established. Finally, he claims truthfulness for the intentions expressed.}^{13}\]

Here Habermas is attracted by an essentially architeconic analogy. The meaning of a speech act is usually broken down into three components: literal meaning; conventional force; and speaker’s intention. Habermas argues that theories of meaning can be classified according to which component of utterance meaning they take as primary: formal semantics in the tradition to Frege is concerned primarily with literal meaning; ‘use’ theories of meaning inspired by the later Wittgenstein take conventional force as the primary linguistic phenomenon; and intentionalist semantics of the Grecoean variety look primarily to speaker’s intention for the key to analyzing utterance meaning.\(^\text{14}\) He then suggests that his speech act theory is able to integrate all three approaches, by supposing that each of these three components of utterance meaning (semantic/pragmatic/intentional) maps on to one of his validity claims (truth/rightness/sincerity). In this view, knowledge of literal meaning would consist of knowledge of the truth conditions of the utterance, knowledge of the conventional force would consist of knowledge of its rightness conditions, and knowledge of the speaker’s intention would consist of knowledge of its sincerity conditions. Thus the speaker, in making an utterance, raises a validity claim for each of the components of the utterance’s meaning, and understanding the meaning of the utterance consists of knowledge of the conditions under which these claims could be redeemed.

This analysis has a certain architeconic elegance, but is rather dubious as a theory of meaning. The general problem is that it severs the relationship between the rightness/sincerity claims and the propositional content of the utterance. In this view, what the rightness claim is ‘about’ is the agent’s own speech act, not the action or state of affairs that the agent is talking about. (This is what Habermas suggests when he refers to ‘the aspect of rightness that the speaker claims for his action in relation to a normative context’.\(^\text{15}\) One awkward consequence of this view is that since each agent can raise a rightness claim only for his or her own speech act, it will be impossible for agents to thematize and discuss any particular rightness claim. Rightness claims would be essentially indexical, and so would not be preserved through inference, and could not form the ‘topic’ of practical discourses.
However, the more significant problem is that in the case of truth claims, the relationship between meaning and validity, i.e. between understanding the utterance and knowing how to justify it, is established by the need to provide a compositional account of the meaning of the propositional content. But the pragmatic/conventional component of the speech act has no semantic structure, and so we have no obvious need for a compositional theory to explain how it can be understood. This means that if the rightness claim pertains only to the speaker's own action, then Habermas's claim that we must know the reasons that could be given for or against the rightness claim associated with an utterance is completely unmotivated. The need for a compositional theory provided the essential connection between truth claims and justification. Insofar as the pragmatic and expressive dimensions of the speech act are not semantic, and hence not compositional, there is simply no obvious reason why justification should enter into the story.

This point is sufficiently important that it is worth belaboring with an example. If Bill says to me 'Do the dishes', according to this version of Habermas's analysis, I understand this utterance if and only if I understand what it is that he is asking me to do, how he could demonstrate that he sincerely wants the order fulfilled, and why he considers it legitimate to give me an order. However, there is no reason why my knowledge that Bill is the one assigning household chores today cannot consist of just that, the knowledge that Bill is the one assigning household chores today. Nothing further is required (and certainly not knowledge of the conditions under which this arrangement could be discursively redeemed). On the other hand, my knowledge of what it means to 'do the dishes' cannot consist of simply knowledge of the meaning of 'do the dishes', since a theory that ascribed knowledge of meaning to me in this way would wind up assigning an infinite number of primitive knowings, if it were adequately to reconstruct my linguistic competence.

Thus there is no reason to think that understanding the rightness claim must involve knowing how to justify that claim. While it may be the case that understanding the illocutionary meaning of an imperative always coincides with knowledge of how the associated rightness-claim could be discursively redeemed, this is no reason to say that the latter consists of the former. With respect to the propositional content, on the other hand, there is such a motivation, because an analysis of meaning in terms of justification promises to provide an explanation of our ability to understand the meaning of the sentence in terms of a finite set of subsentential components. Understanding the truth claim will therefore require (indeed, consist of) knowledge of how the utterance could be justified.

Furthermore, if the meaning of the propositional component of the utterance is always given by its truth-conditions, as this interpretation of Habermas suggests, then the theory of meaning does not require anything more than a standard truth-conditional semantics. Rightness and sincerity claims do not really belong in the theory, because grasping these claims would contribute nothing to the agent's understanding of the 'speech' component of the speech act. In making an assertion, the speaker in a certain sense 'claims' to have performed the action correctly, in accordance with the relevant norms. But this is not a feature that is specific to speech acts. If this is all that it means to raise a rightness claim, then every norm-governed action makes a rightness claim. Every time I follow a rule, I am in a certain sense 'claiming' to follow it correctly. But we would not want to say that by sliding into second base, opening the door for a colleague, or lifting my glass for a toast, I am raising a rightness claim. If this were the case, then knowledge of the rightness conditions would be essential for the understanding of any action, not just a speech act. And if understanding the rightness claim meant knowing how it could be justified, then this view would wind up presupposing the accountability of social action rather than establishing it. This would undermine the thesis that the accountability of social action is inherited from the accountability of speech acts.

The obvious alternative to this view, which Habermas advances in later work, is to suppose that the rightness and sincerity claims do not govern non-linguistic components of all utterances, but that they consist of alternative ways of presenting the propositional content. In this view, speakers use different illocutionary modes to raise different types of validity claims for the associated propositional content. Habermas articulates this idea as follows:

Let $M_p$ represent any explicit speech act, where $M$ stands for the illocutionary component and $p$ for the propositional component; and let $M_{r}$ designate the cognitive use of language, $M_{e}$ the expressive, and $M_{r}$ the regulative. We can, in terms of basic attitudes, distinguish intuitively the senses in which speakers want the propositional components of (their speech acts) to be interpreted. In a valid utterance of the type $M_{r}p$, $p$ signifies a state of affairs that exists in the objective world; in a valid utterance of the type $M_{e}p$, $p$ signifies a subjective experience that is manifested and ascribed to the internal world of the speaker; and in a valid utterance of the type $M_{r}p$, $p$ signifies an action that is recognized as legitimate in the social world.

The key idea here is that with regulative uses of language, the agent does not claim that her own speech act is 'recognized as legitimate', but that the action she is instructing the other to perform, $p$, is legitimate. Thus understanding the rightness claim that an agent raises with a given imperative requires understanding, not why the agent feels justified in issuing it, but rather why the hearer should perform the action specified. In this way, understanding the rightness claim is clearly related to the meaning of the utterance, because the hearer must understand what it is
that she is being asked to do, in order to determine whether it is right or wrong.

According to this view, when making an assertion the agent claims that the state of affairs described by a certain propositional content is true, i.e. obtains in the world. When issuing an imperative, the agent claims that the state of affairs described by a certain propositional content is right, i.e. should be brought about. The following sentences would then render explicit the illocutionary force of an assertion and an imperative, respectively:

1. It is true that \( p \).
2. It is right that \( p \).19

Because the rightness claim is being raised directly for the propositional component, and not just self-referentially for the speech act proper, it can plausibly be maintained that knowledge of the justification conditions for the rightness claim would constitute an understanding of the propositional content. Because of this relationship, it would then be the case that the rightness claim associated with an imperative would be specific to speech acts, and would not be raised by social actions in general. Rightness would therefore figure as the ‘central notion’ in a theory of meaning for imperatives, and participants in practical discourse would be able to thematize and discuss particular rightness claims, in the form of the propositional content of the utterance that the agent committed herself to defending in her regulative utterance.

This interpretation makes the best sense out of Habermas’s overall view, but it is inconsistent with some of the more specific things that he says. For instance, it should be noted that in adopting this interpretation, I am rejecting Habermas’s claim that speakers raise all three validity claims in every speech act. This I take to be a hold-over from the earlier ‘universal pragmatics’ position. If the validity claims must be associated with the propositional content of the utterance in order to motivate the claim that understanding the utterance consists of knowing its justification-conditions, then it makes no sense to suppose that the agent could raise any more than a single validity claim with any given utterance. The agent may incur other commitments through the performance of the speech act, but these cannot be usefully characterized as the result of having raised validity claims, since a grasp of these commitments is not essential for an understanding of the speech component of the speech act.20

The advantage of the interpretation I am urging is that, by preserving the internal connection between meaning and validity, the strong analogy between rightness/sincerity and truth is able to provide a foundation for the more general theoretical results that Habermas would like to get out of speech act theory. However, as mentioned in the previous section, the parallel between truth and rightness expressed in sentences (1) and (2) can be interpreted in two different ways.

3 The Inflationary Interpretation

One way of setting up a general semantics is to suppose that only assertoric speech acts are truth-conditional, and that other forms of speech involve other sorts of conditions. According to Dummett:

In most languages, there are many sentences whose utterance would not normally be described as saying anything that could be true or false, although they bear a systematic syntactic relation to sentences the utterance of which would be so described. The theory of meaning may be formulated so as not to attribute truth or falsity to such sentences, but to associate with them conditions of a parallel kind, e.g. obedience-conditions in the case of imperatives; in that case, it must make explicit what may be done by uttering a sentence which has a truth-condition, and what other things may be done by uttering a sentence which has a condition of some other kind.21

On the inflationary interpretation, a natural way of setting up Habermas’s formal pragmatics would be as follows: when speakers make assertions, they make a truth claim for a certain propositional content. To understand the utterance is to know its truth-conditions, i.e. the conditions under which the validity claim would be satisfied. In a similar way, when speakers make regulative utterances, e.g. imperatives, they raise a rightness claim for the associated propositional content. To understand this utterance is to know its rightness-conditions, i.e. the conditions under which 'an imperative with the content \( p \) [is] legitimate or enforceable'.22 Under the Peircean view, knowing rightness-conditions of this type would consist of knowing how the speaker could defend the legitimacy or enforceability of an utterance with this content under idealized conditions.

This is one way of interpreting Habermas’s claim that his theory of meaning represents a generalization of the traditional truth-conditional approach.23 In this view, the one-sided focus on truth-conditions associated with 'formal semantics' arises from an arbitrary ('scientistic') privileging of assertoric, or fact-stating discourse. Under the inflationary interpretation suggested here, Habermas’s proposal consists of retaining a truth-conditional semantics for assertions, but adding a rightness-conditional semantics for imperatives, a sincerity-conditional semantics for expressions, and then showing that all other forms of speech acts can be resolved into one of these basic types.24

The attraction of this interpretation is that it makes the speech act theory fit nicely with the discourse theory. In Habermas’s view, moral judgments do not admit of truth or falsity, and are not the proper subject
of theoretical discourse. Instead, moral judgments are in the first instance normatively authorized imperatives, capable of rightness and wrongness, and subject to practical discourse. Practical discourses are governed by different rules of inference, e.g. universalization instead of induction. And thanks to the inflationary interpretation of truth and rightness, it can be argued that what makes these different sets of inference rules valid is that they preserve the appropriate property. So, for instance, universalization is a legitimate rule of inference for practical discourse because it never leads from right premises to wrong conclusions.

But despite its appealing simplicity, this strategy also generates a number of difficulties. First of all, it makes it hard to explain how uniformity of meaning is secured across speech-act types. For instance, in the following two utterances:

(3) There are four plates on the table.
(4) Put four plates on the table.

The meaning of the word 'plates' is presumably to be determined by its contribution to the truth-conditions of (3) and the rightness-conditions of (4). The problem is that while an understanding of the meaning of 'plates' is clearly central to the determination of whether (3) is true, it is not necessarily important for the normative authorization of (4). It is easy to imagine cases in which there is nothing specific about plates that makes the content of an imperative like (4) normatively authorized, or 'right'. The person could just as well be asking to have cups or bowls placed on the table. Thus it is implausible to think that, in the case of imperatives, the meaning of the utterance components is determined by the contribution they make to the satisfaction of the validity claim associated with the utterance as a whole.

Furthermore, the idea that different validity claims are associated with different logics means utterances of different speech act types will be governed by different compositional principles. For instance, the introduction rule for 'and' in theoretical discourse (i.e. its truth-table definition) will be very different from the rule in practical discourse (i.e. its rightness-table definition), since the truth of two sentences, taken separately, entails their truth taken together, while the rightness to two actions, performed separately, does not entail their rightness performed together. Now if knowing the meaning of an utterance really is knowing how it could be redeemed in discourse, the consequence appears to be that 'and' will mean something different when used in assertions from what it means when used in imperatives.

Pushing this observation somewhat further, it becomes apparent that if the meaning of terms is given by their contribution to the validity-conditions of utterances, and different utterances raise different types of validity claims, there is no reason that any word has to mean even roughly the same thing when used in different types of speech acts. There is no reason, on this view, why 'plates' could not mean 'cows' when used in imperatives, and still mean 'plates' when used in assertions.

Finally, there is a more general problem with the inflationary strategy of defining valid inference in terms of truth- or rightness-preservation. There are a variety of circumstances in which we use logical connectives to conjoin factual claims and normative authorizations. Thus the truth-conditions of p \rightarrow q cannot be given as function of the truth-conditions of p and the truth-conditions of q in cases where p is true, but q is right. For instance, the norms that specify sanctions for rule violations normally combine a description of an offense with a prescription indicating how it should be punished. A statement like 'He crossed the line, so he should be disqualified' is difficult enough to classify according to illocutionary mode; it is even more difficult to say what validity claim the inference preserves.

Under the inflationary interpretation then, in which truth and rightness are seen as substantive properties of sentences, there is a problem explaining the uniformity of semantic and logical features of language. If the meaning of words is given by their contribution to the validity-conditions of utterances, it is hard to see why these words should have the same meaning in speech acts of different illocutionary types, when the validity claims corresponding to these types are redeemed in completely different forms of discourse. Furthermore, the introduction of multiple validity claims makes it difficult to account for the validity of inferences that in some contexts preserve a particular type of validity claim, while in others they appear to convert one type of validity claim into another.

4 The deflationary interpretation

These problems with the inflationary interpretation of the validity claims suggest that the propositional content of utterances must be given by something that is neutral among the various validity claims. Dummett outlines the basic idea as follows:

Instead of using the distinct pairs of notions truth/falsity, obedience/disobedience, we could use a neutral pair of terms, say 'correct' and 'incorrect', for both ... The conditions for the correctness or incorrectness of a sentence could then be considered as endowing it with a certain descriptive content, which is in general independent of whether it is being used to make an assertion or give a command; this descriptive content corresponds precisely to what Frege calls the sense of a sentence, or the thought it expresses. In order to understand the sentence, to know its use, it will be necessary that it should contain another symbolic element, conveying the
force with which it is used; something playing the part of an assertion sign or a command sign.\textsuperscript{25}

For Habermas, the most obvious candidate for such a neutral element is simply inference or justification itself. Thus the logical connectives could be taken as primitive rules of inference, defined in such a way as to preserve some generic designated value (say a ‘1’). The content of propositions would be given by their inferential role, with again some appropriately formulated recursive function specifying the contribution of subsentential components to the inferential role of the sentence as a whole.\textsuperscript{26}

In this view, the illocutionary mode of the utterance provides something like a semantic interpretation of the designated value associated with the propositional content: in the case of assertions ‘1’ means ‘true’, in the case of imperatives ‘1’ means ‘right’, etc. Thus the compositional mechanism provides speakers with generic content, like ‘four plates on the table’, while the illocutionary mode specifies how this content is being used, by embedding it in a speech act that gives it a certain conventional significance, e.g. saying something about how the world is, saying something about what actions are normatively prescribed, etc. The meaning of the validity claims would be given, not by any property of sentences that they refer to, but rather by their performative role in rendering explicit the illocutionary force associated with moves in these language games. Truth would function like an assertion sign, rightness like a command sign. Understanding the meaning of the utterance as a whole would involve understanding both the propositional content and how this propositional content is being used.

This interpretation fits well with what Habermas says on the topic, particularly when he distinguishes between the ‘success’ conditions of an imperative, associated with its propositional content, and its ‘illocutionary meaning’.\textsuperscript{27} And it appears to be the only interpretation that will account for several obvious features of language use. However, it is still beset by a number of problems.

First of all, the problem of mixed inferences and sentences does not go away. There is no longer a problem explaining how a valid conditional could take a factual premise into a normative conclusion, since validity will be defined simply in terms of generic values, ‘0’s and ‘1’s. However, there is now a problem explaining how a single speech act could confer different interpretations onto the designated value, i.e. how the ‘1’ in the antecedent could come out as ‘is true’ and the ‘1’ in the conclusion could come out as ‘is right’, since by hypothesis there is nothing in the propositional content to distinguish the validity conditions of the antecedent and the conclusion. Furthermore, given a performative analysis of truth and rightness, it is difficult to see how mixed sentences could be possible at all. Although ad hoc devices could be introduced to remedy this, e.g. some speech acts could be treated as belonging to two or more speech act types simultaneously, it is nevertheless the case that these difficulties reduce the plausibility of the account.

The biggest problem, however, is that an account of propositional content that is uniform across different speech act types requires a logic that is similarly uniform. This makes it difficult to believe that there could be different, structurally dissimilar forms of discourse corresponding to the different validity claims. If the meaning of ‘and’ is fixed with respect to preservation of some generic designated value, then the truth-conditions of an assertion with ‘and’ as its primary connective cannot differ from the rightness-conditions of a sentence with the same content used in an imperative. But this means that the introduction rule for ‘and’, or any other logical connective, cannot differ in theoretical and practical discourses. For similar reasons, there can be no special moral rules of inference, like universalizability, since the introduction of rules of this type would preclude a uniform account of propositional content.

These considerations cast doubt upon the idea that there could be such a thing as a specifically practical form of discourse. Without special rules of inference, it is not clear that there is anything distinctive about moral reasoning, other than its topic. But a difference in topic can easily be accommodated without introducing a special theory of practical discourse; a pragmatically sophisticated deontic logic will suffice. Since the standard deontic operators are defined truth-functionally, deontic logic is governed by the same validity claim as propositional or modal logic. The difference between them is strictly one of content, not form, i.e. deontic logics have a special set of axioms, but the usual set of inference rules.

The problems with the idea of a practical form of discourse become even more severe when it is recognized that most arguments about practical questions are conducted with the use of assertions. While a speaker may begin with an imperative speech act that raises a rightness claim, when this claim is challenged by others, the speaker will defend his or her speech act, not with further imperatives, but with assertions. This means that both theoretical and practical discourses will consist of speech acts that raise ‘truth’ claims, seriously diminishing the plausibility of Habermas’s claim that practical discourse is governed by a special set of inference rules. But if there is only one form of discourse, and the validity claim governing speech acts in this discourse is truth, then the only speech act type that connects up the propositional content of an utterance with its inferential role is assertion. This means that the claims to rightness and sincerity, while perhaps important to understanding the speech act as a
whole, are not essential to understanding its compositional component. Thus only the truth claim establishes the internal connection between meaning and validity that is at the heart of Habermas’s analysis.

Habermas himself has an example that indirectly illustrates this point. Ernst Tugendhat suggested as a counter-example to Habermas’s analysis of imperatives in terms of rights-claims that, “When a child beggar in Lima says to me “give me a sol” he is neither commanding me nor is he appealing to any validity claim.” Habermas responded as follows:

Knowledge of success conditions, which can be derived from the propositional component ‘p’ of the imperative ‘Ip’, is not sufficient for understanding the illocutionary meaning of this speech act, namely, its specific character as an imperative. Knowledge of (1) the success conditions must be augmented by knowledge of (2) those conditions under which the speaker has reason to regard an imperative with contents (1) as valid, i.e. normatively justified – e.g. that children in the streets of Lima may beg from arriving foreigners.

The problem here is that it is entirely possible to understand the rights-conditions associated with this imperative, i.e. to be familiar with the institution of beggary, without understanding precisely what was said, e.g. the precise number of sols the child was asking for. On the other hand, if this same propositional content were used to form an assertion, it would be impossible to grasp the truth-conditions of the utterance without also grasping its specific content. This means the internal relationship between meaning and validity, which arose because of the compositionality requirement on semantic theories, does not hold for all validity claims, only truth.

Thus the deflationary interpretation of truth, combined with an inferential semantics, provides a more promising basis for the development of an adequate theory of meaning, but seriously weakens the motivation for introducing ‘rightness’ and ‘sincerity’ as separate types of validity claims. If neither type of validity claim is going to play a significant role in the compositional component of the theory of meaning, and if neither is preserved through special patterns of inference, then introducing them seems to create more problems than it solves.

5 Conclusion

These considerations lead to the conclusion that with respect to the two interesting characteristics of the truth predicate, i.e. those characteristics that establish the internal connection between meaning and validity, there is not a strong analogy between rightness or sincerity and truth. The reason that knowledge of the meaning of an assertoric utterance might be thought to consist of knowledge of its truth-conditions is that the latter can be given through a finite set of recursive functions, which would satisfy the compositionality requirement on theories of meaning for natural language. If new validity claims are introduced, which are also supposed to capture the compositional aspect of linguistic meaning, then it is difficult to see how uniformity of meaning is secured across speech act types. On the other hand, if the compositional element in the meaning of an utterance is severed from the validity claim, and truth, rightness, etc., are introduced through the illocutionary component, then there cannot be a separate ‘logic’ of moral argumentation. Furthermore, it appears that the relationship to the propositional content of the utterance borne by a rightness claim of this type is very different from that borne by the truth claim.

This means, however, that since it is only knowledge of the propositional content that must be analyzed in terms of the agent’s capacity to redeem validity claims discursively, and since it is only in assertions that a validity claim is raised that is internally related to this content, then the built-in structure of accountability of speech acts could only concern their representational dimension, i.e. their truth-conditions. This means that the second half of Habermas’s central argument – the claim that social action inherits its accountability from the use of language as a coordination mechanism – does not go through, because the intelligibility of imperatives does not rest upon any commitment to justification of the background social norms.

This argument, in my view, has no tendency to show that social interaction is not governed by a basic structure of accountability. What it suggests is that one should not appeal to the accountability of speech acts in order to explain the accountability of social action. In my view, the explanation should run in the opposite direction. Accountability should be regarded as a primitive feature of norm-governed interaction, derived from the structure of expectations and sanctions that sustain the normative pattern. Agents are held accountable for their discursive commitments because speech is a type of norm-governed action. This position constitutes a rejection of Habermas’s suggestion that the ‘practical’ conception of rationality should be replaced by the ‘communicative’, therefore a return to a more traditional ‘sociological’ conception of rational action. However, it does not require the rejection of any of the more general claims that Habermas makes about the limits of instrumental rationality or the relationship between moral discourse and social order.

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Notes

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2 The example could be varied if sentences are not treated as the primary truth-bearers, but rather propositions, utterances, beliefs, etc.
7 For defense of this view, see Paul Horwich, Truth (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).
8 It should be noted that an explanatory strategy of this type is completely neutral with respect to which semantic unit is taken as basic, i.e. which unit provides agents with their point of entry into the language game. Compositionality simply requires that the agent's knowledge exhibit a certain structure. This does not say anything about how that knowledge is acquired. It is therefore neutral between atomistic, molecular and holistic theories of meaning.
12 Habermas, 'Wahrheitstheorien', p. 160.
16 In fact, the speech component sometimes drops completely out of the picture in Habermas's analysis. For instance, in The Theory of Communicative Action (1: 306), Habermas suggests that issuing an imperative like 'Get me a cup of coffee' involves making the following claims: (1) truth: that the existential presuppositions required to carry out the action are fulfilled; (2) rightness: that the speaker is authorized to make requests of this type; and (3) sincerity: that the speaker really does want the imperative obeyed. The problem is that unlike an assertion, where understanding the truth claim would require understanding the propositional content, here understanding the justification conditions for all the validity claims would still not constitute an understanding of the utterance, simply because none of the claims pins down the content of the action that is to be performed. In other words, the hearer could know how to redeem all of the above validity claims, and still not know the difference between coffee and tea.
17 In The Theory of Communicative Action, Habermas adheres inconsistently to both this view and the earlier one. In later work, he explicitly endorses only the later view, stating quite specifically that validity claims are raised for the content of an utterance. See Jurgen Habermas, 'Actions, Speech Acts, Linguistically Mediated Interactions, and the Lifeworld', in G. Floistad (ed.) Philosophical Problems Today, Vol. 1 (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1994), p. 57. The development of this view coincides with his adoption of Dummett's 'epistemic turn' in semantics, suggesting that he only later came to realize that the validity claim needed to be related to the compositional component of the speech act in order to secure the desired relationship between meaning and justification.
19 Habermas, 'Discourse Ethics', p. 53.
20 When I make an assertion, there is a sense in which I 'claim' to be sincere. Similarly, when I congratulate someone, I 'claim' to be happy for them. This does not mean that I am raising a special 'happiness claim' for my speech act, or that grasping the conditions under which this happiness claim could be redeemed is constitutive for my understanding of the utterance. It just means that there are certain normative expectations that go along with certain types of social action. Lumping these sorts of 'claims' together with the deontic commitments that establish the meaning of the utterance is needlessly confusing.
21 Dummett, 'What is a Theory of Meaning? (II)', p. 39.
22 Habermas, 'Toward a Critique of the Theory of Meaning', p. 73.
23 ibid., p. 77.
24 The latter ambition is clearest in Habermas's critique of Searle, e.g. The Theory of Communicative Action, 1: 319-28.
26 For the development of a program of this type, see Brandom, Making it Explicit.
27 Habermas, Postmetaphysical Thinking, p. 83.
29 Habermas, Postmetaphysical Thinking, p. 83.