

## Modality, Normativity, and Incompatibility: A Conceptual Map of Analytic Pragmatism

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**Abstract.** Relations between meaning and use (MUR) are the fundamental tools employed by analytic pragmatism in explaining semantic competence. The tutorial will introduce to the analysis of these relations for the basic empirical vocabulary of colors and explain how modal and normative capacities are implicit in its use (§2). Meaning-Use Diagrams are explained in § 3. In the last part (§4), we will explore more in details how modality and normativity are intertwined according to the Kant-Sellars thesis.

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### 1 What is Analytic Pragmatism?

The primary concern with any philosopher trained in the Wittgensteinian legacy is to offer a view of meaning in terms of its use. According to a radical pragmatic reading of the semantics-pragmatics nexus, the meaning of a word or sentence *is* its use. For many philosophers, this implies that semantics simply collapses into pragmatics. According to a moderate reading, semantic and pragmatic rules are descriptively autonomous, but meanings can be *explained* only in terms of a correlative practice of using linguistic expressions. Semantics can stand on its own as a system of interpreted signs (combined to form sentences having truth-values), but the relation between truth-values and their objects is not primitive, but is rather a triadic relationship between sentences, speakers, and objects, where the reference is the resultant of a process involving a social dimension.

In his *2006 John Locke Lectures*<sup>1</sup>, Robert Brandom defends a view of pragmatism as an extension of the classical project of semantic analysis. «Analytic pragmatism» is a moderate pragmatic theory in the sense I have specified: it amounts to a synthesis between the semantic concerns with meanings, and the pragmatist idea that meaning and use cannot be analyzed one apart from the other. Brandom's goal is to systematize pragmatism into a general theory in which the conceptual requirements implicit in the use of ordinary language can be fully expressed. My goal in this tutorial is to focus on one foundational aspect of analytic pragmatism: its way of dealing with the relation between modal, norma-

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<sup>1</sup> Brandom (2008). Henceforth, BSD, followed by the page or chapter number.

tive, and empirical vocabularies. I will consider a portion of empirical vocabulary: the terms referring to colors. If analytic pragmatism is successful, it will be able to provide a satisfactory explanation of the whole range of color-terms.

## 2 Semantic relations between empirical, modal and normative vocabularies

The explanatory core of analytic pragmatism is to explain semantic competence in terms of the correlative practices or abilities of employing a given vocabulary, and then spelling out which conceptual capacities such practices or abilities presuppose. In order to provide a satisfactory explanation, the theory should say which exactly are the relations holding between practices and vocabularies that make it possible to develop a full semantic competence.

In chapter 4 of BSD, Brandom applies this strategy to ordinary empirical terms. In order to be able to make empirical assertions (indeed «in order to be able to talk at all, to make claims and inferences»), one must already know how to do everything necessary in principle to deploy modal and normative vocabulary<sup>2</sup>. The strategy is then to analyze empirical assertions in terms of modal and normative vocabularies jointly combined in a suitable pragmatic framework along with their correlative practices.<sup>3</sup> More specifically, modal and normative vocabularies are combined to result into an overarching pragmatic metavocabulary, which is the *explanans* for the empirical terms.

### 2.1 Empirical vocabulary

Before introducing the relevant Meaning-Use Relations (and the corresponding diagrams), I want to consider a rather intuitive way of showing how it is possible to make explicit the modal and normative notions involved in the practice of making empirical assertions.

Consider a portion of empirical vocabulary, where an object *x* is presented to the attention of an epistemic agent. The object is colored, and the instructor points to the object saying that its color is “magenta”. Let’s assume that the agent is endowed with normal cognitive capacities to understand basic relations holding between color- terms. In order for the agent to be able to say “*x* is magenta”, he will need to be able to distinguish that particular shade of color from other color-samples, for instance from a sample of green. Given these circumstances of application of the term «magenta», our agent will at least be able to identify the sample of magenta *as opposed* to other colors. For instance, he would certainly be able to assert:

«This object does not look magenta; it looks green». (1)

Reasonably enough, we can also affirm that, once the two objects are present to him, he would be able to combine the two sentences in the following way:

« this object is magenta-colored *and* is not green-colored». (2)

According to Brandom’s pragmatic analysis, mastering the term «magenta» is, among

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<sup>2</sup> Brandom (2008), p.102

<sup>3</sup> See Brandom (2008), chapter 1.

other things, to be able to draw inferences from (1) to (2). In drawing the conclusion (3), the agent is employing a property expressed by the term «magenta», i.e. that «looking magenta» is *incompatible with* «looking green». However, employing a concept does not mean being able to say it. In order to express incompatibility relations in the form of contentful propositions, one has to enrich the color vocabulary. Now, the trainer introduces a novel relation among the terms by means of a further expressive tool. This can be done by introducing the conditional form:

«If this object looks magenta, then it does not look green» (3)

(3) does not add any content to (2), but simply makes explicit in the form of an indicative conditional what is already implicit in the practice of discriminating the magenta color sample from the green sample: the statement (3) expresses in the form of a conditional what one already knows in making the inference from (1) to (3). Once we have introduced the conditional, we can also express the bi-conditional in the following way. Given the same circumstances of ostensive teaching, the trainer focuses on the green colored object, as to elicit the following sentence:

« If this object looks green, then it does not look magenta ». (4)

Now, combining (3) and (4), we obtain:

« this object looks magenta *iff* this object does not look green ». (5)

With the conditional being introduced, we have all what we need to express relations among terms in the vocabulary we are analyzing. We would just have to repeat the same sequence for each new color entry: each color term would then be defined by what that color is not. Call this a *disjunctive* definition of color-terms.<sup>4</sup> For instance, take the colors of the rainbow plus magenta. The matrix of their disjunctions is:

If, then	Red	Orange	Yellow	Green	Blue	Violet	Magenta
Red		Not	Not	Not	Not	Not	Not
Orange	Not		Not	Not	Not	Not	Not
Yellow	Not	Not		Not	Not	Not	Not
Green	Not	Not	Not		Not	Not	Not
Blue	Not	Not	Not	Not		Not	Not
Violet	Not	Not	Not	Not	Not		Not
Magenta							

Fig. 1. The disjunctive definition of color-terms. The outcome in the box applies to the second term of the conditional: «If this is magenta, then it is Not red».

<sup>4</sup> For disjunctive analysis of properties, see Armstrong (1986), and Stalnaker (1976).

The matrix above is a graphical representation of the incompatibility relations holding among color-properties, and how they are expressible through a conditional. We have then spelled out all resources we need to express a general equivalence scheme for the semantics of color-terms. In order to obtain the scheme, we need first to introduce the universal quantifier for the object in our domain.

«For any object  $x$ :  $x$  looks magenta *iff*  $x$  does not look green». (6)

Second, we generalize over properties of the objects in the domain, which express the most general rule available within the expressive resources given so far:

( $\forall_E$ ) «For any object  $x$ :  $x$  looks  $\Phi$ -colored, *iff* it does not look  $\Psi$ -colored». (7)

The reasoning behind seems pretty intuitive: if the agent has learned that an object is either magenta *or* green, then he can draw the conclusion that for *any* object, either it is magenta or it is green. The fact that the object could be of a different color altogether does not make this conclusion illicit. The second step proceeds likewise: if the agent has learned that any object can be either magenta or green, then he can rationally assume that *any* color will exclude the others. Of course, the vocabulary of colors is far richer than the one just outlined: a complete description should include all possible colors belonging to the color-wheel. It is not difficult however to generalize the example and specify each possible color-term in terms of mutually disjunctive properties. A systematic mutual disjunction, will be expressed by two things. But things are not so easy as they might appear. Both the objects in a domain and their properties can vary. A competent epistemic agent should be able, after appropriate training, to discriminate between any occurrences of colors, name them, and define each color-term by means of its *opposites*. But, the question is: would this be sufficient to warrant the inferential step from (4) all way down to (7)? What would happen if we introduced weird properties, such as a Goodmanian color? As the name suggests, a Goodmanian color is a chromatic phenomenon in which a objects looks «green» until a certain time  $t_0$ , then it changes suddenly into «magenta». Let's call this color «magreen». What would be required for an epistemic agent, in practice or as potential ability, to deploy «magreen» as a term of his vocabulary? The matrix of colors wouldn't help us. In fact, the ability to define a term by means of *disjunction* would not be sufficient to tackle the case involving paradoxical identities. Now, we could try first to accommodate the use of «magreen» by revising the meaning of «looking colored». Such revision would involve adding a temporal index to the phenomenal properties of colored objects. If we do so, we would also need to generalize such temporal specification for all color-properties. But this move would render unfeasible any practice of making inferences with such revised color-terms: their circumstances of application would not offer a stable ground to define colors in terms of their disjunctive properties. What we have to do is rather to show that this move is wrong. Now, reflect on what is presupposed by such dismissal: «magreen» cannot be a consistent color-term in any empirical vocabulary, since there *cannot* not be a practice involving inferences containing «magreen». In fact, in order to *say* that «magreen» is a *possible* term of the empirical vocabulary, one must be able to *employ* «magreen», and that means knowing what its structure of incompatibilities is. But there is no warrant that at a further point  $t_3$  «magreen» will not turn into a yet another

color, and so on. Likewise, every color whose reference was thought to be already fixed so far could be a Goodmanian color. This would render the properties of colors untreatable and its correlative terms unstable. But, with the resources available to the agent so far we cannot avoid the paradox. The agent's vocabulary is expressively too weak to express modal impossibilities. In order to avoid such conclusion, we need to specify that color-terms are not only mutually disjunctive, but they are *necessarily* so. We are in the position at this point to introduce the modal operators for possibility and necessity in the agent's vocabulary.

## 2.2. Modality

I have said that, once the conditional has been introduced, we can see how incompatibilities are made explicit in cases of actual circumstances of application of a term. While saying «this looks magenta» contains implicitly an incompatibility, asserting «if this looks magenta, then it does not look green», says that looking magenta is incompatible with looking green, and does not just applies an incompatibility relation.

Once we introduce the modal operators for necessity we obtain:

(V<sub>M</sub>) (a) «For any  $x$ , Necessarily: 'x looks  $\Phi$ -colored' iff it 'x does not look  $\Psi$ -colored'». (8)

Likewise, we can introduce the operator for possibility in the following:

(V<sub>M</sub>) (b) «For any  $x$ , it is possible that: if 'x looks  $\Gamma$ -colored', then 'x looks  $\Phi$ -colored' iff it 'x does not look  $\Psi$ -colored'». (9)

(8) expresses in the modal vocabulary V<sub>M</sub> the *incompatibility-exclusion relation* among any given pair of terms. (8) says that ( $\Phi, \Psi$ ) is any pair of properties standing in relation R( $\Phi, \Psi$ ) such that: whatever is  $\Phi$  cannot necessarily be  $\Psi$ , and viceversa. (9) expresses a *compatibility-entailment* relation: it says that a relation R( $\Gamma, \Phi, \Psi$ ) holds such that: whatever is  $\Gamma$  can be  $\Phi$  (but not viceversa), on the condition that whatever is  $\Gamma$   $\Psi$  cannot necessarily be  $\Psi$ .

In mastering V<sub>M</sub> one is to be able to say what one does in practical discrimination between color-properties. We can, more or less informally formulate the incompatibility relations for color-terms in practices or abilities of color discrimination in the following way:

(P<sub>M</sub>) For any object  $x$ , there is a triplet of properties  $\Gamma$ ,  $\Phi$  and  $\Psi$  such that: (10)  
 [x being  $\Phi$ -colored] is incompatible with [x being  $\Psi$ -colored]  
 [x being  $\Phi$ -colored] is compatible with [x being  $\Gamma$ -colored]  
 [x being  $\Gamma$ -colored] is incompatible with [x being  $\Psi$ -colored].

So, for instance, the property of being violet is compatible with the property of being magenta, but being violet is incompatible with being green, and being magenta is incompati-

ble with being green. Notice that  $(P_M)$  is formulated as an inference for the very reason that the practice of color-discrimination is an inferential activity. Put in other words, for any set of properties, they are compatible with each other, if they are incompatible with the same properties. *Tertium non datur*.

According to inferential analysis,  $(P_M)$  establishes a constraint on what is required for a proper mastery of color vocabulary: saying that something «looks magenta» *means* that it is incompatible with «looking blue, green,...» What an agent can do once modal incompatibilities are introduced is not only to say two colors are incompatible in actual circumstances of application, but also to specify the structure of incompatibilities and entailments for each color (in any possible circumstance of application). Modal incompatibilities express also an important feature of inferential reasoning: counterfactual capacities. Such expressive resources are not available to empirical vocabulary in which, 'knowing how to apply color-concepts' causally depend on merely actual episodes of empirical encounters. Instead, counterfactual reasoning allows the agent to determine what incompatibilities would follow if the circumstances of application were different from the actual ones<sup>5</sup>.

### 2.3 Normativity

According to Brandom, in order for an agent to be a competent master of color-terms, modal incompatibilities need to be backed up by normative constraints. And normative constraints, at the same time, reflect the structural modal features of the empirical world. To put it more clearly, normative and modal structures of empirical vocabulary are complementary. Normative constraints are expressible in the form of inferential commitments a speaker undertakes when he makes assertions containing color-terms. Commitments are undertaken implicitly, but can emerge to the propositional surface by making explicit the illocutionary act associated with it. What a competent speaker does is to *acknowledge* those commitments. However, while modal incompatibilities articulate objective properties of the objects of experience, commitments belong to the discursive side of the intentional coin, and their function is to express performances of epistemic recognition.

Although modal and normative structures are complementary, they do not coincide neither collapse. One can fail to recognize the inference from the assertion about an object «looking magenta» to the assertion about an object «not looking green», while the property of [being magenta] still remain necessarily incompatible with the property of [being green]. The problem is how the two dimensions of the subjective cognition (expressed by normative endorsements of assertions) and of the objective properties of the world can be reconciled within a unifying view in which the reliability of our intentional relation to the world can be expressed by an overarching pragmatic theory.

Brandom's idea is that, if we want to understand such complementarity, we need to think of the subjective normative and objective modal dimensions as poles of the same intentional domain:

«The features of discursive practice from which the normative vocabulary of commitment

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<sup>5</sup> See also Newton Garver (1996: 143), and Brandom (2000: ch. 1).

and entitlement is elaborated and which it makes explicit are different from those from which the modal vocabulary of necessity and possibility are elaborated and make explicit. But they are intimately related. What I want to claim now is that those features correspond, respectively, to the subjective and the objective poles of intentional relations [...] The basic idea is that normative vocabulary makes explicit important features of what knowing and acting subjects do when they deploy a vocabulary, when they use expressions so as to say something. And modal vocabulary makes explicit important features both of what is said and of the objective world that is talked about» (BDS: 183)

In drawing an inference correctly, Brandom claims that a speaker must *both* be able to:

- recognize valid material inferences. Here, commitments to the validity of an inference are established within a discursive practice. The source of validity of material inferences is the community within which those commitments are expressed and articulated;
- be a reliable epistemic agent, i.e. he must be able to conform to the objective properties of the objects of experience, and be ready to rectify ones' own commitments when they are at odds with the response elicited from the world.

The capacity to rectify one's own commitments and respond correctly to the empirical world can be expressed in the following way:

[P<sub>N</sub>] For any object looking  $\Phi$ -colored, and for a vocabulary  $V_E$  containing a finite number of discrete color-terms, an epistemic agent is a proper master of  $V_E$  iff he is able to discriminate between correct and incorrect inferential occurrences of  $V_E$ , and, in case of mistake rectify ones' own commitments according to the structure of modal incompatibilities ( $P_M$ ) for each color-term belonging to  $V_E$ . (11)

[P<sub>N</sub>] stands for the practice of undertaking and rectifying normative subjective commitments: it says how commitments stand in relation to the empirical vocabulary and its correlative modal properties.

For (P<sub>N</sub>) there is a corresponding vocabulary that makes explicit the rules for the normative engagement in the practice of asserting claims about colors:

(V<sub>N</sub>) For any object  $x$ , and a triplet of properties  $\Gamma$ ,  $\Phi$  and  $\Psi$ : (12)  
 Committing oneself to [ $x$  being  $\Phi$ -colored] is *incompatible with* being entitled to [ $x$  being  $\Psi$ -colored]  
 Committing oneself to [ $x$  being  $\Phi$ -colored] is *compatible with* being entitled to [ $x$  being  $\Gamma$ -colored]

From which it follows, among other inferences:  
 Committing oneself to [ $x$  being  $\Gamma$ -colored] is *incompatible with* the entitlement to [ $x$  being

Ψ-colored].

Brandom's idea is that the discursive practice involved in empirical discrimination counts as an Autonomous Discursive Practice if it embodies the modal and normative requirements we have analysed so far: it must be a practice in which modal and normative properties of the practice are made explicit in terms of their respective vocabularies.

## 2.4 The Complementarity between modality and normativity

A crucial point in Brandom's analytic pragmatism is that modal and normative dimensions represent two sides of the same intentional coin.<sup>6</sup> Let's see then how normative and modal vocabulary are related to each other.

We shall recall that in order to be a competent master of an empirical vocabulary ( $V_E$ ), one must possess the conceptual resources to acknowledge modal incompatible properties (what we have called the practice-or-ability ( $P_M$ )) and to commit oneself to the correctness of his inferential assertions (what we have called ( $P_N$ )). Modal and normative vocabularies ( $(V_M)$  and  $(V_N)$ ) allow to say what one does in engaging in the practice of using empirical vocabulary.

It is arguable whether one who masters an empirical vocabulary must also be able to master modal and normative vocabularies, or even if he has to be able to understand them. but I will leave this question aside for the moment.

Here is an important point: by engaging in a normative discursive practice, as the one exhibited by the examples above, one already knows how to do and say a lot. First, the vocabulary which specifies the norms for a normative discursive practice ( $V_N$ ) allows to say what one must do in order to say what is expressed by the modal vocabulary ( $V_M$ ).<sup>7</sup>

Likewise, the vocabulary which specifies modal incompatibilities ( $V_M$ ) allows to say what one must do in order to say what is expressed by the empirical vocabulary ( $V_E$ ). Call this a *complementarity* relation between modal and normative vocabularies: they both contribute to specify what one must do in order to say what is expressed by the empirical vocabulary. Modal and normative vocabularies are then *pragmatic metavocabularies* for the empirical terms. When combined, they result in a *pragmatically mediated semantic relation* between modal, normative, and empirical vocabularies:

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<sup>6</sup> The expression is from Danielle Macbeth (1994)

<sup>7</sup> This is what Brandom calls transposition in reference to Sellars's dictum: «When Sellars says “the language of modalities...is a transposed language of norms,” he is saying in my terms that normative vocabulary codifying rules of inference is a *pragmatic metavocabulary* for modal vocabulary». (BSD: 101). See *infra*, §3 for more details. This thesis is controversial, but I will not discuss here its pros and cons.

Given an empirical vocabulary ( $V_E$ ), a *pragmatic metavocabulary* explains the semantic competence of ( $V_E$ ) when the *following pragmatically mediated semantic relation* between ( $V_E$ ), ( $V_M$ ) and ( $V_N$ ) obtains: (13)

- engaging in a autonomous discursive practice (call it ADP) is necessary to specify empirical vocabulary ( $V_E$ ); PV-nec
- employing ( $V_E$ ) is sufficient to deploy a practice-or-ability to discriminate between properties of color-terms ( $P_M$ ); VP-suff
- engaging in ( $P_M$ ) is sufficient to specify modal vocabulary ( $V_M$ ); PV-suff
- employing ( $V_M$ ) is necessary to deploy a practice-or-ability to rectify one's own commitments according to ( $P_N$ ); VP-suff
- engaging in ( $P_N$ ) is sufficient to specify the normative vocabulary ( $V_N$ ). PV-suff
- employing ( $V_N$ ) is sufficient to deploy ( $V_E$ ). VV-suff

In the next two sections we will see how this apparatus is described in terms of Meaning-Use Relations.

### 3 Practices and vocabularies in terms of Meaning-Use Relations

What I have been telling so far was meant to explain the complex Meaning-Use Relations that serve as explanatory tools in Brandom's BSD. I will now briefly recapitulate the main feature of Brandom's theory and refer to what we have said in the preceding sections.

According to Brandom, there are three fundamental relations between vocabularies and practices. He calls the resultant of these relations a Meaning-Use Relation (MUR). Here is how Brandom presents the basic terms involved in MUR:

(i) The relation between practices-or-abilities and a vocabulary sufficient to *deploy* a specific vocabulary to be explained (*PV-sufficiency*):

«It obtains when engaging in a specified set of practices or exercising a specified set of abilities is sufficient for someone to count as deploying a specified vocabulary». (BSD: 9)

(ii) The relation between two vocabularies sufficient to *specify* a set of practices-or-abilities (*VP-sufficiency*):

«VP-sufficiency, is the relation that holds between a vocabulary and a set of practices-or-abilities when that vocabulary is sufficient to specify those practices-or-abilities. Specifying PV-sufficient practices is saying what one must do in order to count as saying something, deploying a vocabulary. VP-sufficient vocabularies let one say what it is one must do to be engaging in those practices or exercising those abilities». (BSD: 9-10)

(iii) The *pragmatically mediated semantic relation* (VV-relations), *which* results from the composition of VP-sufficiency and PV-sufficiency (VV relation is the one holding between normative and modal vocabulary):

«In terms of those basic relations, we can define a more complex relation: the relation that holds between vocabulary  $V_2$  and vocabulary  $V_1$  when  $V_2$  is VP-sufficient to specify practices- or-abilities  $P_1$  that are PV-sufficient to deploy vocabulary  $V_1$ . This VV-relation is the composition of the two basic MURs. When it obtains I will say that  $V_2$  is a pragmatic metavocabulary for  $V_1$ . It allows one to say what one must do in order to count as saying the things expressed by vocabulary  $V_1$ » (BSD: 10).<sup>8</sup>

Here is Brandom's diagram for the pragmatic metavocabulary:

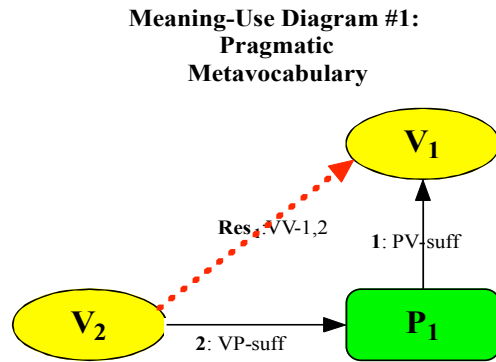


Fig. 2. Brandom's basic Meaning- Use Diagram for pragmatic analysis. (BSD: 10)

**P<sub>1</sub>**: Practice of making empirical judgments (eg: judgments about colored objects). Material inferences take place within P<sub>1</sub>. Knowing *that* an inference is valid consists in knowing *how* to license the conclusion from the premises, quite independently from any awareness of the formal validity of the logical vocabulary involved therein.  
E.g.: (4) from (2) and (3);

**V<sub>1</sub>**: Vocabulary employed in expressing what happens in P<sub>1</sub>. It is a fully expressed empirical vocabulary in the sense that modal concepts have been introduced. V<sub>1</sub> says, in the form of a know-that, what sort of counterfactual reasoning takes place in making inferences in P<sub>1</sub>.  
E.g.: from (P<sub>E</sub>) to (V<sub>M</sub>), from (P<sub>E</sub>) to (V<sub>N</sub>), and from (P<sub>M</sub>) to (V<sub>N</sub>).

However, invoking a piece of practical knowledge does not amount yet to a proper mastery of the concepts involved in empirical vocabulary unless the inferential norms governing their use are suitably specified.

<sup>8</sup> Notation slightly modified to fit the symbols in the diagram.

**V<sub>2</sub>**: normative vocabulary which specifies the inferential norms implicit in the practice of making empirical judgments.

Inferential norms govern counterfactual robustness: they establish which steps are *correct*, from premises to conclusions of counterfactual inferences. A speaker who has proper command of color-vocabulary, in asserting “this is magenta” is *ipso facto* committed to the commissive and incompatible properties of “being magenta” when he draws further inferences from it.

1: PV-suff: making empirical judgment is sufficient to deploy a full empirical vocabulary.  
 2: VP-suff: modal and normative vocabularies are sufficient to specify the inferential norms governing the inferences in P.  
 Res VV-1,2: The relation between empirical and modal/normative vocabularies is a resultant of a mediated V<sub>1</sub>-P<sub>1</sub>-V<sub>2</sub>. Normative vocabulary rules over the correct use of counterfactual statements needed to express what happens in P.

The reason for construing a pragmatic metavocabulary is to show that the empiricist challenge according to which only empirical vocabulary is needed to explain meaning, *presupposes* indeed what the empiricists intend to dismiss: modal and normative concepts. This strategy is already known to those familiar with the language use model elaborated in *Making It Explicit*: knowing that a term expresses a concept is knowing how to treat those inferences in which the term figures as (part of) its premises or conclusions. Making inferences is a practice, and knowing how to make them correctly is an ability that agents exhibit when they grasp the relevant concept. What is new here is the analytic machinery: it is the dependence of vocabularies on their correlative practices which is distinctive of pragmatism in analytic flavor:

«To broaden the classical project of analysis in the light of the pragmatists’ insistence on the centrality of pragmatics we can focus on this fundamental relation between use and meaning, between practices or practical abilities and vocabularies. We must look at what it is to use locutions as expressing meanings—that is, at what one must *do* in order to count as saying what the vocabulary lets practitioners express». (BSD: 9)

Keeping in mind the general framework synthesized in the Meaning-Use Diagram above (Fig.1), we can now analyze a bit more in detail how modal and normative concepts stand together within the structure of the pragmatic metavocabulary.

The semantic relations between empirical/descriptive, modal, and normative vocabularies are complementary but not symmetrical: empirical vocabulary is in fact expressively weaker than modal and normative vocabularies, and by itself, it is unable to count as an autonomous discursive practice. In other words, empirical vocabulary is not self-sufficient to express the relations of incompatibility and the inferential commitments implicit in the practice of using such vocabulary. Empirical vocabulary is indeed unintelligible without presupposing a discursive practice in which also modal and normative constraints are at work. Therefore the diagram above must be reiterated to distinguish between the semantic role of the modal and normative vocabularies.

As I said above, the role played the normative vocabulary ( $V_N$ ) is to specify what one must do in the practice of modal discrimination ( $P_M$ ) in order to deploy the modal vocabulary ( $V_M$ ), which expresses in turn what one does in ( $P_M$ ). Brandom calls this transposition, following an original suggestion by Wilfrid Sellars.

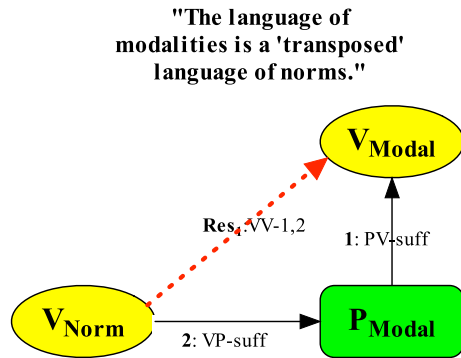


Fig. 3: The MUR Diagram for the «transposition» (BSD: 101).

#### 4 The Kant-Sellars thesis

According to Brandom, there are two distinctive yet complementary kinds of *semantic* relations which underline the use of empirical vocabulary. The Kant-Sellars thesis about modality defines the conditions for this relation:

« a) In using ordinary empirical vocabulary, one already knows how to do everything one needs to know how to do in order to introduce and deploy modal vocabulary;

b) the expressive role characteristic of alethic modal vocabulary is to make explicit semantic, conceptual connections and commitments that are already implicit in the use of ordinary empirical vocabulary». (BSD: 102)

In the language of Meaning-Use-Relations, the «Kant-Sellars thesis about modality» claims that *using* empirical vocabulary is *sufficient* to specify those aspects of the practices that are *necessary* to introduce and deploy *modal* vocabulary.

A parallel relation between the empirical and the normative vocabulary is defined in analogy with the modal case ( this is the «normative Kant-Sellars thesis»): *using* empirical vocabulary is *sufficient* to specify those aspects of the practices that are *necessary* to introduce and deploy *normative* vocabulary.<sup>9</sup>

Both the modal and the normative Kant-Sellars theses result in a more fundamental meta-

<sup>9</sup> See BSD: 110.

relation, a *pragmatically mediated semantic relation*.

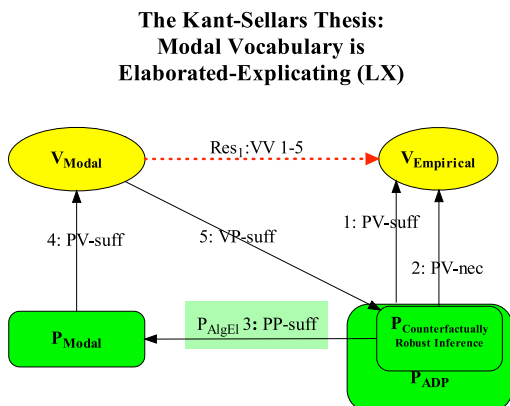


Fig. 4: The MUR Diagram for the Kant-Sellars Thesis about Modality (BSD: 102)

As I said, this relation shows that modal and normative vocabularies are *complementary*: one cannot be given without the other; and that both are sufficient to explain the intentional vocabulary in use within any autonomous discursive practice. The complementarity view maintains that modal and normative vocabularies are jointly sufficient to explain the semantics of empirical vocabulary. But their semantic contribution is not on an equal level. As I said above, the transposition describes why normative vocabulary can express the meaning-use relation between the language of modalities and the practice of modal discrimination. What is then the semantic relation between the three vocabularies we have analysed so far? How do they exactly stand together? The final Pragmatically Mediated Semantic Relation is the following (see (13) for details):

## Modal, Normative, and Empirical Vocabulary

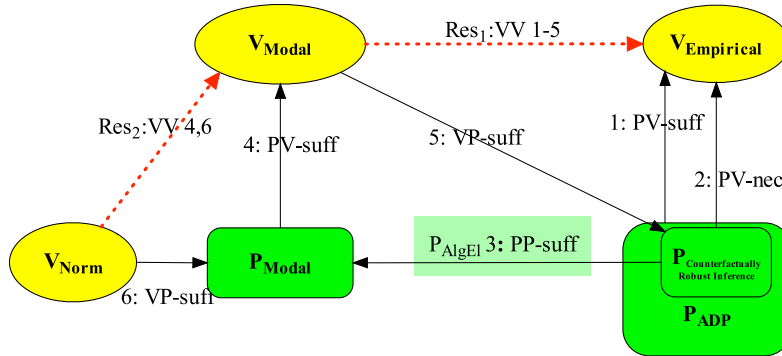


Fig. 5.: *The Pragmatically Mediated Semantic Relation between modal, normative, and empirical vocabularies BSD: 103.*

This Relation combines the Kant-Sellars thesis about modality with transposition. Brandom offers a hint in his last lecture on the significance of combining modality and normativity to express the conceptual resources at work in a discursive practice:

«...by engaging in the practice of rectifying commitments, subjects are at once *both* taking or treating the *commitments* involved as incompatible in the *normative* sense of obliging them to do something about that collision *and* taking or treating two *states of affairs* regarding *objects* as incompatible in the *modal* sense that it is impossible for both to obtain.... [In] practically acknowledging an obligation to rectify or repair a set of commitments, one is doing something that can be specified not just by using one or the other, but, crucially, by using *both*. That it *can* be specified in both ways, both in normative terms and in modal terms, is what it is for the vocabulary whose use is being rectified to have semantic intentional *content*, for its deployment to count as *representing objects* and *saying of them that they are objectively thus-and-so.*» (BSD: 193).

To sum up:

Modal incompatibilities articulate disjunctive properties of the objects of experience. Modal vocabulary makes explicit features of the world, which are indifferent to subjective inferring and acknowledgments.

Material incompatibilities articulate commitments and entitlements to assertions about objects of experience. Normative vocabulary makes explicit subjective undertaking and acknowledgments of inferential commitments and entitlements.

**Rational Rectification =  
Treating Commitments as Normatively Incompatible =  
Treating Properties as Modally Incompatible**

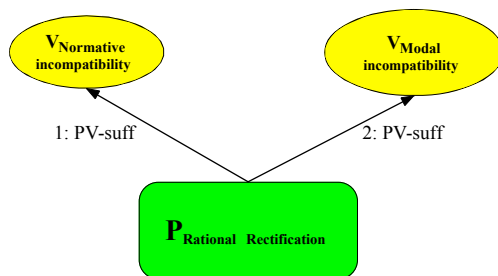


Fig. 5.: Complementarity between normativity and modality. In rational rectification normative incompatibilities among commitments reflect modal incompatibilities among properties. BSD: 194

Both vocabularies (and their correlative practices) share the property of *repelling* incompatible properties or assertions. This fundamental property, which is the basic intuition of the incompatibility semantics deployed in the fifth chapter of BSD, is the key point around which normative responsibility and modal properties of the objects intertwine.

The responsibility that one undertakes in rectifying incompatible commitments is «what one has to *do* in order to be taking one's claims to be *about* an objective world, in the normative sense of granting it *authority* over the *correctness* of one's claims» (BSD: 194). But, at the same time, in treating two commitments as *normatively* incompatible, one treats them both as «claims *about* objects and as *incorrect* about those objects because they attribute to them *modally* incompatible properties. That is what *subjects* must *do* in order thereby to be treating the vocabulary they deploy in acknowledging the commitments in question as expressing objective contents: claims about the properties (usually complex relational properties) of *objects*». (BSD: 194)

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