

## Dewey's Philosophy of Language

### 1. Introduction: Dewey and the linguistic turn

John Dewey's mature thought is situated in the midst of 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy. Works such as *Experience and Nature* (1925) and *Logic: the Theory of Inquiry* (1938) address issues emerging in philosophy during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. More specifically, given Dewey's long standing debate with Bertrand Russell (Burke 1994) and that he took issues with the rising hegemony of logical empiricism, we may find reasons for taking Dewey as 'working out a full-scale theory of discourse, a philosophy of language' (Sleeper 1986/2001: 5).

Nevertheless, those who have interpreted Dewey in the light of the linguistic turn arising in Anglo-American philosophy in the 1930s and 40s have faced several hermeneutical problems. Firstly, philosophers holding a standard view of logic as a formal and ready made tool for semantic analysis have difficulties in understanding let alone accepting his thesis that *inquiry* is the 'ultimate subject matter of logic' and that 'all logical forms ... arise within the operations of inquiry' (LW12: 11–2). Further, even those who have taken Dewey to develop a natural language semantics have tended to focus on unclarities or insufficiencies rather than constructive possibilities. Notably, on Max Black's account Dewey not only fails to establish a sufficient distinction between word and sentence meaning (Black 1970: 239–40); Dewey's overall account of linguistic meaning in terms of action is seen as assuming that 'a *nonverbal counterpart* of a symbol ... exists independently of the symbol whose meaning it is alleged to be' and that such nonverbal counterpart may be 'independently designated'— which suggests a commitment to the '*dogma of substantive meaning*' (Black 1970: 240).

As we will return to, however, such criticisms fails to capture the systematically most promising, if not always clearly formulated aspects of Dewey's natural language semantics. Even where the latter indeed needs systematic clarification and rearticulation, the critic should also take into account the concerns motivating Dewey's semantics. Take the criticism of the insufficient distinction between word and sentence meaning: since one of Dewey's enduring concerns was the neglect in philosophy of situational contexts in which words and sentences are uttered and used, he sometimes defocused semantic distinctions between the two. However, the emphasis on the contextuality of linguistic meaning in fact involves an account of the

semantically relevant *linguistic* contexts of both words and sentences: ‘[a]s every meaning is set in the context of some situation, so every word in concrete use belongs to some sentence ... and the sentence, in turn, belongs to some larger story, description, or reasoning process’ (1910: 185).

In this paper we will assess some aspects of Dewey’s mature philosophy of language presented in, or related to his *Logic* (1938). The natural language semantics suggested in *Logic* particularly captures traits of language that are relevant for Dewey’s theory of inquiry; in terms of recent Dewey scholarship (Browning 2002) we may qualify it as a naturalistic *background theory* or (on a suitable paraphrase) a *background semantics* for his theory of inquiry. Such background semantics not only reconstructs general phylogenetic (biological and cultural) preconditions for any rational inquiry; it claims that language ‘has its own distinctive structure which is capable of abstraction as a *form*’ i.e., ‘the form of language’ that serves ‘as an agency of inquiry’ (LW12: 51). Let us first, however, consider the historical context for the background semantics and its motivation.

## ***2. The background semantics and its motivation***

During the 1930s and 40s Dewey notes with rising concern the logical empiricist project of making formal logic the ready made basis for a theory of scientific method. This concern makes him talk of the need for developing ‘a general theory of language in which form and matter are not separated’ (LW12: 4) – where ‘form’ may read as ‘*syntax*’ and ‘matter’ as ‘*meanings*’ (LW12: 285–6, my emph.). To meet this need his theory of inquiry sets out to provide a so-called ‘empirical account’ of ‘logical forms’ (LW12: 34): *logical forms*<sup>1</sup> are postulations, on ‘different levels of generality’, of conditions that inquiries have to meet (LW12: 24). Such conditions are not imposed on inquiry from without; they are rather discovered and acknowledged on the basis of inquiries, and their very *formulation* ‘commits the inquirer to observance of certain conditions’ (LW12: 24). The guiding assumption underlying this account is that *inquiry* is ‘the ultimate subject matter’ of logic (LW12: 11–12) and that ‘the domain of the relation of propositions to one

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1 Dewey here particular mentions one example, the *nota notae* from classical logic: “If anything has a certain property, and whatever has this property has a certain other property, then the thing in question has this certain other property” (LW12/ED2: 165).

another' makes up only its 'proximate subject matter' (LW12: 9). Logical theory thus becomes an integral part, not a formal prerequisite, of the theory of inquiry.

To accomplish the empirical account *second order* inquiry, 'inquiry into inquiry' (LW12: 12), is needed in order to reconstruct how logical forms on different levels of generality emerge out of the very processes of (first order) inquiry. In so far, an empirical account of logical forms is *circular* and depends on nothing 'extraneous to inquiry' (LW12: 28). This circularity, however, is to secure the *autonomy* of logical theory (LW12: 10, 28–29): the empirical account of logic abstains from any theoretical constructs – whether epistemological, ontological or psychological – not issuing from the inquiry into inquiry itself.

The circularity of second order inquiry suggests why a *background theory* for the theory of inquiry is required. The background semantics is to provide *independent* yet indirect tests on the theory of inquiry:<sup>2</sup> given the circular nature of secondary inquiry such independent tests seem particularly important. This methodological provision further accords with one of the conditions to which Dewey subjects any adequate account of logic: an account of the ultimate subject matter of logic should be of the nature of a *vera causa*: 'whatever is offered as a ground for a theory must possess the property of verifiable existence in *some* domain, no matter how hypothetical it is in reference to the field in which it is proposed to apply it' (LW12: 11). Taking 'domain' to refer to relevant fields of empirical research (e.g., in biology, anthropology, linguistics) informing a background theory, the latter would fill such methodological function by providing independent tests.

In contributing to 'a general theory of language' (LW12: 4) the background theory must provide an overall account of linguistic structure and meaning, an account that cuts across the distinction between a language used in prescientific contexts of 'use and enjoyment' (LW12: 69) and a language designed for purposes of inquiry. To account for scientific inquiry in particular, however, Dewey stresses the distinction mentioned: he appeals to John Locke's distinction

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2 I take Dewey as saying as much in his comment on the two chapters of the *Logic* dealing with the biological and the cultural matrix of inquiry: '[t]he second and third chapters stated the independent grounds, biological and cultural, for holding that logic is a theory of experiential naturalistic subject matter' (LW12: 105), and the term 'naturalistic' may here be taken in the methodological sense of 'observability, in the ordinary sense of the word, of activities of inquiry' (LW12: 26).

between a *civil* and a *philosophical use of words* (Locke II 1959: 104–5) which, in Dewey’s phrasing, becomes the distinction between ‘language that is adapted to the purposes of communication’ and ‘language that is determined solely by prior inquiries related to the purposes of inquiry’ (LW12: 284). Still, given Dewey’s commitment to George Herbert Mead’s account of communication, and given the requirements of ‘a general theory of language’ (LW12: 4), the background semantics should seek to integrate an account of aspects of language relevant for inquiry with an overall account of language as a medium of communication.

### **3. *The social basis of linguistic meaning.***

While the author of *Logic* views language phylogenetically as a ‘development ... out of prior biological activities’ (LW12: 50), his aim is not primarily to tell the story of how language came into existence. Language is conceptualised as the *cultural matrix of inquiry* (LW12: 48–65); this conceptualisation has two objectives. Firstly, it is to provide an analysis of linguistic and social preconditions for cognitive activities qualified as *inquiries*. Secondly, it suggests a certain explanatory strategy in the study of linguistic structure and meaning; a synchronic study of language as an ‘inclusive code’ (LW12: 55) should be anchored in a broader account of social behaviour, communicative behaviour in particular. Hence, Dewey’s background semantics covers both *parole* and *langue* (in a Saussurean sense) by a bottom-up approach focussing on the socio-cultural basis for synchronic abstractions. This broad scope, however, raises serious challenges.

Following G.H. Mead’s account of communication (Mead 1934), Dewey emphasises that the meaning of an uttered verbal sign must be approached by viewing the sign as part of a sequence of coordinated acts of both a verbal and a non-verbal kind. On this view, then, the meaning of a verbal utterance is established through a series of coordinated acts: ‘meaning is established by agreements of different persons in existential activities having reference to existential consequences’ (LW12: 53). However, on Dewey’s and Mead’s account, verbal utterances are not only *elements in*, but a *medium for* the coordination of social behaviour. In an earlier work Dewey claims that ‘[s]peech reaction ... integrates or coordinates behavior tendencies which without it are uncertain and more or less antagonistic’ (1922: 563), and now, in *Logic*, language is generally seen as ‘the agency by which other institutions and acquired habits

are *transmitted*' (LW12: 51). More specifically, language is held to be constitutive for *modes* of behavioural response distributed in a social group (LW12: 52, 66). In so far, Dewey is concerned with language *as* social activity,<sup>3</sup> not with some relation between linguistic signs and action where the latter is conceived as a '*nonverbal counterpart* of a symbol' capable of being 'independently designated' (Black 1970: 240).

Further, cognitive discourse is seen to arise out of modes of behavioural response in virtue of a mechanism compelling 'one individual to take the standpoint of other individuals and to see and inquire from a standpoint that is not strictly personal' (LW12: 52). By virtue of this rudimentary mechanism the reference of verbal acts 'becomes general and "objective"' (LW12: 52). Still, by itself this account has limited explanatory value: it might, perhaps, help to clarify how cognitive modes of verbal response relate, ontogenetically and phylogenetically, to other modes: '[c]ommands, optatives and subjunctives are the primary modes of speech reaction; the indicative or expositive mood is an amplification.' (1922: 566) However, Dewey also needs to explain how the mechanism for taking perspectives relates, not only to the pragmatic force but to the content and the semantic structure of verbal utterances; and he needs to explore such a relation, not only historically, but from a systematic or functional point of view.

Indeed, in *Logic* Dewey goes on to ask how linguistically mediated behaviour may indeed condition valid 'inference and reasoning' and how language may contribute to establish a 'logical', not merely 'a temporal relation' in and between propositions (LW12: 51). The bold response is that language 'has its own distinctive structure' which is capable of abstraction as a form required for inquiry (LW12: 51); Dewey thus recognises the need for an account not only of communication but of linguistic structure, and hence of the semantic structure of verbal utterances.

Given the bottom-up approach at stake, however, we may expect that linguistic structure at a synchronic level of abstraction should be conceptualised on the basis of data concerning social behaviour, verbal or other. In fact, the latter commitment qualifies a negative relation to the new generation of analytic philosophers, the logical positivists and Rudolf Carnap in particular. In so far as the latter use the terms "sentence" and "word", and apply formal devices to purge natural language sentences for metaphysical contents, Dewey criticises two analytic moves made

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3 This conception of language is elsewhere aptly expressed as 'language as *communication* maintaining group organization' (1964: 302).

or assumed.

Firstly, he rejects the idea that formal, mathematical structure can be projected on to a natural language to capture linguistic, particularly syntactic, structure *per se*.<sup>4</sup> In relation to this he also rejects a thesis that became influential in American linguistics through Leonard Bloomfield and that was developed by Noam Chomsky; namely, the view that natural language syntax is *autonomous* in relation to semantic (or cognitive or other) aspects of verbal signs. Thus Dewey not only refuses to accept the idea that ‘the stringing together of [sounds]’ as purely physical sign vehicles can be called ‘language’ (LW12: 53–4) but also that one may establish ‘distinctions between nouns, verbs, adjectives, prepositions, and connectives ... without taking account of [the] meaning [of the words]’ (LW12: 286).<sup>5</sup> This even denies him the opportunity to use the *Immediate Constituent-analysis* as a descriptive tool – a tool anticipated and used by Charles Peirce.<sup>6</sup>

We may also identify a second critique directed against the philosophic-semantic category

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4 He criticizes ‘logical positivism’ for making an ‘over-sharp distinction between matter and form, under the captions of “meaning of words” and “syntactical relations”, and he attributes this analytic mistake to ‘the influence of logical formalism, derived from analysis of mathematics’ (LW12: 285). In his correspondence with Bentley he later he asks, with reference to Charles Morris and Rudolf Carnap’s notion of *syntactic*,: ‘[i]s it possible that “syntactics” is a case of failure to see that symbols are not matters of relations of “things”? I can’t see that the analogy of grammar (syntax) and mathematics holds’ (1964: 283).

5 In his correspondence with Bentley Dewey considers Charles Morris’ attempt to integrate Carnap’s logical syntax in a general and tripartite semiotic (consisting of syntax, semantics and pragmatics and covering natural languages as well as the so-called “language of science”), and his attempt to ground his semiotic in a general behaviouristic account of linguistic meaning. However, as Dewey starts to read Morris in the 1940s he is nothing but disappointed since Morris account would imply that ‘signs are isolated’ both from ‘what they designate’ and from ‘the behavioural event in which alone they are signs’ (1964: 282). Dewey therefore finds Morris thesis of the so-called ‘dual control of linguistic structure’ totally ungrounded: i.e., the thesis that ‘the syntactical structure of language is, in general, a function both of objective events and of behaviour, and of not of either alone’ (1964: 285).

6 See my interpretation of Peirce in Midtgarden 2002 and 200?.

of verbal signs, *sentences*, to which one of two truth values appertains on purely formal grounds (LW12: 287), and to which semantic structure can be assigned independent of any context of language use. Famously, in his theory of inquiry Dewey claims that ‘any sentence isolated from place and function in inquiry is logically indeterminate’ (LW12: 138), and he more particularly rejects Bertrand Russell’s notion of epistemically privileged *atomic propositions* since it involves the fallacy of converting ‘a function in inquiry into an independent structure’ (LW12: 151). Still, how is the background semantics (as distinct from the theory of inquiry) to provide a positive yet independent account of semantic (or semantically relevant) sentence structure; in particular, such structure as is required for ‘the form of language as an agency of inquiry’ (LW12: 51)?

#### ***4. An account of grammatical sentence form***

Dewey’s positive account of grammatical sentence form is developed in tandem with a critical reconstruction of the linguistic roots of ontological metaphysics. On the latter reconstruction, ontological metaphysics consists in a ‘[h]ypostization of *Logos*’ which, in turn, is occasioned by a reflection ‘upon language, upon *logos*, in its syntactical structure and its wealth of meaning contents’ (LW12: 63). The hypostization occurred, Dewey says in *Experience and Nature*, when ‘the Greeks... took the structure of discourse for the structure of things ... [and] ... conceived of ideal meanings as the ultimate frameworks of events, in which a system of substances and properties correspond to subjects and predicates of the uttered proposition.’ (LW1: 136). Still, what is at issue is not only the reification of the meaning of sentence segments but also the isolating of such meaning from verbal discourse. By considering grammatical subjects in particular Dewey suggests how these two fatale steps may be rectified by a positive account of linguistic structure.

In its proper linguistic sense, Dewey claims, the term “subject” concerns the organization through discourse of what the discourse is *about*. Thus term “subject” applies to ‘what you talk or write about running off on the symbolic side into topic, theme’ (1964: 141–2). The term is more specifically said to apply to sentence form such that ‘[t]he *grammatical* subject is the subject-matter that is taken to be common, agreed upon, “understood” as between communicator and the one communicated to’ (LW12: 285/180). While this approach is not altogether clear as to the

level of semantic analysis, the focus ‘on the symbolic side’ (1964: 141–2) would commit Dewey’s account of the grammatical subject to a level of *linguistically structured content*.<sup>7</sup> Further, by treating “subject” as synonymous with “topic” and “theme” (1964: 142, 226, 335) Dewey sides with 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century linguists who take the semantic content expressed by a grammatical subject to be typically structured, not only through a sentence, but through discourse. Moreover, in *Logic* he assumes that grammatical subject-predicate form reflects what linguists now study as *information structure* by the distinction *topic-comment* or that of *theme-rheme*. Accordingly, a topic of discourse, typically reflected by a content expressed through the grammatical subject, sets conditions for what is said about it such that the said is informative (or conversationally meaningful) only if it is *relevant* with respect to the topic, given the direction of ongoing discourse and the background knowledge of the interlocutors. What is said about the topic is usually expressed by the grammatical ‘predicate’, and may be seen to be ‘relevant to the experience and beliefs of the hearer’ (LW12: 285). Sometimes Dewey even claims that ‘the meaning of any single word depends upon topic, theme, subject of conversation ... [*relevance*] to *knowledge*’ (1964: 226, my emph.).

Dewey’s critical strategy is to see Greek ontological metaphysics as conditioned by the information structure of discourse reflected, in turn, by grammatical subject-predicate form. Briefly put, topics introduced and assumed in discourse, and typically reflected through grammatical subjects, provide an occasion for Aristotle’s doctrine of *hypokeimenon* or *substance*. When abstracted from discourse, the grammatical subject of a sentence might be taken to refer to some ‘material ... completely given independently of inquiry and of need of inquiry’ (LW12: 285). The next step is semantic reification: ‘“Entity”, if it says or names anything, is a synonym for “subject,” “topic,” “theme,” when it [has] undergone reification, just as “thing” is sometimes reified in metaphysics into “substance” as [an] independent entity’ (1964: 335). Notably, a similar kind of abstraction and reification is seen to underlie the notion of *sense data* or ‘the immediately given character of the subject-content of propositions’ – and the associated epistemological doctrine of *atomic propositions* (LW12: 285).

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7 In his correspondence with Bentley Dewey clarifies that his use of the term “proposition” in *Logic* assumes that a *proposition* is ‘linguistic ... in content, subjectmatter, meanings’ (1964: 111).



An account of the information structure of discourse, however, also provides an independent, positive account of inquiry. More specifically, if in a particular context of discourse the intent 'is use of what is already taken as known as means of inquiry into the as yet unknown and problematic' (LW12: 285), the notion of information structure may show how symbolic means of inquiry, *propositions* (LW12: 139), emerge out of verbal interaction. In so far, the notion of information structure may provide a clue as to how the Meadean account of communication is linked to an account of the cognitively relevant structure of verbal utterances.

Still, given the rather unsettled theoretical status of the notion of information structure in linguistics (Seuren 1998), we should ask how the latter may indeed contribute to Dewey's account of linguistic structure. Does he, for example, assume that this notion refers to a cognitive level of description independent from linguistic structure proper? Consider Dewey's perhaps most elaborate account of grammatical subject-predicate form:

'The *grammatical* subject is the subject-matter that is taken to be common, agreed upon, "understood" as between the communicator and the one communicated to. The grammatical predicate, is that which is taken to be in the knowledge or thought of the one giving information or advice, but not in the knowledge or thought of the receiver. Suppose the sentence to be "The dog is lost." The meaning of "the dog" is, or is supposed to be, common for all parties; that of "is lost" to be in possession of the speaker, and while relevant to the experience and beliefs of the hearer, not previously known by him.' (LW12: 285)

Notice that the focus is on sentence grammar, and on the cognitive and communicative significance of sentence grammar itself. The background is here Dewey's concern with the ontological temptations that might arise from treating sentences in isolation (LW12: 284-5): methodologically he thus chooses to view sentence grammar in abstraction from knowledge of a *particular* context of language use and in abstraction from 'an intent which can be adjudged only by means of context' (LW12: 284). The connection to discourse is therefore *indirect*, via the more abstract level of sentence grammar. While in Dewey's example a particular morpho-syntactic form (with definite article) occupies subject position, his point is more general and concerns subject-predicate form as such: in terms of modern linguistic theory, grammatical sentence form is seen to reflect information structure otherwise *unmarked* by particular morpho-syntactic (or

prosodic) features of the sentence segments (Lambrecht 1995: 15–8, 136 ). In so far, Dewey is concerned with information structure, not at some independent, cognitive level of description, but as reflected by subject-predicate form. We might say that the notion of information structure is applied, not to discourse, but to the ‘organization of the sentence within discourse’ (Lambrecht 1995: 7). Given this specification, the background semantics gains relevance in the light of recent Dewey scholarship: if in the theory of inquiry *propositions* are analysed as *vehicles of information* (Burke 1994: 176), background semantics would provide an independent account of how such vehicles are conditioned by the information structure reflected by sentence grammar.

Still, the background semantics needs further clarification. If sentence grammar reflects information structure, what is the nature of the *informational content* structured, and *how*, more specifically, is content structured? Notably, the account at stake suggests that informational content, both old and new, is *propositionally* structured: what is introduced as new informational content is not sufficiently established in virtue of the lexical meaning of either of the utterance segments; rather, it is established through ways in which the lexico-grammatical forms evoke both what is already ‘in’ the interlocutors’ *thought* regarding the topic of discourse and also *beliefs* related to it in virtue of which what is said about it becomes relevant (LW12: 285). Hence, the new informational (and propositional) content depends on background knowledge presupposed and evoked by the utterance. How, more specifically, is background knowledge evoked?

The account at stake may be seen to complement Mead’s analysis according to which the meaning of a verbal utterance is established through action coordination conditioned by modes of response distributed in a social group. On the latter analysis, Dewey’s example, the utterance “The dog is gone”, would condition informational content through being received and responded to as, say, *a request* to participate in searching for the animal the whereabouts of which is at stake. Still, in order to establish such action coordination, the interlocutors must be able to identify the referent of the utterance as a topic of ongoing discourse. While an actually accomplished intersubjective identification would rely on mechanisms for action coordination, the new account suggests that informational content depends on the interlocutors’ ability to identify the referent of the utterance, and, further, that this ability draws on linguistic evidence of two kinds.

Firstly, the ability would be supported by the grammatical subject’s reflecting an

otherwise *unmarked topic* of discourse; secondly, evidence is given by ways in which the utterance segments are *morpho-syntactically marked*. Thus in Dewey's example, the grammatical subject provides evidence both by its very sentence initial position and by the use of definite article ("*the dog*").<sup>8</sup> Generally, such structural aspects may provide relevant evidence by linking the utterance up with ongoing discourse. How? As for '*objects*' to be identified through verbal discourse, Dewey makes clear few years later, 'their practical communicative reference [are] to distinctions-identifications *previously made out and later taken for granted* as there in common to speaker and speakee' (1964: 394, last emph. mine). Such object reference, accomplished by means of distinctions previously made out in discourse, is qualified as 'conventionalized reference' (1964: 394). How, then, does such conventionality concern structural relations between an utterance and previous discourse?

If the conventionality conditions that, in issuing and interpreting utterances, interlocutors rely on distinctions previously made and used in saying something about the topic of discourse, the segment of an utterance referring to the topic may typically evoke *pragmatic presuppositions* (Lambrecht 1995: 65–73, 151–2). Pragmatic presuppositions established in discourse may be evoked both through the grammatical segment's sentence initial position and through the segment's marked form, such as a definite description reflecting distinctions already made out and used. Thus the grammatical subject may articulate a 'subject-matter ... taken to be ... agreed upon, "understood" ' (LW12: 285).

As a component of the notion of information structure as defined above, the notion of pragmatic presuppositions gives coherence and credibility to Dewey's background semantics. *Taking each others perspectives* in verbal discourse may now be seen to rely, not only on mechanisms for action coordination, but on ways in which the grammatical form of an utterance conditions agreement in informational content as well. More important, the notion of information structure, as reflected in sentence grammar, may provide an independent account of how linguistic 'structure is capable of abstraction as ... the form of language as an agency of inquiry' (LW12: 51).

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8 See Dewey's comment: 'When we speak of "the river" or "the mountain" we usually mean to refer to a singular familiar object' (ED2: 154).

## 5. *Structural-linguistic conditions for the aboutness of propositions*

According to Dewey, *propositions*, the symbolic means of inquiry, are such that the linguistic ‘symbolizations’ involved are no mere ‘external garb’ (LW12: 287); as he maintains few years later, propositions are ‘linguistic’ even ‘in content, subjectmatter, meaning’ (1964: 111). Further, such symbolizations would be situated in verbal discourse in so far as ‘propositions’ are ‘something pro-posed – put before some group or public for consideration’ (1964: 105); hence, a proposition occurs only ‘in a network or complex of propositions ... including counter-proposals’ (1964: 105). The theory of inquiry itself, however, is primarily concerned with a rational reconstruction of such networks or complexes, i.e., with ‘[the order of propositions] that can be instituted only *after* an inquirer has reached a valid conclusion and surveys the ground upon which it is taken to be justified’ (LW12: 310). Still, there is a structural-linguistic basis for such reconstructions; more specifically, information structure would condition any logical order of propositions in so far as propositions are primitively defined by two related forms of *aboutness*.

Firstly, a proposition is *about* a subject matter it serves as means to determine in the course of an inquiry; namely some existing *indeterminate situation*. Such aboutness is not established in virtue of one (or more) referential term(s) as constituent(s) of the proposition since ‘the situation cannot present itself as an element in a proposition’ (LW5: 247), and therefore ‘a proposition is said to be about something which does not appear as a term in the proposition’ (LW12: 180). Secondly, however, propositions serve as means to determine a situation through having subject matters structured as *contents* (LW12: 122); contents constitute the second form of propositional aboutness. Dewey’s theory of inquiry allows for contents of two kinds: contents describing factual subject matters by which problematic features of a situation are identified; and contents concerning ‘meanings and their relations’ suggesting a direction for transforming the situation (LW12: 139). To use one of Dewey’s examples: if an indeterminate situation underlies some ‘perplexing question of foreign relations’, the two kinds of content would be established by ‘propositions *about* states of fact and about rules of international law’ (LW12: 180).

As for the first kind of aboutness, an indeterminate situation cannot as such be made the *topic* of a proposition; rather, in being ‘*questionable*’ (LW12: 109) a situation sets limits for possible topics and for what may be asked or affirmed about topics. Such questionability is articulated by contents through the ‘interrogative aspect’ of propositions as such (LW12: 170),

i.e., their being ‘questions ... addressed to existential-subject matter’ and functioning in inquiry as ‘a request for information’ (LW12: 171). Even for simple propositions marking their logical subjects by a mere demonstrative “this”, ‘[t]here must be some one *question* to which both the subject “this” and the predicate ... are relevant ... [and] ... [t]hat question grows out of and is controlled by some total situation’ (LW12: 129). Contents thus articulated as requests for, and as meeting requests for information, are first organized by information structure as reflected by grammatical sentence form. As emerging in verbal discourse contents are sequentially articulated such that subject-predicate form reflects, on the one side, topics described as *problematic situations* (or situations under inquiry), and, on the other, what is asked or affirmed about such situations on the basis of the previously said and now presupposed. As for the latter, grammatical predicates typically provide a linguistic basis for developing propositions as pro-proposals; ‘something proposed, propounded for further consideration’ (LW12: 286). On the basis of the information structure reflected (including pragmatic presuppositions), and after significant stages of discourse and inquiry, sequences of contents may be rationally reconstructed as *inferential* relations; thus ‘logical relation[s] in and of propositions’ (LW12: 51) are established.

Finally, information structure may be seen to condition a more developed form of aboutness that arise through contents; the aboutness of *objects*. Let us first note how this aboutness is defined. The theory of inquiry lays down that what may be talked and reasoned about as *objects* must have been ‘previously determined as outcomes of inquiries’ (LW12: 122). It is part of the strategy of defending the ‘autonomy of logic’ (see above) to construe objecthood in terms of warrantably assertible results of inquiry, and to reject received ontological conceptions of the *givenness* of objects; not only the Aristotelian *substances*, but ‘the idea that *any* kind of subject such as “this” or a sense datum, can be given ready-made to predication’ (LW12: 96n5).

On a rational reconstruction, an *object* is ‘that *set of connected distinctions or characteristics* which emerges as a definite constituent of a resolved situation and which is confirmed in the continuity of inquiry’ (LW12: 512, my emph). In actual, ongoing inquiry, however, such distinctions and characteristics emerge through a concrete, descriptive use of words in sentences containing singular terms. To establish intersubjectively the reference of “this”, Dewey argues against Russell’s *atomic propositions*, requires a ‘minimum of description’ (LW12: 241–2, see also 356). Semantically, the reference of demonstrative as well as other

singular terms is established in virtue of some *intensional meaning* having a *differentiating function* in a given context of inquiry: what enables ‘[that for which] an existential term [stands] to be a subject of discourse and inquiry’ is that the term ‘*already* has some differentiated and differential intension’ (LW12: 363, my emph.).

The background semantics takes steps to provide an independent account of how ‘a subject of discourse and inquiry’ (LW12: 363) is established, and how the required differentiating distinctions emerge through discourse. As we have seen, the background semantics claims that, when *objects* are identified through linguistic interaction, ‘their practical communicative reference [are] to distinctions-identifications previously made out and later taken for granted as there in common to speaker and speakee’ (1964: 394). In structural terms, such ‘conventionalized reference’ (1964: 394) may be conditioned both by unmarked information structure reflected by subject-predicate form and morpho-syntactically marked information structure.

## **6. Final remark: making it explicit**

Dewey’s background semantics recognises levels of linguistic structure with cognitive significance in ordinary verbal interaction, and with a further conditioning effect on rational reconstructions of inferential relations between propositions. In so far as linguistic structure itself ties sentences to verbal *activity*, although indirectly, it seems reasonable to suggest that background semantics uncovers a linguistic-structural medium for inquiry as *rational activity* and for inquirers as *rational agents*. Let us end by noting that, by extension, the background semantics may in fact provide an independent account of inquiry as practice. Again, the approach is motivated by the theory of inquiry itself.

To state general conditions for present and future inquiries is, according to Dewey, to formulate a *postulate* which ‘involves the assumption of *responsibilities*’ for what is stated (LW12: 24, my emph). Such responsibilities, however, are situated in a mutual normative relation: they correspond to *claims to be met* in the sense that ‘a claim presents a title or has authority to receive due consideration’ (LW12: 24). This further suggests the rational modes of discourse at stake are conditioned by certain implicit features of ordinary social intercourse in ways similar to how legal transactions, even laws themselves, might be seen as ‘*explicit*

*statements* of what was previously only *implicit* in customs: namely, *formal recognition* of *duties* and *rights*' (LW12: 24, my emph.). Legal discourse aside, the analysis suggested calls for an independent justification.

Language structures social activity, we are told, through modes of response. While Mead and Dewey thus suggest a functional perspective on 'language as *communication* maintaining group organization' (1964: 302), the notion of *responsitivity* uncovers a moral space where the linguistic agent not only takes the perspectives of others, but may, as Dewey and James H. Tufts says in *Ethics*, 'become responsible, that is, responsive to the needs and claims of others, to the obligations implicit in his position' (ED2: 352). Linguistic activity thus consists in making explicit what is implicit in social relations, and in articulating claims to be acknowledged, since '[t]o be right, [the claim] must be an acknowledged claim, having ... the emotional and intellectual assent of the community.' (ED2: 318). Hence, background semantics, or what may perhaps rather be termed "background *pragmatics*", points to a both social and linguistic basis for the analysis of rational discourse in terms of correspondences between responsibilities and entitlements. Moreover, the theory of inquiry and its background theory can be seen to anticipate the recent account of linguistic communication as *a game of giving and asking for reasons* (Brandom 1994). Still, Dewey and Tufts remind us, there are natural constraints as to what can be made explicit and what claims can become acknowledged as rights since

'[m]en live together naturally and inevitably in society; in companionship and competition; in relations of cooperation and subordination. These relations are expressed in demands, claims, expectations. One person has the conviction that fulfilment of his demands by others is his *right*; to these others it comes as an *obligation*, something owed, due, to those who assert the claim'' (ED2: 354).

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