# Sellars's Hyper-Inferentialism

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**A Pragmatist Theory of Meaning:** Understand the *meanings* of linguistic expressions in terms of their *use*.

> ***Wittgenstein:*** *"The meaning of a word is its use in the language."*

**A *Normative* Pragmatist Theory of Meaning:** Understand the meanings of linguistic expression in terms of the *rules* governing their use.

**An *Inferentialist* Theory of Meaning:** Understand the meanings of linguistic expressions in terms of the *inferential* rules governing their use.

**The Point:** A *pragmatist theory of meaning* aims to yield a theory of *conceptual understanding*.

**Sellars's Legacy:** One of Wilfrid Sellars's most significant legacies for analytic philosophy is his pioneering development of an inferentialist theory of meaning.

**However:** The basic shape of Sellars's inferentialist theory is *radically misunderstood.*

**The Supposed Legacy of Sellars's "Inferentalism"**

> **Maher:** "The big idea is to expand our conception of the rational or inferential role of assertion beyond its relation to other linguistic acts," (29)
>
> **Steinberger and Murzi:** "In order to be able to accommodate expressions that are less straightforwardly explained in inferential terms, global inferentialists will have to include 'language-entry' and 'language-exit' rules (Sellars, 1953) among the relevant 'inferential' connections.

**My Aim Here:** Convince you that Maher, Steinberger and Murzi, along with the vast majority of commentators, radically misunderstand Sellars's theory of meaning:

1. Expanding "inferences" to include "language-entries" and "language-exits" is *not* part of Sellars's theory of content.
2. The *only* rules that figure in Sellars's theory of content are those pertaining to *inferences proper.*

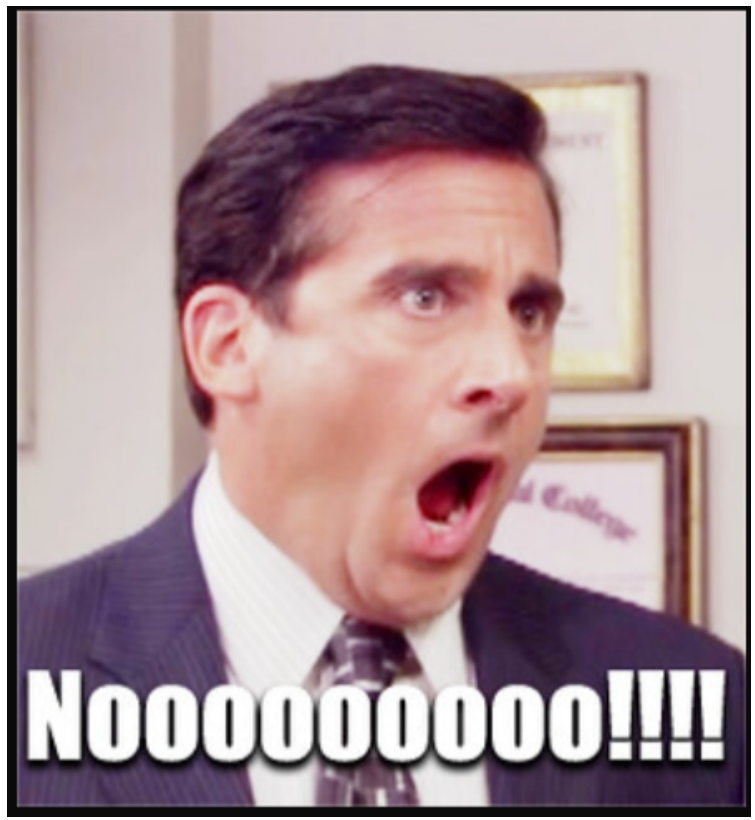
# The Supposedly Sellarsian View

**The Kinds of "Broadly Inferential" Rules:**

1. **Language-Language Rules:** Inferential rules proper, relating uses of language to other uses of language. These split into two kinds:
   - 1.1 **Formal Inferential Rules:** For example, from (the licit assertion of) "The ball is red and round," you can assert "The ball is red."
   - 1.2 **Material Inferential Rules:** For example, from "The ball is red," you can assert "The ball is colored."
2. **Language-Entry Rules:** "Quasi-inferential" rules relating perceptual circumstances to uses of language.
   - For example, from the perceptual circumstance of seeing a red ball, you can assert "The ball is red."
3. **Language-Exit Rules:** "Quasi-inferential" rules relating uses of language to intentional actions.
   - For example, from the assertion "I shall now raise my hand," you should perform the action of raising your hand.

# Sellars's View?

The terms "language-entry" and "language-exit" are drawn from Sellars's "Some Reflections on Language Games" (1954), and the view I've laid out is widely taken to be Sellars's inferentialist account of content. *Is it?*



# The Sellarsian Critique

**On the contrary:** Far from *endorsing* this view, in his writings on inferentialism, Sellars argues *again and again* in literally *all of his writings on inferentialism* that attempting to account for conceptual content with a theory that includes rules this sort is *viciously circular!*

1. Language, Rules, and Behavior (1949)
2. Outlines of a Philosophy of Language (1950)
3. "Inference and Meaning" (1953)
4. "Is there a Synthetic A Priori" (1953)

**The problem is obvious!** Consider again a rule of the form

> **Language-Entry:** If you're in the perceptual circumstance of seeing something red, you can assert "This is red"

It's clear that following a rule of this form *presupposes* and so cannot (in part) *account for* grasp of the concept *red*!

# Language, Rules, and Behavior (1949)

**Regulism as Opposed to Rationalism:** Sellars develops what he calls a "regulist" position, aiming to understand our grasp of content in terms of our mastery of linguistic rules.

**Against Regulist Appeals to "Sense Meaning" Rules:** Certain "overly enthusiastic regulists" have claimed "that the hook-up of an empirically meaningful language with the world is a matter of rules of linguistic usage," (§21).

> **Example of Such a Rule:** "When I have such and such experiences, I am to use the expression 'I see red'" (§23).

**The Issue:**

- According to the regulists, "there is no such thing as cognition unmediated by symbols," (§23). Thus, there is no cognition of things *as red* apart from one's grasp of the rules governing the symbol "red."
- But such cognition is precisely what one needs to grasp the "sense meaning rule" that is supposed to constitute the meaning of "red."
- So, an account that maintains that it is through knowledge of such rules that one acquires knowledge of the meaning of "red" is circular.

# Later Statements of the Same Circularity (1950 1953a, 1953b)

**"Outlines of a Philosophy of Language":** Could there be a rule "When X token 'X"'? No. To take account of (be conscious of) in a rule governed way *is* to token. Consequently, living up to this supposed rule would presuppose the occurrence to be accounted for in terms of the rule, (1950, §2.323311, my italics).

**From both "Inference and Meaning" and "Is there a Synthetic A Priori":** Obeying a rule requires recognizing that a circumstance is one to which the rule applies. If there *were* such a thing as a semantical rule by adoption of which a descriptive term acquires meaning, it would presumably be of the form 'Red objects are to be designated by the word "red".' But to recognize the circumstances in which this rule has application, one must already have the concept of red! (1953a, 133).

# Sellars's Response: Hyper-Inferentialism

**So:** In accounting for conceptual content Sellars *explicitly rejects* the appeal to so-called "language-entry rules" which connect the use of words to sensory experiences or perceptions of objects

**Instead:** He maintains that content must be understood *entirely in terms of intra-linguistic rules.*

> **From "Is there a Synthetic A Priori:** "[A]ll conceptual meaning, the conceptual meaning of descriptive as well as logical symbols, is constituted, *completely* constituted, by syntactical [i.e. intralinguistic] rules," (§9).

**Sellars's Claim:** By expanding the inferences beyond *logical* inferences, to *material* ones (which are still *inferences proper*), we can account for the content of descriptive terms.

> **In "Inference and Meaning":** "[M]aterial transformation rules determine the descriptive meaning of the expressions of a language within the framework provided by its logical transformation rules," (336).

**But:** *What* material inferences should we *actually include* in our inferentialist theory to completely account for the content of a descriptive term like "red"?

> Sellars is less explicit here than one might hope.

# An Unhelpful First Answer

**The Question Again:** Which material inferences constitute the descriptive content of "red"?

**An Unhelpful First Answer:** All of them!


> **Sellars's Radical Holism:** "[T]here is an important sense in which one has *no* concept pertaining to the observable properties of physical objects in Space and Time unless one has them all"

**Still:** Clearly *some* inferences are going to be more central to the meaning of "red" than others. In particular, we want to capture, in inferential terms, the way in which "red" can be deployed non-inferentially in perception. How should we understand *those* inferences?

# "Standard Observers in Standard Conditions"

**A Necessary Truth:** In "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" Sellars draws our attention to the following necessary truth:

> $x$ is red $\leftrightarrow$ $x$ looks red to standard observers in standard conditions.

**Sellars's Claim:** This biconditional always holds not because the right side is an analysis of the left side but "standard observers in standard conditions" just means the conditions in which things *are as they look*, (EPM, §18).

> **In Other Words:** "Standard observers in standard conditions" is a *no defeaters* marker. Grasping its inferential significance (relative to a given a perceptual modality) is grasping what sorts of *potential* defeaters it *rules out*.

**Two Defeasible Inferences:** where $n$ is an observer of $x$:

> **Left-to-Right:** $x$ is red $\rightsquigarrow$ $x$ looks red to $n$
> **Right-to-Left:** $x$ looks red to $n \rightsquigarrow$ $x$ is red

**The Thought:** To grasp the significance of "$n$ is a standard observer in standard conditions" is to know under what conditions (with what additional premises) these defeasible inferences *stay* good and under what conditions they *do not* stay good.

**Sellars on "Standard Conditions":** "[W]hich conditions are standard for a given mode of perception is, at the common-sense level, specified by a list of conditions which exhibit the vagueness and open texture characteristic of ordinary discourse," (§18).

**Claim:** It is precisely these "vague and open textured" inferences that we need to consider in order to inferentially articulate the way in which "red" can be deployed non-inferentially in perception.

**Inferences Pertaining to 1:** where $n$ is an observer of $x$:

1. $x$ is red $\rightsquigarrow$ $x$ looks red to $n$
2. It is completely dark out, $x$ is red $\not\rightsquigarrow$ $x$ looks red to $n$
3. $n$ is color blind, $x$ is red $\not\rightsquigarrow$ $x$ looks red to $n$

**Inferences Pertaining to 2:** where $n$ is an observer of $x$:

1. $x$ looks red to $n \rightsquigarrow$ $x$ is red
2. $x$ looks red to $n$, $x$ is cast under red lighting $\not\rightsquigarrow$ $x$ is red
3. $x$ looks red to $n$, $n$ has red contacts in $\not\rightsquigarrow$ $x$ is red

**The Thought, Once Again:** Grasping the content of "standard observers in standard conditions" just is grasping the goodness (and badness) of these premise-adding inferences.

**Question:** Do we *really need* to grasp the content of "standard observers in standard conditions," constituted by these inferences, in order to grasp the content of "red" or "green"?

**According to Sellars, *Yes*:** "Not only must the conditions be of a sort that is appropriate for determining the color of an object by looking, the subject must *know* that conditions of this sort are appropriate. And while this does not imply that one must have concepts before one has them, it does imply that one can have the concept of green only by having a whole battery of concepts of which it is one element," (EPM, §19).

**The Point of Emphasis:** This "conceptual knowledge" one must posses in order to have the concept green is not knowledge of some "language-entry" rule. Rather, it is *inferential* knowledge of the additional premises under which one can and cannot move from "$x$ looks red" to "$x$ is red" and vice versa.

**Crucially:** The only things that figure in Sellars's theory of the conceptual content of "red," on this reconstruction, are *inferences*!

# Language-Entries and Language-Exits Revisited

**A Lingering Question:** What about Sellars's invocation of "language-entries" and "language-exits" (for instance, in "Some Reflections on Language Games")?

> **A First Point:** Sellars *never* talks about "language entry *moves*" or "language entry *rules*." Rather, he talks about language-entry and language-exit *transitions*, and he is clear that they are *not* rule-governed moves.

**The Place of Entries and Exits:** An account of these transitions, which we are habituated to make through linguistic training, forms part of Sellars's theory of the "pattern-governed" linguistic behavior that constitutes the *substructure* that makes "rule-governed" linguistic activity possible.

**The Place of Inferential Rules:** Above this substructure, "there towers a superstructure of more or less developed systems of rule-regulated symbol activity which constitutes man's intellectual vision," (LRB, §15).

**Claim:** It is the inferential rules belonging to this superstructure that constitute the conceptual contents we grasp.

# Language-Entries and Language-Exits Revisited

**A Distinction from Philosophy of Language:**

1. **Semantics:** Articulates *what* the meanings are.
2. **Metasemantics:** Explains *why* the meanings are what they are and *how* they come to be what they are.

**Excluded in Sellars's Semantics:** Sellars's inferentialist *semantics* involves only the *rules* corresponding to "language-language" transitions.

- This is the part of his theory that aims to account for the conceptual contents grasped by speakers of a language.

**Included in Sellars's Metasemantics:** Sellars discusses "language-entry *transitions*" and "language-exit *transitions*" (he never says "moves" or "rules") only in the context of his *metasemantic* theory.

- This is the part of his theory aims (among other things) to give an "account of the connection between language and living in a world," (SRLG, §33).

# Conclusion

**Four Main Claims:**

1. Sellars is an inferentialist, *properly so-called*, about conceptual content, maintaining that it is *completely constituted by inferential rules.*
2. He maintains that the supposed alternative "regulist" account of content, which involves "rules" from perceptual circumstances to uses of language, is *viciously circular.*
3. The material inferences that constitute the content of "red," on his account, include those pertaining to the conditions in which things are or are not as they look.
4. Language-entries and language-exits figure in his overall theory of language as part of his *explanation of the relation between language and the world*, but *not* as part of his *inferentialist account of content.*

谢谢！期待你们的问题！