

Transcendental Linguistics and Picturing

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March 31, 2025

1 Introduction

“Transcendental linguistics” is Sellars’s successor concept to Kant’s transcendental logic. Whereas transcendental logic attempts to delineate the general features that would be common to the functioning of any cognitive capacity to achieve knowledge of objects in any possible world, transcendental linguistics “attempts to delineate the general features that would be common to the epistemic functioning of any language in any possible world,” (KTE, 452). Though Sellars does not deploy the term “transcendental linguistics” too often in his corpus, the basic idea of transcendental linguistics is present from the very beginning of his philosophical career, and several central aspects of his philosophical system can be fruitfully classified as belonging under that label. Perhaps most notably among these aspects is his theory of *picturing*, which, though clearly a critical aspect of his philosophy of language, remains poorly understood. This chapter considers the different aspects of the project of transcendental linguistics, as envisioned by Sellars, leveraging an important distinction in contemporary linguistics and philosophy of language—between *semantics* (which aims to explain *what* meanings are) and *metasemantics* (which aims to explain *why* meanings are what they are and *how* they come to be what they are)—as an organizational guide. Sellars, at various different places in his writing, asks transcendental questions of *both* sorts, and appreciating what sort of question he is addressing at which places, I take it, is crucial to sorting the myriad elements of Sellars’s basic philosophical picture, which can seem contradictory at times. Most fundamentally, only by carefully drawing this distinction is one able to make clear sense of the apparent *doubling* of representational notions that appears in Sellars’s philosophy of language: with traditional semantic notions like truth and signification, on the one hand, belonging to Sellars’s *semantic* theory, and the notion of picturing, on the other hand, belonging to Sellars’s (transcendental) *metasemantic* theory.

2 The Kantian Framing of Sellars's Philosophy of Language

Kant's basic project in theoretical philosophy, advertised under the label of "transcendental logic," aims to articulate the necessary structural features of any cognitive capacity capable of achieving knowledge of objects. This is, as Sellars terms it, a kind of "transcendental psychology," articulating the general structure of "a mind that gains knowledge of the world of which it is a part" (KTE, 440). Sellars was taken by this Kantian project since his time as a graduate student at Oxford, and, yet, equally taken by the linguistic turn in analytic philosophy, Sellars sought from the outset of his philosophical career to synthesize the two programs.¹ Sellars's earliest papers concerned themselves with a project that he dubbed "pure pragmatics," which he would later describe as aiming to articulate in completely general terms "what it is to be a language that is about a world in which it is used" (KTE, 452). In his first publication, "Pure Pragmatics and Epistemology," Sellars explicitly situates this project as a linguistic successor to Kant's transcendental psychology. The linguistification of the Kantian program, as Sellars saw it, was a way of freeing this program from any problematic remnants of *psychologism*, a philosophical pathology most famously diagnosed by Frege that involves blurring the distinction between philosophical concepts and those of empirical psychology. Sellars claims that "it is in pure pragmatics [. . .] that Kant's Copernican revolution receives its non-psychologistic fruition," (PPE §10). He is clear, however, that, in some sense, his project *just is* the Kantian transcendental project, noting "I should not object to the term 'transcendental logic' in place of 'pure pragmatics'," (RNWW).

Through the next few decades, as Sellars went on to develop a more robust conception of language as a world-involving, norm-governed social practice, he would eventually drop talk of the specific program of "pure pragmatics."² However, the basic idea of his project in philosophy of language as a transcendental one, in the Kantian sense, never went away, nor would the explicitly Kantian framing of his basic project. Indeed, as Sellars began to engage much more substantially and explicitly with Kant's philosophy in his mature writings, this framing became much more explicit. Sellars's most notable engagement with Kant is his 1965 Locke Lectures, published in 1968 as *Science and Metaphysics*, in which Sellars frames his entire philosophical project in the context of a Kantian transcendental framework. It is

¹As told in his autobiographical reflections (AR).

²See Olen (2016) Ch. 5 for an account of this shift in Sellars's thinking.

in 1967 paper “Some Remarks on Kant’s Theory of Experience” that he first explicitly introduces term “transcendental linguistics,” describing the project as one that “attempts to delineate the general features that would be common to the epistemic functioning of any language in any possible world,” (KTE, 452). There, he situates transcendental linguistics as an advance over Kant’s transcendental psychology in that it enables one to consider the essential social character of linguistic training. As we’ll see, it is indeed in this social contextualization of the transcendental project that separates Sellars’s project most starkly from Kant’s.³

Sellars’s philosophy of language is complex and multi-dimensional, corresponding to the complex and multi-dimensional nature of language itself. On the one hand, he is an *inferentialist* about the conceptual content, conceiving of the concepts expressed by linguistic expressions entirely in terms of the inferential rules governing their use. Yet, he maintains that there is at least a dimension of meaning that involves the fact that the actual uses of words in a linguistic practice are systematically responsive to and constrained by elements of extra-linguistic reality. Moreover, he takes it that there are certain conditions necessarily required for this constraint. For each of these dimensions of Sellars’s philosophy of language, there is a corresponding transcendental question: insofar as a meaningful language essentially involves this of dimension, what must its structure be? To clearly distinguish these different transcendental questions, it will be helpful to draw on a distinction widely deployed in contemporary philosophy of language and linguistics between *semantics*, which aims to articulate *what* linguistic meanings are, and *metasemantics*, which aims to explain *why* linguistic meanings are what they are and *how* they come to be what they are. Corresponding to these two theoretical aims, we can distinguish between two distinct transcendental questions:⁴

Transcendental Semantics: What are the necessary logical features of the structured space of semantic contents conferred by the use of a meaningful language and what are the fundamental semantic relations that obtain between the expressions of the language and the elements of that space?

Transcendental Metasemantics: What are the necessary matter-of-factual features of language use, the extra-linguistic world, and the necessary

³To what extent Sellars’s project is thus better described as a “Hegelian,” or, perhaps “post-Hegelian” (perhaps “Marxist”?) is something Sellars himself does not seem to concern himself too much. See Devries (2017) for a highlighting of some of the affinities between Sellars and Hegel, and Dallman (2024) for some connections between Sellars and Marx.

⁴To be clear, I regard Sellars’s early program of “pure pragmatics” as largely

matter-of-factual relations between language use and the the extra-linguistic world that are required for the the meaningful use of a language?

Finally, there is one further transcendental linguistic question that is quite important to Sellars:

Transcendental Syntax: What are the necessary features of sentence structure that belong to any meaningful language?

Sellars's is concerned, in a number of writings, to establish a negative claim in response to this question: that language, as such, need not contain any predicative expressions. Beyond the importance of this claim for his austere ontological nominalism (which I bracket here), it is of crucial importance to understand his theory of picturing.

3 Transcendental Semantics

Sellars is an inferentialist about semantic and conceptual content, understanding the contents of linguistic expressions in terms of the inferential rules governing their use. To grasp a concept, on Sellars's view, is to master the inferential rules governing the use of a word.⁵ This is a kind of "use-based theory of meaning" of the sort associated with Wittgenstein (1953), understanding meaning as *conferred by use*. Like Wittgenstein, Sellars deploys a game-playing metaphor to articulate the basic structure of a meaning-conferring linguistic practice, speaking of such a practice as a "language game." Unlike Wittgenstein, however, Sellars distinguishes *inferences* as the fundamental moves in the game, saying "To occupy a position in a language is to think, judge, assert that so-and-so; to make a move in a language is to infer from so-and-so, that so-and-so," (SRLG §21). For instance, one position one might occupy is being committed to "*a* is red," and, from this position, one is entitled to move to various other positions. For instance, one can move to the position of being committed to "Something is red," one can move to the position of being committed "*a* is colored," and so on. The inference from "*a* is red" to "*a* is colored" is what Sellars speaks of as a "material rule of inference." Such inferences, Sellars claims, are "as *essential to meaning* (and hence to language and thought) as formal rules,

⁵Brandom, in many places, quotes Sellars as saying "To grasp a concept is to master the use of the word," but I can not find this exact quote anywhere in Sellars's writing.

contributing the architectural detail of its structure within the flying buttresses of logical form," (IM, 7). It is only in virtue of material inferences that a language can be understood as conferring substantive contents at all, rather than being an empty skeleton. This is a feature of linguistic practices, characterized in terms of norms governing the use, without which there would be no contents conferred.

The world conceptually grasped by speakers in virtue of mastering a certain set of linguistic norms, is, in an importance sense, a *reflection* of those norms, both formal and material. In an illuminating unpublished manuscript from 1950, "Outlines of a Philosophy of Language," Sellars lays out explicitly the sense in which this is so:⁶

Corresponding to the logical *necessities* in Reality we have the logical *norms* of the language, and the *L*-rules (formation and transformation rules) in the [pragmatic] metalanguage, and corresponding to the natural *necessities*, we have the non-logical (physical, synthetic) *norms* of the language, and the *P*-rules (conformation rules) in the [pragmatic] metalanguage, (§1.2211).

There thus is a structural isomorphism between the world, articulated in terms of the necessities, and the norms of the linguistic practice, articulated by the theorist as explicit rules. Remarking on this structural "sameness" of the world and the language, Sellars remarks, "If it were not for the normative character of a language, we might be tempted to identify it with its world," (§1.3222). So, what distinguishes a language as that which is doing the representing as opposed to the world that is represented is precisely the fact that language, understood in structuralist terms, has a *normative* flavor, whereas the world language represents, also understood in structuralist terms, has an *alethic modal* flavor. For instance, the norms governing the use of "red" include the that, if someone asserts that something is "red," they're committed to asserting that it's "colored," precluded from being entitled to assert that it's "green" (all over), and so on. Corresponding to these norms there is a bit of reality, the property of being red, which is such that, if something instantiates it, then necessarily it is colored, it can't possibly be green (all over), and so on.⁷

It is in the context of this broader holistic theory of meaning that Sellars's theory of linguistic signification, laid out most explicitly in Chapter 3 of *Science and*

⁶Thanks to Bob Brandom for bringing this manuscript to my attention.

⁷I am drawing here on the vocabulary of Brandom (1994), who spells out this correspondence in detail in his (2015) and (2019).

Metaphysics, finds a footing. Linguistic signification is a mapping between a word and the corresponding element of the conceptual order that obtains in the context of this broader structural isomorphism between norms and necessities. 1-place predicates correspond to properties and n -place predicates correspond to n -place relations. Names, for Sellars, correspond to what he speaks of as *individual contents* (SM §12) which are not brute extra-linguistic objects themselves, but, rather, singular conceptual contents. Though Sellars does not develop a worked-out theory of such conceptual contents, the crucial point is that objects in this sense are understood, no less than properties, as belonging to the conceptual order. Simple sentences consisting in n names concatenated with an n -place predicate correspond to simple states of affairs. Objects either exist or fail to exist, properties and relations are either instantiated by certain (tuples of) objects or fail to be instantiated by them, and states of affairs either obtain or fail to obtain. If a state of affairs obtains, the sentence which asserts that it does is true. Thus, for instance, the sentence “Mars is red,” the name “Mars” names Mars, the predicate “red” signifies the property of redness, and, concatenated together with the copula “is,” the sentence as a whole ascribes the property of being red to Mars and thus, is true, since Mars indeed instantiates the property of being red—that is, the state of affairs consisting in Mars’s being red obtains. Though this may, on its face, seem like a robust realist theory of meaning, relating linguistic expressions like “red” to non-linguistic entities such as the property of being red, Sellars’s crucial thought is that these *semantic* relations are not *real* relations. Indeed, Sellars takes it that, ultimately, all of this talk of expressions “signifying” various ostensibly worldly entities of different ontological types is simply a way, in the “material mode” (Carnap 1937), of functionally classifying linguistic expressions according to their inferential and grammatical roles.⁸

It is easy to see how this basic picture is a linguistic variation on the Kantian idea that we can understand the categorical structure of the knowable world, for instance, the fact that world contains an ontological distinction between objects and the properties, in terms of the logical structure of judgments, for instance, containing a grammatical distinction between subject and predicate. Sellars envisioned the

⁸See especially AE and MFC as well as Wolf (this volume) for Sellars’s non-relationalism. See also Heyndols (2024) for a discussion of the material/formal distinction in Sellars’s account of modality which is applicable here. Sellars is rarely as clear as he should be (and as I have been here) about the distinction between the normatively-articulated linguistic roles and their alethically-articulated conceptual correspondents (see Simonelli (2021, 1046-1048) on this point), but this distinction is clearly part of his basic picture.

basic linguisticification of Kant's transcendental philosophy as going beyond core ontological categories such as objects and properties and extending to the fine structure of the world as involving causal relations between temporally and spatially located events. In an early paper, writes:

Kant argued that conformity to the causal principle (the temporal schema of the principle of sufficient reason) is a necessary condition of the possibility of temporal experience. We argue that conformity of its expressions to conformation rules built upon the skeletal predicate 'before' (the temporal form of the coherence necessary to meaning in the epistemological sense) is a necessary condition of the possibility of a meaningful temporal language. Put in the quasi-pragmatic mode of speech, this amounts to saying that a necessary condition of the meaningfulness of a temporal language is that the temporal order of the events occurring in the world it is about be reflected in a necessary and systematic coherence of the characteristics exemplified by these events, (RNWW, 54)

Sellars never spelled out this feature systematically, articulating a way of transposing from fundamental structural features of temporal language as such to structural features of a temporal world.⁹ However, even still in *Science and Metaphysics*, he maintains that among the essential inferential rules constituting linguistic meaning for empirical languages are "Consequence rules relating names, demonstratives, and the language of Space and Time." Such rules will include, for instance, the inference from "a is now above b," "a is moving downward," "b is stationary," to "a will be below b in the future," and the basic transpositional thought is that the spatial and temporal structure of the represented world is reflection of these inferential norms.

Sellars's project of transcendental semantics, as I've just articulated it, is clearly a Kantian project, indeed, as Sellars himself describes it early in his career, a successor to Kant's transcendental logic. However, whereas Kant read off the table of judgments provided by logicians and took that to correspond to the fundamental ontological structure of knowable reality as such, Sellars takes into serious consideration the fundamentally *dynamic* character of linguistic norms, acknowledging that even the basic categorical norms of the language are potentially subject to change, at least in certain contexts of language use. In particular, Sellars focuses on the potential of scientific theorizing to reshape basic categorical norms, and, correspondingly,

⁹His most extensive discussion of time is in TWO, but he never explicitly lays out the transcendental framework in which that discussion takes place.

our conception of the world that is an object of scientific knowledge. He says, “the conceptual structures of theoretical science give us new ways of schematizing categories,” (§49).¹⁰ Indeed, “space” and “time,” in the context of our mature scientific physical theories, may not be characterized by the same of basic inferential norms of ordinary language, and thus *what space and time are*, in the world of those theories will be distinct from what they are in the world of everyday experience. Indeed, though I will not emphasize this issue here, Sellars goes as far as to think that the basic object/property/relation structure articulated above, which clearly does seem to categorize the world of everyday experience, might ultimately be abandoned in the context of scientific development.¹¹ Given this potential for change, it’s not clear how much transcendental semantics on Sellars’s final picture, really preserves its *transcendental* status. As Sellars’s career developed, however, his focus in the project of transcendental linguistics shifted much more to transcendental *metasemantics*.

4 Transcendental Metasemantics: Perception and Sensation

Roughly, transcendental semantics can be understood as the transcendental articulation of the features of language “as from inside,” that is, from *within* the perspective of a self-conscious language user.¹² Transcendental metasemantics, which in fact is much more the focus of Sellars’s philosophy of language in the later portions of his career, can be understood as the articulation of necessary features of language “as from outside.”¹³ Of course, the whole project remains, in some sense, as from within the perspective of a a speaker insofar as it is transcendental, and not based on empirical observations. Nevertheless there is a crucial difference in that it originates not from the perspective of the speaker *qua* speaker *explicating* their grip on use and content, but, rather, from the perspective of the speaker *qua* theorist *explaining* how such a grip is so much as possible. It is from this theoretical yet still transcendental perspective that many aspects of Sellars’s philosophy find their place.

The crucial idea facilitating the transition from transcendental semantics to transcendental metasemantics is that uses of linguistic expressions are “Janus faced [. . .]

¹⁰Though there is room to wiggle about what exactly is implied here—see Seiberth (2021, 172) and Hicks (2022, 545-547) for discussion (I am inclined to side with Hicks here).

¹¹I have emphasized this issue elsewhere. See my (2021) and (2025).

¹²Indeed, in “Outline of Philosophy of Language,” Sellars explicitly adopts the methodology of “phenomenology” in articulating the basic structural feature of use and content as such.

¹³I am drawing my suggestive language here from McDowell (1980), who uses it critically.

as belonging to both the causal order and the order of reasons,” (NAO V §64). That is, “in addition to their logical powers, linguistic expressions have an empirical character as items in the world,” (KTE §42). There are thus two ways of conceiving uses of language, paradigmatically assertoric utterances. The first is as assertions, statements to the effect that a certain state of affairs obtains in the world, made true by the world just in case that state of affairs does obtain in the world. The second is to conceive of such acts at themselves events *in* the world, governed by natural laws like anything else in the world. Sellars introduces the term “natural-linguistic objects” to refer to particular uses of language, so-conceived.¹⁴ Conceiving of uses of language as such, we conceive of “them in terms of empirical properties and matter-of-factual relations, though these may, indeed must, be very complex, involving all kinds of constant conjunctions or uniformities pertaining to the language user and his environment,” (TC p. 212; NAO §85). The fundamental question of transcendental metasemantics is what *must* these “empirical properties and matter-of-factual relations” be insofar as the “natural linguistic object” that is a particular languaging can be counted as a meaningful utterance? In this section, I’ll focus on one obvious first answer to this question: at least some languagings must be perceptual responses to things in the extra-linguistic world. That is, some languagings must be characterizable as the termini of what Sellars speaks of as a “language-entry transitions,” whereby one comes to occupy a position in the language game through exercising one’s perceptual capacities.

There is, at least by my lights, a widespread misunderstanding about the place of “language-entries” and “language-exits” in Sellars’s philosophy of language (no doubt in part due to the fact that Sellars himself never got completely clear on how to characterize their place). On my reading of Sellars, language-entries and language-exits do not belong to Sellars’s inferentialist *semantics*, but, rather, to his *metasemantic* theory. This claim is likely to come as a surprise to many readers of Sellars. Most commentators assume that an inferentialist theory of meaning must include, in addition to *properly* inferential rules like the one from “*a* is red” to “*a* is colored,” what we might call “quasi-inferential” rules relating perceptual circumstances to makings of (or commitments or entitlements to) assertions, like the

¹⁴Sellars often focuses on inscriptions, which might be called “objects” in a more narrow sense than verbal utterances. However, such things, though “events,” can still be counted as “natural objects” in the broad sense of the term (i.e. elements of nature). On Sellars’s final picture, all the elements of nature are in fact events (see Seibt, this volume).

“rule” licensing the transition from seeing something red to asserting “This is red.”¹⁵ However, Sellars *explicitly rejects* the inclusion of such rules in an inferentialist theory of conceptual content, as such a theory would be viciously circular:

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 be 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! (ITSA (in SPR), 312; IM (in ISR), 24-25).

Sellars thus endorses the following position about conceptual content:¹⁶

[C]onceptual status, the conceptual status of descriptive as well as logical predicates—not to mention prescriptive symbols, is constituted, *completely* constituted, by syntactical [i.e. intra-linguistic] rules, (ITSA, 316).

The explanation for this seemingly radical thesis about conceptual meaning has to do with the fact that, though “language-entry transitions” are clearly “rule governed” in some sense, they are not rule governed in the *same* sense as intra-linguistic transitions, which alone can be properly classified as “moves” in the game. In particular, only intra-linguistic moves are governed by *ought-to-do* rules, whereas language-entry and language-exit transitions are, properly speaking, governed only by *ought-to-be* rules.¹⁷ Following linguistic ought-to-be rules is not a matter of explicitly *applying* them, but, rather, having one’s responsive habits brought in conformity with them through linguistic training. Acquiring the correct dispositions of entering

¹⁵See Simonelli (2024, 163) for a sampling of commentators making this assumption.

¹⁶In the original version of ISAP published in *Philosophy of Science*, simply says this (though in slightly different words). In the version of the essay in that ends appearing in *Science, Perception, and Reality*, however, Sellars immediately goes on to qualify this claim, saying:

Note that I am not saying that “ ‘rot’ means *red*” is true merely in virtue of the intra-linguistic moves proper to ‘rot’ (in German). For “ ‘rot’ means *red*” can only be true if in addition to syntactical rules is *applied* by Germans to red objects.

The basic distinction I take Sellars to be drawing here, albeit inchoately, is between the inferentialist *semantics* for “red” or “rot,” which articulates the meaning on which speakers of English or German have a grip entirely in terms of intra-linguistic rules governing its use, and the *metasemantic* theory which explains the facts in virtue of which “red” means what it does. By the end of this chapter, I will have articulated the resources to make clear sense of this puzzling remark.

¹⁷Rules of the latter sort, as the name suggests, are “rules that specify not what someone ought to do, but how something ought to be,” (LTC II).

and existing positions of the language with acts of perception and action is a necessary precondition for speaking a language with empirical contents, but the concepts one grasps in speaking the language are to be articulated (*entirely* articulated) in terms of the “ought-to-do” rules pertaining to inference proper. So, on this proposal, language-entries and language-exits are necessary preconditions for the possibility of a content-conferring inferential practice, and thus, are essential aspects of the metasemantic theory. However, this does not mean that they themselves figure in the inferentialist theory of conceptual content.¹⁸

Turning now from perception to sensation (which is of course required for perception), similar remarks can be made, and they are perhaps more familiar in this context. Sellars famously rejects a traditional empiricist account of conceptual content, while nevertheless maintaining that sense impressions—the basis of the empiricist account of conceptual content—are a necessary feature in accounting for conceptual content. In *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, Sellars diagnoses the traditional empiricist conception of “sense data” as a “mongrel” resulting from “cross-breeding” two distinct theses regarding sensations. On the one hand, there is the *explanatory* thesis that there are certain inner episodes—sensations—the having of which does not require language learning or concept possession that are necessary preconditions for perceptual episodes. On the other hand, there is the *epistemological* and *semantic* thesis that such episodes are those on which all of our empirical knowledge and empirical concepts are based. Sellars vehemently rejects the second theses: sense impressions play *no* role in his epistemology or semantics.¹⁹ Yet, he accepts the first thesis: sense impressions, which are indeed shared between linguistic creatures such as ourselves and non-linguistic creatures with similar sensory capacities, play a crucial explanatory role not just in accounting for the possibility of a content-conferring linguistic practice (as they are crucial to explaining language-entry transitions which, once again, are absolutely necessary for a functioning such linguistic practice), but, moreover, play a crucial explanatory role in accounting for why it is that our inferential norms are materially structured as they are. So, even though sense impressions play no role in Sellars’s *semantics*, they play a crucial

¹⁸In Simonelli (2024), I defend such a “hyper-inferentialist” theory of conceptual content at length, spelling out precisely the sorts of properly inferential rules that inferentially account for the fact that some expressions are essentially non-inferentially deployed in perception.

¹⁹At least, in the epistemology of ordinary knowledge. Of course, sense impressions, explicitly theorized and conceptualized, will play a role in the epistemology of science, as, for instance Quine emphasizes.

explanatory role in his *metasemantics*.

Sellars develops his theory of sense impressions, making their transcendental status explicit, in *Science and Metaphysics*, starting from the basic thought that, in order for our conceptual acts to have empirical content, they must be *receptive* to the world. In the first chapter of SM, Sellars distinguishes between two senses of “receptivity,” both of which he takes to be necessary for conceptual constraint from the world. On the one hand, there is receptivity as constraint from *within* the realm of the conceptual. On the other hand, there is receptivity as constraint from *outside* the realm of the conceptual. The first sort of constraint is given by what Sellars speaks of as “intuitive conceptual representations” (SM I, §75): one’s being non-inferentially saddled with conceptual contents in perception.²⁰ The second sort of constraint *explains* the reliability and uniformity of these intuitive conceptual representations, by linking them with non-conceptual representations that are systematically caused of external objects of various sorts. This “manifold” of non-conceptual representations provide “the ‘brute fact’ or constraining element of perceptual experiences,” (SM I, §21). Of the status of this manifold, Sellars says:

[I]ts existence is postulated on general epistemological or, as Kant would say, transcendental grounds, after reflection on the concept of human knowledge as based on, though not constituted by, the impact of independent reality. It is postulated rather than ‘found’ by careful and discriminating attention, (SM I, §22).

The “manifold of sense,” as Sellars later says, “is required to explain how the *esse* [i.e. essence] of the experienced world can be *concupi* [i.e. conceptual] and yet non-arbitrary and intersubjective,” (II, SM §57). That is, the contents of experience are *conceptual*, and yet, in order for our these conceptual episodes to actually be constrained by a shared external reality, they must be “guided” by the non-conceptual representations that Sellars dubs “sense impressions,” which are systematically caused by external objects.

Sense impressions, for Sellars, are internal states of perceivers whose nomological relations among one another systematically correspond to the conceptual relations among the contents speakers represent in experience, thought, and language. For instance, corresponding to the class of color contents, which speakers ascribe to things

²⁰This is the kind of constraint of which McDowell (1994) develops an account in *Mind and World*, which I believe Sellars would be happy accepting, as far as it goes (and, for Sellars, it doesn’t go far enough).

in using color vocabulary, are internal sensory states of speakers which, while not themselves colored, stand in relations to one another that are structurally analogous to logical relations that colors stand to one another. Thus, just as something's being red, as a matter of conceptual necessity, entails its being colored and excludes its being green, someone's sensing redly, as a matter of nomological necessity, entails that they're sensing coloredly and excludes their sensing greenly. Such states, as Sellars says, are not found phenomenologically, but rather, posited theoretically in order to explain how it is that language is constrained by the world. Sellars suggests a further transcendental ground on which they can be posited: they are also necessary for the possibility of language learning:

[T]he ability to teach a child the colour-shape language game seems to imply the existence of cues which systematically correspond [...] to the colour and shape attribute families, and are also causally connected with combinations of variously coloured and shaped objects in various circumstances of perception, (SM I, §47).

Sellars's idea here is that, in order for the language to be transmitted, speakers must enter into sensory states, to which they are sensitive, which nomologically stand to one another in ways that are structurally analogous to the norms of the language that they are being taught. It is only through such a correspondence that, through linguistic training, the occurrence of a sensory state can ultimately take on conceptual significance, functioning as the terminus of a language-entry transition.

5 Transcendental Metasemantics: Picturing

We are finally in a position to turn to the feature of Sellars's philosophy of language that has puzzled and, indeed, frustrated some of his most sympathetic and influential commentators and successors: *picturing*.²¹ Picturing is a correspondence relation between uses of linguistic expressions, understood as "natural linguistic objects," and elements of the extra-linguistic world to which speakers of the language stand in matter-of-factual relations and are linguistically tracking in their uses of language. Now, we have already articulated *one* correspondence relation that is required for a linguistic practice to deploy a vocabulary that has a perceptual use: a correspondence between internal sensory states of speakers and the properties they ascribe to objects

²¹See, for instance, Rorty (1979).

in using this vocabulary. Consider again shape vocabulary.²² Facilitating the use of this vocabulary are internal states of speakers which, while not themselves being square, circular, and so on, bear relations to one another that correspond to the relations that the shape properties bear towards one another. Importantly, then, the shape properties to which sensory states correspond are the ones *semantically represented* (i.e. signified) in using shape vocabulary. The correspondence here is thus between elements of the *real* order and elements of the *conceptual* order. Such a correspondence, Sellars takes it, is necessary insofar as our conceptual activity is to be understood as guided by the extra-linguistic world. However, insofar as the *products* of our conceptual activity, our concrete linguistic acts, are really about the extra-linguistic world, there must be another correspondence relation where both relata are elements of the *real* order. This correspondence, which Sellars dubs “picturing,” is between natural linguistic objects, on the one hand, and the extra-linguistic objects that speakers are ultimately linguistically “onto,” on the other.

Now, it is worth taking a moment to re-situate this aspect of Sellars’s transcendental linguistics in his overarching Kantian metaphysical picture. In particular, it’s worth being clear that the properties represented in using shape vocabulary must in some way *correspond to*, but need not necessarily be *identical to* the properties in extra-linguistic reality *actually constraining* the use of the vocabulary by bringing about in speakers the corresponding sensory states. Here is where Sellars’s Kantianism rears its head, for we have a fundamental distinction between the perceptible appearances and the things in themselves ultimately responsible for those appearance. Sellars suggests, on behalf of Kant, the following conception:

[T]hings-in-themselves, in so far as they affect our sensibility, have, like sense impressions, attributes and relations which are *in their own way* analogous to those of perceptible things, and by virtue of which they elicit sense impressions which are in their different way endowed with Space-like characteristics

Sellars maintains that, though Kant himself will have no way of spelling out the relations analogous to empirical space and time obtain among things in themselves (only God can provide the “cash value”), the scientific naturalist picture he endorses *does* enable us to provide the cash (if not now, then at least someday): the analogous

²²Color vocabulary brings with it a number of complications that we would be wise to avoid for our purposes here.

notions to empirical space and time will be whatever notions play these roles in the final physical theory. The notions of “space” and “time” as they occur in a final physics, may be determinately different notions than those that structure our experience, and yet they nevertheless will bear a structural analogy to these notions.²³

I bring up Sellars’s appropriation of the Kantian distinction between appearances and things in themselves here for two reasons. The first reason is to be clear that linguistic picturing, at least in the first instance, is generally only *partially adequate* with respect to what it pictures. The second reason is to emphasize the sense in which the “worldly” relata of the *signifying* relation belong to a fundamentally different *order* than the worldly relata of the *picturing* relation. In “Being and Being Known,” Sellars articulates these different orders to which these two relations belong as follows:

[W]hen we say

X pictures Y

both X and Y belong to the real order, i.e. neither belongs to the order of intentionality; and when we say

X signifies Y

both X and Y belong to the logical order, i.e. the order of intentionality, (BBK §33).

Perhaps the most fundamental distinction between the relata of these two fundamentally distinct relations concerns their generality vs. particularity. Signification is essentially relations among general entities: linguistic expressions, understood as types rather than tokens, and their meanings, the conceptual contents grasped by speakers of the language. Picturing, on the other hand, essential involves relations between particulars: concrete uses of linguistic expressions, their tokening, and the particulars in the real world that, as a matter of fact, constrain the actual use of the language. Another crucial distinction is that, whereas we can speak of predicates like “red” and “spherical” signifying properties, it is always *whole atomic sentences*

²³Now, it is of course *possible* for the properties we represent in experience to be just those instantiated by extra-linguistic reality, but, given the natural endowment of our sensory capacities, Sellars takes it that, by default, the much more plausible possibility is that there is a structural analogy between these properties without a complete identity.

that picture, and what they picture is *particulars*, which are, in their particularity, just how they are. Thus, uses of “Mars is spherical” and “Mars is red” in English simply picture *Mars*.²⁴

To understand this feature of Sellars’s account, we must consider Sellars’s view about the fundamentally different functions of singular terms and predicates. Predicates, for Sellars, are ultimately to be understood as *axillary symbols* which essentially amount to no more than a convenient means of writing singular terms in different styles. Sellars often presents this view by way of a negative point in the theory of transcendental syntax: there could be a language, which Sellars dubs “Jumblese,” with no predicative expressions at all, wherein things are said simply by writing singular terms in different styles. Thus, in Jumblese, the role of “Mars is spherical” might be played by “Mars,” the role of “Mars is square” might be played by “*ℳars*,” the role of “Mars is red” might be played by “**Mars**,” and so on.²⁵ Sellars is insistent in his commentaries on Jumblese that we should *not* say that writing a name in a sans-serif font plays the role in Jumblese that the predicate “spherical” plays in English (NAO §35). On the contrary, given that Jumblese is the more perspicuous language, we are rather to say that writing in a name in a sans-serif font plays in Jumblese the role that affixing an “is spherical” to a name plays in English. The point is to show that *even in English* we say that Mars is spherical by writing “Mars” in a certain style—an “is spherical”-affixed style. Extending the thought to relational predicates, Sellars says “We can only say that *a* is larger than *b* by placing the names ‘*a*’ and ‘*b*’ in a (conventional) dyadic relation” (NAO §33), for instance writing “*a*” above “*b*” or by writing “*a*” and “*b*” with an “is larger than” between them.

Turning back to picturing now, Sellars explicates the notion as follows: “the manner in which the names occur in the picture is a projection, in accordance with a fantastically complex system of rules of projection, of the manner in which the objects occur in the world,” (TC 47). Spelling this out, natural linguistic objects such as uses of “Mars is spherical” are elements of a complex system of regularities, and, in the context of this system, they stand in law-like (though defeasible and statistical) relations to other linguistic events such as uses of “Mars is a planet,” “Mars is round,”

²⁴It is not right, on Sellars’s view, to say that “Mars is spherical” pictures Mars’s *sphericity*, because, ultimately, there is no *thing* that is Mars’s sphericity. Whether it is right to say it pictures Mars *as* being spherical, will presumably depend on how we understand this “as” structure, but I suspect Sellars would be skeptical of it as well.

²⁵It is, of course, hard to actually imagine enough distinct styles to provide the cash for the “and so on” here, but this is simply an in practice rather than in principle limitation.

“Mars is square,” and so on. These different sentences, in which “Mars” is affixed with different predicative expressions, can be understood as different “manners” in which the name “Mars” occurs, and, of course, not just “Mars” but any name can occur in any of these manners. Articulating these uniformities governing these manners generally, for any name *n*, if a speaker tokens “*n* is a planet,” then that speaker will generally be disposed, under some suitable prompting, to token “*n* is spherical,” they will be adverse to tokening “*n* is square,” and so on. These different “manners” in which a name can occur in a speaker’s linguistic acts correspond holistically, in their law-like relations to one another, to different “manner”s in which an object can occur in the world, since, after all, if an object is a planet, then it’s necessarily spherical, if an object is spherical, then it can’t possibly be is square, and so on. In the context of this isomorphism, we can say that concrete uses of “Mars is spherical” accurately picture Mars, whereas uses of “Mars is square” fail to do so.²⁶

Now, let us finally turn to the crucial transcendental claim that Sellars makes about the relation between picturing and signification. To do this, let us engage in a science fiction thought experiment, just slightly different than the one that Sellars engages in to make this point in “Truth and Correspondence.”²⁷ Suppose we come into digital communication with some Alpha Centarians. In the course of conversing with them, they repeatedly use the symbol “:/:-:” . We come to the conclusion, given the various patterns of use—it’s co-occurrence and failure to co-occur with other symbols that we have already translated—that “:/:-:” means *Mars*. Now, on Sellars’s analysis of means statements, when we say “ ‘:/:-:’ means *Mars*,” this is a way of expressing that “:/:-:,” in the Alpha Centari language, is governed (at least roughly) by the same set of linguistic norms as “Mars” is in our language.²⁸ Sellars maintains, however that our willingness to translate “:/:-:” as “Mars” essentially involves the presupposition that, beyond this mapping from inferential norms of Alpha Centari to inferential norms of English—this isomorphism in the *logical* order—the concrete uses of both languages involve the same isomorphism is the *real* order. That is, our

²⁶Plausibly, “Mars is red” semi-accurately pictures Mars, whereas “Mars reflects light at 400nm” would more accurately picture Mars. Once again, I’m putting the difficulties regarding color vocabulary to the side for our purposes here.

²⁷Sellars’s own thought experiment involves a robot that records lightning and thunder. I choose one farther from home, but closer to us.

²⁸Sellars’s preferred way of stating this fact would be: “Alpha Centari ‘:/:-:’s are •Mars•s,” where •Mars• is a sortal term that applies to any linguistic expression that plays the same functional role in its language as “Mars” plays in English.

taking it that “:/-:” and “Mars” have the same conceptual significance involves an (at least implicit) commitment that uses of both expressions are picturing the same thing: *Mars*. “In this sense,” Sellars says, “we can say that isomorphism in the real order [. . .] is a presupposition of isomorphism in the order of signification,” (TC). So, though Sellars understands conceptual significance entirely in intra-linguistic terms, he nevertheless takes it to be a transcendental condition of taking two expressions of two different language to have the *same* conceptual significance, that one suppose that uses of these expressions are linguistically “onto” the same bit of extra-linguistic reality.

Sellars does not say too much, at least in “Truth and Correspondence,” to substantiate this claim, but it’s not hard to supply such a substantiation. Without picturing—without the two languages being actually constrained by the same aspects of extra-linguistic reality—there is nothing underlying apparent convergence in inferential norms, and thus, the inferential norms hang in the air. Indeed, even if, at a given time, there is a complete convergence in the norms actually acknowledged by the two communities, without the linguistic communities being sensitive to the same bit of extra-linguistic reality in the shaping of the norms, there is no guarantee that they will *continue* to be convergence in inferential norms. Now, I have made this point in radical fashion by considering a completely extra-terrestrial linguistic community, but the very same point can be made *within* a linguistic community. It is, of course, a necessary feature of a linguistic practice that we take it that we mean the same things when we use the same words; we take it that we are following the same norms. As Wittgenstein (1953) pointed out and Kripke (1982) famously illustrated, however, any actual set of uses will always underdetermine the norms that we are actually following; we can always find an indefinite number of deviant norms to which all of the actual cases conform. What, then, secures the fact that the linguistic practice will not simply fall apart, with the patterns of use splitting into a million different directions despite the prior conformity? In the previous section, we articulated one extra-conceptual constraint that is the sensory states *internal* to speakers, guiding each of their conceptual activity from without in the same way, but this internal constraint can guide the conceptual activity of speakers in the same way only if speakers are onto the same features of *external* reality. In this way, picturing is a transcendental condition for the possibility of a meaning-conferring linguistic practice.

6 Suggestions for Further Reading

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