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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Scribbledehobble: A Dissertation on Linguistic Agency

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

Philosophy

by

Nellie Claire Wieland

Committee in charge:

Professor Wayne Martin, Chair
Professor Gila Sher, Co-Chair
Professor Seana Coulson
Professor Rick Grush
Professor Donald Wayne

2007

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	Co-Chair
	Chair

University of California, San Diego

2007

DEDICATION

To my family, with love and time enough for everything we ever wanted.

EPIGRAPH

From a truly objective viewpoint, one that attempts to see language in a way completely apart from how it appears to any given individual at any given moment in time, language presents the picture of a ceaseless flow of becoming. From the standpoint of observing a language objectively, from above, there is no real moment in time when a synchronic system of language could be constructed.

(Voloshinov, "Language, Speech, and Utterance")

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master—that's all."

(Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*)

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Scribbledehobble: A Dissertation on Linguistic Agency

by

Nellie Claire Wieland

Doctor of Philosophy in Philosophy

University of California, San Diego, 2007

Professor Wayne Martin, Chair

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It is widely held that, although the scope of linguistic freedom is indefinitely large, its very expansiveness is thought to be possible only in virtue of rules that constrain what can be said. I argue that this widely held view is wrong because it posits nomic constraints on language where there aren't any—i.e., where there are only customs and habits, or *uses* in contexts. What this widely held view needs is a permissive conception of linguistic agency. The argument for my thesis proceeds by testing a novel account of linguistic agency against three theories of language that assume this widely held view.

All three test cases are unified by a critical analysis of how the linguistic agent is controlled, but differ in the types of controls they posit, e.g., by the linguistic content of the expressions the agent utters, by the agent's subpersonal language faculties, and by the agent's linguistic environment. The first test pits my conception of linguistic agency against Semantic Minimalism, which claims that truth-conditional content can be ascribed to sentences without reference to speakers' intentions or to context. In place of Semantic Minimalism, I argue for an utterance-based pragmatism about linguistic content. This alternative is truer to the interpretation of, and truth-conditions for, actual utterances made by real speakers. The second test pits actual, "performative" utterances against the assumptions of generative grammar. Whereas generative grammar has assumed that the seat of language is the subpersonal, competence system of a speaker, I suggest a realist alternative that rejects the privileging of the subpersonal in favor of a usage-based model that integrates performative aspects of language use. The third test pits the lone speaker against her linguistic community. Contra this final view, I argue for a leaner, sparser, interpretation-based alternative to the externalist tradition. From these points of departure, a maximally rich conception of the linguistic agent emerges. This conception stresses that language is usage-based, that meanings are constructs in contexts between speakers and interpreters, and that we should favor contextualism, maximalism, and pragmatism over the alternatives.

Introduction to Scribbledehobble: A Dissertation on Linguistic Agency

This dissertation is about what speakers can do with their words. I propose that they can do a great deal—more than most think possible. They can do all of the obvious things: tell jokes, recite poems, express wanton desires, curse their fate, and justify bad decisions. They can also perform many other acts just by using words: they can marry a couple, give a verdict, make a call in baseball, christen a ship, insult, promise, discriminate, and adjourn. Speakers also have the uncanny ability to utter sentences that have never before been uttered, and they do so day after day. There is, it seems, no limit on the possible sentences they can formulate. Yet, there must be some things they cannot do. For instance, can an English speaker meaningfully use the word ‘bnik’ as in,

“I don’t feel like bnik this afternoon; I’d rather stay in”?

Presumably, he can’t do *that* with his words; ‘bnik’, some say, is an impossible combination of letters in English. What if an English speaker said,

“Joe thinks that you adore himself”?

We might think that, although we understand what this sentence is getting at, it makes a basic mistake—a mistake a native speaker of English would never make. In some circumstances, however, we might accept an utterance that transgresses what we would otherwise find acceptable. But why would we do this? We might think that speakers have a certain authority to speak or to write in ways that violate extant norms. For instance, what should we think about this:

That royal pair...have discussst...why lui lied to lei and hun tried to kill ham, scribbledehobbles, in whose veins runs a mixture of, are head bent and hard upon.

When James Joyce wrote *Finnegan's Wake* in 1939, this was not the first time he had used 'scribbledehobble'; he named one of his notebooks from 1922 'Scribbledehobble' and wrote, "Scribbledehobble...I'm feeling so funny all over the same." This notebook is one of his largest and it is speculated that the words and phrases accumulated in it were culled from conversations with his wife. Just the same, these two appearances of 'scribbledehobble' are likely the first. Although this might not make much sense to us out of context, or at first pass, many of us are inclined to think that writers of Joyce's stature are entitled to such novelty just as long as it stays within some loosely defined bounds of interpretability. While we frequently remark on the acceptability of our own and others' constructions, we still allow for—to a limited degree—Joycian novelty in our speech and the speech of others. Sometimes we do this as a way of appreciating creativity, but often we do it just because we are charitable interpreters.

This raises the problem of how to avoid what I will call The Humpty Dumpty Problem. Humpty Dumpty and Alice had the following famous exchange:

"I don't know what you mean by 'glory,'" Alice said.
 "Of course you don't—till I tell you. I meant 'there's a nice knock-down argument for you!'"
 "But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knock-down argument'," Alice objected.
 "When *I* use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."
 "The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean different things."

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all.”

Why does Humpty Dumpty sound so radical and so radically wrong? Is it because we think the meanings of words are fixed independently of Humpty Dumpty’s desires? If so, we might think they are fixed independently of any given speaker’s desires or we might think that there are some speakers (and Humpty Dumpty is not one of them) whose desires *are* relevant. Perhaps it’s the case that Humpty Dumpty just is not the authority figure he takes himself to be. Or, perhaps Humpty Dumpty is just not taking into account that he needs to speak the same way that his interlocutors do in order to speak meaningfully. Or, perhaps there is a literal meaning to the words Humpty Dumpty uses regardless of what context he is speaking in and what he intends to do with those words (and how much he pays them, as he goes on to say). Humpty Dumpty might just be confusing the literal meaning of words with the meaning of what he trying to communicate in some particular speech act. Finally, perhaps, Humpty Dumpty might be right and it is Alice who is confused and shortsighted. It might be Alice who ultimately misunderstands the nature of language.

If we don’t want to believe this, how do we accept meaningful novelty without becoming like Humpty Dumpty? That is, how are we able to discriminate between a case in which a speaker uses an utterance acceptably and one in which he does not? These are the questions that I pursue in this dissertation. The answers will be significant not only to our ordinary understanding of the bounds of acceptable discourse and sensible speakers, but also to linguistic and philosophical theories of language insofar as they rely on judgments of acceptability as evidence about the

nature of language itself. My own view is that judgments of acceptability should be made on the basis of interpretive or communicative success. In comparison with other theories of language, my positive views set a weak standard for what may count as acceptable language use. What I consider explanatorily necessary for any theory of any aspect of language primarily emerges in contrast with the positions discussed in Chs. II, III, and IV. In the concluding chapter, Ch. V, I provide a brief elaboration on the positive aspects of the main theses advanced in this dissertation.

The core of this dissertation consists of three papers that explore ways in which the linguistic agent is constrained in how he can use his language. Each paper provides a critical analysis of proposals for how the linguistic agent is controlled by the linguistic content of the expressions he utters, by his subpersonal language faculties, and by his linguistic environment—including other speakers and the context within which he speaks. The motivation for this project is an ambitious re-conceptualization of how we think about the nature of language and language-users. The actual execution of this re-conceptualization will have to be confined to just these three cases studies, each of which pursues an aspect of one of the three potential forms of constraint on the linguistic agent—namely, linguistic content, linguistic faculties, and linguistic environment.

Chapter I provides an overview of the terrain, both historical and contemporary. That chapter is divided into two major divisions. In the first, I discuss movements in the history of linguistic thought—universalism, empiricism vs. rationalism, realism, relativism vs. objectivism, and internalism vs. externalism. These

are not exhaustive, but they provide a helpful introductory framework for understanding the multiple ways of understanding a language user's relationship to his language. I trace theories of language within these dichotomies from the ambitious rationalists and exploratory romantics to the contemporary Chomskian cognitivists and stalwart externalists in philosophy. In the second major division of the chapter, I focus my introduction to agency on several themes that will recur throughout this dissertation: rule following and conceptual autonomy, the division of labor and the authority of the native, deliberation and interpretation, and, finally, linguistic transgression. These are each broached in some detail, principally in the discussion of debates relevant to these themes as I discuss them in this dissertation. Where possible, I point the reader to later chapters in which each idea is pursued in greater detail.

Chapters II, III, and IV are devoted to analyses of linguistic agency in three titanic theories of language. These theories of language are not themselves about agency, but they each must make assumptions about speakers and how it is that they know languages, how it is that they could use language incorrectly, and how it is that an individual speaker could use language in ways that others do not. There is a conception that is common to each of these theories which is that constraints on how speakers can use language are what grant speakers the freedom to use language in indefinitely creative ways. Another way of thinking about this is that it is through adherence to rules or norms that linguistic expression is possible. I argue that this common conception is largely wrong insofar as it overspecifies constraint on speakers' linguistic agency that doesn't actually exist. My strategy in arguing for this general

claim is to consider three instantiations of this common conception. The first (Ch. II) is a consideration of the possibility of ascribing truth-conditional content to sentences independently of what speakers use those sentences to mean and independently of the context of utterance. I conclude that, although it is doubtful that there can be a determinate ascription of truth-conditions in a null context, even if there were, this would be a semantic project with no applicability to the interpretation of or truth-conditions for actual utterances made by real speakers. The second (Ch. III) is a consideration of the thesis that semantic content is fully determined by the scorekeeping practices of speakers in our deontic communities. In this case, I conclude that the model of scorekeeping practices sets out to explain meaningful utterances but only succeeds in explaining the vindication of knowledge claims. In prying these two apart we see that measuring meaningful language use by scores kept is misguided. The third instantiation of the common conception is an analysis of the subpersonal system as arbiter of linguistic possibility in the tradition of generative grammar. I document a strong identification with *realism* in this tradition both in terms of linguistic methodology and explanatory scope. I concur with the realist ambitions but conclude that, since generative grammar has been forced into the study of competence alone (as opposed to performance), it is a disappointing contrast with a theory that accommodates both competence and performance (and, by extension, the sub- and first-personal systems of a speaker). By ignoring the performance of speakers—including the having of first-personal beliefs about one's own language—generative grammar remains explanatorily inadequate insofar as it is divorced from the practices

of real speakers.

Finally, Ch. V is a minimal proposal about language and linguistic agency, but one that defends a maximally rich conception of the role of the linguistic agent in a proper understanding of language itself. In this final chapter I will respond to the previous chapters by introducing an agentive view of language. I briefly defend ten theses: (1) Language is usage-based and not rule-based; (2) The development of language relies on the symbolic and iconic substrate of cognitive representations rather than on abstract, formal principles; (3) Languages are individualistic and not social; (4) Languages don't exist independently of speakers; (5) Meanings are constructs in contexts between speakers and interpreters; (6) Speakers utter utterances, not sentences; (7) We should reject literalism, minimalism, and eternalism in favor of contextualism, maximalism, and a grounded pragmatism; (8) There are no true linguistic authorities; (9) Gibberish is an ideological concept rather than a linguistic one; (10) The complete expression of linguistic agency occurs when speakers violate the conventional expectations of their linguistic communities, not when they conform.

Chapter I: An historical introduction to linguistic agency

This chapter is an historical and conceptual introduction to the topic of linguistic agency. The first half is a survey of movements in the history of linguistic thought, divided as: universalism, empiricism vs. rationalism, realism, relativism vs. objectivism, and internalism vs. externalism. The second half is a survey of concerns in the philosophy of language that bear on linguistic agency, divided as rule-following and conceptual autonomy, the division of labor and the authority of the native, deliberation and interpretation, and transgressors: deviant language, deviant speakers.

A. Movements in the history of linguistic thought

(i) Universalism

Universalism is the idea that all humans share, in some sense, a linguistic structure. The hedge “in some sense” is meant to advise caution on specifying what it is that humans share, and whether or not “share” is the best way of describing how a universalist thinks about the universality of language. The universality of language has been described as the consequence of all languages deriving from a single original language, as a common stock of concepts among all languages, and as cognitive structure evolutionarily shared by all humans.

The search for linguistic and conceptual universals was the hallmark of Continental Rationalist inquiry, particularly in the work of G.W. Leibniz in his 1697 essay, “On the amelioration and correction of German,” his 1705, *New Essays Concerning Human Understanding*, and elsewhere. Leibniz claimed that innate ideas spring universally in the human mind, are latent in every human being, and are merely

brought to bloom in the mind through experience and education. Leibniz called these universal ideas, “the alphabet of human thoughts,” which combine together to build all of language. On this he writes:

Although the number of ideas which can be conceived is infinite, it is possible that the number of those which can be conceived by themselves is very small; because an infinite number of anything can be expressed by combining very few elements. On the contrary, it is not only possible but probable, because nature usually tends to achieve as much as possible with as little as possible, that is, to operate in the simplest manner...The alphabet of human thoughts is the catalogue of those concepts which can be understood by themselves, and by whose combination all our other ideas are formed. (1903, p. 430)¹

This passage reflects several predominant universalist and Rationalist interests. One of Leibniz’s life-long projects was the search for what he called the “universal characteristic.” He thought that he could devise an artificial language that could express everything that could be humanly expressed in a universal and immediately accessible symbol system, available to any speaker of any language. He thought that although such an artificial language would be difficult to invent, it could be learned without the use of dictionaries or traditional instruction. Leibniz pursued this optimistic project by investigating inspiration as varied as character languages such as Chinese, Egyptian hieroglyphs, a binary system using only the primitive concepts of God and Nothingness, and the ancient text *I Ching*.² The assumption behind such a “universal characteristic” was that innate ideas were essentially identical yet obscured by the varieties of natural languages.

¹ This translation from the French found in Wierzbicka (1992); presumably she is the translator.

² See Rutherford (1995).

Leibniz actively investigated the similarities between existing natural languages in pursuit of the single “Adamic” language—namely, the language spoken before the confusion of tongues at the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11: 1-9).³ The motivating assumption in this case was that modern languages were corrupt versions of an earlier language that more accurately represented the relationship between signs and that signified. This onomatopoeic view of language again reflects Leibniz’s thought that innate ideas—and spoken language at some point—are essentially universally the same in that individual speakers and linguistic communities do not mold languages in incompatible or radically different ways.

Leibniz saw the task of uncovering the basic building blocks—the “alphabet of human thought”—as difficult but not impossible, quite necessary for semantic analysis, and essential to philosophical and scientific progress. Leibniz optimistically thought that the discovery of the “universal characteristic” would parallel the discovery of a complete “true philosophy” (Rutherford 1995, p. 232). If such a universal characteristic could be unearthed it seems it would undermine any sense we may have of conceptual or cultural autonomy in language. If this were the case, the consequences are that language would not, by and large, be a radically conventional expression of an individual community, and the development of language in children would be less a matter of *learning* than of *unfolding*.

³ Rutherford (1995, p. 241) notes that Leibniz did not interpret the Adamic thesis literally such that he was actually looking for the language of Eden. Rather, he was following linguistic evidence of the time that suggested that there was some common language from which all modern languages originated. However, Robins (1990) claims that many other writers of this period did interpret the Adamic thesis literally and spent some effort trying to discern the connection between Hebrew and modern European languages. Leibniz and Humboldt, on the other hand, took a much greater interest in Sanskrit as a possible origin for the Indo-European family of languages.

Leibniz's search for linguistic universals has continued in Wierzbicka's (1980, 1992, 1996; Goddard & Wierzbicka 1994, 2002) search for semantic universals. Wierzbicka has taken Leibniz's task of discovering what is common to all languages as the starting point for her own project. While we may take it for granted that term-by-term translation between languages is possible, Wierzbicka claims that the common stock of concepts universal to all languages is *very* small, taking issue with what she calls Chomsky's "dogmatic" position that, "However surprising the conclusion may be that nature has provided us with an innate stock of concepts, and that the child's task is to discover their labels, the empirical facts appear to leave open few other possibilities" (Chomsky 1987, p. 23). In Wierzbicka's and others' extensive cross-linguistic research on linguistic universals, a very short list has been proposed: *I, you, someone, something, this, say, want, don't want, (or: no), feel, think, and possibly know, where, good, when, can, like, the same, kind of, after, do, happen, bad, all, because, if, and two*. This list is under ongoing revision as more languages are analyzed, but the core of the list has withstood considerable scrutiny. She largely concedes that nature provides us with a "language of thought" that is innate and universal, but she disagrees that people cross-culturally conceive of the world in the same ways, or that the world only permits a fixed conceptual carving. According to Wierzbicka, the semanticist's job is to build up complex definitions out of these universal primitives according to Leibniz's prescription (Wierzbicka 1992, pp. 11-13).

The most successful proponents of Leibniz's project have been Noam Chomsky and the linguists of the "cognitive revolution." The cognitive revolution has

embraced the idea that there is a universal structure to all languages, but rather than thinking that such a structure is to be found in languages as abstract, social objects, the cognitive turn has been to propose that the universal “alphabet” resides in each speaker. The cognitivists differ from the Rationalists principally in their pursuit of the structure of language in syntactic and phonological form, rather than in the search for primitive semantic universals. The cognitive thesis is not that all languages are the same in the ordinary sense of ‘language’ (Farsi, English, Japanese), but rather that each individual speaker develops his own idiolect using the resources of Universal Grammar, or a Bioprogram, with which each human is biologically endowed.⁴

The leading ideas developed in the first two decades of the cognitive revolution were that (1) all humans are born with knowledge of contingent linguistic truths, or *the Innateness Hypothesis*; (2) these contingent linguistic truths are part of a language faculty, through which a mechanism of generative grammar can produce any natural language, or *the Hypothesis of Generative Grammar*; (3) the unspecified mechanism of generative grammar is universally shared, such that all languages follow the same foundational principles of grammatical formation, or *the Hypothesis of Universal Grammar*. In response to the linguistic traditions of Structuralism and Relativism, the critical turn of the cognitive revolution was to study individual or idiolectal languages rather than external, social languages, and to shift attention in Linguistics to the primacy and universality of form in language.

⁴ The term ‘Universal Grammar’ is used by Noam Chomsky to refer to whatever cognitive structure provides the universal biological basis for language acquisition. The less familiar term ‘Bioprogram’ was used originally by Derek Bickerton to refer to the universal cognitive structure for which he thinks sub-ideal language learning environments (such as creole and pidgin communities) provide evidence.

Chomsky initially based these three leading ideas on the intuitive observation that any child is capable of learning any natural language. The ability of all children to divorce themselves linguistically and conceptually from any particular culture and yet still develop a language has been thought to discount the importance of interpersonal agreements and conventionality. If there are different cognitive processes that made different conceptual organizations of the world possible, then these do not constrain the child who appears to be completely plastic from culture to culture and language to language. The second, and more important, observation that endorses a cognitive universalism is the “poverty of stimulus argument.” Whereas some relativist theses rely heavily on a notion of agreement that makes language possible, their burden is to explain how each of us enters into each agreement governing phonological structures, syntax, and semantics, or, if the agreement is not entered into, how we at least come to discover what the agreement is. Even if the notion of “agreement” is relaxed and does not necessarily imply an explicit pact between speakers, but only a rule of language that is being followed, the problem remains of how the language-learner (in this case, an infant or a toddler) comes to understand or have knowledge of these rules. Chomsky exploits this difficulty, claiming that the grammatical structures of any natural language are so complicated, and the data presented to the language-learner so minimal that the child could not have picked up or formulated the correct rules from experience. Since most adults are not aware of the vast majority of such rules, this is evidence that they are not taught to the child language-learner explicitly. If not gathered through experience, the generative grammarian concludes, the rules must

come from inside, from a genetic endowment with which all humans are born. This innatist hypothesis has been supported by further considerations and studies of hearing children born to deaf parents (or deaf children born to hearing parents with no knowledge of sign language), and the knowledge of language that can re-emerge after a long period of inability to use language (e.g., a catatonic period), as well as the ability of children to construct creole languages in linguistically-impooverished environments.

Although the idea of Universal Grammar was revolutionary in its time, Chomsky insists that it is not new, and that many traditional linguists and philosophers have pursued each of these theses in various ways. As we have seen, Leibniz's belief in the universality of conceptual structures, which were merely obscured by the contingencies of modern languages, anticipates the cognitivists' nativist hypothesis as well as the hypothesis of Universal Grammar. Chomsky (1965) dates the use of the term 'Universal Grammar' back to James Beattie's (1788) *Theory of Language*, and the use of the idea to Du Marseis' (1729) *Les Véritables Principes de la Grammaire*. He notes that a similar idea can be found in many of the ethnocentric writings of the 18th century that claim that the author's own language is best suited or most natural for the expression of science or philosophy due its direct correspondence with the nature, order, or structure of thought. See, for example, Diderot's (1751) *Lettre sur les Sourds et Muets*, although this view was certainly not confined to French writers.

What does a universalist presupposition imply for linguistic agency? Certain universalist theses imply that a linguistic agent has little choice in the administration

of his language, and that much of it is innately given. Depending on the extent to which universalism is true, this need not be the case. If innate structures are given only a limited role, there could presumably still be a great deal of autonomy on the part of the language user.

(ii) Empiricism vs. Rationalism

Chomsky conceived of the shift to the study of generative grammar in the 1950s over the explicit grammars of Structuralism as a revival of Rationalist ideas about language. He saw his own work as a return to insights that had been distorted by Linguistic Relativism and Structuralism, drawing the best of universalist sentiment from Leibniz and Mill. However, in the first half of the twentieth century, an empiricist Linguistic Structuralism held sway. In 1922, Bloomfield wrote that, “we must study people’s habits of language – the way people talk – without bothering about the mental processes that we may conceive to underlie or accompany these habits” (Bloomfield 1922, reprinted in Hockett 1970, p. 92). Bloomfield was also swayed by the philosophers of the Vienna Circle in regarding verification through behavioral observation as the standard by which to construct a theory of meaning (see especially, Bloomfield 1933). The Structuralist study of language was rigorously behavioristic and empiricist, taking pains to catalogue the structures of known languages, where a language was understood as the totality of sentences produced by a community. The revolution of Generative Grammar, as Chomsky tells it, returned to an emphasis on the form of language as an initial state that all language-users possess, rather than a form specific to any particular language. He explicitly rejected the

Structuralists' empiricist idea that languages are indexed to communities, and was instead concerned with the individual language user and his relationship to the universal.

Chomsky's concern was to answer what he called "Plato's Problem" as formulated by Bertrand Russell: *How comes it that human beings, whose contacts with the world are brief and personal and limited, are nevertheless able to know as much as they do know?* The question invites an answer that appeals to an innate stock of notions, procedures, or states of the mind that are predisposed to transform motley data into intelligent, systematic, rule-governed forms. And this is just what the study of Generative Grammar has focused on—based on the simple observation that any child from any linguistic community can be transplanted into any other linguistic community and will learn that language fluently. The key insight here was that, whereas there may be a predisposition to learn language, there is no predisposition to learn some particular language. Generative Grammarians began looking for the structural similarities that could be found across all languages, and that make the learning of all languages possible. The shift in Linguistics was away from answering questions about the form of a particular language, and toward asking questions such as, *What constitutes knowledge of language? How is knowledge of language acquired?* and, *How is knowledge of language put to use?* (Chomsky 1986, p. 3).

This revolution in the study of language was similar to the earlier Rationalist preoccupation with constructing a language out of innate, universal concepts that could be learned without the use of dictionaries or, presumably, much interaction with

the physical world. At least some Rationalists thought it was possible that there could be such a language that could be learned simply by tapping into what was latent in the mind without any need for the normal language learning that takes place in interaction with the world and other speakers. Indeed, Chomsky has at times rejected the role of reference to nonlinguistic entities in an explication of semantic values; this position has been identified as ‘internalism’.

Despite Chomsky’s own Rationalist tendencies, the study of Generative Grammar in the second half of the twentieth century has not been wholly incompatible with empirical study. There has in fact been a push by many linguists to confirm linguistic theory in communities of speakers, through surveys of use, psycholinguistic experiments—particularly of young children—with the hope that this will reveal something about innate structures, and neuroimaging studies (I will discuss criticisms of Chomsky and empiricist pressures on freewheeling rationalist linguistic theory in the second half of this chapter). The more moderate position among linguists is that empirical results are what motivate the search for theoretical foundations, regardless of the Rationalist ideology explicit in Generative Grammar’s beginnings (e.g., see Jackendoff 2002, p. 268). And yet, Chomsky has long contended that his linguistic method is superior to that of most philosophers of language insofar as he is concerned with *real* structures of the “mind/brain,” and is interested in studying the language faculty as an “organ” of the mind.

(iii) Realism

The proposed *reality* of language is both the commonsense position and an enormous mess. Presumably, a linguistic *realist* thinks that language(s) exists independently of any speaker's mental states. Further, a linguistic *Platonist* should make the above supposition but also suppose that for any given feature of language, there exists an ideal form of that feature of language. Some kind of basic realist position is probably the most widespread position, with most realists thinking that there is some way that language *is* independently of the way they think about it.

There is, however, a fair amount of disagreement about what being a realist about language entails. Some realists think that the structures of language are psychologically real, and that the reality of language consists in that which is *represented* in the mind of the language user (e.g., see Laurence 2004). Others think that what is real about language is the output of speakers, and not some supposed grammar that underlies those outputs (e.g., see Devitt 2003, p. 120). Others still have rejected both positions in favor of situating the reality of language in the “functional” mind (e.g., see Jackendoff 2002, p. 56).

It has often been repeated that the reality of language lies in its psychological underpinnings, and that, “linguistics is a branch of cognitive psychology.” Devitt (2003) and Devitt & Sterelny (1989, 1999) have rejected the psychological construal of linguistics as realist at all, arguing that realism commits linguists to studying the output of a language user, and not his so-called psychological states. Similarly, Stich (1981) has argued that linguistic theory is committed to developing theories of language *users*, presumably because it is those intuitions that constitute the *real* data

of linguistic theory. Finally, Katz (1981) has described linguistic theory with the terms ‘Realism’ and ‘Platonism’ when it is in its most abstract form, akin to a mathematical theory (see also, Katz 1966; cf. Laurence 2004, p. 77 and Fodor 1981).

In contrast, Generative Grammarians, by and large, eschewed the study of behavioral output in favor of a study of the cognitive mechanisms thought to underlie that output. Interestingly, the various sides of this debate each make claim to better empiricist credentials. Whereas it seems to some realists that the empirical fodder of theories of language is audible behavioral outputs of language users, others view the study of such “external” languages and “performance” factors as hopelessly vague and abstract. In a characteristic passage, Chomsky writes: “Note that if [external] languages do exist, they are at a considerably further remove from mechanisms and behavior than [an internal] language” (Chomsky 1995, p. 17). They would have to be such abstract, idealized, and Platonic objects they hardly make sense to study. On the other hand, he describes internal languages as something “real and definite,” and something “about which true or false claims can be made.” And at times, he writes as if a system of rules should be studied as if it *were* concretely embodied: “Why should we not study the acquisition of a cognitive structure...more or less as we study some complex bodily organ” (Chomsky 1976, p. 11). In most other places, however, he resists this push toward identifying what embodied thing he is studying, or how it looks in an actual person. The problem with thinking of language (as any given linguistic theory construes it) as actually being instantiated in a person is that the actual state of a person’s knowledge and use of language will be structured by

environmental factors beyond the linguist's control or imagination. The only way to construct a serious grammar of a language, then, is to discover how to eliminate environmental noise so that a grammar describes the initial state of a language. Such an eliminative process will involve a great deal of idealization, according to Chomsky. But this idealization should not detract from the pursuit of a *real* description of language: "*Idealization*, it should be noted, is a misleading term for the only reasonable way to approach a grasp of reality" (Chomsky 1995, pp. 6-7; 19).

How do these various takes on the reality or ideality of linguistic structures bear on an understanding of linguistic agency? Some brands of realism promote subservience on the part of the language user to *real* linguistic structures (in particular, a commonsense basic realism). I will claim in Ch. IV that, for some linguistic theories, there is tension between the first-personal perspective of the language user and the apparent *linguistic* or *psychological reality* at the subpersonal level. However, realism about language alone is not committed to there being correctness conditions for utterances—this is a position I call "objectivism."

(iv) Relativism vs. Objectivism

A special, limiting case of realism about language is objectivism. Whereas realism is an ontological view about the existence of linguistic structures, objectivism focuses that realism on the position that linguistic expressions get their meanings only by corresponding or referring to entities in the world (or, alternatively, to possible worlds, or to situations in the world). Objectivist views assume that there are correctness conditions on linguistic expressions that cause linguistic agents to use

expressions incorrectly when they incorrectly refer (or fail to refer) to entities in the world.

Linguistic relativism at first seems like the clear contrast to linguistic objectivism. However, there are two ways of thinking about linguistic relativism, only one of which is in obvious contrast with objectivism. On one hand, a linguistic relativist could assume the radical independence of each speaker from the constraints of other speakers and the world. Speakers in this case might be thought to be radically free to use expressions in any way they like without anything counting as incorrect. Such speakers might be thought to have a “private language” (see the discussion of private languages in the subsection on externalism below) or to be radically individual (although some think that individualism just is a commitment to private languages.) It is conceivable that a speaker of a private language could still be beholden to correctness conditions that are found, for instance, in the speaker’s subpersonal system as a network of internally represented linguistic structures. In such a case, there could be objective correctness conditions on speakers’ uses of expressions even in the context of a radically individualistic relativism. This version of individualistic relativism is much more interesting than a version of relativism which simply claims that anything goes for every speaker. In Ch. V I defend a further variation on individualism in which the correctness conditions on expression use will be based on principles of interpretability.

The second, and more widespread, way in which the term “linguistic relativity” is used indexes the correctness conditions for expression use to the cultural context in

which they are uttered. This form of relativism also contains the further commitment that language dictates thought constitutively implying that the concepts of a community are shaped by the structure of its language. The consequences of this for the study of language and culture have been to study cultural practices and languages as systems rather than as discrete units. For instance, the relativist linguistic anthropologist would not attempt to translate between languages term by term, but would always keep translations within the context of a larger system, recognizing the inherent humility in the task: understanding even the simplest of terms may require conceptual structures inaccessible to the student of the alien culture. The question of translation becomes not, *Is translation possible across all languages?* but the more modest, *Is translation between any two languages possible?* Questions of the possibility of translating between languages and the basis of thought in language were very much in the air in the Romantic era—these views have found their strongest historical proponents in the Romantics, most notably J.G. Hamann, J. G. Herder, Wilhelm von Humboldt, and the American linguist William Dwight Whitney.

The great popularization of linguistic relativism is found in Benjamin Lee Whorf's 1940, *Language, Thought, and Reality*. Although the term 'linguistic relativity' is originally Edward Sapir's, Whorf's study of Hopi systems of time and his determined views on linguistic structure, the relationship between culture and conceptual structures, and the cultural relativity of knowledge solidified the position of linguistic relativity. Whorfian linguistic relativism emphasized the insurmountable differences between languages, and thus cultures, by emphasizing the tight fit between

social agreement and meaningful language. The social contract implicit in linguistic norms is absolutely binding:

We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way—an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. The agreement is, of course, an implicit and unstated one, BUT ITS TERMS ARE ABSOLUTELY OBLIGATORY; we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data which the agreement decrees. (Whorf 1940/1956, pp. 213-214; emphasis original)

[W]e all hold an illusion about talking, an illusion that talking is quite untrammelled and spontaneous and merely ‘expresses’ whatever we wish to have it express. This illusory appearance results from the fact that the obligatory phenomena within the apparently free flow of talk are so completely autocratic that speaker and listener are bound unconsciously as though in the grip of a law of nature...These automatic, involuntary patterns of language are not the same for all men but are specific for each language and constitute the formalized side of the language, or its ‘grammar’...From this fact proceeds what I have called the ‘linguistic relativity principle’, which means, in informal terms, that users of markedly different grammars are pointed by their grammars toward different types of observations and different evaluations of externally similar acts of observation, and hence are not equivalent as observers but must arrive at somewhat different views of the world. (Whorf 1940/1956, p. 221)

This passage contains a number of provocative points. According to Whorf, conventions apply not merely to the expressions, or even sound structures, that we use to communicate with one another, but also apply to our concept-formation: “the way we cut up nature.” Our expressions, grammars, and phonological structures are also conventional, but that is of secondary interest to the Relativist. The important shift for linguistic anthropologists from the 1940s to the present has been the relativism of conceptual frameworks more generally. This led to the further conclusion that understanding a concept of a culture foreign to one’s own entailed understanding a

“web of belief.” The anthropologist could not assume that his own web of concepts could be applied to unpacking a foreign concept because there may be no shared concepts between cultures and the relationships between concepts may vary from culture to culture.

The most provocative feature of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is the emphasis on the obligatory nature of the conceptual and linguistic conventions of a community. As Whorf puts it: “we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data which the agreement decrees.” In contrast to the linguistic “free for all” we might expect out of a relativist position, it is clear that Whorfian cultural relativism emphasizes the impenetrable constraints of one’s linguistic community. It is important to note as well that cultural conventions are said to trump other more obvious sources of conceptual and linguistic structure. When Whorf writes that “the way we cut up nature” is subject to the cultural “agreement” we are “parties to” he explicitly rejects the objectivist thesis. For Whorf, the world itself is not the arbiter of conceptual content, nor is it of significance how it presents itself to language users. Linguistic representation of the world is, rather, a conventional matter, merely subject to agreement among language users.

(v) Internalism vs. Externalism

Both linguistic objectivists and the *social* linguistic relativists (Whorfians) adopt forms of externalism about language. In the first case, objectivists claim that expressions get their meanings on the basis of their reference to or correspondence with features of the nonlinguistic world. In the second case, some relativists claim that

expressions get their meanings on the basis of social rules or norms that are external to any given linguistic agent. An internalist, by contrast, claims that the meanings of expressions are *not* constituted by their relations to nonlinguistic entities. Rather, the meaning of an expression is to be found in the expression's corresponding internally represented linguistic structure. Such a view is at first counterintuitive and yet it has evolved over the last half century to accommodate developments in linguistic theory.

Even before the so-called “cognitive revolution,” linguistic structuralists such as Bloomfield introduced the notion of studying the idiolect as a response to the difficulty of limiting and demarcating the scope of natural languages. They could then analyze one person speaking for one discrete period of time. Generative grammarians took this one step further by studying only one idiolect—the linguist's own, and then generalizing from these findings. Finally, the linguistic judgments under analysis became not even those of natural speech, but rather prompted intuitions. This trend in generative grammar prompted Labov to write in 1975 that,

The study of introspective judgments is thus effectively isolated from any contradiction from competing data. But frequent retreats to the idiolect have the bad consequence that each student of the general structure of language will then be confined to a different body of facts. (Labov 1975, pp. 13-14).

One means of getting around the problems Labov notes was to introduce greater degrees of technicality into the rudimentary notion of an idiolect, which in 1986 Chomsky called an ‘I-language’.

A preliminary definition of ‘I-languages’ is that they are individual and intensional languages, or states of the “mind/brain.” This position can be referred to as

an internalist position due to the assumption that the locus of the study of language is an individual's mind/brain. Chomsky has been forthright in his rejection of study of external or 'E-languages' as appropriate objects of study. 'E-languages' are those familiar linguistic objects such as English, Japanese, and Hebrew that we think we know better or worse, learn, and may always only partially grasp. These notions, such as "having a partial grasp of" a language," while familiar, are misguided according to Chomsky and other 'I-linguists' or internalists. For instance, the philosopher of language Michael Dummett has claimed that languages are "social practices," and that a speaker has a "partial, and partially erroneous, grasp of the language" (1986), an externalist view widely shared by others. Chomsky has repeatedly criticized such views on numerous grounds, including a simple rejection of the idea that a study of E-languages is a study of something real in the world. However, this is a bit misleading, because it is not always clear that Chomsky is even interested in studying anything that can be described as a 'language', even if only an 'I-language'. Matthews (1993) offers a concise characterization of this puzzle about Chomsky's use of 'language':

[A] 'language' was now peripheral to the investigation: as Chomsky had come to see it by the end of the decade, it was "a derivative and perhaps not very interesting concept" (1980, p. 90), something "epiphenomenal" (1980, p. 83, 122f.). But this conflicts with ordinary usage, in which 'language' is precisely what a linguist is studying. Nor had Chomsky himself avoided that usage. "Knowing a grammar" may indeed have "the fundamental cognitive relation" (1980, p. 70); but in *Reflections on Language*, for example, he refers directly to "the acquisition of a cognitive system such as language" (1976, p. 10), to "knowing a language L" or "cognizing L" (p. 164), and so on. (Matthews 1993, p. 238)

In this passage, Matthews captures the tension in Chomsky's explanations of what it is that linguists study. Using the term 'language' to describe the object of study seems natural, yet language itself is described as something "epiphenomenal," peripheral even to what is being studied. (This tension in the use of term 'language' again lies in the commitment to realism.)

The history of internalism in linguistics is muddled to the point of incoherence. A commitment to the study of 'I-languages' has been halfheartedly adopted by many theorists following in Chomsky's footsteps although never properly defended despite repeated challenges to internalism from philosophers of language. I will focus on the basics of what internalist and externalist commitments entail and what this means for an analysis of linguistic agency.⁵ The most salient feature of internalism is its strict insider trading of expressions and their meanings, without the supposed necessity of representation of the external world or the following of external, social norms. As Chomsky writes: "[t]he I-language specifies the form and meaning of such lexical elements as *desk*, *work*, and *fall*, insofar as these are determined by the language faculty itself" (2000, p. 26). Chomsky does not write that the form and meaning of these lexical elements is determined by the language *user* himself, but instead by the more abstract and less personal "language faculty." It is not immediately clear to what extent the linguistic agent is identified with or alienated from his language faculty, or to what extent he can willfully change or introduce the forms and meanings of lexical

⁵ For a clear and detailed description of internalist and externalist semantics, see Davis & Gillon (2004).

elements within his language faculty. I discuss such questions at greater length in Ch. IV of this dissertation.

There are two basic kinds of externalism—which are mutually compatible—and both of which reject the tenets of internalism. The basic externalist commitment is that at least the meaning of a lexical item is derived from entities that are nonlinguistic and external to the language user’s mind. The externalist may just think that these external nonlinguistic entities are features of or situations in the world (or possible worlds) and otherwise take a nonsocial attitude toward language. An externalist may also extend this view of externalism to include regularities, norms, or rules that hold among a community of speakers.

This second kind of semantic externalist (to varying degrees) emphasizes the sense in which meaning is like following a rule or conforming to a convention that is arbitrary, yet determined inter-subjectively within a community of language users all of whom speak the same language. Wittgenstein’s (1953) varied remarks in *Philosophical Investigations* on the possibility of private languages, meaning as rule-following, and meaning as use (among others) formed the foundation and inspiration for many semantic externalists. The familiar version of the Wittgensteinian challenge to private meanings is that in order to mean something by an expression, a speaker must be able to *go wrong* in the use of the expression. That is, when faced with the dilemma of whether or not to deem a particular expression as correct or incorrect, we must look to what normatively requires us to respond in such-and-such a way; the question facing us being: *in what is this semantic governance constituted?* One

response (presumably the Wittgensteinian one) points to the use among others in one's linguistic community; the members of the community generally have ideas about the correct and incorrect uses (these will vary in precision), and it is this consensus that normatively constrains the assessment of correct or incorrect use.⁶

Semantic analysis took a radical turn with Speech Act Theory's theoretical bias towards the status of utterances, and not merely propositions. Speech Act Theory placed linguistic behavior under a theory of action generally, recognizing its constitution in its communicative function, and the way in which, as a species of action, language is used by agents to *do* things in the world. Giving pride of place to linguistic agents and the way they use language appropriately and inappropriately, create and enforce linguistic rules, have intentions and purposes that accompany their linguistic behavior, and live in linguistic communities with others who abide by the same conventions making communication not only possible, but *meaningful*, are the hallmarks of Speech Act Theory. J.L. Austin (1962) explicitly thematized Wittgenstein's nascent thoughts in his taxonomy of illocutionary acts in action-theoretic terms. H.P. Grice (1953) further problematized meaning in the relationship between literal meaning and utterer's meaning, and John Searle (1969) provided the most complete articulation and defense of Speech Act Theory. Ever since the Speech Act revolution, many philosophers of language, regardless of their place inside or

⁶ This is the way the semantic dilemma in *Philosophical Investigations* has struck Crispin Wright (2001) in his essays on "rule-following considerations." It is Wright who frames Wittgenstein's dilemma as a choice between a Platonist and communitarian response. It is his position that Wittgenstein chooses the communitarian response (and that this is the reasonable choice) despite the concerns that he notes regarding the problems of entire communities being wrong about something, the threat of superstition, and constraints on conceptual change.

outside of this tradition, have considered the social nature of language to be platitudinous, or have taken it as a given. Donald Davidson, for instance, off-handedly equates language itself with its social function: “Language, that is, communication with others,” (1994) while denying elsewhere that we share anything more than passing theories of one another’s language, but not a language itself (1986).⁷ Ian Hacking and Michael Dummett extensively criticize any such dismissal of a shared language, Hacking going so far as to say that the varied regularities in communities are features of the language and *not* features of individual speakers (Dummett 1986; Hacking 1986).

Many in Speech Act Theory have interpreted Wittgenstein as arguing that an expression is governed by its use in a community. In this case, the “is right” of an expression is merely a matter of a collective “seems right.” The way in which a community uses language, the way it collectively occurs to them to seem right, is constitutive of the meaning of expressions. Consider Wittgenstein’s proposed definition of ‘meaning’:

For a *large* class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word ‘meaning’ it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language. (Wittgenstein 1953, §43)⁸

⁷ Davidson has a dynamic theory of language that eludes neat categorization. While he affirms that the principal purpose of language is communication (*contra* Chomsky), he rejects the idea of *shared* languages preferring instead an individualistic approach to language, one that does a better job at explaining linguistic transgressions of the sort introduced in the final subsection of this chapter. However, he is also an objectivist in that he thinks a theory of meaning is derived from a theory of truth.

⁸ I am not convinced that Wittgenstein’s stance on meaning as use is so clear; understanding the dialectic between Wittgenstein and his interlocutor is difficult enough. And compare entries 120, 138, 197, 556. In particular, 120: “...You say: the point isn’t the word, but its meaning, and you think of the meaning as a thing of the same kind as the word, though also different from the word. Here the word, there the meaning. The money, and the cow that you can buy with it. (But contrast: money, and its use.)” Also, 138: “But can’t the meaning of a word that I understand fit the sense of a sentence that I

Whereas Wittgenstein variously discusses use, convention, and rules and the relation of all three to meaning, not all semantic externalists have taken the same tack, or been convinced that ‘use’, ‘convention’, and ‘rule’ are synonyms; nor are they all convinced that all three are accurate characterizations of the constitution of meaning. However, in the most recent and thorough exposition and defense of Speech Act Theory (particularly, an *illocutionary act* theory of sentence meaning), William Alston (2000) proposes what he calls the “Use Principle” as the *fundamental* principle of a speech act theory of meaning:

An expression’s having a certain meaning consists in its being usable to play a certain role (to do certain things) in communication. (Alston 2000, p. 154)

Like the theoretical assumption that meaning is use, the idea of meaning as a matter of following the rules of the linguistic community is also taken as a response to the possibility of a private language. Since knowing the meaning of an expression means, in part, being able to go wrong in usage, knowing the meaning of an expression is knowing the rules for its correct application. But since any application of a word accords with an infinite number of rules, one cannot know what rule is being followed. The externalist about rules takes this to mean that the only linguistic rules that we could be following are those that are community-sanctioned. The present point is only that a *weak* skepticism about the possibility of private meanings and a commitment to

understand? Or the meaning of one word fit the meaning of another? – Of course, if the meaning is the use we make of the word, it makes no sense to speak of such ‘fitting’. But we understand the meaning of a word when we hear or say it; we grasp it in a flash, and what we grasp in this way is surely something different from the ‘use’ which is extended in time!” This general cynicism is repeated in 197 and 556.

the community as the source of corroboration, of “is right,” has been a broad theoretical constraint on externalist theories of meaning.

Another familiar argument for externalism comes from Saul Kripke’s Wittgenstein (1982).⁹ This argument is essentially a skeptical argument that since a semantic rule has only applied in a finite number of cases but is meant to apply in an indefinite number of cases, there is no way to know if present or future applications of some rule does, in fact, correspond with the content of the rule. All that a linguistic agent has in order to make the inductive generalization are the facts of past applications of the rule that cannot, in principle, specify the rule’s application for every new set of conditions. This argument is meant to show that an individual—whose knowledge is always finite—can never be said to mean anything in isolation, but only as part of community of speakers.¹⁰

Other persuasive externalist arguments have been made that are not immediately Wittgensteinian. Perhaps the most famous of these is Hilary Putnam’s (1975) “Twin Earth” argument for the conclusion that “meanings just ain’t in the head!” Putnam sets up the following basic thought experiment: imagine that in 1750 there are two planets that are perceptibly identical, Earth and Twin Earth. We know that on Earth the rivers and lakes were filled with water; on Twin Earth a substance

⁹ There is some disagreement as to whether Wittgenstein would have accepted the arguments Kripke attributes to him, and it’s also unclear whether Kripke himself holds these views. For this reason, most have described this view as that of ‘Kripke’s Wittgenstein’ or ‘KW’ or ‘Kripkenstein’. It may turn out that *nobody* in fact holds the views of Kripke (1982).

¹⁰ Although, if KW’s skeptical argument is taken seriously, it isn’t clear how someone could mean something in a linguistic community either. Linguistic communities also have finite knowledge (in so far as communities can ‘know’ a rule), so a corresponding skepticism seems warranted. This sort of skeptical argument is better suited to an argument for meaning eliminativism.

that had all of the same macro-properties as water (taste, scent, color, function) filled its rivers and lakes, except this substance had the chemical composition XYZ rather than H₂O. Putnam claims that we would be wrong to say of the Twin Earther that he correctly uses the term ‘water’ to refer to the substance XYZ. In this case, the causal-historical dubbing of the term ‘water’ (presumably this dubbing happened on Earth and not Twin Earth) referred to what Earthlings would later know was H₂O and not merely a colorless, odorless liquid. Tyler Burge (1974) has made a similar argument on behalf of semantic externalism. While we might call Putnam’s kind of externalism a “causal-historical” externalism, Burge’s externalism is best thought of as a “social” externalism. Burge’s now famous example is of a speaker using the term ‘arthritis’ to refer to a pain she has in her thigh rather than in one of her joints. Burge’s point here is that the correctness of the use of the term ‘arthritis’ (and the beliefs underlying the use of the term) depends on the social use of the term. (I discuss the importance of these arguments in the second half of this chapter under the heading “The division of labor and the authority of the native.”)

Whether a theory of language is internalist or externalist is important for an understanding of linguistic agency. Some externalist constraints (those that fall under the second form of externalism discussed here) on individual linguistic agents are as restrictive as those of the linguistic relativists Sapir and Whorf, in which the norms of the community are the ultimate arbiters of meaning and not necessarily the intentions of the individual agent. However, if externalism is only committed to the position that the meanings of terms depend on *something* nonlinguistic, e.g., facts about the world,

the constraints on the linguistic agent take a considerably different form. Although this view is not the focus of this dissertation, there is a discussion of some of its limitations in Ch. III, in the discussion of reliabilism in the subsection on ‘two-book scorekeeping’. In this case, I discuss problems with Robert Brandom’s otherwise heavily socialized externalism in introducing reliabilism as a means of justifying assertions.

Internalism also poses problems for an understanding of linguistic agency. Familiar features of linguistic life are precluded or fall away given an internalist commitment including a belief in the external reality of languages, interpersonal interpretation and deliberation, and a first-personal access to and control over features of one’s linguistic repertoire.

Each of the positions presented thus far concerns, at its heart, the relationship between the language user and his language. That is, it presupposes or makes a case for a concept of linguistic agency. For instance, each takes a stance on whether linguistic tools are innately given, what sort of access a language user has to those tools, and whether a speaker can decide what a word means on his own or whether he requires at least one other speaker for such a decision to be *real* or *meaningful*. Just as the relativist encounters the problem of the possibility of translation between languages, the cognitivist encounters it on a much larger scale—whether a speaker translates between languages any time he speaks to someone else. And, if it is assumed that there are shared, public languages, the externalist faces the question of what tribunal sets the standards for how much an individual speaker can deviate from

linguistic norms or regularities and still be considered a speaker of a particular public language. In the second half of this chapter, I introduce in more detail the thematic currents surrounding linguistic agency and the sources of authority of such agents.

B. Agency and authority

(i) Rule-following and conceptual autonomy

The comfort and advantage of society not being to be had without communication of thoughts, it was necessary that man should find out some external sensible signs, whereof those invisible ideas, which his thought are made up of, might be made known to others... Thus we may conceive how *words*... come to be made use of by men as *the signs of their ideas*: not by any natural connexion that there is between particular articulate sounds and certain *ideas*, for then there would be but one language amongst all men; but by a voluntary imposition whereby such a word is made arbitrarily the mark of such an *idea*... *words, in their primary or immediate signification, stand for nothing but the ideas in the mind of him that uses them*... (Locke 1689, Book III, Ch. II, italics in original)

In several respects, Locke was not a cognitivist about language: he did not regard language as a biological endowment, he thought linguistic representations are representations *of ideas*, and he thought the association of sign with idea is voluntary (and thus explicit and conscious). What Locke does demand of linguistic agents is that they be conceptually autonomous; words are chosen in order to stand in for ideas in the hope of communicating them to others for “comfort and advantage.” That our linguistic choices are voluntary, and that we presumably could have chosen otherwise are assumptions that bear on the question of linguistic agency and again mark some of the differences between linguistic relativists and universalists. Those externalists who rely on convention-based models of meaning also assume the conceptual autonomy of

speakers (most notably, Lewis (1969)). As Henry Jackman explains it, “Autonomous speakers can come to share a language in virtue of forming intentions such as ‘I will apply the word “cat” to *this* idea, as long as my fellows do’ or ‘I will apply the word “cat” to *that* sort of thing, as long as my fellows do’, and the plausibility of conventional accounts depends upon the antecedent availability of such conditional intentions” (Jackman 1999, p. 296). That is, communities of speakers are collections of individuals who decide, in a collection, to use words to stand in for certain ideas or for certain sorts of things.

The significance of this point is made clearer if we consider the alternative. For instance, Ian Hacking (1986) writes that linguistic variation is a feature of the language and not a feature of individuals: “Moreover, there is an important sense, doubtless in need of clarification, in which this shared language is governed by regularities that are features of the language, not of the individuals” (pp. 448-449). This seems correct: variation is something that is tractable only across groups; it does not make any sense to say that an individual varies in his language use, because we could ask, *Varies according to what?*

This question is exactly what has motivated post-Wittgensteinians to regard meaningful use as a matter of rule-following: too much conceptual autonomy borders on a private language. The familiar version of the challenge to private meanings is that in order to mean something by a word, a speaker must be able to *go wrong* in the use of the word (Wittgenstein 1953). Peter Winch (1958) captures this idea:

The notion of following a rule is logically inseparable from the notion of *making a mistake*. If it is possible to say of someone that he is

following a rule that means that one can ask whether he is doing what he does correctly or not. Otherwise there is no foothold in his behaviour in which the notion of a rule can take a grip.

and below,

Establishing a standard is not an activity which it makes sense to ascribe to any individual in complete isolation from other individuals. For it is contact with other individuals which alone makes possible the external check on one's actions which is inseparable from an established standard. (Winch 1958, p. 32)

Winch unites two leading externalist ideas here: that of rule-following and that of doing so socially. The common externalist view, as captured by Winch and which comes in a variety of forms, is that meaning something is a matter of rule-following—that learning a language is learning a system of rules, and that the rules that govern an expression do not do so just in the instance of utterance, but in all occasions. In all languages, it is these rules that prevent nonsense and promote sense, that allow for our seemingly infinite ability to construct and understand novel sentences, that allow us to translate between languages, to understand sentences in new contexts, and to employ and comprehend a vast language given a poverty of stimulus.

Philosophers have approached these problems of the possibility of private meaning and conceptual autonomy in a variety of ways. Many, following Wittgenstein, have taken language generally and semantics particularly to be inherently social, taking it as a platitude that language is principally for communication, that we could not learn or use a language outside of a community, and that community conventions constitute meaning (Wright 2001; Burge 1979; Dummett 1986; Lewis 1969), as explained in the previous section. As Winch expresses above, it

is other speakers who enforce rules—such rules *cannot* be enforced privately. These theses in philosophy of language bear resemblance to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and a commitment to the idea that the sources of meaning are to be found in the patterns of use of particular linguistic communities.

However, this idea that, “it is contact with other individuals which alone makes possible the external check on one’s actions which is inseparable from an established standard,” is in tension with Lockean conceptual autonomy and as such poses a fundamental problem for theories of meaning that rely on the balance between intentionality and conventionality such as Speech Act Theory and Intention-Based Semantics (Schiffer 1972). Yet, as Jackman rightly points out, Kripke (1982), Burge (1979), and Putnam (1975) demonstrate the tribulations of Lockean conceptual autonomy. If it is true that individuals cannot use terms or assign meanings coherently (as Burge uses ‘arthritis’, Putnam uses ‘water’, and Kripke uses ‘plus’), then the community conventions that are meant to undergird linguistic norms or rules are without foundation. That is, if collections of speakers *cannot* decide, each with conceptual autonomy, the following: “I will apply the word ‘turnip’ to *that* sort of thing, as long as my fellows do,” then the necessary conventions of trust and truthfulness *cannot* get established. (This works for linguistic divisions of labor as well: if collections of speakers *cannot* decide, each with conceptual autonomy, the following: “I will apply the word ‘turnip’ *in the way that the experts say to*, as long as my fellows do so as well,” then the necessary conventions of trust and truthfulness *cannot* get established.) In Ch. III I describe a complicated tension between the

conceptual autonomy of individuals and the authority of linguistic communities, a tension that surfaces as a problem between speakers and their “scorekeepers.” The problem pursued in that chapter is how an individual can have self-determined expressive freedom while having his norms administered by his community of scorekeepers (even in cases where this community of scorekeepers is only understood as containing one other member). I establish in Chapter III that just so long as it is a necessary condition of expressive freedom that other speakers administer one’s norms, or that one’s assertions accord with a community-sanctioned rule or convention, speakers will fail to be conceptually autonomous and, so, free. This tension is at the heart of a theory of linguistic agency.

(ii) The division of labor and the authority of the native

The name “gold”...signifies not merely what the speaker knows of gold, e.g., something yellow and very heavy, but also what he does not know, which *may* be known by someone, namely: a body endowed with an *inner constitution* from which flow its colour and weight, and which also generates other properties which he acknowledges to be better known by the experts. (Leibniz, *New Essays* III.xi.24)

The status of linguistic authorities and the sense in which a native speaker has authority that a non-native speaker lacks are both related to the problems of conceptual autonomy and social rule-following. In the above passage, Leibniz explains a problem that Hilary Putnam would later make famous, namely the “linguistic division of labor” (Putnam 1975). The idea is that whether the use of an expression is correct or incorrect depends on those who command authority over the correct use of the term. Somewhat surprisingly, Putnam thinks that this authority may even derive from currently

unknown facts that will be discovered some time in the future. In his example as presented in the previous section, whether or not a clear, odorless, colorless liquid can be called ‘water’ depended centuries ago on what would later be discovered about molecular structure. Leibniz makes a similar point with respect to gold: that which we may know as gold can only correctly be called ‘gold’ if it has the “inner constitution” as identified by the experts.

The case for the linguistic division of labor seems more intuitive in some cases than others. Many scientific terms constitute clear cases where a layperson would hesitate to insist on their own linguistic authority. Other specialized studies are similar: to my eye, I cannot tell the difference between a Rembrandt and a painting by one of his many students. In my case, style, time period, color scheme, subject matter, and often the signed name “Rembrandt” are enough for me to feel confident in using the term ‘Rembrandt’ to refer to it. However, I lose my confidence immediately once an art historian assures me that this is yet another knock-off for commercial purposes by one of Rembrandt’s many apprentices. That said, the argument for the linguistic division of labor loses its obvious credibility in cases of more familiar terms. While Putnam may not know the difference between a beech and an elm, there are some who would never accept a challenge to *their* authority on the correct uses of the terms ‘beech’ and ‘elm’. That is, there isn’t a discrete class of terms for which there are authorities to whom all speakers should defer. How might these problems be untangled?

The first problem is the complication that results by having two forms of linguistic authority presupposed in Putnam's and others' arguments. The first is the authority that derives from an historical dubbing. The second is the authority that derives from expertise in some particular domain. These two forms of authority interact in a variety of ways that are familiar in Putnam's examples. Some dubbings of ordinary terms (e.g., 'water') depended on an expertise that would come later. Dubbings of technical terms also clearly depend on experts in their local domain. In both cases, Putnam assumes that ordinary speakers *should* (even when they do not) defer to the experts in any given domain. They *should* because the meanings of these terms are dictated by the use of experts in causal-historical dubbings, and not in ordinary use by ordinary speakers. Presumably, there is no reasonable end to these chains of deference to authorities. Ordinary speakers defer to experts, who in turn defer to greater experts, who in turn can always defer to later experts (cf. Woodfield (2000)).

A number of bad assumptions are built into such arguments; so many, really, it hardly seems worthwhile to pursue such arguments, and yet they remain persuasive to many. Three general problems arise for arguments built around deference and authority. First, Putnam's thought experiment in particular (and many of the subsequent examples raised in discussion of this thought experiment) seems to presuppose an infinite progress-of-science worldview: some day we will know all there is to know and the real meaning of terms will lie in those descriptions. Since science is steadily progressing toward that goal and since the knowledge of linguistic

communities defers to the knowledge of the greater scientific community, we reasonably ought to defer to the greater scientific community in formulating a theory of meaning for ordinary language users. If it turns out that this view of science is inaccurate or if we think it poses problems for explaining the meaning of expressions that do not obviously fall into a scientific structure, the theory of meaning it implicates flounders.

The second complication is that the use of some expressions changes over time and not always in the direction of greater sophistication and differentiation. Putnam seems to implicitly assume that language is like scientific progress, moving ahead with advances in knowledge. If it turns out that the use of some expressions evolves and devolves with their practical role for speakers rather than with proximity to the “inner constitution” of their referents or with scientific precision, Putnamian linguistic division of labor appears to lack an explanation of this. A rudimentary and merely intuited example of such phenomena is in the use of a term such as ‘rutabaga’—it doesn’t seem implausible that such a term carries richer content in a time and place where the food itself is a greater part of the culinary landscape, regardless of what the best horticulturalists have learned about the “inner constitution” of this root.

The third complication is that it is not obvious how the linguistic universe divides itself. There are some terms that endorse the thesis of a linguistic division of labor more clearly. These are technical terms, or the jargon of a discipline. There are also terms that only questionably support the thesis of a linguistic division of labor. ‘Water’ is such a term. Most speakers wouldn’t accept a challenge to the correctness

of their use of such a term. Putnam, of course, claims that they *should* accept just such a challenge as a matter of deferring to the authorities. For a third category of terms, it's not clear just who the authorities should be; for these terms, nearly nobody could accept a challenge to the correctness of their use of such a term. These include parts of language such as articles, pronouns, or many proper names. The important thing about dividing language up in this way is that terms don't stay in one of these three categories but shift with needs and use. Now it seems that dividing up the linguistic universe will be a theoretical matter rather than an empirical matter, for it's not apparent how to discover such natural divisions. And, if it is a theoretical matter, any good theory of the linguistic division of labor should have something to say about language beyond just the clearest cases of apparently scientific terms.

Assuming that there is *something* like a linguistic division of labor, who are the experts and why should we listen to them? There are a number of ways of thinking about this. For instance, one could claim to be an authority in domain *X* for those parts of the vocabulary for which *X*ers are considered to be experts (or where experts take themselves to be experts) (cf. Jackman 2001). If a root farmer could claim to be an authority on the uses of 'radish' and 'rutabaga', it is not obvious how his authority extends to me. When someone utters the sounds that correspond with 'rutabaga', I connect it with a meaning such as: "nondescript root vegetable." I certainly do not uniquely pick out rutabagas in my mind in the way that a root farmer could. So in my idiolect, 'rutabaga' has the unrefined meaning 'nondescript root vegetable' regardless of the meaning in the idiolect of the root farmer. That the meaning of *my* term

‘rutabaga’ depends on the meaning *he* connects to the sound ‘rutabaga’ is incoherent unless we presume both that we share a language and that my correct reference can be entirely dependent on his knowledge about the word-world relation. If we do assume that languages are “shared,” this option is normative rather than descriptive. It does not say how “we” use our words, or what “our” words mean, but they say how “we” *should* use “our” words, given the social status of experts. I argue against the idea that languages can be “shared” and thus that there are such authorities in Chapter IV and Chapter V.

Alternatively, if one is a member of a prestigious dialect group (the status of this could be determined non-linguistically), one could claim that others should defer to one’s usage. An example of this is reflected in what’s called “linguistic prescriptivism.” Many linguists have taken pains to distinguish themselves as linguistic *descriptivists* who describe only how it is that language is used, and not how it ought to be used. Examples of linguistic prescriptivists are numerous, and include authors of style, grammar, or punctuation manuals written for a general audience. As compelling as such prescriptivists’ claims may be, it is difficult to gauge the status of their specifically *linguistic* authority. It is also not obvious whether these are the sort of authorities that Putnam would recognize alongside scientists and art historians.

It is easy to become confused about what aspects of language we could be wrong about, and about what demands an authority. Appeals to the linguistic division of labor may overgeneralize. While we may regularly refer to experts to make our culinary choices, or to discern the meaning of timely terms such as ‘embedded

journalists’ and ‘coalition of the willing’, for most of the language we use, expert opinion would not budge us from our basic intuitions and confidence in our own authority. While I may not know the meaning of ‘radishes’ or ‘rutabagas’ and do not know how to correctly apply these terms, it would be difficult to convince me that I do not, after all, know the meaning of ‘water’. It would be difficult to convince most speakers that the knowledge of experts should be brought to bear on the meaning of indexicals, common nouns, and common prepositions. The limits of the linguistic division of labor and the consequent externalist orientation to language are difficult to demarcate, but their existence is nonetheless pervasive enough to convince many that the language that we study, and its meanings, are not internal. The stratification and diversification of linguistic authority throughout linguistic communities will be an important theme throughout this dissertation.

Questions about linguistic authority within linguistic communities brings us to the second, related issue of this section: the authority of the native speaker in linguistic theory. Consider, for instance, Chomsky’s puzzlement at the questioning of his own knowledge of this thing called ‘English’:

At the Texas Linguistic Forum of 1959 there was a panel discussion of Noam Chomsky’s then novel theory of generative grammar, in the course of which Chomsky remarked by way of illustrating a general point that a certain expression of English – call it X – was not an English sentence. One of the panelists asked Chomsky how he knew that. Had he done a survey of speakers? Had he consulted a sufficiently large corpus, verifying that X and expressions like it did not occur? Chomsky replied, “What do you mean, how do I know? I am a native speaker of the English language.” (Higginbotham 1998, p. 429)

We are likely to respond in the same way that Chomsky did at the time—with utter puzzlement that our basic linguistic confidence would be questioned or that we would be pushed to defend our authority for this confidence. We not only respond this way as ordinary speakers, but also in our roles as Philosophers and Linguists. Linguists may mark sentences as correct with no mark, or as mistaken with *, ?, # or some combination such as ?? or ?* or #??. The justification we provide for these nuances are based on hunches: in the face of a question by a second-language learner of English, we respond with, “that’s not the way that expression is usually used,” or we get confirmation from another native speaker’s intuitions. We are confident in assuming that our off-the-cuff judgments about such matters are authoritative simply in being the intuitions of native speakers.

Chomsky confirms the method of using native speaker intuitions to justify theories of grammar in all of his major theoretical works (see especially 1965, pp. 18-27). Although he acknowledges that there may be theoretical differences between that which is judged grammatical and that which is judged acceptable, he sees no other way to assess whether a linguistic theory accords with linguistic “fact,” or whether a linguistic theory is an accurate characterization of a speaker’s underlying competence than to test the theory against a native speaker’s intuitions.

Such a view accords with some common-sense intuitions as well as Chomskian grammatical theory. While we are willing to accept challenges to our encyclopedic knowledge—for instance, what the highest peak is in the Andes—we are (rightly) not willing to accept challenges to our basic linguistic competence. This

comes in familiar forms in our everyday usage. We accept different standards for written and oral speech and accommodate great levels of variation in oral speech. Some take this to suggest that there are no normative strictures on proper grammar or meaning:

For instance, if you tell me that *I deplore your behaving like this* is not a proper sentence of English, I shall feel free to ignore you. It may not be grammatical for *you*, but that is not criterial for *my* grammar, even if we are deemed to speak the same language. The implication is that the rules of grammar that comprise our competence are like the rules of visual perception that enable us to judge distance, and not like the rules of the Highway Code that in Britain instruct us to drive on the left. (Smith 1999, p. 154)

Taking the attitude that what is criterial for one person's grammar may not be criterial for another person's led Chomsky early on to propose the notion of an idiolect for linguistic study. This allows the linguist to rely on data from a single speaker and to regard each speaker as an authoritative native speaker of some language. This theoretical move stimulated rapid development in linguistic theory. Linguistic data was overly abundant and immediately available. Testing results required only introspection and counterexamples became difficult to generate. The only plausible way to generate a counterexample was to elicit a response in spontaneous speech that conflicted with some aspect of the linguistic theory. This was further constrained by the presupposition that each speaker speaks his own idiolect and that mishaps in spontaneous speech (what are called "performance errors") are compatible with an underlying grammar (what is called the speaker's "competence").

As mentioned in the section on internalism vs. externalism, there have been dissidents to this linguistic method. Labov (1975) complained that there was a laundry

list of problems in using first-person introspective judgments to build linguistic theories, particularly when the judgments were those of a linguist. He writes,

...I find that most linguists who are engaged in the study of their introspective judgments feel that the influence of their theory upon their judgments is only a minor problem at best. As far as I can see there is no basis for their confidence. (Labov 1975, p. 30)

and

Thus there are more than a few occasions in which Chomsky himself has not been able to base his argument on “clear cases,” but rather finds that the logic of inquiry forces him to exclude data from those who disagree with him. (Labov 1975, p. 29)

It might seem as if this is much ado about nothing. Surely a native speaker can be relied on to judge the acceptability of sentences. However, this has not been the case in the history of linguistics.¹¹ If the linguist wants to achieve some degree of scientific generality, his proposals must apply to more than just his own idiolect even if his data are solely arrived at through first-person introspective judgments.

Labov proposed that linguists follow three general principles when relying on the authority of native speaker judgments. The first of these three is the Consensus Principle: “if there is no reason to think otherwise, assume that the judgments of any native speaker are characteristic of all speakers of the language.” This principle directs the theorist to look for dissensus, something he may be disinclined to do given his theoretical predispositions. For this reason, Labov proposed the Experimenter Principle: “if there is any disagreement on introspective judgments, the judgments of those who are familiar with the theoretical issues may not be counted as evidence.” This principle alone, if followed, would do much to curtail linguistic theory. But

¹¹ Labov (1975) documents several important examples and subsequent studies that demonstrate discrepancies between linguists and other native speakers.

consider how unique it is if regarded as a more general scientific principle. It requires that theory confirmation not simply be possible, but only if this confirmation comes from those who are completely uninformed about the theories at stake. Finally, Labov proposed the Clear Case Principle: “disputed judgments should be shown to include at least one consistent pattern in the speech community or be abandoned.” Seemingly innocuous, this principle would also serve to prevent linguists from proposing radical theoretical modifications based on obscure data, or even on the supposed lack of data. It would also prevent linguists from disregarding evidence from other, similarly situated speakers (Labov 1975, p. 31).

There is little reason to think that linguists or philosophers of language have heeded Labov’s advice or that they have taken other measures as a discipline to regulate the use of first-person introspective judgments despite the controversy that surrounds them. First-person judgments are regarded as authoritative simply because they come from native speakers. I discuss the normative structure of these judgments at greater length in Ch. IV.

I have presented two rather insidious problems with linguistic authority. The linguistic division of labor presents itself as an obvious, commonsense position given the division of non-linguistic labor in the world. However, there is no clear way to defend, constrain, or limit linguistic authority to keep it from slipping into familiar patterns of linguistic prescriptivism and non-linguistic authority, where society’s elite make pronouncements about what may just be a biological function. I discuss a unique form of linguistic authority in Ch. III as what Brandom calls “deontic scorekeeping.”

In scorekeeping relationships speakers obtain a kind of power of censure over other speakers, although this authority should be based on logical and rational principles rather than the sort of authority invoked by Putnam *et al.* In Ch. V, I defend a radical rejection of the linguistic division of labor in favor of principles of interpretability.

The second insidious problem with linguistic authority is how to rank the authority of the native speaker in developing linguistic theory and whether this grants that a single native speaker possesses enough authority to justify a linguistic theory with broad applications. The cultivation of the notion of an idiolect did much to warrant the use of first-person introspective judgments on the part of linguists who were native speakers of the language they were studying. However, such theoretical moves have invited a host of new problems with the (over-) confidence of linguists and with the proposed scope of linguistic theories.

(iii) Deliberation and interpretation

Speakers often relate to the language they speak in willful ways, and such linguistic deliberation is, at first glance, uncontroversial. Speakers routinely deliberate over the meaning of terms and the correct and incorrect applications of those terms; these deliberations shape and structure the meanings in their heads. We frequently begin a conversation with an idea of what a term such as ‘bachelor’ means, beginning with *an unmarried man* and then suggest connotations of *availability for marriage* and then perhaps either, *desire to become married* or *desire to remain unmarried*. Our definition may quickly be further refined to stipulate that a bachelor must be of marrying age for a particular society; for instance, it would be inappropriate to call a

5-year-old American boy a ‘bachelor’. Age, we might suggest, could not be all there is to it, because we would want to rule out the possibility of referring to the Pope as a ‘bachelor’. We may also stipulate either sexual preference or legal possibility, so that we may call a single gay adult non-papal male a ‘bachelor’ in Hawaii but not in California. In the course of a brief conversation the meaning of the term ‘bachelor’ may evolve into something like, *A man who has never married thought of as a man who can marry if he wants to or people think of this man like this: this man can marry someone if he wants to* (Wierzbicka 1996).

Why might the nature of linguistic deliberation be interesting for an analysis of theories of language? The nature of linguistic change through deliberation turns on one’s view of linguistic agency and the metaphysics of language. For instance, we may think that linguistic meaning has a deliberative nature that is similar to the authoritative nature of some aspects of language: we may think that our ideas and language take shape through and with others, and that our individual view on language is limited and fallible. Thinking that an individual’s view on language is limited and fallible suggests that language is something greater than and distinct from the speakers who use it. Whereas there is a fairly clear way in which externalists can accommodate deliberation into an otherwise social theory of meaning, the structure of deliberation for a cognitivist, internalist theory of language is slightly more complicated. In this latter case, the theory appears to presuppose a greater degree of linguistic determination given how much is assumed to be innate. On the other hand, there is a certain freedom that results from rejecting social constraints on language such that an

individual can presumably simply decide how he will use words in his own individual language (cf. Chomsky 2003, p. 280). This theoretical possibility quickly becomes very complicated; I return to this in greater detail in Ch. IV.

A final way to think of intrapersonal linguistic deliberation could be thought of as a speaker interpreting himself. This idea relies on distinguishing the meaning an expression has for a speaker and the speaker's conception of that meaning (Higginbotham 1998). Making this distinction addresses a phenomenon that language users experience, namely being able to reflectively judge their own meanings. It is in reflective judgment that the meaning of an expression for a speaker and the speaker's conception of that meaning come apart. This phenomenon becomes salient if we consider how we use words in a particular context of utterance and recognize the difference between this use and the way the words are used in our linguistic repertoire. If individual languages are again reduced to mere patterns of use, then we just deny that we could have a standing repertoire denying as well this experience of reflective judgment.

(iv) Transgressors: deviant language, deviant speakers

One way to push theories of language to draw out and make explicit the relationship between an individual language and a public language is to consider the status of errors and linguistic transgressions within theories of language. Very generally, errors and transgressions are those pieces of linguistic behavior that violate norms or rules in some way. That is, in order for an error or a transgression to be possible there must be a standard of correctness. Contenders for the standard of

correctness include linguistic regularities, linguistic norms, and rules of various kinds. For now, I will treat norms, rules, and regularities neutrally. Rules in particular take different descriptions depending if one's larger linguistic commitment is to externalism or internalism; under some construals, the rules will look like norms and in some cases not.

By 'error' I mean an expression that violates norms or rules in some non-deliberate fashion. However, this definition does not distinguish between a mistaken use of the language and a pathological use of the language. For instance, imagine that I am standing in the wings of a concert stage of a hall that is filled with 300 people. Suppose I then ask somebody, "How many people are in the hall?" and he looks out at the crowd, counts each member of the audience, and responds, "five." This case is notably different from the case in which he responds, "295." In the first case, one might wonder if he spoke English at all, could understand the question, could see properly, or was sane. In the second case, one would think he spoke English and understood the question, but made a mistake in his counting.¹² Given this distinction, 'error' could be understood to mean:

Linguistic error: an expression that violates linguistic norms or rules in some non-deliberate fashion in such a way that the speaker was capable of according with the linguistic norms or rules.

'Linguistic transgression', on the other hand, could be defined in contrast to 'linguistic error' by suggesting that the norm or rule violation was deliberate:

Linguistic transgression: an expression that violates linguistic norms or rules willfully.

¹² A version of this example is from Avrum Stroll, personal communication.

The forms that semantic transgression takes are vast, with varying degrees of significance for linguistic agency. Certain kinds of language use—e.g., fiction, figurative language, metaphor, irony, and elliptical speech—are transgressive insofar as they deviate from literal meanings, and flout the norm of talking about people, objects, and events in the actual, literal world. In each of these cases, it is easy to assume that the meaning of the fictional, figurative, metaphorical, and so forth is derivative on the literal, such that literal meanings relate to *real* features of the world. For instance, in the case of fiction, the norm of talking about people, objects, and events in the actual world is flouted or at least suspended. In the case of figurative language, the norm of using the literal or standing meaning of a term is temporarily flouted for expressive effect. Such linguistic forms are transgressive only if it is assumed that the literal meaning of an expression is somehow its most basic meaning, or, better put, its *default* meaning. Most philosophers have assumed some variation on this (what I call Literalism in Ch. II) on the basis of arguments made by Grice, Austin, Schiffer, and more recently Stanley, and Cappelen & Lepore. At the opposite end of the spectrum from the Literalism is Contextualism or even a radical meaning eliminativism. I discuss and defend these views in Ch. II.

Beyond these often discussed forms of linguistic transgressions, perhaps the most important form that linguistic transgression can take is that of novelty. While the problem of linguistic creativity has preoccupied linguists over the last half century, the focus has been on how it is possible to construct and comprehend an infinite number of well-formed sentences with whatever tools are at a speaker's disposal. This has led

most linguists and philosophers of language to assume that one of the most basic principles of any language faculty must be its compositionality. Here I am more interested in two different kinds of linguistic creativity—namely, *How can speakers sensibly invent new expressions or use old expressions in new ways?* and *How can that transgressive language use facilitate conceptual change and the development of new knowledge?* I emphasize *sensibly* because I am less interested in the mechanism by which speakers have inventive abilities and am more interested in what makes innovative language *meaningful*. I began this dissertation by asking how it is that speakers can meaningfully use words, what I called The Humpty Dumpty Problem. For instance, I asked whether an English speaker can meaningfully say, “I don’t feel like bnik today.” Is this a *possible* sentence of English given that ‘bnik’ is often described as an “impossible” word in English? Similarly, can an English speaker meaningfully say, “I’m feeling so funny all over the same” or is this gibberish? An analysis of the concept of transgressive language would explore the boundaries of permissiveness, possibility, and meaningfulness. Many of the philosophical ideas introduced in this chapter—such as authority, interpretation, autonomy, realism, and externalism—lay the foundation for such an analysis of linguistic transgression.

Although an analysis of linguistic transgression will be important throughout this dissertation, I will pay special attention to the semantic confines of Literalism in contrast to the constructive roles of speakers and contexts of Contextualism (Ch. II). The lynchpin of my analysis of Brandom’s inferentialism is a consideration of transgression within the context of ‘scorekeeping’ relationships (Ch. III). Finally, I

analyze various components of linguistic agency and explain transgression as playing a central role in my own positive views on constraints on a theory of language (Ch. V).

Given this variegated understanding of linguistic error and transgression, how is it that we can understand transgression within a larger theory of language? The cognitivist internalist perspective would be that conceiving of meaning individualistically suggests that the regularities, rules, or norms that were violated are internal to the speaker. Despite Wittgenstein's claims to the contrary, internalists appear to have no problem with the possibility of holding rules privately, and in fact, advocate the position quite explicitly: "Individual variation is not only pervasive, it is *prima facie* evidence for the possibility of a 'private language' of the kind that Wittgenstein denied" (Smith 1999). The rules that can be *held* privately will be a small set for the internalist; rules, including semantic rules, are, for the most part, *implicit* in the strictures of UG. Conformity to these rules is part of our biological endowment, and not something that properly comes under the heading of "rule-following considerations." In this model, errors, particularly for young language learners, can be explained in part by the child trying out different features of UG in order to parameterize the rules for his particular idiolect. But under this description, error does not look like violating rules at all, but rather like conforming to some different set of possible parameters. If willful transgression is identified with linguistic creativity or innovation, then an internal semantics seems to allow for a maximal amount of creativity within the parameters of UG. Just so long as one accords with the rules of

UG (and given that this is our biological endowment, it's hard to imagine what discord would look like), there are no other norms that would *prima facie* count as governing meaning in an idiolect.

How are error and transgression understood from the perspective of a social externalism? The preliminary response in this case is more obvious. Violating norms or rules just refers to those rules or norms held by a community of speakers. This community can be understood broadly at this stage: it could be a community of two, or a community of one billion English speakers; it could include only native speakers, or include all speakers. Under any of these conceptions, linguistic transgressions pit the individual speaker against his speech community: whether or not his transgressive utterance is correct relies on community assent or accord with some tradition of use. Social externalist theories rely heavily on the idea that for any term there is a standing meaning that the term carries with it, even if, in use, the employment of the term takes into account a variety of pragmatic, idiosyncratic, and intentional considerations. In this philosophical tradition, externalism has analyzed transgressive linguistic behavior as a phenomenon peripheral to a general theory of meaning – one that only concerns itself with these “standing” meanings. For instance, fiction is thought of as *nonserious* discourse and is contrasted with serious or standard discourse (Searle 1980); ellipses and grammatically incomplete sentences are thought to *stand in* for complete grammatical sentences (Alston 2000); figurative and ironic discourses are thought to be *derivative* forms of literal discourse (Alston 2000).

If the problem for internalists is that they do not distinguish between error, transgression, and mis-judgment, or that they are forced to choose between allowing all linguistic beliefs to be true or denying that any of them could be true, the problem for externalism is quite the opposite. The source of standards for recognizing an error could be violating regularities, rules, or norms. For many externalists, mere regularities do not constitute the standards of linguistic practice (Wright 2001; Brandom 1994); rather, the rules or norms are both held by a community of speakers and are explicit (contra Chomsky). That said, a commitment to a public language, or to an externalist theory of meaning does not commit one to a claim about the *source* of rules or norms. It is still an open question whether the source of rules and norms is to be found in the consensus of the linguistic community or in other features of the world and the word-world relation. However, externalists are unified in taking one or both of these sources of standards to be an aspect of any theory of meaning, whereas internalists deny this. While externalists have been committed not only to the idea that words are used to refer, but that the words refer to things in the world, internalists, again, reject this. Chomskians, for instance, argue that semantics is about relations between sounds and meanings in the head, and not in the world (including the inter-subjective world) (Smith 1999). The nature of the problem of analyzing error and transgression becomes clearer situated thus: errors for an internalist may just involve the logical or inferential relation between meanings in an individual's head; but semantic errors for an externalist are bound to the norms and rules of a speech community, as well as to the way the world is.

Under either version of externalism, the individual is tethered; his autonomy is measured exactly by the friction from the world or from the community. These kinds of friction—if their consequences are taken seriously—artificially limit expressive freedom, conceptual autonomy, and the innovativeness integral to being a linguistic being. That this friction creates limits at all is *not* a criticism on its own; it only becomes a criticism if it does not comport with what we know about meaning, intuit about meaning, and the requirements for making a study of meaning complete, critical, dynamic, and yet principled. For any characterization of semantic rules will need to allow for innovation in language, while also allowing for petrification when we want precision, constraint, or constancy. In short, a characterization of the parameters of meaning needs to constrain and to admit of deviance; it needs to serve the *license* of the speaker of a language to change, create, or violate the rules to meet his expressive needs. It seems that what a singular externalist semantics lacks is what internalism can help itself to, namely, that meaning something by a term, and understanding the meaning of others, invokes compromises and judgment calls fundamentally – we do not merely see if our linguistic behavior *accords* with an external rule or norm, rather, these are the ways we *create* rules, tendencies, and inclinations toward the semantics of our languages.

Chapter II: Semantic minimalism and literal meaning

A. Literal meaning and its constraint on linguistic agency: the terms of the debate

Recently, Justice Antonin Scalia reviewed an analysis of language and legal interpretation and wrote:

The portion of Smith's book I least understand—or most disagree with—is the assertion, upon which a regrettably large portion of the analysis depends, that it is a “basic ontological proposition that persons, not objects, have the property of being able to mean.”

and

Smith claims his assertion that “legal meaning depends on the (semantic) intentions of an author” is “a modest and commonsensical claim.” It strikes me as an extravagant and nonsensical one. That is why Humpty Dumpty's statement of the claim (“When *I* use a word it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less”) has always been regarded—by all except Carroll's game-playing Logicians—as hilarious nonsense. Alice and I believe that words, like other conventional symbols, do convey meaning, an objective meaning, regardless of what their author “intends” them to mean... (2005)

The claim that “legal meaning depends on the (semantic) intention of an author” is extravagant and nonsensical suggests that Scalia thinks that (legal) meaning does not depend on the intentions of an author—and that an author's intentions play *no* part in determining the meaning of what is said by any given utterance. This concern with circumscribing the literal meaning of expressions in the face of those who try to impose authorial or interpretive intentions on those expressions has played a significant role in legal and philosophical discourse. In 1996, in the “Defense of Marriage Act,” the U.S. Congress passed an act that fixed the following definitions: “the word ‘marriage’ means only a legal union between one man and

one woman as husband and wife, and the word ‘spouse’ refers only to a person of the opposite sex who is a husband or a wife.”¹ George W. Bush, similarly concerned about interpretive threats to the literal meanings of these terms, called for a constitutional amendment that would inscribe these fixed meanings into the U.S. Constitution.

Following the models of the Defense of Marriage Act and Bush’s call for a constitutional amendment on this semantic issue, the Texas State Legislature attempted to pass an amendment to the Texas State Constitution that would ban gay marriage. The purpose of the legislation would purport to fix what the legislators take to be the literal meaning of ‘marriage’ for all time. With this concern for literal meaning vividly in mind, the Texas lawmakers drafted the following amendment to their state’s constitution:

Article 1, Texas Constitution, is amended by adding Section 32 to read as follows:

- (a) Marriage in this state shall consist only of the union of one man and one woman.
- (b) This state or a political subdivision of this state may not create or recognize any legal status identical or similar to marriage.

The careful reader will see an unintended slip in the above text. This was pounced upon by an organization that called itself “Save Texas Marriage.” Their argument was that, by the literal meaning of this amendment, *all* Texas marriages would be null and void. After all, this amendment prohibits the state from recognizing a legal status identical to marriage. Since the marriages described in clause (a) are identical to themselves, the state would find itself in the position of being unable to recognize any marriages at all, straight or gay.

¹ "Defense Of Marriage Act" 5/96 H.R. 3396.

What makes this case even more interesting is that Save Texas Marriage wasn't simply poking fun at the mishaps of the Texas Legislature. Rather, this presents a serious problem for those who want to fix the literal meaning of 'marriage' to begin with. Their concern was to block "activist"² judges from *interpreting* constitutional text as if it were intention-dependent, rather than simply reading off the literal meaning of the legal text. And yet, defenders of the Constitutional Amendment could only defend themselves from Save Texas Marriage's criticism by pointing out that it is clear what the authors of the amendment intended even though this intention departs from the literal meaning of the text. This concern with whether or not to regard language as intention-dependent has consequences throughout legal debate, and has fortified strong barriers between legal theorists.³

And, it's no accident that opponents of these kinds of constitutional amendments have framed their resistance along semantic lines as well. They argue that it's not the activist judges that might lead states to recognize gay marriages, but rather an *even closer* look at the literal meaning of 'marriage'. This closer look reveals that the truly literal meaning of the term allows for unions of people without regard for sex or sexual orientation. Since this is what the word *really* means, we should have no hesitation in legislating accordingly.

Literal meaning matters. The idea that we can appeal to the literal meaning of an expression in order to resolve all manner of disputes is appealing. In the case

² In reference to the definitions laid out in the Defense of Marriage Act, George W. Bush said, "In recent months...some activist judges and legal officials have made an aggressive attempt to redefine marriage" (White House Press Release, February 24, 2004).

³ For a recent defense of legislative intent in legal interpretation (that is, the *anti*-literalist position in legal theory), see Solan (2004).

described above, it seems that there is a palpable *fear* on the part of the legislators that the literal meaning of an important term is slipping out of their control.⁴ And if they were to lose control of the literal meaning of some part of the language, they would lose the political game; they appear to believe that whoever is on the side of the literal meaning of the language in question is also clearly in the right. This deal-breaking authority of the literal meaning of expressions comes from the way in which we think it constrains what speakers can do with language and, correspondingly, what the *content* of the sentences speakers utter obligates them to mean. What is the nature of this constraint?

The literal meaning of an utterance seems to limit what it is said by an utterance. ‘What is said’ by an utterance has a specialized meaning in the Literalist debate. I will be using this meaning here. Its specialized sense distinguishes what is said by an utterance from what is communicated or implicated by an utterance. What is being considered in this chapter is what is said in the most minimal sense by an utterance as opposed to the diversity of things that can be communicated or implicated by an utterance.⁵ However, the outcome of this debate turns on how to distinguish accurately between what a sentence (or speaker) means, what is said (by an utterance, or a sentence, or a speaker), and what is implicated (by the utterance or sentence or speaker).⁶ For instance, from Scalia’s perspective, the literal meaning of

⁴ This semantic fear dates back to at least the Holmes Court, when Justice Holmes wrote, “we do not inquire what the legislature meant, we ask only what the statute means” (1899).

⁵ I reject this distinction in Ch. V.

⁶ For more on this, see Bach (2001b) and Recanati (2001b). Recanati, for instance, although anti-Literalist, still describes this distinction as being between “the linguistic meaning of a sentence-type and what is said...*by* an utterance of the sentence (2001, p. 75, my emphasis) as opposed to what is said *by* a speaker. This distinction is subtle, but important for the present analysis. I will set this aside

an utterance determines what is said by that utterance with no possible room for interpretive or communicative variation. If Scalia were a philosopher of language, he would be committed to the following characterization of what I will call Literalism:

(L): truth-conditional content can be ascribed to sentences independently of what the speaker uttering the sentence means.

This is a stark position. (L) requires that the truth-conditions of a sentence can be determined on the basis of a strict analysis of the literal meaning of the uttered sentence without any regard for the utterer's purpose, intended meaning, or the context in which the sentence was uttered.⁷ In order to illustrate the severity of this extreme view, consider this literal analysis of an utterance:

“Rudolf is a reindeer” is true just in case Rudolf is a reindeer, and expresses the proposition that *Rudolf is a reindeer*.⁸

Notice that the proposition purportedly expressed by the sentence “Rudolf is a reindeer” is just that *Rudolf is a reindeer*, and it can be determined that “Rudolf is a reindeer” is true just in case Rudolf is a reindeer. This is said to be the correct

until the final section of the paper where we will see the significance of distinguishing between sentences and utterances.

⁷ Other than Scalia, it is difficult to accurately attribute such an extreme view to anybody. Those who come closest are Grice (1957), Cappelen & Lepore (2005), Borg (2004), and, perhaps, Salmon (1991, 2005). Consider this alternative description of what I'm calling here Literalism and which Salmon calls “the expression centered conception of semantics”: “According to this alternative conception [of semantics], the semantic attributes of expressions are not conceptually derivative of the speech acts performed by their utterers, and are thought of instead as intrinsic to the expressions themselves, or to the expressions *as* expressions of a particular language (and as occurring in a particular context). The expression centered conception takes seriously the idea that expressions are symbols, and that, as such, they have a semantic life of their own...[T]he expression centered conception marks a definite separation between semantics and pragmatics, allowing for at least the possibility of extreme, pervasive, and even highly systematic deviation” (2005, p. 324). In contrast, the view underlying this chapter is that expressions do *not* have a semantic life independently of the linguistic agents who use those expressions in context. This view will not be explicitly defended here. On the contrary, I grant to the Literalists, or “the expression centered conception of semantics” that expressions have a “semantic life of their own,” I just deny that they are part of any natural language and, as such, are not worth studying.

⁸ This is the extent of the analysis provided by Cappelen & Lepore (2005).

analysis of “Rudolf is a reindeer” regardless of the context surrounding the utterance or the speaker’s intention in uttering this sentence. Literalists take this strategy to appear obvious, and it certainly seems, given an example such as this, that this is the correct analysis. Finally, this constrains speakers by claiming that it is sentences and not speakers that are the bearers of content in a communicative exchange.⁹ For this reason, what a speaker purportedly *cannot* do is utter a sentence and mean something other than what that sentence literally means.¹⁰ I will call those who hold this position Literalists.¹¹

Literalism has, of course, come under a great deal of fire. At the opposite extreme is the view that truth-conditional content cannot be ascribed to sentences independently of some combination of what the speaker uttering the sentence means, the context in which the sentence is uttered, and the interpretation on the part of the audience. *This* extreme position also holds that (L) must be rejected for all natural language sentences. This view is often called Contextualism or even Radical Contextualism—I will refer to proponents of this view simply as Contextualists in what follows.¹²

⁹ Compare this with that which Scalia so strongly disagrees: “that it is a ‘basic ontological proposition that persons, not objects, have the property of being able to mean’.”

¹⁰ Here I want to stave off an anticipated response from some readers: all Literalists can agree that speakers can communicate and implicate many propositions with the use of any given sentence. What is at stake in the debate between Literalists and, e.g., Contextualists is the possibility of an ascription of truth-conditions to sentences under an acontextual literal interpretation. I am aware of this response to what might be viewed as my foisting of an untenable position on the Literalist. I address this at multiple points in the text and notes below, and in greater detail in the final section of this chapter.

¹¹ Montminy (unpublished draft) calls this position “truth-conditional invariantism.” Cappelen & Lepore (2005) and Borg (2004) both describe this position as “semantic minimalism.” Recanati (2004), like me, conceives of this extreme position as Literalism.

¹² It is also difficult to know who to put in this extreme camp without some exaggeration. Candidates for this view include Austin (1963, 1976), Travis (1975, 1985, 1989, 1997, 2000), Searle (1978), and Bezuidenhout (2002). Slightly less radical Contextualists are Recanati (2004) and Relevance Theorists such as Sperber & Wilson (1986) and Carston (2002). Theorists such as Montminy

This struggle between Literalism (in the guise of formal or truth-conditional semantics) and Contextualism (first in the guise of Speech Act Theory and later in the discipline of Pragmatics) has structured much of the debate in Linguistics, Pragmatics, and Philosophy of Language over the last half century. The Contextualist onslaught on Literalism began in indelicate terms with Austin's claim that, "the question of truth and falsehood does not turn only on what a sentence *is*, nor yet on what it *means*, but on, speaking very broadly, the circumstances in which it is uttered. Sentences are not *as such* either true or false."¹³ Despite Austin's attempt early in this debate to settle the case against Literalism, it has remained compelling; following each Literalist resistance has been an even more thorough case for the weakness and insufficiency of (L). This chapter chronicles some of these demonstrations not for the purpose of burying (L) once and for all but rather for the purpose of watching it crumble all on its own. Witnessing the dismantling of Literalism and, to a small extent, taking part in the dissection of recent last ditch efforts to resuscitate it, reveals answers to the more general questions structuring this dissertation chapter: What is literal meaning and how does the literal content of sentences serve as a constraint on the linguistic license of speakers? How, if at all, do speakers, in acts of speaking, determine and constrain the literal content—the *what is said*—of the sentences they utter? More importantly, and more narrowly, the history of attacks on Literalism is instructive in showing the failure of Literalism to offer a helpful model of meaning and interpretation. Eventually, I get to the point

(unpublished draft), and Stanley & Szabo (2000) are not Contextualists at all, according to my analysis, but rather moderate Literalists (also called "Syncretists" by Recanati and "Moderate Contextualists" by Cappelen & Lepore—these are all theory-driven variations on how to cut up the pie).

¹³ Austin (1963, p. 111).

that any semantic theory grounded in Literalism is explanatorily impotent. Although we might conclude that there are reasons to maintain that literal semantic analyses are available to theories of language, we should also recognize that they do no explanatory work. On the contrary, it is an account of the practices of linguistic agents and not linguistic content that explains meaning and interpretation.

B. Exceptions to Literalism

Before discussing the many exceptions to (L) that a Literalist must make in order to make the Literalist position plausible, let's set aside certain classes of sentences as being obviously outside the scope of (L). Acknowledging the ways in which a speaker's use of an expression may deviate from what the expression itself means need not threaten (L) according to the Literalist. Salmon makes such a point here:

What we represent with the symbols we produce need not be the very same as what the symbols themselves represent. We are constrained by the symbols' system of representation—by their semantics—but we are not enslaved by it. Frequently, routinely, in fact, what we represent by means of a symbol deviates from the symbol's semantics. Most obviously, this occurs with the sentences we utter, whereby we routinely assert something beyond what the sentence itself semantically expresses. Irony, sarcasm, and figurative language may be cases in point. (Salmon 2005, p. 323)

The idea here is that truth conditions can be ascribed to the sentence that is uttered ironically based on what the sentence says and not on what is implicated by the utterance, and not for sentences that make assertions that are ironic, sarcastic, figurative, or are even just slips of the tongue. These are some of most obvious and least controversial deviations from (L). I am more interested in cases where (L) fails to hold that are less immediately obvious and are less readily conceded by

Literalists. For this reason, I will not discuss speech acts such as these now, but I will return to this in the final section of this chapter. I will also not discuss implicatures and the ways in which they augment literal interpretations. In the meantime, let's modify (L) to accommodate concerns for metaphorical, figurative, and ironic utterances:

(L)': truth-conditional content can be ascribed to sentences independently of what the speaker uttering the sentence means, making exceptions for cases of sentences that are used metaphorically, figuratively, or ironically.

Similarly, (L)' is still too literal, even for a stalwart Literalist. David Kaplan, in his 1989 paper, "Demonstratives," provides a list of demonstratives and indexicals that we should think are obvious exceptions to (L)'. For instance, if I utter (1),

(1) She's not here,

truth-conditional content can *only* be ascribed to the sentence I utter in light of at least two pieces of crucial information: to whom I am referring, and where I am. That (L) has to accept the assignment of indexicals and demonstratives has been argued—persuasively to most—by Kaplan, who claims that an expression containing an indexical has its content relative to a context. Because an expression containing an indexical is true or false relative to a context, the content of that expression varies with the context. He calls the linguistic meaning of an indexical its 'character': the 'character' of an indexical is a function from contexts to content. It is widely accepted that truth-conditional content cannot be ascribed to sentences

without first fixing the clear indexicals and demonstratives, as well as tense.¹⁴ Let's set aside for the time being what exactly should go on the basic list of indexicals and demonstratives and just call the list the Basic List.¹⁵ Let's then modify the Literalist position one more time to take on these obvious concessions:

(L)": truth-conditional content can be ascribed to sentences independently of what the speaker uttering the sentence means, making exceptions for cases of sentences that are used metaphorically, figuratively, or ironically, and allowing for the assignment of indexicals and demonstratives from the Basic List.

Yet, this position is still thoroughly constraining; one might say that even the modified (L)" establishes a constraint on speakers that is entirely derivative from literal meaning without any control from speakers or context. Consider (1) again. In this case I say of someone that she is not here. I do this even though 'she' does not literally pick out anyone in particular. However, 'she', as an indexical, does require its own completion, and the typical way to do that is to look to whom the speaker is referring. So, although (1) does require processing beyond the mere interpretation of the literal meaning of the sentence uttered, this processing is prompted by the literal meaning itself.¹⁶

¹⁴ Two recent resolutely Literalist defenses make immediate concessions for obvious indexicals, demonstratives, and tense (Cappelen & Lepore (2005) and Borg (2004)). I write "obvious indexicals" rather than just "indexicals" because, for some, the question of what exceptions to make to (L) turns on what unexpected or surprising indexicals are hiding in syntactic form: e.g., see Stanley & Szabo (2000), as well as my discussion of this position below. At this stage of the argument ((L)') I am only referring to the obvious and indisputable indexicals and demonstratives as they appear on Kaplan's (1989) "Basic List." See fn. 15.

¹⁵ This is Kaplan's (1989) Basic List. It uncontroversially includes 'I', 'you', 'he', 'she', 'it' (in singular, plural, nominative, accusative, and genitive forms), 'that' and 'this', 'here', 'there', 'now', 'today', 'yesterday', 'tomorrow', 'ago', 'hence' and 'henceforth', and 'actual' and 'present'. Cappelen & Lepore (2005) make important use of the Basic List, and so it is important that I identify it here for the argument that follows.

¹⁶ Recanati calls this a "minimal" departure from literal meaning and one that involves no non-literal elements (Recanati 2004, p. 69).

Since Literalism makes exceptions for indexicals, demonstratives, ironic, metaphorical, and figurative speech, what other kinds of speech may cause problems for the Literalist? There is one more obvious set of cases for which an exception needs to be made. As an example, consider this utterance made recently about the new version of the movie *King Kong*:

(2) She escaped the clutches of King Kong with the help of a bat.

It's pretty clear that even a moderate Literalism such as the one characterized by (L)" will have trouble identifying what has been minimally said by (2) without the help of a context. In context, we know that the heroine did not strike King Kong with a long piece of wood, but instead that, at the moment of her dramatic rescue by Mr. Driscoll, they were fortuitously aided by a team of oversized flying nocturnal mammals, one of whom flew them to safety far from Kong. Ambiguous expressions pose tricky problems for Literalism. We cannot determine the veridicality of (2) without first disambiguating the term 'bat'. But, this can only be done by appeal to context or to speaker intentions. One might say that the various meanings of an ambiguous term such as 'bat' each have their own literal meaning which can be compositionally assigned in semantic analysis just as long as one knows which meaning is being deployed in the utterance. On the other hand, one might say disambiguating ambiguous expressions for the purposes of a truth-conditional analysis relies on speaker intentions and contextual cues in a way that undermines Literalism. Literalists have preferred to make an exception for ambiguous expressions and to preclude them from their semantic analyses. I'll call this refined version Literalism With Some Obvious Modifications Including Exceptions for

Metaphorical, Figurative, Ironical Speech, and the Disambiguation of Ambiguous or Polysemous Expressions, or (L)".

The scope of the Literalist's constraint on linguistic agents is beginning to narrow dramatically. Even if we set aside the assignment of indexicals and demonstratives, metaphorical, figurative, and ambiguous speech amount to a great deal of ordinary language use. Still, though, the Literalist can use (L)" to describe the constraint that literal meaning maintains on what is said by speakers uttering sentences. The Literalist still has hope of ascribing truth-conditional content to literal, unambiguous sentences.

Recently, however, there have been several challenges to (L)" that question the possibility of literal analyses of what appear to be unambiguous utterances with no metaphorical, figurative, or ironic elements. The first challenge that I will discuss is still very much in the spirit of Literalism in that it posits that any contextual content that goes beyond the literal meaning of a sentence is provided in the grammar of the sentence itself. The processing of sentences that contain these syntactic prompts is still all "bottom-up" rather than "top-down," meaning that all deviation from literal meaning is required by a literal analysis and not opted for by linguistic agents.

This challenge to Literalism has considered two classes of utterances: those that include quantified expressions and those that include comparative adjectives.¹⁷ The idea behind this more recent challenge to Literalism is that, for sentences that contain quantified expressions, truth-conditional content cannot be ascribed to those

¹⁷ Stanley & Szabó (2000). Montminy (unpublished draft) concedes those expressions that contain comparative adjectives. Cohen & Rickless (2007) concede those that include quantified expressions.

sentences unless the quantified domain is restricted. Similarly, for sentences that contain comparative adjectives, truth-conditional content cannot be ascribed to those sentences unless the relevant comparison class is specified. These are two more ways in which the literal meaning of an utterance fails to express a complete proposition, or even an interpretable utterance. These challenges have been described as examples of the ways in which literal meaning *underdetermines* propositional content; another way of putting this is that these examples show that a strictly literal analysis of utterances fails to make possible an ascription of truth-conditions to many sentences.

Stanley & Szabó (2000) present a possible solution to these problems which I will describe in a little detail here so that we can see that, while this is presented as a challenge to Literalism, it doesn't stray too far from home. Stanley & Szabó's solution still maintains the idea that deviation from literal meaning must be dictated by literal meaning itself—or, in Recanati's (2004) terms, it contains only a “minimal” departure from literal meaning. This is one more attempt to preserve the autonomy of semantics and to reject pragmatic or agent-centered solutions to this growing list of challenges to (L). As an illustration, consider quantifier-sentences such as (3) introduced by Stanley & Szabó to illustrate their solution to the problem of quantifier domain restriction:

(3) Every bottle is empty.

The absence of quantifier domain restriction is evident here as (3) does not say that, for instance, every bottle in the universe is empty, but rather it might express the restricted proposition that *every bottle Lisa just purchased is empty*. A related case

proposed by Stanley & Szabó is of the underdetermination of comparative adjectives as seen in this example:

(4) That basketball player is short.

(4) cannot express the proposition that *that basketball player is short* simpliciter, but rather might express the proposition that *that basketball player is short compared to all NBA basketball players*. That is, we cannot assess the veridicality of (4) without first knowing the relevant comparison class and this information is filled in by context and speaker intentions. However, Stanley & Szabó do not think (4) is merely *elliptical*¹⁸ for (4)+:

(4)+ That basketball player is short for a basketball player.

Rather, as we will see below, they think the nominal element contains a hidden indexical that specifies the appropriate comparison class.

This is a *semantic* solution to the challenge of semantic underdetermination for the Literalist position in that it presupposes that there are hidden unarticulated linguistic constituents, or hidden indexicals. These hidden indexicals allow for the appropriate domain restriction of quantifiers or provide relevant comparison classes for adjectives such that these sentences can be ascribed truth-conditions. Surprisingly, the claim here is that an indexical is not hiding with the quantifiers or adjectives themselves but rather with the sentences' nominal elements. In the case of a sentence containing a comparative adjective, such as "That basketball player is short," the hidden indexical element is hanging out (co-habiting a terminal node)

¹⁸ Literalists make exceptions for cases of elliptical expressions and preclude them from their semantic analyses just as they do with metaphorical, figurative, and ambiguous utterances.

with ‘player’ such that the logical form of the sentence contains an indexical and looks something like this: “That basketball $\langle \text{player}, f(i) \rangle$ is short.”

What does it mean to co-habit a terminal node? It means that the hidden indexical is found on the lexical node in a tree diagram of a sentence’s logical form. The terminal nodes are just those nodes that lead to no other nodes (lexical items always occupy terminal nodes); it’s important to Stanley & Szabó’s account that the indexical occupy the nominal node and not either a nonterminal node or the quantifier node (for quantifier sentences), but beyond the scope of this discussion. What work does the function operator do in the diagrammed “That basketball $\langle \text{player}, f(i) \rangle$ is short”? f is a function provided by the context that maps objects onto quantifier domains (2000, p. 44).

Since this indexical function maps from contexts or, really, speaker intentions, onto quantifier domains, then, if their analysis of hidden indexicals is correct, this stands as yet another challenge to Literalism. It shows that there are a range of expressions beyond the members of the Basic List—all those that contain quantifiers or comparative adjectives—for which the truth-conditions are underdetermined without appeal to the linguistic agent who utters the sentence in context. Taking this challenge seriously requires another modification to the content of Literalism such that it is Literalism With Some Obvious Modifications Including Exceptions for Metaphorical, Figurative, Ironic Speech, and the Disambiguation of Ambiguous or Polysemous Expressions, as well as the Enrichment of Comparative Adjectives and Quantified Expressions, or (L)'''. Justice Scalia and other Literalists’ claims that conventional symbols contain an objective meaning regardless of what a

speaker ‘intends’ them to mean is starting to look a little weak. It’s starting to look as though what a speaker speaking in a context ‘intends’ matters quite a bit, even for an a strictly *literal* analysis of an utterance.

Let’s turn to one more set of challenges to (L) so that we can get a full sense of just how (L) must be finessed to account for the various exceptions to literal semantic analysis. These challenges have also been made from the perspective that literal semantic analysis is both possible and useful, *just as long* as certain contextually-sensitive expressions are set aside. Each of these cases has relied on versions of underdetermination arguments as described above. Kent Bach, for instance, has maintained a pride of place for semantic analysis and has resisted the more extreme forms of contextualism and yet accepts that there is what he calls “semantic slack” in utterances such as (5) and (6):¹⁹

(5) Steel isn’t strong enough.

(6) Marvin K. Mooney is ready.

In each case, the minimal sentence here needs to be *completed* in order to express a complete, truth-evaluable proposition. According to Bach, (5) and (6) only express “propositional radicals.” These sentences are semantically underdetermined because they only deliver incomplete propositions which must be filled in by pragmatic elements which will specify, for instance, what steel needs to be strong enough for and for what Marvin K. Mooney is ready. This filling in occurs through an appeal to

¹⁹ See Bach (forthcoming b). To be fair, Bach neither considers himself a Literalist (or minimalist like Cappelen & Lepore) or a Contextualist. He maintains that one can say of a sentence like (5) that it fails to express a complete proposition but deny that (5) is context-sensitive. Bach thinks that Cappelen & Lepore’s minimal propositions are in-credible, as I will also claim in the final two sections of this chapter.

the linguistic agent's intentions or to contextual cues, or to some combination of the two.

Similar examples have been provided of color terms and the ways in which they exhibit context-sensitivity and are thereby not truth-evaluable given a *literal* semantic analysis. Anne Bezuidenhout (2002) provides an example to illustrate how the term 'red' can change meaning between contexts and depending on the way in which the linguistic agents have structured its meaning:

We're at a county fair picking through a barrel of assorted apples. My son says "Here's a red one," and what he says is true if the apple is indeed red. But what counts as being red in this context? For apples, being red generally means having a red skin, which is different from what we normally mean by calling a watermelon, or a leaf, or a star, or hair, red. But even when it is an apple that is in question, other understandings of what it is to call it 'red' are possible, given suitable circumstances. For instance, suppose now that we're sorting through a barrel of apples to find those that have been afflicted with a horrible fungal disease. This fungus grows out from the core and stains the flesh of the apple red. My son slices each apple open and puts the good ones in a cooking pot. The bad ones he hands to me. Cutting open an apple he remarks: "Here's a red one." What he says is true if the apple has red flesh, even if it also happens to be a Granny Smith apple.

Given that we need to know the details of the conversational goals of the speakers and the context in which they are speaking in order to understand, for instance, the utterance, "Here's a red one," a literal analysis of this utterance does not produce a complete, comprehensible proposition. Instead, this utterance expresses an underdetermined proposition. In order to see this more vividly, insert this utterance into the Literalists' semantic analysis: "Here's a red one" is true just in case here's a red one and expresses the proposition that *here's a red one*. Suppose we fix the demonstrative such that we know what apple is being referred to. Can we then

determine whether this apple is a red one? No, not unless we know whether ‘red’ is being used to refer to the flesh or to the skin (i.e., the way in which the apple has the property of redness). That semantic slack in this utterance must be taken up by speakers in context suggests that Literalism isn’t as proscriptive as we initially thought. For that reason, it needs one final re-description as Literalism With Some Obvious Modifications Including Exceptions for Metaphorical, Figurative, Ironical Speech, and the Disambiguation of Ambiguous or Polysemous Expressions, as well as the Enrichment of Comparative Adjectives and Quantified Expressions, and, Finally, a Handful of Other Expressions that Pretty Obviously Cannot be Ascribed Truth-Conditional Content Without Relying on What The Speaker Means as well as the Context in which the Utterance is Uttered, or (L)'''''. A case has been made that there are so many exceptions to (L) that it’s starting to look like it may not be the most helpful starting point for a theory of meaning, and may not, after all, be a very strong constraint on linguistic agency at all.

C. One last fight for literalism: in search of empirical adequacy

Recently, some have responded to this now broken, weakened constraint on linguistic agents with one last fight for Literalism. Herman Cappelen and Ernie Lepore’s (2005) defense of what they “Semantic Minimalism” purports to return to a much leaner Literalism, namely (L) plus the Basic List.²⁰ According to Cappelen & Lepore, the only context and speaker sensitive expressions are those that are on the Basic List. They propose that each of the amendments that led from (L) to (L)'''''

²⁰ This extreme form of Semantic Minimalism has also recently been defended by Emma Borg (2005).

was either misguided or opportunistic (i.e., proposed as an attempt to bolster another non-semantic theory). Their own proposal is designed to appear obvious just as Justice Scalia is trying to appear obvious by choosing Humpty Dumpty as his semantic rival. They anticipate that it will be difficult to argue against the claim that, once the indexicals and demonstratives from the Basic List are fixed, a sentence expresses its disquoted propositional equivalent as in, “Ducks have soft beaks” expresses the proposition that *ducks have soft beaks*. This is the beginning and the end of a literal semantic analysis for Cappelen & Lepore. Indeed, it’s difficult to know how to begin to assess such a minimal theory. Their desire for a radically minimal literalism requires that they purposely blind themselves to the exceptions and arguments that led us to (L)'''—the natural, but withered, conclusion to a Literalist position.

Before I describe the failure of Cappelen & Lepore’s version of Literalism to explain indirect reports and collective descriptions, it’s worth noting that their self-described Literalism with the exception of only the Basic List is itself a misleading description. Despite the ruthlessly minimal, yet comprehensive *appearance* of their Semantic Minimalism, they manage to sneak in a number of exceptions—many of the same exceptions that led to (L)'''. In order to defend their Literalism against positions they describe as moderate and radical Contextualism, they say that first they must set aside all sentences involving ambiguity, syntactic ellipsis, polysemy, vagueness, and even *nonliterality* (2005, p. 42). They provide a justification for limiting Semantic Minimalism in this way. This is what they say:

Since our goal is to show that certain kinds of intuitions can be triggered for an arbitrary English sentence, for these intuitions to

have the relevant significance (i.e., to provide evidence for semantic context-sensitivity), it is crucial that they not be triggered by irrelevant factors. If, for example, the intuition that sentences containing *e* change truth conditions across contexts of utterance can be explained by *e*'s being ambiguous, polysemous, used metaphorically...etc. then our examples would be irrelevant. (2005, p. 42)²¹

This brief concession by what otherwise appears to be the most stalwart of literalist positions, with the possible exception of Justice Scalia's, seems to push them all the way to (L)'' (if not further—this depends on how we should interpret 'nonliterality'). Yet, they want to hold the line here. Specifically, they want to hold the line against what they call *Radical* Contextualism—a position that is fundamentally agent, rather than sentence, centered.

So, what is it that Cappelen & Lepore think Semantic Minimalism can do that its agent-centered counterparts cannot? They claim that it is Contextualism that is radically *empirically* inadequate; I will make the opposite case here. According to Cappelen & Lepore, Contextualism seems plausible only because its focus is limited. Once the focus is widened, it can't explain much. This should strike us as somewhat ironic given that we've seen that maintaining a Literalist semantic theory requires a very narrow empirical scope. Yet, their argumentative tactic is to appeal

²¹ Here is the appropriate context in which to interpret this quote: Cappelen & Lepore are about to present a set of cases that *should be* context-sensitive according to Contextualism position in order to demonstrate the instability of Contextualism. In particular, they want to show how *Moderate* Contextualism (as held by, for example, Bach, Stanley and Szabó) slips into *Radical* Contextualism (as held by, for example Recanati, Carston, Bezuidenhout, Searle, and Travis). Once they do this, then they think they just need to show the problems Radical Contextualism faces (I consider some of these here). What they are saying when they preclude cases of ambiguity, polysemy, etc. is that they want the Moderate Contextualists to accept that Cappelen & Lepore's toy examples are sufficiently like the Moderate Contextualists' own examples (e.g., quantifiers, comparative adjectives, 'enough', and 'already'). Yet what is implied by this passage is that Cappelen & Lepore think these exceptional cases are exceptions to their minimalist theory and may in fact count as cases of context-sensitive expressions.

to the intuitions of language users in order to test for *real* context-sensitivity. They have three tests for context-sensitivity, all of which take the form:

An expression e is context sensitive only if competent speakers have certain intuitions about uses of certain sorts of sentences containing e .

The *particular* intuitions Cappelen & Lepore are appealing to here are that context-sensitivity blocks inter-contextual disquotational indirect reports, that context-sensitivity blocks collective descriptions, that context-sensitivity passes an inter-contextual disquotational test and admits of real context shifting arguments, and that without literal meaning, communication would be impossible.

Another way of putting their key claim here is that an expression deviates from its literal meaning (and is context-sensitive) only if it blocks inter-contextual disquotational indirect reports and blocks collective descriptions. They also think that the possibility of literal analyses is necessary to explain communication *about the same thing*. This claim is neither new to Semantic Minimalism nor is it pursued in more than superficial detail by Cappelen & Lepore. The idea is that, if we assume that the meaning of an expression relies on the intentions of linguistic agents and the contexts in which they speak, then meaning will be so fleeting that we will be unable to say of two speakers that they are “talking about the same thing.” Literal meaning is purportedly what grounds communication between speakers and across contexts.

In the next two sections, I will show that, in contrast to Cappelen & Lepore’s claims, it is Literalism that is empirically inadequate. It is Literalism that is handicapped in its ability to explain the practices of speakers in contexts of indirect

reporting and collective descriptions. In the first case, I show that, from within the confines of Literalism, indirect reporters must be conceived of as akin to tape recorders. In any case where actual, contentful reporting takes place, Literalism must be supplanted by an agent and context-centered theory. It must be assumed that semantic content is in fact context and speaker sensitive. In the second case, I show that a Literalist analysis of even the kinds of collective descriptions Cappelen & Lepore are interested in results in collective descriptions that are at best unnatural and at worst false. Again, Literalism can provide an interpretation of such collective descriptions, but it is one foisted upon utterances with no regard for how speakers use and hearers interpret those utterances. Indeed, it creates an artifice of speakers' practices thereby remaining empirically inadequate and explanatorily impotent.

C.1. Literalism fails to explain indirect reports

Let's focus on the first of these intuitions that speakers' allegedly have about context-sensitivity. Given that Cappelen & Lepore write that "Semantic Minimalism is both sufficiently attentive and adequately respectful of our actual linguistic practices" (2005, p. 87), we should expect that the content of indirect reports is not context-sensitive, but rather it is semantically minimal. Once this consequence is made clear, their defense of Literalism starts to crumble.

First we need to understand what their argument is for their claim that context-sensitivity blocks inter-contextual disquotational indirect reports. They describe their test for context-sensitivity as:

(A) *If* an expression is context-sensitive, *then* it typically blocks inter-contextual disquotational indirect reports.

The idea they have in mind here is that the Contextualist would find (A) problematic because it establishes the blocking of inter-contextual reports as a necessary condition on being context-sensitive. The rest of Cappelen & Lepore's argument (with (A) as the first premise) against Contextualism goes:

(B) The Contextualists' favorite expressions (such as 'is red', 'every', 'enough', 'ready') do not block inter-contextual disquotational indirect reports.

Therefore, (C) The Contextualists' favorite expressions are not context-sensitive.

What's left for the Contextualists to do is either falsify (A) by presenting independent arguments for why some expressions are context-sensitive that do not block inter-contextual disquotational indirect reports, or to falsify (B) by showing that their favorite expressions do block inter-contextual disquotational indirect reports. Let's consider the second approach: falsifying (B).²²

In order to do this, we first need an example of a purportedly context-sensitive expression that is not on the Basic List. A good place to start is with color predicates, such as 'is red'. Let's return to Bezuidenhout's example as dismantled and re-presented by Cappelen & Lepore:

Context of Utterance C1. We're at a county fair sorting through a barrel of apples. The apples are sorted into different bags according to the color of their skin. Some have green skin; others have red skin. Anne utters:

(7) The apple is red.

Context of Utterance C2. We're sorting through a barrel of apples to identify and discard those afflicted with a horrible fungal disease. This fungus grows out from the core and stains the flesh of the apple

²² Cappelen & Lepore consider this approach (2005, p. 97) under "Reply 1: The indirect reports are false." I'll try to provide a better version of Reply 1 in what follows.

red. One of us is slicing apples open, placing the good ones in a cooking pot. The bad ones are tossed. Cutting open an apple Anne again utters (7). (2005, p. 92)

Contextualists call the kind of context-sensitivity in (7) “part-dependent” because the part of the apple of which ‘is red’ is being predicated is underdetermined. If we apply Cappelen & Lepore’s test to (7), though, it appears to fail. Cappelen & Lepore go on to imagine they are in a third context (*C3*) when they utter (8):

(8) Anne said that the apple is red.

If the Contextualists are correct, (8) should not be true in *C3*, and yet Cappelen & Lepore think it is. The Contextualist needs to show, perhaps counterintuitively at first, that (8) could be false.²³

In order to show this, the Contextualist needs to deconstruct the above example. As the example is presented, it’s question-begging to write that Anne utters (7) in *C1*, and then utters (7) again in *C2*. Here’s the reason that it is question-begging to say that Anne uttered (7) twice: suppose we distinguish between the act-sense and the content-sense of ‘utterance’. We can agree that there were two different utterance-acts, namely the act at t_1 and the act at t_2 . We should also say that there are two different *contents* associate with these two acts if the two acts express two different propositions. Since the Contextualist thinks that, if Contextualism is true, then two different propositions *are* expressed, and the Literalist think that, if Literalism is true, then *only one* minimal proposition is expressed, it is question-begging for the Literalist to presuppose that Anne uttered one utterance twice

²³ I am following Cappelen & Lepore’s lead: the Contextualist is not obligated to show that (8) is never true, but only that it is accidentally true, or that (8) is *typically* false when, in the reporting context, the reporter fails to invoke the original context.

(thereby assuming the truth of their own position). Given that the Contextualist thinks ‘is red’ is a context-sensitive expression, let’s assume instead that the utterances in *C1* and *C2* are distinct. We’ll call the utterance in *C1* (7), and the utterance in *C2* (7)*. Now, remember that Cappelen & Lepore’s report is supposed to be *inter*-contextual, and in this case (8) reports across both (7) and (7)*. Cappelen & Lepore should accept this thus far. It shouldn’t bother them to distinguish (7) from (7)*; they would just say that (7) and (7)* have the same semantic content. It is *this* identical literal semantic content that (8) reports according to them. Further, the content of the report in (8) can only be semantically minimal.

Now, from the perspective of the Contextualist, (7) and (7)* are both semantically underdetermined. Their decomposed linguistic contents do not determine complete propositions independently of speaker intentions and the contexts in which they were uttered. Since the complete propositions intended by the speaker Anne are something like *the apple is red-skinned* and *the apple is red-fleshed* respectively, the semantic minimalist proposes that in reporting contexts, what is reported is what is common (semantically speaking) between (7) and (7)*, namely the proposition that *the apple is red*. This is what Cappelen & Lepore think is happening in the reporting context and they think the report is true.

Cappelen & Lepore’s claim that the report in utterance (8) is true hangs on one critical assumption: that the content of the report in (8) is semantically minimal. We can ask a couple of questions about this assumption: Is it possible to utter a sentence with semantically minimal content? I think the answer to this is “no.” But let’s give Cappelen & Lepore the benefit of the doubt and assume the answer is

“yes.” If we can utter a sentence with semantically minimal content, how can we distinguish it from those utterances that are not semantically minimal? To put this question in the terms of our example, how can we be sure that the content of the proposition expressed by (8) is not (P₁) *Anne said that the apple is red-skinned* rather than merely (P₂) *Anne said that the apple is red*? If the proposition expressed by (8) were in fact (P₁), then it would be false any time the utterer is reporting on what was said in *C2*, and it would be false any time a reporter were reporting across both contexts *C1* and *C2*. This is just what the Contextualist wants to show: that the context-sensitivity of ‘is red’ blocks inter-contextual disquotational indirect reporting.

To avoid this, Cappelen & Lepore need a test for how to distinguish when an utterance contains only semantically minimal content and when it doesn’t. They could try to say that it is in inter-contextual indirect reporting contexts²⁴ that utterances are semantically minimal. But, this just isn’t true. Most of the time indirect reports are used in order to convey whatever non-minimal content was uttered in the original context of utterance. So, for instance, if someone utters (8) to me they are probably trying to tell me whether an apple is suitable for eating or better thrown away. It would be the exception to this widespread practice to report the semantically minimal content of a speaker’s utterance (if such a thing were

²⁴ I left out ‘disquotational’ here. I think including the qualification that the report be disquotational is question-begging on the part of Cappelen & Lepore. They seem to be building into the test the assumption of semantic minimalism because what they’re stipulating is reported is a merely disquoted version of the original utterance, as if disquoting it preserves it across contexts. But, that’s just what’s at issue.

possible).²⁵ It would be *empirically* untenable and *unrealistic* to assume that intercontextual reports are reports that are contextually neutral. Yet, Cappelen & Lepore think just this. The motivation for this test for context-sensitivity is that Contextualism supposedly cannot make sense of our common and commonsense abilities to provide indirect reports on the utterances of others. Cappelen & Lepore appear to think that in reporting we *typically* report the semantically minimal content of another speaker's original utterance. The option that they fail to entertain is that in order to successfully report on the utterances of others we need to invoke enough of the relevant context in which the original utterance was made in order to make our report sensible. Instead, Cappelen & Lepore trade on the mere ability to reproduce the words used in the original utterance, as if mere phonetic reduplication itself captures the practice of reporting what was said in another context. In their analysis, indirect reporters resemble tape recorders conveying the sounds that were uttered in the original context, but without conveying what was meant. Since the bare phonetic reduplication of (8) fails to report the original utterance (7)—which would have expressed the robust proposition (P₁)—and in so doing fails to deliver anything but the minimal proposition (P₂), (8) is false.

²⁵ In the text below I consider a possible case of reporting semantically minimal content (i.e., passing coded messages from one spy to another). While I concede that this kind of case might be a possible case of reporting semantically minimal content, I am in fact dubious. Rather, I think a more detailed description of the case is warranted and, under this description, the reporter does not know the content of the sentence being reported, but this does not mean its content is semantically minimal. Its context is probably richly context-sensitive: the original speaker is entrenched in this context, and the ultimate hearer is also entrenched in this context, it's just that the medium between the original speaker and the ultimate hearer is not entrenched in this context and so does not know what the utterance means. Imagine for a moment if this were incorrect: if the reporter knew what was being said via a literal semantic analysis, *this would make for a lousy means of communication between spies!* It is the very vacuity that comes from context-free reporting that allows for the secrecy of spy language.

The conclusion that (8) is false is counter-intuitive at first. But this intuition goes away once we consider the peculiar circumstances under which Cappelen & Lepore utter (8). Their context for uttering (8) is purported to be a context during which semantically minimal content is expressed.²⁶ I am not claiming that such a context for uttering (8) is an impossible context—on the contrary, I am happy to concede the possibility of such a context. For example, imagine the Secret Spy context in which I am having a conversation with Secret Spy Bill and he says to me, “Listen, when you see Secret Spy Frank pass on this message: ‘Anne said that the apple is red’.” Confused, I ask Bill, “But what does that mean, ‘Anne said that the apple is red’? What shall I tell Frank?” Secret Spy Bill elusively responds, “Never mind, just report what I said and he’ll know just what it means.” In such a case, it’s perfectly plausible for me to meet Secret Spy Frank and say to him, “Anne said that the apple was red.” And when I do this, it’s plausible that I’m *reporting* minimal semantic content, although it will not be *interpreted* by Frank as semantically minimal—he will, of course, invoke earlier contexts in which he and Bill established this secret spy language. As this kind of reporter, I am no different than a tape recorder that can play sounds in multiple contexts. But this context is so contrary to our ordinary reporting practices that we can see that it is the peculiarity

²⁶ Under a section titled “Argument from Explanatory Force: The Seven Virtues of Semantic Minimalism,” Cappelen & Lepore write, “Semantic Minimalism, and no other view, can account for how Inter-Contextual Disquotational Indirect Reports can be true where the reporter and the reportee find themselves in radically different contexts. In such cases, *the reported content is the semantic content*” (2005, p. 152, emphasis mine). There are two claims here: one is that the content of indirect reports is the minimal semantic content, and the second is that only Semantic Minimalism can explain this. *If* it were true that reported content were *ever* the minimal semantic content, then Semantic Minimalism would be the theory to explain this fact. But reported content is rarely, if ever, minimal semantic content and so Semantic Minimalism is rarely, if ever, a useful semantic theory. However, this is not worth pursuing because Cappelen & Lepore go on to recant this claim of p. 152 later on in *Insensitive Semantics*. I discuss this in the final section of this paper.

of this context that makes the falsity of (8) in other, more ordinary contexts appear counterintuitive, and not some strange and dogmatic conviction of Contextualism. As it turns out, it is our ordinary practices of indirect reporting that Literalism fails to explain; literal semantic analyses of indirect reports would make most reports inscrutable. Of course, the context-sensitivity of predicates such as ‘is red’ is quite different than the context-sensitivity of indexicals such as ‘tomorrow’ and it is these nuanced differences that will make them look so different when it comes to handling tests such as Cappelen & Lepore’s Inter-Contextual Disquotational Indirect Report Test. But the difference lies not in whether or not each of these expressions is in fact context-sensitive, but rather in the ways in which it is context-sensitive.

C.2. Literalism fails to explain collective descriptions

If it is not yet convincing that a defense of Literalism is not only empirically untenable but also contrived and artificial, let’s consider the second intuition that Cappelen & Lepore appeal to in order to insist that every expression is literally interpretable with the exception of the members of the Basic List. They claim that truly context-sensitive expressions make collective descriptions impossible. We can understand Cappelen & Lepore’s idea of a collective description with the following example:

If (9) and (10) are true utterances, then (11) is also a true utterance:

(9) Frank plays backgammon.

(10) Rudy plays backgammon.

(11) Frank and Rudy play backgammon.

The idea here is that even though (9) and (10) may have been uttered in different contexts, (11) can still generalize over those contexts to form a collective description. But if the Contextualists are correct, these kinds of collective descriptions should be impossible. So the form of Cappelen & Lepore's second argument against Contextualism goes as follows:

- (D) *If* an expression is context-sensitive, *then* it typically blocks collective descriptions.
- (E) The favorite expressions of the Contextualists do not block collective descriptions.
- Therefore, (F) the favorite expressions of the Contextualists are not context-sensitive.

Again, given this argument, the choices available to the Contextualists are either to provide independent arguments that some expressions are context-sensitive even though they fail to block collective descriptions or to argue that their favorite contextually-sensitive expressions do in fact block collective descriptions. Which option the Contextualist should take should depend on the contextually-sensitive expression being considered. Either way, Cappelen & Lepore's collective descriptions test fails against the Contextualist. As we will see, it is Literalism that fails to explain ordinary collective descriptions.

Let's consider how the Contextualist might challenge premise (E). It seems that the best way to go about this is to consider Cappelen & Lepore's analyses of stock examples of contextually-sensitive terms and see if their analyses comport with the reader's intuitions. In each of Cappelen & Lepore's analyses, they rely on the collective description they provide sounding "perfectly natural"²⁷ in a way that

²⁷ One problem of this debate between Literalism and Contextualism is the extent to which it turns on intuition-mongering. Cappelen & Lepore base their argument against Contextualism on their

Contextualism wouldn't anticipate. Here I'll pick out the examples provided by Cappelen & Lepore that I think sound least natural in the form of a collective description. First:

(12) Both Smith and Jones weigh 80 kg.

(12) was preceded by context-setting in which speakers say of Smith, "Smith weighs 80 kg" just after he has weighed himself on another planet in full space gear, and by context-setting in which speakers say of Jones, "Jones weighs 80 kg" just after he wakes in the morning and weighs himself naked. It strikes me that if a speaker were to offer (12) as a collective description of those two utterances (circumstances?²⁸), it wouldn't sound natural at all unless that speaker were to add, "...although Smith was dressed in a heavy space suit and Jones was naked" suggesting that they weighed 80 kg in different ways.

intuitions about the possibility and truth of collective descriptions using purportedly context-sensitive expressions. And yet they are quite critical of the same tendency on the part of critics of (L) to endorse context-sensitivity: they critically quote Kenneth Taylor as saying that, "semantic incompleteness is manifest to us as a felt inability to evaluate the truth value of an utterance..." (Taylor 2001, p. 53; qtd. in Cappelen and Lepore 2005, pp. 33-34). Like Cappelen & Lepore, many of the philosophers in this debate both deride semantic intuitions while relying on them. Bach writes: "Some philosophers think that explaining semantic intuitions is the job of semantics. One would have thought that its job is to explain semantic facts, for which intuitions are merely evidence. In my view, there is no particular reason to suppose that such intuitions are reliable or robust or, indeed, that they are responsive mainly to semantic and not to pragmatic facts. Moreover, there is no reason to suppose that such intuitions play a role in the process of communication" (2005, p. 29). Stanley, on the other hand, does think semantic intuitions are a good guide to semantic and syntactic content, but realizes that this cannot just be presupposed, but must be argued for (Stanley 2002a, p. 3). Cappelen & Lepore don't explain any of the reasons why semantic intuitions might not be good evidence for one semantic analysis over another or why semantic theory shouldn't try to make sense of semantic intuitions. They also fail to explain why their own intuitions that collective descriptions using context-sensitive terms are true and that collective descriptions are themselves good tests for context-sensitivity. Here I use their own examples and their own tests, but just try to pitch them in such a way that they no longer sound "perfectly natural."

²⁸ I'm puzzled about collective descriptions. Are they supposed to describe varied circumstances collectively, or are they supposed to provide a description of varied utterances that were uttered in varied circumstances? If it's the former, I don't see why Cappelen & Lepore need to posit that in each circumstance there was an original utterance of the form, "Jones weighs 80 kg." But if it's the latter, I don't understand what it means to provide a collective description of a set of utterances especially given that collective descriptions such as (12) don't describe the other utterances at all. Just the same, this is one of the key arguments for the Minimalist/Literalist position

Second:

(13) Mount Everest is tall, and the Empire State Building is too.²⁹

Suppose that this doesn't prompt the "unnatural" response—perhaps this is because, from the perspective of a normal-sized speaker, Mount Everest and the Empire State Building are tall in similar enough ways. To prompt an unnatural response, we just need to switch out some of the expressions such that they are tall in very different ways:

(14) My 5-month-old baby is tall, and Shaq is too.

Since my 5-month-old baby is tall against an esoteric standard (other 5-month-old babies) and Shaq is tall against the standard of the height of all humans, (14) sounds unnatural without adding a qualification such as, "...for a baby." If that's not convincing, consider this: an average-sized 4-year-old looks up at me and utters (15):

(15) Nellie is tall.

The Contextualist might say, depending on the context, that the complete proposition (15) expresses is *that Nellie is tall relative to the height of the speaker*. Given that I am taller than the average-sized 4-year-old, (15) is true. Now imagine I meet Shaq. I look up at him and I utter (16):

(16) Shaq is tall.

The complete proposition (16) expresses is *that Shaq is tall relative to the height of the speaker*. We know that Shaq is tall for a human being (though not very tall if

²⁹ This is one of Cappelen & Lepore's variations on the Collective Descriptions test; it includes a VP-ellipses.

Yao is the comparison class), and much taller than I am. So (16) is also true. Ernie Lepore, hearing of this exchange, utters (17):

(17) Nellie is tall, and Shaq is too.

Has Ernie Lepore uttered something true? He's certainly uttered something unnatural.³⁰

Third, I think at least one more of Cappelen & Lepore's examples blocks collective descriptions (or at least sounds unnatural when forced into a collective description):

(18) Both Jill and Jackie have had enough.

It strikes me that in any case where Jill and Jackie have had enough of different things, (18) sounds unnatural. Imagine that Jill has had enough to drink such that if she drinks any more she'll be unable to drive home. Jackie, on the other hand, has had enough of Jimmy's cheatin' heart, and she's finally leaving him. Again, many conscientious interpreters would not accept (18) as a collective description without further qualification (i.e., about what Jill and Jackie have each had enough of).

Finally, there is one more general consideration that undermines Cappelen & Lepore's attempt to destabilize Contextualism through Collective Description tests. It is that the Contextualists wouldn't accept that sentences like (15) and (16) are true simpliciter. Cappelen & Lepore are relying on the presupposition that two true

³⁰ Cappelen & Lepore are working with two different metrics here: one is naturalness and one is veridicality. Since I am not defending Contextualism in this paper, I am happy to concede the veridicality of (17) while pushing the unnaturalness of (17). Although a literal semantic analysis can be provided such that (17) without adornment or exception expresses something true, a literal semantic analysis fails to capture a natural reading of (17). This is important because it reveals the empirical and explanatory inadequacy of literal semantic analyses. All the action is taking place in the analysis that shows how agent and context-sensitivity requires that (17) be deconstructed and analyzed along two distinct semantic lines. This, however, is not an analysis that Literalism has to offer.

sentences that share a description are true when a third sentence provides a collective description. Not only would the Contextualist deny that the first two sentences share a description, but they would deny that they are true at all. This is, in fact, what is central to Contextualists' underdetermination (incompleteness) claims. Since (18) fails to express a complete proposition, it is not truth-evaluable. Cappelen & Lepore are not playing the same game as the Contextualist.

While the ability to explain collective descriptions (and the Contextualists' corresponding failure) is touted as a virtue of Literalism, it turns out that this is just what Literalism is unable to explain. To repeat my earlier point, it looks as if the difference between expressions such as 'is here now' and 'is tall' lies not in whether or not each of these expressions is in fact context-sensitive, but rather in the ways in which it is context-sensitive. More to the point, the difference between expressions such as 'is here now' and 'is tall' lies not in whether they have an "objective meaning" regardless of what their "author" intends, but in the various ways in which each of them in fact may rely for semantic determinacy on cues from speakers and contexts.

D. The explanatory impotence of literalism

I opened this chapter with this claim by Justice Scalia:

The portion of Smith's book I least understand—or most disagree with—is the assertion, upon which a regrettably large portion of the analysis depends, that it is a "basic ontological proposition that persons, not objects, have the property of being able to mean."

It is important to keep in mind when discussing the Literalism-Contextualism debate that this is a debate that is as much about the source of content (whether it be

acontextual minimal propositions or context-rich speech acts) as it is a debate about the ontology of language and the sorts of things (sentences, utterances, events, contexts, or agents) that can be the bearers of content. The position taken here is that it is agents in context that have the ability to mean something or other, or to be bearers of content. I disagree with Scalia and Cappelen & Lepore that it is merely the propositional form of sentential objects (sentence-types, or what I call “eternal” sentences below) that can have the property of being able to mean.

To this end, it is helpful to consider what is brought to an indirect report and to a collective description that goes beyond the literal meaning of the sentence being uttered. Doing so enables us to see where the real explanatory work is being done—and why it isn’t being done within a Literalist semantics. In ordinary, real linguistic practice linguistic agents invoke extra-linguistic knowledge in order to make themselves interpretable. If agents did not bring this knowledge to bear, these purportedly literal, minimal reports and descriptions would not only be false, they would be uninterpretable. Bezuidenhout (2002, p. 117) makes the following first pass at what linguistic agents bring to the interpretive table:

- (i) knowledge that has already been activated from the prior discourse context (if any)
- (ii) knowledge that is available based on who one’s conversational partner is and on what community memberships one shares with that person
- (iii) knowledge that is available through observation of the mutual perceptual environment
- (iv) any stereotypical knowledge or scripts or frames that are associatively triggered by accessing the semantic potential of any of the expressions currently being used
- (v) knowledge of the purposes and conversational abilities of one’s conversational partner (e.g., whether the person is being

- deceitful or sincere, whether the person tends to verbosity or is a person of few words, etc.)
- (vi) knowledge one has of the general principles governing conversational exchanges (perhaps including Grice's conversational maxims, culturally specific norms of politeness, etc.)³¹

This list is a helpful beginning to a full explication of what linguistic agents bring to conversational exchanges. What should strike us at this point is how Justice Scalia proposed that linguistic agents should avoid the *extravagances* of an agent-centered theory of meaning, and Cappelen & Lepore proposed a return to a cleaner, leaner version of Literalism in order to be more “sufficiently attentive and adequately respectful of our actual linguistic practices” (2005, p. 87). In spite of these virtuous returns to an objective rather than a *subjective* semantic theory, they fail to realize the motivating aims of staying true to the practices of linguistic agents. Actual linguistic agents are everywhere and always speaking in contexts and making use of (i)-(vi) (at least) in order to understand and make understood the meaning of their utterances. The rule and not the exception is that linguistic agents speak in ways that stretch, bend, contort, and contradict whatever literal semantic analysis might be provided for an utterance. They do so in richly informative contexts, and it is in these contexts, taking account of intentions of speakers and the dispositions of hearers, that meanings and the possible ascription of truth-conditions are to be found. In actual linguistic practice, there is just little sense to be made of literal semantic analyses.

³¹ (i)-(vi) point toward an extensive body of theory and research in communication. It is too extensive for me to introduce here and would not be fruitful for me to introduce my own theory. For an introduction to these issues, see Grice (1989), Gumperz (1982), Jackendoff (1987), Schank & Abelson (1977), Fillmore (1982), and Lakoff (1987).

In this final section I consider the possibility of supplementing Literalism with another theory, one that is intended to explain communication. The motivating idea here is that semantics was never meant to explain communication, and never even meant to explain utterances, which are themselves pragmatic acts (cf. Bach 2003, p. 23). If a Literalist semantic theory can be supplemented with a pragmatic theory, then the pragmatic theory can explain the varied and fleeting speech events in context, and the semantic theory can be left to do what it does best, namely, explaining the meaning of context and speaker-independent sentences. I will consider Cappelen & Lepore's proposal to supplement Semantic Minimalism with "Speech Act Pluralism" as a way of explaining phenomena such as irony, metaphor, and figurative language. Speech Act Pluralism, although not defended in much detail by Cappelen & Lepore, has the potential to be just the theory that saves Literalism. Unfortunately, it saves Literalism at the cost of making it obsolete. Speech Act Pluralism explains everything worth explaining while Semantic Minimalism can only explain eternal sentences that are not a part of any natural language.

In this spirit, Literalists hasten to remind Contextualists of the basic distinction drawn by J.L. Austin between locutionary and illocutionary acts.³² A locutionary act is an act that is merely a saying. An illocutionary act is an act that is a doing by means of a saying. Another way of putting this is that there is a difference between sentences, utterances, assertions, commands, and other speech *acts*. Contextualists appear to conflate locutions and illocutionary acts by importing

³² See, for instance, Bach (2005).

the content of the speech act into the semantics of the sentence. The Literalist would like to turn our attention to the idea that, when uttered, sentences don't just have any old semantic content that the utterer might want them to have or that interpreters might interpret them as having. Bach puts this point as follows:

Obviously not just anything that a speaker means, no matter how far removed it is from what the sentence means, counts as semantic content, and the semantic content of the sentence is the same whether an utterance of it is literal or not. So semantic content is a property of the sentence, not the utterance. After all, the fact that the sentence is uttered is a pragmatic fact, not a semantic one. (Bach 2005, p. 23)

This is really a correlate of the claim being made above: that semantic content has a very narrow scope—one that fails to capture or constrain what speakers actually use sentences to mean.

It looks as if the Contextualist and the Literalist should agree on this point. But they do not. Many Contextualists insist that the Literalist notion of semantic content is too rigid and should instead bend to the contextuality of natural language. My tactic here is a bit different. I am willing to grant that semantics is about what sentences say whereas pragmatics (and related disciplines) aim to explain what utterances communicate. My quibble with Literalist semantics is, then, that due its narrow scope and modest aims it only hopes to explain sentences that we have no reason to think are part of a natural language.

Let's take this final point more slowly. What I am granting here is that there are literal, minimal interpretations available for sentences. These literal, minimal interpretations could very well take the form:

"Ducks have soft beaks" is true just in case ducks have soft beaks and expresses the proposition that *ducks have soft beaks*.

What I will have to assume here is that there is a complete, fully determinate sense of the proposition that *ducks have soft beaks*, and that one can communicate this thought with the eternal sentence “Ducks have soft beaks” (even though we have seen in the definition of (L)''' that there probably isn't a complete, fully determinate proposition expressed by this sentence, but we will set that aside in order to be maximally charitable to the Literalist). This notion of an “eternal sentence” is an often-unstated but critical notion for the Literalist position. The Literalist is committed to thinking that there are sentences that have truth-values fixed between contexts, that are completely (well) formulated, and that express a complete proposition. These sentences are Platonic and constant, hence “eternal.”³³ It seems perfectly plausible to me that we should semantically analyze the *eternal* sentence “Ducks have soft beaks” as being true just in case ducks have soft beaks and expressing the proposition that *ducks have soft beaks*. Further, we should accept that Literalist semantics is the study of the content of such eternal sentences. True, analyzing sentences in their disquoted propositional form may sound like a tedious endeavor, yet the Contextualist should concede that this just is the province of Literalist semantics.

From this semantic foundation, the Literalist makes the uncontroversial move of helping himself to a pragmatic theory that explains not the semantics of eternal sentences, but the pragmatics of communicated utterances.³⁴ While semantic theory offers an explanation of eternal sentences, it is pragmatic theory—as nearly

³³ See Carston (2002, pp. 30-42). And, *cf.* Frege (1918), Quine (1960), and Katz (1972, 1977, 1978, 1981). For further discussion of “eternal sentences,” see Wettstein (1979), and Hookway (1997).

³⁴ There may be exceptions to this. Scalia, for instance, may be a Literalist who doesn't admit of a complementary pragmatic theory. His position, however, may be incoherent for just this reason.

everybody appears ready to admit—that explains timely sentences, namely those sentences used in contexts by speakers complicated by intentions and communicative goals.

Let's look at one example of the kind of pragmatic theory a Literalist helps himself to. Cappelen & Lepore call their supplementary pragmatic theory “Speech Act Pluralism.”³⁵ Whereas they think semantic content is common to every sentence, it is pragmatic speech act content that makes it possible that:

No one thing is said (or asserted, or claimed, or...) by any utterance; rather, indefinitely many propositions are said, asserted, claimed, stated. What is said (asserted, claimed, etc.) depends on a wide range of facts other than the proposition semantically expressed. It depends on a potentially indefinite number of features of the context of utterance and of the context of those who report on (or think about) what was said by the utterance. (2005, p. 4)

They go on to say that this speech act content need not be a “logical implication” of the semantic content nor need it even be “compatible” with the semantic content. Cappelen & Lepore don't have much to say about the content of Speech Act Pluralism and they needn't, since, really, this can be left to other well-developed theories of speech acts. And, unlike, their Literalist Semantic Minimalism, they rightly think that Speech Act Pluralism has a *wide* scope—they think *all* sayings and implicatures have speech act content (2005, p. 204). So, if the speech act content of any given utterance can express indefinitely many propositions and each of these can be incompatible with the proposition expressed by an eternal sentence, and if the literal semantic theory only offers disquotational analyses of eternal sentences,

³⁵ Cappelen & Lepore actually deny that Speech Act Pluralism is a theory because they think that, “there can be no *systematic theory* of speech act content” (2005, p. 190). Rather than proposing a *theory* of speech act content, they put forward a “collection of observations” about speech act content. This distinction isn't important for my purposes except where noted.

whereas the speech act theory explains *everything else*, then it seems like the speech act theory is doing all of the interesting work. The relevant proposition to account for in executing a correct interpretation of an utterance is the proposition expressed by that utterance's speech act content; indeed, an interpreter would likely be misled (or, more likely, wind up empty handed) if he were to heed the disquoted proposition expressed by some eternal sentence. The Literalist appears to know this (e.g., Cappelen & Lepore 2005, p. 204), so why do they hang on to the now obsolete and explanatorily useless notion of eternal sentences and the literal meanings?

There are a few reasons that Literalists proffer in favor of hanging on to eternal sentences and their literal meanings, several of which have already been mentioned. Their concern is that communication—particularly in the form of intercontextual reports and collective descriptions—would be impossible without the semantic bedrock of eternal sentences literally interpreted. Yet, as we saw in the previous section, these concerns are unwarranted. Recall that, far from literalism making intercontextual reports possible in a way that speech act theory cannot, literal semantic analyses of indirect reports would make indirect reports inscrutable. This is similarly true for collective descriptions and our ability to “talk about the same thing.” And, it's difficult to see how it could be established that, for instance, acontextual reporting was taking place without begging the question.³⁶

³⁶ For example, Cappelen & Lepore think that the Contextualists are definitively rebutted by their inability to explain reports, and that in any explanation they offer they presuppose literal/minimal semantic content. On this Cappelen & Lepore write nothing more than, “...when A knows that B uttered ‘Peter’s book was red’, but knows nothing else about the context in which that utterance took place, A can still say truly that B said that Peter’s book was red (as we can do, in this very context)” (2005, p. 152). They claim that this report is true due to the literal semantic content of the reported sentence, and such a report would be false if there were no literal semantic content to report. But, again, following my discussion of “the apple is red” case above, the report is only true if it reports

A picture is building here of literalism that crumbles under the weight of its exceptions and caveats. What's left of it can explain very little. There's reason for thinking that the eternal sentences of which Literalism provides an analysis are not part of any actual speech event, for there are no sentences that are ever uttered acontextually or by a strictly literal speaker devoid of intentions and communicative goals.

So, sure, a Literal semantic analysis tells us that:

“Ducks have soft beaks” is true just in case ducks have soft beaks and expresses the proposition that *ducks have soft beaks*.

But, so what?

the same content as the content expressed by the original utterance. At some points Cappelen & Lepore claim that, “The reported content is the [literal] semantic content” (2005, p. 152). At other points, they contradict this: “...there's no one correct answer to what was said by a report of what was said by an utterance...There's no meta-language [read: semantic content] in which the speech act content is fixed and determinate. Pluralism applies all the way through” (2005, p. 199).

Chapter III: Keeping score on expressive freedom

A. Inferentialism and expressive freedom

There is a long tradition of thinking that the only kind of interesting freedom is the kind that comes about by subscribing to norms, laws, or rules that are external to one's self. Although it is acknowledged that there is a more primitive kind of freedom that comes from individualistically following one's own desires, this freedom does not compare to the truly rational, civic, and redemptive freedom that is the consequence of submission to external law.¹ Robert Brandom is heavily invested in this tradition. His semantic theory rests the possibility of meaningful speech at the feet of the linguistic community; moreover, a speaker is only the kind of cognitive creature that is fully sapient if that linguistic community approves. Brandom calls the relationships between members of linguistic communities "scorekeeping" relationships because the members keep tabs on what one another are entitled to and committed to as a way of measuring the "deontic score" of each member. Under this theory, the semantics of expressions is reductively explained in terms of their inferential role. In this chapter, I argue that Brandom is using a model for the vindication of knowledge claims for what seems to be the larger problem of explaining meaning, and, even more generally, sapience. In light of language use that does not fit within the model of the vindication of knowledge claims, Brandom must designate it as meaningless and the speaker of it as not fully sapient. What this reveals is an externalist, inferentialist theory of meaning that is inadequate to the task of explaining how it is that speakers mean what they say.

¹ For the classic articulation of this view, see Isaiah Berlin's "Two Concepts of Liberty" reprinted in (1997) *The Proper Study of Mankind*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. For a further discussion of this, please see Chapter V of this dissertation.

Brandom's professed project in his seminal works *Making It Explicit* (1994) and *Articulating Reasons* (2000) is to give an account of conceptual content. According to this account, conceptual content is derived from (and only from) inferential practices. In his case, 'conceptual content' and 'linguistic meaning' amount to the same thing and I will use those terms interchangeably in what follows.² Hence, we can call his theory of linguistic meaning *inferentialism*. One reconstruction of Brandom's argument for inferentialism about conceptual content might look like this:

- (1.1) Conceptual content is normative.
 - (1.2) These norms are instituted in social practice—specifically, these norms are instituted in the trading of reasons (i.e., inferential articulation).
 - (1.3) The trading of reasons just is the manipulation of propositional content as either premise or conclusion.
- Therefore, (C1), Conceptual content is derived from (and only from) inferential practices.

Now, it doesn't look like (C1) follows from (1.1), (1.2), and (1.3). Why not? One could go after (1.1) and argue that conceptual contents are not inherently normative. Or, one could go after (1.3) and argue that Brandom misrepresents the social practice of inferential articulation. My strategy in this chapter is to go after (1.2). I am willing to accept that there are norms that are constitutive of conceptual contents, but I am going to argue that the giving and asking for reasons cannot completely determine conceptual content. Therefore, inferentialism about conceptual content (and thus,

² The opening lines of *Articulating Reasons* are: "This is a book about the use and content of *concepts*. Its animating thought is that the meanings of linguistic expressions and the contents of intentional states, indeed, awareness itself, should be understood, to begin with, in terms of playing a distinctive kind of role in *reasoning*" (2000, p. 1; emphasis Brandom's). Although he doesn't speak of "linguistic meaning" to a great extent in (1994) or (2000), it's safe to assume that by "conceptual content" he means "linguistic meaning"; as a matter of fact, by his own inferential account, the inter-substitution of these two terms in his claims commits him to the belief that they have the same meaning (i.e., conceptual content).

linguistic meaning) is wrong, even if it is right with respect the vindication of knowledge claims.

The part of the above argument to which I would like to draw attention is the fairly salient slip from *conceptual* contents to *propositional* contents, which assumes that the two play the same role in the argument. This is not something of which Brandom is unaware; as a matter of act, the collapse of *conceptual* and *propositional* content is at the core of his theory. The question is, of course, how he justifies this collapse and whether this justification a good one. Its goodness will be determined to the extent to which his model provides a complete and correct account of linguistic meaning. I think that, despite the widespread merits of Brandom's Inferentialism over traditional referential theories, the collapse of epistemology and semantics is not an asset for Brandom. Rather, it is a handicap that leaves Brandom with a theory that *underexplains* linguistic meaning and *underpredicts* what speakers will find meaningful.

In order to get to this conclusion, I need some way of showing that it's not the case that the conceptual content of some expressions is propositional content. I will need to show that not all expressions have propositional content and are not, in fact, used in the game of giving and asking for reasons. If this turns out to be the case for some expressions, it would seem that either those expressions lack conceptual content or that Brandom's theory is wrong. (2.1) – (C2) is the basic structure of my argument against Inferentialism about conceptual content:

- (2.1) If Inferentialism about conceptual content is correct, then all expressions derive their conceptual content from propositional

- content (i.e., the propositional use of those expressions in inferential exchanges). [Premise of Inferentialism]
- (2.2) Not all expressions derive their conceptual content from propositional content. [Argued for in this chapter]
 - (2.3) If there are expressions that do not derive their conceptual content from propositional content, then either such conceptual content is illusory (i.e., these expressions in fact lack content), or Inferentialism about conceptual content is incorrect. [Commitment of Inferentialism]
 - (2.4) We have independent reason for thinking that that such conceptual content is not illusory (i.e., these expressions do not lack content). [Argued for in this chapter]
- Therefore, (C2) Inferentialism about conceptual content is incorrect.
[From (2.1), (2.3) or (2.2), (2.3), (2.4)]

(C2)) is overdetermined in this argument. It follows from (2.1) and (2.2), and it follows from (2.2), (2.3), and (2.4). So why include (2.3) and (2.4)? (2.1) is the positive expression of Brandom's view, as Brandom expresses it. (2.4) is the negative characterization of Brandom's view and the first disjunct of the consequent characterizes his response to the possibility that there are expressions that do not derive their conceptual content from propositional content. Establishing (2.4) provides the key support necessary for supporting (2.2) and concluding (C2). (2.1) is Brandom's "animating" claim of (1994) and (2000) and so, although it will be fleshed out in what follows, it will not be defended at great length since it can be uncontroversially attributed to Brandom. (2.3) is also uncontroversial: Brandom repeatedly claims of expressions that do not derive their conceptual content from propositional content that those expressions in fact lack content.³ The interesting

³ Here is one place where Brandom makes such a claim: "Practices that do not involve reasoning are not linguistic or (therefore) discursive practices. Thus the 'Slab' *Sprachspiel* that Wittgenstein introduces in the opening sections of the *Philosophical Investigations* should not, by these standards of demarcation, count as genuine *Sprachspiel*. It is a *vocal* but not yet a *verbal* practice" (2000, p. 14; emphasis Brandom's).

claims are (2.2) and (2.4). What I need to identify are expressions that have conceptual content but that do not get that conceptual content from inferential articulation, and some reasons for why we should still believe that these expressions are meaningful in spite of Brandom's Inferentialism. I will frame this omission on Brandom's part in terms of *freedom*: Brandom is explicitly trying to provide an account of expressive freedom—that is, an account of whatever it is that grants speakers the freedom to use language in indefinitely creative ways. However, he underpredicts meaningful linguistic activity, thereby underexplaining *real* expressive freedom.

The rest of this chapter is divided into two arguments for conclusion (C2): Inferentialism about conceptual content is incorrect. The first of the two arguments will follow the structure presented in (2.1)–(2.4) above. In the second of the two arguments, (C2) will be defended by means of an investigation into a central assumption of Inferentialism, which is that in order for scorekeepers to exchange a reason—call it *p*—in the way required by Inferentialism, *p* has to have continuity of propositional content across speakers in order to play the same argumentative role in the arguments of different speakers.

B. Deriving conceptual content from inferential articulation

In this section I provide a characterization of Brandom's defense of (2.1):

(2.1) If Inferentialism about conceptual content is correct, then all expressions derive their conceptual content from propositional content (i.e., the propositional use of those expressions in inferential exchanges).

As I said above, (2.1) can uncontroversially be attributed to Brandom, but for the purposes of this paper, it is worth elaborating on just why Brandom thinks this. Brandom claims that all expressions derive their conceptual content from inferential articulation by means of the propositional use of those expressions in reason-trading exchanges. The idea is that when speakers make assertions, the expressions used in those assertions acquire conceptual content because the speaker in the *act* of asserting *commits* herself to some content or another. This is the first level of analysis of how expressions get their conceptual content. The second level of analysis is that this reason-trading must be social in order for content to truly be acquired. The idea here is that in a *social* exchange of reasons, a speaker can be held accountable for the commitments she undertakes when asserting. These two levels of analysis parallel two levels of normativity: an assertion always commits a speaker to further beliefs (i.e., she accrues a deontic score), and by asserting a speaker is held responsible for those further beliefs (i.e., she enters a scorekeeping relationship with another speaker).

One of Brandom's central examples of how it is that expressions derive conceptual content from their propositional role in inferential exchanges is presented in his lengthy discussion of singular terms. At first, it might seem that singular terms pose a particular challenge to Inferentialism because they ostensibly lack propositional content. Brandom goes to great lengths to show that this is not the case, and that even the conceptual content of singular terms is derivative on their propositional role in inferential exchanges. In addition, his account of the linguistic meanings of singular terms and the principles of substitution is meant to demonstrate how expressive

freedom is cultivated in an Inferentialist semantics. I briefly present an account of the linguistic meanings of singular terms as an example of the larger argument given for (2.1).

While Brandom considers the sentence the smallest graspable unit and considers subsentential expressions incoherent outside of sentences, singular terms can be substituted into what he calls “substitution frames” in order to produce an infinite number of novel sentences. An example of such a substitution of a singular term into a substitution frame looks like this:

“Benjamin Franklin invented bifocals”

to

“The first postmaster general of the United States invented bifocals”
(Brandom 1994, p. 370)

Substitution is limited by whether or not a singular term can be substituted into a sentence without transforming it from a well-formed sentence to a sentence that is not well formed. That is, the singular terms are equivalent if they occupy the same syntactic category and do not turn a good inference into a bad one in their larger role in arguments. If truth is preserved from inference to inference with substitutions taking place, then the terms can be substituted for one another. To clarify, the “substitution frame” is a schematization of the premise and conclusion of the argument:

Premise: “Benjamin Franklin invented bifocals”

Conclusion: “The first postmaster general of the United States invented bifocals”

such that the substitution frame simply takes the form:

“ α invented bifocals”

Substitution, as with all logical principles, holds just in case truth is preserved in virtue of the substituting singular terms, and not based on the soundness of the argument as a whole, so:

Premise: “Benjamin Franklin was an orangutan”

Conclusion: “The first postmaster general of the United States was an orangutan”

meets the conditions of the principles of substitution.

Cultivating one’s understanding of substitutable singular terms as well as what counts as an appropriate substitution frame is meant to extend one’s expressive freedom. In this case, in coming to understand the substitutability of the singular term ‘The first postmaster general of the United States’ for the singular term ‘Benjamin Franklin’ makes one *free*—entitled—to utter all of the novel sentences using this first singular term in place of the second in appropriate substitution frames. One’s expressive freedom is doubled upon a proper understanding and use of the principles of substitution.⁴

The substitution principles proposed by Brandom are uncontroversial. It is obvious that a firm grasp of substitution principles increases a speaker’s expressive power. However, the conceptual content of singular terms is, according to Brandom, purportedly derived from the propositional role that the larger substitution frame plays. Although given that the content of substitution frame can vary indefinitely, it’s

⁴ The complete account of the principles of substitution is the subject of Chapter 6 of *Making It Explicit*. This account is much more elaborate than I am letting on here. It is only the basic outlines that I need in order to make my point that this is a source of novelty, and thus a kind of freedom, made possible by Brandom’s theory.

not immediately clear to me how this is supposed to instill singular terms with propositional content. For example:

Premise: “Benjamin Franklin was an orangutan”

Conclusion: “The first postmaster general of the United States was an orangutan”

Premise: “Benjamin Franklin enjoys fly fishing”

Conclusion: “The first postmaster general of the United States enjoys fly fishing”

Premise: “Benjamin Franklin finds marmalade unappetizing”

Conclusion: “The first postmaster general of the United States finds marmalade unappetizing”

The conceptual content of ‘The first postmaster general of the United States’ cannot be in any way derived from the the propositional content of the frame, but rather the inference from premise to conclusion in each of these cases is just supposed to show us that ‘The first postmaster general of the United States’ has identical conceptual content to ‘Benjamin Franklin’. It isn’t obvious how it is that ‘Benjamin Franklin’ *or* ‘The first postmaster general of the United States’ actually acquire their conceptual content. It’s clear that Brandom thinks they have the same semantic content but not what this content is or where it comes from and how, in particular, it’s derived from inferential practices. One piece of the puzzle is filled out by Brandom when he writes, “The linguistic community determines the correct use of some sentences, and thereby of the words they involve, and so determines the correct use of the rest of the sentences that can be expressed by using the words” (2000, p. 128). In our example, a linguistic community might endorse “Benjamin Franklin invented bifocals.” In doing so, that linguistic community also implicitly endorses “The first postmaster general of

the United States invented bifocals.” Since this is not a chapter on singular terms, I will not spend any more time defending Brandom’s account of how singular terms get their conceptual content. The general account of how *all* expressions derive conceptual content from the propositional role of those expressions in inferences will be more fully explained in the sections that follow.

C. Conceptual content without propositional content?

In this section I defend (2.2):

- (2.2) Not all expressions derive their conceptual content from propositional content.

This section is the first stage of my argument against Inferentialism. I discuss several candidate expressions that do not derive conceptual content from propositional content. In the next section, I consider Brandom’s possible response to such examples before providing reasons for thinking that such examples are real and need to be predicted by a semantic theory—something Brandom’s Inferentialism fails to do.

Brandom’s central linguistic example is the assertion. In the previous section, it is the assertion that can be thought of in terms of substitution frames—in the act of asserting, speakers initiate themselves to the riches of linguistic possibility that come from the substitutability of singular terms. And, of course, it is only the assertion that can play a role in an inferential exchange; only assertions can be offered as reasons for or against a thesis. There are, of course, many speech acts other than assertions, such as interrogatives and exclamations, and there are many kinds of language use that cannot be re-cast in propositional form at all, including linguistic acts that are

incomplete, grunts, sighs, expressions of alarm, etc. Assertions are certainly exalted in a document such as this. Dissertations, seminar discussions, and philosophical exchanges are rarely dominated by subsentential grunts and sighs, nor is interpretation moderated by the pragmatic effects of intimate relationships, contextual salience, expectations of economy, of trying to be funny, or of desiring attention. A dissertation is, fortunately, a rare linguistic event. So rare, really, that we should be careful about modelling a more general theory of language on its central feature—the assertion.

So, there are several possible routes one might take for defending (2.2). One could challenge the Inferentialist to give us reasons for thinking that there's something primitive about the description by means of the assertion, and further, that there's something primitive about the role of assertions in arguments rather than as *mere* assertions. One could claim that whereas Brandom might think that he's established that *the content of some speech acts is parasitic on the content of assertions*, he hasn't established the stronger claim that *the content of all speech acts is parasitic on the content of assertions*. On the other hand, one could claim that some subsentential expressions have conceptual content that is novel. This conceptual content is derived from the communicative goals of the speaker and the interpretive contributions of the hearer and cannot be explained in terms of the parasitic role the entire utterance plays in an argument, or the conceptual content of the subsentential expression as a singular term. The norms governing the conceptual content of such a subsentential expression are only those of the scorekeeper's interpretive success. In what follows, I argue that Brandom fails to establish that the content of all speech acts is parasitic on the content

of assertions because the conceptual content of expressions is—in part—derived from pragmatic features of concrete speech contexts that cannot be explained by or modelled on Inferentialism. Put another way, giving and taking reasons is something that speakers often do with words, but it is not all we do.

Let's begin by considering some candidates for expressions that do not derive their conceptual content from propositional content. The central candidates are expressions that are sub-sentential and arguably non-linguistic. In fact, Brandom himself will make such an argument—I consider and reject his argument in the next section.

Candidates:

Expression: “Ugh”

Conceptual content: *disgust, revulsion, boredom...*

Propositional content: *I am disgusted? This is disgusting?*

Expression: “Slab”

Conceptual content: *large piece of concrete, Get me a slab!*

Propositional content: *That is a slab?*

Expression: “I want a [non-linguistic sound of gate closing and locking] gate”

Conceptual content: *I want an automatic self-locking gate?*

Propositional content: Unclear. It's probably *I want a gate*. Can non-linguistic elements have propositional content?

Expression: “I'm going to the [throat clearing sound] White House”

Conceptual content: *I'm going to the White House and that's a matter of some prestige?*

Propositional content: Unclear. It's probably *I'm going to the White House*.

It's worth repeating that Brandom thinks that expressions such as ‘ugh’ and ‘slab’ lack conceptual content:

Practices that do not involve reasoning are not linguistic or (therefore) discursive practices. Thus the ‘Slab’ *Sprachspiel* that Wittgenstein

introduces in the opening sections of the *Philosophical Investigations* should not, by these standards of demarcation, count as genuine *Sprachspiel*. It is a *vocal* but not yet a *verbal* practice. (2000, p. 14; emphasis Brandom's)

The idea here is that if a speaker were *only* to use expressions such as 'ugh' and 'slab' that speaker would not be fully sapient, or would be merely vocal and not fully verbal. However, as speakers know, these utterances are used by speakers who pass Brandom's tests for verbal behavior and for sapience; 'ugh' can be interjected in the philosophy seminar room alongside traditional assertions. What Brandom seems to be confusing here is whether or not speakers can be fully sapient language users when *only* using subsentential expressions such as 'ugh' and 'slab' with whether they can be fully sapient language users when *also* using such expressions. Presumably, 'slab', for instance, gets its conceptual content from its place in a larger expression such as "That is a slab" along with a demonstration in the world (what Brandom calls 'entry' and 'exit' transitions, following Putnam). And, presumably, he would say of 'ugh' that it's not even worth considering for a semantic theory given that it ranks alongside raising eyebrows, winking, hand twitching, etc.

The last two candidates are more interesting. In each of these cases, I want to argue that the conceptual content of the expressions differs from the propositional content of the expressions. Each case includes the interjection of a purportedly non-linguistic element. In both cases the interjection changes the conceptual content, but in neither case is the non-linguistic element the kind of thing that can be truth-evaluable—it's just not in the right category. But, in each case the interjection is more than a pragmatic embellishment; instead, it changes the meaning of the expression

itself. In the case of “I want a [non-linguistic sound of gate closing and locking] gate,” the meaning is less general than *I want a gate*; it’s specific and rules out the possibilities that the speaker wants a white-picket gate or a chain-link gate. Perhaps Brandom would say that the propositional content is that *I want a gate* and is true just in case I want a gate. But, with the interjection of this non-linguistic element, the meaning of the sentence is clearly more specific and, in propositional terms, is false if I in fact want a white-picket gate.

The final candidate is a case where a speaker is announcing something about his plans to go somewhere. Again, it could be analyzed as having the propositional content that *I’m going to the White House* where this is true just in case I’m going to the White House. Now, in this final case, the interjection in the middle of the expression doesn’t obviously change the truth-value of the expression, but it does change the meaning of the expression. It seems to add something like: *I’m going to the White House, and the White House is an important place* or *I’m going to the White House, and this is a matter of some prestige for me*. What’s important to see here is that the conceptual content of the expression “I’m going to the [throat clearing sound] White House” can’t be assigned by a traditional semantic analysis. Brandom and I are in agreement about that. He and I agree that it has to do with more than just reference and a truth-conditional analysis. But while he thinks it also has to do with the pragmatic role that the assertion plays in an inference, I think it has to do with facts about the speaker and the context that can’t be ascertained from just looking at the words themselves or how those words have been configured in past reason exchanges.

In both of these cases I want it to be clear that the bracketed element could stand for any number of vocal acts. Here I included a sound that is meant to represent the sound an object makes and a non-linguistic marker used for emphasis. Alternatively, I could have included a novel word or expression that has no inferential history, such as ‘schmooby’ or ‘schmabel’. Each of these expressions refuses to cooperate with inferential analysis that requires that they fully compose truth analyzable propositions or that they are interchangeable with other composable parts. So, whereas we know that we can swap ‘Benjamin Franklin’ for ‘the first postmaster general of the United States’ we have no idea what we can swap for ‘schmooby’ or ‘ugh’, or [throat clearing], etc. when any of these is taken out of context. And yet, this does not establish that they do not have conceptual content. Indeed, the above candidates not only have conceptual status when we try and interpret them, we in fact readily interpret them and their kin in our daily linguistic exchanges.

D. Parasitic relations: is the content of non-propositions parasitic on the content of propositions?

As we might anticipate, Brandom thinks that the conceptual content of non-propositions is parasitic on the content of full propositions. It is this proposed parasitic relationship that I look into in this section. Specifically, I consider these two premises of the argument of this chapter:

- (2.3) If there are expressions that do not derive their conceptual content from propositional content, then either such conceptual content is illusory (i.e., these expressions in fact lack content), or Inferentialism about conceptual content is incorrect.
[Commitment of Inferentialism]

- (2.4) We have independent reason for thinking that that such conceptual content is not illusory (i.e., these expressions do not lack content). [Argued for in this chapter]

The central background assumption of Inferentialism is a good one. It's that meaningful expressions are the kinds of things that are used by speakers in temporally and spatially extended communities, and that the content of an expression is not a function of its isolated use. I concur that the meaning of expressions is something that is correctly indexed to speakers speaking in times, spaces, and places. Brandom, however, extends this general idea in one narrow direction (down one alley, to extend his metaphor): the meaning, or conceptual content, of expressions is not something that is apparent by an examination of mere reference without regard for inferential role, history, and prior commitments. Ultimately, he commits himself to the stronger claim that it is *just these* inferential roles, histories, and prior commitments that determine conceptual content. He illustrates this as follows:

By contrast to Wittgenstein, the inferential identification of the conceptual claims that language (discursive practice) has a *center*; it is not a motley. Inferential practices of producing and consuming *reasons* are *downtown* in the region of linguistic practice. Suburban linguistic practices utilize and depend on the conceptual contents forged in the game of giving and asking for reasons, are parasitic on it. Claiming, being able to justify one's claims, and using one's claims to justify other claims and actions are not just one among other sets of things one can do with language. (Brandom 2000, pp. 14-15)

This passage makes the 'parasitic' relationship explicit. This parasitic model of conceptual content works only to the extent that a speaker uses an expression as it has been used before. Clever metaphor aside, if she uses an expression with the intention of violating extant normative practices, and she doesn't now use the expression

inferentially, then it's inevitable that her expression will lack conceptual content. Even more importantly, for any use of an expression, there will be no way to determine *whether* it violates extant practices. If its conceptual content is parasitic on its propositional use in an inference in other contexts, then it doesn't make any sense to appeal to what the speaker *meant* for it to *mean*. Brandom's account of conceptual content is claimed to be exhaustive—there isn't conceptual content that is somehow independent of inferentialism (the speaker can't mean something *sui generis*). In this way, this central assumption of Inferentialism rules out the possibility that Inferentialism about conceptual content could be incorrect. That is, if there were conceptual content that was independent of a prior inferential use, Inferentialism as a semantic theory wouldn't be able to detect it—it has no conceptual apparatus for doing so. But, we do, as a matter of fact, make use of novel expressions in ways that go beyond what Brandom allows for (namely, the intersubstitutability of singular terms). That these terms have conceptual content is not illusory given that we, as speakers, regularly and successfully interpret novel expressions. Therefore, (C2) Inferentialism about conceptual content is incorrect.

E. The disunity of propositions

For the remainder of this chapter I will make a second argument that is meant to establish (C2): Inferentialism about conceptual content is incorrect. The reasons that I will give in this case have to do with what I think is a central assumption of inferentialism that is false or at least deeply problematic. The central assumption is that in order for scorekeepers to exchange a reason—call it *p*—in the way required by

Inferentialism, *p* has to have continuity of propositional content across speakers in order to play the same argumentative role in the arguments of different speakers. As I will argue below, there are a couple of problems for this assumption within an Inferentialist theory of conceptual content. The first problem can be borrowed from the conclusions of Chapter II of this dissertation: *p* lacks fixed semantic content across *contexts*. In this chapter, I want to develop this conclusion further by modifying it such that *p* lacks fixed semantic content across *speakers*. In some ways, Brandom should find this conclusion amenable; after all, he thinks that semantic content is not something fixed at all but is instead constructed through scorekeepers in inferential exchanges. However, this may be self-undermining for Brandom. If the semantic content of sentences varies across speakers, then reasons can't be traded that are semantically (and thereby conceptually) immune to the changes in speaker-hearer relationships. I will consider and develop a few possibilities: (i) discursive abilities are differentially distributed among *S*'s in such a way that suggests the semantic incompatibilities of *p*'s. (ii) Two-book scorekeeping—Brandom's proposal for regulating differences between speakers—doesn't create semantic compatibility between speakers nor will it predict the full breadth of expressive freedom speakers in fact exhibit. (iii) The I/Thou model of authority relations—Brandom's tertiary proposal for regulating differences between speakers—is socially, and semantically, naïve.

The argument structure for the remainder of this chapter looks like this:

- (3.1) If inferentialism about conceptual content is correct, then conceptual content is exclusively determined by reason-trading exchanges between scorekeepers. [Premise of Inferentialism]
- (3.2) In order for conceptual content to be exclusively determined by reason-trading between scorekeepers, the linguistic meaning [propositional content] of those reasons must be interchangeable across speakers. [Commitment of Inferentialism]
- (3.3) The linguistic meanings of reasons are interchangeable across speakers only if speakers themselves do not contribute to the meanings of the expressions they utter (e.g., by means of their non-linguistic social statuses or by means of the varied communicative goal of each speaker). [Self-evident semantic fact]
- (3.4) Discursive abilities and discursive goals among speakers vary along non-linguistic lines and these variations change the possible meanings of expressions. [Argued for in this chapter]
- (3.5) Two-book scorekeeping does not have sufficient resources to regulate the variations in discursive abilities and goals. [Argued for in this chapter]
- (3.6) The I/thou model of authority relations does not have sufficient resources to regulate the variations in discursive abilities and goals. [Argued for in this chapter]
- (3.7) The linguistic meanings of reasons are not interchangeable across speakers. [From (3.3)-(3.6)]
- (3.8) Conceptual content is not exclusively determined by reason-trading between scorekeepers (although these may play a role in the vindication of knowledge claims, they provide a socially inadequate model for explaining language as a socially dynamic activity that may lack a primarily epistemic orientation and as such underexplains the expressive freedom of speakers). [From (3.2), (3.7)]

Therefore, (C2), Inferentialism about conceptual content is incorrect.
[From (3.1), (3.8)]

As we can see, premises (3.1) and (3.2) are a premise and a commitment of Inferentialism respectively. As has been established in the first part of this chapter, (3.1) is one of the most basic tenets of Inferentialism, and (3.2) is a commitment that follows naturally from (3.2): in order for conceptual content to be the product of reason-trading exchanges between speakers, where speakers exchange and evaluate the *same* reasons, then the semantic content of those reasons must remain fixed across

contexts and speakers. (3.3) is a statement of just what is entailed by the requirement that the propositional content of reasons be interchangeable across speakers. Although there are multiple factors that might make it the case that the propositional content of a reason is interchangeable across speakers, one of those requirements is that the speakers themselves—in virtue of *who* they are—cannot contribute to the propositional content of an expression. For an elaboration on this point and its importance, see Ch. II of this dissertation.

(3.4) is a statement of one of the positive theses of this dissertation. Throughout I have been examining the ways in which linguistic agents actively contribute to the metaphysics of language, whether through being part of an interpretive context that bears on the propositional content of expressions, or being individual institutors of the norms that govern languages. The discussion of Inferentialism taken up in this chapter allows me to investigate the positive contributions made by agents in constructing meanings with other speakers. This project is not altogether different from the one taken up by Brandom himself, who views, as do I, the construction of meaning as an essentially social project that happens within communities. One question is whether his view of these meaning-making communities is itself politically naïve. It doesn't seem unreasonable to suppose that expressions mean different things when spoken by speakers of varying social statuses and situations. A situated semantics would take into account that meanings change between speakers and that some speakers have authorities to speak and to mean in ways that other speakers do not. The problem with this for

Inferentialism is that it seems readily apparent that Inferentialism requires continuity of propositional content across speakers. This problem, like most others, is not lost on Brandom. He provides several possible resources for resolving such a problem, each of which I assess in what follows.

Before broaching Brandom's possible solutions, let me elaborate on what weakness I see in Inferentialism *qua* social theory. If discursive activity is the source of all linguistic meaning, and yet engaging in discursive activity is somehow not possible for some speakers, then the content of their speech acts are either (a) not up to them, or (b) parasitic on the speech acts of those for whom discursive speech is a possibility. This may not be a problem for Brandom. He may recognize that there are authority relations between speakers: some have greater access to and mastery over discursive speech. It is due to this access and mastery that entitles these speakers to be *meaning-makers* and condemns all other speakers to having their linguistic agency be somehow parasitic on the agency of the authorities. This is also a way in which Brandom's theory of meaning is not unlike other externalist theories of meaning, all of which make heavy use of the notion of linguistic authority. Brandom differs, however, in his description of what confers authority on some speakers and not others. Rather than claiming linguistic authority is derived from extra-linguistic authority (e.g., one's status as a botanist gives one authority over botanical terms), or from historical referential dubbings (e.g., "*that* is water"), Brandom claims linguistic authority is something that comes from the mastery of specifically discursive discourse. This is a bit confusing: it's a little clearer how it is that discursive mastery begets expressive

power, but less so how discursive mastery begets linguistic authority. Yet, this is just the position that Brandom must take with respect to those who may lack access to and mastery over discursive speech.

This claim requires elaboration. Namely, we should ask how is it that some speakers may be less able to engage in discursive speech. Here it is helpful to borrow the Greek concept of *parrhesia* and the *parrhesiastes* as discussed by Michel Foucault in his lecture series *Fearless Speech*. As this concept is treated in that text, *parrhesia* is a kind of speech that is truth-telling but only under certain conditions. The conditions under which truth-telling speech falls under the richer category of *parrhesia* is if it is truth-telling that involves frankness (perhaps from legislator to king), danger (in the sense that speaking may endanger one's life), criticism (which may, for instance, be what provokes the danger), and some kind of relationship to the moral law (perhaps one has a moral obligation to tell the truth despite the political consequences of doing so). An analysis of conditions under which this concept is correctly deployed suggests that using speech in ways that are essential to the expression of one's linguistic agency (for example, for political criticism) is reserved for some speakers and not others. In Foucault's reconstruction of the uses to which *parrhesia* was put in Greek literature, it was reserved for the social elite—any exception to this practice had to be made explicit as an exception and only with the permission of the elite. In his analysis, a slave needs to request permission from the master to speak truthfully to that master; once such permission is granted, however, the expressions she uses adopt a different semantic content. Without such a concession

of power, the slave as linguistic agent would be unable to mean what she intends with the expressions she uses; these expressions realize their full semantic potential by the vicarious power of the master. But the master, on the other hand, can realize his discursive authority simply by being who he is and does not require a change in social rank in order to assert with an intended propositional content. To extend Foucault's analysis, reason-trading is the kind of activity that is not merely linguistic, but always instead social: the value of the trader of reasons, and the consequent value of those reasons, is measured in ways that are extra-linguistic and extra-logical. (Since Brandom is offering a theory of meaning that is normative, we should expect that meaning is normative and the theory is not—that is, he is not describing how meaning *ought* to be constituted by discursive practice, but how it *is* constituted by discursive practice.)

However, the mere existence of *parrhesia* does not detract from the possibility that linguistic meaning is constituted by discursive practice. It is still possible that this is the case, but that not all speakers can engage in discursive practice that is on equal footing. What the possibility of *parrhesia* does detract from, however, is that discursive practice is *simply* inferential. If some reasons count for more than others, then the deontic status of a speech act cannot be merely the calculation of commitments and entitlements. While this might look like a politicization of a politically innocent theory of meaning, this isn't quite right. Brandom's theory is thoroughly political insofar as it is a theory that provides explicit justification for the

inclusion and exclusion of members of communities. Inclusion is explicitly determined by the willingness to conform to rules of expression:

[W]e treat someone as free insofar as we consider him subject to the norms inherent in the social practices conformity to which is the criterion of membership in our community. He is free insofar as he is one of us. (Brandom 1979, p. 192)

What Inferentialism needs is some way to regulate the propositional content of expressions across speakers in order to neutralize the effects of the identities and agencies of *S*'s. Brandom provides at least two ways of doing this. I refer to the first as "Two-Book Scorekeeping" and the second as "The I/thou model of authority Relations." I discuss each in turn and conclude that neither has the resources to regulate propositional content across speakers and thus that the linguistic meanings of reasons are not interchangeable across speakers. In each case, Brandom will not be able to neutralize propositional content from the effects of agents in the way that is requisite for a semantic inferentialism. In the final section, I provide a diagnosis of Inferentialism as a theory of linguistic meanings and the speakers who make them.

F. Two-book scorekeeping

The first of Brandom's two proposals for regulating propositional content across speakers is what he calls "two-book scorekeeping." In this section, I describe this proposal and argue for (3.5):

(3.5) Two-book scorekeeping does not have sufficient resources to regulate the variations in discursive abilities and goals.

As I mentioned at the outset of this chapter, my analysis of Inferentialism can be cast in terms of *freedom*. I claimed that Brandom's Inferentialism underpredicts the

freedom of linguistic agents to engage in meaningful linguistic activity and to thereby have substantial expressive freedom. This can be thought of as a conservative feature of Brandom's semantic theory—one that is not altogether different from the conservative political theory his semantic theory reproduces.⁵ In such a political theory, the freedom of political agents is found in their conformity to the existing political norms of a community. Two-book scorekeeping is meant to be one way in which to defend the freedom of the linguistic agent and thereby skirt a charge of conservatism. More to the point, the communitarian model of Inferentialism also assumes a continuity of propositional content across *S*'s. Two-book scorekeeping promises to provide a model such that the situation of any given *S* has semantic authority even in light of the semantic norms of *S*'s community.

According to the account of two-book scorekeeping, the most immediate means available to the individual linguistic agent of transcending the strictures of the community are to select those whom she wants as deontic scorekeepers. The agent can specify who is worthwhile as a discursive agent or community member by choosing for whom she performs. As Brandom runs the example, by choosing to be in a community of good chess players, one acknowledges the chess-playing abilities of others by allying oneself with them; but, one also runs the risk of being rejected by the

⁵ Here is a characterization of the Hegelian political theory that Brandom is using as a model for his semantic theory: "For the everyday contingencies of private life, definitions of what is good and bad or right and wrong are supplied by the laws and customs [*Sitten*] of each state, and there is no great difficulty in recognizing them...The individual's *morality*...consist[s] in fulfilling the duties imposed upon him by his social station [*Stand*]...If someone declares that, in ordinary, private existence, it is not at all easy to decide what is right and good...we can only attribute this to his evil or malevolent will which is looking for excuses to escape its duties, for it is not difficult to recognize what those duties are" (Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, 94/80).

others for not being a good enough chess player. Whether others get the chance to reject a speaker as sub-optimal is up to the speaker initially as he sets the boundaries on his relevant class of scorekeepers. The speaker reprimanded by the scorekeeper also has recourse through two-book scorekeeping whereby she can in turn keep score on the scorekeeper's practices.

Presumably, outside of the chess-playing example, the idea of two-book scorekeeping is as simple as the ability of a person choosing to whom he speaks, thereby limiting the possibilities for external sanctioning and regulating the continuity of propositional content (e.g., slave speaks to slave). In the case of sanctioning, the speaker can in turn sanction the sanctioner. For the most part, this proposal seems innocuous. We, by and large, speak to others who share many of our beliefs about language and the world, and so have a natural limit on disagreements as to what we as speakers are entitled or committed, and to the propositional content of our locutions.

The relationship of Two-Book scorekeepers is, however, quite a bit more complicated. Brandom claims that in making an assertion, I incur a responsibility to defend my entitlement to that assertion. There are three main ways that this responsibility can be met: justifying the claim (providing reasons), appealing to the authority of another speaker (passing the buck), or invoking my authority as a reliable reporter (appealing to my capacities) (1994, pp. 172-174). The complement to this responsibility is that if it is not met, the assertion is always challengeable: "The *prima facie* status of the commitment as one the interlocutor is entitled to is not permanent or unshakable; entitlement to an assertional commitment can be challenged" (1994, pp.

177-178). The important point about scorekeeping challenges to assertions is that they have the same structure as the assertions being challenged, and so shoulder the same burden of responsibility: “One then can challenge an assertion only by making an assertion incompatible with it...Then challenges have no privileged status: their entitlement is on the table along with that of what they challenge” (1994, p. 178). The challenger, in challenging, puts himself in the same vulnerable position of facing a drop in “score,” of having to defend his challenge through one of the three means available to him, and facing sanctions if he is unsuccessful.

The intersubjective checks provided by the scorekeeping relationship are supposed to provide “objectively representational propositional contents on claims” and “objective truth conditions” on assertions, and, ultimately, make it possible that “the entire linguistic community could be wrong in its assessment” of an assertion (1994, p. 178; see also p. xvii). This is the kind of community transcendence that would make it possible for an individual linguistic agent to be free to make an assertion that is objectively true, or at least *meaningful*, while remaining a sapient language user.⁶ This kind of semantic freedom could also stand to acknowledge the social situatedness of *S*’s.

⁶ It’s not clear whether Brandom’s use of the term ‘objectively’ means something like what is described in Ch. I in the subsection on Relativism vs. Objectivism. Brandom seems to mean something similar to the subjective and intersubjective (or the ‘merely relative’), but this does not necessarily imply that the conditions for objectivity are correspondence with the world. However, Brandom is certainly not uninterested in *some* form of world correspondence as a feature of objectivity conditions. This is best explained by what he calls ‘entry transitions’ for inferences and are paradigmatically observations of the world on which a speaker bases an inference. At the other end, the speaker’s ‘exit transition’ is to act on that inference by committing herself to it through expression in discourse.

Two-book scorekeeping differs from the cultivation of logical vocabulary (as discussed in Section II above on singular terms and substitution frames) in that the practice requires something like a linguistic community. In fact, it is the scorekeeping relationship that is the elemental relationship of Brandom's social theory. Under one interpretation, the scorekeeping relationship may be the *only* relationship that Brandom thinks is legitimately normative (see "The I/thou model of authority relations" below). Given the significance of the scorekeeping relationship, it remains to be seen whether two-book scorekeeping fosters expressive freedom in light of the initial constraints of score being kept.

The tests of two-book scorekeeping should be those cases where the content of a linguistic agent's assertion is not shared by others, or those cases where the linguistic agent himself is in the minority. In the first kind of case, the agent's assertion initiates some kind of conceptual shift. The ways in which a conceptual shift is reached varies with the kinds of conceptual shifts involved. The interesting cases here will not involve pedestrian perceptual claims such as "grass is green," although it's true that many perceptual cases deceptively involve radical conceptual shifts. Consider, for example, the perceptions of two agents of a giant footprint; one agent may assert that the footprint is a fossil from a different geological era, while another agent may assert that the same footprint is a clever trick by an all-powerful creator to give the Earth the illusion of age and complexity. Such assertions appear to fall within the rubric of two-book scorekeeping whereby the two agents can support their assertions about either the grass or the giant footprint by providing reasons, passing the buck, or appealing to

their own capacities as reliable reporters. Indeed, this rubric is designed around such examples.

What happens in cases of assertions that cannot be supported in one of these three ways? In the myriad cases where linguistic novelty involves the transgressive use of an expression without an appeal to matters of fact, assertions are challengeable but not defensible. The kinds of cases that I have in mind here are cases of poetic novelty or what is typically called “slang.” In such cases, an innovative use of an expression can be challenged with a simple, “That’s not an expression” or “That’s not how that expression is correctly used” or “You’re mistaken about the propositional content of that expression.” Now, both the original speaker and his scorekeeper are in a bind from the perspective of two-book scorekeeping. The original scorekeeper cannot plausibly appeal to reasons for his use, pass the buck, or appeal to his capacity as a reliable reporter. His reasons may be as meager as liking the way the expression sounds, and he may be able only to pass the buck to other speakers who share the same meager reasons. What the speaker is *not* trying to do is establish his entitlement to the expression within an inferential network. For instance, it is difficult to make sense of how such expressions share incompatibility relationships with the speaker’s other commitments. On the other hand, the scorekeeper finds himself in a similar position. A scorekeeping challenge such as “That’s not how that expression is correctly used” can appeal to reasons and pass the buck, although neither move should be successful. Passing the buck might involve the familiar appeal to linguistic authorities—those self-described authorities positioned to comment on linguistic

correctness as it's distinct from matters of non-linguistic fact. The legitimacy of such authorities will be rightfully difficult to establish within the confines of Brandom's two-book scorekeeping and as such are in the same position as other speakers in so far as they can only appeal to reasons or pass the buck. Assuming the buck reaches its last pass, what sort of reasons can a scorekeeper invoke? Presumably, all such reasons will take the form of appealing to regularities in use, where it is the regularities themselves that are meant to carry normative weight. Brandom's extended discussion and rejection of "regularism" in Chapter 1 of *MIE* should make it clear that such an appeal will not work.

The question that the fate of two-book scorekeeping turns on is how it makes it possible for an entire community to be wrong, as Brandom claims. Presumably, this would involve a lone speaker asserting p , which when challenged by his community of scorekeepers, in turn counter-challenges thereby revealing that the community is wrong in their beliefs about p . The tools that we have for fleshing out this claim on Brandom's behalf are articulating entailment relations, providing reasons for an assertion, appealing to authority, or appealing to one's own reliable capacities. Appealing to authority should be ruled out immediately because the task at hand is to establish how an entire community could be wrong, including authorities. This leaves articulating entailment relations, providing reasons for an assertion, and appealing to one's own reliable capacities. The first two should turn out to be the same: whatever count as reasons are such because they are entailed by what the audience is already

committed to. So, the possibilities can again be narrowed to articulating entailment relations and appealing to one's own reliable capacities.

This second tool—appealing to one's own reliable capacities—is deceptively simple, but it's the deception that makes it particularly interesting. Again, such a case would work like this: a speaker asserts *p*. His community of scorekeepers challenges his assertion. He defends his assertion through an appeal to his own capacities as a reliable observer of situations relevant to *p*. Brandom's oft-cited example is of chicken-sexers who work in poultry factories sorting male and female chicks. To the ordinary observer, male and female chicks are indistinguishable. If a chicken-sexer were to assert "this is a female chick" we would have a difficult time believing that the chicken-sexer could *know* that his assertion were true. As it turns out, chicken-sexers themselves have a difficult time explaining how it is that they do in fact *know* that such an assertion is true, and yet they reliably sort the chicks. (Apparently, they appeal to a visual difference between the chicks; there turns out to be no reliable visual difference between males and females and it is thought that chicken-sexers in fact distinguish between them on the basis of smell, although they are not aware that this is how they do it.) As it turns out, chicken-sexers have a kind of reliable authority in their capacities for performing this task. In less specialized circumstances, any of us have reliable capacities that we could appeal to in order to defend an assertion. And most of the time this may be all that is needed to demonstrate to an entire community that they are incorrect about *p*.

The example of the footprint described above reveals the shortcomings of reliabilism in bearing such a significant load (which is, again, demonstrating that an entire community is wrong). In the case of the footprint two agents are presumably presented with the same state of affairs in the world and yet they disagree regarding *what it is*—one concluding that it is a fossil while the other disagrees. What the footprint fails to do for the two agents is to present itself *as* anything that could serve to resolve a dispute between the two speakers. (It doesn't even obviously present itself *as* a footprint, much less a fossil but I call it such for ease of presentation.) If the dispute between these two agents was about the assertion p —"there is a fossil in this room"—it could not be resolved by the agents reliably reporting on what they perceive, or on having a cognitively reliable experience. At least in cases of disagreement such as this, reliable reporting relies on articulating reasons or entailment relations in order for the reliable report to be a report that counts as a justification for the disputed assertion.

Establishing the continuity of propositional contents through the method of two-book scorekeeping now turns on one remaining tool: articulating entailment relations. Unfortunately, this is a question-begging non-starter. Articulating entailment relations assumes rather than makes possible the continuity of propositional content across S 's and speech contexts.

More to the point, the deployment of two-book scorekeeping within a descriptive semantic theory is misleading. The theory itself is normative in its positing of three resources for regulating the continuity of propositional content between

speakers: justifying a claim, appealing to the authority of another speaker, or invoking authority as a reliable reporter. However, these three resources are collectively unable to regulate the continuity of propositional content across *S*'s if they are not available to all *S*'s. They offer what is, perhaps, an ideally rational model of semantic scorekeeping but one that is politically naïve. Consider, again, Foucault's description of the *parrhesiastes* as she requests permission to speak the truth. Now, it might not be totally obvious that, in this case, she is engaged in semantic scorekeeping—the example of the speaker of “slang,” on the other hand, is explicitly engaged in this project—but what is made clear by the *parrhesiastes* is that *S*'s find themselves in positions of non-linguistic authority where justifying their assertions, making legitimate appeals to the legitimate authority of other speakers, or invoking their own authority as reliable reporters are not options that are available to them or for which they will be taken seriously. Given this, it seems politically plausible that some speakers will not be in the position of being meaning-makers and will instead be relegated to the position of being meaning-takers: adopting the meanings of the dominant group. This is how “high” or “superstructure” languages (and the speakers who speak those languages) have in fact functioned in linguistic reality. The state of rational semantic equality between scorekeepers is not a state that speakers—especially those who are politically subservient—find themselves in.

However, there are also cases in which it seems incorrect to say that speakers who fail in the scorekeeping game of getting their reasons recognized also utter expressions that lack propositional content. It's more accurate to say that those

expressions just have a different propositional content—one that reflects the social situation of the speaker and the communicative goals she imparts to her speech act. Poetic license, therefore, is not speech that derives its conceptual content exclusively from scorekeeping exchanges but one that derives its conceptual content in part in reaction to these very scorekeeping exchanges. It is this kind of speech that demonstrates linguistic agency in light of inferential failure and suggests, again, that not all of the conceptual content of expressions is derived from the propositional content deployed in inferential exchanges. Brandom fails to see the full range of expressive freedom among speakers of natural, rather than ideally epistemic, languages.

G. The I/thou model of authority relations

The second of Brandom's two proposals for regulating propositional content across speakers is what can be described as his "I/thou model of authority relations."

In this section, I describe this proposal and argue for (3.6):

- (3.6) The I/thou model of authority relations does not have sufficient resources to regulate the variations in discursive abilities and goals.

Perhaps the clearest response Brandom has to a charge of linguistic conservatism is to deny that *S*'s stand in a relationship with a semantic community, and to insist that *S* only stands in a relation to one other speaker at any given time. This one-to-one relation between *S*'s and their *p*'s could enable the cultivation of propositional continuity. Propositional content would not need to survive the test of continuity across large communities of speakers but would only require propositional agreement

from a second person to succeed as semantic content. This is the gist of his endorsement of what he calls an *I/thou* model of authority relations over an *I/we* model. He thinks the *I/thou* model sets him apart from other semantic externalists in that it amounts to a rejection of the special authority of the ‘we’ over the ‘I’ (1994, p. 39). He rightly recognizes that there isn’t a concrete sense in which a ‘community’ can endorse something; rather, assessing and endorsing are always done by individuals. The *I/thou* relationship, then, is meant to be between two individuals rather than between an individual and a community. As he would say, the structure of cognitive relations are always between an *I* and a *thou*, and the speech acts that constitute deontic moves in a scorekeeping relationship are always made by a single *I*. Endorsing an *I/thou* model is meant to avoid the externalists’ problems with saying how much community endorsement counts as enough. But before we simply grant an *I/thou* model of authority relations to Brandom, we need to be clear on what this model is, what it does for his theory, and whether he is entitled to it.

Like two-book scorekeeping, this model of cognitive relations is also meant to make it possible for an entire community (or at least a large part of it) to be wrong. The *I/we* model of authority relations is something he thinks philosophers of language have adopted, perhaps unwittingly, from political philosophers. Brandom sees other externalists (such as Kripke and Wright) as the linguistic conservatives arguing for the untenably high standard of community endorsement. Among traditional philosophers of language he identifies Davidson as an exception, attributing to him an *I/thou* model. The language of *I/thou* and *I/we* models should be traced to the existential use of the

terms by Feuerbach, Buber, and Heidegger. Most notably, Buber described the I/thou relationship as a relationship between subjects in contrast to the subject-object relationship of Kantian epistemology. Presumably, Brandom's use of this terminology does not carry spiritual significance as Buber's clearly did. And Brandom also differs from Buber in that he does not contrast the 'I/thou' with the 'I/it', but rather with the 'I/we'. The I/we model implies that communities assert, acknowledge, and assess, and it requires the universal community endorsement of semantic norms. Brandom rejects that this is plausible, claiming that it is individuals who assert and assess one another's performances.

Yet, elsewhere Brandom blithely writes, "One has not learned the language, has not acquired the capacity to engage in the social practices which are the use of the language, until one can produce *novel* sentences which the community will deem appropriate" (1979, pp. 193-194). Presumably, his use of 'community' here is merely a "*façon de parler*" (1994, p. 38) and he means something more specific. What should stand in for 'community' according to an I/thou model of authority relations? 'Community' should be replaced not only with talk of another individual, but of an individual who is acknowledged as a fellow scorekeeper thereby adhering to the force of the 'thou' as opposed to a mere 'he' or 'she'.

We would need to grant Brandom a lot of interpretive charity here given how frequently he uses the language of 'community', 'we', and 'one of us', and how little he does to explain that authoritative relations are always and only between individuals. On the other hand, not granting him this interpretive charity leads to the incoherence

of many of his central theories, e.g., the model of two-book scorekeeping. But can the *I/thou* model stand up under scrutiny within the confines of his full set of theories? Suppose speaker S_1 asserts p and S_2 deems p appropriate. Later, speaker S_2 asserts p but speaker S_3 successfully challenges S_2 's entitlement to p . Given that S_3 has deemed S_2 's use of p inappropriate, what comes of S_1 's original assertion? Does it remain appropriate as deemed by S_2 ? In an *I/thou* model of scorekeeping, the standards for the veracity of p seem untenably high or low depending on the circumstances and with whom one is engaged. This is not entirely unreasonable but lends a certain instability to the larger theory that more traditional communitarians can avoid.

More importantly, does an *I/thou* model respect the social realities of linguistic freedom and the semantic situatedness of speakers? Presumably it does, at least *ceteris paribus*. The assumption that Brandom attributes to linguistic communitarians is that linguistic correctness requires universal assent in a linguistic community. Correspondingly, linguistic change or novelty requires a universal judgment of acceptability. Brandom notes that this standard is untenably high, and it certainly seems to promote conservatism. Anything lower than this would relieve such conservatism. Thus, an *I/thou* model appears to promote novelty if only because a speaker merely seeks approval from his immediate interlocutors.

Unfortunately, Brandom does not say enough about an *I/thou* model for a thorough understanding of how it might completely relieve him of such conservatism. While he clearly endorses such a model in (1994), he continues to describe language as a "social institution," and to write that we achieve the positive

freedom to do new things such as use language and have new thoughts only within a “community of language users” (qtd. in Testa 2003). It also has a poor fit with his anterior inferentialist assumptions. If one’s immediate scorekeeper happens to be a poor or careless judge of one’s entitlements and commitments, it is theoretically unsound to allow for the particular, careless ‘thou’ to make it the case that one is still entitled to one’s assertions.

However, it should be clear that the principal problem for the *I/thou* model of authority relations for the purposes of this chapter is that it invites semantic instability. To be clear, I don’t see that there’s much of a problem with the semantic instability of acknowledging speakers S_1 and S_2 mean p_1 with expression ‘p’ and speakers S_2 and S_3 mean p_2 with ‘p’—I think this is probably a correct description of linguistic reality. But, what it makes problematic for Inferentialism is how it is that speakers can track one another’s entitlements and commitments across contexts. Presumably, this is one of the principal resources of the scorekeeper: to claim that S can’t mean p because it would be inconsistent with what S has committed herself to in other speech contexts. If each speech context is bound to its own *I/thou* authority relations, then the appeal to entitlements and commitments is radically limited in a way that I don’t think Brandom would accept. Note that, for better or worse, this is a problem that traditional semantic communitarians do not face. So, while the *I/thou* model of authority relations is appealing from the perspective of preserving expressive freedom and eliminating the effects of non-linguistic authority on conceptual content, it’s not something that is consistent with the principal premises of Inferentialism, and so not something the

Inferentialist can help himself to. I conclude from this: (3.7) The linguistic meanings of reasons are not interchangeable across speakers.

H. Conclusions: The divergence of linguistic meaning and an epistemic model of propositional content

In this final section, I diagnose the reasons why Inferentialism fails as a semantic theory. The upshot is that there are two key failures. The first is that conceptual content is not exclusively determined by reason-trading between scorekeepers. The second is that the epistemic model of Inferentialism fails to do justice to the actual social dynamics of linguistic communication and thereby underpredicts what speakers actually find meaningful in language use. For these reasons, I conclude that Inferentialism about conceptual content specifically has got to be incorrect.

Brandom's meta-model is the explanation of conceptual content generally. Brandom succeeds in explaining the vindication of knowledge claims, namely, the paradigmatic *assertion* of the philosophy seminar room, but not the language use of ordinary speakers. The assumption is that if he can explain the conceptual content of assertions, then everything else follows because all of that language use is derivative or parasitic. This is tendentious and despite Brandom's best efforts, it's not clear why we should think it's true. This lack of clarity—on the parasitic relation between the assertion and all other speech acts—leaves a gaping hole, or perhaps a *wound*, in the explanation of conceptual contents.

Brandom's normative inferentialism is not only a theory of language but it's a theory of language-users. Those who don't use language in the way Brandom describes shouldn't be considered sapient. This is something that I have not explained in much detail, but it is central to Brandom's view. What are the implications of this view on the relationship between inferential language use typified by the assertion and candidacy for sapience? If what I've described in this chapter is a description of purportedly meaningful language use that doesn't fall under his model, then presumably the speaker who uses that language isn't sapient. This consequence makes it seem like Brandom's theory is too weak; that is, we can think of theories of language in terms of what they predict will be meaningful and compare those predictions against what we have independent reason for thinking is meaningful. We use these comparisons to assess any given theory of meaning. If Brandom underpredicts meaningful language use and renders the users of that language pre-sapient, then his theory of language *underpredicts* and is thereby too weak. For Brandom, expressive freedom is based in what he regards as Hegel's model of reciprocal recognition. Again, this is something I have not spent time discussing in this chapter so I will only note it in passing here at the end with the understanding that much would need to be said to fill out the details. Brandom constructs his own model both to respect Kant's requirement of autonomy and a Hegelian model of commitment through social action; his model seeks a socialized linguistic autonomy. Brandom wants us to consider the model in one direction: when linguistic agents are induced into a conceptual community, those agents are introduced to norms which

enable them to, “formulate an indefinite number of novel sentences, expressing novel possible claims, intentions, and aims, and so have a range of *thoughts* that were unavailable before” (Brandom, qtd. in Testa 2003). He goes on to reaffirm that it is this induction that makes an agent *free* in Kant’s sense. What happens when this model is probed in the other direction? Is community sanctioning necessary for formulating novel sentences, expressing novel claims, intentions, aims, and thoughts? A lack of social sanctioning renders these sentences, claims, intentions, etc. uncommitted and presapient. However, presapient freedom is no kind of freedom at all.

Finally, I would like to connect the discussion of the sapient language-user to the discussion of transgressive language use that began in Ch. I. Willful violations of rules are especially poignant for Brandom’s inferentialism given that he takes his own starting point to be the explanation of novel language use and ends up with an overly conservative semantic theory as argued in this chapter.⁷ Brandom’s treatment of transgressive linguistic behavior is cursory. He considers why there is a possibility of transgression at all and says that behavioral irregularities are only possible within a context of regularities; there is nothing that marks an act as transgressive except for the background of practices that the community engages in. He says that government

⁷ Here is his full original provocative statement of this goal: “One has not learned the language, has not acquired the capacity to engage in the social practices which are the use of the language, until one can produce *novel* sentences which the community will deem appropriate, and understand the appropriate novel utterances of other members of the community (where the criterion for this capacity is the ability to make inferences deemed appropriate by the community). This emergent expressive capacity is the essence of natural languages. We ought to understand this creative aspect of language use as the paradigm of a new kind of freedom, *expressive* freedom” (Brandom 1979, pp. 193-194; emphasis original).

by norms *demand*s that transgression is possible, but, interestingly, his description of what constitutes transgressive behavior is fairly limited. He treats “violating a norm” as synonymous with “making a mistake,” “acting incorrectly according to that norm,” “those subject to the norm going wrong,” “being cognitively irresponsible,” “failing to do what they are obliged by those norms to do,” “or doing what they are *not* entitled to do.”⁸ Since norms are established dialogically, our obligations to go on in a certain way come from others and not from ourselves. Our entitlements cannot be created by self-citation but require interpersonal legitimization. If we do not get this legitimization, we are not entitled to the meanings of our words or to our inferences. We are not in the game.

Brandom’s key concern here is to ward off the skeptic who says that *actual* punishment of the transgressor is the same as *deserving* punishment, and that our correct attitudes are just an amalgamation of our actual attitudes. This works in the other direction too: even if we fail to punish a transgressor, the standard we are held to is whether the transgressor deserved punishment or not. Maintaining this standard requires transcendence that it is not clear Brandom can help himself to. As he points out, his account faces the structural dilemma of tying assertibility closely to actual attitudes (what we *take* to be assertible, or our intuitive notions of assertability) while maintaining objective standards for the proprieties of such assertions. These proprieties must both capture and transcend the attitudes of the practitioners.⁹

⁸ See Brandom (1994, pp. 28-36) for a brief treatment of these issues.

⁹ See Brandom (2000, pp. 197-198) for a discussion of this point.

Brandom's version of Inferentialism is a daring rejoinder to traditional semantic theories where meanings have been taken so far out of the head that we have forgotten that it is us, us speakers, who create and sustain languages. We are the ones that give words meaning and we do so with and through each other. Brandom has recognized the deep ways in which language is fundamentally a social activity. Unfortunately, he has not been able to resist the sirens of analytic philosophy in privileging the assertion—the exchange of a reason, as opposed to the exchange of a sentiment, an affection, or a human connection. In Brandom's social ecology, reasons are the units of social exchange even when the reasons of some speakers just don't matter. Perhaps Brandom is to be applauded that he has the hope that speakers have the humanity to gauge one another's speech merely along the lines of commitments and entitlements rather than on the pervasive and salient community demarcations that we all readily adopt. Unfortunately, Brandom's hopeful theory is too normative in just that sense and fails, in the end, to provide a true account of the linguistic meaning of expressions.

Chapter IV: Realism, idealism, and idiolectal languages

A. The real reality of language

An I-language, according to Noam Chomsky, is a real element of the mind/brain¹ that is individual and idiolectal. Given the staggering problems associated with studying more familiar conceptions of language—as public, interpersonal, and performative—Chomsky gave up on these “external” languages in favor of “internal” languages.² In 1986, he wrote that the only way to get at the *reality* of language is via a highly *idealized* concept of an I-language:

In contrast [to E-languages], the steady state of knowledge attained and the initial state S_0 are real elements of particular mind/brains, aspects of the physical world...Statements about I-languages...are true or false statements about something real and definite... (1986, p. 27)

He also claimed that a motivating reason for studying I-languages instead of E-languages is that they are closer to the *real*, scientifically approachable elements of the mind/brain:

Note that if E-languages do exist, they are at a considerably further remove from mechanisms and behavior than I-language. (1995, p. 17)

and

Why should we not study the acquisition of a cognitive structure...more or less as we study some complex bodily organ. (1976, p. 11)

Despite the *reality* of I-languages and their concrete embodiment, Chomsky confesses that there is no way to study an I-language in a general, scientific manner, given the inherent individuality and idiosyncrasy of an I-language, without succumbing to a

¹ Unfortunately, we're stuck with the clunky neologism 'mind/brain'. Please don't interpret my use of this expression as an endorsement of the sense of using this expression.

² See Ch. I under the section Internalism vs. Externalism for an account of these problems.

high degree of idealization of the object of study. This does not pose a problem for the antecedent claim that I-languages are *real* elements of individual mind/brains, for as Chomsky clarifies:

Idealization, it should be noted, is a misleading term for the only reasonable way to approach a grasp of reality. (1995, pp. 6-7; 19)

Fair enough. The scientist of the I-language is then in the position of purporting to study some real and embodied thing and describing it terms that are general enough to capture its structure in a way that allows for falsifiable predictions. In Chs. II and III, I presented two case studies that epitomize current thinking about what speakers can do with expressions. Literalists argue that every utterance expresses a semantically determined minimal, eternal proposition regardless of a speaker's intentions in using that expression, and they think that top-down, or speaker-centered control over the meaning of sentences is minimal. Robert Brandom's semantic externalism, on the other hand, constrains the semantic potential (via inferential status) of utterances by scorekeeping relationships between members of a linguistic community. In this chapter, I present my final case study on a third type of constraint—the subagentive system—which figures most predominantly in the tradition of Chomskian linguistics. This notion that a subagentive system—call it *linguistic competence* or the *core* of language—is the *real* seat of language, while the linguistic usage of speakers is relegated to a secondary status, is another variation on my meta-theme of constraint and linguistic agency. The problematic idea is that, by positing that there is a *core* and *periphery* to language or a *competence* and *performance*, linguists need to assume

(and at least part of this assumption needs to be *a priori*) that they know what aspects of language are core and what are peripheral noise. They also need to assume that the core (whatever this is) is what generates language whereas speakers' usage is a degraded product of linguistic output and other non-linguistic factors. However, there must be some principle for sorting a feature of the core competence system from a feature of the peripheral performance system. This principle is lacking and this fact, I argue, reveals that there is a commitment to privileging the subagentive system in linguistic theories at the significant cost of explaining real language use. In order to see how the subagentive system gets privileged in this model, imagine the alternative: languages are formed through use at the periphery. As this use becomes habitual, it moves toward the interior and at some point speakers cannot imagine speaking in any other way. If a speaker encounters a construction that conflicts with usage that has been internalized, it sounds unacceptable. But, this is only a commentary on the speaker's idiosyncratic patterns of use and not something about language as it exists either independently of the speaker or subagentively. But, this is not what Chomskian internalists think. They think that an innate language faculty determines eventual language production—including what counts as acceptable for any given language—save for parameter setting by minimal linguistic input. What follows is a study of the science of generative linguistics in the sense that I consider how, in the most general terms, the linguist can determine what counts as the correctness conditions for a language.

What the scientist of the I-language needs is a means of *describing* the I-language. Despite Chomsky's claim that we should study language in the way we would study any "bodily organ," the language organ escapes easy study. Rather than describing the language organ as it transparently appears to the linguist, the linguist must describe an I-language on the basis of posits about what counts as a part of that language and what does not. The linguist must make these posits, check these posits against the available evidence, all the while maintaining both the falsifiability of his predictions about the I-language and the *reality* of the thing being studied. One way to think about the posits that form a description of an I-language is that they are a set of correctness conditions for that language (Pullum 2004). That is, the posits are of conditions that state what expressions count as correct within any given language. In this chapter, I propose that in order to describe the grammar of any given I-language, a linguist must provide correctness conditions for that I-language. This, however, forces the linguist into the following dilemma in determining what these correctness conditions are: either a linguist can appeal to his own judgments which, I will argue, are problematically normative, or a linguist can provide correctness conditions on the basis of performative features of an I-language (e.g., actual utterances). The first horn of this dilemma should be unsatisfactory for the Chomskian linguist because it compromises the falsifiability, generality, descriptivity, and thereby scientific respectability of the enterprise. The second horn of the dilemma allows that I-languages are the kinds of things that can be affected by performative, agentive

systems contrary to the competence-based model preferred by Chomsky and generative grammarians.

B. Are really real languages idiolectal?

The purpose of this section is to recover Chomsky's historical and theoretical reasons for claiming that the reality of languages lies in an idiolectal mechanism of the mind/brain. There were four major concerns that led him to the commitment that the reality of language lies in a subagentive system: (1) a theoretical commitment to maintaining a sharp distinction between a speaker's competence and performance; (2) the rejection of public languages as something real and worthy of study; (3) the possibility of a viable alternative—namely, I-languages; (4) compatibility with the other principal assumptions of the generative grammar paradigm, including the presence of a poverty of stimulus in early childhood language learning, and compatibility with the possibility of a *universal* grammar. I will discuss these concerns in turn.

With regard to (1)—i.e., Chomsky's concern to maintain a sharp distinction between competence and performance—pre-Chomskian linguistics and philosophy studied linguistic performance in its various aspects, owing much to behaviorism. This included a focus on the structure of particular natural languages, the sentences produced by a particular linguistic community, and linguistic change and evolution as documented in socio- and historical linguistics. In tandem with his discreditation of

behaviorism,³ however, Chomsky's interest was not so much in linguistic performance as in what he has called linguistic competence.⁴ The presence of a latent linguistic competence becomes salient in cases such as catatonic periods marked by no linguistic performance followed by the recovery of language, indicating a dormant linguistic competence. The study of infant and child language learning also suggest a gulf between competence and performance, where the child is able to understand linguistic discriminations before he is able to use language to make such discriminations himself, as well as developing linguistically on a scale that outstrips explicit teaching or even exposure to language forms.⁵ The study of linguistic competence is not a matter of identifying the sentences a person has produced, but is a matter of identifying the generative structures in his mind/brain that make possible his language production, or give him linguistic competence. The move to the study of generative grammar marked a move away from the importance of the utterance in the study of language.

With this distinction in hand, Chomsky excused himself from the obligation to gather evidence from actual language use since it purportedly does not bear directly on

³ Most think that this occurred in Chomsky's review of B.F. Skinner's *Verbal Behavior*. This review marks the demise of behaviorism and the rise of post-structural linguistics. See, Chomsky (1959).

⁴ Chomsky's interest in performance does not extend beyond the bare and spare sense of using language. This sparse sense should be distinguished from at least two other conceptions of performance: first, the Austinian sense in which expressions are used to *do* things, where sentences are species of actions; and second, the sense in which expressions have an aesthetic quality, and so expressions that are seemingly identical *do* different things in the world, have different effects, differ in their ability to persuade, to scorn, etc. Chomsky's spare sense of 'performance' is emblematic of his rejection of the range of concerns one could have about language including what it does, what one does because of it, or its role in communication. Chomsky argues that if it makes any sense to describe language as having a "function," it seems that its function is largely self-talk, or internal monologue, rather than communication with others.

⁵ Although, there has been considerable debate regarding the lacuna of evidence available to children. On this point, see Cowie (1998).

questions about the underlying mechanisms that constitute language. Although these underlying mechanisms are responsible for generating the performative output, the output itself is not good evidence of the nature of the mechanisms because of a host of intervening factors that may alter or distort the initially generated language. These factors include memory limitations, fatigue, and motor skill failure. More interesting than the mere failure to gather evidence of actual utterances is the consequent claim that such utterances are not a feature of languages *per se* insofar as they are the outcome of this variety of competing factors, only one of which is the language generated by the language faculty.

A natural consequence of the devaluation of the performed utterance is (2) the rejection of public languages as something both *real* and worthy of study and (3) the introduction of a viable alternative, an I-language. In a characteristic passage, Chomsky denies that ordinary, public languages exist: “[L]anguages in this sense are not real-world objects but are artificial, somewhat arbitrary, and perhaps not very interesting constructs” (1986, p. 27). A decade later he repeats this position, reiterating that external languages lack a significant relationship to the cognitive mechanisms that generate language: “Note that if E-languages do exist, they are at a considerably further remove from mechanisms and behavior than I-language” (1995, p. 17). It’s clear that this position follows from the distinction between competence and performance: if it’s true that language is generated by a faculty of the mind/brain, and that the output we experience in, for instance, speech, is not itself the direct product of this subpersonal production but is instead the confluence of a variety of competing

factors, then this holds true to a much more significant degree in the case of public languages. Public languages are, after all, the reification of these utterances which are then distorted by linguistically uninteresting factors such as style manuals and the social authority of grammar teaching, Oxford dons, media personalities, and the non-linguistic elite. This distortion of linguistic output has led Chomskians to conclude that public languages are abstract, idealized, and platonic objects, thoroughly divorced from the psychological mechanisms that produce *true* language. For these reasons, public languages, insofar as they exist at all, are not (linguistically) interesting to study.⁶

Prior to conceiving of linguistics as a branch of cognitive psychology there were concerns by even the students of Bloomfield about delineating the parameters of public languages. This led these pre-Chomskians to propose the notion of an idiolect, which permitted them to analyze one person speaking for one discrete period of time. While this may have been a methodological proposal that allowed for a single, unified data set to be compared with other single, unified data sets, Chomsky elevated it to a metaphysical thesis about the nature of language as an individual, idiolectal, and private phenomenon:

I should mention that I am using the term ‘language’ to refer to an *individual* phenomenon, a system represented in the mind/brain of a

⁶ This is a point on which I agree with Chomsky. To clarify, while I don’t agree that linguistic performance is just “noise,” and that competence is where the *reality* of language lies, I do agree that what passes for a public language is the product of linguistically irrelevant social norms that have nothing to do with what constitutes a language and what does not. Many of these social norms are interesting in their own right but not because they tell us about linguistic possibility, meaningfulness, or correctness conditions. For an ultimately flawed, but nonetheless interesting, analysis of this, see Pullum (2004). See Ch. V of this dissertation for a further elaboration of my views on public languages.

particular individual. If we could investigate in sufficient detail, we would find that no two individuals share exactly the same language in this sense, even identical twins who grow up in the same social environment. Two individuals can communicate to the extent that their languages are sufficiently similar. (Chomsky 1988, p. 36)

This is in contrast to the view that language is the total and potential output of a community who share, for instance, knowledge and use of English:

In the literature of generative grammar, the term ‘language’ has regularly been used for E-language in the sense of a set of well-formed sentences, more or less along the lines of Bloomfield’s definition of ‘language’ as a ‘totality of utterances’. The term ‘grammar’ was then used with systematic ambiguity, to refer to what we have here called ‘I-language’ and also to the linguist’s theory of the I-language... (1986, p. 29; 2003, p. 270)

I-languages were secured a place in generative theories despite concerns about their respectability and appropriateness for general scientific study.⁷ These concerns were amplified by the tendency among linguists to rely on data that come from their own introspective judgments as native speakers. This makes it seem as if any given linguistic theory is somehow autobiographical. This will be discussed critically in Section C.

Finally, Chomsky was motivated to argue that the reality of languages lies in an idiolectal mechanism of the mind/brain due to (4) the compatibility of this position with other principal assumptions of the generative grammar paradigm. Chomskians have long claimed that it is a primitive fact that deserves explanation by any successful linguistic theory that there is a poverty of input in early childhood language

⁷ William Labov has been one of the few linguists to question the use of idiolectal data and introspective judgments: “The study of introspective judgments is thus effectively isolated from any contradiction from competing data. But frequent retreats to the idiolect have the bad consequence that each student of the general structure of language will then be confined to a different body of facts” (Labov 1975, pp. 13-14).

learning compared to the output achieved by children.⁸ If languages were public entities that were taught to speakers by other members of the linguistic community, then one would expect that the linguistic abilities of children would be, at most, commensurate to their exposure to language. As it turns out, according to Chomsky, the linguistic abilities (in output and, more importantly, in inferential knowledge) of children surpass their exposure. Explaining this fact requires, he thinks, *a priori* linguistic knowledge in the form of a generative mechanism in the mind/brain. Given that this mechanism seems to be able to generate linguistic abilities and linguistic knowledge independently of the linguistic environment, and the first-personal interactions between speakers, it looks like it must be a *subpersonal* mechanism, an *innate* mechanism, and an *individual*, highly adaptable mechanism. Chomsky proposed what is still a radical proposal, namely that language is a biological phenomenon and not a social one. And, as a biological phenomenon, it is not something that is shared between organisms, although there can be a great deal of similarity between languages as manifested in various humans. This biological mechanism, an I-language, is claimed to be the real seat of language.

Describing I-languages as completely individuated with each speaker holding his own set of private rules might be slightly misleading under at least one dominant research program. The theory of Universal Grammar (UG) has undergone several major re-formulations in the last several decades (and is likely to continue to do so).

⁸ Chomsky often writes of two measures by which to gauge a linguistic theory: descriptive and explanatory adequacy. By his count, a theory is only explanatorily adequate if it is able to explain the fact of the poverty of stimulus. Variations on this view are widely defended. See, for example, Crain et al. (2005). Recently, detractors have argued that the stimulus isn't as impoverished as Chomsky as long claimed; see, e.g., Cowie (1998).

The predominant view formulated in the late 1970s and early 1980s by Chomsky construed UG as a system of principles and parameters that govern the possible instantiations of rules within an idiolect as well as provide a set of meta-rules governing the ways in which rules can be combined in an idiolect. The principles and parameters approach allowed for a complete rejection of (E-)language-specific rules as well as a rejection of a complete idiosyncrasy of rules within an individual. It was thought to be possible that all cross-linguistic variation could be explained in terms of UG and its meta-rules. This approach allowed for an explanation of individual variation as well as the overall similarity between languages. According to this approach, apparent differences between speakers are only skin deep; their similarities are far more striking. All rules accord with UG and all combinations of rules within UG accord with the meta-rules of possible parameterization. In this tradition, the most recent Minimalist program furthers this line of inquiry, advancing the thesis that languages are configured to be maximally efficient (or minimally redundant). That is, the meta-rules governing the possible configurations of UG permit and constrain in the most efficient ways (Belletti and Rizzi 2002; Chomsky 1995).

We can see that the introduction of I-languages was well-motivated within the existing generative paradigm. Given the apparent problems with studying E-languages, we should expect the introduction of ‘I-languages’ into our theoretical lexicon to be an improvement: the study of idiolects should be the study of a feature of the world that is not arbitrary, is not artificial, is interesting, real, and definite, and about which true and false statements can be made.

C. Correctness conditions for I-languages

Given the proposed idiolectal and individual nature of I-languages, there's a real question of how to determine what the structure of any given I-language actually is—their idiolectal and individual nature defies easy access. One way to articulate the constitution, i.e., reality, of a language is to identify the correctness conditions for that language. By 'correctness conditions', I mean the conditions under which something counts as an utterance of that language. This suggestion is not new. Identifying the correctness conditions for a language has been part of the generative grammar methodology since the beginning. Chomsky and most other linguists have relied on statements of what would be incorrect for a given language, and used those statements as evidence for linguistic hypotheses.

What would be the most reliable way to access the correctness conditions for a language given the inherent inaccessibility of I-languages in the mind/brains of language-users? There are only two options that are compatible with the I-language construct. The first is to rely on speech data from actual speakers. Such speech data would provide the "voice of competence" (see Devitt 2006). The source of this data could be recordings of speakers in natural speech settings, data from corpi such as the British Corpus or the *Wall Street Journal* Corpus, or it could be elicited data in controlled experiments. All of these sources suffer from the same shortcoming, namely that the language to be found in each context is compromised by performative factors. Using data from some corpi is especially problematic: the language used in the *Wall Street Journal*, for instance, while perhaps interestingly indicative of the norms

of a particular social class in a particular generation, should say little about the correctness conditions of any I-language. The *Journal* strives to accord with its conception of a public language as well as the systematic distortions of style manuals and editors. This shouldn't tell us much about what is a possible product of an individual's biological faculty insulated from the noise of non-linguistic factors. Speakers in natural speech settings look like a more promising alternative. However, they suffer from the range of competing performative factors such as fatigue, memory limitations, motor defects, and laziness that make them defective sources of the correctness conditions of a language. Finally, elicited judgments in controlled experiments look like the most promising alternative.⁹ If the experiment is controlled appropriately, performance factors could be minimized the most, and speakers might speak without regard for according with non-linguistic ideals of public language. However, I don't think this option will work as well as we might hope. Up until now, I have listed performative factors as if they are *a priori* obviously distinct from the output of the language faculty, and as if it is *a priori* obvious what these performative factors are. However, what could be done to distinguish an element of performance from an element of competence? In order to answer this question, one must have an expectation of what the product of a speaker's competence will be. But, this is just what we are trying to determine. We are trying to identify the structure of a given I-language by means of articulating its correctness conditions. So, if we are required to know the correctness conditions of the language prior to being able to distinguish the

⁹ This option is used with a surprisingly low frequency. Recently, Devitt (2006) has claimed that such evidence is both a good source of data for linguistic theory and is a predominant source of evidence for linguistic theory. A tour through recent publications in Linguistics will show that this is not the case.

real linguistic competence from the *mere* linguistic performance, we will be obligated to antecedently and unjustifiably assume our conclusion.

A more immediate and readily available source of evidence for the correctness conditions of a language is the native speaker intuitions of the linguist himself. This is just what linguists have turned to for the history of generative grammar. Expressions that sound like “gibberish” or are “unacceptable” according to a native speaker have long been fodder for the development of linguistic theory. The linguist must be able to do several things in the development of linguistic theory: rely on the intuitions of native speakers, idealize those intuitions, and distinguish correct expressions from incorrect expressions. Presumably, each linguist himself is a reasonably good source of such intuitions.

The theoretical use of judgments of unacceptability has been essential to all aspects of the advance of linguistic theories. For example, in order to defend the innateness hypothesis, Chomsky begins with the observation that children are exposed to a limited number of sentence constructions. Despite this fact, children are able to distinguish correct from incorrect constructions with facility and to make few mistakes given the seemingly infinite possibilities for error. He thinks there are two likely explanations for this ability: (1) children construct correct sentences on the basis of *analogy* with sentences they have been exposed to; or (2) children draw from an *innate* stock of sentence-formation concepts in order to form correct sentences. Explanation (2) largely disregards the role of experience with other language-users, teaching by parents, or the passing of conventions, whereas explanation (1) trades on

these factors. Chomsky then uses examples of correct and incorrect sentences in order to demonstrate that if children worked on the basis of analogy they would produce the deviant sentences; yet, they do not do this in ways that a theory of language acquisition by analogy would predict. Therefore, there must be an alternative source of their knowledge, and he sees (2) as the most plausible explanation. Below are some of the examples he uses in order to present this argument. The correctness and incorrectness of each of these sentences has been determined by Chomsky's appeal to his own intuitions as a native speaker:

- (1) Mary was persuaded to take her medicine.
- (2) Mary was promised to join her at the beach.¹⁰
- (3) There is a fly believed to be in the bottle.
- (4) There is a flaw believed to be in the argument.¹¹
- (5) (a) John is too stubborn to expect anyone to talk to Bill.
(b) John is too stubborn to expect anyone to talk to.
- (6) (a) John is too stubborn to visit anyone who talked to Bill.
(b) John is too stubborn to visit anyone who talked to.¹²

(1), (3) and (5) are all presented as examples of correct English sentences. (2) is cited by Chomsky as an example of a “deviant” English sentence, but one that could plausibly be constructed by analogy with (1). (4) is also a “deviant” English sentence constructed on analogy with (3). Sentences (5a) and (5b) are both supposed to be English sentences; the theorist would expect that the language-learner would move from (6a) to sentence (6b), on analogy with the correct movement from (5a) to (5b).

¹⁰ These examples from (2003, p. 23).

¹¹ These examples from (2003, p. 23).

¹² These examples from (1986, p. 11).

But Chomsky points out that this analogy will not work. He describes sentence (6b) as “gibberish.”

This method of analyzing correct and incorrect sentences comparatively is not reserved for bolstering an innateness hypothesis. This method has been used at every stage in the study of generative grammar. Determining what distinguishes (1) from (2) tells us not only that children are capable of sophisticated discriminations that go unarticulated by adult language-users, and that this leads to the conclusion that these sophisticated discriminations must come from within, but it also tells us to what rules children implicitly subscribe. That is, linguistic theory tells us just what rule permits (1), (3), (5), and (6a) and prohibits (2), (4) and (6b).¹³ This is the starting point for the study of grammar in all languages: the theorist begins with gibberish and then determines what makes it gibberish. He *uncovers* the principles that are parameterized in each case. Yet even calling this *uncovering* is misleading, for while it may be the case that Chomsky is correct and that *real* rules in a *real* language faculty are being uncovered, the process is still a matter of assuming a crucial element of the conclusion. Think of it this way: the linguist begins by positing a language faculty that is genetically endowed to all humans and contains a universal grammar. This grammar consists of a finite number of rules that constrain one another in specified ways, and some subset of which applies to each natural language (internal or external). The linguist does not yet know what the correctness conditions of any given I-language

¹³ If this talk of “rules” sounds anachronistic, substitute “principles” or even “representations.” If each of these still sounds hyper-epistemic (cf. Devitt 2006), think of this as a non-propositional competence. Whether or not one endorses a representational thesis (of any kind) does not undermine my argument here.

within UG are and can only come to know what they are by empirical investigation. The empirical investigation consists of considering correct and incorrect sentences for each I-language and determining what gives the correct sentences their status. Whatever gives the correct sentences their status is posited as the rule or correctness condition that governs them. A correctness condition of an I-language, it seems, has been discovered.

These observations on linguists' proclivity to appeal to their own intuitions regarding the status of possible correctness conditions for their I-languages show how explanatorily basic their own intuitions must be. If an intuition leads the linguist in a different direction, then the posited correctness conditions would be different.¹⁴ This isn't to say that the correctness conditions themselves would be different—Chomsky is a realist about language and does not think that the correctness conditions of a language rely on a speaker's intuitions about language.¹⁵ His position should allow that his intuitions could get the facts of the matter wrong.¹⁶

Thus far I have been oversimplifying the relation between the use of intuitions and establishing correctness conditions. Making this work requires at least three levels of idealization. These three levels of idealization do not, Chomsky thinks, make

¹⁴ See Carrol *et al.* (1981), Cowart *et al.* (1998), Nagata (1988, 1990, 1997, 2001, 2003), Spencer (1973), and Gordon and Hendrick (1997).

¹⁵ Although, this is not a crazy position. In fact, I think it may be the correct position. My own positive view is that the real reality of languages lies in their dynamic use. This use, and reflective judgments about this use, could change the correctness conditions of a language over time.

¹⁶ However, I cannot recall a place when he has suggested that his intuitions regarding the correctness of some expression has in fact been wrong. Devitt (2006) takes the fallibility of linguistic intuitions as reason to privilege the intuitions of linguists over the intuitions of native speakers. Given linguists incessant reflection on language, they are more likely to have, "Cartesian access to the truth about the data" (2006, p. 498). I disagree with Devitt on this and other points. My position is elaborated in the main text below.

linguistic theory stand out from any other scientific theory, as noted at the beginning of this chapter. The first level is the idealization of the speech community—this is important even if the individual is the unit of study. As Chomsky writes:

The language of the hypothesized speech community, apart from being uniform, is taken to be a ‘pure’ instance of UG in a sense that must be made precise, and to which we will return. We exclude, for example, a speech community of uniform speakers, each of whom speaks a mixture of Russian and French (say, an idealized version of the nineteenth-century Russian aristocracy). The language of such a speech community would not be ‘pure’ in the relevant sense, because it would not represent a single set of choices among the options permitted by UG but rather would include ‘contradictory’ choices for certain of these options. (1986, p. 17)

Even the study of the individual bilingual language-user must be idealized so that only one set of options “permitted by UG” is under consideration.¹⁷ The second level is the idealization at the level of the I-language. This is necessary so that stages in language acquisition can be delimited. Since each stage of language acquisition is considered a distinct I-language, each stage itself must be idealized in order to be recognizably discrete and unique. The third level of idealization is at the level of the intuitions of the theorist. It must be taken as basic in a theory of generative grammar that the theorist’s intuitions discriminating correct from incorrect sentences are trustworthy. Chomsky has said in various places that this authority is granted to the theorist by virtue of being a native speaker of the language, and this seems initially plausible. If a non-native speaker of English were to challenge my intuitions by asserting that some

¹⁷ It is not immediately obvious here why Chomsky cares much about the composition of the speech community given his commitment to idiolectalism. However, he has long thought that I-languages were in part structured by the “relevant evidence available to the language user.” The incoming signal is relevant, and it is no mere coincidence that people who live near one another by and large have no difficulty interpreting one another.

expression is just as grammatically correct as some other, I would see no reason to listen to him. The fact that I am a native speaker of English seems to give me special authority on the status of most of the sentences of English. But can Chomsky make the same claim? If he is a native speaker, it must not be of English, but rather of his own I-language. Consider this provocative passage:

In my I-language, airplanes fly, submarines don't swim, robots can't murder, and my brain and computer don't think. I might some day replace my word 'think' by another one that applies to my brain and my computer... (2003, p. 280)

There are several interesting things going on in this passage. The first is that Chomsky is clearly conceding that his knowledge and authority is over his own I-language only. This has a peculiar consequence for linguistic theory. While the study of language is seemingly general, and even purports to discover universal linguistic principles, the concentration on I-languages is, at best, strictly autobiographical. The theorist appears to be in the position of describing the correctness conditions of a single person's grammar, perhaps only his own.¹⁸

The second is that the passage contains a certain well-crafted ambiguity. It is unclear whether Chomsky is proposing that he has control over the contents of his I-language or not. The first sentence merely describes what certain terms in his I-language mean. The second sentence says that the meanings of these terms may change, but it is not clear whether this will be something that will happen *to* Chomsky

¹⁸ Presumably, the assumption for the idiolectalist is that, although language is an idiolectal phenomenon, idiolects can be grouped by relevant similarities such that generalizations can be generated, and data gathered from multiple speakers. At the risk of sounding coy, we might wonder how it is that linguists determine that speakers of two different I-languages speak languages that are relevantly similar such that appropriate generalizations can be made.

or something that Chomsky will change about his language. The latter interpretation seems perfectly plausible given that speakers change their minds about a concept and thereafter change what they mean by the term that expresses that concept.

Here he writes with authority about what is permissible in his I-language. The idealization of the theorist consists of extending this authority over his own I-language to an authority over other I-languages. If this is the correct way to interpret the method and authority of the theorist, this would change the development of generative grammar. For instance, in the reconstruction of the method of generative grammar that I have provided, I suggested that formulating the rules of UG proceeds by empirical investigation. For instance, we might begin by looking at the rules that constrain I-languages within English and posit preliminary rules of UG. Then, after an examination of Farsi (or some I-language within an Iranian community), we may notice exceptions or variations and modify our original hypothesis. This process of refining the proposed rules has in fact been what has happened over the last half century as generative grammar has proceeded empirically. But, imagine if the study went from I-language to I-language, modifying the hypothesis as exceptions or variations were found, then the hypothesis would have to take into account the use of sentences (2), (4) and (6b) if such sentences were used and the speaker—all speakers are native speakers and thus authorities over their own I-languages—were to confirm his intuitions that these are in fact correct sentences. The second-language speaker of English may challenge Chomsky's intuition that (4) is a deviant sentence and that (3) is a correct sentence. If his level of analysis is confined to I-languages, then it does not

matter that this speaker is a second-language speaker of English—in fact, it makes little sense to call him that. The language he uses might be some mixture of what we might otherwise call English and Russian, but at the level of I-languages, he constructs language in some way permitted by his language faculty.¹⁹

This is a practical problem within the science of using native speaker judgments as evidence for the correctness conditions for any given I-language. There is a second, but more important, problem with using such judgments. The problem is that judgments of acceptability²⁰ are normative rather than an unadulterated transparent look at the “language organ.” Why should we think that judgments of acceptability are problematically normative? It is because *judgments of acceptability are themselves performances*. Making a judgment about the acceptability of some locution is not the same act as uttering the locution, but neither does it provide an unsullied window on competence. Being called upon to judge the acceptability of a construction in a language in which you are supposed to be an authority calls on you to *act*, to *give the right answer* in an artificial context. This isn’t the natural interpretive context where we are merely trying to understand what our interlocutor is trying to tell us. Rather, this is the artificial context where we drop our charitable interpretive practices and, rather than reflecting on what such a usage might mean or

¹⁹ This question of the cogency of the concept of *native speaker* within an idiolectal account of language also deserves more attention than I can give it here. For example, in folk terms we may describe a speaker as a non-native speaker of a language *L* if that speaker learned *L* after some critical age. However, that speaker has some competence with speaking *L* and it’s not altogether obvious why the idiolectalist should reject this speaker’s intuitions about the structure of *L*. If anything, the non-native speaker is often *more* reflective about the structure of *L* than the native speaker is.

²⁰ Again, the substitution of “grammaticality” or “correctness” for “acceptability” does not change my argument here.

whether we have ever used such an expression, we reflect on whether we *ought* to use such an expression. Where does this *oughtness* come from? Above, I identified memory limitations, fatigue, and motor failures as performative factors, but we have every reason to think that there are additional performative factors introduced in this kind of act of judging. If, for example, the speaker is the linguist himself, a relevant performative factor is the non-negligible desire to support the linguistic hypothesis at stake. If, on the other hand, the speaker is unaware of the linguistic hypothesis under scrutiny, he still may judge according to his conception of *correct* language use. There is no reason to think that this conception has not been formed by linguistically irrelevant factors such as the peculiarities of one's grammar school education (cf. Labov 1975).²¹

Does this mean that speaker intuitions—particularly when those speakers are linguists—should not provide an evidential base for a theory of a speaker's linguistic competence? I think the answer to this is *no*—that is, speaker intuitions *are* relevant pieces of evidence for a linguistic theory; this comports well with my view that language is importantly agentive and deliberative. The view that each speaker takes of her own language is a crucial element of what that language *is*. What I think happens in the act of making a linguistic judgment is that the performance itself functions in a

²¹ In my experience, I have not found it possible to test the intuitions of speakers on *wanna* contractions over a trace when those speakers are high school English teachers because they cannot get past the fact that *wanna* “isn't a word” or isn't itself grammatical regardless of where it appears in the sentence. I also find that intuitions shift dramatically for most linguistic examples when the question “Is this sentence grammatical/acceptable/correct?” is replaced with “Do you know what a speaker might mean by uttering this sentence?” or “Is this sentence interpretable?” It's not clear whether the responses to the first line of questioning provide a more accurate reflection of competence than the second line of questioning. In fact, I think they do not. Similarly, I find that the effect of the acceptability/unacceptability of many linguistic examples (in particular, contractions over a trace) weakens with repetition.

language-making capacity. That is, the correctness conditions for a language are in part established by self-reflective judgments about that language, including the prompted judgments of a linguist. My view on this is not shared by most; recently, Devitt (2006) has argued that linguistic intuitions are, in fact, superior pieces of evidence for linguistic theory because linguists, in light of their incessant reflection on the nature of language, are *better* at distilling competence from these performative judgments. This strikes me as highly unlikely, or at least in need of a good deal of justification. Devitt's view is that ordinary speakers are prone to making errors in judgment even when the linguistic judgment is prompted and self-reflective due to performative factors. The linguist, on the other hand, is able to resist such factors. But, as I argued above, Devitt needs an *additional* piece of evidence to make this case—that is, if the judgment itself is evidence that linguistic competence in *L* is like such-and-such, then there needs to be some further evidence that the speaker who says otherwise (i.e., makes an error in judgment) has made a mistake. There must be evidence that linguistic competence in *L* is like such-and-such *above and beyond* the intuitive judgment otherwise there would be no means of sorting the good judgments from the bad judgments, and no way of discerning that the linguist is actually a *better* judge of competence than a naïve speaker is.

To restate, I do think that linguists' judgments can play a role in linguistic theory-building, but perhaps not the role assumed by many in the field. However, such judgments should be demoted in the evidential hierarchy. Below I argue for a promotion of use by ordinary speakers in the evidential hierarchy for the nature of

linguistic competence. Somewhere between unreflective conversational speech and the prompted judgments of linguists, I would put the prompted speech of naïve speakers in an experimental setting, unreflective and unedited writing, and the prompted judgments of naïve speakers outside of an experimental setting.²²

Above, I said there are two possibilities for determining the correctness conditions of any given language: relying on speech data from actual speakers or relying on acceptability judgments of linguists. I initially dismissed the first option as unreliable due to the performative factors involved in natural speech. The second option should be dismissed because it involves the judgments of linguists that we have reason to believe fail the tests of descriptivity and generality. This is a thorny dilemma for the linguist: he either has to reconsider how he thinks of performance or he has to give up on descriptivity and generality. Given the ambitions and commitments of the generative grammar research program, they shouldn't be happy with either of these options. By way of conclusion, let's consider what it might mean to reconsider how we should think of performance factors.

D. Conclusion: the real reality of language is (also) personal and performative

The overwhelming reliance on linguist's intuitions threatens the scientific viability of generative linguistics. The root reason is the particular conception of I-languages and the deployment of this conception in Chomsky's larger theoretical

²² This is, of course, a major demotion for linguists' judgments. Chomsky has described the evidential free-for-all of generative grammar by saying that linguists "can easily construct masses of relevant data and in fact are immersed in such data" (1988, p. 46). And Devitt admits that, "Intuitions are often a very convenient shortcut in theorizing" (2006, p. 500). Gathering data from well-controlled experiments, or from corpi of spontaneous speech makes the linguist's task much more difficult, but since the 1950s, Linguistics has been the only science with such easy access to data.

model over the last several decades. I-languages were introduced into the linguist's lexicon in order to fit with the larger universal and generative program. But they are inaccessible things, made real by the deeply normative judgments of linguists. On the other hand, speakers' performative uses are real in that they are accessible, perceptible features of our world. By accepting the normative and structuring properties of language *use*, we can acknowledge the reality of this feature of language rather than dismissing it as merely peripheral noise. This will require alternatives to many of the principles of traditional generative linguistics. Since the weak link in the generative program is the pride of place given to the subpersonal system, this should be reconsidered in light of alternative explanations that explain language acquisition primarily in terms of use.²³ Adopting a usage-based account would require a reconceptualization of the model of language itself. While we still might understand language on a core/periphery model, we could regard the periphery (which is constituted by the actual language use of speakers) as the real reality of language use, and the core as merely an ossification of that use. This reconceptualization, in turn, would entail a different way of thinking about agentive speech. The generative paradigm regarded actual speech as a derivative product of a variety of factors, only one of which is linguistic production. The generative linguist then idealized away from the "noisy" factors to get at the resulting *core* linguistic phenomenon. A usage-based model of language acquisition and steady-state linguistic abilities could integrate *personal* (as opposed to merely *subpersonal*) language use. This would accommodate

²³ See Ch. V of this dissertation for a further elaboration on this.

the difference between, for instance, a speaker who has a first-personal belief about how to use an expression but purposely deviates from his standard use, and a speaker who does not have such a first-personal belief (and so does not have a belief from which he can deviate).²⁴ The generative view of language simply cannot make any sense of having first-personal beliefs about language and having those beliefs be a part of the language itself. Chomsky considers, and dismisses, this alternative as if the hard problems it raises really have nothing to do with the study of language:

The actual use of language involves elements of the mind/brain that go beyond the language faculty, so what the speaker perceives or produces may not precisely reflect the properties of the language faculty taken in isolation. In cases such as these, where speakers of a language have no clear idea of what an expression means or are informed that their interpretation is not the correct one, the speakers ‘think about the expression’ (whatever this means), and after a period of reflection a conclusion springs to mind about the meaning of the expression. All of this, again, lies far beyond consciousness, though we can observe its results. (1988, p. 94)

It is not clear why Chomsky writes that this “lies far beyond consciousness.” Surely we come to associate meanings with expressions in ways that are not at the forefront of consciousness, but could it be the case that the entire process of thinking about the meaning of an expression lies far beyond consciousness? Chomsky is appealing to

²⁴ Let me try to motivate this point a little further with an example. Consider classic examples of *wh*-movement in linguistics that are meant to justify the ability of innate knowledge of a principle regarding correct *wh*-placement in a sentence such that when a *wh*-word is moved, a trace is left behind making contractions over that trace impossible. The result is supposed to be that sentences such as, *Who do you wanna kiss Bill?* are unacceptable, or at least are never uttered by native speakers. Now, it just isn’t true that these sentences are never uttered by native speakers. *Wh*- experiments show that *most* native speakers will not form the contraction *wanna* when prompted to utter this sentence, but not *all* native speakers refrain. In addition, once you have spent much time talking about *wh*-movement studies, the effect tends to go away and contracting over the trace that is supposedly left by the *wh*-movement no longer sounds bad. This is also language use even if it is language use that *might* be an artifact of reading *wh*-movement studies, but it is no different than other kinds of artifacts such as grammar school educations, Sesame Street programming, parental language use, etc.

extra-linguistic ability to explain the apparent linguistic agility of integrating our first-personal beliefs about our language with our underlying linguistic competence. It is not, however, obvious that these *are* extra-linguistic. More importantly, if they are, then so are the judgments of acceptability that are used as evidence for the nature of linguistic competence itself, as argued in the previous section. Again, although judgments of acceptability may not provide immediate access to an otherwise unobservable language faculty, they may still have language-making power; we may change the languages we speak in virtue of engaging in reflective judgments about language. Trying to keep these neatly partitioned starts to look like an *ad hoc* move to avoid larger epistemic questions.

The final structuring principle that follows from the dissolution of a viable concept of I-language is that we should consider returning to thinking of language as a social phenomenon and only secondarily as a biological phenomenon. This does not mean that Chomsky was wrong to reject E-languages as appropriate objects of study. I agree with him that the ideas of public languages, shared languages, or languages that are somehow external to and independent of speakers are not theoretically sound. Languages are largely individualistic in that speakers do not share languages, if that's understood in the way we might understand subscribing to the same telephone service. Instead, languages are constructed in contexts between speakers and interpreters. This view is not committed to denying that there is a significant biological, perhaps even innate, component to language acquisition and abilities, it's only committed to

relegating these mechanisms to a secondary status and elevating language use by speakers in contexts.

In this chapter I have argued that if one wants to claim that the real seat of language is in a subpersonal, idiolectal language, then one is committed to identifying the correctness conditions for that I-language in one of two ways. Either one can appeal to the performative uses of a language to provide evidence for what counts as correct in that language or one can appeal to one's judgments as a native speaker. Since neither of these options are in the interest of the generative grammarian, we should reconsider the viability of the concept of I-language and whether it commits us to an impossible task, namely, gathering evidence for a phenomenon that is by definition adulterated by the mere access of it from the first-personal perspective. The concept of the I-language fits well within the generative research paradigm, but if it is abandoned, this allows for the possibility of re-thinking many of the structural and methodological principles of how to study speakers and the nature of language itself.

Chapter V: Sketch of a positive proposal

In this final chapter, I provide a sketch of what I think is the correct way to think about languages and the speakers who create those languages. I will introduce ten theses on which I hold views that are in response to the views raised in the first four chapters of this dissertation. These remarks will only be introductory, however, as the primary purpose of this dissertation has been to describe what I think many current theories of language get wrong. This final chapter is devoted to what I think theories of language and language-users ought to get right.

1. Language is usage-based and not rule-based

There is a growing body of literature that suggests that we have been wrong to think that language acquisition is rule-based rather than usage-based. I think this growing body of literature is on the right track. As early as 1959, in his review of B.F. Skinner's *Verbal Behavior*, Chomsky introduced the idea that there is a poverty of stimulus in early childhood language learning compared to the output and inferential linguistic knowledge of children. This was Chomsky's confident intuition at the time and there have been attempts to confirm it by controlled studies of the prompted output of young children (e.g., Crain & Thornton 1998). The idea was that children could not get from the input available to them to the output they handily achieve in the first few years of life. This has been called the You Can't Get There From Here thesis (Tomasello 2003). Since it was thought that children couldn't get there from here, they must have help along the way in the form of innate universal rules adaptable to any linguistic input that they might receive. Given that each child suffers from the same

poverty of stimulus and yet each child ends up mastering a language that is similar to the language spoken by those around her, it was thought that that these innate, universal rules are a Universal Grammar—abstract, formal, and propositional (Chomsky throughout; Pinker 1999).

It has been assumed throughout that it is the burden of any linguistic theory that it must explain language acquisition given *the fact* of the poverty of stimulus. The series of programmatic defenses of Universal Grammar have offered a rule-based answer to this challenge of “explanatory adequacy.” Until recently, few thought to challenge whether or not it is *a fact* that there is a poverty of stimulus at all in early childhood. In the past few years, there have been two related challenges to this structuring assumption of the last half-century of linguistics. The first is that there may not be the poverty of stimulus that has long been supposed.¹ The second is to challenge the rule-based and innate explanation of the possibility of language acquisition. Proponents of this second challenge often accept the first challenge as well (although this has not been true in reverse). Both of these challenges, however, offer possibilities for how language acquisition could be usage-based—that is, language acquisition could be driven on the basis of the linguistic input of the speakers surrounding a language learner and, more interestingly, on the needs and desires of the language learner, cognitively salient environmental elements, and the integrated nature of symbolic, gestural, and kinesthetic representation with linguistic representation.

¹ See Cowie (1998, 2001) for a defense of an anti-nativist position within the Philosophy of Mind. Her main target in these texts is captured by Fodor (1981). There have been *many* hostile responses to Cowie’s position, captured by Crain & Pietroski (2001). Within Linguistics and Cognitive Science, there have also been a number of responses to innate assumptions. Good examples of these are documented in recent work by Tomasello and Pullum.

There is another reason for thinking that language is usage-based and not rule-based and this has less to do with the acquisition of language and more to do with the evolution of language. At the risk of peddling the obvious, languages are things that change over time and by means of the use of those who speak them. My view is that they change on the basis of speakers' uses—including intentions, desires, and even accidents—because languages are our *own* instruments of communication and not abstract entities that exist independently of our use. Once we reach a certain level of communicative competence (I am not sure when this happens), we modify our own language to meet our communicative needs. The fact that we don't willfully abandon predicates, for instance, has nothing to do with a purported rule that they belong in our complete sentences but instead has to do with our *custom or habit* in their use, to borrow a phrase. Perhaps it is in our nature to see rules where we have no reason to think they exist, and perhaps it is a helpful myth to think that what we have always done what we have done because we are nomically obligated, but there is little reason to think there is anything to language outside of our variable use of it.² Although this is my own thesis, it is line with theories of language oriented toward speech *acts* and empiricist based approaches to Linguistics.

2. *The development of language relies on the symbolic and iconic substrate of cognitive representations rather than on abstract, formal principles*

² “Most fortunately it happens that, since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium” (Hume, *Treatise*, Book I, Part IV, Section VII).

This thesis owes everything to the development of linguistic systems³ that are alternatives to the dominant, formal systems of Chomsky et al. as well as to the semantic theories that have dominated the philosophy of language. Many formal theories of syntax and semantics are tenacious and tempting. They are tenacious because they continue to posit, for instance, universal formal principles that grow increasingly complex and, for lack of a plausible empirical explanation, posit an ever weightier innate load or an ever more robust ontology in a linguistic Platonic heaven. They are tempting because—due to their formality—they can be neatly integrated with other persuasively formal systems such as logic and, by extension, epistemology.

Despite these virtues, there are alternative theories of syntax and semantics that posit an integration of language use and acquisition with other cognitive modalities. These alternative views, while perhaps not completely worked out, are headed in the right direction. The overarching premise of these alternative theories is that the language faculty is not an isolated cognitive system (as modularity advocates would have us believe). The development of linguistic skills is tightly integrated with visual and spatial representation. Because of this fact there is a great deal to be learned about language structure and acquisition through the study of representation, gesture, and motor development, and through more attention to the possibilities of usage-based acquisition. For instance, we may have to give up on the idea that linguistic and non-linguistic representation are different in kind rather than variations on the same underlying cognitive process. More specifically, rather than putting the explanatorily

³ I have in mind the development of Cognitive Linguistics primarily in the work of Ronald Langacker (1987, 1991) and, secondarily, others such as Leonard Talmy (2000), Tomasello (2003), and Goldberg (1995).

load on an innate stock of contentful principles, they focus instead on a set of abilities that develop in children in the first years of life, including the ability to read the intentions of others and the ability to recognize patterns in a very complex data set. The virtue of this way of thinking about language acquisition is that it drops the assumption that children are born with the propositional *knowledge* that generative grammar requires of them, and only proposes that they slowly develop the kinds of abilities that will help them in a variety of ways, both linguistic and non-linguistic.

3. *Languages are individualistic and not social*

I have spent a good deal of space describing views in favor of this thesis in Chs. I and IV, although I did not defend this view as my own. The reason for this is that, whereas I generally agree with, for instance, Chomsky and Davidson that there are a number of reasons for thinking that external, shared languages do not exist, I do not always agree with their proposed alternatives. I do not think that positing the existence of I-languages is the best alternative to social languages. As should be clear from Ch. IV, I-languages do not accomplish what they were intended to accomplish in that they do not resolve the problems of excessive idealization thereby remaining true to the biological model of language that Chomsky and others (e.g., Pinker 1999) proposed. Now, there are alternative biological models of language that take into consideration the social dimension of language (Millikan 1984, 2003, 2005), but not in a way that is adequate to the task.

Alternatively, languages are individual phenomena in the senses defended in the rest of this chapter, namely that there is no linguistic division of labor, there are no

linguistic authorities, and that there is no eternal propositional content for an utterance. Languages are things that each of us use, but even that is misleading because they aren't *things* in the sense that they somehow exist independently of us and we sometimes *use* in the way we might use a friend's car for the afternoon. Rather, they are a *part* of us and as they are used by us this very use determines their constitution. One of the central metaphysical theses of this dissertation is about the nature of language itself. This thesis is that language is a concrete embodied agentic activity, rather than a formal propositional abstract entity. The thesis here stands in sharp contrast with the often-stated metaphysical assumptions of the majority of philosophy of language in the last century. The idea here is to draw attention to the dissimilarities between natural and formal languages and to accept the consequences of that, including an understanding of the fleeting nature of language itself.

One of the ways in which thinking of language as a temporary and ephemeral activity causes problems for the standard theories in philosophy of language is in how to *theorize over* language such that we end up with something like a Theory of Meaning. The way I think about this is to think of the constitution of any given language as indexed to a particular speaker and as formed and reformed in its use by that speaker—each speaker using something like a ‘passing theory’ (Davidson 1986) in her conversations with others. Although we each have a prior, partially implicit theory of how we use language to talk about ourselves and the world, we engage a new, temporary theory each time we use language, particularly when we use it with someone else in a conversation. This passing theory helps us navigate the interpretive

challenges that we face in any given conversation and—often, but not always—provides us with fodder for reforms to our own linguistic beliefs, customs, habits, and even long-term unconscious language patterns. The mistake is in thinking that all of this adds up to something that exists in linguistic communities, beyond just speakers speaking and which has some authority over speakers in any kind of interesting linguistic sense. I will elaborate on this point in the next section.

4. *Languages don't exist independently of speakers*

This is a point that has been raised multiple times in this dissertation. On this point, I agree with the general idea as defended by Chomsky and also in the following way by Davidson:

Perhaps we are influenced by the idea that a language—especially when its name is spelled with a capital, as in ‘English’, ‘Croat’, ‘Latvian’, ‘Inuit’, or ‘Galician’—is some sort of public entity to one or more of which each of us subscribes, like the telephone service, and which therefore really is extraneous to us in a way that our sense organs are not. We forget there is no such thing as a language apart from the sounds and marks people make, and the habits and expectations that go with them. ‘Sharing a language’ with someone else consists in understanding what they say, and talking pretty much the way they do. There is no additional entity we possess in common any more than there is an ear we share when I lend you an ear. (Davidson 1997, p. 18)

Davidson (and Chomsky elsewhere) has something right here. Although I defend the position that meanings are things that are constructs in contexts by speakers *and* interpreters and not—except in the rare occasion—private entities, I think this position is consistent with thinking that languages are phenomena of speakers rather than communities, as defended in the previous section. I don’t think communities or speakers share languages and, along with Chomsky and Davidson, I don’t think there

is something, e.g., “English,” which exists and in which individual speakers simply take part. It’s a much more plausible view to take language acquisition to be a process of a child speaking like those around her, but not a process of a child learning a language which is somehow independent of the child and those who speak to her. It follows from this view that no two languages are exactly alike and each of us does speak our own language, even if this language isn’t really private. It is reasonable to think language is individualistic but not private because of the obvious but overlooked fact that we talk to each other and so it’s more than likely that we’ll make similar noises to communicate with one another.

As much as I have tried to appeal to the ordinary perspective of speakers, and have tried to adopt a *realist* position about language throughout this dissertation, I admit that this position runs contrary to commonsense. It seems reasonable to think that the language I speak pre-dated my birth and will continue to live on after my death, and it seems reasonable to think the reason I can communicate with certain other humans is because we know the same language in the sense of subscribing to the same telephone service as Davidson puts it above. It also seems reasonable to correct other speakers for the ways in which they misuse language, and to resist Humpty Dumpty’s claim that a word means whatever he wants it to mean. In some way, it is correct to hold each of these views, but just not to the extent or for the reasons that we think they are correct. For instance, the phonemes I now use to communicate have been used to communicate in similar ways before I was born and will probably be used again to communicate in similar ways after I die. This does not entail that an abstract

and theoretical entity pre-dates and post-dates my short life, but only that many patterns of use are handy enough to be used again. Why overcomplicate our linguistic ontology beyond reason? We can each communicate with some humans and not others not because we *share* a language, even though it is reasonable to suppose that those who have been exposed to phonemes in similar combinations as the phonemes I have been exposed to will speak a language that has *a great deal of overlap* with the language I speak. Again, this is just a more modest way of thinking about linguistic ontology. And, correcting the language use of others is similarly reasonable. We have reason to expect that other speakers will do their best to communicate with me in ways that are appropriate to the task at hand. Why use speech that will create interpretive difficulties in a situation that demands efficiency? On the other hand, why use speech that is conventional when novelty is most appropriate? We can and should expect that there are standards of language use that we ought to conform to in many situations (e.g., journal style, college level writing), but we should remember that these standards are not linguistic but social. Splitting infinitives, ending sentences with prepositions, and using standard spellings are all social standards, and we shouldn't lapse into thinking that such standards function as authoritative *linguistic* prescriptions. Finally, should we resist Humpty Dumpty's self-indulgent suggestion? To an extent. Since meanings are constructs in context between speakers and interpreters, what a word means does depend to a significant extent on what Humpty Dumpty wants it to mean. I maintain that Humpty Dumpty does need an external interpreter, though, unless he can manage to be his own. So, the interesting question is less whether or not Humpty

Dumpty is correct in his belligerent individualism about language, but whether or not anybody would want to talk to him. He has the metaphysics of meaning just about right; he just lacks social skills.

5. *Meanings are constructs in contexts between speakers and interpreters*

This innocuous looking thesis entails the view that there is no such thing as the meaning of an expression independently of particular speakers speaking at particular times (as defended below). So what are meanings? More precisely, what is the meaning of any given utterance? Let's take an utterance from chapter II:

(1) The apple is red.

In Chapter II, I took the position that (1) involves context-sensitive expressions. In this case, I agree with many contextualists who hold that color terms, such as 'red' are context-sensitive because there is no one way in which something can be red. Because of this, the meaning of "The apple is red" depends on the context in which it is uttered. However, I think that the term 'context' is misleading here. For some reason, the word 'context' has risen to prominence, being used to suggest that meaning is determined, at least in part, by the circumstances surrounding utterances. This makes no mention of speakers or interpreters. I think this is a mistake. (It might be said that 'context' is being used vaguely enough to accommodate the intentions of speakers, but this isn't obvious.) I think it is speakers and interpreters who, with reference to the context of speaking and relevant past and future contexts, and with the aid of shared knowledge, stereotyped assumptions, environmentally salient percepts, and evocative gestures, construct meanings. Again, to keep this from seeming just obvious, let me press the

point further. What I don't mean here is that there are propositions that can be expressed in context that deviate from the literal meanings of the expressions used to convey those propositions. A view that is something like this is employed by Cappelen & Lepore (2005) in order to have an alternative to Semantic Minimalism that explains the speech acts that are *actually* performed by speakers. I don't mean for this proposal to be an *addendum* to a literal semantic theory; this proposal *replaces* a literal semantic theory. Meanings just are constructs in contexts between speakers and interpreters and nothing else. Speakers don't exploit the general semantic potential of an uttered sentence (see below) in order to express a unique proposition in a context of utterance. They don't do this because there is no general semantic potential of expressions independently of their various uses.

Let me respond to a natural criticism of such a radical contextualism that has been raised when I have expressed this view. One version of this criticism was raised by a philosopher who read Ch. II of this dissertation without ever having met me. When we met for the first time in person, he asked me whether he understood the main theses of that chapter and stated his interpretations of those theses. When I responded that, yes, those sound like my main theses, he asked how he could have come to understand what I was saying if Literalism is false because he and I shared no prior discourse context. Referring to Bezuidenhout's list ((i) – (vi)) of what linguistic agents bring to the interpretive table, he claimed that, he had (i) *no* knowledge that had already been activated in a prior discourse context. He claimed that (ii) he had *no* knowledge of who his conversational partner would be since we had just met for the

first time. He claimed (iii) he had *no* knowledge available through observation of our mutual perceptual environment. And, referring to (v) of that list, he claimed to have *no* knowledge of my purposes or conversational abilities since we did not know yet know each other when he read the paper. It seemed to him that we shared no conversational context at all and yet, based on the literal meanings of the expressions used in Chapter II, he was able to make true claims about what the expressions in that paper mean.

I take his point that we should be dubious about the possibility of contextualism overreaching itself, but I think in this case the tendency is to adopt too narrow an understanding of ‘context’. What is needed in response to this objection is a full account of ‘context’. I won’t provide that here but instead I will merely sketch why I think this objection turns on an artificial conception of ‘context’. This reader of Ch. II seemed to suppose that in order for he and I to have prior discourse context he and I would have had to sit in a room on a previous occasion and have a conversation about some topic related to the philosophy of language. And, certainly, that would be the paradigm case of a prior discourse context. But, I contend, there are many more ways in which contexts are constructed and in which extra-linguistic information is relevant to the interpretation of utterances. So let’s look at why, in fact, that reader was able to correctly reconstruct the major theses of Ch. II. He and I have a lot in common: we grew up in geographical, political, social, and educational proximity. We have experienced many of the same cultural traditions. We both majored in Philosophy in college and pursued graduate degrees in that same field. Our graduate institutions were quite similar demographically and curricularly. He took classes in

which he read Frege, Quine, Putnam, and Davidson, and so did I. He recently wrote a dissertation thesis on contextualism in epistemology. I am writing a dissertation thesis on contextualism in philosophy of language. As a matter of fact, we are shockingly similar in many other respects as well. Is it much of a surprise that we might use similar orthographic and phonemic tools to communicate in similar ways? When I sent him Ch. II he had previous knowledge that it was a writing sample for a job application and that he was reviewing that sample to see if I was qualified for a job teaching about language in his Philosophy Department. He knew he wasn't getting his electricity bill, or a shopping list, or a piece of government legislation. Rather, the document was contextually marked in a number of salient ways. And, although he and I had never had conversation with each other about Cappelen & Lepore, he had read their recent book, as had I, and he had read many of the conversations about that book in recent philosophy journals, as had I. In many ways, he and I have engaged in more shared conversational contexts than he and most other people on the planet, despite never having met me. The point of this is that I could build up similar descriptions for any given encounter between putative strangers. Meanings can be constructed between strangers in grocery stores on the basis of our collective experience of what goes on in grocery stores. And, in fact, this is a *simpler* explanation than assuming that inferences from literal meanings to contextualized speech acts are always and everywhere taking place.

6. *Speakers utter utterances, not sentences.*

I think a grave mistake based on an embarrassing metaphysical confusion has led so many philosophers to think that speakers utter sentences. The difference between uttering a sentence and uttering an utterance may seem to be of no consequence for a theory of language. This is wrong. Whereas sentences are semantic and syntactic creatures, utterances are thoroughly pragmatic ones; if speakers are uttering utterances and not sentences, then a true account of those utterances will come in the form of a pragmatic theory and not a semantic one. What *is* clear is that thinking that speakers utter sentences leads quite naturally to thinking that there is fixed semantic content that is expressed between contexts of utterance. But it is not at all clear what it might mean to utter a sentence. And it is also not at all clear what sentences the proponent of this view has in mind. It is obvious to anyone who has been faced with the arduous task of transcribing natural speech that speakers, by and large, speak in loose collections of expressions, marked by interruptions, distractions, changes of direction, self-corrections, meta-commentary, and motor skill failures. Speakers are not uttering sentences in anything like the sense of sentences (complete and grammatical) that proponents of this view have in mind or use as examples in their analysis.

On the contrary, speakers utter utterances and these utterances are *not* tokens of sentence types (see below). An utterance is the output of a speaker's intentions, the interpretation of the phonemes by the hearer, and the knowledge of both speaker and interpreter of their shared background, the current context, and the expected conversational progression. An utterance is a pragmatic phenomenon, implying that its

analysis should include intention, interpretation, symbolic or deictic gesture, non-verbal cues, as well as what have been traditionally thought to be non-linguistic components of speech. Examples of this final category include things like pauses, smirks, throat-clearing, chuckles, and sounds in imitation of the matter being discussed.

7. *We should reject literalism, minimalism, and eternalism about language in favor of contextualism, maximalism, and a grounded pragmatism*

Ch. II assessed the demise of a concept of literal meaning that relies on an old idea of “eternal” sentences as the bearers of propositional content that speakers convey through utterances. Under Thesis 6, I argued that a basic confusion is exemplified in claiming that speakers utter sentences. I want to push that line a little further by arguing that there is no reason to populate our linguistic ontologies with eternal sentences (they just cause more problems than they solve) and that we ought, instead, to embrace a thoroughly pragmatic theory of language that recognizes that language is a highly-contextual, top-down affair involving contributions from multiple (non-propositional) modalities.

So, assume for a moment that, for any utterance, there is an eternal, literal sentence that contains a minimal proposition that is expressed in an utterance. These sentences are eternal in the sense that they exist independently of the intentional constructions of the speaker uttering them. But, if it were not for a speaker uttering a novel sentence, this supposedly speaker-independent entity would not exist. Why is this the case? It’s because there is thought to be a type-token relationship between

sentences and utterances. Sentences are the eternal types of which utterances are the fleeting tokens. So, for every utterance, speakers are uttering tokens of an eternal type. It is widely acknowledged that much of the time speakers' utterances have never been uttered before—that is, they are completely novel constructions. Each of these completely novel utterances must be a token of an eternal sentence type, because that is just what utterances purportedly are. Yet, each eternal sentence type must come into existence at the same time as an utterance token is uttered by a speaker. This is so unless we believe that all eternal sentences types of which there will be utterance tokens already exist in some kind of Platonic heaven. Otherwise, we are committed to thinking that it is *because* a speaker utters an utterance-token that the eternal sentence-type to which the utterance relates comes into existence. If it were not for a speaker uttering a novel utterance, the sentence type which purportedly provides the utterance token with its literal meaning would not exist. So, thinking that we utter sentences commits us to thinking one of two strange things: speakers might be uttering eternal sentence types that have a speaker-transcendent meaning. But it doesn't make much sense to think that a speaker utters a sentence *type* rather than a sentence *token*. Or, speakers utter sentence tokens, where the tokens don't have a speaker-transcendent meaning, but the types of which they are tokens do. But if this were the case, speakers would be responsible for creating the types of which the tokens are tokens in the very act of tokening. So, rather than thinking that a token is a token because there is a type of which it is a token, we are obligated to thinking that a type is a type because there is a token which types it. This supposed metaphysical relationship between sentence

types and utterance tokens doesn't make any sense. We are wrong to think that speakers utter sentences, even if we only mean by this that what speakers utter are tokens of sentence types.

Now suppose we respond to the argument of the previous paragraph by saying that it just misses the point of compositionality. Literalists think meaning is compositional such that the meaning of any given uttered sentence token is composed of the literal propositional meaning of its parts. This skirts the problem that, given the uniqueness of utterance tokens, each token is typed in the act of uttering. But in the discussion of singular terms and their substitution frames in Ch. III, there should be some legitimate concerns about how it is that the expression parts of propositions get their conceptual content independently of complete propositions and, I would argue, the concrete conversational contexts in which they're uttered.

"Eternalism" about language is unfortunately the predominant view in contemporary philosophy of language as it goes hand-in-hand with minimalist and literalist positions. Minimalism and literalism mistakenly hold that every utterance expresses a (sentence which expresses a) minimal, literal proposition. Other than an empty disquotationalism (as held by Cappelen & Lepore 2005), it's not clear what proposition is eternally expressed by an utterance and how this proposition gets selected out of the admittedly infinite list of contenders.⁴ This family of views offers a clean way to explain meaning, but does so at the cost of not explaining anything real at

⁴ Cappelen & Lepore introduce what they call "Speech Act Pluralism" to complement their Semantic Minimalism. Speech Act Pluralism is supposed to be the theory of speakers' actual utterances that, they claim, can express an infinite number of possible propositions.

all—such as, for instance, real utterances uttered by speakers who cannot help but be deep in conversational contexts.

The family of views that I think should replace what is an explanatorily vacuous tradition in philosophy of language is made up of what I will call contextualism, maximalism, and a grounded pragmatism for lack of better terms. There are a number of well-developed views⁵ in these areas that I think are on the right track, albeit not uniformly in agreement with what I am defending here. By ‘contextualism’, I mean that meanings are constructs in contexts between speakers and interpreters and that, for any given meaning construct, a proper interpretation will typically involve non-linguistic factors such as those listed in the final section of Ch. II. At first, this looks obvious—of course speakers need to know *what thing*, for instance, is being referred to in order to understand a referring expression. And, they will probably even need to know what conversations and events preceded this conversational context in order to make sense of what is being said now. Nobody denies this; in order to accommodate these extra-linguistic factors, many minimalists distinguish between ‘what is said’ and ‘what is communicated’. I diverge from minimalists in that I reject the usefulness of this distinction; I don’t think there is anything that falls under ‘what is said’—this is a relic of a Platonic eternalism that should be rejected along with the idea of public, shared languages. In terms of the tests for contextualism discussed in Ch. II, I don’t think it is possible to report on the utterances of others in a way that is both meaningful and divorced from the original

⁵ Recanati (2004), Bezuidenhout (2002), Carston (2002), Sperber & Wilson (1986), and Travis (1975, 1985, 1989, 1997, 2000).

context. Without invoking, implicitly or explicitly, the features of the original context minimally necessary for interpretation, it will not be possible to report the original utterance. As I argued in Ch. II, I think we should be careful not to confuse phonetic repetition with true contentful reporting.

By ‘maximalism’ I just mean that the content of any given utterance will be richer than a traditional semantic analysis would allow. Meanings are indexed to three points: contexts, speakers, and interpreters. Given these three indices, the content of an utterance is best understood as ‘pragmatic’ content, rather than semantic content. This pragmatic content is not merely truth-conditional, and is multiply modal as argued under Thesis 6 above. Given contextualism about the proper approach to linguistic meaning and maximalism about expanding the base of conceptual content, the resulting theory will not be a semantic theory at all, but a grounded pragmatism. There are two ways to go given the failures of literalism, minimalism, and eternalism. One is to redescribe a ‘true’ semantic theory, and the other is to give up on semantics for natural languages altogether. This latter approach is the one I endorse; it is the very naturalness of languages that makes them the kinds of creatures that defy the formality of traditional semantic analysis. Rather, natural languages are part of gritty, multiply-modal, ephemeral humanity.

8. *There are no true linguistic authorities*

Ch. I reviews the (now old) literature on the linguistic division of labor that, by and large, doubles as a defense of externalism. Since I am an externalist only to the extent that I think that meanings are constructions in context between speakers and

interpreters, I also reject the linguistic division of labor. This should fairly obviously follow from 1-7 above. Externalism about meaning has long confused a social division of labor with a linguistic one. The *social* division of labor gives us reason for using the same expressions as the experts do to talk about what the experts are experts in, but this authority in, say, botany, does not translate into an authority about meaning. Speakers can, in fact, mean whatever they want to mean with whatever expressions they choose given a receptive interpreter. The obvious objection to this view is that communication about, for instance, whether someone in fact has arthritis given that we could all be using our words in whatever way we choose would be impossible. Instead, the externalists think, the meanings of words are determined by an expert dubbing in a socially shared language to which we all subscribe. This is easily overcome once we realize the *usefulness* of using words in the same way, and letting that utility explain our tendency to do so rather than trying to explain it by claiming we have some mysterious *semantic obligation* to do so.

9. *Gibberish is an ideological concept rather than a linguistic one*

An important premise of the argument in Ch. IV is that linguists, in particular, need to be able to identify what *doesn't* count as correct in some particular language as a way of identifying what *does* count as correct in that language. Theories of language have typically progressed in this fashion: the evidence that some such rule holds for a language is that a violation of the rule sounds like gibberish to a native speaker. Gibberish—and its equivalents: the “unacceptable,” “ungrammatical,” “incorrect”—is taken as theoretically primitive. As native speakers it is assumed that we can intuit

what is acceptable and unacceptable in our language. One of the tasks of Ch. IV was to explode the concept of the native speaker (although the problem of the existence of native speakers has been acknowledged many times before).⁶ And, although it has also been acknowledged that the sanctity of judgments of native speakers (especially when they are linguists) should be held in great suspicion, they persist as the evidential basis of linguistic theory. This continues despite studies that show conflicts between the judgments of native speaker linguists and other native speakers and conflicts between the self-conscious judgments of speakers and their unreflective use in conversation.⁷ I am not proposing that there is an obvious way to sort this out (e.g., by privileging use over judgments or by privileging the judgments of speakers who are not linguists over those who are), except perhaps to abandon the idea that there are multiple speakers of one language (and so to abandon the idea that more than one judgment even matters). Here I have primarily been trying to draw attention to the problem and to deconstruct the ideas that gibberish can be identified primitively and that it is the result of rule-violation.

10. The complete expression of linguistic agency occurs when speakers violate the conventional expectations of their linguistic communities, not when they conform

There is a long tradition of thinking that human freedom is most interesting when it conforms to a law. Outside of Hobbes' covenant with the sovereign, life is nasty brutish, and short. The freedom that comes with such a life does not constitute *liberty* in the civic sense. Kant's categorical imperative is that we ought to submit

⁶ See Davies (1991, 2003), Paikeday (1985), Labov (1975).

⁷ See Labov (1975) for an early review of these studies.

ourselves to the universal law; the particular will acting under a hypothetical imperative does not constitute *rationality* in the fullest sense. Even in the New Testament, Jesus asks his followers to accept his “kindly yoke” and to renounce their own personal laws in order to find happiness: “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:29-30). Following the laws of Jesus is supposed to be *easier* than following one’s own self-directed laws. The idea of some kind of liberation (political, rational, spiritual) by means of submitting one’s own freedom to external strictures is not a new idea. It has been imported into theories of language in a variety of ways, some more pernicious and systematic than others. From Leibniz’s search for the “universal characteristic” of language to Brandom’s claim that there are only *sapient* linguistic agents in a community of scorekeepers, the idea persists that freedom is only fully realized when it comes in the form of submission to external laws. We saw variations on this idea in each of the three central chapters of this dissertation. In Ch. II, an underlying but unstated assumption of Literalism is that the universal, speaker-independent, literal meaning of expressions *makes possible* the individual variations by speakers. In Ch. III, it is an explicit assumption of Brandom’s inferentialism that linguistic freedom, creativity, and expressive power *are parasitic on* submission to community norms. In Ch. IV, it is a structuring thesis of the generative grammar research project that it is impossible for speakers to get from their limited input to their hyper-productive output without the *innate substructure* of a universal and speaker-transcendent grammar. Conformity to

laws external to oneself, and not individuality in light of such external impositions, is the guiding principle in each of these cases just as it has been in the political, epistemic, and religious models that each of these theories of language imitate.

Despite the possible merits of the political, epistemic, and religious models that take conformity to external law to be the benchmark of an agent's success (I am not going to consider those possible merits here), I think this is a short-sighted and ultimately misleading way to think about language. While it is undoubtedly exciting when children acquire the conventional linguistic symbols of their parents and in doing so *conform* to their parents' expectations and, perhaps, to a universal biologically-endowed grammar, it is not what I think is the mark of a fully realized free and distinctively human use of language. This realization comes from that language use that is in violation of the conventional expectations of a linguistic community. This kind of language use is exciting not only because it occurs, but also because it is *meaningful*. The reason it is meaningful is because it is interpretable. Yet, interpretability in these cases cannot be reductively explained in terms of conformity to an external and speaker-transcendent standard. This is the ploy of so many philosophers of language in defending, for instance, the possibility of a literal meaning for utterances such as, "This is red." On the other hand, a meaningful utterance of "Scribbledehobble, I'm feeling so funny all over the same" is possible given an adequately receptive speaker, interpreter, and audience, and not given the conformity to a speaker and context transcendent law, rule, or norm. Speakers are *essentially* inventive creatures with a great deal of tolerance for the catalogue of "performance

factors” in language use. While this inventive plasticity helps to explain how we can substitute “Benjamin Franklin” for “the first postmaster general of the United States” while maintaining inferential role, it also explains how we successfully interpret what is largely a chaotic mess of phonemes and, by doing so, constantly move the borders of what counts as “correctness conditions” for the languages each of us speak. Linguists have long recognized that languages are always in some kind of flux and evolution, but they still try to articulate the architecture of a language at any given time. Philosophers of language have been slower to recognize this about language, and slower to let go of the idea that there is a certain rigidity in language, in particular a rigidity of meaning and reference. But, this Platonic view of language and speakers’ obligation to these transcendent rules is groundless. While there are certainly social artifacts (e.g., dictionaries) of the commitment to thinking that languages have a privileged existence independently of speakers, the mere production of these artifacts does not constitute a justification of their authority. Further, their authority is constantly belied by successfully defiant uses of language in contradiction to their prescriptions.

There is much to be learned from the search for a universal characteristic in whatever form it takes. In the end, however, we must be careful not to mistake the constant conjunctions that we see for evidence of a nomic *something* that makes these conjunctions possible. Rather, we should balance the search for a universal characteristic with an openness to the possibility that ‘bnik’ might just be a possible word in English, if you know what I mean.

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