

Metalinguistic Negotiation and its Limits

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This paper defends the idea that disputes which do not feature conflicts in literally-expressed contents could express genuine disagreement. Using the model of metalinguistic negotiation and Stalnakerian common ground, the paper argues that many such disputes are driven by the conversational parties' disagreements in the meaning of expressions. The disputants convey and settle their disagreement pragmatically, negotiating the meanings of terms under controversy by using instead of mentioning the terms. The paper further examines how the disputants collect cues from the conversation to become aware of the metalinguistic nature of their dispute and explains why such an account is compatible with semantic externalism, by clarifying the scope and limits of metalinguistic negotiation.

1 Introduction

he paper seeks to defend the possibility that dispute between speakers could express genuine disagreement, even if the speakers mean different things by the same term they both use and literally express rationally compatible content. This is against an accepted way of reasoning, which insists that the speakers must mean the same thing by their common term in order to genuinely disagree with each other. To explain such a possibility, the paper starts by introducing the metalinguistic negotiation model, according to which conversational participants negotiate the proper meaning to use for certain common terms by using instead of mentioning the very term. The paper further clarifies this model by reviewing it in light of the Stalnakerian common ground. It sees the efforts of conversational participants to decide which meaning to use for the common term as a negotiation regarding what to include within their interpretative common ground, the common information body about language presupposed by conversational participants for effective communication to happen.

The paper then proceeds to respond to two challenges against metalinguistic negotiation model raised by Herman Cappelen, a speaker-error objection that speakers engaging with these disputes do not see themselves as debating the meaning of words, and the externalist criticism that the model assumes a control of speakers over meaning that does not exist, which makes it incompatible with mainstream semantic externalism. Regarding the speaker-error objection, the paper points out that speakers approach these disputes with the default assumption that there is no meaning difference of the terms they use, and it oftentimes only becomes clear for the speakers when they collect cues from their conversational proceedings that demonstrate their divergence in language use. For the externalist argument, the paper clarifies that metalinguistic negotiation can only

directly act on what people think, believe, presuppose, and their other attitudes toward words' meaning and reference, instead of the actual meaning of terms. The paper then takes a step further, by exploring the possibility of metalinguistic negotiation to indirectly contribute to the facts grounding the meaning of terms, by influencing speakers' attitudes toward the meaning of terms and changing the use patterns.

2 Metalinguistic Negotiation Model, Explained

2.1 Mark Sainsbury's "fishy" case

In his short paper *Fishy Business*, Mark Sainsbury tried to make sense of a 19th century courtroom debate between an inspector and an oil merchant on whether whale oil should be taxed as fish oil. Both parties recognized that whales are lung-using, air-breathing mammalian sea creatures but disagreed on the relevance of these facts. The inspector used "fish" to designate all sea creatures while the merchant emphasized that mammals cannot be fish.¹ Do the speakers' different ways of classification correspond to different meanings of the expression "fish"? The oil merchant and the inspector applied radically different methodologies of classification and, as a result, used the term "fish" in systematically different ways. The oil merchant applied the term in such a way as to never include mammals, while the inspector applied the term in such a way as to include marine mammals. The difference holds true even when all the relevant factual information about whales is on hand, making it difficult to pinpoint the factual basis of their different classifications, unless they mean different things by the term "fish." This, at the very least, provides *prima facie* reasons for thinking that the merchant and the inspector meant different things for the term "fish."

Call the above argument *different-meaning interpretation* of the "fishy" case. It quickly faces a challenge that it fails to capture the observation, which we would like to preserve, that the dispute between the merchant and the inspector expressed genuine disagreement.² The accepted view of disagreement tells us that it requires conflict in content literally expressed: if a dispute between speaker A and B expresses a genuine disagreement, in which speaker A asserts that p and speaker B asserts that q, it must be rationally incompatible for anyone to accept both p and q. It suggests that for any dispute to express genuine disagreements, the speakers cannot talk past each other. According to this view, if any dispute involves assertions of the form that the *F*s are *G*s and that the *F*s are not *G*s, the speakers must mean the same thing by the terms "F" and "G" to assert something rationally incompatible and avoid talking past each. This view of disagreement, which requires conflict in content literally expressed, helps draw a semantic conclusion about "F" and "G" from our intuition of disagreement, and challenges the different-meaning

¹Sainsbury, M., "Fishy Business," *Analysis* 74, no. 1 (December 2013): 3.

²The observation that there is a genuine disagreement is worth defending for many reasons. The dispute would not have stopped had they agreed that whales are lung-using mammalian sea-creatures. There is also good evidence suggesting that the dispute heavily centered on whether whales are fishes instead of other possible disagreements, since the trial largely proceeded with the jury hearing evidence from eminent anatomists (saying that whales are not fish), merchants and seafaring men (mostly, but not in every case, saying that whales are fish).

interpretation of the “fishy” case, because there is no conflict in the content literally expressed.³ If the merchant and the inspector meant different things by the term “fish”, the merchant asserted, in paraphrases, that whales are cold-blooded vertebrate animal living wholly in water, while the inspector asserted that whales are sea creatures. The speakers asserted compatible propositions, and did so by virtue of the fact that they intended to mean different things by the same term “fish”. It is not rationally incompatible for either of them to accept both of the two propositions. The different-meaning interpretation, therefore, seems unable to validate our observation that the “fishy” case involves genuine disagreement.

2.2 Non-canonical Disputes and Metalinguistic Negotiation

The above challenge to the different meaning interpretation is misplaced because it mistakenly presumes that only *canonical disputes* — disputes that involve literal expression of incompatible content — could express genuine disagreement. It is wrong to assume, merely based on the recognition of genuine disagreement, that the relevant dispute should involve the literal (semantic) expression of incompatible contents. *Non-canonical disputes* — disputes centered on information that is not conveyed semantically — could express genuine disagreements as well.⁴ For this paper, I am using the term *dispute* to refer to any linguistic practice that appears to evince or express a genuine disagreement. And I am using the term *disagreement* to involve conflicting attitudes of speakers toward certain content, such as acceptance, beliefs and desires, rather than what they utter. For two speakers to disagree with each other there should be some objects p and q (e.g. propositions, plans, etc.) such that A accepts p and B accepts q, when it is rationally incompatible for anyone to accept both p and q.⁵ However, the content in conflict may well be conveyed pragmatically without being literally expressed.

While the distinction between semantics and pragmatics is hard to draw, the paper will make the distinction between the sentence meaning, the linguistic meaning of a sentence-type, and speakers’ meaning, which consists of what is said and what is implicated. This is the maximalist interpretation of this distinction, which emphasizes the difference between “primary” contextual processes and “secondary” contextual processes.⁶ Primary pragmatic processes are contextual processes that help determine what is said, the proposition expressed by the sentence, while secondary pragmatic processes are inferential processes that presuppose what is said, take it as input, and yield further propositions as output.⁷ For this paper, if a speaker conveys that p *semantically/literally*, the proposition that p belongs to what is said, while what is conveyed *pragmatically* belongs to what is implicated.

With the above concepts clarified, consider the following case of disagreement centered on information conveyed via implicature of relevance.

³Plunkett, D. and Timothy Sundell., “Disagreement and the Semantics of Normative and Evaluative Terms”, *Philosophers’ Imprint*, 13, (2013): 3.

⁴Plunkett, Sundell, 7.

⁵Plunkett, Sundell, 11.

⁶Recanati, F., “What Is Said”, *Synthese*, 128 (2001): 79.

⁷Recanati, 79.

- (1a)** Sally was able to solve the last problem on the test.
- (1b)** But Sally chose to quit before she got there.

The literal contents of (1a) and (1b) are rationally compatible, but there is an incompatibility between (1b) and the implicature of (1a), namely that Sally in fact solved the last problem on the test. The genuine disagreement expressed by the dispute centered on this incompatibility.⁸ The example demonstrates that the possibility of non-canonical disputes to express genuine disagreement. Therefore, one could argue that in the “fishy” case the genuine disagreement between the merchant and the inspector did not center on the propositions they asserted but on what the speakers pragmatically conveyed in addition. The merchant and the inspector, when they made the assertions, each pragmatically advocated for the meaning of “fish” he deemed appropriate. The two speakers pragmatically proposed two meanings of “fish” incompatible for one to accept at the same time. The conflict in content, in this way, lies within what is pragmatically conveyed within the conversation instead of its literally-expressed semantic content.

The different-meaning interpretation of the “fishy” case, which locates the conflict in what the speakers convey pragmatically, helps shed light on a series of similar questions across various fields of philosophy. When progressives and conservatives debate whether gay marriage should be legal, do they mean the same thing by “marriage”? When a sports radio host and his audience argue whether a racehorse could be an athlete, do they mean the same thing by “athlete”?⁹ When missionaries and cannibals debate whether collecting human scalps is good, do they mean the same thing by “good”?¹⁰ If one believes that in these disputes the speakers mean different things by their common terms, we could analyze such non-canonical disputes as *metalinguistic negotiations*, disputes where participants use (as opposed to mention) expressions whose meanings they disagree about in order to resolve this very disagreement.¹¹

2.3 Why Metalinguistic Negotiations are Worth Having

Metalinguistic negotiations are worth having, because how we use our words matters. Conversational participants of metalinguistic negotiations feel the need to continue their disputes, even when it becomes common ground that they intend to mean different things by the same term, because they have independent reasons for the incompatible meanings of the expression they each pragmatically advocate for. In the above “fishy” case, although the merchant and the inspector both recognized that they intended to mean different things by the term “fish,” they continued their dispute because they accepted different classifications and had economic consequences tied to the trial. In debate between gay right activists and conservatives over gay marriage, even if the conservatives

⁸Plunkett, D. and Timothy Sundell, “Disagreement and the Semantics of Normative and Evaluative Terms”, *Philosophers’ Imprint*, 13, (2013): 12.

⁹Ludlow, P., *Living Words Meaning Underdetermination and the Dynamic Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2018): 78.

¹⁰Hare, R.M., *The Language of Morals* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991): 148.

¹¹Plunkett, D. and Timothy Sundell, “Disagreement and the Semantics of Normative and Evaluative Terms”, *Philosophers’ Imprint*, 13, (2013): 10.

make clear that they take “marriage” to mean a union between a male and a female, the activists will want to insist that this meaning is unacceptable in order to advance same-sex marriage rights.¹² Similarly, a feminist may advocate that “woman” should refer to people that are subordinated in virtue of their observed or imagined female bodily features, because such an ameliorated meaning of “woman” will advance the feminist cause.¹³ All these examples demonstrate that there are all types of reasons for speakers to battle over the meanings of particular lexical items.

Speakers mostly accommodate others’ uses of words that differ from theirs to facilitate communication, unless they have fair enough reasons not to. These reasons concern the expressive aspects of lexical items that one cannot stipulatively do away with (for example, one cannot claim to use derogatory terms in a benign manner), the practical benefits of adopting certain meanings of terms that are fixed in legal documents (“marriage”, “rape”, “people”, etc.), the possibility of advancing social justice by advocating for meaning revision of various terms (“queer”, “woman”, etc.), and many more. The reasons to engage with metalinguistic negotiations may vary, but the case is strong enough to conclude that speakers can have good reasons to negotiate the use of expressions that they do not want to accept.

What makes metalinguistic negotiations worth having distinguishes them from *merely verbal disputes*, which arise solely in virtue of miscommunication and can be resolved after well-received clarification. Merely verbal disputes are non-canonical disputes that involve different meanings for common expressions but convey no genuine disagreements. These disputes arise solely in virtue of miscommunication: one speaker may take the other speaker to mean something different from what the other speaker takes herself to mean by a particular expression, and both speakers actually accept the other’s intended way of the using the expression after clarification.¹⁴ Once it is common ground what each speaker takes the expression to mean, there is no disagreement between the speakers for them to continue the dispute.

2.4 In Light of the Conversational Common Ground

We could better see how metalinguistic negotiations unfold in practice in light of Robert Stalnaker’s common ground model. *Common ground*, identified as the common beliefs about what is mutually accepted, is both the end of the communicative action which seeks to add contents to the common ground and the means available to the speaker that is necessary for communication to take place. The speaker *accepts* that p as long as the speaker treats it as true for some reason, and it is *common belief* that p among a group of believers if and only if all believe that p, all believe that all believe that p, all believe that all believe that all believe that p, etc. The common ground includes the information that must be available in order for the utterance to be reasonably taken as an act of communi-

¹²Both examples here involve a legal setting in which words and expressions written in law could not be easily changed, a fact that motivates speakers to advocate for different meanings of the same term to use when the court and legal system interpret and apply the law. These legal disputes involving different meanings are typical metalinguistic negotiations that are worth having.

¹³Haslanger, S., “Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?”, *Noûs*, 34, no. 1 (2000): 52.

¹⁴Chalmers, D.J., “Verbal Disputes”, *Philosophical Review*, 120, no. 4 (January 2011): 526.

cation.¹⁵ This part of common ground includes the presuppositions the speakers expect the audience to have ready for use in making sense of what they say, many of which are tied to particular words and accompany their use. This information body within the common ground is what Mark Richard refers to as the interpretive common ground (ICG).^{16,17} For example, when a competent English speaker speaks of bachelor using “bachelor”, the speaker expects to be recognized as talking about an unmarried male and expects the audience to access this idea via proper interpretation. The speaker normally presupposes that “bachelor” refers to unmarried male, and hence, that bachelors are unmarried males. The latter follows by disquotation, which any competent speaker will hold to be analytically true. Given the speaker’s presupposition that “bachelor” refers to unmarried males, the speaker will have pro tanto reasons to think that anyone who does not share this presupposition uses the term to mean something else. The kind of analyticity I am introducing here could be seen as follows: that bachelors are unmarried males is true for the speaker solely in virtue of the presupposition that “bachelor” refers to unmarried male. This argument is inspired by Kevin Scharp’s analysis of constitutive principles for concepts as principles to guide interpretation. If a speaker rejects a principle that one takes to be constitutive for a concept in conversation, one then has a pro tanto reason to think that they do not mean the same thing by the word in question.¹⁸

The genuine disagreements in metalinguistic negotiations, which are conveyed pragmatically, are then expressed by manifesting presuppositions about the ICG. If a participant pragmatically conveys certain ways of using a term that violate part of what the other participant presupposes to be part of the ICG, the latter may refuse to accommodate by blocking the proposed way of using the term from becoming part of the ICG. The speakers then proceed to dispute whether the proposed way of using certain expression ought to be added into the ICG, negotiating the meaning of the expressions. In the fishy case, the merchant presupposed that “fish” is used to talk about cold-blooded vertebrate animal living wholly in water, and that fishes are cold-blooded vertebrate animals living wholly in water. On the other hand, the inspector presupposes that “fish” is used to talk about sea-creatures, and that fishes are just sea-creatures. Therefore, when the inspector asserted that whale oil is fish oil, the manifest occurrence of this assertion became common ground, which not only proposed to add the semantic content of the assertion to the common ground, but also pragmatically conveyed the metalinguistic message that it is appropriate to use “fish” to talk about whales. This, at the very least, violates the merchant’s presupposition that fishes are vertebrate animals, which follows analytically from the presupposition that “fish” does not refer to mammalian sea creatures. Maybe it was still not clear to him that the inspector presupposed something completely different about how to use the term “fish”, but it gave the merchant enough reason to start the metalinguistic negotiation.

¹⁵Stalnaker, R., “Common Ground”, *Linguistics and Philosophy*, vol. 25, no. 5/6 (2002): 704.

¹⁶Richard, M., “The A-Project and the B-Project”, *Conceptual Engineering and Conceptual Ethics*(2020): 363.

¹⁷While I am using Richard’s term ICG to describe the presuppositions that a speaker expects her audience to recognize in order to make sense of what she seeks to communicate, I am distancing myself from his view that meaning of lexical items is, to a first approximation, interpretive common ground. In fact, my take on meaning is quite different from this view, which I will detail in my response to the externalist objection to the metalinguistic negotiation model in part three of the paper.

¹⁸Scharp, K., “Philosophy as the Study of Defective Concepts”, *Conceptual Engineering and Conceptual Ethics* (2020): 397.

2.5 The Issue of Dependence Between Presuppositions

One final note about metalinguistic negotiation model is that we must resist the misleading way of explaining canonical disputes in virtue of what is pragmatically conveyed about meaning. For example, when a college student meets a flat-Earther, the flat-Earther asserts that the Earth is flat. The college student responds by asserting that the Earth is not flat. Following the spirit of metalinguistic negotiation, one could argue that the two speakers seek to adjust the meaning of the term “Earth” in their upcoming dispute. When the flat-Earther asserts that the Earth is flat, the college student must have found it to be a violation of what she presupposes to be part of the ICG, that it is inappropriate to use “Earth” to designate something that is flat and that the flat-Earther probably means something different by the expression “Earth.”

Such analysis is blatantly wrong. The dispute between the flat-Earther and the college student is a canonical one in which the asserted propositions are incompatible. The Earth is not flat, and the flat-Earther asserts something false. There are also relevant factual disagreements between the speakers about the Earth: whether the Earth is a flat disc with the Arctic Circle in the center and whether there is a 150-foot-tall wall of ice around its rim. It is not a case of non-canonical dispute, let alone metalinguistic negotiation. Moreover, that the Earth is flat, or that the Earth is not flat, is not something that speakers presumably hold to be analytically true. That the Earth is not flat, for the college student, does not hold true solely in virtue of the meaning of the term “Earth”. Conversely, the college student only presupposes that it is inappropriate to use “Earth” to designate something that is flat in virtue of her belief that it is commonly accepted that the Earth is not flat. This is something that she possibly learns by listening to her parents as a child or reading a textbook, not just by mastering how to use the term “Earth.”

This illustrates the issue of *dependence* between presuppositions. The speakers presuppose that the *Fs* are *Gs* if and only if they presuppose that “the *Fs*” refer to *Gs*. In some cases (type A), the speaker presupposes that the *Fs* are *Gs* because one presupposes that “the *Fs*” refer to *Gs*. In other cases (type B), the speaker presupposes the latter because one presupposes the former. The “fishy” dispute, as well as the other cases of metalinguistic negotiations, belongs to type A, while the flat-Earth dispute, as well as other cases of canonical disputes, belongs to type B. The presupposition that fish is not mammalian depends on the presupposition that “fish” refers to vertebrate animals, while the presupposition that “Earth” does not designate something flat depends on the presupposition that the Earth is not flat. It is even possible that the college student does not believe that this rule of appropriate use of the term “Earth” is common ground, if she does not expect everyone to accept that the Earth is not flat.¹⁹ The distinction between type-A and type-B cases of dependence among presuppositions should help explain why the metalinguistic negotiation model should not apply to canonical disputes.

¹⁹ While the idea that one should not expect someone to know that the Earth is not flat may seem wild (a poll in 2018 suggested that only two thirds of American millennials believe that the Earth is round), think of how experts adjust their presuppositions when addressing technical problems to their friends who have no expertise in the field. The experts may not presuppose that an average user of what they hold to be jargons should only use the words in certain ways, because the experts do not expect an average speaker to have the needed background expertise that drives one to use the words in these ways.

3 Speakers' Misconceptions of Metalinguistic Negotiations, Explained

One objection to the above picture of metalinguistic negotiation is that the model often-times goes against the speakers' own reflections and self-reports of what they are doing in what the model takes to be metalinguistic negotiations.²⁰ Many times the speakers are under the impression that they are not debating how to use particular words. This is the problem raised by Herman Cappelen against the metalinguistic model, that the speakers regard themselves as having a debate about torture, not "torture", when they debate whether waterboarding is torture. The discrepancy between the model's prediction and what the speakers take themselves to be doing in the waterboarding debate requires further explanation.²¹ The paper has two responses to this speaker-error objection. First, it is difficult for speakers to recognize the non-canonical and metalinguistic nature of their disputes, but once they do it becomes difficult for Cappelen to explain what is going on. The speakers usually spend much time looking for potential factual disagreements, reflecting on what they presuppose to be analytically true of the expressions they use, and collecting cues from their ongoing dispute, before they realize that the literal contents of their assertions are compatible and confirm that their dispute is non-canonical and metalinguistic. The well-known dispute about whether Pluto is a planet well demonstrates such difficulty. When the astronomers at first tried to resolve their dispute over whether Pluto is a planet, they each brought about facts they thought to be relevant to the evaluation concerning Pluto's planet-hood. It soon became clear to many astronomers that they did not have a consensus over the meaning of the term "planet" because they failed to see why the facts raised by their colleagues were even relevant. The fact that astronomers could not reach a consensus about what is relevant in evaluating Pluto's planet-hood finally convinced them that they lacked a common way of using the term "planet" in the first place, revealing the metalinguistic nature of their dispute. Just like what happened in the Pluto case, conversational participants approach their non-canonical, metalinguistic disputes with the default assumption that it does not involve meaning differences. In other words, they do not expect to run into contents about words' meanings conveyed pragmatically against what they take to be within the ICG. Many times, the fact that conversational parties mean different things by the same word only becomes salient as speakers continue their non-canonical metalinguistic dispute. Peter Ludlow calls the cues in conversation that allow conversational participants to recognize the meaning differences "triggers."²² The trigger could be the realization that one conversational party has a broader or narrower modulation of a term ("fish" includes mammals or "athlete" excludes non-human animals). It could also be the realization of the need for both parties to sharpen a meaning ("planet") to resolve certain problems ("Is Pluto a planet?"). Nonetheless, given enough triggers from the conversation, the speakers will be aware that there is a meaning difference between them. They will realize that the genuine disagreement behind their dispute is the different meanings they pragmatically advocate for

²⁰Cappelen, H., *Fixing Language: an Essay on Conceptual Engineering* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018): 174.

²¹Cappelen, 175.

²²Ludlow, P., *Living Words Meaning Underdetermination and the Dynamic Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2018): 40.

in conversation.²³

Cappelen then has difficulty explaining these cases when speakers later admit that their dispute is about meaning differences. While the metalinguistic negotiation model allows for the conversational parties to gradually uncover the fact that their dispute is non-canonical and metalinguistic, Cappelen must insist that the conversational parties initially have the correct attitude that their disagreement is over one subject matter, only to get lost upon further evidence and reflections. If the speakers take in all the triggers and conclude that they are engaging with a dispute concerning the meaning of the contested term, Cappelen has to argue that these speakers now are mistaken about the nature of the dispute they have. Moreover, he has to say, somewhat implausibly, that their initial attitude is correct, but the one they have after they receive more information from the ongoing dispute is mistaken.

Besides the above difficulty of Cappelen's challenge, a simpler response is that most of the time speakers are disposed to seek factual ground for their normative disagreement. They are terrible at overtly normative disputes, so they tend to find some factual disagreement to distract themselves from the normative aspect of their disputes. This may happen because speakers have trouble specifying what they mean by certain expressions or what particular normative standards they have in mind when using the expressions under controversial circumstances. Feeling reluctant to appear as if they do not know what they mean when using these normative terms, the speakers may avoid directly engaging in the normative disagreement, driven by the recognized social expectation that they should know what they mean or what normative standards they uphold. Getting caught not knowing what you are talking about looks bad. Influenced by these social conditions, people tend to have long grinding debates about whether a dish tastes delicious, whether a picture looks beautiful, or whether it is morally good to do something or not in a unique fashion. They keep raising all types of details and facts that the other party may find irrelevant and talking past each other, without pausing to clarify that they share different aesthetical or ethical views or specify their normative standards. Direct engagement in normative disagreement is simply not the norm and there is no good reason to suspect that metalinguistic negotiation, with its normative aspect concerning the meanings of expressions, does not fall on the same line.

4 Externalist Arguments and the Limits of Metalinguistic Negotiations

Another important objection to the metalinguistic negotiation theory is that it is incompatible with semantic externalism.²⁴ The theory seems to assume that the speakers have

²³An interesting question is whether it is still rational for the speakers to continue using instead of mentioning the term under dispute after it becomes common ground that the speakers mean different things by the same expression and aim to resolve the meaning disagreement. The speakers certainly could start to mention the term instead of using it to more directly litigate the meaning of the term. However, if the arguments for certain meaning of the term can be conveyed pragmatically, it can still be reasonable to continue the dispute by using the term and litigating the meaning of the term pragmatically.

²⁴Cappelen, H., *Fixing Language: an Essay on Conceptual Engineering* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018): 173.

control over the meanings of the terms they use. It takes for granted that the speakers could cooperatively resolve their metalinguistic dispute by battling over their ICG, raising reasons for or against certain meanings, and settling on a meaning that the speakers eventually come to accept. The “fishy” case could be resolved with the inspector and the merchant agreeing that “fish” means sea-creatures. The astronomers could resolve their dispute by having IAU sharpen the meaning of the term “planet.” However, according to semantic externalism, this assumed control is largely illusory.²⁵ Many externalist arguments have shown that the grounding facts for meaning consist in part of various external, non-psychological facts: meanings ain’t in the head. External factors shape, influence and determine the intension and extension of linguistic expressions and speakers’ mental contents. These factors include features of the past such as the introductions of expressions (initial dubbing and “baptism” events), the causal and historic factors of how people use certain expressions, experts and social institutions, and the list goes on. In other words, presupposing words to mean something doesn’t make it so.

Here are two examples inspired by Burge (1979) and Kripke (1980). If two naïve patients talk to each other and agree that they both have arthritis in the thigh, their joint agreement about how “arthritis” ought to be used will not change the fact that both of them have been using the term in a wrongful manner. If two speakers agree that from now on when they speak of “Jane” it no longer designates Jane but Henry, their consensus will not change the initial event of Jane’s parents’ naming her Jane in the past or disrupt all the causal chains connecting those who use the name and the initial naming event. The list of external *metasemantic facts* — facts that ground the meaning of linguistic expressions — is long and open. If all these metasemantic facts that fix the meaning of the terms are outside the speakers’ control, it makes acts of metalinguistic negotiation hard to justify, because there is no way for interlocutors to fruitfully control the relevant metasemantic facts of meanings that they aspire to negotiate.²⁶

My take of this externalist objection is that it demonstrates the limits of metalinguistic negotiations. At first glance, the scope of metalinguistic negotiations could be narrow and temporary. It works only on a conversation-by-conversation basis. Speakers may not use the meanings of expressions that they agree on in one conversation to navigate their future linguistic practices after the conversation is over. Their ICG updates proposed by their negotiation process can be fleeting, only effective within limited contexts and timeframes much like Ludlow’s conception of *microlanguages*, one-off fleeting languages he thinks humans build and discard on a conversation-by-conversation basis.²⁷ Even if the speakers could agree on the meaning of certain expression in their conversation, the agreement does not necessarily have any influence on the conversation next door or anyone else that uses the expression. It is then important to recognize the difference between *metasemantic bas*, the grounding facts for meaning and reference, and *metasemantic superstructure*, which consists of our beliefs, presuppositions, preference, intentions, theories, and other attitudes about meanings and reference, what they are and what they ought to be.²⁸ Given that metalinguistic negotiations take place over the ICG, the changes pro-

²⁵Cappelen, 74.

²⁶Sterken, R.K., “Linguistic Intervention and Transformative Communicative Disruptions”, *Conceptual Engineering and Conceptual Ethics* (2020): 422.

²⁷Ludlow, P., *Living Words Meaning Underdetermination and the Dynamic Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2018): 3.

²⁸Cappelen, H., *Fixing Language: an Essay on Conceptual Engineering* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018): 59.

posed and made to the ICG throughout the process should be recognized to occur within the metalinguistic superstructure of the disputed expression instead of the metasemantic base. Metalinguistic negotiations aim at changing what the speakers accept certain expressions to mean, instead of what certain expressions actually mean. In other words, the negotiating efforts do not directly change the meanings of certain expressions but change the meanings the speakers accept for the sake of communication.

The difference between metasemantic superstructure and metasemantic base can be seen in how people communicate through encrypted messages. The speakers settle on a set of rules to take what certain expressions mean in their conditioned conversational context, without making a commitment about what these expressions mean for them in other contexts or the actual meanings of the expressions. In response to the “Lack of Control” principle of Cappelen that speakers have little or no control over what words mean, I would like to propose an “In Control” principle that speakers mostly have control over what they accept to be the meaning of certain linguistic expressions in their ICG through joint efforts of metalinguistic negotiations.²⁹ It is worth noticing that the “In Control” principle does not require more than the basic premises of Stalnakerian common ground model, which assume that speakers do at least have control over their common ground and what they accept. Therefore, semantic externalism is not directly at odds with the metalinguistic negotiation theory, since it only requires the speakers to have control over what they accept to be the meanings of linguistic expressions, not control over what the expressions actually mean. A more cynical view is that the speakers could make and even force certain people to misinterpret sentences containing particular expressions by exploiting the speakers’ charitable interpretative nature, cooperativity and their common goal of successful communication. A more charitable reading could instead argue that the end of successful communication justifies the means of “forcing” misinterpretation. If all that the speakers want is effective communication, they could use the expressions as tools in whatever ways as long as they serve the purpose of successful exchange of information. Such an overly simplistic view apparently neglects all the other things speakers want to achieve through linguistic practices, which might as well constitute good or bad reasons for speakers to force misinterpretations that do good to them. However, it does explain how metalinguistic negotiation should be compatible with semantic externalism.

While it has been conceded that metalinguistic negotiation does not *directly* legislate the actual meaning of the term the disputants are using, it could still contribute to diachronic meaning changes, and influence these meaning shifts under the view of externalism. After all, in the “fishy” case, the inspector and the merchant cared about how “fish” is used in their court dispute because they believed the dispute would affect the court-sanctioned meaning of “fish” and, in turn, affect taxation. But even the idea that the court decision could effectively change the public meaning of terms requires further scrutiny. The dispute could still affect the taxation result, even if the court, without changing the public meaning of “fish”, forced a misinterpretation of the term in the legal context. The court’s ruling may only work on the metasemantic superstructure of these expressions, by forcing the participants of trials to accept certain meanings of expressions in court with the aid of the state and its law enforcement, without actually impact-

²⁹Cappelen, 72.

ing the metasemantic bases and actual meanings of the expressions.³⁰ It is even unclear whether the court has the supposed control over the public meaning of these expressions since the court may not have much control over the metasemantic base of words after all. The argument is that the metasemantic mechanism that generates current meanings and drives meaning changes remains largely *inscrutable*.³¹

It then becomes difficult to come up with a clear and complete picture of how individual metalinguistic negotiation each contributes to possible public meaning shifts. Still, I want to end the paper by making a few proposals. Consider the example of the diachronic meaning shift of “salad”. Not too long ago, “salad” meant a cold dish served with high preponderance of green leaves. A concoction of cold cut fruit would not qualify as salads. Nowadays, however, “salad” could designate various warm leaf-free concoctions and concoctions of cold cut fruits. The meaning of “salad”, both its intension and extension, is observed to have shifted through time.³² It is not hard to postulate how metalinguistic negotiations on a conversation-by-conversation basis could contribute to such diachronic meaning shift. Maybe at certain point some chefs without much deliberate coordination started calling their new warm leaf-free concoctions “salad” in their menus. Many customers rejected this practice, since they found it inappropriate. Many conversations took place, involving “this is not a salad,” “the salad has no green leaves,” or “this is not the salad that I ordered.” Through metalinguistic negotiations, some customers would accept the proposed changes to the ICG between them and the chefs, and carry the changes with them in future conversations, presupposing that “salad” could be used to talk about warm leaf-free concoctions. The proposed update to the metasemantic superstructure then occurs on a large scale as words spread and changes are continuously being made to the metasemantic superstructure of “salad”, which, in an inscrutable and yet-to-be-explored manner, continuously influence the metasemantic base of the word “salad”. When the change becomes salient enough, someone makes the observation that the meaning of “salad” has changed. Therefore, as long as an externalist semantic theory allows for and seeks to explain the diachronic meaning shifts, metalinguistic negotiation, with its limits and scope of influence over the ICG and metasemantic superstructures of interlocutors, could still contribute to and explain certain types of meaning changes in various ways that require further investigation. For example, if externalists are to believe that complex use patterns of lexical items overtime constitute part of the metasemantic base of language, metalinguistic negotiations, which revise speakers’ accepted way of using terms and influence how they proceed to use those terms, apparently influence speakers’ use patterns and contribute to the changes of the metasemantic base. It is not hard to imagine that countless non-canonical metalinguistic disputes over whether a gay couple could *marry* each other, whether a husband could *rape* his wife, or whether whale oil is fish oil contribute to the supposed meaning changes of “marry,” “rape” and “fish oil,” as speakers, via metalinguistic negotiations, discard the old ways and accept new ways of using these terms and bring about use patterns of these terms that constitute part of the metasemantic base.³³

³⁰Cappelen, 76.

³¹Cappelen, 73.

³²Dorr, C. and Hawthorne, J., “Semantic Plasticity and Speech Reports”, *Philosophical Review*, 123, no. 3 (January 2014): 284.

³³The same analysis might not apply to natural kind terms, and could work at its best in explaining meaning changes of terms of groupings that people agree are a matter of choice.

5 Conclusion

It is best to explain non-canonical disputes that seem to express genuine disagreements as literal expression of incompatible content through the model of metalinguistic negotiation. While the model validates the observation that speakers mean different things in these disputes, it also proves to be compatible with semantic externalism. Metalinguistic negotiations only directly work on what the speakers take the words to mean instead of the words' actual meanings that are partially fixed by external non-psychological factors. However, this does not mean that metalinguistic negotiations cannot contribute to meaning changes of words at all. They still influence and explain meaning changes by exploiting an inscrutable relationship between their metasemantic superstructure and metasemantic base that requires further investigation.

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