

# Nonnegotiable Contents

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The attendant in the post office picks up an oddly shaped ruler and says:

1. Let me measure your package with a koba.<sup>1</sup>

Encountering an empty cell, the prisoner inexplicably missing:

2. The prisoner managed to Houdini his way out.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Armstrong, (2016), after Markson and Bloom, (1997).

<sup>2</sup>After Clark & Clark, (1979, 784).

# Lexical Innovation and Semantic knowledge

- A case of meaning (and communication) without prior knowledge of meaning conventions.
- Such cases buck the received wisdom that communication requires shared content.

- Communicative success is achieved through coordination on content *on the fly*.<sup>3</sup>
- Little *antecedent* knowledge of background conventions is needed: we establish conventions on the fly.

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<sup>3</sup>C.f. Armstrong, (2016), Carston (2002), Davidson, (1986), Ludlow (2008, 2014), and Plunkett and Sundell (2013).

# Renegotiating Extant Conventions

- Small step from innovation to the Dynamic Meaning Hypothesis (DMH): that agents can renegotiate *extant* conventions, on the fly.

## Example?

3. You should avoid hiring that plumber because he is very erotic.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>After Schiffer (1972).

## Another Example? (Ludlow, 2014)

4. Secretariat is an athlete.

5. No, Secretariat is not an athlete.

↪ conversational crisis

↪ the hope is to provide convincing reasons to favor one side of the debate

↪ similar cases with more laden terms, e.g., 'woman,' 'marriage,'  
'family,' 'torture.'

## Example

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- All relevant facts are familiar to everyone involved.



## Example

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- So, not a disagreement about facts.
- So, must be conceptual or verbal.

- Negotiation allows for communicative success: joint grasp of content.
- Resolution requires understanding how to adjust background conventions.

## Serious Problems for DMH...

- Problems for characterizing the nature of the linguistic change.
- Deep tension with possibility of ignorance and error about meaning (Putnam 1975; Burge 1979; Kripke 1980).

# **Lexical Choice vs Meaning Choice**

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## Lexical Choice vs Meaning Choice

- **Meaning Choice:** settle on one of many competing *meanings* for a single item.
- **Lexical Choice:** choice between different lexical items (e.g., 'athlete<sub>1</sub>', ..., 'athlete<sub>n</sub>').

## Lexical Choice

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- The debate is over whether to introduce a new homonym for our word 'athlete.'

## A Worry: Can't Explain Why We Care

- Why should we care about a homonym?



## A Worry: Can't Explain Why We Care

- Why should we care about a homonym?  
↪ 'schmathlete' vs 'athlete.'

## Appeal to normative, or functional role?<sup>5</sup>

- 'athlete' plays a role in our lives that wouldn't transfer to 'schmathlete.'

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<sup>5</sup>Plunkett Sundell, 2013; Haslanger, 2012

## Appeal to normative, or functional role?

- Such role cannot be tied to the meaning (for it wouldn't be preserved by non-synonyms).
- But it doesn't seem to be tied to another aspect of the word, e.g., its articulation (for its preserved by synonyms).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Stojnić and Lepore, (2021; forthcoming) argue articulation can be normatively significant, but not in a way that'd be of use here.

## Content Choice

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# Content Negotiation Proper

- Negotiation and disagreement over what the word does (or should) mean.
- Resolution consists in settling on a particular content on the fly.

- The strategy mis-locates the focus of conversational crises: as being about the content of particular *words*.
- But the negotiation should affect synonyms (within and across languages).

# Conceptual Change?

- Synonyms express the same concept.
- Negotiation pushes for conceptual change.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Haslanger, (2000, 2020), inter alia.

# Conceptual Change?

- Requires that contents of concepts can change, the concept remaining the same!  
(Controversial, won't dispute here.)
- How do concepts play a normative role?<sup>8</sup>
- *Ex hypothesi* not in virtue of meaning.)
  - ↪ If ATHLETE came to denote (also) rocks, it presumably wouldn't play the same role; same if MARRIAGE came to denote bachelorhood.

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<sup>8</sup>Similar sentiment in Cappelen (2018).



## Problem for Meaning Change and Conceptual Change

- Suppose we resolved 'athlete' applies both to human and non-humans. Then consider (4)–(5):
4. We used to think that Secretariat was not an athlete, but now we think he is.
  5. We stopped thinking Secretariat was not an athlete.

# **Ignorance and Error, Shared Content and Metalinguistic Negotiation**

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6. A: I want some water.

7. B: Here you go!

↪ Compatible with all sorts of ignorance and error about 'water.'<sup>9</sup>

↪ The successful usage is grounded in causal-historical connections between the members of the linguistic network, leading back to baptism.

↪ Trivial knowledge is not useful: 'water' means whatever 'water' means.

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<sup>9</sup>Burge, 1979; Kripke, 1980; Putnam, 1975; c.f. Evans, 1973.

- The meaning of 'athlete' grounded in the network of causal-historical connections leading to baptism.
- So long as speakers are within the same network, 'athlete' in their mouths means the same thing.
- Background beliefs are irrelevant.

# Pragmatics?

- By saying something blatantly false a speaker signals a non-standard use, and hence, pragmatically conveys either
  - i) a word should be introduced in accord with this use (as per ambiguity), or
  - ii) the extant word should have a different meaning (as per meaning choice).

## If it signals a new term should be introduced...

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- ...how does it do so?

- Typically the speaker doesn't intend to use a term non-standardly, so *ipso facto* isn't implicating (Grice, 1975).
- *Even if* the speaker were intending to implicate a new term should be introduced, such implicature isn't calculable on the basis of (4) or (5).
  - ↪ We have to start with the literal meaning; but disagreement reveals, for all we know, one of us is confused.

8. Even if Secretariat is not an athlete, we should have a word like 'athlete' that applies to Secretariat as well.
- ↪ Even if we mutually agree to act according to (9), to act on it we'd have to start with the original content.
  - ↪ Further, there's indefinitely many contents "like" that of 'athlete' but including Secretariat: *athlete or Secretariat, athlete or a horse, etc.*



# If it signals the content of the term should change

- Analogous problems:
  - ↪ Typically speaker's won't have the right intentions to implicate the term should have some particular novel meaning.
  - ↪ Even if they did, the implicature wouldn't be calculable.

9. Even if Secretariat is not an athlete, the word 'athlete' should apply to Secretariat as well.
- ↪ Even if we mutually agree to act according to (9), we'd have to start with the original meaning.
  - ↪ Further, there's indefinitely many meanings "like" that of 'athlete' but including Secretariat: *athlete or Secretariat, athlete or a horse, etc.*

# Underspecification?

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# Underspecified meanings?

- 'athlete' has underspecified standing content.
- negotiation is about specifying the underspecification:
  - ↪ e.g., narrowing application, or sharpening, reducing vagueness (Ludlow, 2014; Carston 2002).

# “Not Anything Goes” Problem

- We cannot negotiate ‘athlete’ to mean *sportsperson or a rock*.
- Its standing meaning, even if underdetermined, must constrain the possible ways in which we can reduce indeterminacy.
  - ↪ ignorance and error kick in again.

- Must start with the actual content, yet the disagreement (typically) reveals either of us could be wrong.
- Even starting from the actual meaning, there're indefinitely many ways to reduce underspecification, again.
  - ↪ indefinitely many (underspecified) meanings just like 'athlete' but including Secretariat.

# Shared Contents and Lexical Innovation

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1. Let me measure your package with a koba.

↪ Doesn't this show agents can coordinate on meanings on the fly?



# Initiation into the Network

- Once exposed, the audience can use 'koba' to express its meaning: e.g., ask, "What is a koba?" or "How does a koba work?"
- They can do so even without any specific hypothesis about what a koba is.
- Interlocutors' understanding can diverge in many ways: regarding what koba measures, and how, whether it must be oddly shaped, etc.
- The speaker can also be confused in all sorts of ways.

- (3). You should avoid hiring that plumber because he is very erotic.
- ↪ The hearer exploits the assumption that Ms. Malaprop believes 'erotic' means whatever the English 'erratic' means (if anything).
  - ↪ They can piggyback on this: whatever the content of 'erratic' is, that's what she attempted to express.
  - ↪ Both could be misapplying, or misunderstand, both words.

## But what of Neologizing?

2. The prisoner managed to Houdini his way out.

↪ Aren't there indefinitely many possibilities for what 'houdinied' could mean?

## But what of Neologizing?

- ↪ If a neologizing is successful, a content will be fixed.
- ↪ Still, no guarantee agents will have a joint grasp of content in any substantive sense.
- ↪ Their divergences might be revealed in future conversational crises over a disputed instance of houdining.

- The meaning of ‘athlete’ is constant through the evolution of our understanding of athletehood.
- This understanding can diverge from what the initial neologizer might have had in mind, *and* from the actual content.
- Conversational crises can drive and affect such evolution.
  - ↪ We approach them through “litigation” or a kind of public reasoning (Ludlow 2013): offering analogies with “core” cases, point out important properties and distinctions, etc.

## Conclusion

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## We've argued...

- Meanings are non-negotiable.
- No metalinguistic interpretation: either disambiguation, or meaning change, or reduction of under-specification, plausibly models conversational crises.
- Further, DMH is in tension with the stability of linguistic usage in the face of ignorance and error—a significant cost.

- Conversational crises highlight not a difference in meaning, but in understanding: we disagree over the phenomena (e.g., athletehood).
- If the phenomenon is successfully named, we can investigate it.
- But such inquiry is not a process of changing or constructing meanings.



**Thank You!**