

# Verbal Disagreement and Semantic Plans\*

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*Abstract.* I develop an expressivist account of verbal disagreements as practical disagreements over how to use words rather than factual disagreements over what words actually mean. This account enjoys several advantages over others in the literature: it can be implemented in a neo-Stalnakerian possible worlds framework; it accounts for cases where speakers are undecided on how exactly to interpret an expression; it avoids appeals to fraught notions like subject matter, charitable interpretation, and joint-carving; and it naturally extends to an analysis of metalinguistic negotiations.

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## 1 Introduction

In New York, sandwiches are currently subject to a sales tax of nearly 9%. Tax Bulletin ST-835, which lays out what kinds of things count as sandwiches for the purposes of this law, explicitly mentions burritos as an example of a sandwich.<sup>1</sup> I suspect that I am not alone in thinking this is a bit of a stretch.<sup>2</sup> With this in mind, consider the following dialogue:

- (1) A: Burritos aren't sandwiches! Sandwiches are made using two separate slices of bread.  
B: Not necessarily. After all, pita sandwiches are sandwiches, even though they're made using a single pita bread. So if pita sandwiches are sandwiches, why not burritos?  
A: But surely a sandwich is not just anything surrounded by bread. What about hot dogs? Those are most definitely not sandwiches.  
B: Actually, I think hot dogs are sandwiches. . .

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.tax.ny.gov/pubs\\_and\\_bulls/tg\\_bulletins/st/sandwiches.htm](https://www.tax.ny.gov/pubs_and_bulls/tg_bulletins/st/sandwiches.htm)

<sup>2</sup> This example is inspired by an episode of NPR's *Planet Money* (Ep. 554, "How the Burrito Became a Sandwich", <https://www.npr.org/sections/money/2014/07/18/332612643/episode-554-how-the-burrito-became-a-sandwich>), where the host calls the classification of burritos "bizarre". This example is also discussed by Ludlow (2014, pp. 10–13).

The two speakers in (1) disagree over whether burritos are sandwiches (among other things). But one gets the sense that this disagreement does not concern some objective feature of burritos. The speakers need not disagree over which things are burritos, how burritos are made, what they're made of, and so on. Rather, the disagreement seems to be about what to call a "sandwich". Put differently, the speakers seem engaged in a *verbal* disagreement rather than a *factual* one.

Many philosophical disputes have been deemed to be entirely verbal. Carnap (1950) famously argued that ontological disputes come down to different choices of linguistic framework (cf. Thomasson 2015, 2017). Hirsch (2002, 2005, 2007, 2009) argues that many metaphysical disputes over mereology and persistence are verbal. Sidelle (2007) suggests the same for disputes over the mind, free will, justification, knowledge, and even moral luck. Chalmers (2011) maintains that most disputes over "What is X?" questions are verbal. Given the prevalence of such claims within philosophy, it is not surprising that philosophers have been interested in investigating what it means for a disagreement to be "verbal".

The goal of this paper is to give a novel account of verbal disagreement. In short, a verbal disagreement is one where the parties involved disagree over *how to use words*. Such disagreements do not simply boil down to *what words actually mean*. Instead, they are often disagreements in *plan*: the parties involved agree on the relevant facts, including facts about how language is actually used, but adopt incompatible plans for how to use language. Verbal disagreements differ from factual disagreements over language in that the former, though not the latter, are expressed, rather than explicitly asserted, through the disputants' use of language. I call this an **expressivist account** of verbal disagreement, as it is inspired by various forms of plan-based expressivism from the literature (e.g., Gibbard 2003; MacFarlane 2016; Kocurek, Jerzak, and Rudolph 2020).

Theorists working on verbal disputes often warn against having a verbal dispute over what a verbal dispute is (see, e.g., Hirsch 2009, p. 242 and Chalmers 2011, p. 520). While I do not share this concern (§2), I agree that we shouldn't get too hung up on what a verbal dispute "really" is. In presenting my expressivist account, I do not mean to suggest there is a uniquely correct account of verbal disagreement. My goal is not to argue against the many alternative accounts that have been proposed in the literature (Hirsch, 2005, 2009; Sider, 2009, 2011; Chalmers, 2011; Balcerak Jackson, 2014; Jenkins, 2014; Vermeulen, 2018; Abreu Zavaleta, 2021). In fact, given the right auxiliary assumptions, my account can be viewed as a synthesis of many extant accounts (§5).

## 2 “Merely Verbal Disputes”

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Still, I believe the expressivist account of verbal disagreement is interestingly different from others in the literature and enjoys some distinctive advantages over them:

- it can be implemented in a neo-Stalnakerian possible worlds framework of communication;
- it accounts for disagreements where one or more speaker is undecided on how exactly to interpret an expression;
- it avoids the use of fraught notions like subject matters (Jenkins, 2014; Balcerak Jackson, 2014), charitable interpretations (Hirsch, 2005, 2009), in-virtue-of relations (Chalmers, 2011), and joint-carving (Sider, 2011), and instead reduces the verbal-factual distinction entirely to the mental states of the speakers involved; and
- it extends naturally to an analysis of metalinguistic negotiation.

Here is an outline. After clarifying the target notion of verbal disagreement I aim to analyze (§2), I explicate disagreement over how to use words by introducing the notion of a “semantic plan”, which is roughly a speaker’s plan concerning how to use language (§3). With this in place, I present a formal implementation of my account in a possible worlds framework and explain how verbal disagreements are expressed in conversation (§4). I then briefly compare the expressivist account with other accounts in the literature (§5). Finally, I extend this account to metalinguistic negotiations (§6) before concluding (§7).

## 2 “Merely Verbal Disputes”

Many philosophical disputes have been criticized as being “merely” verbal. However, the term ‘merely verbal dispute’ is potentially confusing and the literature does not use it in a univocal manner. My account can be seen as an account of “merely verbal disputes” in some senses, but not in others. So before presenting my account, I will briefly comment on the sense in which my account is, and is not, an account of “merely verbal disputes”.

First, following the literature, let’s distinguish a **disagreement**, i.e., a conflict in attitude, from a **dispute**, i.e., a linguistic exchange where speakers (at least apparently) express a conflict in attitude (Plunkett and Sundell, 2013; Jenkins, 2014; Beddor, 2019). Disagreements can arise across vast spatiotemporal distances and do not require the parties involved to realize they disagree. Thus, I may disagree with Aristotle over the good life, but we are not engaged in a “dispute”.

My focus here is on verbal disagreement, not just verbal disputes. Most of the literature tries to directly analyze the notion of a verbal *dispute* as a linguistic exchange. By contrast, I start with an analysis of the underlying *disagreement* expressed in such disputes. Thus, I aim to first characterize verbal disagreements even amongst speakers who are not engaged in a conversation.<sup>3</sup> I will then analyze verbal disputes in §4.4.

Second, let’s distinguish **merely verbal** disputes from **wholly verbal** disputes. The former is meant to carry a negative connotation whereas the latter is not.<sup>4</sup> Merely verbal disputes are those that arise from a verbal confusion: the speakers only *appear* to disagree because they misunderstand what the other side is saying. As a result, merely verbal disputes are often said to be “distinctively pointless”, as the speakers involved do not “really” disagree: they are simply “talking past one another”. Wholly verbal disputes, by contrast, are those that arise from a disagreement over language (in a sense to be made precise). Such disputes need not involve any verbal confusion or misunderstanding: speakers may be fully aware that they mean different things by the disputed term and yet *genuinely* disagree.

To illustrate, consider the following example of a merely verbal dispute (the bracketed material is not pronounced):

- (2) Monet: Bancroft went to the [money] bank this morning.  
Riviera: Bancroft didn’t go to the [river]bank this morning!

Here, the speakers are clearly talking past one another: they only *appear* to disagree over a wholly factual matter (viz., where Bancroft went this morning) due to a verbal confusion over ‘bank’.

Contrast (2) with the burrito dispute in (1). In that case, neither side misunderstands the other: they both know that they are using the word ‘sandwich’ differently. Yet the speakers are not “talking past one another”: what to call a “sandwich” is *precisely* what is at issue! The speakers *genuinely disagree* over whether to classify burritos as “sandwiches”. This disagreement may or not be frivolous depending on the details of the case (perhaps the speakers are congress members deciding whether to revise the tax law).

<sup>3</sup> The “expressivist” label should not be taken to imply that a verbal disagreement requires *verbally expressing* that disagreement in a conversation. If one finds the label misleading, one could call my account “non-cognitivist” instead.

<sup>4</sup> Some use the term ‘(merely) verbal dispute’ more neutrally for what I’m calling a wholly verbal dispute (e.g., Balcerak Jackson 2014; Abreu Zavaleta 2021). Others use the term negatively (cf. Jenkins 2014; Vermeulen 2018). Chalmers (2011) often uses ‘wholly verbal’ for cases I would label as ‘merely verbal’, even though his account of wholly verbal disputes does not carry this negative connotation.

My focus in what follows is on analyzing wholly verbal disputes (and disagreements), not merely verbal ones. Thus, as I use the term, a “verbal dispute” need not be pointless (cf. Balcerak Jackson 2014; Knoll 2020, 2021; Pitcovski 2022). Disputes over words like ‘woman’, ‘marriage’, ‘torture’, ‘terrorism’, ‘free will’, ‘knowledge’, and so on may be wholly verbal, but that in no way undermines their significance (Haslanger, 2000, 2005, 2012; McConnell-Ginet, 2006, 2008; Plunkett and Sundell, 2013; Plunkett, 2015). Of course, many verbal disputes *are* pointless; but so are many factual disputes. By itself, the charge of verbalness is innocuous: there is nothing wrong with wholly verbal disputes as such.

### 3 Disagreement Over Language

Verbal disagreements are characterized as disagreements “over language”. But in what sense? Sometimes, this talk is simply meant to refer to disagreements over *what words mean*. In this section, I motivate an alternative suggestion: verbal disagreements are disagreements “over language” in that they concern *how to use words*. These are *practical* disagreements, which often arise from differences in plans for language use rather than beliefs about how one’s community uses language. Speakers verbally disagree by using language differently—that is, by associating different meanings with the relevant words (Jenkins, 2014; Vermeulen, 2018).

#### 3.1 Speaker Meaning vs. Semantic Meaning

There is a familiar distinction between **speaker meaning**, i.e., what a speaker means by an expression, and **semantic meaning**, i.e., what an expression means (cf. Grice 1968, 1969; Vermeulen 2018; Pinder 2021). One way to understand this distinction is as the distinction between the meaning a speaker  $S$  associates with an expression  $e$  (as in ‘ $S$  means  $m$  by  $e$ ’) and the meaning of  $e$  in some language  $L$  (as in ‘ $e$  means  $m$  in  $L$ ’, or just ‘ $e$  means  $m$ ’ if  $L$  is contextually understood).

Speaker meaning is largely determined by the speaker’s intentions. Nothing in principle prevents a speaker from associating a nonstandard meaning with an expression: they can *choose* what *they* mean.<sup>5</sup> Seman-

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<sup>5</sup> Cappelen (2018, p. 76) argues that the classic arguments for externalism about meaning (e.g., Putnam 1975; Burge 1979) show that speaker meaning is not within our control. Others have argued this conclusion does not follow (Pinder, 2021; Koch, 2021). Speaker meaning may be outside a speaker’s control if they intend for their speaker meaning to align with external facts, though these intentions are not mandatory (§3.2; cf. Riggs 2019).

tic meaning, by contrast, is largely determined by the collective intentions of the relevant linguistic community and/or various external factors. An individual speaker cannot simply choose what words semantically mean.

Throughout, I model meanings as **intensions**, i.e., functions from worlds to extensions. Other models of meaning may be used if desired, but intensions are relatively simple and easy to work with. One way to model speaker meaning, then, is as a choice of an **interpretation**, which maps each non-logical expression of the target language to an intension of the appropriate type. Thus, a speaker  $S$  means  $m$  by  $e$  if  $S$ 's interpretation maps  $e$  to  $m$ . (As we'll see in §3.3, this 'if' should not be strengthened to an 'iff'.)

There is a further distinction between two notions of speaker meaning. Suppose Greta is learning English as a second language. She intends to use 'grass' the way it's used in English. But she mistakenly thinks 'grass' means snow. In one sense, when Greta says 'Grass is white', she means that snow is white: Greta thinks 'grass' refers to snow, so what she is trying to say is that snow is white. In another sense, however, Greta means that grass is white: Greta's intention, first and foremost, is to use 'grass' however English speakers use it, so what she's actually saying is that grass is white.

This ambiguity arises because what *the speaker thinks* fulfills their intentions can diverge from what *actually* fulfills them. Let's use the labels **internal speaker meaning** and **external speaker meaning** for this distinction. Thus, Greta internally speaker means that snow is white: she believes 'grass' refers to snow, and so in her head, she is saying that snow is white. But she externally speaker means that grass is white: she intends to mean by 'grass' whatever English speakers mean, and so will be interpreted as saying that grass is white.

Both notions of speaker meaning are theoretically important. In what follows, I will use internal speaker meaning to analyze verbal disagreement, since doing so, in my opinion, more closely matches our intuitions about what should count as a "verbal" disagreement. So unless otherwise stated, the phrase 'speaker meaning' should be understood internally.

#### 3.2 Two Ways to Disagree Over Meaning

Verbal disagreements arise when speakers associate different meanings with some expression. In other words, they are disagreements in *speaker* meaning. Disagreements over what words *semantically* mean, by contrast, are (at least partly) factual disagreements that often can be settled empirically.

### 3 Disagreement Over Language

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ically, e.g., by consulting a dictionary.<sup>6</sup> While verbal disagreements may arise from a factual disagreement over semantic meaning, they need not always (cf. Jenkins 2014, p. 14; Balcerak Jackson 2014, p. 38).

Here's an example. In 2006, the International Astronomical Union (IAU) redefined the word 'planet' to require planets to "clear their orbital neighborhood", meaning they must be significantly larger than anything within their orbit. They did this because there are several objects in the solar system with physical properties similar to Pluto's, and astronomers worried that future observations would reveal dozens more, leading to a proliferation in the number of planets. The new definition ruled out all the Pluto-like objects, but it also ruled out Pluto itself, since its orbit crossed with Neptune's. Many people were upset by this decision and even resisted it.

With this in mind, consider (3).

- (3) Yahya: Pluto is a planet.  
Nadia: No it's not! According to the astronomical definition, for something to count as a planet, it must clear its orbital neighborhood—and Pluto certainly does not.  
Yahya: I don't care about that. Pluto is still a planet to me.

Just for concreteness, let's suppose the semantic meaning of 'planet' is given by the IAU's definition and both speakers know this. We can even imagine that Yahya and Nadia are two gods, who know everything about how English speakers use 'planet' as well as Pluto's physical characteristics. Thus, (3) is not a factual disagreement over what 'planet' semantically means in English. Even so, they can still coherently carry out the dispute in (3). They disagree insofar as they associate different meanings with 'planet'.

One reason speakers engage in such verbal disputes, despite knowing all the relevant facts about semantic meaning, is to *advocate* for a certain meaning for an expression to be adopted by their linguistic community (cf. Plunkett and Sundell 2013; Thomasson 2017; see §6). We can imagine Yahya taking part in pro-Pluto protests, urging astronomers to revert back to the old definition of 'planet'. In doing so, Yahya advocates for his preferred interpretation of 'planet' by *using* it that way—by *showing* rather than *telling*.

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<sup>6</sup> I say "partly" factual, since it might be a partly verbal question what an expression "really" means in natural languages such as English. The problem of determining the semantic meaning of an expression from speaker meanings is, in my view, akin to the problem of judgement and preference aggregation, i.e., of determining the beliefs and desires of a group from the beliefs and desires of its members. Multiple aggregation methods may be available and there may be no uniquely correct method of extracting "the" meaning of an expression from the complex patterns of use in a linguistic community (cf. Kocurek et al. 2020, §6).

Conversely, speakers can factually disagree over semantic meaning without verbally disagreeing. Suppose Nadia had believed that the IAU's definition of 'planet' does not include the orbital neighborhood condition, so that her interpretation of 'planet' aligns with Yahya's. In that case, they would (verbally) *agree* with the claim 'Pluto is a planet'. But they would still factually disagree over the semantic meaning of 'Pluto is a planet'.

Factual disagreements over semantic meaning often give rise to verbal disagreements. This is because speakers often intend for their speaker meaning to line up with semantic meaning (cf. the example of Greta in §3.1). Given those intentions, speaker meaning will depend on the speaker's factual beliefs concerning semantic meaning. In that case, factual disagreements over semantic meaning will give rise to differences in speaker meaning, which in turn will give rise to verbal disagreements.

But the choice to align one's speaker meaning with semantic meaning is a contingent one. One could equally decide to use an expression in a way that one knows does not line up with its use by the broader linguistic community (cf. footnote 5). In such cases, factual disagreements over semantic meaning need not give rise to verbal disagreement. So while it is natural for factual disagreements over semantic meaning to go hand in hand with verbal disagreements, the two are distinct phenomena.

### 3.3 Semantic Plans

Suppose that Yahya thinks the semantic meaning of 'planet' aligns with the IAU's definition. In that case, what Yahya speaker means by 'planet' in (3) comes apart from what he believes 'planet' semantically means. Thus, the following thesis is false:

**Meaning is Believing**

$S$  speaker means  $m$  by  $e$  iff  $S$  believes that  $e$  semantically means  $m$ .

Speaker meaning is not a doxastic state.<sup>7</sup> It is rather, I want to suggest, the

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<sup>7</sup> This is compatible with there being a systematic connection between speaker meaning and belief. Indeed, my own account of speaker meaning (Meaning is Planning) analyzes speaker meaning partly (but not entirely) in terms of a speaker's beliefs. An anonymous referee points out another potential candidate principle governing the connection:

**Meaning is Believed Meaning**

$S$  speaker means  $m$  by  $e$  iff  $S$  believes that  $S$  speaker means  $m$  by  $e$ .

Officially, I remain neutral on this principle. Even if it is true, however, what's important here is just that it cannot be used as a *reductive analysis* of speaker meaning.

result of a **semantic plan** concerning how to use, or interpret, words.<sup>8</sup>

A semantic plan is a kind of decision: it is a decision to associate certain meanings with certain expressions, either in general or for the purposes of a particular conversation.<sup>9</sup> This decision will generally be informed by the speaker's beliefs and desires, including beliefs about how others around them use words and desires to coordinate their usage with other speakers. But adopting a plan is not the same as believing or desiring something. Instead, it is an intention: in adopting a plan, one intends to perform actions in accordance with that plan (cf. Bratman 1987). Similarly, a semantic plan is not a semantic belief (about how others use words) or a semantic desire (for one's usage to match with others), but instead an intention to semantically interpret words in a certain fashion.<sup>10</sup>

Like ordinary plans, semantic plans can be incomplete, or **partial**. To give an analogy, I may plan to go out to a restaurant tonight while being undecided on which restaurant to go to. Similarly, I may be undecided on whether to interpret 'sandwich' so that it applies to certain food items (e.g., burritos), even if I have decided to interpret it so it definitively does apply to some items (e.g., grilled cheese) and definitively does not apply to others (e.g., soup). My semantic plan thus only partly dictates how to interpret 'sandwich', while remaining silent on certain edge cases.

Also like ordinary plans, semantic plans can be **conditional**. By way of analogy, I may plan to go to whatever restaurant my friends want to go to while being unsure which restaurant that is, and thus unsure which restaurant to go to. Similarly, I may intend to define 'planet' however the

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<sup>8</sup> Terminological note: I talk of "use" and "interpret" interchangeably throughout. Semantic plans are plans for how to *use* language in the sense that they're plans for interpreting words. They are not merely plans for applying a word to particular objects at the actual world.

<sup>9</sup> In some cases, we may want to distinguish a speaker's *general* semantic plans from those they adopt *for a specific purpose*. The former concern how a speaker "really" interprets language, whereas the latter concern how they use language in a particular conversation, say. For example, maybe Nadia generally plans to define 'planet' as the IAU does, but decides to temporarily adopt Yahya's definition when talking to him. (This plan need not be dishonest. Perhaps she just does not want to get bogged down in yet another dispute over 'planet'. Or perhaps she is simply playing devil's advocate. Or maybe she just wants to avoid misunderstanding.) In that case, Nadia only temporarily accepts 'Pluto is a planet' for the sake of conversation, but doesn't "really" accept it herself. So her general semantic plans diverge from those she adopts for the sake of conversation. Here, I will set these cases aside for simplicity and assume these two kinds of plans coincide for speakers.

<sup>10</sup> By "semantically interpret", I am setting aside any pragmatic influence on the interpretation of a word or expression. Thus, a speaker's *semantic* plan may not be their *all things considered* plan for how to use language. This is just to keep the exposition clean and simple: we could incorporate a speaker's all things considered linguistic plan, but doing so introduces unnecessary complications that don't affect the general picture.

astronomers define it, but be unsure as to how exactly they define the term, and thus unsure how to define the term myself. My semantic plan thus dictates how to interpret the term *given* astronomers interpret it in a certain way, while remaining silent on how to use the term *simpliciter*.

Two clarifications about these notions are in order.<sup>11</sup> First, a conditional semantic plan is not just a plan to “apply” a term differently in different circumstances. Suppose my semantic plan says the following: no matter how the world turns out, interpret ‘planet’ so that for any world  $w$  and any object  $x$ , ‘planet’ applies to  $x$  at  $w$  iff  $x$  has such-and-such size, shape, and orbit at  $w$ . My plan thus tells me to apply ‘planet’ to different objects, i.e., assign different extensions to ‘planet’, at different worlds. That doesn’t make my plan conditional in the relevant sense, however. For while my plan tells me to *apply* the word ‘planet’ to different objects in different circumstances, it doesn’t tell me to *interpret* the word differently in different circumstances. Put differently, the *extension* it instructs me to assign to ‘planet’ varies from world to world; the *intension* it instructs me to assign to it does not. By contrast, a plan to interpret ‘planet’ as the astronomers do is conditional: the intension it tells me to assign to ‘planet’ varies from world to world.

Second, while partial and conditional plans are both forms of indecision, they are importantly different. Agents with complete yet conditional plans are indecisive only because they lack information. When I defer to my friends about my dinner plans, my plan is conditional: go to the restaurant my friends want to go to, whatever that is. Upon learning my friends want to go to a particular restaurant, I will firm up my intention to go to that restaurant (unless, of course, I change my plans). Agents with partial yet unconditional plans, by contrast, do not know what to do in the moment, not due to a lack of information but because they are simply indecisive. When I know all the relevant facts about the options, my friends’ desires, and so on, and yet still don’t know which restaurant to go to (say they tell me to decide for the group between some options they deem equally good), my plan is partial: I’m simply undecided on where to go. Learning more information won’t help me decide: I just need to pick.

This distinction applies equally to semantic plans. When I defer my usage of ‘planet’ to the IAU, say, my plan is conditional: interpret ‘planet’ the way the IAU does, whatever that is. Upon learning the IAU interprets ‘planet’ with the orbit condition, I will firm up my intention to interpret ‘planet’ in a similar fashion. By contrast, when I know all the relevant astronomical facts and still don’t know whether to interpret ‘planet’ to

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<sup>11</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for helping me clarify these points.

include Pluto or not, my plan is partial: I'm simply undecided on how to interpret 'planet'. Learning more information won't help me decide which interpretation to adopt: I simply need to pick.<sup>12</sup>

This talk of semantic "plans" is inspired by Gibbard's (2003) plan-based expressivism for normative discourse. For Gibbard, a plan can be modeled as a set of maximally specific plans, or "hyperplans", dictating which actions are permissible in which situations. Formally, a hyperplan is a function from worlds to actions.<sup>13</sup> A partial plan is a set of hyperplans with more than one member. A conditional plan is a set where the permissible action(s) it outputs depends on the input world.

For semantic plans, an "action" is effectively a choice of interpretation: when a speaker decides how to interpret the word 'planet', they decide what meaning to associate with 'planet'. A **semantic hyperplan**, then, is a maximally specific plan dictating which interpretations to adopt in which situations.<sup>14</sup> Formally, a semantic hyperplan is a function from worlds to interpretations. Semantic plans are just sets of semantic hyperplans. A partial semantic plan is a set of semantic hyperplans with more than one member. A conditional semantic plan is a set where the interpretation(s) it outputs depends on the input world.

Thus, I propose to replace Meaning is Believing with:<sup>15</sup>

#### **Meaning is Planning**

$S$  (internally) speaker means  $m$  by  $e$  iff  $S$  adopts a semantic plan that assigns  $m$  to  $e$  on every compatible semantic hyperplan in every world compatible with what  $S$  believes.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> In practice, it's rare for plans (semantic or otherwise) to be complete or unconditional. These extreme cases are useful largely for identifying different kinds of indecision.

<sup>13</sup> Gibbard takes hyperplans to map worlds to *sets* of actions, not just a single action. This is to distinguish agents who are undecided about what actions are permitted from agents who are decidedly indifferent. To simplify things, I ignore this complication in what follows.

<sup>14</sup> Gibbard thinks of hyperplans as effectively maximal consistent sets of conditional imperatives of the form "If  $p$ , do  $a$ !". Similarly, we can think of semantic hyperplans as maximal consistent sets of conditional imperatives of the form "If  $p$ , interpret  $e$  to mean  $m$ !". Thanks to an anonymous referee for pointing out this alternative characterization of hyperplans.

<sup>15</sup> This account of speaker meaning is related to Gibbard's (2012) view of meaning. For Gibbard, to believe  $e$  means  $m$  is to be in a planning state: roughly, planning to accept  $e$ -involving claims on  $m$ -involving occasions. Whether this coincides with Meaning is Planning depends, in part, on how normative beliefs relate to plans (see §6.1 for discussion). Regardless of how these relate, I think it's better to analyze speaker meaning directly in terms of semantic plans rather than normative metalinguistic beliefs.

<sup>16</sup> Similarly,  $S$  *externally* speaker means  $m$  by  $e$  iff  $S$  adopts a semantic plan that assigns  $m$  to  $e$  in the actual world on every compatible semantic hyperplan.

Earlier, I talked of “the” meaning a speaker associates with an expression. This was an oversimplification: according to Meaning is Planning, if a speaker’s semantic plans are either partial or conditional, they may not associate a single univocal meaning with an expression. This is the norm, not the exception: most actual speakers do not adopt a maximally specific interpretation of every expression of the language. There is no single thing a speaker “really” means by expressions whose exact interpretation they have not settled. Fortunately, as we’ll see, the expressivist account accommodates verbal disagreements and communication even when speaker meaning is underdetermined (§§4.2–4.4).

Notice that on this account, (internal) speaker meaning depends both on a speaker’s plans *and* their beliefs. So there are two ways speakers can end up adopting different interpretations. They could adopt different semantic plans. Thus, Yahya and Nadia mean different things by ‘planet’ because Yahya plans to follow the folk interpretation while Nadia plans to follow the IAU’s. Alternatively, they could adopt the same semantic plan but have different beliefs about what that plan recommends in their situation. Thus, Greta and ordinary English speakers mean different things by ‘grass’ because Greta has a false belief about English.

Disagreements over how to use words, then, are not *always* disagreements in semantic plans. However, often times, they are. We will see how this works more concretely in §§4.2–4.3.

#### 3.4 Expressing Plans

Consider the dialogue in (3) once more. Yahya asserts ‘Pluto is a planet’; Nadia denies ‘Pluto is a planet’. Again, we may suppose both speakers know all the facts about semantic meaning and all the relevant physical properties of Pluto. What, then, is Yahya doing when he makes his assertion? And what is Nadia doing when she makes her denial?

According to the standard model of communication due to Stalnaker (1970, 1978, 1999, 2002), assertions are proposals to add the content of the assertion to the **common ground**. The common ground of a conversation is the set of propositions that are commonly accepted by the speakers (at least for the purposes of that conversation). On this picture, then, Yahya is proposing that Nadia comes to accept the content of that assertion.

However, if we understand the “content” of an assertion as a possible worlds proposition, then the Stalnakerian picture doesn’t explain what’s going on in (3). After all, Nadia accepts the possible worlds proposition that Yahya expresses with ‘Pluto is a planet’: both speakers know what

Pluto is like physically. Moreover, neither misunderstands what the other is saying: both know what proposition the other expresses by ‘Pluto is a planet’. So on the Stalnakerian picture, Yahya is making a trivial assertion, one that (he knows) Nadia already accepts and should not disagree with.

Kocurek et al. (2020) present a neo-Stalnakerian picture of communication that is able to capture cases like (3).<sup>17</sup> Stalnaker models the common ground of a conversation (or rather, “the context set”) as a set of worlds, viz., the set of worlds left open by what the speakers commonly accept for the sake of conversation. Kocurek et al.’s idea is to instead model the common ground as a set of interpretation-world pairs. Thus, the common ground encodes not only the factual assumptions that speakers share, but also their shared assumptions concerning how to use words.

According to Kocurek et al., the assertoric content of a sentence is not a possible worlds proposition, but instead a fine-grained notion of content they call **semantic value**, viz., the set of interpretation-world pairs  $\langle i, w \rangle$  such that the sentence is true at  $w$  according to  $i$ . When a speaker asserts a sentence  $\phi$ , they are proposing to add the semantic value of  $\phi$  to the common ground. Accepting such a proposal requires the other speakers to not only accept the proposition the utterer expresses with their assertion (should there be a unique such proposition), but also to adopt semantic plans that support the assertion. So in (3), Yahya’s assertion of ‘Pluto is a planet’ is effectively a proposal for Nadia to join him in interpreting ‘planet’ in such a way that Pluto falls in its extension at the actual world.<sup>18</sup> This proposal is non-trivial and is one that Nadia could reasonably refuse. Hence, the neo-Stalnakerian picture explains why disputes like (3), where the speakers agree on all the relevant facts and know what each side means, can nevertheless involve genuine disagreement.

This picture of communication effectively borrows elements from both Barker’s (2002; 2013) and MacFarlane’s (2016; 2020) accounts of vague pred-

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<sup>17</sup> See Armstrong 2013, 2016, 2023; Richard 2019; Soria-Ruiz 2023, forthcoming; Charlow 2022; Mena 2023 for similar accounts. Krifka (2012) adopts a closely related model of common ground as a pair of a set of worlds and a set of interpretations to account for definitional generics. We adopt a model of common ground as a set of pairs, rather than as a pair of sets, in order to reflect the ways in which speakers’ semantic plans may be conditional on contingent facts about the world (cf. Kocurek et al. 2020, p. 14).

<sup>18</sup> This is related to Stalnaker’s (1978) idea to model some assertions using diagonalization. Note, however, that diagonalization does not by itself solve the problem: Yahya and Nadia both know how their linguistic community interpret ‘planet’, and so both should reject the diagonalized content of ‘Pluto is a planet’. See Kocurek et al. 2020, footnotes 28 and 31 for further criticism of the diagonalization strategy.

icates and generalizes them to all predicates.<sup>19</sup> Barker holds that when one asserts a vague sentence like ‘Feynman is tall’, one could either be communicating something about Feynman’s height or about the threshold for ‘tall’, depending on what is common ground. Indeed, in most cases, one simultaneously communicates something about both. MacFarlane adopts a similar view, adding that when a speaker asserts ‘Feynman is tall’, they *express* their plan for where to set the threshold for ‘tall’ without directly asserting that they plan to do so. The content of ‘Feynman is tall’ is not the same as the content of ‘I set the threshold for ‘tall’ so that Feynman meets it’. Thus, they may not be communicating something about what the threshold is for the present context, but rather expressing where they intend to set it.

Like Barker, Kocurek et al. hold that when one asserts ‘Pluto is a planet’, one could either communicate something about the physical characteristics of Pluto or about how to interpret ‘planet’, depending on what is common ground. Indeed, in most cases, one simultaneously communicates something about both (Kocurek et al., 2020, p. 16). And like MacFarlane, they hold that when speakers assert ‘Pluto is a planet’, they *express* their plans for how to interpret ‘planet’. In doing so, they do not thereby *assert* what those plans are. The content of ‘Pluto is a planet’ is not the same as the content of ‘I use the term ‘planet’ so that it applies to Pluto’, just as the content of ‘It’s raining’ is not the same as ‘I believe it is raining’. When a speaker asserts ‘It’s raining’, they *express* their belief that it’s raining without asserting that they believe. Similarly, when speakers make assertions, they *express* their semantic plans without asserting what their semantic plans are.

This account embodies a global form of expressivism, which I’ll call **semantic expressivism**. According to this view, whenever a speaker makes a sincere assertion, they express or display the way they intend to use the expressions in that sentence, at least for the purposes of the conversation.<sup>20</sup>

Semantic expressivism has a ring of triviality to it: *obviously* when a speaker sincerely uses a word, they display how they intend to use it! Even so, it serves as the foundation of the account of verbal disagreement presented in the next section: when speakers engage in a verbal dispute, they express their disagreement over language by using words in incompatible ways, rather than asserting something about their use of those words.

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<sup>19</sup> See also Fleisher 2013; Umbach 2016; Kennedy and Willer 2016, 2022 on predicates of personal taste and Khoo 2020 on “quasi indexicals”.

<sup>20</sup> The notion of semantic plan here only governs *sincere* assertion. I set aside cases where a speaker is lying or intending to conceal their “real” plans (cf. footnotes 9 and 10).

## 4 The Expressivist Account

We now have the tools in place to develop the expressivist account of verbal disagreement. The basic idea is this: speakers verbally disagree over some claim  $\phi$  when they adopt different speaker meanings and on each of their speaker meanings,  $\phi$  expresses a proposition that the speakers do not disagree over. This section presents the account in more detail.

### 4.1 The Simple Account

Let's start with a simple version of the account. The simple account assumes speakers adopt a single, univocal interpretation for every expression of the language. Thus, speakers' semantic plans are neither partial nor conditional. We will lift these assumptions in §4.2, but this simplification is a reasonable idealization for modeling many verbal disagreements.

So on the simple account, a speaker's mental state is represented as a pair of a belief state  $B$  (a set of worlds) and an interpretation  $i$ . Two speakers verbally disagree over  $\phi$  when they disagree over  $\phi$  as a *sentence*, but not over the *proposition* that  $\phi$  expresses on either of their interpretations.

We can formalize this picture straightforwardly in a possible worlds framework. Start with language with an infinite stock of names  $a_1, a_2, a_3, \dots$  and  $n$ -place predicates  $P_1^n, P_2^n, P_3^n, \dots$  for each  $n$ . Given a set of possible worlds  $W$  and a set of objects  $D$ , an **interpretation** is a function  $i$  such that:

- (i)  $i(a): W \rightarrow D$  for each name  $a$
- (ii)  $i(P^n): W \rightarrow \wp(D^n)$  for each  $n$ -place predicate  $P^n$ .

We define truth relative to an interpretation  $i$  and a world  $w$  in the usual way (with standard clauses for the connectives):

$$\llbracket P^n(a_1, \dots, a_n) \rrbracket^{i,w} = \text{T} \iff \langle i(a_1)(w), \dots, i(a_n)(w) \rangle \in i(P^n)(w).$$

The **proposition expressed by  $\phi$  on  $i$**  is the set  $\llbracket \phi \rrbracket^i := \{w \in W \mid \llbracket \phi \rrbracket^{i,w} = \text{T}\}$ . A speaker's mental state is represented as a pair  $S = \langle B, i \rangle$ , where  $B \subseteq W$  and  $i$  is an interpretation. Where  $S = \langle B, i \rangle$  and  $S' = \langle B', i' \rangle$ , where  $\phi$  is a sentence, and where  $A \subseteq W$  is a possible worlds proposition:

- $S$  **accepts**  $A$  if  $B \subseteq A$ ; likewise,  $S$  **rejects**  $A$  if  $B \cap A = \emptyset$
- $S$  and  $S'$  **disagree over**  $A$  if one accepts  $A$  while the other rejects  $A$
- $S$  **accepts/rejects**  $\phi$  if  $S$  accepts/rejects  $\llbracket \phi \rrbracket^i$
- $S$  and  $S'$  **disagree over**  $\phi$  if one accepts  $\phi$  while the other rejects  $\phi$ .

Here, then, is the simple version of the expressivist account.<sup>21</sup>

### Simple Account

Let  $S_1 = \langle B_1, i_1 \rangle$  and  $S_2 = \langle B_2, i_2 \rangle$ , where  $S_1$  accepts  $\phi$  and  $S_2$  rejects  $\phi$ . Then their disagreement over  $\phi$  is:

- wholly verbal iff (i)  $S_1$  does not accept  $\llbracket \phi \rrbracket^{i_2}$ , and (ii)  $S_2$  does not reject  $\llbracket \phi \rrbracket^{i_1}$ ;
- wholly factual iff (i)  $S_1$  accepts  $\llbracket \phi \rrbracket^{i_2}$ , and (ii)  $S_2$  rejects  $\llbracket \phi \rrbracket^{i_1}$ ;
- partly verbal iff it is neither wholly verbal nor wholly factual.

In words,  $S_1$  and  $S_2$ 's disagreement over  $\phi$  is wholly verbal if they do not disagree over the proposition  $\phi$  expresses on each of their interpretations. It is wholly factual if they do disagree over the proposition  $\phi$  expresses on each of their interpretations. And it is partly verbal if whether or not they disagree over the proposition  $\phi$  expresses depends on who's interpretation you consider.

To illustrate, let's consider a few examples involving the dispute over whether Pluto is a planet from (3). In each case, the disagreement is between Yahya, who accepts 'Pluto is a planet', and Nadia, who rejects it. Throughout, I will shade Yahya's mental state in blue and Nadia's in red.

**Example of Wholly Verbal Disagreement.** Take the original setup for (3). Both speakers agree that, say,  $w$  is the actual world, so that  $B_Y = B_N = \{w\}$ . But they adopt different interpretations of 'planet': Yahya adopts  $i_Y$ , which interprets 'planet' without the clearing-orbit condition, while Nadia adopts  $i_N$ , which interprets 'planet' with it. Pluto doesn't clear its orbit at  $w$ . So  $\text{Pluto} \in i_Y(\text{planet})(w)$  while  $\text{Pluto} \notin i_N(\text{planet})(w)$ . The truth values for 'Pluto is a planet' are given by the following matrix of truth values, where  $P(x)$  stands for  $\lceil x \text{ is a planet} \rceil$  and  $p$  stands for Pluto.

$P(p)$	$w$
$i_Y$	T
$i_N$	F

<sup>21</sup> The simple account (at least, the first bullet) is essentially a formalization of Vermeulen's (2018) account of verbal disputes. The main difference is that Vermeulen also requires that each speaker  $S$  (mistakenly) thinks that the other disagrees with them over the proposition  $\phi$  expresses according to  $S$ 's speaker meaning. In other words, the disagreement must be only apparent. The account I present here imposes no such requirement.

Yahya does not accept (the proposition expressed by)  $P(p)$  on Nadia's interpretation. Nadia does not reject (the proposition expressed by)  $P(p)$  on Yahya's interpretation. Hence, their disagreement is wholly verbal.<sup>22</sup>

**Example of Wholly Factual Disagreement.** Both speakers adopt the same interpretation  $i$ , which interprets 'planet' with the clearing-orbit condition. But they disagree over which world is actual:  $B_Y = \{w_Y\}$  and  $B_N = \{w_N\}$ , where Pluto clears its orbit in  $w_Y$  but not in  $w_N$ , i.e.,  $\text{Pluto} \in i(\text{planet})(w_Y)$ , but  $\text{Pluto} \notin i(\text{planet})(w_N)$ . In a truth matrix:

$P(p)$	$w_Y$	$w_N$
$i$	T	F

Yahya accepts  $P(p)$  on "Nadia's" interpretation (because it is his own), and Nadia rejects  $P(p)$  on "Yahya's" interpretation (because it is her own). Hence, their disagreement is wholly factual.

**Example of Partly Verbal Disagreement.** The speakers have different beliefs and adopt different interpretations: Yahya thinks Pluto does clear its orbit ( $w_Y$ ), whereas Nadia does not ( $w_N$ ). Yahya interprets 'planet' without the clearing-orbit condition ( $i_Y$ ). Thus, on his interpretation, Pluto counts as a "planet" regardless of whether  $w_Y$  or  $w_N$  is actual. Nadia, by contrast, interprets 'planet' with the clearing-orbit condition ( $i_N$ ). Thus, on her interpretation, Pluto counts as a "planet" only in  $w_Y$ , not in  $w_N$ . The truth values are now given by the following matrix:

$P(p)$	$w_Y$	$w_N$
$i_Y$	T	T
$i_N$	T	F

Nadia does not reject  $P(p)$  on Yahya's interpretation. So their disagreement is not wholly factual. But Yahya still accepts  $P(p)$  on Nadia's interpretation.

<sup>22</sup> An anonymous referee points out that, in this case, it's natural to think that each side can express what the other side means by 'Pluto is a planet' in different terms. For example, Yahya can say 'Pluto is a planet that doesn't clear its orbit' to express  $\llbracket P(p) \rrbracket^{i_N}$ . And Nadia can say 'Pluto is a large, roughly spherical celestial object orbiting the sun' to express  $\llbracket P(p) \rrbracket^{i_Y}$ . Finding such a "substitute" in each speaker's own language is not required to determine the disagreement is verbal on this account, though it may often be possible. All that is required, strictly, is to determine whether the speakers disagree over any of the propositions that either expresses with 'Pluto is a planet'.

## 4 The Expressivist Account

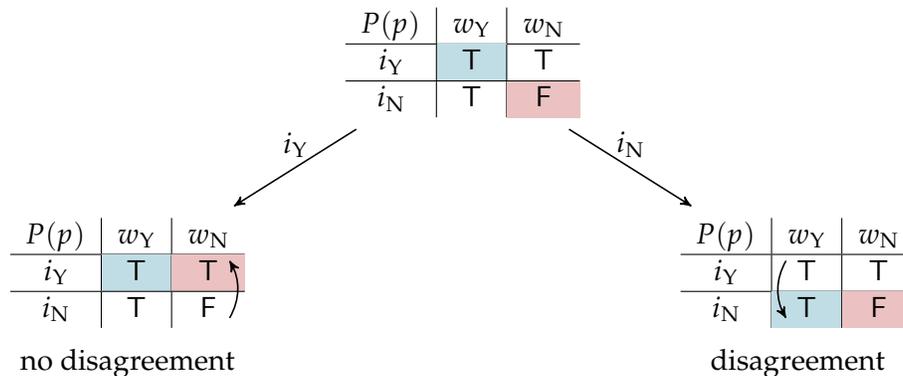
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So their disagreement is not wholly verbal. Hence, their disagreement is partly verbal (and partly factual).

We can summarize the Simple Account in terms of the shaded truth matrix for  $\phi$ , where each row represents the interpretation adopted by one of the speakers. A disagreement over  $\phi$  is:

- wholly verbal if for each row, vertically moving all the shaded cells to that row eliminates the disagreement;
- wholly factual if for each row, vertically moving all the shaded cells to that row does not eliminate the disagreement;
- partly verbal if for only some rows, vertically moving all the shaded cells to that row eliminates the disagreement.

We can think of the vertical movement of shaded cells as the speaker conceding to settle on some interpretation left open by their interlocutor. Thus, in the preceding example, the disagreement is partly verbal since (i) moving the blue cell down to the  $i_N$  row (i.e., Yahya adopting Nadia's interpretation) does not eliminate the disagreement, but (ii) moving the red cell up to the  $i_Y$  row (i.e., Nadia adopting Yahya's interpretation) does.



### 4.2 The General Account

The Simple Account assumes semantic plans are always complete and unconditional. This is clearly an idealization, however. Here, I'll show how to generalize the account to do away with these idealizing assumptions.

On the Simple Account, a speaker's mental state is represented as a pair of a belief state  $B$  and a single interpretation  $i$ . To account for partial and conditional semantic plans, we need to replace the single interpretation

with a more complex object. Recall that a **semantic hyperplan** is a function  $h$  from worlds to interpretations. Thus,  $h(w)$  is an interpretation,  $h(w)(e)$  is the intension  $h$  assigns to  $e$  at  $w$ , and  $h(w)(e)(v)$  is the extension assigned to  $e$  in  $v$  by  $h(w)$ . We can think of “ $h(w)(e)(v) = E$ ” as roughly saying the following: “ $h$  contains the following instruction: at  $w$ , interpret  $e$  so that its extension in  $v$  is  $E$ !”.<sup>23</sup> A **semantic plan** is a set  $H$  of semantic hyperplans. A speaker’s mental state will now be represented as a pair  $S = \langle B, H \rangle$  of a belief state  $B$  and a semantic plan  $H$ .

We can formally define partiality and conditionality as follows. Let’s write  $H(w) = \{h(w) \mid h \in H\}$ . Where  $X \subseteq W$ , we say  $H$  is **complete relative to  $X$**  if  $|H(w)| = 1$  for all  $w \in X$ ; otherwise, it is **partial relative to  $X$** . We say  $H$  is **unconditional relative to  $X$**  if  $H(w_1) = H(w_2)$  for all  $w_1, w_2 \in X$ ; otherwise, it is **conditional relative to  $X$** . We can say  $H$  is **partial (simpliciter)** if it is partial relative to  $W$ ; likewise for **conditional (simpliciter)**.<sup>24</sup>

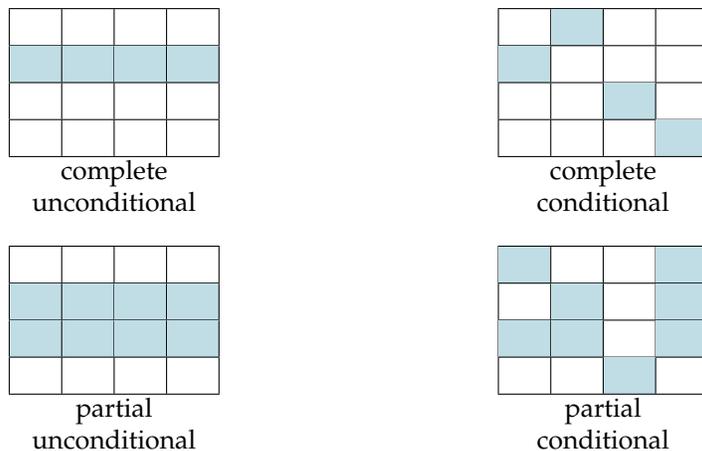
One can visualize partial and conditional semantic plans, at least when restricted to the speaker’s beliefs, using a shaded truth matrix. A speaker’s semantic plan is partial relative to their belief state iff there is a column in the matrix with multiple shaded cells. A speaker’s semantic plan is conditional relative to their belief state iff there are some shaded columns in the matrix with different patterns of shading.

Below are illustrations with truth matrices representing a single speaker’s mental states. To be clear, one cannot deduce the entirety of a speaker’s semantic plan just from a shaded truth matrix. For one, shaded matrices say nothing about how speakers plan to interpret language at worlds incompatible with their beliefs. Moreover, the set of interpretation-world pairs compatible with the speaker’s beliefs and semantic plans underdetermines their semantic plan even when restricted to their belief state.<sup>25</sup> Still, you can glean whether a speaker’s semantic plans are partial or conditional *relative to their belief state*, using shaded truth matrices like these.

<sup>23</sup> This double dependence on worlds is similar to the two roles worlds play in two-dimensional semantics, viz., a content-determining role and an extension-determining role (Kaplan, 1977; Davies and Humberstone, 1980; Chalmers, 2002, 2004, 2006). Worlds similarly play two distinct roles in my framework: an intension-determining role and an extension-determining role. In “ $h(w)(e)(v)$ ”, the  $w$  is used to determine which intension to assign  $e$ , whereas  $v$  is used to determine the extension of some intension.

<sup>24</sup> Technical note: the semantic hyperplans in  $H$  may be conditional (relative to  $X$ ) even if  $H$  is not. Example: let  $H = \{h_1, h_2\}$ , where  $h_1(w_1) = h_2(w_2) = i_1$  and  $h_2(w_1) = h_1(w_2) = i_2$  with  $i_1 \neq i_2$ . Then  $H(w_1) = H(w_2)$  even though  $h(w_1) \neq h(w_2)$  for all  $h \in H$ .

<sup>25</sup> Let  $B = \{w_1, w_2\}$ . Let  $H = \{h_1, h_2\}$ , where  $h_1(w_1) = h_1(w_2) = i_1$  and  $h_2(w_1) = h_2(w_2) = i_2$ , and let  $H' = \{h_3, h_4\}$ , where  $h_3(w_1) = h_4(w_2) = i_1$  and  $h_4(w_1) = h_3(w_2) = i_2$ . Then  $H(B) = H'(B) = \{\langle i_1, w_1 \rangle, \langle i_1, w_2 \rangle, \langle i_2, w_1 \rangle, \langle i_2, w_2 \rangle\}$ .



If a speaker's semantic plans are both complete and unconditional, their semantic plan is just a singleton of a constant semantic hyperplan, i.e., a hyperplan  $h$  such that  $h(w_1) = h(w_2)$  for all  $w_1$  and  $w_2$ . In that case, we can effectively replace  $\langle B, \{h\} \rangle$  with  $\langle B, h(w) \rangle$  (for any  $w$ ). So the simple model of mental states from §4.1 is just a special case of the more general model.

Originally, we said a speaker  $S$  accepts/rejects  $\phi$  if they accept/reject  $\llbracket \phi \rrbracket^i$ . Since a speaker's semantic plan may leave open multiple interpretations given their beliefs, these notions need to be generalized. Define  $H(B) := \{ \langle h(w), w \rangle \mid h \in H \text{ and } w \in B \}$ . Informally,  $H(B)$  is the set of interpretation-world pairs compatible with  $S$ 's factual beliefs and semantic plans. Define also  $I := \{ i \mid \exists w: \langle i, w \rangle \in H(B) \}$ . Informally,  $I$  is the set of interpretations left open by  $S$ 's factual beliefs and semantic plans.<sup>26</sup>

Define the **semantic value** of  $\phi$  to be  $\llbracket \phi \rrbracket := \{ \langle i, w \rangle \mid \llbracket \phi \rrbracket^{i,w} = \top \}$ . Then:

- $S$  **accepts** a sentence  $\phi$  if  $H(B) \subseteq \llbracket \phi \rrbracket$ .
- $S$  **rejects** a sentence  $\phi$  if  $H(B) \cap \llbracket \phi \rrbracket = \emptyset$ .

This generalizes the previous notions of accepting/rejecting a sentence from §4.1: if  $H(B) = \{i\} \times B$ , then  $H(B) \subseteq \llbracket \phi \rrbracket$  iff  $B \subseteq \llbracket \phi \rrbracket^i$ . The definitions of accepting and rejecting propositions, as well as disagreement (both over propositions and over sentences), remain the same as before.

Here, then, is the general expressivist account.

<sup>26</sup> Technical note:  $H(B)$  is *not* the same as  $I \times B$  in general. Example: let  $B = \{w_1, w_2\}$  and  $H = \{h\}$ , where  $h(w_1) = i_1$  and  $h(w_2) = i_2$ . Then  $H(B) = \{ \langle i_1, w_1 \rangle, \langle i_2, w_2 \rangle \}$ , whereas  $I \times B = \{ \langle i_1, w_1 \rangle, \langle i_1, w_2 \rangle, \langle i_2, w_1 \rangle, \langle i_2, w_2 \rangle \}$ .

**General Account**

Let  $S_1 = \langle B_1, H_1 \rangle$  and  $S_2 = \langle B_2, H_2 \rangle$ , where  $S_1$  accepts  $\phi$  and  $S_2$  rejects  $\phi$ . Then their disagreement over  $\phi$  is:

- wholly verbal iff (i) for each  $i_2 \in I_2$ ,  $S_1$  does not accept  $\llbracket \phi \rrbracket^{i_2}$ , and (ii) for each  $i_1 \in I_1$ ,  $S_2$  does not reject  $\llbracket \phi \rrbracket^{i_1}$ ;
- wholly factual iff (i) for each  $i_2 \in I_2$ ,  $S_1$  accepts  $\llbracket \phi \rrbracket^{i_2}$ , and (ii) for each  $i_1 \in I_1$ ,  $S_2$  rejects  $\llbracket \phi \rrbracket^{i_1}$ ;
- partly verbal iff it is neither wholly verbal nor wholly factual.

In words,  $S_1$  and  $S_2$ 's disagreement over  $\phi$  is wholly verbal if they do not disagree over any proposition expressed by  $\phi$  on any interpretation left open by either speaker. It is wholly factual if they disagree over every proposition expressed by  $\phi$  on any interpretation left open by either speaker. And it is partly verbal if they disagree over the proposition expressed by  $\phi$  on some interpretation left open by one of them, but not on another.<sup>27</sup>

Again, we can summarize the General Account in terms of the shaded truth matrix for  $\phi$ , assuming we include exactly those interpretations that one of the speakers leaves open (i.e., every row has at least one cell shaded). The disagreement over  $\phi$  is:

- wholly verbal if for each row and each color on that row, vertically moving all the shaded cells of the other color to that row eliminates the disagreement;
- wholly factual if for each row and each color on that row, vertically moving all the shaded cells to that row does not eliminate the disagreement;
- partly verbal if for some row and some color on that row, vertically moving all the shaded cells of the other color to that row eliminates the disagreement, while for some row and some color on that row, it does not.

To illustrate the General Account, we'll look at examples of verbal disagreement with partial (but unconditional) plans and with conditional (but complete) plans. Colored cells represent interpretation-world pairs compatible with the corresponding speaker's beliefs and semantic plans. Thus, a world  $w$  is compatible with  $S$ 's beliefs iff there is a cell with  $S$ 's color in the  $w$ -column. Likewise, an interpretation  $i$  is compatible with  $S$ 's speaker meaning (via Meaning is Planning) iff there is a cell with  $S$ 's color in the  $i$ -row.

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<sup>27</sup> Note that this includes cases where a single speaker leaves open several interpretations, some of which eliminate the disagreement and others of which do not.

**Example of Wholly Verbal Disagreement with Partial Plans.** Both speakers agree that  $w$  is the actual world. Both are also undecided whether to count Ceres as a planet. Yahya still counts Pluto as a planet, while Nadia does not. In a truth matrix:

$P(p)$	$w$
$i_{Y1}$	T
$i_{Y2}$	T
$i_{N1}$	F
$i_{N2}$	F

$P(c)$	$w$
$i_{Y1}$	T
$i_{Y2}$	F
$i_{N1}$	T
$i_{N2}$	F

On every interpretation one of them leaves open, they do not disagree over the proposition  $P(p)$  expresses on that interpretation. Hence, their disagreement is wholly verbal.

**Example of Wholly Verbal Disagreement with Conditional Plans.** Yahya thinks Pluto neither clears its orbit nor has a moon, i.e., he thinks  $w_1$  is actual. Yahya plans to (unconditionally) interpret ‘planet’ so as to include Pluto come what may, i.e., to adopt  $i_Y$ . Nadia is unsure whether Pluto clears its orbit or whether it has a moon. She is sure that it’s one or the other but not both, i.e., she leaves open  $w_2$  and  $w_3$ . Moreover, she plans to interpret ‘planet’ in whatever way necessary so that Pluto does not count as a planet. So if Pluto clears its orbit but doesn’t have a moon, she intends to adopt  $i_{N1}$ , which requires having a moon. If it has a moon but doesn’t clear its orbit, she intends to adopt  $i_{N2}$ , which requires clearing one’s orbit.

$P(p)$	$w_1$	$w_2$	$w_3$
$i_Y$	T	T	T
$i_{N1}$	F	F	T
$i_{N2}$	F	T	F

On every interpretation one of them leaves open, they do not disagree over the proposition  $P(p)$  expresses on that interpretation. Hence, their disagreement is wholly verbal.

### 4.3 Verbal Disagreement Without Disagreement in Plan(?)

Verbal disagreements arise due to differences in speaker meaning. Differences in speaker meaning *can* be, and often are, the result of differences in semantic plan. But as we mentioned in §3.3, this is not always the case: speakers can share a common semantic plan and still verbally disagree if the

semantic plan is conditional and speakers have incompatible beliefs about what that semantic plan recommends in the current situation.

**Example of Wholly Verbal Disagreement with Same Conditional Plan.**

Both speakers adopt the same semantic plan: use whatever definition of ‘planet’ the IAU adopts. But they disagree over what definition the IAU adopts, and so disagree over interpretation. At  $w_1$ , the IAU does not require planets to clear their orbital neighborhood. At  $w_2$ , it does. In both worlds, Pluto fails to clear its orbital neighborhood. Yahya thinks  $w_1$  is actual, while Nadia thinks  $w_2$  is. Their semantic (hyper)plan is maximally specific: it says to adopt  $i_1$  at  $w_1$  and to adopt  $i_2$  at  $w_2$ . Let  $O$  stand for the sentence ‘The IAU requires planets to clear their orbital neighborhood’.

$P(p)$	$w_1$	$w_2$
$i_1$	T	T
$i_2$	F	F

$O$	$w_1$	$w_2$
$i_1$	F	T
$i_2$	F	T

On every interpretation Yahya or Nadia leave open, they do not disagree over the proposition  $P(p)$  expresses on that interpretation. Hence, their disagreement is wholly verbal. To be sure, the disagreement arises from a prior factual disagreement over  $O$ ; but the disagreement over  $P(p)$  itself is a verbal one, as it is due to the speakers meaning different things by ‘planet’.

With that said, I submit that there is a way of thinking about this example on which the disagreement should be deemed factual rather than verbal. In a sense, the speakers *do* agree on *how* to talk: they both agree to talk like the scientists! Where they disagree is on the entirely factual matter of how scientists *actually* talk. Another way to put the point is that in many cases of verbal disagreement, one gets the sense that there isn’t a “right” answer. But in this example, at least one of the speakers is *objectively wrong*.

There is an alternative generalization of the Simple Account that captures this intuition. What the example above shows is that some disagreements in *interpretation* can arise without a corresponding disagreement in *semantic plan*. On the General Account, every verbal disagreement is a disagreement in interpretation, but not necessarily a disagreement in plan. So we could instead require that every verbal disagreement be a disagreement in plan, not just a disagreement in interpretation. This is captured by the following account:

**Alternative Account**

Let  $S_1 = \langle B_1, H_1 \rangle$  and  $S_2 = \langle B_2, H_2 \rangle$ , where  $S_1$  accepts  $\phi$  and  $S_2$  rejects  $\phi$ . Then their disagreement over  $\phi$  is:

## 4 The Expressivist Account

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- wholly verbal iff (i)  $\langle B_1, H_2 \rangle$  does not accept  $\phi$ , and (ii)  $\langle B_2, H_1 \rangle$  does not reject  $\phi$ ;
- wholly factual iff (i)  $\langle B_1, H_2 \rangle$  accepts  $\phi$ , and (ii)  $\langle B_2, H_1 \rangle$  rejects  $\phi$ ;
- partly verbal iff it is neither wholly verbal nor wholly factual.

The General Account and Alternative Account differ on what feature of a speaker's mental state needs to be aligned in order to resolve a verbal disagreement. The General Account is an "interpretation-first" approach: a disagreement is wholly verbal if the disagreement disappears when either speaker aligns their *interpretation(s)* with the other's. The Alternative Account is a "plan-first" approach: a disagreement is wholly verbal if the disagreement disappears when either speaker aligns their *semantic plan(s)* with the other's.<sup>28</sup>

The Alternative Account predicts that if speakers have the same semantic plan (i.e., if  $H_1 = H_2$ ), then any disagreement between them is wholly factual. So in the example above, since Yahya and Nadia both agree to adopt whatever definition of 'planet' the IAU adopts, but disagree over what that definition is, their disagreement is wholly factual.

The General Account and Alternative Account differ on how they treat disagreements involving speakers who defer their interpretations (e.g., to experts, legislators, their linguistic community, or external facts about the world). The Alternative Account treats all such disagreements as factual: if the speakers all agree to defer their interpretation of 'planet' to scientists, say, then any disagreement over which objects are planets is factual. The General Account, by contrast, deems some such disagreements as verbal if the different beliefs of the speakers, when combined with their shared semantic plan, yield different interpretations. So even if both speakers defer their interpretation of 'planet' to scientists, they can still have a verbal disagreement over which objects are planets in virtue of disagreeing over the facts that their plans say determine how to interpret 'planet'.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> We can similarly visualize the Alternative Account using shaded truth matrices if the rows are *hyperplans* rather than interpretations (where  $\llbracket \phi \rrbracket^{h,w} = \llbracket \phi \rrbracket^{h(w),w}$ ). Roughly, a disagreement is verbal if for each color, vertically distributing the shaded cells to the rows with the other color eliminates the disagreement.

<sup>29</sup> These different accounts loosely correlate with Chalmers's (2011) distinction between narrowly verbal and broadly verbal disputes. Roughly, we can think of the General Account as formalizing something like Chalmers's notion of a "broadly verbal" dispute, whereas the Alternative Account formalizes something like his notion of a "narrowly verbal" dispute (assuming we understand his notion of a speaker "expressing" a proposition in terms of external speaker meaning).

Both accounts have their appeal. There's no need to "choose" between them. As I mentioned in §1, I doubt there is a single "correct" account of verbal disagreement to be had. Either account will do for my purposes to follow. What's more important is simply recognizing the distinction between disagreements in semantic plan and disagreements in interpretation.<sup>30</sup>

### 4.4 Expressing Disagreement

So far, we have primarily focused on verbal disagreement. Let us turn now to verbal disputes. In particular, the question I wish to ask now is how speakers express their verbal disagreement in a conversation.

Speakers do not generally state their verbal disagreement explicitly in terms of plan-talk. In fact, doing so would not sound like a disagreement (at least, not directly). Consider:

- (4) Yahya: I plan to use the word 'planet' so that it applies to Pluto.  
Nadia: Well, *I* plan to use the word 'planet' so that it doesn't!
- (5) Yahya: By 'planet', I mean a property that Pluto has.  
Nadia: Well by 'planet', *I* mean a property that Pluto doesn't have.

While Yahya and Nadia do disagree in plan, their disagreement is not explicitly expressed in either example. Both assertions could be true and someone could accept them simultaneously.<sup>31</sup>

By contrast, (6) does explicitly express a verbal disagreement:<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> An anonymous referee suggests a third option that appeals to a distinction between the "core" and "peripheral" components of meaning, which is used in componential analysis (cf. Rast 2022). The idea would be that a disagreement is verbal only if the speakers agree on the core component of the meaning of the disputed term and only disagree over the peripheral meaning. This would in some ways split the difference between the General Account and the Alternative Account, as it would characterize disagreements where speakers adopt different interpretations of 'planet' as verbal (even if they have the same semantic plan) *unless* they disagree over its core meaning (i.e., at least one side is "objectively mistaken" about what 'planet' means), in which case, the disagreement would be factual. This is an interesting alternative worth exploring further in future work.

<sup>31</sup> By this, I mean that someone could accept the *nonindexical* content of what they assert (viz., that *Yahya* plans to use 'planet' in one way and that *Nadia* plans to use it in a different way). For now, I am setting aside complications arising from indexicals for sake of exposition. See footnote 52 for an extension of the current framework to indexicals.

<sup>32</sup> Compare this with predicates of personal taste. It is generally acknowledged that (i) does not express disagreement; it only involves speakers stating their gustatory preferences:

- (i) Tasha: I find grapefruit is tasty.  
Nasha: Well, *I* find grapefruit is nasty!

- (6) Yahya: Pluto is a planet.  
Nadia: Pluto is not a planet!

Yahya and Nadia's assertion cannot be accepted at the same time. The disagreement can also be expressed metalinguistically, as in (7):

- (7) Yahya: The word 'planet' applies to Pluto.  
Nadia: The word 'planet' doesn't apply to Pluto!

Despite the fact that their disagreement is (let's suppose) a disagreement in plan, they cannot directly express their disagreement in plan-talk.

To explain this, recall the account of assertion in §3.4. When a speaker asserts a sentence, they are proposing to add its semantic value to the common ground. In (6) and (7), the semantic values of Yahya's and Nadia's assertions are incompatible: one is the set-theoretic complement of the other. So the expressivist account has a straightforward explanation for why (6) and (7) express disagreements.

Contrast this with (4). Here, the semantic values of Yahya's assertion and Nadia's assertion are compatible. An interpretation that makes 'Pluto is a planet' true at a world could also make 'Nadia plans to use 'planet' so that it doesn't apply to Pluto' true at that world. That is,  $\llbracket$ Pluto is a planet $\rrbracket$  and  $\llbracket$ Nadia plans to use 'planet' so that it doesn't apply to Pluto $\rrbracket$  aren't disjoint. So Yahya can accept Nadia's assertion, and, likewise, Nadia can accept Yahya's assertion.

This also explains why verbal disputes are prone to misunderstanding. The very same assertions could either be an expression of a verbal disagreement or a factual disagreement (or a mix of both; cf. §3.4). What makes it one or the other is the speakers' respective beliefs and intentions. The mechanism through which they express their disagreement is the same regardless. If the speakers do not realize that the other adopts a different interpretation of the relevant sentence, they could easily mistakenly think there is a factual disagreement between them.<sup>33</sup>

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To express a disagreement in taste, one must do so more directly, such as in (ii):

- (ii) Tasha: Grapefruit is tasty.  
Nasha: Grapefruit is nasty!

<sup>33</sup> See Osorio and Villanueva 2019 for a discussion of such "crossed disagreements".

## 5 Comparisons with Other Accounts

In this section, I briefly explain how my expressivist account compares to other accounts of verbal disputes in the literature. Many of these accounts can be brought into harmony with my own given certain auxiliary assumptions. So my goal is not to “argue against” these accounts, but rather to outline their similarities and differences. Still, I think the expressivist account does enjoy an advantage over these other accounts in that it either avoids or else clarifies certain fraught notions that others invoke. (Readers interested in metalinguistic negotiation may skip to §6 without loss.)

Very roughly, the accounts of verbal disputes in the literature can be split into three groups.<sup>34</sup> The first group analyzes verbal disputes in terms of topics (Balcerak Jackson, 2014; Jenkins, 2014). The second group analyzes verbal disputes in terms of explanatory relations, such as in-virtue-of relations (Chalmers, 2011), joint-carving (Sider, 2011), or truthmaking (Abreu Zavaleta, 2021). The third group analyzes verbal disputes in terms of charitable interpretation or translation (Hirsch, 2005, 2009).

### 5.1 Topics

According to topic accounts, a verbal dispute involves speakers whose utterances are not *about* the same things: they are on different *topics*. Thus, Jenkins (2014) defines a verbal dispute as one where the speakers “do not disagree over the subject matter(s)” of the dispute and only appear to do so “owing to their divergent uses of some relevant portion of language”. Similarly, Balcerak Jackson (2014) defines a verbal dispute as one where there is “no question under discussion to which the parties offer conflicting answers”.<sup>35</sup>

One worry is that it’s difficult to demarcate what counts as a genuine “topic”.<sup>36</sup> If we are too permissive about what counts as a topic, then no dispute is ever truly verbal. For example, one could argue that the verbal dispute in (3) is over a shared subject matter (*viz.*, Pluto’s planethood), or that there is a question under discussion that the speakers give conflicting answers to (*viz.*, is Pluto a planet?).

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<sup>34</sup> The one exception is Vermeulen’s (2018) account, which is related to the Simple Account from §4.1. See footnote 21 for discussion.

<sup>35</sup> The notion of a “question under discussion” comes from Roberts (2012).

<sup>36</sup> Vermeulen (2018, pp.345–346) raises a distinct but related worry, *viz.*, it is difficult to determine what a dispute is really “about”. However, advocates of this view seem to be content to let this be resolved by context (Jenkins, 2014, p. 24). In general, the question under discussion is rarely made explicit (Roberts, 2012).

The expressivist account offers a simple solution. Following the literature on questions, we can take a question/subject matter to be, as a first approximation, a partition on possible worlds (Hamblin, 1973; Karttunen, 1977; Groenendijk and Stokhof, 1984; Lewis, 1988a,b). So a yes-no question is a set consisting of two disjoint yet exhaustive propositions. When speakers wholly verbally disagree over  $\phi$ , each interpretation  $i$  they leave open is such that the speakers do not accept conflicting answers to the question of *whether*  $\phi$ , i.e.,  $\{\llbracket \phi \rrbracket^i, \llbracket \neg \phi \rrbracket^i\}$  (cf. Vermeulen 2018, p. 346).<sup>37</sup> Thus, we can be completely permissive about subject matters. The expressivist account only requires looking at subject matters that can be derived from the disputed claim together with the interpretations left open by the speakers.

### 5.2 Explanation

According to explanation accounts, a verbal dispute is *explained* by speakers using words differently. Chalmers (2011) analyzes a verbal dispute as one where speakers disagree about the meaning of an expression in the disputed claim and the dispute “arises wholly in virtue of this disagreement”.<sup>38</sup> Sider (2011) characterizes a dispute as “non-substantive” when its answer turns on the choice of equally joint-carving candidate meanings for some expression in the disputed claim. Abreu Zavaleta (2021) defines a dispute as not merely verbal if there is either an actual truthmaker or an actual falsemaker for the propositions expressed by either speaker with the disputed utterance.

Chalmers’s account appeals to a primitive “in virtue of” relation. He describes this relation as non-causal and claims it can be approximated by counterfactual dependence.<sup>39</sup> While he illustrates with examples, it remains unclear what the nature of this relation is.

The expressivist account provides an answer: it is constitutive. *What it is* for a disagreement over  $\phi$  to be verbal is for the speakers to not disagree over the proposition expressed by  $\phi$  on any interpretation they leave open. This requires speakers to adopt diverging interpretations of  $\phi$ .

<sup>37</sup> With that said, speakers who wholly disagree over  $\phi$  do accept conflicting answers to an “interpretive” question,  $\{\llbracket \phi \rrbracket, \llbracket \neg \phi \rrbracket\}$ . For example, the question of whether Pluto is a planet could be interpreted either as a request for factual information or as a request for a decision on whether to count Pluto as a planet (cf. Balcerak Jackson 2019; Soria-Ruiz 2023).

<sup>38</sup> By “disagree about meaning”, Chalmers seems to have in mind (what I would call) factual disagreements over semantic meaning. However, he seems less committal in some places, suggesting his account simply “works best” if we assume this (p. 522).

<sup>39</sup> Chalmers seems to have something like grounding in mind here, though he does not explicitly say so. (The grounding literature was still in its early stages at the time.)

Constitutive explanation is a good candidate for Chalmers’s “in virtue of” relation. For one, constitutive explanation is not causal: a verbal disagreement is not *caused by*, but rather *consists in*, speakers adopting different interpretations. Moreover, counterfactual dependence is generally a reliable approximation for constitutive dependence. Indeed, we employed a kind of counterfactual reasoning in §§4.1–4.2 when we vertically moved shaded cells to determine whether a disagreement was verbal or factual.

The expressivist account departs more substantially from Sider’s and Abreu Zavaleta’s accounts. The former makes no appeal to joint-carving or truthmaking: it is entirely couched in terms of the speakers’ beliefs and intentions, and can be implemented within an intensional possible worlds framework. To be clear, the expressivist account does not say these notions play no role in determining whether a disagreement is verbal.<sup>40</sup> It just doesn’t directly appeal to them.

### 5.3 Translation

According to translation accounts, speakers in a verbal dispute would not reasonably disagree were the other’s assertion suitably translated in their own idiolect. Hirsch (2005, 2009) is a prominent proponent of this sort of account. Here, I’ll focus on his 2009 account. He says a dispute is “merely verbal” if “Each side can plausibly interpret the other side as speaking a language in which the latter’s asserted sentences are true” (p. 231).

The word ‘plausibly’ is doing a fair bit of work here. As Hirsch observes (p. 238), it’s almost always possible to *misinterpret* what a speaker is saying so that what they say is true, given sufficiently deviant auxiliary assumptions. So not just any way of interpreting a speaker counts: only *plausible* interpretations can be used to determine whether a dispute is verbal.

What makes an interpretation “plausible”? Part of the answer lies in a principle of charity: all else equal, an interpretation is plausible to the extent that it interprets the speaker as making assertions that are “reasonably accurate” and not obviously false. But Hirsch also admits that charity is not the only constraint on plausible interpretations and leaves open the possibility that other factors could come into play (p. 243).

The expressivist account avoids the issue of what a “plausible interpretation” is entirely. In effect, a plausible interpretation is just an interpretation left open by the speaker, i.e., an interpretation that their semantic plan per-

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<sup>40</sup> For example, these notions could help address worries about the indeterminacy of meaning (Putnam, 1981) or rule-following (Kripke, 1982), which suggest that speaker intentions are insufficient to determine speaker meaning (Lewis, 1984; Sider, 2009, 2011).

mits at a world compatible with what they believe. In other words, a charitable interpretation will simply amount to one that respects the speaker's intentions.

## 6 Metalinguistic Negotiations

The notion of a verbal disagreement I have been exploring throughout is closely related to what is known as a **metalinguistic negotiation** (Plunkett and Sundell 2013; Plunkett 2015; cf. Haslanger 2000, 2005 on “analytical” or “ameliorative” projects). While not every verbal dispute, in my sense, is necessarily a metalinguistic negotiation, the expressivist account of the former can illuminate the latter. In closing, I will discuss the relationship between the two notions. Specifically, I want to suggest that the expressivist account of verbal disagreement provides a simple and elegant account of the linguistic mechanisms underlying metalinguistic negotiations. Moreover, it sheds light on several attempts to understand other related forms of disagreement in terms of metalinguistic negotiations.

### 6.1 What's the Difference? The Practical-Normative Divide

If a verbal dispute is a dispute over how *to* use words, a metalinguistic negotiation is a dispute over how words *should* be used. A metalinguistic negotiation is a type of *normative* dispute, i.e., a dispute over what ought to be done.<sup>41</sup> A genuine verbal dispute is a type of *practical* dispute, i.e., a dispute over what to do.

So described, it might seem as though verbal disputes are just metalinguistic negotiations of a practical flavor. But this would be too quick: in principle, disputes over what one *ought to* do (even in a practical sense) can come apart from disputes over what *to* do (Bratman, 1987; Hieronymi, 2009, 2011; Southwood, 2016; Balcerak Jackson, 2019; Risberg, 2023).

Two cases are commonly cited to illustrate the difference: **akrasia** and **parity**. In cases of *akrasia*, an agent decides to do something that they think they shouldn't do (i.e., weakness of will). For example, I may believe I really shouldn't buy ice cream but decide to buy some anyway. In cases of *parity*, an agent decides to do something even though they think other options

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<sup>41</sup> In characterizing metalinguistic negotiations, Plunkett and Sundell (2013) move back and forth between—to borrow a distinction from Schroeder (2011)—the *deliberative* ‘ought’ (what *we ought to do*) and the *evaluative* ‘ought’ (what *ought to be done*). It is an interesting question how these formulations might differ, but I lack the space to go into this in greater detail. For concreteness, I have chosen the evaluative formulation here.

are normatively on a par (e.g., Buridan's ass). For example, I may believe buying chocolate and buying vanilla are equally good ice cream flavors but still can arbitrarily decide to get chocolate.

Of course, there is room to debate here. It may be that such cases aren't really possible so-described. Perhaps if I decide to buy ice cream, I must really believe that it is (in some sense) the best option. Still, I am inclined to think examples such as these require us to at least take seriously the theoretical possibility that *normative* questions of what one *ought* to do come apart from *practical* questions of what *to* do.<sup>42</sup> And if such cases are possible for interpretations of language, then metalinguistic negotiations, i.e., metalinguistic disputes over how words *should* be used, will come apart from verbal disputes, i.e., metalinguistic disputes over how *to* use words.

For example, we can consider cases involving **semantic akrasia**, where a speaker interprets words in ways they think they shouldn't. Suppose Yahya in (3) adopts the folk definition of 'planet' for purely nostalgic reasons. He even realizes this and acknowledges that the IAU's definition is objectively better and that society as a whole would be better off adopting this definition. Even so, he prefers the folk definition: it was what he was taught in school as a child; he hates to see Pluto diminished in the eyes of the public; he wants Pluto to be the ninth planet! So he decides to interpret 'planet' in this way even though he thinks it's worse overall. In this case, (3) would be a verbal dispute but not a metalinguistic negotiation: Yahya agrees with Nadia that 'planet' *should* be defined according to the IAU's definition, but he simply decides not to use it in that way.

Likewise, we can consider cases involving **semantic parity**, where a speaker decides to adopt an interpretation even though they think other interpretations are equally good. Suppose Yahya and Nadia both recognize all the pros and cons for the different proposed definitions of 'planet' and think none is decisive: any of them would work just fine. They then decide arbitrarily to adopt a definition and stick with it. Unfortunately, they adopt competing definitions. They agree that, normatively speaking, it would be best if they could come to an agreement and it doesn't really matter which definition they agree on. In this case, (3) would again be a verbal dispute but not a metalinguistic negotiation: Yahya and Nadia agree that adopting

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<sup>42</sup> We cannot collapse these simply by introducing a practical 'ought' that is semantically analyzed in terms of intentions. Even if we did this, questions about what one "ought" to do in this practical sense could still come apart from questions of what to do. For example, answering questions about the former amounts to forming a belief about one's intentions, whereas answering questions about the latter amounts to forming an intention or committing to a plan (cf. Hieronymi 2009; Southwood 2016).

any of the proposed definitions would do just fine, but they disagree over which among equally good definitions to adopt.

Again, there is room to debate here. It may be that such cases aren't really possible so-described. Perhaps if Yahya interprets 'planet' with the folk definition, he must really believe that definition is (in some sense) the best one. But again, I am inclined to think such examples require us to take seriously the theoretical possibility that metalinguistic negotiations and verbal disputes come apart.

### 6.2 Expressing Normative Metalinguistic Disagreement

In §4.4, we saw how verbal disagreements can be expressed through the *use* of the disputed term rather than having to *mention* the term explicitly. Similarly, Plunkett and Sundell (2013) argue that metalinguistic negotiations can be carried out at the level of *use*, rather than the level of *mention* (see also Plunkett 2015). Speakers in a metalinguistic negotiation do not need to explicitly mention the word in dispute, or use any normative terms, to express their normative metalinguistic views: they can simply use the very words whose appropriate use is in dispute. So rather than saying 'The word 'planet' should be defined so that it applies to Pluto', speakers can state their normative position simply by saying 'Pluto is a planet'.

While Plunkett and Sundell argue *that* metalinguistic negotiations can be expressed this way, they say little about *how*, except to suggest that it is via some sort of pragmatic mechanism (p. 15).<sup>43</sup> The claim that metalinguistic negotiations, i.e., disputes over norms for language use, do not require invoking normative or metalinguistic terms is initially very puzzling. One would not expect in general to be able to carry out disputes over biology, say, without invoking biological terms. So why are metalinguistic negotiations different?

One possible explanation is constitutive: perhaps verbal disputes *just are* metalinguistic negotiations. We've already seen how verbal disagreements can be expressed simply using, rather than mentioning, the disputed term (§4.4). So if disagreeing over how *to* use a word is just a way of disagreeing over how a word *should* be used, then the expressivist account provides a straightforward answer as to why metalinguistic negotiations can be carried

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<sup>43</sup> Plunkett and Sundell (2021, p. 153) later acknowledge they are "content to remain neutral" on the exact pragmatic mechanism in question. For specific pragmatic proposals, see Bel-leri 2017; Thomasson 2017; Mankowitz 2021. My aim here is not to argue against these suggestions, but to instead offer an alternative that falls out of the expressivist account.

out without invoking metalinguistic or normative terms.<sup>44</sup>

But of course, as we saw in §6.1, there are reasons to think that not all verbal disputes are metalinguistic negotiations. Cases of semantic akrasia and semantic parity are apparent counterexamples. To be clear, I'm not saying they *are* counterexamples. It may turn out that neither semantic akrasia nor semantic parity are really possible. But it would be worth investigating whether we can explain the mechanisms underlying metalinguistic negotiations without relying on such strong assumptions about the relation between the normative and the practical.<sup>45</sup>

Here is an alternative, pragmatic explanation that does not require all verbal disputes to be metalinguistic negotiations. While it may be possible for one's normative beliefs and one's intentions to come apart, this is arguably not the default. In general (though there may be exceptions), *one ought to intend to do what one thinks ought to be done*.<sup>46</sup> Now, it may be difficult for an agent to intend to do what they think ought to be done (e.g., due to akrasia). But it is generally fairly easy for a speaker to intend to *talk* in the way they think they ought to talk. Given this, it is natural to expect speakers to assume, all else equal, that other speakers obey this link between intentions and normative beliefs.

If this is correct, then it is not mysterious why metalinguistic negotiations can be implicitly conveyed through the use of language. When a speaker asserts, they only directly express their intentions for how to use the words occurring in that assertion. A listener can then pragmatically infer, from general principles relating the practical to the normative, that they hold certain normative beliefs. Thus, a metalinguistic negotiation can be carried out at the level of use *as long as* it is commonly presupposed that how a speaker intends to talk aligns with how they believe they ought to talk.

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<sup>44</sup> For example, Gibbard (2003) argues that to believe that one ought to  $\phi$  *just is* to adopt a plan to  $\phi$ . So for Gibbard, a normative disagreement just is a kind of practical disagreement. Carried over to the linguistic realm, this view entails that metalinguistic negotiations *just are* verbal disputes. Alternatively, one could hold that while adopting a plan is distinct from having a normative belief, the former constitutively requires the latter: one cannot intend to  $\phi$  unless one believes that one *should*  $\phi$  (in at least some sense of 'should'). In that case, verbal disputes would all involve metalinguistic negotiations. Thanks to Rachel Rudolph for helpful conversations on this point.

<sup>45</sup> Even if one does not collapse the practical to the normative, there could be reasons for seeking an alternative pragmatic mechanism. It's open to a Gibbardian expressivist, for example, to stick to the standard Stalnakerian picture of communication (modeling common ground as a set of worlds) and adopt an alternative pragmatic explanation (e.g., Mankowitz's (2021)) of how speakers express a normative metalinguistic disagreements via the use of terms. A separate treatment of verbal disagreement would then need to be provided.

<sup>46</sup> Here, the two uses of 'ought' arguably should be the same flavor, be it rational, moral, etc.

In cases where this presupposition is not active, speakers must state their disagreement explicitly in normative and metalinguistic terms.<sup>47</sup>

### 6.3 Applications

Regardless of which explanation we adopt (constitutive or pragmatic), the mechanisms underlying metalinguistic negotiation are explained via verbal disputes. In closing, I mention two potential applications of this account of metalinguistic negotiation: one to faultless disagreements and one to normative disagreements.<sup>48</sup>

**Faultless disagreement.** Many taste-based disagreements seem to be, in some sense, faultless. Consider (8), for example.

- (8) Tasha: Grapefruit is tasty.  
Nasha: Grapefruit is nasty!

On the one hand, Tasha and Nasha seem to genuinely disagree with one another. On the other hand, neither side seems “wrong”. Naïvely, what Tasha says is true iff grapefruit is tasty *to Tasha*, while what Nasha asserts

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<sup>47</sup> An anonymous referee raises the following question for the pragmatic explanation: what, on this account, explains how speakers are able to come to *think* the metalinguistic proposition (call it *p*) that ‘planet’ should be interpreted in such-and-such way by thinking **that Pluto is a planet**? The answer turns on what proposition—what set of possible worlds—we are saying the speaker is thinking with the bolded phrase. In other words, how do we interpret belief attributions of the form “*S* thinks that Pluto is a planet”?

On one salient reading, ‘*S* thinks that Pluto is a planet’ just means *S* accepts the sentence ‘Pluto is a planet’, i.e., every interpretation-world pair compatible with their mental state renders it true (what Kocurek et al. 2020, p.6ff call the “c-monster” reading). Understood this way, speakers can come to entertain normative metalinguistic propositions via the same mechanisms that explain how they’re able to express such propositions. So while *S* may, in principle, accept ‘Pluto is a planet’ without automatically believing *p* (and vice versa), these will generally coincide for speakers who intend to do what they think they ought to do.

On another salient reading, ‘*S* thinks that Pluto is a planet’ means *S* believes a proposition *p*<sup>\*</sup>, where *p*<sup>\*</sup> is the proposition expressed by ‘Pluto is a planet’ on some salient interpretation (perhaps ours) even if this isn’t the one *S*’s adopts. We very often describe other thinkers’ doxastic state in our own language rather than their own. For one, we can ascribe beliefs to speakers of other languages. I might say ‘Pierre thinks London is pretty’ even if Pierre doesn’t know what ‘pretty’ means (cf. Kripke 1979). Moreover, we can ascribe beliefs to non-linguistic creatures. I might say ‘My cat thinks I’m a food dispenser’ without saying my cat knows what ‘food dispenser’ means. Understanding the belief ascription this way, there may not be a systematic connection between *p* and *p*<sup>\*</sup>. But that’s to be expected, since there’s no reason to think one should believe *p* in virtue of believing *p*<sup>\*</sup>.

<sup>48</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for encouraging me to think about these connections.

is true iff grapefruit is nasty *to Nasha*. These two things are compatible. This tension has been the subject of much of the literature on predicates of personal taste, or “PPTs” (see Stojanovic 2017 for overview).

The expressivist account can be extended to explain this phenomenon.<sup>49</sup> To do this, we simply replace worlds with pairs of worlds and standards of taste. Thus, sentences are evaluated at triples of interpretations, worlds, and standards, and interpretations now map expressions, worlds, and standards to extensions.<sup>50</sup> On this picture, taste-based disagreements can be explained via the same expressivist mechanisms as verbal disagreements: Tasha and Nasha express a disagreement over which standard to use through the direct use of a PPT. The disagreements are faultless since neither side is “objectively wrong”. But there is genuine disagreement since the fine-grained contents (i.e., the set of interpretation-world-standard triples) that each asserts are incompatible.

Contrast this with accounts that view taste-based disagreements as metalinguistic negotiations over where we should set the standards of taste (Sundell 2011, 2016, 2017; Umbach 2016; cf. Barker 2013). Such accounts are often used to save the standard contextualist semantics for PPTs from the problem of lost disagreement. Thus, while Tasha and Nasha do not disagree over the content either expresses with ‘Grapefruit is tasty’ (as they are determined by different contexts of use), they do indirectly disagree over whether it is *appropriate* to apply ‘tasty’ to grapefruits.

The expressivist account of metalinguistic negotiation puts pressure on this approach, however. For expressivists, metalinguistic negotiations over which standard should be used to evaluate PPTs are explained (either constitutively or pragmatically) via verbal disputes over which standard to use to evaluate PPTs. But for contextualists, the context of use fully determines what standard of taste to use to evaluate PPTs. So there’s no further question over which standard to use to evaluate ‘tasty’: the answer is simply the one provided by the context of use (see Fleisher 2013; Finlay 2017; Marques 2017; Rast 2017a,b; Soria-Ruiz 2023 for further criticism).<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Expressivist accounts of PPTs have also been used to explain the acquaintance inference. See Franzén 2018; Willer and Kennedy 2020; Rudolph 2023.

<sup>50</sup> Indeed, this account can be applied to disagreements over gradable adjectives more generally (cf. Barker 2002, 2013; MacFarlane 2016, 2020; Khoo 2020).

<sup>51</sup> Some ways of spelling out contextualism avoid this worry, though they end up looking like versions of expressivism. For example, Sundell (2016, p. 804) holds that in taste-based disagreements, speakers are trying to “settle on what that standard shall be”, which suggests the context of use does not settle the standard. Similarly, Khoo (2020) adopts a view he calls “negotiated contextualism”, where gradable adjectives are not context-sensitive the way indexicals are, but rather “score-sensitive”, i.e., their content depends on the conversational

Compare this to other context-sensitive expressions like indexicals, for which there is no problem of lost disagreement. Since the context of use fully determines the referents of indexicals, there's no further question over which referents to assign them in a given assertion.<sup>52</sup> In the case of indexicals, this is a good prediction: when one speaker asserts 'I am hungry' and another asserts 'I am not hungry', there is no feeling of genuine disagreement. For PPTs, however, there is a residual feeling of disagreement.

So the contextualist cannot use the expressivist account of metalinguistic negotiations to avoid the problem of lost disagreement. Of course, it is open to the contextualist to find alternative explanations of how speakers in a taste-based disagreement express normative metalinguistic disagreements of the sort they appeal to. But the burden is on them to provide such an explanation: the explanation in terms of verbal disputes is unavailable.

**Normative disagreement.** Plunkett and Sundell (2013) argue that many normative disagreements can be understood as metalinguistic negotiations. As they observe, however, many of their examples involve *non-basic* normative and evaluative terms, like 'torture', 'jerk', or 'fun' (pp. 28–29). It is more controversial whether disputes involving *basic* normative terms like 'ought' or 'should' can be understood as metalinguistic negotiations (Finlay, 2017; Rast, 2017a), though some recent empirical evidence suggests they can be (Khoo and Knobe, 2016; Bolinger, 2022).

The view that basic normative disagreements can be understood as metalinguistic negotiations faces a well-known self-reflexivity problem (Plunkett and Sundell 2013, p. 29; cf. Eklund 2017; Simion 2018). After all, metalinguistic negotiations are standardly glossed as disputes where speakers express disagreements over how terms *should* be interpreted. Thus, it's tempting to say that metalinguistic negotiations involving 'should', say, are disagreements over how 'should' **should** be interpreted. But on what interpretation of the bolded 'should' do the speakers disagree? Both speakers can accept that 'should' should<sub>1</sub> mean should<sub>1</sub> and that it should<sub>2</sub> mean

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score, which is analogous to what I'm calling the common ground. My account is compatible with these forms of contextualism.

<sup>52</sup> While I have largely set aside context-sensitive expressions, such as indexicals, the expressivist account can be easily extended to accommodate such expressions by adapting Khoo's (2020) account of gradable adjectives and extending it to all predicates. Thus, interpretations map expressions to *characters*, i.e., functions from contexts to contents (intensions). But common ground is still modeled as a set of interpretation-world pairs (or interpretation-world-standard triples, if we include gradable adjectives). When a speaker *S* asserts  $\phi$  in context *c*, they propose to add  $\llbracket \phi \rrbracket^c = \{ \langle i, w \rangle \mid \llbracket \phi \rrbracket^{c,i,w} = T \}$  to the common ground.

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should<sub>2</sub>. It's hard to spell out, in neutral terms, where the two sides of a basic normative disagreement disagree if they are glossed as metalinguistic negotiations.

There is a way out of this puzzle if we construe these cases not as metalinguistic negotiations, but as verbal disputes. The self-reflexivity problem only arises from thinking of such disputes over 'should' as *normative* disputes over what 'should' *should* (in some unspecified sense) mean. If they are instead *practical* disputes over what *to* mean by 'should', then the self-reflexivity problem does not arise. Speakers in such a dispute may disagree over what *to* mean by 'should' simply in virtue of adopting different plans for interpreting the term. It thus becomes possible to state, in neutral terms, where and in what sense the two sides disagree.

Of course, this response hinges on separating the practical from the normative.<sup>53</sup> If the two coincide, this solution will not work: if the question of what *to* mean by 'should' just reduces to what it *should* mean, then we still need to state in what sense of 'should'. So this solution may not be acceptable to everyone. Still, it offers at least one way to maintain that even basic normative disagreements can be understood in metalinguistic terms.

## 7 Conclusion

In this paper, I presented a novel account of verbal disagreement inspired by plan-based expressivism. On this account, verbal disagreements are expressed, rather than explicitly stated, through the divergent use of language. As we've seen, this expressivist account enjoys the following benefits: it can be formally implemented within an intensional, neo-Stalnakerian framework for assertion and communication; it accommodates speakers who do not assign maximally specific univocal meanings to every expression in the disputed claim; it avoids the use of fraught notions like subject matters, in-virtue-of relations, joint-carving, and charitable interpretations; and it extends to an account of metalinguistic negotiations. This makes the expressivist account an attractive picture of verbal disagreement overall.

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<sup>53</sup> Interestingly, this response is anticipated by Plunkett and Sundell 2013, fn. 76, although they remain noncommittal precisely due to questions concerning the practical-normative divide.

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