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# What is the Proper Function of Language?

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## Abstract

It doesn't have (just) one, and this matters for how we ought to pursue a theory of meaning and communication.

*Conversation is essentially a game of tennis played with a ball of playdough that changes shape each time it crosses the net.*

—Laurent Binet, *The Seventh Function of Language*

## 1 Introduction

According to Jakobson (1960, pp. 353-57), there are six functions of language: the referential, poetic, emotive, conative, phatic, and metalingual functions. To expand on just two of these, the emotive function involves using language to express emotions or feelings rather than information. It is exemplified by pure exclamatives like 'Wow!' The phatic function, in contrast, involves the use of language to open, close, or maintain a channel of communication. Exemplars include utterances of 'Hello', 'Um', or 'Bye'.

Analytic philosophers tend not to pay Jakobson much heed these days. And perhaps that is justified; his categories are vague at best, introduced more via ostention than by definition. Still, the general approach to understanding language is one worth taking seriously: a picture of language as serving a multitude of functions. What is the function of language? There isn't just one on this picture. Rather, language is a tool that we can, without in any way sullying it, put to a variety of uses in different circumstances.

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Forthcoming in *Inquiry*.

This way of understanding the function of language cuts against the recent functionalist vogue, represented by a pair of excellent new books on the foundations of language. Unnsteinsson (2022) proposes that the proper function of language is communication. Adopting this thesis, he argues, illuminates a set of cases that have long proved a thorn in the side of philosophers of language. Keiser (2023), in contrast, talks in terms of minimalist idealizations rather than proper functions. But there is a striking overlap between these notions. According to Keiser, an earlier generation of philosophers of language adopted a minimalist idealization which viewed language as a system for cooperative information exchange (read: the proper function of language is cooperative information exchange). In its place, she proposes *not* to reject idealization, but instead to adopt a less idealized alternative: language is a system for directing each other's attention (read: the proper function of language is attention direction). The payoff here is supposed to be a theory which can account for a much broader range of real-world phenomena.

I will argue that the claim that language has *a* proper function is a bunch of hooey. Rather, language is something like a multi-tool: it serves a multitude of functions. Perhaps some of these are still worthy of being called 'proper' functions, but once we move away from a picture on which language serves a single proper function, this stance becomes more difficult to defend. Fighting words, I suppose. So let's see if I can back them up.

## 2 Proper Functions and Language

What exactly is a proper function? According to Unnsteinsson (2022, p. 105), the answer runs:<sup>1</sup>

Mechanism  $M$  has a proper function  $f$  only if (i)  $f$  is a constitutive function of  $M$ , (ii)  $M$ 's non-performance of  $f$  on a given occasion can be due to a flaw, failure, or malfunction in  $M$ , and (iii) describing  $M$  as performing  $f$  is essential to a theory explaining the mental or cognitive capacities of members in some population.

Ignore for the moment that this understanding of proper functions entails that (non-intelligent) artifacts cannot have proper functions, for that can be

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<sup>1</sup>To be clear, Unnsteinsson's answer is in keeping with what is probably the dominant view in the field. See Schulte & Neander (2022).

remedied and will be shortly. To be clear, Unnsteinsson prefers to talk in the first instance about language use, or what he calls ‘pragmatic competence’, and only secondarily about the function of language itself, i.e. the function of the languages we speak. So this entailment doesn’t much bother him, at least when it comes to language.

To better understand Unnsteinsson’s proposal, we need to clarify the notion of a ‘constitutive function’. Using the example of the human heart, Unnsteinsson (op cit.) tells us that:

According to etiological theories of functions, the distinction [between constitutive and merely accidental functions] arises from the fact that pumping blood is part of what causally explains the presence and persistence of hearts in the population of humans.

A bit later, Unnsteinsson tells us explicitly that ‘[o]n the most plausible theories of proper functions, those functions are determined by the etiology of the mechanism’ (Ibid., p. 107). I take it that, given his earlier claims regarding proper functions, this determination must run via etiology fixing the constitutive function(s) of a mechanism. This is in keeping with a broader, ‘teleological’ approach to biological functions propounded by, *inter alia*, Millikan (1989), Neander (2017), and Garson (2019). On such views, etiology is, effectively, the best guide to proper functions that we have.

A brief aside: following Neander, we should be careful to clarify that neither etiological functions nor proper functions are supposed to be ‘deeply’ normative, in the sense of underwriting claims about how we ought to act. One might have an abnormal heart, one which is malfunctioning according to its proper function of pumping blood, and yet lack any reason to get it fixed. Malfunction, in this sense, isn’t intrinsically reason-providing.

Can we somehow adapt this sort of picture to talk about artifacts like languages? Yes we can! Drawing on recent work by Eaton (2020, p. 47), we might say something like:

[D]esired traits are selected by inventors, users, and manufacturers...[T]he criterion for selection is the artifact’s “success,” where this means not that the artifact performs as its maker intended but, rather, that its performances are deemed valuable by some members of the society. In this way “fitness” is determined by how well the artifact fulfills human needs and desires, where these may

be medical, economic, political, aesthetic, and so forth. When a given artifact meets these needs and desires better than its competitors, it is selected over competitors for replication and distribution.

On this extension of the etiological theory of constitutive functions, we look to the factors that keep this particular artifact, as opposed to other options, in circulation among the artifact-creators and use those factors to identify the artifact's function. Feeding this back into Unnsteinsson's definition of proper functions, an artifact would then have a proper function  $f$  only if (i)  $f$  is a constitutive function of that artifact, (ii) a failure to perform  $f$  can be due to a malfunction of the artifact, and (iii) describing the artifact as performing  $f$  helps us understand why this artifact was introduced into the human population and why it, as opposed to some alternative, persists. With this revised definition in hand, we can now talk freely of the functions of languages themselves.

Returning to Unnsteinsson's specific claims regarding the proper function of pragmatic competence: this function, he posits, is communication (Ibid., p. 107). Communication, in turn, is to be understood in a Gricean manner, in terms of generating evidence for having an intention that the audience entertain a particular proposition and, reciprocally, recognizing such intentions on the basis of language use (Ibid., p. 125). But, of course, one could agree with Unnsteinsson regarding the proper function of language use while disagreeing with him about what exactly communication amounts to.

Given the preceding, one might expect to find in Unnsteinsson an extended argument for communication being the etiological function of language use, the function which best explains the presence and persistence of language use amongst human beings. That is not Unnsteinsson's strategy, however. Instead, after exploring why one purported alternative turns out to collapse into a communication-based account, Unnsteinsson adopts the view as a 'working hypothesis' (Ibid., p. 107). This is more than a little surprising, given that the history of philosophy furnishes a natural alternative: on a line of thought stretching back from Herder, through von Humboldt to Frege and Chomsky, our capacity for language use both arises and persists, in the first instance, to allow us to think. It is this capacity which allows us to break free of the stream of Humean sensation and engage in something that qualifies as genuine thinking and inferring (cf. Michaelson & Textor 2023).

In more recent work, Unnsteinsson (2023) acknowledges this possible ex-

planation of the etiology of human language, but claims not to need an argument against it; rather, he remains open to embracing both etiological stories (p. 929). I take it that, in this, Unnsteinsson must mean that he remains open to the claim that neither etiological story alone suffices to explain the presence and persistence of the linguistic capacity among human beings.

Note that this insouciant attitude raises some puzzling questions: if language use has two distinct proper functions, then what are we to say about some instance of language use which comports with one but not the other? Is that a malfunction simpliciter, and if so why? Or should we now relativize malfunctions to a particular proper function, allow for some sort of vote, a weighted vote, or what have you? The point is not that one cannot adopt a view like this, but that if Unnsteinsson wants to avoid giving an argument for some particular  $f$  being *the* proper function of language use, then his view looks bound to be significantly more complicated than was advertised. What's more, if Unnsteinsson is open to language use having more than one proper function, it is unclear why he is justified in stopping at just two—particularly if allowing more would result in significant increases in explanatory power. We will return to this possibility below.

### 3 Minimalist Idealizations, Proper Functions, and Attention Direction

Let us turn now to minimalist idealizations. Generalizing on Weisberg (2013)'s work on scientific modeling, Keiser proposes to understand minimalist theories as those which contain only those explanatory factors (be they metaphysical, causal, etc.) which are essential to characterizing the phenomenon in question (Keiser 2023, p. 7). Minimalist idealizations are the converse of this: we idealize in a minimalist manner by stripping away whatever of the phenomenon we take to be inessential to characterizing it.

Keiser argues that the pervasive minimalist idealization in the philosophy of language to this point has been: language is a system of cooperative information exchange. A theory of language which reflects this, she claims, will:

First...represent only those features of the target phenomenon which involved cooperation and information exchange—i.e., non-cooperative uses of language and uses other than information

exchange would be left out. Second, the theorist's reasons for representing the target in this way would be that they thought that alternative uses of language played no role in metaphysically determining the target phenomenon. (Ibid., pp. 7-8)

So the proponent of this sort of minimalist idealization would hopefully offer us some argument for cooperative information exchange being the aspect of language use that, fundamentally, helps us characterize the phenomenon of using language. One natural way of filling in that argument would be via the interim conclusion: cooperative information exchange is the proper function of language. Cooperative information exchange, in other words, is the primary thing we do with language. Non-cooperative uses of language would then be characterized as either malfunctions or accidents, depending on the details. This starts to look much like Unnsteinsson's proposal.

Keiser, as noted at the outset, rejects this minimalist idealization. Her main reason is this: there are, she claims, a number of important features of languages that a minimalist theories along this lines are going to be in no position to explain. For instance, in the 'Northern Cities Shift', White Midwesterners started pronouncing their vowels in a new way, seemingly in response to an influx of Black Americans migrating north during the period between, roughly, the end of World War I to 1960 in order to pursue relatively well-paid industrial work. In brief, the shifted pronunciation seems to have been part of a rapid shift in sociolinguistic identity, aimed in no small part in excluding the Black newcomers (Ibid., pp. 30-31).<sup>2</sup>

On one fairly standard way of working out the above minimalist idealization, due to Lewis (1969, 1975), the Northern Cities Shift should be impossible. For, according to Lewis, the conventions which characterize a language are fully cooperative: they are conventions which, essentially, maximize communicative efficacy among a linguistic community.<sup>3</sup> So it should have been impossible for speakers of English in the Midwest to have shifted from a shared, more communicatively efficient, pronunciation profile to a bifurcated, and thus far less efficient, one. Yet this isn't just some freak accident; there is a natural explanation of this shift in terms of one group of speakers' desire to differentiate itself from another group, to generate a

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<sup>2</sup>See also Van Herk (2008).

<sup>3</sup>Technically, these conventions are supposed to be coordinative equilibria, or strategies where, supposing that the sole goal is maximizing communicative efficacy, no one would prefer that anyone deviate from the strategy. See Lewis (1969, pp. 45-6).

distinct linguistic identity even at the cost of communicative efficacy.<sup>4</sup>

As against this particular idealized understanding of language as a system of cooperative communication exchange, Keiser proposes an alternative minimalist idealization: language is a system for directing each other's attention. As she puts it pithily, '[d]irecting attention is the central thing that we use language to do' (Keiser 2023, p. 90). While Keiser never expands on the significance of 'centrality', it strikes me as natural to read this as: directing attention is the proper function of language.<sup>5</sup> Although there are presumably many other things we do with language, these will amount to either 'mere accidents' or 'malfunctions' in the teleo-functional terminology. Hence, these needn't be explained by our core theories of e.g. meaning and communication, but can rather be explained via supplemental material.

In contrast to Unnsteinsson's etiological grounding for his communicative account of the proper function of language, Keiser's justification of her alternative is explicitly pragmatic. To allow for the possibility of the Northern Cities Shift, she drops the requirement that conventions must maximize communicative efficacy. Rather, they are allowed to be local equilibria which balance both communicative efficacy and whatever other interests the linguistic community might want to promote. Likewise, Keiser thinks that some communication runs without overt intention-recognition, covert dogwhistles for instance. In such cases, we rely on each other to draw certain inferences via brute associative power or the like, not via any recognition of the speaker's intentions (cf. Khoo 2017, Saul 2018). Keiser takes such communicative effects to be both important and pervasive, and so thinks it would be a mistake to adopt a theory which categorizes them as malfunctions or accidents.<sup>6</sup> I am

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<sup>4</sup>One might try and treat these two groups as, over time, coming to speak two distinct versions of English. But Keiser's point, I take it, is that Lewis's tools would seem to offer us no way of explaining why and how such a linguistic split might come about—particularly in populations with a sustained overall need to communicate, even in cases where one sub-group wants to differentiate itself, linguistically, from another sub-group.

<sup>5</sup>Indeed, Keiser (p.c.) agrees with this assessment of things, though she is now inclined to also distinguish between the (multitudinous) immediate and (unified) ultimate functions of language. I will leave it to her to introduce this picture in any detail.

<sup>6</sup>Keiser offers a range of other cases she takes to illustrate this phenomenon of covert meaning, including the sorts of insinuation discussed in Camp (2018) and certain sorts of propaganda as discussed in Stanley (2015). While I am not convinced that these cases adequately illustrate her point, the point itself I certainly take to be correct. For what I take to be some better cases, see the sorts of 'conversational elicitures' discussed in Cohen & Kehler (2021) or the cases of 'sneaky reference' developed in Michaelson (2022a).



inclined to agree, though I won't argue the point here.

We now have two theories of the proper function of language on the table. In the next two sections, I will raise problems for each of these theories. First, I will turn to some specific problems that arise for each theory. Then I will turn to some more general considerations which tell against the thesis that language has any one proper function.

## 4 Particularized Problems for Proper Function Accounts

Both Unnsteinsson and Keiser claim that their respective ways of understanding the proper function of language ultimately yield a better understanding the nature of meaning and communication. Indeed, for both authors, these improved understandings are supposed to offer indirect evidence in favor of their suggested proper function.

For Unnsteinsson, one of the main upshots of his proposal is what he calls the **Edenic Constraint** on reference. For Keiser, it is a weakened notion of Gricean speaker meaning, capable of accounting for phenomena like covert dogwhistles. In this section, I will examine the merits of each of these results, arguing that neither stands up to scrutiny.

### 4.1 The Edenic Constraint

As noted earlier, Unnsteinsson takes on a Gricean picture of communication, according to which communication depends on the speaker generating signals about their intentions for the listener (to come to believe  $P$ , in the case of declaratives) and the listener's reciprocally recognizing these intentions. Unnsteinsson argues that the only rational explanation available for why human beings say things is that they intend to have certain sorts of effects on others. So rational acts of expressing, of saying things in the normal manner, must be accompanied by intentions to have certain sorts of effects on others—or perhaps sometimes on the speaker themselves.

What sorts of intentions? Well, Unnsteinsson reasons, we cannot simply will that others come to have various thoughts and intentions by means of saying things to them; human beings aren't quite so easily influenced, for the

most part at least.<sup>7</sup> So, more plausibly, we intend to provide our interlocutors with evidence about our intentions for them, then hope that they act in accordance with those intentions (Unnsteinsson 2022, pp. 84-85).

Unnsteinsson's **Edenic Constraint** is supposed to derive from this picture of communication: when referential terms are involved, the relevant intentions will have to do with getting the listener to come to adopt one or another object-directed attitude. If the speaker is in no position to intend such a thing, then it looks like the communicative function of language will necessarily be frustrated. And indeed, Unnsteinsson takes it that there are certain cases—cases of what he calls 'combinatorial confusion'—where the speaker simply cannot form the relevant kind of intention. The **Edenic Constraint**, therefore, rules these cases out: it holds that, in such cases, speakers cannot use referential terms to refer, for those terms cannot perform their proper function of helping to enable object-directed communication (Ibid., p. 151).

Unnsteinsson takes this result to speak strongly in favor of his account, for cases of combinatorial confusion have long proven a thorn in the side of philosophers of language. For instance, consider a case adapted from Camp (2002): Unnsteinsson gives his daughter, call her 'Freya', a teddy bear. In fact, he has purchased two identical teddy bears, so that he can switch them out when necessary. Freya names the bear 'Malcolm' and happily uses that name when in the vicinity of either *Malcolm-1* or *Malcolm-2*. Unnsteinsson regularly switches the bears in order to launder or repair them. So Freya is exposed to each bear roughly half of the time. Freya, however, never becomes any the wiser regarding the Malcolm situation (Ibid., pp. 30-31).

Now suppose that, without either *Malcolm-1* or *Malcolm-2* being nearby, Freya utters:

- (1) I miss Malcolm.

Is there an answer here to the question: which bear is the referent? Presumably not. Reference failure thus seems to be a reasonable prediction. But how are we to derive this prediction? On a standard causal-historical account of names à la Donnellan (1970) or Kripke (1972), the name would have been introduced via a baptism, and so has whatever reference it has. The prediction would seem to be that the name 'Malcolm' refers to whichever bear Freya was first given by Unnsteinsson—though that hardly seems right.

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<sup>7</sup>Perhaps certain human beings in certain situations—e.g. Donald Trump on January 6th—are in a position to rationally so intend. And indeed, as Keiser rightly points out, covert dogwhistles plausibly also exhibit this kind of intentional structure.

The advantage to Unnsteinsson's account is that he can offer a principled explanation of this result: supposing that names are used to refer, to intentionally offer evidence regarding object-directed attitudes, then Freya is in no position to offer such evidence. For she is confused. On Unnsteinsson's analysis, she believes the false proposition that *Malcolm-1 = Malcolm-2* (Ibid., p. 33). But we don't need anything so strong for Unnsteinsson's explanation to go through: all that we need is to reject the claim that Freya is in a position to generate a clear intention targeting either *Malcolm-1* or *Malcolm-2*. Supposing that to be the case, then her utterance cannot fulfill the proper function of language use on Unnsteinsson's picture. Thus, it counts as a malfunction. And malfunctions, we now add, result in reference failure.

So far, so good for the **Edenic Constraint**. However, there are nearby cases where our judgments seem to flip the other way. For instance, consider a situation where Freya has just brought *Malcolm-1* in from playing in the rain. She utters:

(2) Malcolm really needs a wash!

In this instance, it seems far from clear that Freya's use of the term 'Malcolm' fails to refer. In fact, it seems reasonably clear that it does, in fact, refer. But Unnsteinsson predicts the opposite, for he is committed to the claim that someone in Freya's situation is *never* in a position to have clear *Malcolm-1* directed intentions, due to her confusion. So she is never in a position to fulfill the proper function of language use with respect to the term 'Malcolm'.

One option at this point would be for Unnsteinsson to dig in his heels and insist that the theoretical clarity he offers is worth the cost of classifying a few cases in counterintuitive ways. After all, he is trying to offer an overall informative theory of meaning, not predict all of our naive reactions to cases. This response is fair enough, but to assess it we would need to know more about the yardstick by which Unnsteinsson hopes to measure the success of his theory. The final chapter in his book is given over to showing how the theory captures a range of hard cases, like (1), and Unnsteinsson treats the capacity of his theory to account for these cases as indirect evidence in favor of that theory. So it seems fair to use this criteria as at least one measure of success. The problem is that, even if the theory can account for certain hard cases, like (1), it would seem to do so at the cost of accounting for others, like (2). Why should we not hope for a theory of meaning and communication that helps us understand why it is rational for Unnsteinsson to react to (2) by taking *Malcolm-1* and putting him in the wash?

Another option would be for Unnsteinsson to account for this case in some other way. One strategy he often relies on is to liken certain recalcitrant cases to malapropisms. But, by Unnsteinsson's own lights, this case is nothing like a malapropism. For in the case of a malapropism, the speaker's meaning is clear—it's just that they've chosen the wrong term to express that meaning. In this case, Unnsteinsson is committed to the claim that there is nothing that Freya means; due to her confusion, she cannot. So the listener would be making a mistake to treat Freya as meaning anything at all.

What other options are open to Unnsteinsson? Well, he could give up on his account of communication, or on his account of confusion. I will assume that neither of those options will prove appealing. There is one other possibility, however, and one that I already alluded to above: allow that clarifying our thinking may constitute an equally important proper function of language use. Suppose for the moment that thinking and communicating are co-equal proper functions of language use. Then Unnsteinsson might claim (2) is an instance of Freya's thought becoming clear via the outward manifestation of her mentation. That is, if external context can somehow help to fix the reference of our utterances of ambiguous or context-sensitive terms like names, then perhaps external context can, indirectly, help to settle the reference of Freya's 'Malcolm' thought here too (cf. Wettstein 1984).

Of course, much more would have to be said about how such fixing might work. My point here is only that, if our thinking is regularly subject to combinatorial confusion of the type that Unnsteinsson points to—as, it seems, it might well be—then part of what might make a particular language, or set of linguistic conventions, appealing to us is precisely the resources it makes available to dissolve our confusion in cases like this one.

This way of going, while certainly interesting, raises a host of further questions: why does an utterance of (1) count as unclarifiable whereas (2) does not? Are there simply different types of meaning and reference corresponding to these two proper functions? Or does meaning and reference merely require that the utterance not count as a malfunction relative to at least one proper function, but not necessarily both? If Unnsteinsson really does want to go down this route, I will leave it to him to answer these questions.

## 4.2 K-Meaning

Whereas Unnsteinsson aims to offer us a constraint on referring, the upshot of Keiser's minimal idealization is different: a less idealized understanding

of what it is to mean something with our utterances. To get the contrast in view, I will start by introducing the relevant bits of Grice (1957)'s theory of meaning and then turn to Keiser's alternative.

We have already seen the basics of Grice's theory, given Unnsteinsson's reliance on them. But let's put the idea into a canonical formulation:

**G-Meaning** In uttering  $U$ ,  $S$  means that  $p$  just in case  $S$  intends to produce some characteristic  $p$ -related effect (entertaining  $p$ , believing  $p$ , etc.) in the listener  $L$ , at least partially on the basis of  $L$ 's recognizing this very intention.

There has been a longstanding dispute between various Griceans regarding whether the relevant effect for declaratives is belief or something weaker, and how best to extend this sort of definition to incorporate speech acts other than assertions. I will leave all of that to the side, however.<sup>8</sup> Unnsteinsson adds—helpfully, I think, for this sort of picture—that part of meaning is intending to generate evidence regarding one's intentions. But again, we can leave that out of the official definition for present purposes.

In contrast to this understanding of meaning, Keiser (2023, p. 95) proposes:

**K-Meaning** In uttering  $U$ ,  $S$  means that  $p$  just in case  $S$  intends to direct  $L$ 's attention to  $p$ , at least partially on the basis of  $L$ 's utterance of  $U$ .<sup>9</sup>

Note that Keiser has departed from Grice in two substantial ways here. First, the characteristic effect has been weakened even beyond entertaining a proposition to simply having one's attention directed to it. This allows her to, among other things, more uniformly characterize the meanings of both complex expressions, like sentences, and simple ones, like sub-sentential

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<sup>8</sup>In one of the most memorable parts of his book, Unnsteinsson (2022, p. 94) suggests that Griceans who have been moved by various cases to weaken the characteristic effect from belief to entertaining a proposition have effectively begged the question against Spinozan theories of belief-fixation, according to which entertaining a proposition *just is* believing it. Assessing this argument would go well beyond the scope of the present piece, but I will note my deep appreciation for Unnsteinsson's hardcore-ness here.

<sup>9</sup>Note that I have modified Keiser's definition of meaning slightly so as to better parallel **G-Meaning**. I take these modifications to be immaterial for our purposes.

exclamations, which are plausibly used to direct attention to things, properties, and concepts.<sup>10</sup> Second, Keiser has weakened Grice's 'reflexive' clause, which requires intending for the speaker to recognize one's intentions, so as to allow for covert meanings like those we see in certain types of dogwhistles. In those cases, it is important that the listener comes to have their attention directed in a particular way on the basis of the speaker's utterance, but not by recognizing her intentions.<sup>11</sup>

So far, it seems like Keiser's notion of meaning is succeeding by her own lights: it doesn't idealize away from covert meanings, but rather allows us to see how they might count as a type of meaning. How does it fare though with respect to the problem that dogged Lewis, i.e. accounting for the possibility (indeed, the reality) of the Northern Cities Shift?

Keiser proposes to account for the possibility of the Northern Cities Shift not directly with her account of meaning, but rather with her account of 'metasemantics', or the factors that determine the meanings of terms. On Keiser's telling, meaning is conventional. And a meaning *M* becomes conventional in a community just in case there is a stable equilibrium which balances the community's various interests, including but not limited to their communicative interests, which sustains the expectation that the term in question will regularly be used to overtly mean *M* (Ibid., p. 106). By 'overtly meaning *M*', Keiser means something like **G-Meaning**—so meaning which is intended to be overtly recognized by the listener as such. In effect, despite her broadening her overall notion of meaning to include covert meanings, Keiser is still committed to the claim that only overt, more traditionally Gricean meanings play any role in fixing the conventions which govern our language use, and hence the meaning of any given expression.

It is these further commitments that serve to raise a challenge for Keiser's view which largely parallels her own challenge to Lewis. The shifted pronunciation characteristic of the Northern Cities Shift was novel and unfamiliar when first introduced, and hence presumably *less effective* at drawing listeners' attention to objects, properties, and propositions than the natural alternative: the older, more established vowel patterns that these were a departure from. So the innovators of the Northern Cities Shift, insofar as they

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<sup>10</sup>That said, when it comes to propositions, I'm not sure what exactly attending to a proposition would mean beyond entertaining it.

<sup>11</sup>This move away from intention-recognition might seem to re-open a whole Pandora's Box of potential counterexamples to the view, originally raised against early versions of Grice's own view. As these issues are not our focus here, I will set them to the side.

meant anything with their words, would have been under rational pressure to conform to the old patterns of pronunciation.<sup>12</sup> But it is highly dubitable that the innovators of the Northern Cities Shift were under any rational pressure to continue conforming to the old pronunciation pattern. They might have been had their only goal been to maximize communicative efficacy, or efficacy in attention direction, but that was not their only goal. Rather, they were equally, if not more, interested in forging a new linguistic identity.

This problem arises for both the **K-Meaning** and **G-Meaning** analysis of meaning, since according to both of those analyses, if the speaker was trying to mean something, a better way of doing so was readily available. The speaker should thus have been under pressure to use the more effective means. Two obvious ways out of this challenge would be: (i) to give up on means-ends rationality, or (ii) to give up on the present analysis of meaning, such that whatever intentions might be required for meaning don't put the speaker under pressure in this way. Neither of these options will, I presume, prove appealing to Keiser.

But there is a third, and more interesting, response available: plausibly, there are cases where I can intend to  $\phi$  but decline to  $\psi$ , where I take  $\psi$ -ing to be the most effective way of  $\phi$ -ing available to me, yet remain rationally unimpeachable.<sup>13</sup> In particular, suppose that  $\psi$ -ing incurs significant costs relative to  $\chi$ -ing, but  $\chi$ -ing is a less effective way of  $\phi$ -ing. Should the expected value lost by opting to  $\chi$  amount to less than the costs of  $\psi$ -ing as opposed to  $\chi$ -ing, then it looks like I am under no pressure to  $\psi$  as opposed to  $\chi$ .

And yet, this is a tricky road to take for the defender of either **K-Meaning** or **G-Meaning**. The problem is that this way of going lays the view open to a version of the Humpty Dumpty objection.<sup>14</sup> Suppose that I really, really dislike the word 'cheese'; it gives me the willies. So, whenever I want to direct my listeners' attention to cheese, or communicate something about cheese, I instead say 'snood'. I am fully aware that this is a terrible way of carrying out my communicative goals, but I can't think of a better one and I judge the risks of failing to communicate to be of less disvalue than

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<sup>12</sup>Note that it isn't anything about the proper function of language that generates this rational pressure; proper functions aren't generally understood to generate such pressure. Rather, it is Keiser's commitment to **K-Meaning** which serves to put speakers under such pressure, supposing that these speakers are trying to speak meaningfully.

<sup>13</sup>By 'most effective' here I just mean the way of  $\phi$ -ing most likely to succeed.

<sup>14</sup>See MacKay (1968). The allusion is to Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, particularly chapter 6.

having to utter the term ‘cheese’. According to the response to our initial worry presently under consideration, it looks like I am rationally unimpeachable in my use of the term ‘snood’ to mean cheese. I submit that, contrary to this line of reasoning, one cannot in fact use the term ‘snood’ to mean cheese. One can try as hard as one likes, but one will fail.<sup>15</sup>

Of course, Keiser might well rise to this challenge and explain how (i) the innovators of the Northern Cities Shift could mean something with their utterances while being under no rational pressure to hew to more traditional vowel patterns, and (ii) do so in such a way that doesn’t leave her account of meaning vulnerable to the Humpty Dumpty objection. But I am at a loss for how that might be done. The culprit, it seems to me, is not means-ends rationality, but rather the sort of audience-directed account of meaning that Keiser has inherited from Grice. While certainly less idealized than **G-Meaning**, **K-Meaning**, I would suggest, is still too heavily idealized.<sup>16</sup> It still depends on thinking that there is a proper function of language which can helpfully guide our inquiries into meaning and communication. And so far, at least, that thought has mostly served to get us into trouble.

## 5 Generalized Problems for Proper Function Accounts

Above, we introduced two *prima facie* plausible claims regarding the proper function of language use: the proper function of language is either communication or attention-direction. Each was found wanting. But I started with a more general claim, to the effect that language has no single proper function. And, of course, nothing I have said so far serves to establish this. In this section, I will offer some considerations against language having a single proper function, regardless of what we take that function to be.

The first thing we need to do is clarify what’s meant by ‘the proper func-

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<sup>15</sup>But, one might think, what about linguistic innovation? Can’t one intend to innovate here, and even potentially succeed? Fair enough. It is a further tricky question, however, what makes it the case that linguistic innovation succeeds when it does. Rather than getting in to all that, let me restrict my above claim to: try as you might to use the term ‘snood’ to mean cheese, you will fail unless you somehow manage to inaugurate a new meaning for the word ‘snood’ by means of your utterance. So in most cases, one will fail. For a fuller defense of this kind of picture, see Michaelson (2022b).

<sup>16</sup>For further discussion, see Michaelson (2024).



tion of language'. As we saw already, Unnsteinsson is primarily interested in language use, or what he calls our 'pragmatic competence'. This competence, he tells us, amounts to the production of utterances paired with a suite of relevant intentions. For him, these intentions are of the sort necessary to underwrite **G-Meaning**. But, of course, that part is debatable.

In contrast, for Chomsky (1975)—probably the best-known contemporary heir to the Herderian tradition—the primary phenomenon in which we are interested is linguistic competence. In contrast to Unnsteinsson's pragmatic competence, linguistic competence is supposed to be defined as the capacity to recursively generate well-formed representational structures. So nowhere in Chomsky will one find an appeal to anything like a suite of relevant intentions to try and characterize the target phenomenon. Chomsky's target is a competence effectively stripped of all its interactional social aspects.

Put this way, it is plain to see why the sort of function that Unnsteinsson attributes to language is likely to be rather different from what Chomsky does: these two theorists are focused on a very different cluster of phenomena. As we saw above, one can try and accept that each provides a proper function for 'language use' in some sense, but that leads to significant complications if we try and work from this proper function to conclusions about the nature of meaning or communication. Distinct proper functions are likely to point in different directions regarding the nature of these phenomena, so we need some way of adjudicating which function is the more relevant.

In spite of their differences, both of these approaches start with the thought that there is some psychological capacity which stands as our primary target when we are investigating language use. That, I contend, limits our perspective on what might be of interest to a theory of meaning and communication in ways that philosophers ought to be wary of. This isn't to cast doubt on the interest of investigating either of these phenomena. On the contrary, both investigations strike me as highly worthwhile. But there is more to language use than either of these capacities, and more still that we might hope to incorporate into a full and complete theory of meaning.

To see why, let us change tack for a moment. Consider a rather different question from any that Unnsteinsson or Chomsky seem inclined to ask: what is the function of the particular sorts of languages that we actually speak? Returning to our initial inspiration in Jakobson, we might ask: why do human languages contain filler words like 'um' or other *phatics* in his sense, like 'hello' and 'bye'? None of these terms, or utterances of them more specifically, plausibly fit the mould of either **G-Meaning** or **K-Meaning**. That is, one

doesn't say 'um' in order to indicate to your listener that you intend for them to come to believe that you are thinking and may have more to say. Nor does one say 'um' in order to direct your listener's attention to anything. But 'um' is not meaningless, nor is it beyond the reach of conventionality. It is not just some random noise that we insert to preserve our turn to speak. Rather, different human languages have specific terms which serve similar phatic functions, like 'also' or 'nah' in German.

Phatic terms like these are hardly an outlier. Actual human languages are rife with features that make little sense if all we are concerned with is explaining communication, attention-direction, or even facilitating thought. Politeness marking can, for instance, work directly against communicative efficacy—in Japanese, for instance, where politeness marking typically makes utterances substantially longer and, often, less direct. And, as Nowak (2024) points out, actual human languages allow for substantially more subtle differences in communicative effects than would be expected if the function of language were merely to prompt each other to entertain propositions or direct each other's attention to objects, properties, or propositions.

Consider, for instance, how in English dropping a 'g' at the end of an '-ing' construction can cultivate a sense of approachability and solidarity (cf. Burnett 2019). Or how the following four sentences all plausibly convey the same information and direct our attention to the same state of affairs, but will predictably generate different reactions in the listener:

- (3) Bob needs to urinate.
- (4) Bob needs to pee.
- (5) Bob needs to take a piss.
- (6) Bob needs to go pee-pee.<sup>17</sup>

If the proper function of language use really is to communicate, then it would seem odd that the sorts of tools we have developed to carry out that function—the actual languages we speak—contain so many differently-socially-valanced linguistic variants.<sup>18</sup> What's the point of all of these variants if all that language aims at is changing each other's beliefs via overt

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<sup>17</sup>The examples are from Nowak (2024), though he credits the inspiration for them to Diaz-Legaspe et al. (2020). See also Sander (2024) for further discussion of the relationship between register and more traditional philosophical notions of meaning.

<sup>18</sup>Sociolinguists typically call these 'variables', but I eschew that terminology for obvious reasons.

intention-recognition? And likewise with attention-direction: all of this subtlety looks like a distraction if what we are up to, fundamentally, is directing each other's attention to things, properties, and states of affairs.<sup>19</sup>

To hammer the point home: suppose for the moment that the proper function of language is communication. Would we expect to find variants like (3)–(6) in any given human language? It wouldn't be all that surprising to find them in one or another; the development of a language is undoubtedly a noisy process, after all. But would we expect to find such variants in *every* human language? No. For if the proper function of language is exchanging information, the presence of variants could only really be explained as the product of randomness. In fact, variants like (3)–(6) can be found across the full range of human languages. Far from being the random byproduct of language development, it looks instead like linguistic variants like these serve a fundamental purpose: allowing us to develop our linguistic style and to forge a sense of linguistic identity (cf. Burnett 2019, Nowak 2019, 2024).

Now let us return to Eaton's approach to artifact functions, introduced in §2. Recall that Eaton proposes to determine artifact function by considering what makes a particular artifact more valuable to its inventors, users, and manufacturers than its nearby possible rivals. That sort of usefulness, she takes it, constitutes the 'fitness' of artifacts, and serves to explain why that artifact arises and persists, as opposed to a nearby variant on it or something even further afield. This sort of orientation towards artifact function can also help us to understand functional differences at a rather fine-grained level. Why do we have framing hammers, finishing hammers, and ball-peen hammers? Not necessarily because they were originally designed for different tasks, but more likely because a long series of tryings of different hammers for different tasks led to preferences for these various hammer designs, each suited (for most people, at least) to a slightly different purpose.

This raises the possibility of asking, at a relatively fine level of grain, why a particular human language is like it is—what function the particulars of that language exist to serve. Why does English allow for g-dropping? Why all these

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<sup>19</sup>Keiser, it is worth noting, could try broadening her view to allow that we use language meaningfully to direct attention to e.g. further aspects of the situation that are motivating me to use one variant as opposed to another, politeness norms, comedy norms, etc. I remain unconvinced that the humorous derision of (6), uttered in the right context, can be helpfully explained in terms of, for instance, attention-direction to comedy norms plus various other features of the context. But perhaps my skepticism is unwarranted. I shall leave it to Keiser to argue the point, should she choose to do so.

different variants for ‘urinate’? Why such limited politeness marking? Why phatic terms? Why pure exclamatives? I take it that the answer to precisely none of these questions is ‘To better facilitate information exchange’ or ‘To better facilitate attention-direction’. Rather, it looks far more plausible to think that this particular human artifact, English, functions in a particular set of ways to allow us to build and express our personae, to facilitate a broad sense of familiarity and solidarity, to subtly drop shade on our acquaintances, to initiate and end the social practice of conversation, to give voice to pure joy and wonderment, and a great deal else besides.

Again, these sorts of questions are not at all unique to English. A language like Japanese raises the analogous question: why such an intricate and explicit politeness marking system? The answer, in a very general sense, would seem to be that particular human languages are selected for by particular human cultures, or at least by past iterations of those cultures, to serve specific social purposes. In Eaton’s terms: it looks as though the reasons why we have developed the particular human languages we have, as opposed to nearby versions of them, are functional. The reification of social hierarchy isn’t some random feature of Japanese; rather, the reason that Japanese looks the way it does is because it served, and perhaps still serves, the function of reinforcing and sustaining a highly stratified social structure. Or so the idea goes.

If we are moved to accept a picture like this one, should we continue to set apart some subset of these functions as the *proper functions* of language? I am skeptical. To be clear, I am inclined to hew to the claim that some uses of language constitute genuine mistakes. That said, I suspect that we can account for this by appealing not to proper functions, but rather to the conventions of languages combined with an account of what it takes to speak a particular language in a given context, where that involves making oneself beholden to certain linguistic rules.<sup>20</sup> If that’s right, then I’m not sure what proper function talk ends up buying us in the domain of language.

In fact, if one is inclined to follow me in thinking that language serves a number of different functions, then there is at least some pressure to reject the thought that any of these are proper functions: it’s just too easy to think of cases where one of these functions is going to be fulfilled but others will not be. Either these cases are to be counted as malfunctions, which seems misleading, or our account of how proper function and malfunction relate to each other will have to be revised. Without some significant payoff in return,

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<sup>20</sup>See Reiland (2023) for a detailed description of the sort of picture I have in mind.

I cannot see why either of these options would be worth embracing.

## 6 A Plurality of Meanings?

What does all of this entail for the theory of meaning? Strictly speaking, not much. Even if we reject the claim that the proper function of language use is, for instance, communication, we might still hope to offer some independent argument to the effect that meaning is best captured by something like **G-Meaning**. That said, extant arguments in favor of **G-Meaning**, Unnsteinson's to the side, tend to claim that it is either a conceptual truth—which, at this point, should be highly dubitable—or that it better captures our intuitions about meaning than do its competitors. That latter was the style of Grice (1957)'s original argument for **G-Meaning**. But, as we have seen, there are any number of cases involving intuitively meaningful behavior that **G-Meaning** fails to capture: cases involving covert meanings, offensiveness or politeness marking, personae construction, etc.

Of course, the defender of **G-Meaning** is welcome to try and claim that many, or perhaps even all of these, shouldn't be counted as meaning proper. But, for this move to be taken seriously, it stands in need of some argument in its favor, not just the bare assertion of the claim. After all, most of these effects are highly conventionalized features of particular languages with predictable 'normal' effects on listeners—something which might naturally be taken as a mark of meaningfulness.

The move to **K-Meaning** already represents a move towards pluralism about meaning, as Keiser herself is happy to accept. For Keiser, there are both covert meanings and overt meanings.<sup>21</sup> Where Keiser's radicalism stops short is in thinking that all these species of meaning can all be brought under the umbrella of one sufficiently abstract analysis, namely **K-Meaning**, and in holding that it is only overt **K-Meaning** which serves to ground the conventions of a language. Again, once we have taken this step towards a plurality of meanings, I cannot see any justification for excluding the many other types of meaning that cannot be readily explained in terms of attention-direction, like politeness marking. So I do not think we are justified in stopping here.

Instead, I take it that the natural response to the above considerations is to adopt a more expansive and pluralistic understanding of meaning: in

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<sup>21</sup>Keiser also admits of what she calls 'direct' and 'indirect' meanings, though those are largely tangential for our purposes and so I have omitted discussion of them.

addition to meaning in the sense of what the speaker intends to communicate, or how the speaker intends to direct attention, there are any number of meaningful effects that a speaker might intentionally have on their listener, involving the role of phatic terms and pure emotives, or the sorts of sociolinguistic variation we introduced in the previous section and which it is difficult to conceive of a human language lacking. This sort of approach is consonant with recent work by Burnett (2019), Diaz-Legaspe et al. (2020), Nowak (2024), and Sander (2024), and draws inspiration from them all.

To these types of meanings, I would now add yet more: some kinds of meaning may not be audience-directed at all, but instead aimed at altering the normative situation of the conversation; some kinds of intentional meaning may be filtered through conventionalized constraints, whereas others may not be; some may serve primarily to structure rather than direct attention; some may be intended to shift how terms are subsequently used; and some may not need to be intended by the speaker at all, such as the kind of meaning that we would use to settle a bet on the truth-value of the utterance in a case where the speaker is confused about the meaning of the very terms they are using.<sup>22</sup> And I suspect there are others still.

It is an interesting question whether there is anything to be gained from abstracting sufficiently away from the specifics of these various kinds of meaning to capture all of these under a single rubric, or whether that is even possible. Before we turn our attention to that project, however, I think we would do well to first explore these various phenomena on their own terms: not *the* function of language, but the many, many functions that languages have been selected, over any number of generations of use, to support.

Likewise, if we expand out our understanding of meaning in this way, then there is pressure to adjust our understanding of communication in turn. For surely it is coherent to talk about success or failure in saying ‘Bob needs to urinate’ as opposed to ‘Bob needs to go pee-pee’, and surely this has to do, somehow, with the differential ‘normal’ effects that each of these should be expected to have on a listener. These effects, I contend, are unlikely to be adequately captured by if we remain committed to thinking of communication in terms of coordinating on a proposition or co-attending to a particular state of affairs. So we should not. Meaning pluralism, in other words, pushes us towards communication pluralism as well.

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<sup>22</sup>I have explored some of these notions in Michaelson (2016, 2022a) and others, together with Ethan Nowak, in Nowak & Michaelson (2021, 2022a,b).

## 7 Conclusion

The lure of taking language to have just one proper function is clear: if language does have a single proper function, then we would be justified in focusing our investigations in the first instance on the ways that human languages allow us to fulfill this function, on the presumption that the rest of the vast, messy reality of human language use will eventually come along for the ride. In other words, proper functions hold out the hope of offering a reductive analysis on the cheap. Whatever accidents might accrue to the actual languages we speak, those needn't impinge on our foundational theories of meaning, communication, reference, and so on.

I have argued above that we should not succumb to this siren's song. Advocates of proper function accounts have tended to be seduced by the thought that all that matters to language use is the psychological capacities underlying it. But real as those may be, the vast differences amongst human languages show how these basic capacities can give rise to vastly different tools in different social, material, and historical circumstances. To understand how these tools are used, the functions of these tools, we need to understand the full range of tools available and why they have been shaped in the very particular ways that they have. Even a cursory look at the vast diversity of ways that human languages have evolved should be enough to dissuade us from claiming that all these languages, suited to such a wide variety of ends, have all been shaped to serve one overarching proper function.

Just as there could be no contemporary theory of hammer use without understanding the differences between the different kinds of hammers we have developed for different sorts of hammering, so too can there be no theory of language use without an understanding of the different sorts of language we have developed to serve different purposes in different cultures over time. We should not allow some latent Platonic belief in the form of the one true hammer, or the one true language, to convince us otherwise.<sup>23</sup>

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