



From Semantic Deference to Semantic Externalism to Metasemantic Disagreement

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Abstract

We argue for an intimate relation between semantic externalism and semantic deference and propose a typology of speakers' metasemantic views as revealed by their deferential attitudes. Building on this typology, we then offer a classification of metasemantic disagreements understood as verbal disputes between speakers who (consciously or unconsciously) hold divergent metasemantic views about the same word. In particular, we distinguish lower-order metasemantic disagreements between speakers who disagree on the exact source of meaning determination for a word yet agree on the kind of deferential attitude this word is liable to, from higher-order metasemantic disagreements between speakers who do not even agree on the suitable kind of deferential attitude. We demonstrate the fruitfulness of our classification through the concrete implications it has for conceptual engineering.

Keywords Semantic deference · Semantic externalism · Meaning determination · Metasemantic views · Metasemantic theories · Metasemantic disagreement

1 Semantic Deference and Semantic Externalism

1.1 Semantic Deference

In a great many situations of communication, speakers (or writers) use words whose meaning they only understand imperfectly.¹ Yet, those very speakers usually also intend to use those words in the same sense as the other members of their linguistic community. When they do so, those speakers *defer* to the meaning norms in effect in the community, and it is those meanings that are contributed to the propositions

they express, not the imperfect or incomplete meanings they have in mind.

Tyler Burge (1979) imagines a patient named Bert who goes to the doctor and says he thinks he has arthritis in his thigh. This, Burge says, cannot be true since the standard meaning of *arthritis* only includes ailments of the joints. What matters here is that the patient himself wants to use the word *arthritis* in accordance to communal practice, which reflects the definition provided by medical experts. Therefore, when informed of the medical definition of the word, Bert will not stick to his claim and maintain that, according to his own understanding of the word, he has arthritis in his thigh; on the contrary, he will admit that he meant to use the word in the standard medical sense and thus that his claim was false. For the meaning of the word *arthritis*, Bert defers to the experts and to the way they define the word.

François Recanati (1997) provides a clear description of that phenomenon of semantic deference. He discusses the case of a student who has learnt from a teacher that Cicero made ample use of synecdoches. The student, however, has no other understanding of synecdoches than that they are a figure of speech. Imagine that he utters the following sentence:

“Cicero’s prose is full of synecdoches.”

Recanati argues that the content contributed by *synecdoches* in this utterance is not determined by the Kaplanian character that the student has in mind (that character

¹ Wikforss (2017) challenges the very idea of incomplete understanding of concepts but also of word meanings. We cannot address her arguments here.

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is merely the indeterminate “figure of speech”) but by the character stored in the teacher’s lexicon. Intuitively, Recanati argues, if Cicero’s prose turns out to be replete with figures of speech but not actual synecdoches, the sentence should be considered false. This confirms that the student’s own understanding is not what goes into its truth-conditions. If it did, the sentence would be true even if Cicero’s prose was full of figures of speech other than synecdoches.

Recanati’s account suggests that deference requires one speaker’s imperfect mastery of a word and the presence of an expert speaker who masters it perfectly. But that is not necessarily the case. The meaning of *synecdoche* in the student’s utterance is fixed not by the teacher—to whom the student surely defers *epistemically* but not *semantically*²—but by the definition arrived at by the best experts in rhetoric—to whom the teacher herself defers even if she masters their definition rather well.

1.2 Conventional Externalism, Indexical Externalism, Usage-Dependent Externalism

We take the deferential behaviour just described—deference to the experts’ conventional definition—to be an empirically investigable phenomenon that lies at the root of one widespread notion of semantic externalism.³ That brand of externalism is often called *social externalism*, a term that has been applied to Tyler Burge’s anti-individualism (e.g. Burge 1979). We will prefer to call it *conventional externalism*, for reasons that will shortly become clear.

In what follows, we show that there are two more kinds of semantic deference, hence three in all, distinguished on the basis of the kind of ‘deferee’ that is actively involved in meaning determination. In all three cases, speakers take the meaning of the word they use to rest in the collective meaning of that word rather than in their own understanding of it. Yet the way this collective meaning is fixed depends on what is regarded as the legitimate source of meaning

determination.⁴ We show that the three kinds of deference reflect three varieties of underlying semantic externalist views.

As the literature on semantic externalism has amply shown, word meanings are not always fixed by experts’ definitions. Consider Putnam’s well-known Twin-Earth thought experiment: on Twin Earth, Putnam invites us to imagine, there exists a substance that goes by the name of *water* and shares with it all its stereotypical properties. Yet, that substance is not water, because its (physical) internal structure is different from that of the earthly paradigms of water that served as the basis for the ostensive definition of our term *water* (1975a, p. 224, 234; 1975b, p. 277; cp. Kripke 1972, p. 128). The view just introduced, that the “extension of our terms depends upon the actual nature of the particular things that serve as paradigms” (Putnam 1975a, p. 245), is fundamental to so-called *indexical externalism*. Some authors like Wikforss (2001), Liu (2002) or Sawyer (2003) also name it *physical externalism* because they take the nature of the referent to rest in its physical structure. We will stick to the label *indexical externalism*, which stresses that the meaning of the word rests in the nature of its referent without making a commitment to this nature being necessarily physical.

There is, we argue, an additional way of comprehending the notion that externalist meaning determination can do without expert definitions. Consider a word like *game*. Wittgenstein (1953) proposes that the word is involved in a bundle of uses which are related only by family resemblance; its use does not, therefore, conform to any definition that fixes the necessary and sufficient conditions for its application. Many members of the linguistic community will use the word in the absence of a perfect grasp of its use within the community; yet this usage, not their own understanding of the word, is what fixes its meaning⁵ in their utterances. The view just described lies at the basis of what could be called *social externalism*. But, as pointed out above, that term has

² For more on the distinction between epistemic and semantic deference, see De Brabanter et al. (2007).

³ This is not the place to provide further substantiation of our claim that semantic deference can be studied empirically. For an outline of how that can be done, see Leclercq and De Brabanter (2019). In that paper, we do not only claim that speakers’ deferential attitudes regarding some word reveal their own metasemantic *views* on that word; we also claim that speakers’ deferential attitudes should be taken into consideration in philosophers’ metasemantic *theories* because semantic externalism is a consequence of semantic deference. We expand on the difference between views and theories in Sect. 1.3.

⁴ As a referee insightfully points out, in ordinary life, speakers also defer to other authorities than the three pointed out here; they defer to the dictionary, to their parents, to relatives they regard as reliable, and so on. But they do not take these authorities to be the sources of meaning determination; they only rely on them in so far as they believe them to defer to the right source of meaning determination. Accordingly, we do not take these cases of vicarious deference to be distinct kinds of semantic deference.

⁵ By *meaning* we will henceforth mean the semantic contribution of the word to the truth-conditions of the sentences it is part of. This is what Recanati, after Kaplan, named its *content*. But the character/content distinction is only relevant when descriptive satisfaction-conditions are concerned which lead to different contents depending on the circumstances of their evaluation. This happens when meaning is fixed by a definition, as is the case in conventional externalism. But things are very different in the case of usage-dependent externalism or of indexical externalism. We will thus use the general notion of *meaning* for what is common in the three cases.

widely been used to characterise the thesis that the meaning of a word rests in its conventional expert definition. For the sake of clarity, we propose calling it *usage-dependent externalism*, on the understanding that this label applies to cases in which community practice is not ruled by an expert definition or by scientific theories on the nature of word referents.

Now, the two kinds of semantic externalism we have just distinguished from conventional externalism also have deference at their root. This is obvious in the case of usage-dependent externalism. When uttering the word *game*, those speakers semantically defer to the practice of the whole community for the determination of its meaning; not only do they use the word according to that practice, but they take the meaning of the word to be fixed by it (rather than by a definition or by the nature of a specific referent).

But what about indexical externalism? It is admittedly awkward to stick to the notion of deference in a context where speakers appeal to worldly phenomena rather than to other speakers for the determination of the meaning of the words they use. Our proposal is that, as Putnam (1975a) showed, such ‘deference’ to the world takes the form of provisional deference to the people who are best qualified to get at the nature of this referent, i.e. to the experts in the field of investigation to which the phenomenon pertains. This deference goes to present experts but even more so to future, more knowledgeable, experts (on this, see Jackman 2005). Fundamentally, deference goes to the putative ‘ultimate experts’, the ones who will speak the final word on the scientific investigation of the referent. On this picture, deferring to the ultimate experts goes proxy for deferring to reality itself (on this, see Peirce 1868, p. 311, 1878, p. 693).⁶ Yet it is important to stress that the deference to experts that occurs in this context is very different than in the case of conventional externalism. What matters here is the nature of the referent; a conventional definition won’t do. Deference to experts is justified by the fact that they possess the best available knowledge of the referent. Division of linguistic labour in this case is subordinate to the division of epistemic labour; experts are only in charge of ‘keeping track’ of the referent that had been intended when the initial exemplars of the thing, substance or phenomenon that the relevant word is designed to capture were pointed to, and of studying that referent as accurately as possible. Their descriptive knowledge of it does not provide a definition of the word; it is just a proxy for the nature of the referent and therefore for the meaning of the word.

⁶ We provide further justification of the view that experts go proxy for the world in a separate publication.

1.3 Taking Stock: Four Metasemantic Views Linked to Four Deferential Attitudes

We have linked three varieties of semantic externalism with three distinct manifestations of semantic deference. A speaker who, for the determination of the meaning of some particular word, defers to an expert definition behaves in conformity with conventional externalism. A speaker who, for the determination of the meaning of some particular word, ultimately defers to future experts because that speaker trusts that the nature of the referent is the final judge behaves in conformity with indexical externalism. A speaker who, for the determination of the meaning of some particular word, defers to the implicit norms that emerge from community usage (without them being governed by an expert definition or by scientific theories on the nature of its referent) behaves in conformity with usage-dependent externalism.

Now, we have assumed so far that speakers are generally disposed to defer, and that that disposition is consistent with different externalist metasemantics. This said, we remain keenly aware that sometimes speakers do not defer and only rely on their own understanding of a word to determine its meaning. They take what is ‘in their head’ to be sufficient for fixing its meaning. In this sense they behave according to an ‘internalist’ view of meaning.⁷

Speakers’ deferential attitudes somehow reveal their (usually unconscious) metasemantic views, i.e. their views concerning the way the meaning of a word is determined. And these views can change from one word to the other within a single speaker—a speaker can defer to community usage for the word *game* and to scientific experts (present, future and ultimate) as regards the word *water*—just as these views can vary from one speaker to the next concerning one and the same word. It is in this latter case that we will talk of metasemantic disagreement (see Sect. 2).

It is therefore important to appreciate that speakers’ semantic views are very different from (and much less elaborate than) philosophers’ semantic theories, which are deliberate, argued and normative. Philosophers provide reasons

⁷ As a metasemantic *theory*, internalism is a sophisticated theory which mixes—sometimes not without some confusion (Gertler 2012)—metaphysical considerations as to whether the meaning of a word is fixed by the speaker’s mental states only (or requires other elements in the world) with epistemic considerations as to whether the meaning of a word is transparent to the speaker and lies in her own understanding of it. In this paper, we leave these important questions aside because our sole focus is on internalism as a metasemantic view that can be (consciously or unconsciously) held by the speaker herself. From the speaker’s perspective, epistemic considerations prevail—the reason why speakers do not defer is because they rely on their own understanding of a word and take its meaning to be transparent, not because they have metaphysical assumptions according to which this meaning must be fixed by their mental states only.

for claiming that this or that word falls under internalism or under one variety or other of semantic externalism. But lay speakers can use words—and defer (or not)—according to implicit metasemantic views which do not comply with what philosophers think those lay speakers should do.

Remember, however, that philosophers often rest their metasemantic theories on intuitions about linguistic phenomena such as incomplete mastery of meanings or deference—Putnam (1975a) and Burge (1979) are cases in point. We therefore propose that metasemantic theories cannot be completely indifferent to lay speakers' metasemantic views. This is of course especially the case when philosophers seek to have an impact on lay speakers' semantic and metasemantic views, as they do when they engage in conceptual engineering. We offer some insights into this issue in our concluding discussion.

In the next section, we show how our four-pronged taxonomy of metasemantic views provides a fruitful basis for an enlightening classification of what we call metasemantic disagreements, one that is intended to enrich and possibly clarify recent proposals in the philosophical literature.

2 Metasemantic Disagreements

Section 2 of our paper develops a classification of 'metasemantic disagreements' based on the taxonomy of deferential dispositions and associated metasemantic views that we arrived at in Sect. 1. We could have called these disagreements *metalinguistic* but we have opted for the more precise term because our exclusive concern is with disagreements underlain by incompatible metasemantic views. The heading *metalinguistic disagreement* would also encompass disagreements about where norms of pronunciation or of grammar are to be located, concerns which fall way outside the scope of the present paper.

We structure our presentation around concrete examples, each of which instantiates a metalinguistic dispute that stems from a metasemantic disagreement. Note that both our notions of a disagreement and of a metalinguistic dispute do not fully align with the notion as developed by Plunkett & Sundell in various publications, but we prefer to leave discussion of this and related issues until after we have gone through our examples—Sect. 2.3 is devoted to situating our proposal with respect to the recent philosophical literature.

Within the linguistic disagreements underlying metalinguistic disputes, we make an initial distinction between semantic and metasemantic disagreements. There is semantic disagreement as soon as speakers disagree on the meaning of a word. When the disagreement is implicit, it may typically lead to 'merely verbal' rather than 'real' disputes. Such a semantic disagreement is, additionally, metasemantic if it stems from the fact that the disputants—consciously or

unconsciously⁸—hold divergent views on the way the meaning of the word is determined. In what follows, we are concerned exclusively with disputes underlain by metasemantic disagreements.

Within this set, we make a further distinction between lower-order metasemantic disagreements, opposing speakers who agree on the kind of semantic deference a word is liable to and yet disagree on the exact source of this deference, and higher-order disagreements, opposing speakers who do not even agree on the kind of semantic deference a word requires. In both cases, we will make finer distinctions according to the deferential attitudes adopted by the disputants.

Metasemantic disagreements most often exist in an implicit guise, since speakers are not normally conscious that their deferential attitudes align them with particular views on meaning determination. For expository purposes, however, our examples of dialogues frame each speaker's contribution in such a way that it supports a specific grasp of her deferential dispositions—these dispositions being independent of whether she has incomplete mastery of the contended term, as pointed out at the end of Sect. 1.1. We invite our readers to read the examples in a certain manner, but by no means do we want to suggest that only one interpretation of each dialogue is possible. What matters here is that the various kinds of disagreements we illustrate have a plausible existence.

2.1 Lower-Order Metasemantic Disagreements

2.1.1 Between Speakers Holding Internalist Views of Meaning

The most basic case is a semantic disagreement between two speakers' personal understandings of one and the same word. If the speakers do not defer—if they take their personal understanding of the word to contribute to the truth-conditions of the sentence uttered—but have in mind different senses of the same word, they may be said to be talking at cross-purposes.

Imagine two parents who disagree on whether their son is a geek and whose pro and con arguments reveal that they do not associate the word *geek* with the same meaning. Note that whether we judge either speaker to be wrong or right is immaterial to the point we are illustrating. What matters is

⁸ We invite our readers to constantly keep in mind that we assume that lay speakers' metasemantic views can be held consciously or unconsciously (mostly the latter). To avoid cumbersome repetitions, though, we will not systematically restate this point in the following discussion.

how each speaker arrives at the meaning of *geek* they stand up for:

Topic: “Our son is (not) a geek”. [Geek]⁹

Speaker 1: “He’s always hunched over his computer playing videogames and chatting with gamers”.

Speaker 2: “Well, he does use his computer a lot but only for games. He’s not interested in other uses of the computer, does not create anything with it, is not skilled nor even interested in programming”.

This first example has often been taken to be what verbal disputes boil down to: two speakers have at least partly incompatible meanings in mind for a word that is key to a proposition they give credence to. Two main upshots of such a dispute may be distinguished. The disputants may remain deaf to each other: “I am right because you are wrong about the meaning of *geek*”. Each speaker takes their personal understanding to fix the common meaning of the word and expects the other speaker to conform to it; i.e., although not themselves being ready to defer, they expect their interlocutor to defer to their own understanding of the word. Alternatively, the disputants may realise that different personal definitions of the word *geek* can be sustained and that their son is a geek according to one definition of this word but not according to the other one. In that case, they accept (tacitly or not) that the exact meaning of one and the same word can be different depending on who uses it. That is, they share internalist views on the meaning of the word *geek*—its exact meaning resides in the head of the speaker who uses it (and only depends on their mental states)—and do not even seek to settle on a common meaning of the word. In both cases, the disagreement is metasemantic since speakers do not rely on the same source for meaning determination.

2.1.2 Between Usage-Dependent Externalist Views of Meaning

Another kind of lower-order metasemantic disagreement might occur between speakers who both assume that the meaning of a word lies in its use within the linguistic community (rather than in the speaker’s personal understanding of it) and yet disagree on what counts as the linguistic community relevant for providing the norm, for instance on the geographical extent of the community that should be deferred to.

Imagine that Tom (a Briton living in the US) and Kim (his American partner) disagree on whether he is wearing pants:

Topic: “Tom is (not) wearing pants” [Pants]

Kim: “My mum will be here within minutes. Go put your pants on!”

Tom: “I’m already wearing pants!”

Kim: “These are underpants! Not what we call ‘pants’ here”

Tom: “Well, I’m British, right?”

Here, both speakers share usage-dependent externalist views on the meaning of *pants*—they agree to defer to the common usage of the word—and yet disagree on the meaning of this word because they do not defer to the same linguistic community. Tom is aware of American usage but takes it as deviant—only British usage is legitimate as far as proper English is concerned. For her/his part, Kim is aware of the British ways but does not regard them as relevant in conversations taking place on US soil.

Examples of that kind could be multiplied at will, along various sociolinguistic dimensions. One teenage speaker only defers to norms of her age group and uses *sick* in the sense of ‘excellent’ whereas her older conversational partner relies on the norms of his age group in which that sense is non-existent. One speaker defers to Canadian-English usage at large while the other conversation participant believes that, at least for some words, e.g. *Indian* or *Native American*, we should only defer to First Nations peoples. Any two varieties of a language distinguished on the basis of any sociolinguistic criterion can give rise to analogous disagreements.

Now, these disagreements are clearly metasemantic too: speakers disagree on the meaning of a word because they disagree on the way the meaning of this word is fixed; they have divergent views on who the right deferees are for meaning determination.

2.1.3 Between Conventional Externalist Views of Meaning

There is another kind of lower-order metasemantic disagreement that may occur between speakers who agree that the meaning of a word lies in its expert definition but fail to agree on the experts who are legitimate for fixing that definition. For instance, as Plunkett and Sundell (2013, p. 19; 2021, p. 149) have proposed, two speakers could disagree on whether someone who has been subjected to waterboarding has been tortured:

Topic: “The plaintiff has (not) been tortured” [Water-board]

Speaker 1: “According to the UN’s definition, torture is ‘any act inflicting severe suffering, physical or mental, in order to obtain information or to punish’”.

Speaker 2: “Well, according to the US department of justice (2002), torture is, and I quote, ‘any such act inflict-

⁹ We are giving each example an identifying label for easier reference in the discussion in 2.3.

ing pain rising to the level of death, organ failure, or the permanent impairment of a significant body function”.

We may take both speakers to agree on the view that the meaning of *torture* lies in a definition conventionally fixed by experts. Yet by deferring to different experts, they disagree on the exact source of meaning determination. Their semantic disagreement is metasemantic.

2.1.4 Between Indexical Externalist Views of Meaning

Yet another kind of lower-order metasemantic disagreement occurs when speakers who agree that the meaning of a word lies in the nature or essence of its referent fail to agree on what that nature is and therefore on who are the experts best qualified to investigate it. For instance, as Machery (2016, 2022) has pointed out, two speakers may disagree on whether a segment of a DNA strand is a gene because they do not agree on what the nature of a gene consists in and thus on the meaning of the word *gene*. Speaker 1 takes that nature to be biochemical, whereas Speaker 2 believes it resides in an evolutionary mechanism:

Topic: “This segment of DNA chain is (not) a gene”
[Gene]

Speaker 1: “Biochemistry tells that genes are nucleotide polymers exhibiting certain stereochemical features and recurrent sequence patterns, which is the case here”.

Speaker 2: “Evolution theory tells that genes are the products of mutated, reshuffled, duplicated, transposed, and rearranged bits of DNA within a complex chromosomal environment that has evolved through differential reproduction, selection, or other evolutionary mechanisms. This segment of DNA surely plays a role in the production of proteins but, since no evolutionary significance can be assigned to them, it is not a gene”.¹⁰

To be sure, both speakers defer to experts. But, unlike in [Waterboard], they do not entrust them with the task of providing a conventional definition of *gene*; they defer to them epistemically, the experts being those persons whose scientific investigation of the referent is most likely to reveal its nature.

It is worth pointing out that it is not just traditional natural-kind terms that could be the object of those sorts of disagreements. Consider two speakers who tacitly agree on the view that the meaning of the word *rape* cannot be

conventionally fixed, in particular not by any legal experts in one or the other country. Assume, too, that they look on rape as a social phenomenon of a very specific nature which can be the object of scientific investigation, but that they disagree on what exactly is constitutive of this nature, hence on which scientific discipline should be in charge of investigating it. Now imagine that they have the following conversation, prompted by the revelation that an acquaintance of theirs has been sexually assaulted by a man who groped her breasts.

Topic: “The case of assault under discussion is (not) rape” [Rape 1]

Speaker 1: “Lawyers’ current definition, which requires sexual penetration, doesn’t get it right. We should leave it to science to tell us exactly what rape is.”

Speaker 2: “You’re right in saying that this is not just a question of legal definition. Rape is an assault on someone’s sex organs. Yet medicine specifies that the sex organs are those involved in reproduction. Breasts are no part of that.”

Speaker 1: “Well, psychology defines the sex organs as those that are the objects of sexual fantasy, especially as they are different in male and female bodies. This does count as rape.”

Here again the semantic disagreement is metasemantic since it originates in divergent deferential attitudes—even though both speakers share indexical externalist views with respect to the word *rape* and believe that it is the nature of its referent that determines its meaning.

What is interesting in—and specific to—the last two examples of semantic disagreement is that the verbal dispute tends to coincide with a substantive dispute. Indeed, the (explicit or implicit) dispute on the kinds of experts that should be deferred to because they are best qualified to shed light on the phenomenon under discussion is also a dispute on the essence of the referent, on what it really is.

In the present Sect. 2.1, we have illustrated four types of lower-order metasemantic disagreements: even though two speakers subscribe to an internalist view of the meaning of a word, they can diverge on whose personal definition is decisive. Even though they endorse a usage-dependent externalist view of the meaning of a word, two speakers can diverge on the boundaries of the linguistic community whose practices are relevant. Even though they agree on a conventional externalist view of the meaning of a word, two speakers can diverge on which experts are legitimate to fix the meaning of the word. Even though they accept an indexical externalist view of the meaning of a word, two speakers can diverge on the true nature of its referent and on the experts responsible for investigating it.

¹⁰ Putnam (1994) anticipates this kind of disagreement within indexical externalism. He has an excellent discussion (1994, p. 75–78) of how the essence of the kind *dog* can be described differently by evolutionary biologists and molecular biologists.

The range of cases considered so far all involved speakers who shared core views on the kind of source that fixes the meaning of a word (one's personal conception, common usage, conventional expert definition, nature of the referent): they diverged only in terms of their *lower-order* deferential dispositions. We now move on to disagreements arising from incompatible *higher-order* deferential dispositions.

2.2 Higher-Order Metasemantic Disagreements

The semantic disagreements we are considering below are metasemantic in an even stronger sense, in that the speakers do not even agree on the kind of source that should be deferred to for the meaning of the disputed term. They (consciously or unconsciously) have divergent views on how the meaning of this term should be determined. We name these deep semantic disagreements *higher-order metasemantic disagreements*.

We provide a few illustrations below, but of course all the disagreements resulting from any combination of the four metasemantic views are theoretically possible.

2.2.1 Between an Internalist View and a Conventional Externalist View of Meaning

Consider two speakers who disagree on whether some rather messy street performance that has just been acted in front of them is an artwork and provide pro and con arguments that betray a disagreement about the way the meaning of *artwork* is fixed:

Topic: "This street performance is (not) an artwork" [Artwork]

Speaker 1: "The way I see it, something that deserves to be called an 'artwork' must possess beauty and elegance, and it must be made with the intention to be displayed somewhere where people would like to come and see it. And this would clearly not be the case here".

Speaker 2: "Sorry, I took art courses at school and it appears that art theorists nowadays take the artist's intention to make art to be a sufficient condition for something being a work of art".

The first speaker takes her personal understanding of the word—"the way she sees it"—to fix its meaning, while the second speaker relies on the current expert definition. They have divergent deferential attitudes, evincing divergent views on meaning determination for that word.

2.2.2 Between a Usage-Dependent Externalist View and an Indexical Externalist View of Meaning

Take two speakers who quibble about whether a tomato salad is a fruit salad because they do not defer to the same sources of meaning determination for the word *fruit*:

Topic: "Tomato salad is (not) fruit salad" [Fruit]

Speaker 1: "A tomato is a fruit! As biology points out, it's the seed-bearing structure of a flowering plant that is formed from the ovary after flowering".

Speaker 2: "Come on! This is not what we call *fruit* / this is not the way we use the word *fruit*".

The first speaker is aware of the everyday use of *fruit* and yet takes it to be a natural-kind term, therefore trusting in the ability of science, in particular biology, to provide an (increasingly) accurate characterization of the nature of its referent. The second speaker, who may be aware of the scientific use of *fruit*, nonetheless takes it to pertain to common language, whose meaning is fixed by its use within the relevant linguistic community.

2.2.3 Between a Conventional Externalist View and an Indexical Externalist View of Meaning

We consider the word *rape* again, but this time the semantic disagreement surrounding it rests on a higher-order metasemantic disagreement:

Topic: "The case of sexual assault under discussion is (not) rape" [Rape 2]

Speaker 1: "There was no penetration here. Now, the law currently defines rape as sexual penetration without consent".

Speaker 2: "I don't care how the legal profession defines it. We know what rape *is* and this *was* rape. Lawyers must pay attention to our increasing understanding of this phenomenon".

In the scenario we are inviting the reader to accept, the first speaker clearly takes *rape* to be a word whose meaning can be fixed conventionally. The second speaker, on the other hand, takes it to refer to a social phenomenon of vital importance whose essential nature can be made the object of continuing scientific investigation.

2.2.4 Between the Four Views of Meaning Determination

It is even possible to imagine a case where all four views of meaning would come into conflict. Consider the word *woman*, a word whose meaning is currently hotly debated in various social and academic spheres. In the situation we

have in mind, four speakers disagree on whether someone is a woman because they exhibit divergent deferential attitudes to that word and, consequently, disagree in their views on the way its meaning is fixed:

Topic: “Caster Semenya should (not) be allowed to compete in women’s athletics” [Woman]

Speaker 1: “We usually call *woman* anyone who has a vagina rather than a penis.

Speaker 2: “Well, according to World Athletics, you are a man as soon as you have more than 5 nanomoles of testosterone per litre of blood”.

Speaker 3: “This limit is arbitrary. As medicine shows, the significant difference is genetic”.

Speaker 4: “I take a person raised as a woman to be a woman”.

The first speaker adopts the meaning of the word as she believes it is fixed by common use within the community¹¹; the second speaker relies on a (conventional) current expert definition; the third one takes *woman* to be a natural-kind term whose meaning cannot be conventionally fixed but lies instead in the nature of its referent; and the fourth speaker takes their personal understanding to fix the meaning of the word.

Such higher-order metasemantic disagreements seem to go much deeper than lower-order ones. It seems, for instance, easier for someone who already accepts that a word’s meaning can be fixed conventionally to take a new conventional definition into consideration and possibly adopt it, than it is for someone who denies that the meaning of that word can be conventionally fixed because they take its meaning to rest in its use within the linguistic community or in the nature of its referent or in their own personal definition.

2.3 Relevance of the Proposed Classification

We announced at the start of Sect. 2 that we would clarify how our classification of metalinguistic disagreements connects with recent discussions in the philosophical literature. This is what we endeavour to do in the following paragraphs.

¹¹ To be sure, a speaker who seeks to defer to the community practice can be mistaken about what the community practice is. In that case, some of her truth-evaluations of sentences will be at odds with her dispositions or intentions. But the fact that she uses a wrong representation of community practice in her actual evaluations does not make her an internalist. She has usage-dependent externalist views and wants to conform to the meaning as it is fixed by community practice. Yet she has imperfect mastery of it. And she could be led to admit that she has. Should she get better information on actual community practice, she would then be glad to correct her evaluation.

2.3.1 Plunkett & Sundell

We begin by situating our work with respect to Plunkett & Sundell’s, which has been especially influential. Central to Plunkett & Sundell’s concerns are *metalinguistic negotiations*. These are *normative metalinguistic disputes*, as they bear on how a disputed term *should* be used in the context at hand. Metalinguistic disputes, in turn, are predicated on “competing metalinguistic usages” (2021, p. 149), namely cases where a term “appears to be used (not mentioned) to convey information about how that very term is or ought to be used in the context” (2021, p. 146). *Use*, as opposed to *mention*, is key in this respect, as Plunkett & Sundell seek to demonstrate that many apparently substantive disputes are actually metalinguistic in character, albeit not meaningless for that.

Like Plunkett & Sundell (2013, 2021), we take such notions as *disagreement* and *metalinguistic dispute* to be central to our proposal. Like them, we believe that disagreements are states, not activities, that do not require that the parties involved in the disagreements are even ever in the presence of each other. We also agree that disputes, by contrast, are one-off occasions that *do* pit the parties against each other. We have made use of disputes to bring out disagreements, but the latter are not conditional on the former.

Now, we concur with Plunkett & Sundell that metalinguistic disputes usually surface around the *use* of some word. But disputes often go through further stages; they are not restricted to just two speech turns, with one speaker asserting *p* while the other asserts $\neg p$. They may soon lose their purely tacit character and quite naturally come to include mentions of the disputed word. Several of our examples are disputes that do involve mentions ([Pants], [Fruit], [Woman]). Applying Plunkett & Sundell’s definition of a metalinguistic dispute strictly, we should say that when mention makes an appearance, the metalinguistic dispute has come to an end. We take this stricture to be excessive, as many real-life putative metalinguistic disputes may end up including mentions of the disputed word.

Ours and Plunkett & Sundell’s conceptions of a disagreement are also not identical. Similar to [Pants] is an example discussed by Plunkett & Sundell (2013) in which the dispute revolves around the use of *chips* by a British and an American speaker.¹² Plunkett & Sundell imagine two contextualisations for this example. On the one most similar to [Pants], they conclude that the example illustrates a merely verbal dispute “premised on a linguistic misunderstanding”,

¹² British ‘chips’ are American ‘French fries’; American ‘chips’ are British ‘crisps’.

one that, therefore, “fails to reflect a disagreement” (2013, p. 27). We grant that [Pants] ticks all the boxes for a merely verbal dispute—we return to that issue below. Nonetheless, we claim that, underlying it, there is a genuine disagreement. To be sure, that disagreement is not substantive. If, however, one takes speakers’ metasemantic views into account, then it becomes undeniable that there is a disagreement involved. In our example, the dispute is probably wilful—Speaker 2 is in a jokey mood. But for all its silliness it is diagnostic of the existence of lower-order metasemantic disagreements between speakers who agree on the bigger metasemantic picture. And other examples we provided make the same point.

Finally, we should remind the readers that we name these disagreements *metasemantic* rather than *metalinguistic* because we take the former term to be more specific and clearer. In the recent philosophical literature, Vermeulen (2018, p. 338) uses the phrase *metalinguistic disagreement* in the sense of “semantic disagreement”, while Belleri (2017) more relevantly applies it to the normative disagreement at the root of a metalinguistic negotiation. We use the phrase *metasemantic disagreement* for any metalinguistic disagreement—even one not involved in metalinguistic negotiation—that is based on a semantic disagreement that results from divergent metasemantic views.

2.3.2 Merely Verbal Disputes

As Jenkins (2014) or Belleri (2018) rightly point out, the characterisation of a debate as a *merely verbal dispute* is a way of dismissing it as irrelevant, certainly to philosophers. But what are merely verbal disputes? Jenkins highlights three ‘themes’ that are recurrent in discussions of merely verbal disputes, each of which captures a potential diagnostic property.

Theme 1: there is “lack of substantive, relevant, ‘real’ disagreement between the parties” (Jenkins 2014: 22), the parties “do not disagree about the subject matter of their *prima facie* dispute”.

Theme 2: “when two parties are engaged in a merely verbal dispute, it is some difference about language [to be understood in terms of different *speaker meanings*] which underlies, generates, and/or even perhaps constitutes that dispute” (2014, p. 15). In addition, there needs to be a contrast between what the disputants think is going on—that they disagree about some subject matter, be it linguistic or not—and what is actually going on—they are talking at cross-purposes because they have divergent uses of language (2014, p. 22).

Theme 3: “the idea that when a dispute is merely verbal it will be possible to cash out the parties’ apparently oppos-

ing views in alternative (‘neutral’) vocabulary, such that the parties will agree about the matter when expressed in those alternative terms.” (2014, p. 20; see also Belleri 2018, p. 692).

These themes are intended as approximations to what constitutes necessary or sufficient conditions for a merely verbal dispute. And it seems clear that some of our examples tick all the boxes above and should count as merely verbal disputes. That is certainly the case for [Geek] and [Pants], and quite possibly for [Artwork]. Does this detract from the philosophical relevance of our proposal? We think not.

First of all, we agree with Jenkins’s (2014) observation that there is contextual indeterminacy as to whether a given *prima facie* dispute should count as merely verbal. But, besides that, all our examples, be they reducible to merely verbal disputes or not, are diagnostic of speakers’ divergent (usually tacit) assumptions about what determines the meaning of a given word. They therefore serve a justifiable purpose within our classification of metasemantic disagreements.

Now a subsequent objection might consist in saying that it is all well and good to have an umpteenth classification of an object of some philosophical concern, but that it is unclear what work that classification does at all. And if it serves no purpose, then it is simply a waste of philosophers’ time. We address this objection in the next section.

2.3.3 Different Objectives, Different Perspectives

First, we would like to argue that any mismatch between our work and the recent literature on metalinguistic disputes and negotiations is mainly due to the adoption of different perspectives on material that largely overlaps. If our readers will forgive us an outrageous simplification, Plunkett & Sundell’s project can be summarised as follows: it seeks to demonstrate, first, that many disputes that appear substantive at first sight are in fact metalinguistic, and, second, that the metalinguistic nature of these disputes does not prevent them from having major substantive consequences. To achieve their goal, Plunkett & Sundell need disputes without mentions (since mentions remove the strong impression that the dispute is substantive). There must be underlying divergent metalinguistic usages, such that can give rise to metalinguistic negotiations. Our project, by contrast, is to offer a fine-grained picture of the sources of metalinguistic disagreement, i.e. to specify the different types of metasemantic views available to speakers and the ways these can come into conflict. For that purpose, it is immaterial that a dispute is merely verbal or that mentions of the disputed word crop up in the conversation.

Now, the relevance of our distinctions is especially obvious when the goal is to amend views and overcome disagreements.

Awareness of speakers' tacit (and explicit) assumptions about meaning determination is key for any philosopher seeking to improve, reform, modify the meaning or use of a concept and to ensure that the suggested modifications be adopted by a large segment of the speech community. In other words, it is, we argue, important for a current core preoccupation in analytic philosophy, namely conceptual engineering.

Conceptual engineering is not just a matter of raising semantic issues and/or solving semantic disagreements. It also often implies raising metasemantic issues and/or solving metasemantic disagreements.¹³ This first means taking into consideration philosophers' metasemantic theories on the concept or word meaning one is concerned with. Now, because our point of departure was semantic deference as an actual linguistic phenomenon exhibiting lay speakers' implicit metasemantic views and because we wanted to deal with everyday verbal disputes, our focus has been on metasemantic disagreements between speakers who have divergent metasemantic *views* about one and the same word. But there are of course also metasemantic disagreements between philosophers rationally upholding divergent metasemantic *theories* about one and the same word or category of words. We believe that the distinctions we have made between lower-order and higher-order metasemantic disagreements, but also between different kinds of lower-order and between different kinds of higher-order disagreements, can prove helpful as well in order to think about these theoretical disagreements in metasemantics. These are genuine concerns for conceptual engineering. If the meaning of a word falls under conventional externalism and if you are a legitimate expert for redefining it, then offering new definitions could do the work. But if it falls under usage-dependent externalism or indexical externalism, new definitions will not do. In the first case, community practice is what needs to be more directly addressed. In the second case, work has to be focused on the best way of investigating the nature of the referent. Now, of course, a very important part of conceptual engineering may consist precisely in reassessing the metasemantic theory governing the word meaning one is working on. And this could lead to various lower-order or higher-order metasemantic disagreements with other philosophers, similar to the ones we described except that here they would be fully conscious and argued.

Furthermore, if conceptual engineering wants its re-elaboration of concepts and word meanings to have an impact on collective linguistic practice and collective thought—this is what is now called the *implementation problem* (or *challenge*) (Plunkett and Sundell 2013, Cappelen & Plunkett 2020, Deutsch 2020, Jorem 2021)—it also needs to take into account lay speakers' own (conscious or most often unconscious) metasemantic

views as revealed by their deferential attitudes. Cappelen rightly states that a “theory of conceptual engineering has to incorporate a metasemantic theory because it is the facts that ground meaning that the conceptual engineer will have to act on. To change meaning she has to change the facts that ground meaning” (2018, p. 57–58). He doesn't, however, distinguish between metasemantic views and theories. Yet, it is lay speakers' views that implementation of meaning change will have to deal with. Conceptual engineers should for instance not expect lay speakers to easily accept new definitions of words which they do not take to be a matter of conventional definitions. When reforming concepts and word meanings, a conceptual engineer is actually likely to start from an initial metasemantic dispute—instantiating one of the kinds we have distinguished—with the speakers she wants to win over to her reform. This means that, to make lay speakers adopt a new word meaning and a new concept, she will also need to work first on their deferential attitudes: she will, say, have to convince them that a word whose meaning they used to take as fixed by the biological nature of its referent should rather be fixed by the psychological nature of its referent (lower-order metasemantic switch) or that a word whose meaning they used to take as fixed by community practice rather than by a clear expert definition can actually receive such a definition (higher-order metasemantic switch).

We hope these observations are enough to convince readers of the relevance of the classification we have argued for.

3 Conclusion

We started by relating the linguistic—and empirically observable—phenomenon of semantic deference with different metasemantic views lay speakers can (consciously or unconsciously) hold in relation to some word. We distinguished an internalist view, a usage-dependent view, a conventional externalist view and an indexical externalist view, according to whether the speaker does not defer to other speakers but only relies on her own understanding of the word, whether she defers to the community practice, whether she defers to the experts as the legitimate source for the conventional definition of the word, or whether she defers to present and even more so to future experts in so far as they provide an increasingly accurate account of the nature of the referent of the word.

On the basis of that typology of metasemantic views, we then suggested a classification of metasemantic disagreements. We first distinguished lower-order metasemantic disagreements from higher-order metasemantic disagreements. In the former, speakers (consciously or unconsciously) agree on a common general metasemantic view for a word and on the kind of deferential attitude that word calls for, and yet (within that kind) disagree on the exact source of meaning determination to which

¹³ The importance of attending to metasemantics has been nicely articulated by Cappelen (2018, p. 58, 2020, p. 147–149).

one should defer. In the latter, speakers do not even share general metasemantic views for that word.

Lower-order metasemantic disagreements can oppose speakers sharing internalist views about the meaning of a word yet disagreeing on which personal definition should prevail; they can oppose speakers sharing usage-dependent views about the meaning of a word yet disagreeing on the relevant community practice; they can oppose speakers sharing conventional externalist views about the meaning of a word yet disagreeing on the experts best qualified to fix the definition of the word; or they can oppose speakers sharing indexical externalist views about the meaning of a word yet disagreeing on who are the most legitimate experts to investigate the nature of the referent.

Higher-order metasemantic disagreements can oppose a speaker with any of the four (conscious or unconscious) metasemantic views to a speaker with any of the three other views for the same word, e.g. a speaker with an internalist view to a speaker with an indexical externalist view or a speaker with a usage-dependent externalist view to a speaker with a conventional externalist view. With four metasemantic views that can get into conflict, there are six combinations of such higher-order disagreements if only two speakers are concerned, but there are of course further combinations if the dispute involves more speakers.

In the last section of the paper, we situated our work with respect to the recent philosophical literature on disagreement and metalinguistic disputes, and we argued for the relevance of our proposed classification of metasemantic disagreements by hinting at ways in which it may prove useful to conceptual engineers.

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Data Availability We do not analyse or generate any datasets, because our work proceeds within a theoretical approach.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declared there is no conflict of interest

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