Meaning change you can make

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Abstract: Standard metasemantic frameworks render word meanings resistant to the control of ordinary speakers, and hinder our ability to exercise sovereignty over the denotations of words. The literature suggests three main responses to the problem: views on which ordinary denotational interventions cannot cause changes to semantic reality, views on which we should drop the metasemantic premises that generate the difficulty, and views on which denotational interventions boil down to operations on a non-recalcitrant region of the semantic spectrum. I review these responses and argue that they face difficulties. Then, I draw on linguistic work on variation to make an alternative proposal. I suggest that part of the problem hinges on a tendency to think about standing meanings under heavily idealized assumptions of intra-linguistic homogeneity. To amend this, we should consider endorsing a localist ontology for semantic properties that allows individual vocabulary items to bear variable standing meanings at different communities of speakers of a public language. The result, I argue, is a middle-ground framework which accepts the difficulties of wide-scope meaning change while granting speakers semantic self-determination, and strikes an attractive balance between a few central desiderata.

Keywords: meaning change; interventions; denotations; metasemantics; variation.

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1. Introduction

Word meanings can be deficient. They may be so because they obscure important distinctions, because they stand in the way of effective practical deliberation, because they hinder social justice

and moral progress. Whenever we realize that the meaning of a word is deficient, it is rational to try to revise it and make it non-deficient. To do that, the popular phrase goes, is to "engineer" that word meaning. Or, as from now on I shall put it, to engage in a *denotational intervention*.

In an ideal scenario, we could readily think of denotational interventions as efficacious endeavors without needing to motivate preemptive stances on deep metasemantic controversies. We would have no trouble stating an intuitive theory of meaning reflecting the consensus that word meanings are norms that bind a language community independently of the intentions and beliefs of individual speakers, and yet which speakers can change. With such an intuitive metasemantics at our disposal, we could preserve the explanatory perks of orthodox theories of meaning grounded on standing norms of correctness, and regard denotational interventions as endeavors that can aspire to produce real semantic change in their proximate lifespan, without going through the hassle of developing an account of the phenomenon in play. Yet, there are multiple concerns about the feasibility of this low-effort approach.

In the literature on conceptual engineering (Cappelen 2018 is the *locus classicus*), one reason for concern has been the commitment of many metasemantic frameworks to externalism: the view that lexical-semantic meanings are fixed by external factors over which individual speakers have no jurisdiction, such as the properties of substances in the environment, naturalness, magnetism, dominant sources, and so forth (Lewis 1969; Evans 1973; Putnam 1975; Burge 1979; Kripke 1980; Dorr and Hawthorne 2013; Williamson 2014). This particular problem, sometimes referred to as the "externalist challenge" to conceptual engineering (Koch 2021), is no doubt important, and has attracted considerable attention. It is also, however, a partisan challenge: it makes sense provided you accept the commitments of an externalist metasemantics, and opinions as to whether one should adopt an externalist metasemantics, as well as how *strictly* externalist one's metasemantics should be, are bound to differ.[1] But there is a higher-order version of the problem which a) poses an

1 As will opinions about what the externalist challenge is *really* about. Suppose that standing meaning is determined at least in part by the external environment. Now suppose a group K of speakers establishes that 'water' should

equally pressing challenge to the efficacy of denotational interventions, b) builds entirely on majority premises that should be acceptable across the metasemantic spectrum (thus making sense to the externalist *too*, but not to the externalist *only*), and c) raises a substantial metasemantic difficulty which has not yet been adequately accounted for.

The problem, which I will call for brevity the *Problem of Denotational Sovereignty* (PDS), can be initially stated thus (the formulation will be refined in § 2). Suppose ω is a word of L and that it is a fact of L (beyond the purview of individual speakers' authority) that in L ⟦ω⟧ = [*m*].[2] Suppose, further, that it is possible for speakers of L to exercise control over the value of ⟦ω⟧, and change it into some [*m**]. The conjunction of these two claims is problematic. Either that ω denotes [*m*] is a speaker-insensitive fact of L, and speakers of L are not in a position to change the value of ⟦ω⟧. Or speakers of L have control over ⟦ω⟧, and the premise that it is a speaker-insensitive fact of L that ω denotes [*m*] is false. Either way, the two claims cannot, at least *prima facie*, be co-asserted without contradiction. If we stick with the idea that denotations are a speaker-insensitive given, then the idea that speakers can exercise sovereignty over standing meanings is in jeopardy. If, by contrast, speakers can enjoy semantic self-determination, then the initial picture of denotations must be false.

The goal of this paper is to propose a new reaction to PDS which improves on available strategies to answer the problem. The gist of the new reaction is the following. Although PDS alerts

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should denote the liquid in Twin Earth oceans. Meanwhile, a duplicate of K on Twin Earth establishes that 'water' should should denote the liquid in our oceans. Whether these two interventions can cause changes to semantic reality seems orthogonal to the truth of externalism. *If* the interventions succeed, *then* Earthly 'water' will be externalistically bound to denote XYZ, and Twin 'water' will be externalistically bound to denote H_2O. But at least in this toy example, the truth of externalism does not seem to prejudge matters against the antecedent of the conditional. Like I said, my focus will not be on the "externalist challenge" so I will not dwell on this further. But thanks to a reviewer for pressing me to acknowledge this complexity.

2 I use a version of the standard convention for lexical entries (Heim and Kratzer 1998): double square brackets with a word of the object language, the equal sign, and a simplified representation of a denotation, flanked by single square brackets for readability's sake.

us to the existence of an important metasemantic difficulty, it should not lead us to conclude that speakers cannot reliably effect changes to the standing semantic resources of their language. The pessimistic moral follows under the (widespread) homogeneistic premise that either speakers can reform the norms of word meaning binding all speakers of L, or they cannot cause denotational change at all, since standing meanings are perfectly public and a word of L cannot denote something only for some speakers of L. I will propose to revisit this either-or. Idealized populations of speakers of a language L divide up in a plurality of semantic communities which can entrench variable denotations for a word of L. Adopting this variationist, localist ontology[3] requires refining some ordinary assumptions about word meanings, and zeroing in on a minimally deidealized picture of the distribution of semantic properties that removes some of the rigidities of the standard view. However, I will suggest that the exercise is feasible, that it can be pursued within familiar metasemantic commitments, and that it yields a middle-ground account which strikes an attractive balance between a few central desiderata.

The plan is as follows. § 2 clarifies PDS and adds some preliminaries. § 3 describes three responses to PDS. § 4 identifies the limits of these responses and derives the desiderata on an improved reaction to the problem. § 5 introduces the variationist approach. § 6 applies the approach to PDS. § 7 concludes.

2. The problem

Let us start with the following: i) a stipulation about the force of PDS; ii) a clarification about what denotational interventions consist of; iii) a reminder about the neutrality of PDS with respect to matters of advisability; iv) a note on the distinction between PDS and the "implementation challenge"; and v) a distinction between pure and impure denotational interventions.

3 Not to be confused with other brands of semantic "localism". E.g., Rayo's localism: the view that "language mastery does not require that a speaker have access to semantic rules that determine the range of application of basic lexical items independently of the speaker's general-purpose abilities" (Rayo 2013: 648).

First, I interpret the claim that denotations are speaker-insensitive facts of the language and the claim that speakers can intervene on denotations as *generic* theses, logically consistent with the existence of a sparse population of word meanings that are not speaker-insensitive facts of the language, and with a sparse population of word meanings speakers over which speakers cannot exercise control, respectively. The claim that speakers can exercise control over *all* word meanings would be falsified by the existence of a lone word meaning unamenable to intervention,[4] but its falsification would not rule out the interesting claim that control over word meanings is typically feasible. The claim that *at least one* word meaning is speaker-controllable would be satisfied by a lone word meaning over which speakers can intervene, but its satisfaction would not tell us much about speakers' capacity for denotational self-determination. Similarly, the claim that *at least one* word meaning is a speaker-insensitive fact of the language would be satisfied by a lone word meaning which does not collectively bind the speakers of the language, but its satisfaction would yield no informative generalization about the makeup of semantic reality. Finally, the claim that *all* word meanings are speaker-insensitive facts of the language would require proof that in languages there are no such things as denotations that are not speaker-insensitive facts of the language.[5] The generic claims avoid these complications while still giving us an interesting tension to solve: denotations cannot both be typically speaker-controllable and be typically speaker-insensitive.

Second, I define "denotational interventions" as interventions aiming to producing controlled change in the core semantic meaning of a lexical expression.[6] The restriction does not imply that denotational interventions are the only type of intervention over meaning speakers might seek to

4 Which may be trivial: function words are widely understood to be change-averse (e.g., Bybee 2015).

5 One could make the opposite claim about, for instance, dying word senses. For instance, 'to wink' is now mostly used in the sense of closing and opening one eye as a sign of complicity. But in the early modern period, it could also simply mean "to close one's eyes" (as in Shakespeare's *Sonnet 43*, "When most I wink, then do mine eyes best see"). This semantic possibility must have abandoned the language gradually. It is conceivable that at some point in this process, the association between 'wink' and "to close one's eyes" became a socially available, residual semantic currency that, however, no longer constituted a hard fact about the meaning of 'wink' in the system.

pursue, even at the lexical level. For instance, one might want to alter the pattern of implicatures associated with a vocabulary item without intervening on its denotation. However, PDS is about *semantic* change, and the stipulation reflects that.[7] I stipulate, further, that denotational interventions are proposals of controlled denotational *change*, and therefore that for an intervention *i* over a word ω to qualify as a denotational intervention, it necessary that *i* be a proposal to shift the standing meaning of ω to a state that bears a sufficient amount of intensional and extensional connections with ω's original denotation. Suppose ω is a word such that ⟦ω⟧ = [*m*] and that a group of speakers K proposes to the change value of ⟦ω⟧ into some [*n*] which has no extensional overlap with [*m*]. Say, ⟦'cat'⟧ = [λx.x is a lunar crater]. I will take revolutionist cases of this sort to fall outside the scope of PDS. Assuming, as seems plausible, that massive divergence in standing meaning is inconsistent with word identity, it is possible to dismiss the case by saying that K is campaigning for the replacement of ω with a new homonym ω*, and therefore for an initiative of vehicle secession, not for a semantic reform.[8] PDS is about meaning change, not about the formation of neologisms, and therefore about courses of linguistic reform that cannot be easily explained away as covert cases of lexical coinage (more on this later).

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6 In its "literal meaning", in its "minimal linguistic meaning", or in its "standing meaning", as others may put it. Though depending on one's theory of meaning these notions may or may not be used interchangeably, for present purposes I will treat them as equivalent.

7 The restriction also does not imply that the importance of PDS is conditional on whether many of the ameliorative enterprises discussed or pursued in the literature are denotational interventions. As best I can tell, Haslanger (2000) on 'woman' and Manne (2017) on 'misogyny' can be classified as (pleas for) denotational interventions under the proposed definition of the label, as they are motivated by a belief that the standing intensional properties of these words are sources of injustice and harm. With that said, even if it turned out that these and other ameliorative enterprises are best classified as something else, that would not make PDS any less worthy of scrutiny.

8 Emphasis on "it is possible". The point is simply that this response can in principle be pursued in the attempt to accommodate revolutionist interventions, whereas the premise that massive divergence in standing meaning is inconsistent with word identity does not generate a candidate strategy to deal with incremental interventions.

Construed thus, denotational interventions can be distinguished from neighboring phenomena like semantic pacts, metalinguistic proposals, metalinguistic negotiations and meaning modulations. Denotational interventions are not initiatives of meaning modulation (Ludlow 2014) because they are not mere proposals to agree over what precise meaning some underdetermined word should have in a conversational microlanguage: they are proposals to determine what semantic properties some particular word should have in *the* language. They are not metalinguistic negotiations (Plunkett and Sundell 2013; 2021; Thomasson 2017) because metalinguistic negotiations are implicit processes of convergence over a fiat rule of use for an expression that can be satisfied irrespective of whether convergence on the rule is also associated with semantic change. They are not semantic pacts (Brennan and Clark 1996) because conceptual pacts are emergent patterns of lexical entrainment that speakers establish over a situated conversational exchange or categorization task, but are not understood to generate situation-insensitive norms of thought and talk (they do not "leave" the token situation or context where the pact is supposed to be in force). And they are not metalinguistic proposals (Hansen 2021) because metalinguistic proposals can be viewed as large-scale semantic pacts. Once again, denotational interventions are proposals to introduce non-transient changes to the core semantic meaning of a word.

Third, PDS is logically independent from questions of advisability and fairness. Speakers can intervene on standing meanings for commendable or reprehensible purposes, and do so in a participatory or an authoritarian manner. Clearly, we ought to promote only the interventions that afford moral, societal or epistemic improvements on the pre-intervention scenario. And we ought to promote only the interventions that comply with requirements of deliberative pluralism and free consent (e.g., Queloz and Bieber 2022). However, denotational interventions can be the opposite of fair or advisable. An ill-intentioned community of speakers might seek to change an extant denotation into reactionary variant that stigmatizes a minority and fosters discrimination, and try to turn it into a perfectly conventionalized semantic norm through (non-)linguistic violence and

political oppression. Similarly, a well-intentioned community of speakers might seek to shift a denotation [*m*] into a variant [*m**] to counter a social bias against a vulnerable group, succeed in making many speakers freely subscribe to the intervention, only to realize that [*m**] yields the opposite result. PDS is not about what makes deliberate changes to standing meanings fair or advisable. It is about whether they are *possible.*[9]

Fourth, it is important to distinguish the problem of the semantic efficacy of denotational interventions from the so-called "implementation challenge" (e.g., Jorem 2021). Suppose a group of speakers K wishes to intervene on the standing meaning of a word ω so as to transition from ⟦ω⟧ = [*m*] to ⟦ω⟧ = [*m**]. As I interpret it, the "implementation challenge" is the problem of how it may be practically and theoretically possible for K's initiative to spread in the speaking community and cause ⟦ω⟧ = [*m**] to become a norm of meaning binding all speakers of the language. This is *not* the same thing as the problem of awarding K's initiative semantic efficacy *simpliciter*. There is a distinction between the problem of giving K's initiative a plausible path at having repercussions on the norms binding the linguistic community at large, and the problem of granting K's initiative the power to cause changes to semantic reality. The issue of self-determination targeted by PDS corresponds to the latter problem, not to the former, and the distinction will play a role in the *pars construens* of my argument. For the time being, suffice it to say that PDS should not be confused with the "implementation challenge" and that my attempt to develop a plausible response to PDS should not be interpreted as an attempt to solve the "implementation challenge" (though I will return to the connection between the two).[10]

9 Naturally, saying that PDS and matters of advisability are logically independent is no saying that they are orthogonal. If a denotational reform is not "advisable" because it involves the introduction of a variant that yields catastrophic discontinuities in subject matter, this may render the reform too counterproductive in the short run to have a chance at stabilizing (Saul 2006; Schupbach 2017; Prinzing 2018; Sterken 2020). Having said that, PDS is in principle distinct from considerations of moral, epistemic, or practical value, and should be investigated as such.

10 Thanks to a reviewer for pressing me to clarify this from the get-go.

Finally, we can distinguish two types of denotational interventions: "pure" and "impure".[11] The former demarcates the class of denotational interventions that attempt to generate semantic change by operating directly on semantic meanings. The latter demarcates the class of denotational interventions that attempt to generate semantic change by operating proximally on something other than semantic meanings. Someone attempting to trigger changes in the denotation of a word ω by intervening on what speakers pragmatically express by using ω, or on the social practices in which uses of ω are embedded (Nimtz 2021), would intervene "impurely" over the semantic meaning of ω. By contrast, someone attempting to change the denotation of ω by proposing a direct renegotiation of the value of ⟦ω⟧, would intervene "purely" over the semantic meaning of ω.

I introduce the distinction to signal that my focus will be on the relationship between the metasemantic orthodoxy and the efficacy of *pure* denotational interventions. Thus, by "denotational interventions" I mean "pure denotational interventions", and I will omit the qualification henceforward. One could question the relevance of the stipulation. Suppose denotations are metaphysically downstream from social norms and co-vary with social norms in rationally apprehensible ways (think of the standing meaning of 'marriage' and the public norms granting or preventing access to marriage to, e.g., non-heteronormative couples).[12] Suppose further that public social norms can be changed in a controlled fashion, for instance through the pursuit of appropriate political or legislative action. It follows that denotations bound to social norms can be changed in a controlled fashion. However, what is at stake in PDS is not the claim that controlled semantic change is feasible *tout court*. It is the specific metasemantic issue of how vanilla anti-individualist assumptions may allow speakers to exercise sovereignty over word meanings without any intermediary intervention on the metasemantic determiners of those meanings. Thus, proof that

11 The labels are inspired by the distinction between "pure" and "impure" conceptual analysis. See Glock (2017).

12 The example is purely for the sake of argument. I am aware of the possibility to argue that changes in the norms that regulate access to marriage are changes in the extra-linguistic properties of the institution that do not entail changes in lexical entry ⟦'marriage'⟧ = [λx.x is a marriage]. See, e.g., Cappelen (2018: 28-30).

routine anti-individualist assumptions leave room for "controlled semantic change" would not necessarily help us here.

3. Retreat, revision, deflation

Searching the literature for reactions to (what I have dubbed) PDS, one finds the ingredients for three main responses to the problem: a) views on which we should bite the bullet and conclude that denotational interventions cannot reliably cause semantic change; b) views on which PDS reveals that we should drop the metasemantic premises that generate the difficulty; and c) views on which denotational interventions boil down to operations on a non-recalcitrant region of the semantic spectrum. For concision, I dub these responses *Retreat*, *Revision*, and *Deflation*. Let us review their core claims in turn.

First, *Retreat*. The gist of this response is to i) accept that if the metasemantic orthodoxy is true, then semantic reality cannot be affected by ordinary denotational interventions, ii) accept the antecedent of the conditional, and iii) accept the consequent. Denotational interventions must typical fail to have real semantic consequences. They may have semantic consequences in *some* cases. As was noted, a generic anti-individualist metasemantics is compatible with the existence of (small) pools of speaker-sensitive denotations; it is agnostic about the prospects of impure denotational interventions; and it allows denotational interventions to yield semantic change in non-ordinary or counterfactually demanding scenarios. Suppose the whole population of speakers of English gathers together, unanimously deliberates in favor of changing the value of ⟦'cat'⟧ into [λx.x is a red cat], and starts infallibly using 'cat' accordingly. Everybody should grant that this would change what 'cat' denotes in English (Andow 2021; Koch 2021). The verdict, however, is grim. Denotational interventions can only exceptionally manage to generate true semantic novelty (Cappelen 2018); "it is largely unfeasible to change the standing meaning of natural language expressions" (Jorem 2021: 199).

Next, *Revision*. The gist of this response is to i) accept that if the metasemantic orthodoxy is true, then semantic reality cannot be affected by denotational interventions, and ii) reject the antecedent of the conditional. That could be done by claiming that thinking about semantic meanings within ordinary anti-individualist frameworks is unhelpful to assess intentional meaning change (compare with Thomasson 2021 on externalism), or by denying that the subject matter of statements like ⟦ω⟧ = [*m*] is a shared supra-individual linguistic norm (Barber 2003; Devitt 2006; McGilvray 2017), or by revising from the ground up our metaphysics for semantic properties.[13] Another option would be to develop a variant of the standard framework on which denotations are speaker-insensitive facts of the language but the body of factors that fix denotations comprise future patterns of use and semantic coordination, along the lines of Jackman (1999) or Ball (2020). Similarly, suppose the face-value reading of the standard view is the claim that semantic meanings are speaker-insensitive facts of the language. We could soften this into the hybrid claim that semantic meanings are typically *partially* speaker-insensitive facts. If denotations were in part speaker-insensitive facts, and in part fixed by doxastic or conative factors like beliefs and intentions (Schroeter and Bigelow 2009), they could be changed by intervening on the doxastic or conative factors (Haslanger 2020). Different variations on a common theme: the way out is to move away from (standard formulations of) the metasemantic orthodoxy.

Finally, *Deflation*. The gist of this response is to i) accept that if the metasemantic orthodoxy is true, then denotational interventions cannot affect semantic reality, ii) accept the antecedent of the conditional, iii) accept the consequent, but iv) deny that this threatens denotational interventions,

13 For instance, it is generally accepted that vanilla metasemantic assumptions can be pursued provided semantic properties strong-globally supervene on non-semantic properties, and thus provided no two worlds instantiating the same worldwide distribution of non-semantic properties can fail to instantiate the same worldwide distribution of semantic properties. Kearns and Magidor (2012) reject semantic supervenience. If the falsity of the supervenience thesis entails the falsity of the vanilla metasemantic assumptions, one could think that endorsing Kearns and Magidor's case against the supervenience thesis (or some other argument to the same effect) would dissolve PDS. But see Gasparri (2024) for an argument that giving up the supervenience thesis would make things worse.

since the metasemantic assumptions that feed PDS and denotational interventions actually concern different semantic kinds. We need to switch from the face-value view that ordinary denotational interventions operate on denotations (which would doom them to inefficacy), to the view that denotational interventions operate in practice on a non-recalcitrant region of the semantic spectrum. Even when they are framed or understood by the very speakers that pursue them as initiatives to alter the core semantic meaning of a word, denotational interventions are not operations on denotations. This is the strategy used by Pinder (2021) to respond to the "externalist challenge" to conceptual engineering: while standard externalism is about semantic meanings, initiatives like Manne's (2017) plea for reforming the meaning of 'misogyny' should be described as pleas for the dissemination of novel speaker meanings (Grice 1989). *Mutatis mutandis*, when a group of speakers K deliberates that a word ω should undergo a denotational shift and starts using ω accordingly, K may believe that it is intervening on the semantic meaning of ω. In reality, K is just producing novel speaker meanings with ω. The claim that what words denote in a language is a speaker-insensitive given, and the claim that speakers are free to speaker-mean unfamiliar things with familiar vocabulary items, are perfectly consistent. Thus, PDS is harmless.

4. Not quite

I will now argue that each of these lines of argument faces complications, or introduces costs that an attractive response to PDS should not impose. The difficulties in play consistently concern the genus or the kind of strategy pursued by the three responses, and should therefore apply to all of their possible species or instances.[14]

14 For concision's sake, and because my goals are not exegetical, I will limit the reconstruction of the debate to the indispensable and, except where necessary, I will not delve into the way my observations overlap with, or differ from, those already advanced by others. For instance, Deutsch (2020) claims that responding to the "externalist challenge" to conceptual engineering via the speaker-meaning strategy trivializes conceptual engineering. A version of the objection (with which I am sympathetic) could apply to attempts to respond to PDS via the speaker-meaning strategy. However, I leave the differences between Deutsch's argument and mine to the interested reader.

Let us start with *Retreat*: the correct reaction to PDS is to accept the view that what words denote in a language is a speaker-insensitive given, and claim that denotational interventions can only exceptionally be efficacious. This approach has two main problems: its pessimistic outlook on the self-determination of ordinary speakers and its unstable relationship with error. First, the verdict limits the feasibility of denotational interventions to cases satisfying demanding requirements, and downgrades it to an accidental matter in more realistic settings. Earlier, I noted that *Retreat* does not make controlled denotational changes impossible, and that it "only" limits their feasibility to cases satisfying exceptional conditions (e.g., the conditions of a scenario where the whole population of English speakers gathers together, unanimously deliberates in favor of changing the value of ⟦'cat'⟧ into [λx.x is a red cat], and starts infallibly using 'cat' accordingly). But possibility is not the point here. What matters to PDS is some vindication of our capacity to *reliably* generate semantic change without the mediation of events outside our agentive purview, and as part of our situated, ecologically unexceptional linguistic practices. Settling for the claim that denotational interventions can generate genuine semantic change modulo some improbable set of enabling conditions, and therefore that speakers lack a more robust access to controlled semantic innovation, is an expensive concession, and one we should probably not accept lightly.

The second issue is that *Retreat* overgenerates semantic errors.[15] Suppose ω is a word of L and that it is a fact of L that ⟦ω⟧ = [*m*]. Suppose, further, that a group K of ordinary speakers of L, all aware that [*m*] is the standing value of ⟦ω⟧ in L, deliberates that ⟦ω⟧ = [*m**], and starts employing ω accordingly. Suppose, finally, that K's deliberation occurs in a run-of-the-mill context of linguistic reform which is not an example of the exceptional scenarios in which denotational interventions can unproblematically yield semantic novelty (e.g., again, the ⟦'cat'⟧ = [λx.x is a red cat] scenario). If so, it is still a fact of L that ⟦ω⟧ = [*m*], and K's intervention cannot succeed in setting [*m**] as a value of ⟦ω⟧ in L. But then, the K-speakers must now be misusing and misinterpreting ω. Even if ω-infused communication in K is successful, it is not because the K-speakers have brought about a

15 See Pinder (2021) for an earlier version of this observation.

change in the language and bear the right attitudes to it. It is because the members of K have entered, so to speak, in a joint semantic hallucination. Leading so easily to massive error is a significant downside. *Ceteris paribus*, we should refrain from interpreting cases of post-intervention communicative success by ascribing mutually canceling errors to conversational parties, and, to quote Haslanger (2020: 248), "opt for an error theory only as a last resort".[16]

Let us now turn to *Revision*: we should move away from traditional metasemantic premises and replace them with a metatheory of meaning that deescalates PDS. Giving a principled assessment of this approach might seem difficult, since, as was mentioned, the move could take many shapes: increasing the psychologistic commitments of the framework, stating a refurbished metasemantics on which facts such as ⟦ω⟧ = [*m*] are partially speaker-sensitive, rebuilding from scratch our metaphysics for semantic properties, to name just a few options. Yet, there is a principled observation we can make: this strategy is available on condition that one commits to the falsity or the irrelevance of vanilla views about the publicity of semantic meanings.

Perhaps that is not such a bad prospect, especially if you entered the arena with the antecedent feeling that anti-individualism is a thing of the past. Be that as it may, *Revision* is a conditional running on a less than perfectly stable antecedent. It is conditional because it claims that if whatever problem-solving metasemantics one were to choose over the initial one is correct, then the claim that meanings can be affected by denotational interventions would be safe. And it is less than perfectly stable because the move is never going to satisfy the vast portion of the theoretical

16 I am siding with the consensus that this is a problem without ignoring the possibility of counterarguments against the consensus. For instance, one could argue that when a linguistic violation has a wide distribution in a community of speakers and is endorsed by that community of speakers, the distribution of the violation and the attitudes that the speakers have towards it may *seem* to make the violation worthy of normative forgiveness, and fundamentally unlike mundane failures to meet an established grammatical norm. But just as we find it unproblematic to accept that widespread organized crime is nevertheless crime (and not, say, the innocent pursuit of an "alternative" or "nonconformist" code of social conduct), so we should be ready to grant that collectively organized linguistic deviance remains nevertheless deviance. Accepting that the issue is pressing means rejecting this analogy.

spectrum that subscribes to the initial metasemantics and, e.g., would not consider renegotiating their position on the basis of pragmatic arguments.[17] If only for dialectical equilibrium, I suggest we should look for a treatment which remains viable under the premise that our framework should have common anti-individualist commitments.

Finally, *Deflation*: PDS is shallow, and the difficulties it raises are due to a faulty characterization of what denotational interventions operate on. The metasemantic commitments that fuel PDS constrain denotations. However, denotational interventions, pace their nomenclature, operate in practice on a different level of meaning. For simplicity, and following Pinder's (2021) answer to the "externalist challenge", I will focus on the brand of *Deflation* on which the value of the variable "different level of meaning" in play is *speaker meaning*, but the points below should generalize to other incarnations of the approach, since they all concern the idea that ordinary denotational interventions are *not* operations on denotations. In my view, the main issue with speaker-meaning *Deflation* is that it is unprepared to account for the grammatical depth of denotational interventions.

Distinguish two readings of speaker-meaning *Deflation*. The first is prescriptive: speakers seeking to change denotations should aim to produce semantic change impurely, by means of the circulation of properly crafted speaker meanings. The second is descriptive: pure denotational interventions *are* introductions of novel speaker meanings. The prescriptive reading is

17 For example, consider Thomasson (2021: 7-8) on the difficult relationship between conceptual engineering, conceptual Platonism, and externalism. She claims that "a Platonist approach to concepts, and an externalist approach to linguistic meaning, present barriers to thinking about the kind of change that conceptual engineers aim to make" and "don't provide helpful ways of thinking about concepts or meaning, for the purposes of conceptual engineering". What we should do instead is, "in bootstrapping fashion, ask […] how we *should* think of language or concepts for such purposes". But as best I can tell, the externalist can agree with Thomasson's diagnosis while denying that the difficulties it identifies can be brushed off so easily. The observation that externalism mires conceptual engineering in metatheoretical difficulties does not make externalism false.

metasemantically unproblematic but uninteresting for the present purposes.[18] By contrast, the descriptive reading is interesting but problematic. Speaker meaning is an utterance-level phenomenon. That is, it is a feature of token words, and felicitously speaker-meaning *x* by uttering ω on some occasion of use does not *ipso facto* establish a lexical precedent that determines the truth-conditional legality of future uses of the type ω. Now suppose ω is a common noun whose denotation in L is [λx.x is an F], and that a group of speakers establishes that ω should denote [λx.x is an F or a G], where the switch from "is an F" to "is an F or a G" entails a change in the way referents of ω can be legally identified across contexts, and a change in the way the literal truth conditions of ω-infused sentences of L are calculated. A proposal of this sort cannot be merely utterance-level. Mapping an existing vocabulary item with a novel truth-conditional profile and with a novel policy for the legal identification of referents of ω in contexts, is a proposal to reform the intensional machinery instantiated by the type ω, and only indirectly the meaning projected by ω's utterances. And it is a proposal to reform what ω can legally mean in literal uses of the term, not what speakers may or should decide to mean by ω. Denotational interventions concern by definition the facts we would expect to see specified in the lexical component of a grammar.

Advocates of speaker-meaning *Deflation* could respond in three ways. First, they could grant that because denotational interventions cannot boil down to simple changes in use, and because denotational interventions are in fact operations over denotations, then, given PDS, denotational interventions cannot be successful. In such a case, the account would collapse on *Retreat* and inherit its defeatist inclinations. Second, they could adopt a mixed strategy on which denotational interventions are in fact carried out via speaker meanings, but where speakers can "speaker-mean revised semantic meanings". However, such a rejoinder would rest on a use of the notion of speaker

18 With a *caveat* I will come back to later. Namely, assuming that the denotation of ω can be indirectly reformed through the circulation of novel speaker meanings, the speaker-meaning theorist owes us an account of the conditions for some pool of newly circulated speaker meanings for ω to rise through the ranks of the grammar and yield change to what ω denotes in the language.

meaning that is both theoretically perplexing (I am not sure what speaker-meaning a revised denotation could possibly consist of) and difficult to reconcile with the uses of the notion accepted in the literature.[19] Third, they could hold that denotational interventions are neither manipulations of speaker meanings nor operations over semantic meanings. For example, they could hold that denotational interventions are introductions of coordinated changes to the idiolects of the speakers that participate in those interventions. In which case, however, they would reinstate the challenge from error, and face once again the complaint of an all too casual relationship with semantic deviance.

Let us sum up. If I have described the situation accurately, *Retreat*, *Revision*, and *Deflation* face difficulties. These difficulties, taken together, make a plausible case in favor of looking for an alternative reaction to PDS. They also place some specific desiderata on such an alternative reaction. From *Retreat*, we have learned that the reaction should vindicate our ability to affect semantic reality in unexceptional scenarios, and lift the threat of error. From *Revision*, we have learned that the reaction should be compatible with a metasemantics accepting that denotations are facts of the language. Finally, from *Deflation*, we have learned that the reaction should ascribe semantic efficacy to pure interventions over semantic meanings, instead of merely allowing speakers to cause semantic change through the proximal manipulation of something else (e.g., what is speaker-meant by utterances). I will now suggest that there is, in fact, one interesting middle ground we can strike among these desiderata.

5. Local denotations

Let us reconsider PDS for a moment. As we have seen, PDS is about the difficulty of granting denotational interventions the power to affect semantic reality in a framework where semantic meanings are anti-individual facts. If denotations are public linguistic currency and bind whole communities of speakers of a language, it is difficult to think of how a group's convergence on a

19 See Saul (2002). See also Armstrong (2016) for parallel remarks about on-the-fly lexical innovation.

revised denotation for an existing word could cause genuine semantic change. There is, however, a subtlety which has gone unnoticed so far in our discussion, and yet deserves attention. Suppose it is impossible to conjoin the claim that we can grant speakers the power to control what words publicly denote, and the claim that we cannot grant speakers the power to cause controlled denotational change. *Prima facie*, this may seem a perfectly innocent assumption. But the reasoning does presuppose something: it presupposes extensional equivalence between the notion of controlled denotational change, and the notion of controlled change to what words publicly denote. Take again speaker-meaning *Deflation*. A group K of ordinary speakers of L stipulating that the denotation of some word ω should be altered, and revising their linguistic practices accordingly, cannot change what ω denotes in L. Because either we can grant speakers the power to control what words denote in the language, or it is impossible to grant semantic self-determination, then K's intervention cannot cause denotational change. At the same time, K is certainly doing *something*, and we have an antecedent interest in safeguarding K from error. Hence the attraction of reclassifying K's face-value intervention on the denotation of ω as the propagation of novel speaker meanings for ω.

But what if we did without this shadow equivalence? Reasoning under the premise that the equivalence holds, and that no distinction between controlled denotational change and controlled change to what words publicly denote in the language can be drawn, is far from an idiosyncrasy of the dialectical setup we have relied upon thus far. It is reflected in textbook treatments of semantic meanings, where denotations are modeled through two-place lexical entries featuring a word form and the set of its semantic meanings in a system without internal variation. For instance, in English, ⟦'bottle'⟧ = [λx.x is a bottle]. Under this idealized ontology, there is no way out. Denotational properties are assumed to be perfectly homogeneous in the system, which entails that denotational change can only be change in what a word means in the language, and that only change to what a word publicly means in the language can qualify as denotational change. There is a difficulty, however. The model maximizes simplicity at the cost of ignoring variational phenomena, and there

is a case to be made that in thinking about PDS we should ask our ontology make a reasonable effort to acknowledge this complexity.

Let me ease into the point with a toy example of "natural" denotational shift and then draw the theoretical considerations. Suppose C_1, C_2, C_3, … is a plurality of communities of English speakers, each comprising only competent users of the word 'bottle'. Over time, the linguistic practices of C_1 start to diversify from the rest of the plurality. A new word, 'zottle', spreads in the community. 'Zottle' denotes [λx.x is a bottle made of anything other than glass], and due to the competition with 'zottle', in C_1 'bottle' contracts into ⟦'bottle'⟧ = [λx.x is a glass bottle]. C_1 and C_2, C_3, … remain causally connected communities of speakers, and this is the only linguistic difference between C_1 and the rest of the plurality. Also, though ⟦'bottle'⟧ = [λx.x is a glass bottle] is a vanilla norm of meaning that C_1 understands to mark a binding boundary between legal and illegal literal uses of the term within intra-community linguistic transactions, C_1's life goes on as normal in linguistic transactions with out-group speakers. There, the laws of the language still dictate that ⟦'bottle'⟧ = [λx.x is a bottle], and the C_1-speakers are happy to defer. This scenario seems perfectly conceivable. How can we make sense of it?

Assuming the lessons drawn from *Retreat*, *Revision*, and *Deflation* in § 4, we no longer have some options. We cannot say that the inconsistency is shallow because ⟦'bottle'⟧ = [λx.x is a glass bottle] is not a genuine truth-conditional norm, and that when the C_1-speakers require other C_1-speakers to comply with the contracted denotation, they are merely harmonizing what they speaker-mean with 'bottle'. This would not do justice to the grammatical depth of the shift and to the in-group expectations of conformity associated with it. Also, we cannot say that the contraction reduces to the emergence of a collective hallucination that preserves communicative success because the C_1-speakers make complementary mistakes. This would contravene the desideratum of parsimony in the distribution of semantic errors. Finally, we cannot say that the intra-community entrenchment of [λx.x is a glass bottle] in C_1 adds [λx.x is a glass bottle] to the senses listed under

the lexical entry for ‘bottle’ in English (e.g., ⟦‘bottle’⟧ = [λx.x is a bottle; λx.x is a glass bottle]). Accepting this would mean accepting that C_1 has turned ‘bottle’ into a polysemous word in English. But why would the event occurred in C_1 cause out-group speakers like the members of C_2, C_3, … to suddenly suffer from partial ignorance about the meaning of ‘bottle’?

Suppose instead you go secessionist. The contraction occurring in C_1 does introduce a genuine linguistic change, but because [λx.x is a glass bottle] cannot be pushed into the value of ⟦‘bottle’⟧ in English, the shift is best described as the emergence of a duplicate vocabulary item ‘bottle’*, numerically distinct from the English word ‘bottle’, such that ⟦‘bottle’⟧ = [λx.x is a bottle], ⟦‘bottle’*⟧ = [λx.x is a glass bottle], and where ‘bottle’* is a nascent homonym which is not specified in the lexicon of English. In the end, what happens with ‘bottle’ in C_1 is no different from what happens with ‘zottle’ in C_1. Both are originations of a new lexical vehicle.

This may seem a sensible reaction to the case. We can keep ⟦‘bottle’⟧ = [λx.x is a bottle] safe by forcing the intervention to create a novel vocabulary item and paying the corresponding (small) price in ontological inflation. But the counting just does not sound right. Suppose the shift is initially entrenched just in C_1 and then spreads to C_2, C_3, and so forth. Under the secessionist reasoning, a speaker from C_2, C_3, … deciding defer to the denotational norms regulating the form /ˈbɒt.ᵊl/ in C_1 is effectively adopting a foreign vocabulary item and abandoning its native homonym. Repeat the process for every instance of affiliation to the shifted denotation until it becomes an entrenched norm for all speakers of English. At the end of the process, ‘bottle’ will be eliminated from English and replaced with ‘bottle’*. But this is a perplexing result. Assuming that most courses of “natural” semantic change start off as local innovations that slowly gain traction in the language (e.g., Allan and Robinson 2012), the reasoning threatens the very idea that words can change their standing semantic properties while maintaining their numerical identity, instead of having to perish and be replaced by close truth-conditional lookalikes.[20]

20 The observation dovetails the way we think of the emergence of regular intra-linguistic variation outside semantics. ‘One’ and ‘gone’ rhyme for speakers of British English in Manchester but do not for speakers in London. Should

There is, however, another option, one that keeps word counting in check while allowing dynamics of this sort to consist of what their nomenclature in descriptive linguistics suggests they are: intra-linguistic *variation*. In the present context, the option that would be to allow C_1 to mark a locus of semantic diversification at which the word 'bottle' instantiates the community-specific set of standing denotational properties that fix the norms for its correct use in shifted linguistic transactions. A semantic meaning associated with a vocabulary unit ω of a language L can be either a standing norm for the entire range of speakers of L, in which case it fixes a vanilla public denotation for ω in L, or standing norm in force at a specific sub-community of speakers of L, in which case it fixes a denotation for ω which is *locally* standing in L. Notationally, this can be implemented via a conservative amendment of the two-place lexical entries of the idealized picture. Instead of two-place entries with simple pairs of word forms and semantic meanings implicitly indexed to a homogeneous public language, we can introduce three-place entries[21] combining word forms, semantic meanings, and an index marking the local sub-community of speakers at which the expression is subject to the relevant denotational norm. Thus, for instance, the entry for 'bottle' after C_1's intervention would combine a plurality-indexed slot marking the denotational norm(s)

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we conclude that the Manchester articulations and the London ones cannot be articulations of the same words, 'one' and 'gone', and must be articulations of phonetically close homographs? Probably not. That *may* be the case (e.g., because additional evidence suggests that our ontological catalogue should count more than two words), but we would hesitate to consider the question settled in the affirmative by the difference in accent. A rational hesitancy which makes sense provided we accept that individual vocabulary items may be associated with variable patterns of standing phonetic implementation. For more on English, see Hughes, Trudgill and Watt (2012). Here is a similar statement about Spanish: "The phoneme /x/ of Spanish, the *jota*, varies geographically in its articulation, being pronounced in some places as the velar fricative [x], in others as the glottal fricative [h], and in yet others with sounds intermediate between [x] and [h], or as the palatal fricative [ç]. We can therefore say that the variable (x) [...] is realized (in different, specific places) as [x], [h], [h^x], [ç], etc." (Penny 2000: 6).

21 By analogy with Clark's (1998) notation for communal lexicons. See also Croft (2000).

originally prevalent in C_1, C_2, C_3, …, followed an indexed slot specifying the shifted norm in force in C_1. So, ⟦'bottle'⟧ = [@C_2, C_3, …: λx.x is a bottle; @C_1: λx.x is a glass bottle].

The suggestion that a theory of meaning should take up the challenge of incorporating variational wisdom is not new, and not just in the corners of the literature where this claim has consistently been prominent, such as sociolinguistic theory (e.g., McConnell-Ginet 2011; Burnett 2017; Eckert 2012; 2019) or the semantics of expressives (e.g., Potts 2007; Gutzmann and Gärtner 2013). Jorgensen Bolinger (2020) argues that a textured theory of public languages appealing to a distinction between speech communities is necessary to safeguard from the threat of semantic incompetence cases where different groups of speakers disagree about the derogatory properties of slurs. Lassiter (2008) claims that extending sociolinguistic accommodation theory to semantics can unify anti-individualism with variation, and proposes a dispositional theory of speech communities that avoids at once the pitfalls of internalist frameworks and the rigidities of their externalist counterparts. Descriptive grammars are embarking explicit variationist commitments. For example, the grammar of French edited by Abeillé and Godard (2021) notates judgments of grammaticality and felicity through the aid of a symbol, '%', which, placed before an example, signals that judgments about the acceptability of the example exhibit systematic variation across communities of speakers of French. The account of the 'bottle' case I am suggesting is a minimal attempt at feeding tolerance to variation within a picture bearing standard anti-individualist commitments.

6. The problem reconsidered

In sum, we have reasons to consider a metasemantics that allows individual words to have community-specific denotations. Now back to PDS. Suppose C_1, C_2, C_3, … is a plurality of communities of speakers of L, and that in L ω is standingly associated with a denotation [*m*] with no local variation across L. Suppose, further, that C_1 wishes to intervene on the denotation of ω and change [*m*] into [*m**]. The members of C_1 endorse the change, restructure their linguistic practices,

and apply the revised semantic policy for ω within in-group linguistic transactions, while advertising the change to the rest of the speakers of L.[22] In thinking about how C_1's intervention may bring about genuine denotational change, the localist model suggests a simple answer: C_1's intervention feeds the entry for ω with a new slot that specifies the convention of semantic meaning locally in force at C_1, and therefore causes a shift between an initial state where the entry for ω is ⟦ω⟧ = [@C_1, C_2, C_3, …: *m*] to a state where ⟦ω⟧ = [@C_2, C_3, …: *m*; @C_1: *m**].[23]

I announced I was going to look for a reaction to PDS that could strike an attractive balance between the desiderata missed by available strategies to deal with the problem. First, the strategy incorporates the cautionary wisdom of *Retreat* while alleviating the inconvenient aspects of its pessimism. It grants that organized groups of semantic activists with shared attitudes towards a denotational reform cannot control the norms of meaning binding speakers of L at large. No matter the sincerity of C_1's effort, it is still the case that at C_2, C_3, … ω standingly means [*m*], and therefore that C_2, C_3, … marks a region of the distribution of L where the standards for the correct employment of ω are governed by ⟦ω⟧ = [*m*]. But failure to eradicate ⟦ω⟧ = [*m*] from the language and replace it with ⟦ω⟧ = [*m**] no longer entails that C_1 is semantically powerless. The shift to ⟦ω⟧ = [@C_2, C_3, …: *m*; @C_1: *m**] is genuine denotational change. The account allows denotational interventions to cause changes to semantic reality irrespective of whether they manage to affect the norms globally in force throughout L.

The model also relaxes the threat of error. Insofar as the intervention manages to shift the entry ⟦ω⟧ = [@C_1, C_2, C_3, …: *m*] into ⟦ω⟧ = [@C_2, C_3, …: *m*; @C_1: *m**], C_1's linguistic behavior is no longer a make-believe practice at odds with the actual semantic properties of ω. What changes from

22 For a potential real-world example of this abstract scenario, see Bettcher (2013) and Dembroff (2018) on trans-inclusive uses of 'woman' and 'man' within queer communities. Thanks to a reviewer for the suggestion.

23 To situate the proposal in the literature. Koslow (2022) and Thomasson (2021) argue that models of spontaneous semantic change can offer important insights into the wide-scope prospects of ameliorative projects and of (what I have called) denotational interventions. The suggestion here is to couple diachrony with synchronic variation to take care of the foundational component of the picture.

the base picture is that ascriptions of deviance are now distributed on the basis of deference to a communal norm. This can be analyzed in dispositional terms along the lines of Lassiter (2008). If a group of speakers K fails to bear the relevant attitudes towards C_1's reform, then K is functionally outside C_1 and its utterances of ω will be governed by the norm $[\![\omega]\!] = [m]$. Conversely, if K does bear the relevant attitudes to C_1's reform and defers to the semantic policy binding members of C_1 on the literal employment of ω, then K is functionally an arm of C_1 and its utterances of ω will be governed by the norm $[\![\omega]\!] = [m^*]$. Conversational settings with conflicting deferential standards (imagine K is made up in equal proportions by members of C_1 deferring to C_1 and by members of C_2, C_3, … deferring to C_2, C_3, …) will be modeled as situations featuring a conflict between standing norms of meaning, and therefore as situations that may call for *ad hoc* regulation through a metalinguistic negotiation or a metalinguistic proposal.

Second, unlike *Revision*, the reaction is designed to make room for ordinary control over semantic meanings without dropping classical commitments to the publicity of denotations. Local denotations are still facts of the language; a "federalist" picture of denotational reality is still an anti-individualist picture. As we noted in considering the fictional case where the whole population of English speakers gathers together and unanimously deliberates in favor of changing the value of [‘cat’] into [λx.x is a red cat], the anti-individualist is, or at least should be, already committed to the proposition that semantic meanings may be fixed by deference-based chains of transmission initiated by a collective act of baptism. The proposal is to allow the same dynamic at work in the fictional example to take place intra-linguistically, at local communities of speakers of the language. With this concession in place, the assumption that C_1 cannot exercise control over the fact that at C_2, C_3, … the value of $[\![\omega]\!]$ is $[m]$, leaves C_1 a shot at baptizing the indexed slot $[@C_1: m^*]$ and causing intra-linguistic change in the standing properties of the type ω.

Finally, unlike *Deflation*, the strategy gives speakers a way of effecting linguistic change by intervening directly on semantic meaning, instead of merely allowing them to cause denotational

change through the proximal intervention on something else, or of forcing a top-down re-description of what denotational interventions are about. To reiterate a point announced in the beginning, the fact that the response grants speakers a measure of denotational self-determination does not solve the "implementation challenge". Changing the denotational standards in force throughout the language remains, as it should, formidably difficult; and endorsing the case for semantic self-determination does not obliterate the many challenges denotational interventions are bound to face when they aspire to become dominant. But the account gives ordinary communities of speakers i) the power to cause changes to semantic reality within the agentive bounds of their intervention; ii) the power to cause such changes by intervening directly on semantic meaning; and iii) the power to cause such changes irrespective of the wider-scope developments of the intervention.

Let me add three comments. First, under the suggested account we can model the relationship between the proximal effects of local interventions and their potential rise to perfect publicity as a change in quantity rather than a change in kind. We have seen that on speaker-meaning *Deflation* denotational interventions are operations on speaker meanings, and that on *Retreat* they yield complementary patterns of semantic error. Now, in order for some pool of speaker meanings newly circulated for a word ω, or for a wave of semantic errors about ω, to affect the semantic properties of ω, the pool of speaker meanings and the wave of errors should become semantic currency and be absorbed into the standing meaning of ω. How and when would this happen? *Retreat* and *Deflation* owe us a story about the semantic coronation of speaker meanings and semantic errors, a qualitative leap which will inevitably be difficult to account for. By contrast, the localist framework offers the ingredients for a simpler story: there is real semantic change from the beginning of the process; and we can think of the transition between local and wide-scope denotational innovation as an incremental process of sociolinguistic affiliation, to be modeled in turn as an increase in scope of the communal locus to which the intervention is initially indexed.

Second, let me return briefly to how the proposed approach to PDS sets itself apart from other alternatives in the landscape. Part of the relevant considerations were stated in the beginning, where the differences between denotational interventions and neighboring types of (meta-)linguistic acts (meaning modulations, lexical pacts, and so on) were described. My claim is not that these neighboring types do not track actual linguistic phenomena, nor that they are theoretically uninteresting. My claim is that existing philosophical discussions of the "neighboring types" do not the provide the resources to relax the specific metasemantic problem raised by PDS. For instance, suppose you are inclined to think that denotational shifts like those I have been concerned with are "microlinguistic" phenomena broadly understood à la Ludlow (2014). What is a "microlanguage"? Is it a system metaphysically distinct in number and kind from the public language, or just in number? Should we account for the divide between publicly sanctioned and microlinguistic uses of a word as cases of (covert) language switch? Or should we pursue the idea that microlinguistic diversification can occur within a public language because public languages can be internally diverse? Suppose we opt for this option. Then we have to state the relevant model. The localist account is an attempt to advance on this terrain without shying away from its hurdles.[24]

Third, and finally, the strategy I have considered has one additional element of attraction: it provides a descriptive blueprint applicable to non-semantic interventions. Suppose our community C_1 is nervous about trisyllabic shortening.[25] For C_1, an orthographic system that does not mark the difference in pronunciation between the second vowel of 'serene', an [iː], and the second vowel of 'serenity', an [ɛ], is a travesty, and should be reformed. They then borrow the grapheme <ɛ> from the IPA (2020) convention for the transcription of the lax vowel, they start requiring all in-group inscriptions to spell 'serenity' as <serɛnity>, and the convention becomes stable. We can say: C_1's intervention causes the orthographic entry 'serenity' = [@C_1, C_2, C_3, …: <serenity>] to change into

24 Thanks to a reviewer for pressing me to add this comment.

25 The historical process whereby tense vowels in a stressed syllable followed by two other syllables turn into short monophthongs. See, e.g., Lahiri and Fikkert (1999).

‘serenity’ = [@C_2, C_3, …: <serenity>; @C_1: <serɛnity>]. Spelling conventions were reformed multiple times throughout the history of modern languages (see Crystal 2013 on English), and they are subjects of contention even today. Think of the debates on whether languages where the nouns for professional roles are grammatically gendered should implement a word-final *schwa* to ensure inclusiveness (see, e.g., Sulis and Gheno 2022 on Italian). It would be surprising if an account of denotational interventions were not prepared to say anything at least vaguely promising about interventions on other standing linguistic properties such as spelling or inflectional properties. Yet, take again speaker-meaning *Deflation*. Even if this reaction to PDS were a live option for word meanings, the very idea of speaker-meaning, say, a reformed inflectional pattern sounds like a category mistake. By contrast, the localist account can be generalized to non-semantic interventions without obvious theoretical hindrances.

7. Conclusion

Orthodox metasemantic frameworks make word meanings resistant to deliberate change and raise concerns about ordinary speakers’ ability to control them (PDS). I have reviewed the three main responses to PDS, argued that they face difficulties, and derived the desiderata on an improved reaction to the problem. Then, I have suggested a reaction to PDS that meets the desiderata in play. On the resulting proposal, while PDS does raise a significant metasemantic difficulty, the difficulty should not lead us to the conclusion that ordinary speakers have no power to reliably effect changes to semantic reality. Denotations can be local and locally controlled. A textured, variationist ontology for standing meanings can be pursued, has independent attractions (e.g., it allows formal models of lexical entries to be serious about intra-linguistic diversity instead of dismissing it as an afterthought to idealized homogeneity), and clears the way for a reaction to PDS which presents advantages over other treatments of the problem.

The story does not end here, naturally. Though I hope to have offered a sufficient argument that the approach deserves consideration, there is work to do. The proposal generates several new questions and problems – questions and problems which, I have argued, are preferable to those generated by rival reactions to PDS, but remain nevertheless open. I will mention four for concision. First, I have not dwelt upon whether the proposed treatment can be extended to speech communities individuated by, say, diatopical or social variation (and their sub-types), or whether we should expect these to be treated in a completely different manner. Second, the argument has focused on word meanings. One question is if, how, and to what extent, a variationist ontology of this sort could be extended to proposals to engineer concepts.[26] Third, I have assumed a rough-and-ready view of the mechanisms of deferential affiliation that generate the loci at which local semantic changes can be indexed, building on Lassiter (2008). This rough-and-ready view will need independent development. Fourth, I have not said much about the line of demarcation between true denotational interventions and secessionist coinages of novel lexical vehicles. Arguments about the correct way of dealing with this graded boundary connect to independent issues about the conditions of individuation of words. This connection will require more scrutiny.

26 Assuming an anti-individualist theory of concepts, of course, otherwise the issue is moot.

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