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How should we explain metalinguistic disputes?

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ABSTRACT

Das Ziel dieser Arbeit ist es, einen Beitrag zur aktuellen philosophischen Debatte über sogenannte „metalinguistische Streitigkeiten“ (*metalinguistic disputes*) zu leisten. Es soll besser verstanden werden, welche sprachlichen Mechanismen diesen Streitigkeiten zu Grunde liegen. Im Zentrum steht dabei die Frage, wie Sprecher:innen in solchen Streitigkeiten ihre Meinungsverschiedenheiten über Bedeutungs- oder Kontextfragen kommunizieren, ohne diese explizit zum Thema zu machen.

Die Arbeit konzentriert sich auf zwei verschiedene Ansätze, die erwähnte Frage zu beantworten. Der erste Ansatz geht davon aus, dass die in metalinguistischen Streitigkeiten zum Ausdruck gebrachten Meinungsverschiedenheiten als konversationale Implikaturen kommuniziert werden. Ich argumentiere, dass dieser Ansatz—insbesondere im Rahmen der klassischen griceanischen Auffassung von konversationalen Implikaturen—nicht in der Lage ist, die gesamte Bandbreite metalinguistischer Streitigkeiten adäquat zu erklären. Insbesondere zeigen sich Probleme bei Fällen, in denen Sprecher:innen sich der metalinguistischen Natur ihrer Streitigkeit nicht bewusst sind oder diese bestreiten. Es zeigen sich aber auch Probleme im Hinblick auf die Unterscheidung zwischen deskriptiven und normativen metalinguistischen Streitigkeiten.

Der zweite Ansatz, die erwähnte Frage zu beantworten, basiert auf Stalnakers Konversationsmodell. Ich skizziere, wie dieses Konversationsmodell angepasst werden kann, um metalinguistische Streitigkeiten prinzipiell erklären zu können. Demzufolge versuchen Sprecher:innen in metalinguistischen Streitigkeiten, den gemeinsamen Gesprächskontext (*common ground*) auf inkompatible Weise zu aktualisieren. Ich argumentiere dafür, dass dieser Ansatz als vielversprechenderer Versuch gewertet werden kann, zu erklären, wie Sprecher:innen ihre Meinungsverschiedenheiten in metalinguistischen Streitigkeiten ausdrücken.

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0. INTRODUCTION

In *ordinary disputes*, speakers express disagreements based on incompatible beliefs about the circumstances in the world, i.e. the relevant facts underlying their conversation. Suppose that, in the following conversation while they are walking through Vienna, Michael relies on the weather forecast from the previous day, whereas Lena has actually checked the temperature. TEMPERATURE:

Michael: "The temperature is currently below the freezing point."

Lena: "No, the temperature is not currently below the freezing point."

The interlocutors have incompatible beliefs about the weather conditions in Vienna at the time of their conversation and they express a disagreement about these facts by making incompatible assertions.

In other disputes, although they appear similar on the linguistic surface and seem to involve *prima facie* disagreement, it is less clear what the speakers disagree about. Suppose that a fruit seller and a customer argue about the size of an apple right in front of them. APPLE:

Customer: "This apple is not large!"

Fruit seller: "No, this apple is large!"

Or suppose that two astronomers are arguing about the status of Pluto. PLUTO:

Neil: "Pluto is a planet."

Jocelyn: "No, Pluto is not a planet."

In both scenarios, we can assume that the disputants have *common knowledge* of the relevant facts underlying their conversation. It is, therefore, unlike in ordinary disputes, not plausible that the speakers have incompatible beliefs about those facts and express a disagreement about them. Moreover, since the point of using declarative sentences is usually to convey information about the world, and since, in both scenarios, the speakers have common knowledge of the relevant facts, it is unclear what the point of their respective utterances is. Hence, although the conversations in APPLE and PLUTO appear perfectly natural, it remains unclear what the speakers' disagreement is about and what the point of their utterances is.

Plunkett and Sundell (2013) argue that cases like APPLE and PLUTO can be analysed as *metalinguistic disputes*. In such disputes, speakers employ an expression central to their conversation in competing *metalinguistic usages*. That is, they *use*—not mention—the expression in question not to express a disagreement about the world, but about the appropriate usage of

the expression in question. Thereby, the speakers do not make literal incompatible assertions, but express an *implicit* disagreement.

Plunkett and Sundell's analysis allows us to explain both what the speakers disagree about and what the point of their utterances is in APPLE and PLUTO. In APPLE, the speakers do not disagree about the size of the apple, but about the contextual standard of largeness underlying their conversation. They employ 'large' in competing metalinguistic usages to express this disagreement. In PLUTO, the speakers do not disagree about facts concerning Pluto, but about whether 'planet' can appropriately be applied to describe an entity with Pluto's properties. They employ 'planet' in competing metalinguistic usages to express this disagreement.

Although the theory of metalinguistic disputes offers an attractive explanation of such cases, metalinguistic usage, as a central feature of these disputes, raises an explanatory issue, which Plunkett and Sundell remain largely neutral about:

What is the linguistic mechanism underlying metalinguistic usage, i.e. can established semantic or pragmatic theories account for how speakers express their disagreements in metalinguistic disputes via metalinguistic usage?

My thesis engages with two approaches to solving this explanatory issue. The first approach invokes *conversational implicatures*. Belleri (2017) and Mankowitz (2021) think that speakers engaged in a metalinguistic dispute conversationally implicate contradicting metalinguistic propositions via competing metalinguistic usages.

The second approach (Kocurek, Jerzak and Rudolph 2020; Soria-Ruiz 2023; MacFarlane (forthcoming)) invokes Stalnaker's (1978) model of conversation and holds that assertions with competing metalinguistic usages amount to incompatible attempts to update the common ground.

The challenge of explaining metalinguistic disputes lies in their variety. Speakers express disagreements about the context of their conversations in metalinguistic disputes, as in APPLE. But speakers also express disagreements about the meaning of expressions, as in PLUTO. Moreover, as Plunkett and Sundell (2021) have argued, speakers may be engaged in metalinguistic disputes despite being unaware of that fact or contesting that they are. On top of that, metalinguistic disputes can be descriptive, i.e. about how an expression *is* used, or normative, i.e. about how an expression *ought* to be used. Thus, the adequacy of an explanation of metalinguistic usage, besides drawing on well-established semantic or pragmatic resources, depends on whether it accounts for the variety of metalinguistic disputes. I argue that the second approach meets this challenge more successfully.

I proceed as follows. I introduce Plunkett and Sundell’s theory of metalinguistic disputes, beginning with the phenomenon of metalinguistic usage (Section 1).

After these preliminaries, I argue against implicature-based accounts of metalinguistic usage (Section 2). My critique of an implicature-based explanation of metalinguistic usage considers two conceptions of (conversational) implicature, the first might be seen as the standard Gricean (1989) account, the second might be seen as a more liberal account, motivated by Saul (2002) and Heck (2006).

I introduce and discuss a “Stalnakerian alternative” to implicature-based explanations of metalinguistic disputes (Section 3). Drawing on Stalnaker’s (1978; 1984; 2014) model of conversation and conception of assertion, I first show that Barker’s (2002) work on metalinguistic usage of gradable adjectives and Barker’s (2013) work on disagreements about taste provide a promising basis for explaining metalinguistic disputes. I then sketch how this basis is extended by recent proposals (Kocurek, Jerzak and Rudolph 2020; Soria-Ruiz 2023; MacFarlane (forthcoming)) into a more comprehensive account of metalinguistic usage, aimed at explaining metalinguistic disputes in general.

I conclude that the Stalnakerian alternative is a good candidate for meeting the explanatory challenges posed by the diversity of metalinguistic disputes, even if some central aspects of Plunkett and Sundell’s theory do not translate neatly into the semantic framework of the Stalnakerian alternative.

1. FROM METALINGUISTIC USAGE TO METALINGUISTIC DISPUTES

1.1. METALINGUISTIC USAGE

Following Barker (2002, 1–2), we can distinguish between a *descriptive* and a *metalinguistic* mode of using linguistic expressions. In the *descriptive* mode, expressions are used to convey information about the world. For example, a speaker (A) can use ‘tall’ in an utterance of ‘Feynman is tall’ to convey information about Feynman’s height, given that a standard for tallness is in place (Barker 2002, 8).

Under certain circumstances, the communicative upshot of an utterance cannot plausibly be to convey information about the world, but rather about the linguistic expressions used. Consider, for example, that Feynman, A and a hearer (B) are at a limbo party, with Feynman standing in front of them beside a measuring stick.¹ In this scenario, A and B can be assumed to have *common knowledge* of Feynman’s height: each of them knows how tall Feynman is, each

¹ This is a slightly modified version of Barker’s (2002) example.

knows that the other knows how tall Feynman is, each knows that the other knows that the other knows how tall Feynman is, and so on. Consequently, if A utters 'Feynman is tall', A uses 'tall' in the *metalinguistic* mode, i.e. to convey information about the appropriate use of the expression, rather than information about the world (in this case Feynman's height). A's utterance, if unchallenged, establishes that the contextual standard for tallness is such that Feynman counts as tall (Barker 2002, 9).²

Metalinguistic usage is not a phenomenon restricted to gradable adjectives like 'tall', it also occurs with expressions of different lexical categories, such as nouns. Common instances of metalinguistic usage are, for instance, utterances in language-learning situations. Imagine the teacher of a German course pointing at a chair and uttering 'Das ist ein Stuhl'. The participants know what the object in front of them is, so the point of the teacher's utterance is to convey information about the meaning of 'Stuhl', not about the object in front of them.

The examples above show that the main point of these utterances is not what is apparently, or explicitly, said about a person or an object, but what is implicitly conveyed about an expression used in the utterance. By contrast, an explicit way of talking about a particular expression is to mention it instead of using it. One could, for instance, say that '*tall*' *applies to people of at least 185cm in height*, or that '*Stuhl*' *is a German expression for a piece of seating furniture*, etc. Picking up on the inexplicitness of metalinguistic usage, Plunkett and Sundell use this notion to describe cases where a "linguistic expression is used (not mentioned) to communicate information about the appropriate usage of that very expression" (2013, 3).

1.2. METALINGUISTIC DISPUTES

Plunkett and Sundell (2013; 2021) argue that certain linguistic exchanges in which speakers make apparently conflicting utterances are best understood as *metalinguistic disputes*, i.e. linguistic exchanges where disputants employ "competing metalinguistic usages" of an expression to "express a disagreement about how that [expression] *is used* or how it *ought to be used*" (2021, 146). Accordingly, metalinguistic disputes can either be *descriptive* or *normative*. Plunkett and Sundell refer to normative metalinguistic disputes as 'metalinguistic negotiations' (2021, 147).

Recall the limbo-party scenario from above, but this time assume that B does not accept A's utterance. *Case 1:*

² Note that this standard would still be partial, it would not yet determine whether someone shorter than Feynman counts as tall.

A: "Feynman is tall."

B: "Feynman is not tall."

Intuitively, this exchange involves a disagreement. As noted above, the speakers can be assumed to have common knowledge of Feynman's height. Under such conditions, the communicative upshot of A's and B's utterances is not to convey information about Feynman's height, and it is implausible to suppose that they disagree about that issue. Rather, A and B propose conflicting standards for tallness through competing metalinguistic usages of 'tall'. Therefore, they disagree about the appropriate contextual standard of tallness.³

The next case I introduce highlights what Plunkett and Sundell take to be a central feature of metalinguistic disputes, namely that speakers do not assert literally conflicting contents. This is because they employ the relevant expression in *competing* metalinguistic usages and thereby mean different things by the expression.

Case 2. The sporting achievements of Secretariat, a racehorse, were presented in a broadcast. Afterwards, the hosts of the show are having the following exchange:

C: "Secretariat is an athlete."

D: "Secretariat is not an athlete."

Analogous to *Case 1*, we can assume that the speakers have common knowledge of the relevant facts concerning the apparent subject of their conversation, i.e. Secretariat's achievements as a racehorse, its speed, strength, etc. It is, therefore, implausible that the speakers disagree about whether Secretariat bears certain properties. Rather, they disagree about whether 'athlete' is appropriately used to describe an entity with the properties Secretariat has.

Plunkett and Sundell (2013, 16–17) argue that cases in which speakers have common knowledge about the relevant facts concerning the apparent subject of their conversation, yet still make apparently contradictory claims about it, provide *prima facie* evidence that the speakers apply expressions with different meanings. Plunkett calls such conditions "non-defective" (2015, 842). As in *Case 2*, under these conditions the speakers arguably do not assert contradictory propositions, but make true assertions in virtue of what they individually mean by 'athlete'. This interpretation is supported by considerations according to the Principle of Charity (Hirsch 2005, 71). If the speakers were taken to express contradictory propositions, they would have to be using 'athlete' with the same meaning. This interpretation would require attributing a straightforward misapplication of the expression to one of them. It is therefore more

³ In this sense they also disagree about the corresponding appropriate usage of 'tall'.

charitable to interpret the exchange as involving an implicit metalinguistic disagreement about the appropriate use of ‘athlete’, expressed via competing metalinguistic usages.

To conclude this brief introduction of metalinguistic disputes, two further distinctions should be drawn. First, we should contrast *metalinguistic* with *ordinary*, i.e. object-level, disputes. Second, a distinction within metalinguistic disputes should be made, in order to illustrate the difference between *Case 1* and *Case 2*. Both distinctions can be made explicit in a double-index semantic framework. According to this framework, the utterance of a sentence (s) in a context (c) yields a proposition (p), which is in turn evaluated for truth (1) or falsity (0) at circumstances of evaluation (w):

$$s(c) \Rightarrow p; p(w) \Rightarrow \{0,1\}.$$
⁴

In an ordinary, or object-level, dispute, speakers express a disagreement that concerns whether the propositional content uttered by one of them is true, i.e. they disagree about the circumstances of evaluation, respectively the relevant facts (w).⁵ By contrast, in a metalinguistic dispute, the speakers’ disagreement can either be *meaning-based*, i.e. arising from a disagreement about the meaning⁶ of a constituent expression of a sentence (s), or *context-based*, i.e. arising from a disagreement about the context of their conversation (c) (see Sundell 2011 for a discussion of different subjects of disagreement). Accordingly, the disputants in *Case 1* have a context-based disagreement about the operative standard of tallness, whereas the disputants in *Case 2* have a meaning-based disagreement about the meaning of ‘athlete’. Note that this distinction within metalinguistic disputes is neutral with respect to whether the dispute is descriptive or normative. Hence, both meaning-based and context-based metalinguistic disputes can be descriptive or normative.⁷

⁴ This framework is broadly based on Kaplan (1989, 500–507). I employ this semi-formal notation for heuristic purposes.

⁵ For illustration, consider the following exchange as an object-level dispute. A solely relies on the weather forecast, whereas B has actually checked the temperature. A: “The temperature is currently below the freezing-point”. B: “No, the temperature is not currently below the freezing-point”. The interlocutors have incompatible beliefs about the weather conditions in Vienna at the time of their conversation and they express a disagreement about these facts by making incompatible assertions.

⁶ Where meaning is understood as a fundamental, contextually invariant semantic component of an expression, such as *character* in Kaplan (1989).

⁷ I will remain largely neutral about whether a specific metalinguistic dispute is descriptive or normative, since the goal is to explain how both types of disputes are expressed. However, to determine whether a metalinguistic dispute is descriptive or normative, sufficient background information is needed, or further assumptions must be made (see Plunkett (2013) for a proposal of features of conversations which should provide evidence to decide whether a metalinguistic dispute is descriptive or normative). For example, consider *Case 1*, in which A and B disagree about the standard of tallness. Suppose they want to figure out what counts as tall for the limbo-dance competition of the party. If A and B have a descriptive metalinguistic dispute, their disagreement would vanish, if they are told what the standard is (for instance because the hosts of the party have determined such a standard). If A and B have a normative metalinguistic dispute, their disagreement would persist, even if they are told what the

Interpreting certain exchanges as metalinguistic disputes, according to Plunkett and Sundell, rests on the idea that the full scope of what speakers communicate is not exhausted by what is literally asserted, and that disagreements can consist of contents that are implicitly communicated via metalinguistic usage. This raises the question of *which linguistic mechanism underlies metalinguistic usage in metalinguistic disputes*, i.e. whether and how we can use semantic or pragmatic theories to account for how speakers express their disagreements in metalinguistic disputes via metalinguistic usage. I propose that an adequate answer to this question must satisfy two desiderata:

- (D1) it should draw on *established* semantic or pragmatic theories;
- (D2) it should be parsimonious, i.e. capable of accounting for a wide range of metalinguistic usages in disputes that vary along multiple features with appeal to a single explanatory mechanism.

With an understanding of metalinguistic disputes and with desiderata for an adequate explanation of them in place, we can now assess whether particular explanatory approaches are satisfactory.

2. IMPLICATURE-BASED ACCOUNTS OF METALINGUISTIC USAGE

A prominent opinion in the recent literature is that metalinguistic contents in metalinguistic disputes are conveyed as *conversational implicatures*. Mankowitz (2021) develops a detailed implicature-based account of disputes such as *Case 2*, while Belleri (2017) likewise claims that the implicitly conveyed contents in metalinguistic disputes can be taken to be conversational implicatures, derived via broadly Gricean pragmatic reasoning. I refer to these approaches collectively as ‘implicature-based accounts’. Before evaluating them, I outline the relevant aspects of Grice’s theory of conversational implicature.

2.1. CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURE (THE GRICEAN PICTURE)

Grice (1989, 24) distinguishes between what *is said* and *implicated* with an utterance. Grice’s notion of *what is said* can be taken to be equivalent to the proposition literally expressed by the utterance of a sentence (Neale 1992, 520–521), or its truth-conditional content (Levinson 2000, 171). Grice does not offer an explicit definition of implicature, respectively of *what is implicated*. However, a common exegetical interpretation of Grice holds that what a speaker *implicates* can be understood as what the speaker *means* to communicate with the utterance of

standard is. In this case, we could imagine that A and B negotiate what the standard of tallness should be in order to ensure a fair competition.

a sentence but does not *say* with it.⁸ According to Grice (1989, 219), a speaker *means* that p with an utterance of x iff they utter x with the intention to induce the belief that p in their audience by means of the recognition of this intention (Grice 1989, 219). Accordingly, what a speaker implicates with an utterance is part of their communicative intentions.

Grice further distinguishes between *conventional* and *conversational* implicatures. Conventional implicatures are determined solely by the “conventional meaning” (1989, 25) of the words used by a speaker to utter a sentence.⁹ Conversational implicatures, on the other hand, are determined by what is said by a speaker in an exchange and the assumption that exchanges are “cooperative efforts”, governed by the *Cooperative Principle* which speakers are expected to observe and which can be formulated as follows:

Make your conversational contribution such as required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged. (1989, 26)

Grice thinks that a speaker’s contribution to an exchange will be in accordance with the Cooperative Principle if it complies with conversational maxims. These maxims can be subsumed under four general categories (1989, 26–27):

QUANTITY: Make your contribution as informative as is required and not more informative than is required.

QUALITY: Try to make your contribution one that is true.

RELATION: Be relevant.

MANNER: Be perspicuous, i.e. avoid obscurity of expression and ambiguity, be brief and orderly.

Grice imposes three necessary conditions on conversational implicatures (1989, 30–31). *Condition 1-3*:

A speaker S, by saying that p has implicated that q, may be said to have conversationally implicated that q, provided that (Condition 1) S is to be presumed to be observing the conversational maxims, or at least the Cooperative Principle; (Condition 2) the supposition that S is aware that, or thinks that, q is required in order to make S’s saying that p consistent with the presumption in Condition 1; (Condition 3) S thinks, and would expect the hearer to think that S thinks, that it is within the competence of the hearer to work out, or grasp intuitively, that the supposition in Condition 2 is required to make S’s saying that p consistent with the presumption in Condition 1.¹⁰

Condition 4. Grice imposes a fourth necessary condition on conversational implicatures, namely cancellability. A content p conveyed by an utterance is cancellable if adding “not-p”,

⁸ See, for instance, Levinson (1983, 101), Neale (1992, 524-525), Bach (2006, 22), Buchanan (2013).

⁹ Because my arguments do not bear on conventional implicatures, I will not further discuss them.

¹⁰ For the sake of readability, I have slightly modified Grice’s original passage.

respectively a sentence that entails not-*p*, or “I do not mean to imply that *p*” (Grice 1989, 44) to the original utterance does not give rise to contradiction (Neale 1992, 529), infelicity (Zakrou 2018, 4), or inadmissibility (Grice 1989, 44). Conversational implicatures, as pragmatically conveyed contents, are cancellable because they are derived by *what is said* by a speaker’s utterance *together* with the assumption of cooperativeness. In cases of cancellation, either the presumption of the speaker’s cooperativeness does not apply, or it is preserved by what is explicitly said by the speaker, so that no implicated content is required to render what is said consistent with this presumption. By contrast, contents conveyed by an utterance that are part of the semantic content, or closely related to a semantic component of the utterance, are not cancellable.

As an example of conversational implicature, and to illustrate *Condition 4*, consider the following conversation:

E: “Do you have a lighter?”

F: “I stopped smoking.”

F’s reply implicitly conveys two propositions, *p*₁ (that F does not have a lighter) and *p*₂ (that F has smoked habitually in the past). *p*₁ is a conversational implicature. Without its presence, the presumption of F’s cooperativity could not be maintained, because only what is said, i.e. that F stopped smoking, would violate the Maxim of Relation. However, F could add “But I have a lighter” without contradiction, infelicity, or inadmissibility. So, *p*₁ is cancellable.¹¹ By contrast, F could not add “But I have never been a smoker” without infelicity or without making an inadmissible conversational move, since this would violate or retract a commitment incurred by the original utterance. This is because *p*₂ is a presupposition of F’s utterance which is generated by the semantics and syntax of that utterance (Soames 1982, 488).

I will refer to the characterization of implicature and conversational implicature discussed in this section as the ‘Gricean picture’. In what follows, it serves as a framework for evaluating implicature-based accounts, specifically whether speakers can be taken to express disagreement in metalinguistic disputes via conversational implicature.

¹¹ The exact rationale is that *p*₁ is cancellable because, in the parallel run of the conversation, where F adds “But I have a lighter”, the underlying assumption of F’s cooperativeness is preserved by what is said – without *p*₁. Hence, there is no implicature. In the original run of the conversation, what is said is *that F stopped smoking*. Here, *p*₁ is conversationally implicated, since otherwise the maxim of Relation would be violated.

2.2. UNRECOGNIZED AND CONTESTED METALINGUISTIC DISPUTES

A central aim of the theory of metalinguistic disputes is to establish this kind of dispute as a ubiquitous phenomenon. Plunkett and Sundell (2013; 2023), as well as Plunkett (2015), argue that not only many everyday disputes, but also a range of philosophical disputes, are best understood as metalinguistic disputes. Other authors, including Belleri (2017) and Thomasson (2016), are sympathetic to this idea. In order to support the ubiquity of metalinguistic disputes and to respond to objections against the very idea of metalinguistic disputes, Plunkett and Sundell maintain that

[an] important distinction among metalinguistic disputes is how aware the speakers are of what they are doing. In some cases, they might understand that they are engaged in a metalinguistic dispute. In other cases, they might not. Indeed, they might resist this characterization quite strongly. (2021, 143)

Desideratum D2, concerning theoretical parsimony, suggests that implicature-based accounts should be able to explain metalinguistic usages in metalinguistic disputes that range over the distinction Plunkett and Sundell draw here: speakers may (i) be aware of being engaged in a metalinguistic dispute; (ii) be unaware of it; or (iii) resist characterizing their exchange as such. I refer to disputes exemplifying (ii) as ‘unrecognized metalinguistic disputes’ and to disputes exemplifying (iii) as ‘contested metalinguistic disputes’. In general, the speakers engaged in a metalinguistic dispute can only be taken to conversationally implicate metalinguistic propositions if *Conditions 1-4* for conversational implicatures are satisfied. In this section, I focus on *Conditions 1-3* and especially *Condition 3*, since it is connected to the speakers’ awareness concerning the nature of their exchange.

To make things explicit, let us consider *Case 2* and apply an implicature-based explanation:

C: “Secretariat is an athlete.”

D: “Secretariat is not an athlete.”

Because C and D mean different things by ‘athlete’, they do not assert contradictory propositions, i.e. they do not disagree about *what is said* with their utterances. Via competing metalinguistic usages of ‘athlete’, C conversationally implicates the metalinguistic proposition that ‘athlete’ *should be used to include non-human animals* and D implicates that ‘athlete’ *should not be used to include non-human animals*.¹² Mankowitz (2021) would explain the presence of these implicatures via the Maxim of Quantity. The rationale is that, since C and D have common knowledge of the relevant facts about Secretariat, including its properties as a racehorse, their

¹² For the present purpose, I assume that the metalinguistic dispute is normative.

utterances would not convey any new information and would, therefore, violate the Maxim of Quantity. The presumption of the speakers' cooperativeness can be maintained if their utterances conveyed additional information. The candidates for providing this additional information are the metalinguistic propositions about the meaning of 'athlete', which are, thus, conveyed as conversational implicatures.

Before I proceed assessing whether the conditions for conversational implicatures are satisfied in unrecognized or contested metalinguistic disputes, it is worth noting a potential general problem for implicature-based accounts in such cases. According to the Gricean picture, something that is conversationally implicated needs to be implicated, i.e. meant without being said, in the first instance. Hence, implicature-based accounts require that the conveyed metalinguistic propositions are part of the speakers' communicative intentions. The potential problem this poses is that if speakers are unaware that they are engaged in a metalinguistic dispute, or resist this characterization of their dispute, it is unclear whether they can be said to have the required communicative intentions. This issue depends on our understanding of intentions.¹³ Thomasson (2016, 22) offers a way of thinking about intentions which would allow one to sidestep the said general problem. Thomasson claims that, in interpreting human intentions, an individual's actions are more revealing than their avowals of their intentions. Following this approach, advocates of implicature-based accounts could claim that speakers in unrecognized or contested metalinguistic disputes manifest communicative intentions through their actions, i.e. through their utterances in the given circumstances. Although it is unlikely that such speakers would, if asked in the first instance, attest that they intend to communicate metalinguistic information, their utterances nonetheless provide evidence for these very intentions.

It should be mentioned that there are other conceptions of intentions that contradict Thomasson's approach. Buchanan (2013, 723) takes it to be a constraint on intentions that a subject intends to do X only if they believe that they are going to do X. Given this conception, it is again debatable whether speakers have the necessary communicative intentions in unrecognized or contested metalinguistic disputes since they arguably lack belief that they are going to communicate metalinguistic information.

However, even if we grant advocates of implicature-based accounts that speakers do have the required communicative intentions in unrecognized or contested metalinguistic disputes, this will only circumvent the mentioned general problem. A more specific problem for

¹³ In the next section, I will discuss a different approach to avoid the general problem which is not based on a specific understanding of intentions, but on our conception of implicature.

implicature-based accounts is that *Conditions 1-3* must be satisfied in any metalinguistic dispute for an implicitly conveyed proposition to be a *conversational* implicature. In what follows, I argue that *Condition 3* is not satisfied in unrecognized metalinguistic disputes.¹⁴

Plunkett and Sundell (2021, 151) consider scenarios in which speakers who are in fact engaged in a metalinguistic dispute mistakenly believe that they disagree about the literal semantic contents, i.e. *what is said*, of their utterances and, consequently, believe that they do not disagree about a metalinguistic issue. Such scenarios exemplify unrecognized metalinguistic disputes. Consider *Case 2* as an unrecognized metalinguistic dispute. The speakers regard their exchange as a disagreement about the facts concerning Secretariat, i.e. an object-level disagreement. This means that they take themselves to be using 'athlete' with the same meaning and to disagree about whether Secretariat instantiates the properties that, given that meaning, make the application of 'athlete' true.

Condition 1 is satisfied, since speakers can be presumed to be cooperative in any serious conversation, including unrecognized metalinguistic disputes.

Condition 2 is plausibly satisfied as well, since its satisfaction does not require actual awareness of the speakers, but only that the supposition of their awareness is required for making their literal contribution consistent with the presumption that they are cooperative.

However, *Condition 3* is the critical condition for unrecognized metalinguistic disputes, since its satisfaction requires awareness on the part of the speakers concerning the nature of their exchange. More explicitly, whether *Condition 3* is satisfied depends on whether there is an expectation from the speaker's perspective that the hearer can grasp a metalinguistic proposition which is needed to make their utterance consistent with the presumption that they are preserving the Cooperative Principle, respectively the conversational maxims. *Condition 3* is not satisfied in unrecognized metalinguistic disputes, because from the speakers' perspective, the assumption of cooperativeness is preserved without attributing any implicit (metalinguistic) content to their utterances.

To see why *Condition 3* is not satisfied, consider again *Case 2* as an unrecognized metalinguistic dispute in light of every conversational maxim from the speakers' perspective: QUANTITY is complied with because each speaker provides the amount of information required to express their opinion on whether Secretariat is an athlete. QUALITY is complied with because the speakers take themselves to sincerely assert what they think is true.

¹⁴ Note beforehand that I assume that due to the same (or a comparable) lack of awareness on the part of the speakers regarding the nature of their dispute in contested metalinguistic disputes, an analogous argument to the one that follows regarding unrecognized also applies to contested metalinguistic disputes.

RELATION is complied with because each utterance directly addresses the issue at hand. MANNER is complied with because the utterances are perspicuous, especially because 'athlete' is, from the speakers' perspective, used unambiguously.

Since the speakers' utterances comply with every maxim from their perspective, the assumption of cooperativeness is preserved at the level of *what is said*. Consequently, there will be no expectation from the speakers that their hearer can grasp a metalinguistic proposition which is needed to make their utterance consistent with the presumption that they are preserving the Cooperative Principle, respectively the conversational maxims. Thus, *Condition 3* is not satisfied in unrecognized metalinguistic disputes.¹⁵ Therefore, implicature-based accounts fail to explain these cases. Additionally, I assume that if *Condition 3* is not satisfied in unrecognized, it is also not satisfied in contested metalinguistic disputes, given the same lack of the speakers' awareness. So, implicature-based accounts also fail to explain these cases.

Although implicature-based accounts can arguably explain cases in which speakers are aware that they are engaged in metalinguistic disputes, I have shown that they fail to explain unrecognized and contested metalinguistic disputes. Hence, implicature-based accounts cannot provide a uniform explanation of the linguistic mechanism underlying these occurrences of metalinguistic usage. This means that they do not provide a basis for a parsimonious account of the mechanism underlying metalinguistic usage and therefore fail to meet desideratum D2.

However, there is one important limitation to my criticism of implicature-based accounts: it presupposes the Gricean picture. Advocates of implicature-based accounts could invoke an alternative conception of (conversational) implicature to circumvent my criticism. In the following section, I outline an alternative conception of implicature and its motivation in order to see how such a conception relates to the two problems for implicature-based accounts discussed in the present section.

2.3. AN ALTERNATIVE CONCEPTION OF IMPLICATURE?

In order to identify the motivations for an alternative conception of implicature, let us consider variations¹⁶ on one of Grice's (1989, 33) classic examples of conversational implicature. The

¹⁵ Note that Odrowąż-Sypniewska claims that *Condition 2* and *Condition 3* are not satisfied in unrecognized metalinguistic disputes, because, due to the lack of awareness, the speakers "cannot have the thoughts that Grice would want them to have if they were to conversationally implicate those contents" (2023, 1022-1023). First, I disagree regarding *Condition 2*, because for its satisfaction, the speaker does not need to *actually have* a specific thought, but it is needed that the supposition that the speaker has a specific thought is required for making their literal contribution consistent with the presumption that they are cooperative. Second, I agree regarding *Condition 3*, but provide a substantial explanation, which Odrowąż-Sypniewska does not beyond what is quoted here.

¹⁶ I borrow the structure of the variations from Saul (2002). Note that I draw different conclusions from the variations.

basic scenario is this: a rather untalented student with no realistic prospects of a philosophy career asks their philosophy professor for a reference letter. The professor agrees and wants the best for both the student and the potential employers. The professor knows that the student has excellent handwriting and is always punctual, so in each of the following scenarios, she decides to write a polite letter, but the only substantial information provided about the student's capabilities concerns their handwriting and punctuality.

Reference Letter 1. Suppose, in addition to the basic scenario, that the student is applying for a philosophy job and the professor knows this. What the professor wants to convey implicitly, and expects the audience to grasp, is *that the professor thinks that the student is not suitable for the job*. On the basis of what is said in the letter and the given circumstances, the audience could legitimately infer this proposition.¹⁷

The situation in *Reference Letter 1* illustrates what we could call a 'successful implicature'. The audience could legitimately infer the proposition *that the professor thinks the student is not suitable for the job*, based on what the professor has said in the given circumstances. This proposition is a conversational implicature according to the Gricean picture, since it was clearly part of the professor's communicative intentions to convey it and *Conditions 1-3* are satisfied.

Reference Letter 2. Suppose, in addition to the basic scenario, that the student previously told the professor that they would quit philosophy and pursue a career in stenography. The professor, however, has forgotten this conversation, and the student did not mention that the application is for a stenography job. Since the professor usually writes reference letters for philosophy positions, she mistakenly assumes that the letter is addressed to a philosophy admissions committee. What the professor wants to convey implicitly, and expects the audience to grasp, is *that the professor thinks that the student is not suitable for the job*. However, on the basis of what is said in the letter and the given circumstances, the audience would—by taking the letter literally—come to think that the candidate has useful skills for the job.

The situation in *Reference Letter 2* illustrates what we could call a 'failed implicature'. There is a conversational implicature according to the Gricean picture, namely *that the professor thinks that the student is not suitable for the job*. This is because it was part of the professor's communicative intentions to convey this proposition and since the professor also expects that the audience grasps this proposition, *Conditions 1-3* are plausibly satisfied. However, the audience does not plausibly take the professor to convey what the Gricean picture predicts.

¹⁷ Grice (1989, 33) explains the presence of the implicature via the Maxim of Quantity: without the presence of the implicature, the maxim would be violated. The speaker flouts the maxim in order to get a conversational implicature – in this case information about the student's suitability for the job.

Reference Letter 3. Suppose, in addition to the basic scenario, that the student previously told the professor that they would quit philosophy and pursue a career in stenography. The professor remembers this and mistakenly assumes that the letter is for a stenography job application. However, the student decided at the last minute to apply for a philosophy job but does not mention this, assuming the professor only writes letters for philosophy positions. The professor does not want to convey an implicit message, but exactly what is stated in the letter. Thus, only *Condition 1* is plausibly satisfied. However, on the basis of what is said in the letter and the given circumstances, the audience could legitimately infer *that the professor thinks that the student is not suitable for the job*.

The situation in *Reference Letter 3* illustrates what we could call an ‘accidental implicature’. There is no apparent candidate for a conversational implicature according to the Gricean picture, since the professor does not want to convey anything beyond what is said in the letter. However, the audience would take the professor to implicitly convey and could legitimately infer *that the professor thinks that the student is not suitable for the job*.

Intuitively, there appears to be a tension between what the Gricean picture predicts as conversational implicatures and what the audience would plausibly come to think in *Reference Letter 2* or could legitimately infer in *Reference Letter 3*. If a theory of conversational implicature is meant to explain how utterances generate non-literal communicative effects under the assumption of speaker cooperativeness in specific conversational contexts, then divergences between its predictions and what hearers are entitled to infer can be taken to constitute a theoretical cost.

One response to this tension is to treat failed and accidental implicatures as communicative phenomena worth explaining, but not as genuine conversational implicatures. Saul (2002) pursues this strategy and proposes an extended taxonomy for the Gricean picture. Accordingly, the failed implicature in *Reference Letter 2* is an *utterer-implicature* (2002, 235) and the accidental implicature in *Reference Letter 3* is an *audience-implicature* (2002, 242).¹⁸

A more radical response to this tension is to hold that the Gricean picture mispredicts the communicative effects in *Reference Letter 2* and *Reference Letter 3*. As indicated above, the intuition behind this verdict is that the relevant datum which our theory of (conversational) implicature should account for consists in plausible communicative effects, i.e. the propositions

¹⁸ Note that Saul’s approach would not help the advocate of implicature-based accounts, since the conditions of speaker- and audience-implicature parallel those of the Gricean picture for conversational implicature. In particular, the analogue of *Condition 3* for speaker- and audience-implicature would likewise not be satisfied in unrecognized and contested metalinguistic disputes.

the audience could legitimately infer, rather than what speakers attempt (and perhaps succeed) in implicitly conveying. Hence, *Reference Letter 2* and *Reference Letter 3* are counterexamples¹⁹ to the Gricean picture. *Reference Letter 2* shows that the Gricean picture fails to provide sufficient conditions for conversational implicature.²⁰ *Reference Letter 3* shows that the *speaker's communicative intentions* and *Conditions 2-3* of the Gricean picture are not necessary conditions for conversational implicature.

The diagnosis of why the Gricean picture fails is roughly as follows. Conversational implicatures are communicative contents whose presence can be reconstructed through an interpretative effort, in order to make a speaker's utterance compatible with general assumptions underlying rational and cooperative conversation. They are, thus, abductive pragmatic inferences (Geurts 2010, 33–37). However, the Gricean picture fails because it adopts the speaker's perspective on the conversational situation as the standpoint from which the presence of implicatures is recovered.

Based on a similar line of criticism of the Gricean picture as outlined above, Heck (2006, 28) proposes a corresponding broader notion of (conversational) implicature:

The basic notion [...] I am suggesting, is a weak notion of implicature that does not require one to have any communicative intentions regarding what proposition is implicated: these propositions are ones the audience can conclude the speaker believes on the basis of an inference to the best explanation concerning her specific act of saying what she did; it makes no sense for [the speaker] to have said that *p* specifically, in this context, unless [the speaker] believe[s] that *q*; [the speaker's] saying that *p* therefore implicates that *q*, in this weak sense. Meaning something one does not say is a less fundamental notion: meaning, in this sense – and so implicature, in Grice's sense – is implicating something, in my weak sense, plus having the appropriate communicative intentions.

Hence, conversational implicatures are communicative contents that the audience can (or could) legitimately infer on the basis of what has been said and general assumptions about the rationality and cooperativity of communication (arguably along the lines of Grice's

¹⁹ One might object that *implicature* is a technical notion (see Grice 1989, 24), and that these cases are therefore not genuine counterexamples. Nevertheless, I think once one is familiar with Grice's theory, there is an intuitive tension between its predictions and the scenarios described. Even if the claim that these cases constitute counterexamples is too strong, they can still be taken to highlight phenomena sufficiently continuous with conversational implicatures to warrant modifying Grice's theory to accommodate them.

²⁰ Note that, for the sake of comprehensibility, I have not discussed *Condition 4* in *Reference Letter 1-3*. However, *Condition 4* (Cancellability) is plausibly satisfied for all the relevant propositions in these examples. The claim that *Reference Letter 2* shows that the Gricean picture does not provide (mutually) sufficient conditions for conversational implicature presupposes that the Gricean picture is intended to provide not only necessary but also mutually sufficient conditions. I assume that this is the case. See Neale (1992) for discussion.

Cooperative Principle and conversational maxims). On the basis of Heck's proposal, one could propose the following conception of conversational implicature:

A speaker S, by saying that p, has conversationally implicated that q provided that (*Condition 1*) S is to be presumed to be observing the conversational maxims, or at least the Cooperative Principle; (*IBE*) on the basis of an inference to the best explanation in the given circumstances, the hearer could legitimately infer that S's saying that p would not be consistent with the presumption in *Condition 1* unless S is aware that, or thinks that, q.

This more liberal conception of conversational implicature would make correct predictions in the scenarios above. There would be a conversational implicature in *Reference Letter 1* (namely *that the professor thinks that the student is not suitable for the job*); there would be no obvious conversational implicature in *Reference Letter 2*; and there would be a conversational implicature in *Reference Letter 3* (namely *that the professor thinks that the student is not suitable for the job*).

It should be stressed that on this account, not every possible or plausible inference counts as a conversational implicature. Implicatures are constrained by inference to the best explanation under the assumption that the speaker is cooperative. Only those inferences that best explain the utterance in light of the Cooperative Principle and the maxims count as implicatures.

In the same regard, this alternative conception of conversational implicature would allow advocates of implicature-based accounts to circumvent my criticism of their approach to explaining the communicative effect of metalinguistic usage in unrecognized and contested metalinguistic disputes. First, they can avoid the mentioned general problem, because even if the speakers in such cases of metalinguistic disputes do not intend to convey implicit metalinguistic contents, they can still be taken to conversationally implicate them according to the alternative conception. Second, they can avoid the problem connected to the critical *Condition 3* of the Gricean picture. Even if speakers in such cases of metalinguistic disputes are unaware of the nature of their dispute and thus lack the expectations mentioned in *Condition 3*, they can still be taken to conversationally implicate metalinguistic contents, because their audience could legitimately infer that they believe such contents (*IBE*).

I will not discuss the feasibility of the more liberal conception of conversational implicature, but instead grant the advocate of an implicature-based account of metalinguistic usage that the version presented here, or a similar version, is feasible. However, independently of which conception of conversational implicature the advocate of an implicature-based account invokes, *Condition 4* (Cancellability) applies to both. This is because, on both conceptions,

conversational implicatures, as pragmatically conveyed contents, are cancellable insofar as they are derived from what is said by a speaker together with general assumptions about rational and cooperative conversation. Thus, even when the presence of a conversational implicature is explained along the lines of the more liberal conception, the speaker can cancel it.

In what follows, I argue that, in light of *Condition 4* (Cancellability), the distinction between descriptive and normative metalinguistic disputes places a significant restriction on the explanatory scope of implicature-based accounts, regardless of whether they adopt the Gricean picture or the more liberal conception of conversational implicature.

2.4. METALINGUISTIC DISPUTES AND CANCELLABILITY

If implicature-based accounts treat the implicitly conveyed contents in metalinguistic disputes as conversational implicatures, then these contents must be cancellable (*Condition 4*). Recall that metalinguistic disputes can be either descriptive or normative. Implicature-based accounts must, accordingly, cover two kinds of putative implicatures. Again, consider *Case 2*:

C: “Secretariat is an athlete”

D: “Secretariat is not an athlete”

In a descriptive metalinguistic dispute, C would conversationally implicate that *‘athlete’ is used to include non-human animals*, while D would implicate that *‘athlete’ is not used to include non-human animals*.

In a normative metalinguistic dispute, C would conversationally implicate that *‘athlete’ should be used to include non-human animals*, while D would conversationally implicate that *‘athlete’ should not be used to include non-human animals*.

Consider first the descriptive case. The putative implicatures are not cancellable. C cannot say “Secretariat is an athlete, but *‘athlete’* is not used to include non-human animals” without infelicity or inadmissibility. This follows from the relation between assertion and truth.²¹ By asserting “Secretariat is an athlete” C incurs a commitment to the truth of what is asserted and, thereby, to using the constituent expressions of the asserted sentence in a way that makes it true. Since the truth of the assertion depends on *‘athlete’* being used to include non-human animals, C cannot subsequently deny this usage without retracting or violating that commitment. Hence, the relevant metalinguistic content is not cancellable and, therefore, the implicitly conveyed descriptive content is not a conversational implicature.

²¹ See Pagin and Marsili (2025, section 3).

Note that Mankowitz’s (2021) implicature-based account also suffers from this problem, since it predicts that speakers conversationally implicate descriptive metalinguistic propositions via metalinguistic usage. Mankowitz argues that metalinguistic usage is an instance of “expression focus” and focused expressions are used to convey metalinguistic propositions concerning the “aptness” of using the focused expression to express a non-metalinguistic proposition (2021, 5610–5611). Accordingly, D would conversationally implicate that “‘athlete’ fails to be apt for conveying that Secretariat has the salient property”, where the salient property is “likely to concern being a successful racehorse, a creature proficient at sport, (etc.)” (2021, 5618). Again, D is committed to ‘athlete’ not being apt for conveying the salient property, since the truth of the assertion “Secretariat is not an athlete” depends on that lack of aptness. Hence, D cannot say “Secretariat is not an athlete, but ‘athlete’ is apt for conveying that Secretariat has the salient property” without infelicity or inadmissibility.

Consider the normative case, which is, in contrast, cancellable. A speaker who asserts “Secretariat is an athlete” can coherently add, “but I do not mean that ‘athlete’ should be used to include non-human animals. All I mean is that ‘athlete’ is used that way”, without contradiction, infelicity, or inadmissibility. The reason is that normative metalinguistic claims do not entail corresponding descriptive claims: from a claim about how an expression should be used, no particular claim about how it is used follows. Accordingly, cancelling a normative metalinguistic implicature does not amount to retracting or violating any commitment incurred by the original assertion, unlike in the descriptive case.²²

The considerations in this section show that the contents that speakers express and disagree about in descriptive metalinguistic disputes are not cancellable, whereas the contents they disagree about in normative metalinguistic disputes are cancellable—regardless of whether the Gricean picture or a more liberal conception of conversational implicature is adopted. This puts pressure on implicature-based accounts, since it is unclear why the mechanism underlying metalinguistic usage should involve conversational implicature in normative, but not in descriptive metalinguistic disputes. This restricts the explanatory scope of implicature-based accounts since they would be required to postulate a different explanation of metalinguistic usage in cases of descriptive metalinguistic disputes.

²² Note that both, Odrowąż-Sypniewska (2023, 1023) and Soria-Ruiz (2023, 1030), claim that normative metalinguistic propositions conveyed in metalinguistic disputes are not cancellable, but neither of them provides a substantial explanation. I disagree for the reasons stated.

2.5. TAKING STOCK

My argument in Section 2.2 shows that, given the Gricean picture of (conversational) implicature, speakers can be taken to conversationally implicate metalinguistic propositions only in cases in which they are aware that they are engaged in a metalinguistic dispute. In unrecognized and contested metalinguistic disputes, speakers lack the requisite awareness of the nature of their exchange, which is necessary for conversationally implicating metalinguistic propositions.

Section 2.3 shows that these specific problems for implicature-based accounts could be circumvented by appealing to a more liberal conception of conversational implicature to explain the communicative effects of metalinguistic usage in metalinguistic disputes. On such a conception, implicature-based accounts could arguably also explain unrecognized and contested metalinguistic disputes.

Section 2.4 establishes that, regardless of which of the two conceptions of conversational implicature is adopted, implicitly conveyed descriptive metalinguistic propositions in metalinguistic disputes are not cancellable and are therefore not conversational implicatures. By contrast, implicitly conveyed normative metalinguistic propositions are cancellable.

Taken together, these arguments show that implicature-based accounts have only limited explanatory scope. In the worst case, if the Gricean picture is adopted, they can account only for normative metalinguistic disputes in which speakers are aware of the fact that they are engaged in a metalinguistic dispute. In the best case, if a more liberal conception of conversational implicature is adopted, they can explain cases of normative metalinguistic disputes, but still fail to explain the mechanism underlying metalinguistic usage in descriptive metalinguistic disputes. Implicature-based accounts therefore fail to satisfy desideratum D2, as their restricted explanatory scope precludes a parsimonious explanation of the mechanism underlying metalinguistic usage.

3. A STALNAKERIAN ALTERNATIVE

I take the arguments of the preceding section to show that an alternative explanation of how speakers express their disagreements in metalinguistic disputes is required. In this section, I show how such an alternative could be articulated. Building on Stalnaker's (1978; 1984; 2014) model of conversation and assertion, I first show that Barker's (2002) work on metalinguistic usage of gradable adjectives and Barker's (2013) work on disagreements about taste provide a promising basis for explaining context-based metalinguistic disputes. I then sketch how this basis is extended by recent proposals (Kocurek, Jerzak and Rudolph 2020; Soria-Ruiz 2023)

into a more general account of metalinguistic usage, aimed at explaining metalinguistic disputes in general. I refer to this account as the ‘Stalnakerian alternative’. I conclude the section with an evaluation of the Stalnakerian alternative.

3.1. STALNAKER’S ACCOUNT OF ASSERTION

I introduce Stalnaker’s model of conversation and account of assertion, drawing on Stalnaker’s (1978) initial proposal and its development in later work (2002; 2014). This framework is then adapted in two stages and applied to metalinguistic disputes.

A sentence has a content, i.e. a proposition, which is expressed by asserting the sentence. By expressing propositions, we represent the world as being in a certain way. Stalnaker (1978, 316) thinks of propositions as sets of possible worlds, i.e. possible states of the world. An assertion of ‘Snow is white’ expresses the proposition that *snow is white*. The set which represents this proposition contains all and only those worlds in which snow is white, i.e. worlds at which the sentence is true. Every possible world in this set is in accordance with how an utterance of ‘Snow is white’ represents the actual world. I will use ‘ $\llbracket S \rrbracket$ ’ to denote the content of a sentence, i.e. the set of all possible worlds at which the sentence ‘S’ is true.²³

Conversations do not usually take place in isolation, but in *speech contexts*.²⁴ According to Stalnaker, a central aspect of speech contexts is the background information against which a conversation takes place. Since conversations are social activities, the relevant notion of background information for Stalnaker is based on what speakers accept mutually. Stalnaker proposes to understand a speech context’s background information in terms of its *common ground*:

A proposition is common ground between you and me if we both accept it (for the purposes of the conversation), we both accept that we both accept it, we both accept that we both accept that we both accept it, and so on. (2014, 25)

The notion of common ground is based on the notion of acceptance, in order to be suited to explain the background against which conversations with different purposes happen. Stalnaker (1984, 79–81) has a technical understanding of *acceptance*, departing from our ordinary notion. Stalnaker takes acceptance to be a generic attitude that comprises attitudes like belief, presumption, assumption, etc. To accept something is to “treat it as true for some reason”, or to “act as

²³ As we will see, the framework aiming to explain metalinguistic disputes will introduce different contents of sentences – ‘ $\llbracket S \rrbracket$ ’ should always denote the content of sentence S.

²⁴ A note on terminology. To avoid confusion, I use ‘speech context’ to describe what Stalnaker usually refers to as ‘context’, since I have used ‘context’ in Section 2.2. to describe double index semantics, which is a different semantic framework. I will not discuss the relation between *speech contexts* and *contexts* in detail. However, they have in some respects similar explanatory roles.

if one believed it”. Importantly, Stalnaker adds that acceptance may be “active or passive”, “more or less self-consciously” or “with more or less feeling of commitment”. If the notion of common ground would be based on a narrower notion, like common belief, it could not serve to explain hypothetical conversations, joking around, or other forms of conversation where the background information is something that is not necessarily believed by the interlocutors. For most conversations, we can arguably assume that something that is common knowledge will be common ground. However, speakers can also accept something in the relevant sense that they do not know or believe, or do not accept something they do know or believe.

Importantly, there is a difference between what is actually common ground in a conversation, and what the participants to the conversation take to be common ground, i.e. what they *presuppose* (Stalnaker 2002, 707). Accordingly, if speakers have false beliefs about the common ground, i.e. they do not presuppose the same things, the speech context will be *defective*; if their beliefs about the common ground are true, i.e. they presuppose the same things, the speech context will be *non-defective* (Stalnaker 2002, 717).

We can utilize the way of representing propositions introduced above to represent a speech context’s common ground (or what a speaker presupposes) as a set of possible worlds. Stalnaker (1978, 321) refers to these sets as ‘context-sets’. The context-set C determined by the common ground is, thus, the set containing all and only those possible worlds in which all propositions which are common ground are true. Similarly, the context-sets determined by the individual speaker’s presuppositions are the sets of possible worlds compatible with what is presupposed. More precisely, the common ground (and the individual speaker’s presuppositions) are sets of propositions. Propositions are sets of possible worlds. So, the common ground is a set of sets of possible worlds. The context-set representing the common ground is the intersection of the sets of possible worlds in the common ground. In non-defective speech contexts, the interlocutors’ individual context-sets align with the common ground, in defective speech contexts these sets come apart. For ease of exposition, I will assume non-defective speech contexts and, thus, assume one context-set for a given speech context.

With this way of modelling sentence content and the informational background against which assertions take place, we can understand assertions as attempts to narrow down the context-set by adding propositions to the common ground (Stalnaker 1978, 323). If a speaker makes an assertion, and no interlocutor objects, then possible worlds incompatible with the content of the asserted sentence are eliminated from the context-set. An accepted assertion of a sentence S against a given context-set C can be modelled as the intersection of the context-

set with the content of the asserted sentence, leading to an updated context-set C^* , according to the *assertion rule*:

$$C^* = C \cap \llbracket S \rrbracket$$

Suppose, for illustration, a conversation with the common ground that *Vienna is the capital of Austria*. Hence, we can find worlds w in the context-set determined by this common ground which may differ in various aspects, but it is the case in all of them that Vienna is the capital of Austria (for ease of exposition, let us consider fragments of context-sets):

$$C = \{w_1, w_2, w_3, w_4, w_5\}$$

Suppose further that snow is white in w_2 and w_3 , but not in w_1 , w_4 and w_5 . An assertion of ‘Snow is white’, if accepted, would remove all worlds in C in which it is not the case that snow is white. Thus, the remaining worlds in the updated context-set C^* are worlds in which Vienna is the capital of Austria *and* snow is white:

$$C^* = C \cap \llbracket \text{Snow is white} \rrbracket = \{w_2, w_3\}$$

With Stalnaker’s model of conversation in place, we can now apply it to cases of metalinguistic usage, beginning with Barker’s account of metalinguistic usage of gradable adjectives.

3.2. BARKER ON METALINGUISTIC DISPUTES

As already mentioned in Section 1.1., Barker (2002) distinguishes between *descriptive* and *metalinguistic* usage of gradable adjectives. We will now see how Stalnaker’s account of assertion can be used to model this distinction, as suggested by Barker (2002; 2013).²⁵

Gradable adjectives, like ‘tall’, are context dependent (Kennedy 2007, 7). What it means to call something ‘tall’ depends on a prevailing, i.e. contextually supplied, standard of tallness. One option to integrate standards in Stalnaker’s framework is to take the said standards as parts of the speech context. On the assumption that such standards can be common ground, such standards are part of the information encoded in the context-set underlying a conversation.

Barker (2002, 6) takes worlds in a context-set to encode not only non-linguistic facts, but also other information, like standards for gradable adjectives. On this view, a single parameter

²⁵ Note that Barker offers dynamic semantics for sentences containing gradable adjectives. In this framework, sentences are assigned context update functions as their denotations. I will not adopt this framework but develop Barker’s analysis of descriptive and metalinguistic usage in a static semantic framework. Accordingly, sentences are not assigned update functions, but static contents as their denotations (see Rothschild and Yalcin (2017, 27) for a discussion of these frameworks).

in the context-set encodes both non-linguistic information and information relevant for the interpretation of gradable adjectives. I will not adopt this conception. Instead, following Barker's later work (2013, 245–246), we can separate these roles by distinguishing between worlds, encoding non-linguistic facts, and *discourses*, encoding relevant information about speech contexts, in our case standards for gradable adjectives.²⁶ All the world-discourse pairs in a speech context's context-set are in accordance with how the interlocutors take the world to be and how they take the speech context to be with respect to the relevant standards.

Accordingly, in the adopted framework, context-sets do not contain worlds, but world-discourse pairs:

$$C' = \{\langle w_1, d_1 \rangle, \langle w_1, d_2 \rangle, \langle w_2, d_1 \rangle, \langle w_2, d_2 \rangle, \dots\}$$

In the modified framework, sentence contents are sets of world-discourse pairs, not sets of worlds. An utterance of 'Feynman is tall' is true at a pair $\langle w, d \rangle$ iff Feynman's height in w is such that Feynman counts as tall according to the standard of tallness specified by d . Accordingly, the content of 'Feynman is tall' is:

$$\llbracket \text{Feynman is tall} \rrbracket = \{\langle w, d \rangle : \text{Feynman's height at } w \geq \text{standard of tallness according to } d\}$$

In the adopted framework, assertions still lead to updated context-sets, following our assertion rule:

$$C'^* = C' \cap \llbracket S \rrbracket$$

It follows from this rule that an assertion of a sentence which has a fixed content will have different significance or import, depending on the status of the context-set.

In a speech context in which the prevailing standard of tallness is common ground and Feynman's height is not, 'tall' will be used *descriptively* (Barker 2002, 8). In such circumstances, the discourses in the world-discourse pairs in the context-set do not vary regarding the standard of tallness they specify. Suppose that the standard is 180cm. Hence, asserting 'Feynman is tall', if accepted, leads to an updated context-set which contains only world-discourse pairs with worlds in which Feynman is 180cm or taller, i.e. where Feynman satisfies the standard.

²⁶ Committing to this separation now will prove fruitful later, when modelling metalinguistic usage of nouns like 'athlete'.

For illustration of our case of descriptive usage, we can keep the discourses in the context-set fixed, as the prevailing standard of tallness is common ground: d_{180} .²⁷ Suppose that in

w_1 : Feynman is 172cm.

w_2 : Feynman is 176cm.

w_3 : Feynman is 180cm.

w_4 : Feynman is 183cm.

Consider this fragment of the context-set of our scenario:

$$C'_D = \{\langle w_1, d_{180} \rangle, \langle w_2, d_{180} \rangle, \langle w_3, d_{180} \rangle, \langle w_4, d_{180} \rangle\}$$

After an accepted assertion of 'Feynman is tall', the updated fragment of the context-set would be:

$$C'^*_D = C'_D \cap \llbracket \text{Feynman is tall} \rrbracket = \{\langle w_3, d_{180} \rangle, \langle w_4, d_{180} \rangle\}$$

In descriptive usage, therefore, an assertion of the sentence conveys information about the world. Accepting an assertion of 'Feynman is tall' in a conversation in which a standard of tallness is common ground rules out all world-discourse pairs with worlds in which Feynman does not meet the standard that is in place.

In a speech context where Feynman's height is common ground and the prevailing standard of tallness is not, 'tall' will be used *metalinguistically* (Barker 2002, 9). In such circumstances, the worlds in the world-discourse pairs in the context-set do not vary regarding Feynman's height. Suppose that Feynman is 180cm. Asserting 'Feynman is tall', if accepted, leads to an updated context-set in which only those pairs remain whose discourse parameter specifies a standard of tallness compatible with classifying Feynman as tall. If no one objects to the utterance in the said circumstances, it would be inconsistent to refuse to apply 'tall' to someone with Feynman's height or taller. Note that this would determine a partial standard of tallness in this speech context, since it would not yet be settled if someone shorter than Feynman would be considered tall.

²⁷ This is a notational simplification indicating that the discourse component of each world-discourse pair in the context-set specifies the same standard of tallness. This does not imply that discourse parameters are uniform in all respects. Discourses may still vary with respect to other dimensions, such as the standards they specify for other adjectives, e.g. the standard of expensiveness.

For illustration of our case of metalinguistic usage, we can keep the worlds in the context-set fixed, as Feynman's height (180cm) is common ground: w_{180} .²⁸ Suppose that according to

d_5 : The standard of tallness is 178cm.

d_6 : The standard of tallness is 179cm.

d_7 : The standard of tallness is 181cm.

d_8 : The standard of tallness is 183cm.

Consider this fragment of the context-set of our scenario:

$$C'_M = \{\langle w_{180}, d_5 \rangle, \langle w_{180}, d_6 \rangle, \langle w_{180}, d_7 \rangle, \langle w_{180}, d_8 \rangle\}$$

Suppose that this is the common ground against which *Case 1* takes place:

A: "Feynman is tall."

B: "Feynman is not tall."

If A's assertion were accepted, the updated fragment of the context-set would be:

$$C'_{MA}^* = C'_M \cap \llbracket \text{Feynman is tall} \rrbracket = \{\langle w_{180}, d_5 \rangle, \langle w_{180}, d_6 \rangle\}$$

In metalinguistic usage, an assertion of the sentence conveys information about the prevailing standard of tallness. Accepting an assertion of 'Feynman is tall' in a conversation in which Feynman's height is common ground would rule out all world-discourse pairs with discourses specifying a standard of tallness which is not compatible with classifying Feynman as tall.

If B's assertion were accepted, it would remove any world-discourse pair compatible with Feynman being tall from the context-set:

$$\llbracket \text{Feynman is not tall} \rrbracket = \{\langle w, d \rangle : \text{Feynman's height at } w < \text{standard of tallness according to } d\}.$$

Accordingly, the updated fragment of the context-set after B's assertion would be:

$$C'_{MB}^* = C'_M \cap \llbracket \text{Feynman is not tall} \rrbracket = \{\langle w_{180}, d_7 \rangle, \langle w_{180}, d_8 \rangle\}$$

The potential updates of A and B's assertion would partition C_M into disjoint²⁹ sets, distinguished by the respective discourses within the pairs constituting the sets. This neatly fits the

²⁸ Again, this is a notational simplification, complementary to the simplification in the scenario for descriptive usage. See footnote 27.

²⁹ $C_{MA}^* \cap C_{MB}^* = \emptyset$.

verdict that A and B express a disagreement not about the relevant facts, which are held fixed across the context-set, but about the standard of tallness.

While Barker’s account is limited to gradable adjectives, metalinguistic disputes arise across a wider range of expressions. Recent proposals aim to modify this framework accordingly. I now sketch such a modification.

3.3. THE STALNAKERIAN ALTERNATIVE

Building on proposals by Kocurek, Jerzak and Rudolph (2020), Soria-Ruiz (2023), and MacFarlane (forthcoming), we can further adapt Stalnaker’s model of communication to account for metalinguistic usage in general. To this end, we modify the discourse parameter in sentence contents and context-sets, thereby generalizing the framework beyond gradable adjectives.

Kocurek, Jerzak and Rudolph (2020, 13) introduce context-sets as sets of world-*hyperconvention* pairs; Soria-Ruiz (2023, 1035) introduces context-sets as sets of world-*interpretation* pairs; MacFarlane (forthcoming) introduces context-sets as sets of world-*assignment* pairs.³⁰ This additional parameter has the status of a function specifying possible-world intensions of expressions. Despite differences in how this parameter is understood by these authors—whether as encoding speakers’ plans for using expressions, linguistic conventions or rules, or more general linguistic commitments—its role remains the same.

I will adapt my conception of context-sets accordingly, replacing discourses in the world-discourse pairs with interpretations:³¹

$$C'' = \{\langle w_1, i_1 \rangle, \langle w_1, i_2 \rangle, \langle w_2, i_1 \rangle, \langle w_2, i_2 \rangle, \dots\}$$

All the world-interpretation pairs in a speech context’s context-set are in accordance with how the interlocutors take the world and the interpretation of expressions to be.

In the modified framework, sentence contents are sets of world-interpretation pairs, not sets of worlds or world-discourse pairs. An utterance of ‘Secretariat is an athlete’ is true at a pair $\langle w, i \rangle$ iff Secretariat is an athlete at w according to the interpretation i , i.e. iff Secretariat at w is in the extension of ‘athlete’ as specified by i . Accordingly, the content of ‘Secretariat is an athlete’ is:³²

³⁰ Assignments, according to MacFarlane (forthcoming), represent a nonfactual and decisional aspect of language use, i.e. how speakers plan to use expressions.

³¹ I adopt Soria-Ruiz’s terminology, but I remain neutral regarding the specific proposals of the authors mentioned.

³² We would give a parallel description of the content of a sentence containing a gradable adjective.

$$\llbracket \text{Secretariat is an athlete} \rrbracket = \{\langle w, i \rangle : \text{Secretariat counts as an athlete at } w \text{ according to } i\}$$

With this framework in place, descriptive and metalinguistic usage of ‘athlete’ can be modelled analogously to descriptive and metalinguistic usage of ‘tall’, as explained above. To keep things brief, I will only sketch the application of metalinguistic usage to our metalinguistic dispute in *Case 2*:

C: “Secretariat is an athlete.”

D: “Secretariat is not an athlete.”

The interlocutors C and D have common knowledge of the relevant facts concerning Secretariat. So, again, the worlds in the pairs of the context-set do not vary in this respect: w_{SEC} . Suppose that according to:

i_{INCL1} : athletes are highly skilled horses with dedication to training and competition.

i_{INCL2} : athletes are highly skilled non-human and human animals with dedication to training and competition.

i_{EXCL1} : athletes are highly skilled bipeds with dedication to training and competition.

i_{EXCL2} : athletes are highly skilled humans with dedication to training and competition.

Again, consider a fragment of the context-set of our scenario:

$$C''_M = \{\langle w_{\text{SEC}}, i_{\text{INCL1}} \rangle, \langle w_{\text{SEC}}, i_{\text{INCL2}} \rangle, \langle w_{\text{SEC}}, i_{\text{EXCL1}} \rangle, \langle w_{\text{SEC}}, i_{\text{EXCL2}} \rangle\}$$

If C’s assertion were accepted, the updated fragment of the context-set would be:

$$C''_{MC}^* = C''_M \cap \llbracket \text{Secretariat is an athlete} \rrbracket = \{\langle w_{\text{SEC}}, i_{\text{INCL1}} \rangle, \langle w_{\text{SEC}}, i_{\text{INCL2}} \rangle\}$$

If D’s assertion were accepted, it would remove any world-interpretation pairs compatible with Secretariat being an athlete from the context-set:

$$\llbracket \text{Secretariat is not an athlete} \rrbracket = \{\langle w, i \rangle : \text{Secretariat does not count as an athlete at } w \text{ according to } i\}$$

Accordingly, the updated fragment of the context-set after D’s assertion would be:

$$C''_{MD}^* = C''_M \cap \llbracket \text{Secretariat is not an athlete} \rrbracket = \{\langle w_{\text{SEC}}, i_{\text{EXCL1}} \rangle, \langle w_{\text{SEC}}, i_{\text{EXCL2}} \rangle\}$$

The potential updates of C and D’s assertion would partition C''_M into disjoint sets, distinguished by the interpretations within the world-interpretation pairs. This neatly fits the verdict that C and D express a disagreement not about the relevant facts, which are held fixed across the context-set, but about how ‘athlete’ is to be interpreted.

I have included interpretations that specify somewhat unusual intensions of 'athlete', namely i_{INCL1} and i_{EXCL1} . This is to illustrate that, similarly to metalinguistic usage in Barker's framework, which allowed to determine only partial standards of tallness, metalinguistic usage in the present framework does not determine a precise intension of 'athlete'. Rather, it serves to rule out a certain class of interpretations, i.e. interpretations according to which 'athlete' does not include entities with properties similar to Secretariat in w_{SEC} (or vice versa).

On the Stalnakerian alternative, the significance or specific import of assertions is explained by the assertion rule and features of speech contexts, i.e. the context-set determined by a speech context's common ground. Accordingly, speakers engaged in metalinguistic disputes express their disagreements by virtue of the contents of their assertions. Assertions in which an expression is employed in competing metalinguistic usages are incompatible attempts to update the common ground of the conversation.

3.4. EVALUATION

Whether the Stalnakerian alternative provides a satisfactory explanation of metalinguistic disputes depends on whether it meets the proposed desiderata. (D1) it should draw on established semantic or pragmatic theories; (D2) it should be parsimonious, i.e. capable of accounting for a wide range of metalinguistic usages across disputes that vary along multiple dimensions.

With respect to D1, the present framework departs from standard semantic assumptions by relocating the interpretation of expressions, which is usually treated pre-semantically, to part of semantic contents. On the Stalnakerian alternative, contents are sets of world-interpretation pairs, so truth depends not only on the state of the world but also on how expressions are interpreted, where interpretation is no longer held fixed but treated as a parameter that can vary. As a result, semantic content becomes comparatively schematic: it no longer fully determines what expressions apply to, but rather what expressions apply to varies with interpretation. In this framework, the knowledge described by the semantic theory that competent speakers rely on in communication does not consist in knowledge of semantic content (or meaning) but must belong to broader non-semantic knowledge. On the Stalnakerian alternative, speakers still manage to communicate successfully because the fact that competent speakers of the same language are communicating can be taken as part of the common ground and, thus, impose strong constraints on the interpretation parameter of the context-set. Competent speakers operate with a pre-structured range of admissible interpretations prior to conversation. This rules out a vast range of interpretations (for example, interpretations according to which 'athlete' applies to plants), while leaving open those dimensions along which metalinguistic disputes arguably

arise (for instance, whether ‘athlete’ applies only to humans or also to certain non-human animals).

In this way, the Stalnakerian alternative draws directly on Stalnaker’s account of assertion and common ground as an established pragmatic theory, while departing from standard semantic assumptions. Whether this departure is acceptable depends on broader theoretical considerations that go beyond the scope of this work. However, for the purposes of the present inquiry, it will largely depend on how well the framework satisfies D2. In this respect, it should be added that the modification of sentence content also has independent motivation. For example, Kocurek, Jerzak and Rudolph (2020) appeal to a framework of this kind in order to account for the existence of “c-monsters”. Additionally, they think that a framework like the Stalnakerian alternative provides a more adequate picture of communication in natural languages, since it accommodates the fact that many expressions lack sharp boundaries and fully determined meanings or rules of application (2020, 24).³³ For similar reasons, MacFarlane (forthcoming) proposes adopting such a picture of conversation.

By comparison, implicature-based accounts fully satisfy D1, as they preserve standard semantic assumptions and rely on established pragmatic theory.³⁴ In this respect, they may appear theoretically more conservative than the Stalnakerian alternative. However, this advantage is limited, as argued in Section 2.

With respect to D2, recall that the Stalnakerian alternative should account for metalinguistic disputes varying along several dimensions. First, disputes may vary with respect to the degree of speaker awareness: speakers may be aware that they are engaged in a metalinguistic dispute, or they may fail to recognize, or even contest, that this is the nature of their exchange. Second, metalinguistic disputes may be descriptive or normative. Third, they may be context-based, as in *Case 1*, or meaning-based, as in *Case 2*.

First, how does the Stalnakerian alternative account for metalinguistic disputes that vary in speaker awareness? Recall that Plunkett and Sundell (2021) maintain that speakers do express disagreements about the usage of expressions via metalinguistic usage independently of their awareness of the nature of their dispute. On the Stalnakerian alternative, metalinguistic usage is an instance of an ordinary assertion of a sentence with a fixed content, governed by the assertion rule. The potential metalinguistic import of a given assertion depends on the common

³³ It follows that, in most conversations, the import of assertions will be neither purely descriptive nor purely metalinguistic, but mixed (see Barker 2002, 9–10). This is because we would usually assume that interlocutors have mutual uncertainty about both, what the world is like and about their linguistic commitments. In such cases, assertions will add information about the world and about language use to the common ground.

³⁴ However, this is arguably weakened if a more liberal conception of implicature is adopted.

ground, more specifically the context-set against which the sentence is asserted. The key point is that the assertion rule applies, and sentence contents are in place, independently of speaker awareness. Moreover, speakers can be taken to operate with a restricted but open range of interpretations prior to conversation. Thus, assertions made in a speech context in which specific facts are common ground will have metalinguistic import, independently of whether the speakers recognize, or contest, that they are engaged in a metalinguistic dispute.

Second, how does the Stalnakerian alternative account for descriptive and normative metalinguistic disputes? Barker (2002; 2013) applies the explanation of metalinguistic disputes to what we would consider descriptive metalinguistic disputes.³⁵ Kocurek, Jerzak and Rudolph (2020), on the other hand, apply the Stalnakerian alternative to normative, but not explicitly to descriptive metalinguistic disputes. MacFarlane (forthcoming) also focuses on normative metalinguistic disputes. Soria-Ruiz (2023, 1036–1037) briefly mentions that, due to the “normative status” of common ground, updates of the context-set via metalinguistic usage amount to normative claims about usage of expressions. On the other hand, Soria-Ruiz holds that descriptive claims about usage of expressions amount to updates of the factual component of context-sets, which would amount to descriptive, not metalinguistic usage.³⁶

At this point, the explanatory strategy of a proponent of the Stalnakerian alternative can be to remain neutral regarding whether the attempted updates of context-sets in speech contexts of metalinguistic disputes are explicitly descriptive or normative. It is sufficient that the proposed framework accounts for the significance and import of assertions under metalinguistic usage. The question whether the disagreement expressed by such incompatible attempts to update the context-set is descriptive or normative can be settled by considerations external to the framework, such as additional background information or plausible assumptions about the conversation, as described by the diagnostic features for normative metalinguistic disputes offered by Plunkett (2013, 847). By comparison, a similar explanatory strategy would be invoked by proponents of implicature-based accounts, since the exact content of implicatures would likewise be determined by additional features of or assumptions about the conversational context.

However, one of the diagnostic features mentioned by Plunkett deserves special attention, if this explanatory strategy is pursued. Plunkett holds that it is good evidence that a

³⁵ See Barker (2013, 247). In the scenario analyzed by Barker, someone asks “What counts as tall around here?”, and two interlocutors disagree about whether John is tall. Plunkett and Sundell (2013, 14) analyze this as a *descriptive* metalinguistic dispute about “which of two characterizations of the shared conversational context is most accurate”.

³⁶ This way of explaining descriptive metalinguistic disputes seems to rest on the assumption that worlds encode such information about language use. One might think this is problematic, because it is not clear that worlds encode such facts (see MacFarlane (forthcoming, 156)).

metalinguistic dispute is normative if “speakers persist in their dispute even when they agree on the facts about a term’s current meaning or current use” (2013, 847). At first sight, one might object that exactly such cases would be problematic for the Stalnakerian alternative’s strategy of accounting for normative metalinguistic disputes. If the speakers agree on a fact about the current usage or meaning of an expression, then it seems that the range of interpretations in the context-set would be too restricted to allow for metalinguistic usage, since the interlocutors are settled on specific interpretations. A proponent of the Stalnakerian alternative can still hold that the fact that speakers agree on something does not entail that it is also common ground, because their conversation indicates that the speakers do not *accept* it (in Stalnaker’s technical sense). So, if speakers express a disagreement about how an expression should be used, the purpose of their conversation is such that the common ground does not contain information about current usage. Hence, variation across interpretations in the context-set of such disputes remains possible and, therefore, metalinguistic usage too.

It should be emphasized that, in general, whether the Stalnakerian alternative can account for metalinguistic disputes across varying degrees of speaker awareness, as well as descriptive and normative cases by means of the explanatory strategy outlined above, hinges on the feasibility of ascribing suitably structured common grounds (and corresponding context-sets) to the speech contexts in question. In particular, it is assumed that we can plausibly model the conversational background in such a way that it both reflects the relevant shared factual information of the interlocutors and leaves open the dimensions along which metalinguistic disagreement arises. If this assumption cannot be met in certain cases, the explanatory scope of the Stalnakerian alternative would be limited. However, Stalnaker’s (1984, 79–81) specific understanding of acceptance, on which common ground is modelled, suggests that such ascriptions are feasible. Since acceptance, in Stalnaker’s sense, seems not to require a strong form of introspection, awareness, or recognition on the part of the speakers, it allows us to ascribe suitable common grounds even in cases where interlocutors are unaware of, or mistaken about, the nature of their disagreement.

Third, how does the Stalnakerian alternative account for context-based and meaning-based metalinguistic disputes (*Case 1* vs. *Case 2*)? It does so by treating both as instances of the same underlying mechanism. In metalinguistic usage, speakers use assertions to express linguistic commitments about the intensions of the expressions used. However, expressions differ with respect to how their intensions are determined. Expressions like ‘tall’ have characters that can determine different intensions depending on the context of use, whereas expressions like ‘athlete’ have characters that determine constant intensions across contexts. The Stalnakerian

alternative seems to be indifferent to the distinction between context dependent and context independent language. This raises the question whether it runs together context-based and meaning-based disputes. However, it preserves this distinction implicitly. When speakers assert sentences containing expressions like ‘tall’, the linguistic commitments they express can be taken to concern given standards, since the standard affects the intension of that expression in that (speech) context. By contrast, when speakers assert sentences containing expressions like ‘athlete’, the linguistic commitments they express can be taken to concern the character of the expression, since in this case the character itself determines a constant intension. This is how the interpretation parameter introduced by the Stalnakerian alternative can be treated as compatible with different verdicts about the subject (standard/context vs. meaning) of a metalinguistic dispute, depending on which type of expression is being used metalinguistically.

The contrast between the Stalnakerian alternative and implicature-based accounts is decisive with respect to D2. As argued in Section 2, even under a liberal conception of conversational implicature, implicature-based accounts struggle to accommodate descriptive metalinguistic disputes. By contrast, the Stalnakerian alternative can be taken to provide a unified framework able to account for both descriptive and normative disputes, as well as for cases that vary in speaker awareness. In this respect, it offers the basis for a parsimonious explanation of how speakers express their disagreements in metalinguistic disputes, and satisfies D2.

Finally, I want to highlight one central respect in which adopting the Stalnakerian alternative would be in tension with Plunkett and Sundell’s original characterization of metalinguistic disputes. As a central motivation for their theory, Plunkett and Sundell maintain that speakers engaged in metalinguistic disputes express compatible contents via competing metalinguistic usages and thereby implicitly express a metalinguistic disagreement (2013, 12). However, it follows from the conception of sentence content adopted by the Stalnakerian alternative that speakers do express incompatible contents through their assertions via competing metalinguistic usages.³⁷ In this respect, it would remain to clarify the implications of adopting the Stalnakerian alternative for Plunkett and Sundell’s specific theory of metalinguistic disputes.

³⁷ For instance, the speakers in *Case 2* express incompatible contents because the contents of ‘Secretariat is an athlete’ and ‘Secretariat is not an athlete’ are complementary relative to the set of all world-interpretation pairs.

4. CONCLUSION

I have argued that, if we take Plunkett and Sundell's theory of metalinguistic disputes at face value, we face a difficult explanatory issue, namely, to explain how speakers express their disagreements in such disputes via metalinguistic usage. The very nature of metalinguistic disputes and the varying conditions under which they occur make it challenging to apply established theories.

The first approach considered in this thesis attempts to answer this question in terms of conversational implicature. According to this view, speakers engaged in metalinguistic disputes implicate conflicting metalinguistic propositions. I have argued that neither a standard Gricean conception of implicature nor a more liberal conception is suitable for this purpose.

By contrast, the Stalnakerian alternative offers a more promising account. Treating metalinguistic usage as the import of ordinary assertions made in specific speech contexts allows us to better accommodate the varying degrees of speaker awareness under which such disputes occur. However, this account is not without its costs. Most notably, it departs from standard semantic assumptions by allowing sentence content to encode not only information about the world, but also information about expression usage. Whether this departure is ultimately acceptable depends on broader theoretical considerations that go beyond the scope of this thesis.

Finally, I have left open how adopting the Stalnakerian alternative bears on Plunkett and Sundell's original theory. Implicature-based accounts initially appear to be a natural fit with their characterization of metalinguistic disputes, in particular the idea that speakers express implicit disagreements by asserting compatible contents. By contrast, the Stalnakerian alternative implies that speakers assert incompatible contents in such disputes. These issues highlight some of the questions that remain to be addressed in future work.

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