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Nondescriptive Negation for Normative Sentences

Andrew Alwood

aalwood@vcu.edu

**Abstract** Frege-Geach worries about embedding and composition have plagued metaethical theories like emotivism, prescriptivism and expressivism. The sharpened point of such criticism has come to focus on whether negation and inconsistency have to be understood in descriptivist terms. Because they reject descriptivism, these theories must offer a non-standard account of the meanings of ethical and normative sentences as well as related semantic facts, such as why certain sentences are inconsistent with each other. This paper fills out such a solution to the negation problems, following some of the original emotivist ideas about the interplay of interests in conversation. We communicate both to share information and coordinate our actions, and we use distinctively normative language like deontic ‘must’ and ‘may’ to negotiate what people are to do. The kinds of disagreement involved in such negotiation can illuminate the issues with negation and inconsistency. This paper outlines a dynamic semantic system in which these ideas can bear fruit, developing the scorekeeping model of conversation. The result is clarification about what Frege-Geach worries can mean for nondescriptive semantics.

If the language of ethics functions to do something *other* than describe how the world is, then what does such language mean? Emotivists, prescriptivists, and expressivists of different stripes have tried to characterize what *else* the language of ethics does, if not to describe reality. These attempts have gone in different directions. Stevenson’s emotivism said that such language has emotive meaning, Hare’s prescriptivism said it involves acts of telling someone what to do, and expressivists have said that normative language expresses noncognitive states of mind such as plans.[[1]](#footnote-1) The project they share in common is to articulate some kind of nondescriptive meaning: these are different strands of *nondescriptivism*.[[2]](#footnote-2)

However, despite the enduring credibility given to nondescriptive views in metaethics, every such theory faces foundational challenges that have been repeatedly raised for decades under the label “The Frege-Geach Problem”. An atomic normative sentence like (1) can occur in other kinds of sentential constructions to which it appears to bear exactly the semantic relations it would if it were an ordinary descriptive sentence. The particular case of negation is simple yet instructive. Sentences (1) and (2) below are inconsistent, but how is that to be explained if the meaning of (1) is nondescriptive? What could it mean to negate a noncognitive attitude, an act of telling someone what to do, or emotive meaning?

(1) John must keep his promise.

(2) It is not the case that John must keep his promise.

In section 1 I’ll set out the problems with negation in more detail and then, in the rest of the paper, I’ll explain how a version of nondescriptivism can solve them. My overall argument has two parts. One is that the original guiding ideas in emotivism are best upheld with a nonstandard semantic story about the meanings of normative sentences. Another is to show how a certain kind of dynamic semantic system can make good on these ideas.

I’ll introduce what I will call “the speech-act view” in section 2 and then go into details in sections 3 and 4. This view claims that the conventional meanings of normative sentences are identified with their communicative potential, i.e. the conversational actions they are suited for. It's *what you do* with the words that make for distinctively normative meanings, not *what they are about*, and what you do is something other than describing. One of the interesting commitments of the speech-act view is the viability of a notion of speech-act negation, and this will be a major focus in what follows.

# Section 1: The Negation Problem for Nondescriptivism

(1) John must keep his promise.

(2) It is not the case that John must keep his promise.

(3) John must not keep his promise.

The negation problem for nondescriptivism stems from the need to explain *external* negation. (2) and (3) are relatively simple types of complex sentences which demonstrate two ways that negation can be added to (1). (2) is the external negation of (1) because its structure is *Not[Must(p)]*, whereas (3) is the internal negation of (1), because its structure is *Must[Not(p)]*. This difference in structure is clearly related to a difference in meaning, and it seems obvious that (1) conflicts with each of (2) and (3), yet for different reasons.

A descriptivist can say that (1) and (2) are inconsistent because they have incompatible truth-conditions, or because they express contradictory propositions. But a nondescriptivist seems required to say something else.[[3]](#footnote-3) But what else is there to say? Is there any other way of understanding negation?

First and foremost, the negation problem is the need to explain what sentences (1) – (3) mean and why they bear the relations of semantic conflict to each other that they in fact do. This explanation also needs to complement the principle of compositionality – the meaning of a whole sentence depends on the meanings and arrangement of its parts – and therefore account for sentences’ internal compositional structure. However, there are other facets of the problem best brought out by criticizing attempts to do this. I’ll do this briefly since these issues have been sufficiently explored in detail by other authors.

Suppose that we account for the meaning of (1) like an expressivist would, by saying that it expresses the noncognitive attitude that is possessed by someone who mentally accepts the sentence, e.g. the attitude of planning for John to keep his promise.[[4]](#footnote-4) So, if John mentally accepts (1) he thereby plans to keep his promise. Along these lines, (3) would express planning for John *not* to keep his promise. If John mentally accepts (3) he thereby plans *not* to keep his promise. But this doesn’t help with (2): mentally accepting (2) doesn’t commit John to any particular plan. What now? Here are three possible routes expressivists might take:

*Option A:* *(2) expresses the lack of a plan.* Perhaps the negation in (2) helps the sentence to express the *absence* of a plan for what John is to do with respect to promising. While a nice thought initially, this cannot be right. The lack of a plan is compatible with not forming any judgment whatsoever about whether John is to keep his promise. One needn’t even consider the issue to lack a plan for what to do if John in his circumstances. Thus, option A can quickly be dismissed. There is some positive state of mind that distinguishes acceptance of (2), but it isn’t a plan for what John is to do. This suggests two other ways of addressing the problem, which run into similar challenges.

*Option B: (2) expresses a different kind of attitude than (1).[[5]](#footnote-5)* Perhaps whereas (1) expresses a plan, (2) expresses a different kind of noncognitive attitude, e.g. *tolerating* John’s not keeping his promise. This does sound right. But then why are certain combinations of planning and tolerating incoherent, if they’re different kinds of attitudes? In particular, what is it about planning for John to do X and also tolerating him not doing X that makes for an inconsistent state of mind? Tolerating cannot simply be defined in terms of externally negating planning, if it is to help explain what external negation means in the first place. Is the inconsistency of that state of mind just a brute, ad hoc stipulation?

*Option C: (2) expresses a complex attitude.[[6]](#footnote-6)* Perhaps instead (2) expresses an attitude directed at the attitude expressed by (1), e.g., (2) expresses *disagreeing* withplanning for John to keep his promise. On this route, the presence of external negation adds a layer of complexity to the attitude expressed by the whole sentence, making it a higher-order attitude. This also seems to have something right about it. But what exactly is this higher-order attitude and, again, what is it about the attitudes of planning for X and disagreeing-with-planning for X that makes their combination incoherent? The same kind of worry arises for option C as did for option B: is the inconsistency of this combined state of mind just a brute, ad hoc stipulation?

There’s also another charge against options B and C. In explaining when and why an inconsistency relation holds between the respective attitudes, the expressivist appears to need to postulate a different kind of inconsistency relation, something in addition to what is already needed for ordinary descriptivist semantics and logic. Descriptive inconsistency is exemplified by the paradigm of conflicting beliefs, which are one kind of attitude taken towards incompatible propositional objects. But on options B and C, there needs to be a relation of semantic conflict holding between distinct types of attitude toward one and the same object: John’s keeping his promise. This raises some questions and worries for these expressivist strategies.

One worry here is simply what *is* this inconsistency relation and why does it hold between distinct attitudes that are apparently logically unrelated. Another worry is whether it is dialectically respectable for an expressivist to appeal to such explanatory resources, if descriptivists don’t need to posit such semantic relations. Are there even any uncontroversial examples of such things? On the basis of these worries and others, Schroeder 2008a argues that all these expressivist strategies will fail. Schroeder claims that expressivists who wish to make headway with the negation problem “are going to have to appeal to incoherence among attitudes that is of the very same type as the incoherence involved in both believing that p and also believing that ~p” (Schroeder 2008b, 710). To label the problems, he calls the conflict between beliefs with contradictory contents *A-type inconsistency*, and accuses expressivists of additionally requiring a suspect notion of *B-type inconsistency* which holds between attitudes of different types taken towards one content.

With that brief tour, we can see more particularly what questions and problems are involved with the negation problems for expressivism. Since expressivists take a ‘mind-first’ approach to normative semantics – meanings are explained in terms of which attitudes are expressed – their problems with negation come in at the level of psychology. But these are just particular instances of more general problems which apparently plague any version of nondescriptivism.

Any nondescriptivist has problems with negation on account of the claim that a normative sentence like (1) is not an ordinary descriptive sentence and thus also that combining it with (2) does not produce ordinary descriptive conflict. I’ll demonstrate this by developing some ideas from Stevenson’s emotivist theory of normative language into a prescriptivist-friendly, ‘language-first’ account of normative meanings. First, I’ll show how the same problems with negation arise for this view (section 2.2), and then I’ll show how a modernized development of Stevenson’s ideas can solve them (section 3). Then, I’ll explain in more detail what kind of semantic theory can exploit this solution (section 4), and how this theory compares with competitors in the contemporary debate over the prospects of nondescriptivism (section 6).

# Section 2: Introducing the Speech-Act View

*2.1: Emotivist beginnings*

C. L. Stevenson’s landmark article “The emotive meaning of ethical terms” argued that ‘good’ has a special kind of meaning such that it tends to be used to influence an audience’s noncognitive attitudes: “the word “good” has a pleasing emotive meaning which fits it especially for the dynamic use of suggesting favourable interest” (452). This dynamic use of language is contrasted with the descriptive use of language on which a speaker reports information. When a sentence like ‘This is good’ is used dynamically, it has a “suggestive force” that attempts to achieve the purpose of “the redirection of interest” (454).

Note that Stevenson’s distinction between the dynamic and descriptive uses of language is not itself sufficient to motivate what we would now call dynamic semantics. ‘Dynamic’ here can mislead. We would do better to substitute ‘performative’ or simply ‘nondescriptive’ where Stevenson says ‘dynamic’.[[7]](#footnote-7) His point is that “the major use” of ethical terms

“is not to indicate facts but to *create an influence*. Instead of merely describing people’s interests they *change* or *intensify* them. They *recommend* an interest in an object, rather than state that the interest already exists. … When you tell a man he oughtn’t to steal…your ethical judgment has a quasi-imperative force which, operating through suggestion, and intensified by your tone of voice, readily permits you to begin to *influence*, to *modify*, his interests” (448, emphasis in original).

I’m going to explain how a semantic theory with contemporary credibility can make good on Stevenson’s claims. But it is important to correct a misleading impression that Stevenson leaves us with. R. M. Hare rightfully pointed out that *telling* someone to do something and *getting* him to do it are different matters.[[8]](#footnote-8) Stevenson’s remarks seem to blur the distinction between the illocutionary act of directing someone to act one way or another and the perlocutionary act of actually influencing him; the latter requires the addressee to agree with what you’ve told him to do and also to intend to do it. Still, the two acts are closely related: the illocutionary act of telling someone what to do cannot be understood as totally divorced from the purpose of influencing behavior, even if success in performing the illocutionary act does not depend on actually getting anyone to behave as directed. Below, I’ll be careful to distinguish a proposal to change what someone is to do from the perlocutionary act of getting him to do it.

How should we understand the communicative process by which a speaker can direct the actions of a hearer? One might try to do this in isolation, to focus on a particular utterance and the particular intentions that accompany it. But this would mistake the fact that such an utterance is a part of something much larger, “a cooperative enterprise in which we are mutually adjusting ourselves to the interests of others”, as Stevenson puts it (455). We would do well to focus on an entire conversation as an arena of competing interests advanced by speakers by means of a public language. Ethical language fits right into this picture: “an ethical sentence readily permits counter-suggestion, and leads to the give and take situation which is so characteristic of arguments about values” (452). In distinctively normative conversations, speakers are interested in advancing ideas about what people generally should aim at, if not also more locally about what each other is to do: “ethical terms are *instruments* used in the complicated interplay and readjustment of human interests” (449).

*2.2: A new solution to the negation problems for nondescriptivism*

Let’s take Stevenson’s suggestion that ethical language has a quasi-imperative force at face value. How far can we get by simply equating the meaning of the normative sentence (1) with the meaning of its corresponding imperative sentence (4)? This is the gambit of the view I’ll call ‘the speech-act view’ of normative semantics.

(1) John must keep his promise

(4) John, keep your promise!

The essential claim of the speech-act view is that the meanings of normative sentences are accounted for by specifying what a speaker does in using them. Negated sentences, too, have their meanings accounted for in this way, by specifying the speech-acts they are suited for.

In this section, I will lay out the solutions offered by the speech-act view in a brief manner, leaving it for later to address important details. By way of introduction, though, I’d like to compare Stevenson’s idea about how speakers adjust their interests in conversation, with a simple language game. The game involves a group of people who need to form a collective decision. There can be negotiation on the proposals for what is to be done. Needless to say the purpose of the game is not the participants’ amusement, but rather solving some simple practical problems which require mutual coordination.

Here are the rules of the game: someone can issue a directive for what A is to do by saying ‘A must do P’. But since no one has been deemed the authoritative commander, this issuing of a directive is itself a proposal that must be accepted or declined by the group. If no one objects, then by default the directive proposal succeeds and its content becomes part of the collective policy, at least until someone raises an objection. In fact, all the communicative moves in this simple game are proposals, even raising objections. There are two ways to raise an objection. One can propose the opposite directive of what is objected to, e.g. by saying ‘A must not do P’. Or instead one can *reject* the proposal, which amounts to refusing to accept it. Rejections are not directive proposals, since they don’t direct anyone to do anything. Instead, they are ways of blocking directive proposals, since they ensure that the directive is not accepted. Rejections are proposals that automatically succeed in this game, whereas directive proposals require unanimous acceptance in order to succeed.

This is already enough by way of introducing the game for me to draw out how the analogy is helpful. The moves of directing and rejecting in the game are speech-acts, defined by how they try to change the conversational group’s collective policy. That is, these speech-acts are defined by their *success-conditions*, e.g., a directive that A is to do P is successful just in case the group’s policy entails that A does P. In the jargon of speech-act theory, these moves correspond to types of illocutionary force, which can be represented in capital letters, as below. Speech-acts also have (propositional) content, represented in lower-case letters. Notice that rejection is not itself a type of force but rather a force-functor: it reverses the proposed change of the speech-act that is its object and leaves the content as it is, e.g., rejecting a directive that p changes the directive proposal into a different kind of proposal, one that ensures that that directive proposal does not succeed.

DIRECT(p)

REJECT(DIRECT(p))

Here is a summary of what I want to suggest about the meanings of the deontic modal expressions ‘must’ and ‘may’, as well as their combinations with negation. The speech-acts introduced in the language game will be identified as the meanings of certain normative sentences. I’ll specify their meanings with the notation just introduced, letting the proposition that p be *that John will keep his promise*. Following Stevenson’s suggestion, I’ll say that a basic deontic ‘must’ claim is equivalent in meaning with the corresponding imperative , i.e., they are equivalent in (conventionalized) speech-act potential.

(1) John must keep his promise

(1a) DIRECT(p)

(4) John, keep your promise!

(4a) DIRECT(p)

How can the speech-act view account for the different ways of negating (1)? My suggestion is that adding external negation to (1), as in (2), creates a sentence suited for rejecting the directive for John to keep his promise. Adding internal negation to (1), as in (3), creates a sentence suited for the opposite directive.

(2) It is not the case that John must keep his promise.

(2a) REJECT(DIRECT(p))

(3) John must not keep his promise

(3a) DIRECT(~p)

‘May’ can be defined in terms of ‘must’ and rejection. I here introduce the force of permitting by defining it as rejecting a directive: they have equivalent success-conditions.

(5) John may refrain from keeping his promise.[[9]](#footnote-9)

(5a) PERMIT(~p) = (2a) REJECT(DIRECT(p))

That serves to indicate how the speech-act view assigns meanings to our target normative sentences. Now, we can begin to see how the view addresses the difficult questions involved with the negation problems for nondescriptivism. The speech-act view faces linguistic versions of the psychological questions that were earlier raised for expressivism.

The inconsistency of (1) and (3) is the result of their proposing opposite directives for what John is to do. These proposals try to affect the group’s decision in opposite ways, since they try to add incompatible contents to the group’s policy.

The inconsistency of (1) and (2), on the other hand, is different. They are assigned opposite moves with opposite force, although they involve the same propositional content. While (1) is a proposal to add a certain content to the group’s policy, (2) is a proposal to ensure that that content is not part of the group’s policy. The conflict is symmetrical, as I’ll explain later. Note, for now, that the speech-act view is committed to two different kinds of inconsistency here, and therefore is committed to explaining them and justifying the respectability of something that might seem unfamiliar or unorthodox as part of semantic explanation.

The compositional structure of (2) and (3) is rather apparent when regarded with the ‘FORCE(content)’ notation of (2a) and (3a), as above. The different occurrences of ‘not’ make different compositional contributions, depending on whether it is force or content being negated: ‘~’ is propositional negation (e.g., set-complementation or truth function) and ‘REJECT(\_(\_))’ is force-negation. Note, again, that this highlights commitments that the speech-act view needs to discharge, regarding the meaning of negation words and their compositional interaction.

The speech-act view doesn’t exactly take any of the options A, B, or C that were introduced in the context of expressivism’s problems with negation, yet it bears similarities to each. Like option A, the speech-act view thinks that the lack of a definite policy, regarding what John is to do, distinguishes the result of rejecting the directive for John to keep his promise. But it also involves a positive change in the conversational context. I’ll explain in section 3.2 how the conversational record will register a successful act of rejecting a directive, which effectively raises an obstacle for the directive’s success.

Similar to how option B appeals to an alternative type of attitude (e.g., toleration), the speech-act view looks for an alternative type of speech-act to say what the external negation of a basic normative ‘must’ claim means. But the alternative speech-act is not just a brutely postulated distinct act, stipulated to be in conflict with the directive in just the right circumstances. Instead, the idea of rejecting involves more complexity: it is introduced by its role in blocking the success of the proposal it rejects. This makes the solution look more like option C which, recall, appealed to a higher-order attitude. Rejecting might be thought of as a higher order speech-act, although a more careful description would be, as I said, that ‘REJECT(\_(\_))’ is a force-functor that reverses the force of the speech-act in its scope.

The speech-act view offers deeper explanations for what externally negating a basic ‘must’ claim means and why it produces inconsistency when it does. The meaning of (2) will be defined as the reversal of the change in conversational context assigned to (1): they have opposite success-conditions. As mentioned, this is a different kind of inconsistency than that which holds between (1) and (3). The speech-act view inherits a commitment to answer questions similar to those Schroeder raises for expressivists about B-type inconsistency. But because the speech-act view has a deeper explanation for the semantic properties of (1) – (3), it is able to solve these problems, as I’ll explain in section 3.2. Additionally, as I’ll now show, the explanatory resources that it appeals to are dialectically respectable in the debate with descriptivism. In fact, it is in overtly descriptivist theories of language that the crucial notion of rejection has its source.

# Section 3: Conversational Scorekeeping

*3.1: Lewis and Stalnaker*

The overtly descriptivist semantic theories developed by David Lewis and Robert Stalnaker were paired with theories of conversational dynamics which, perhaps unintentionally, inspired the sort of dynamic theories of semantics that the speech-act view claims to be.

Lewis 1979a suggests that we see a conversation as a language game with a scoreboard that has one part to keep track of the exchange of information and another part to keep track of the regulation of behavior.[[10]](#footnote-10) The exchange of information, according to Lewis, might as well happen just as Stalnaker says about the pragmatics of assertion, and the communicative regulation of behavior can be fashioned in a parallel manner.

Stalnaker suggests we think of asserting as a proposal to make the asserted claim become mutually presupposed in the conversation. The *context-set* is a set of possible worlds each of which could be actual given what the conversants mutually presuppose. When a speaker asserts that p, she proposes to reduce the context-set so that it only includes the p-possibilities compatible with the other presuppositions. We can think of the context-set as the part of the conversational scoreboard that keeps track of information-exchange.

One of the most interesting features in the language-game conceit is the interplay it allows. The success of a player’s proposal depends upon the other players not blocking it. As Stalnaker 1978 says, “To make an assertion is to reduce the context set in a particular way, provided that there are no objections from the other participants in the conversation” (86). The assertion proposes to change the context in a certain way and “This effect is avoided only if the assertion is rejected” (86). The scoreboard doesn’t change without at least the acquiescence of the conversants and there can be objections and debate about whether to let a proposal succeed.

What is it to *reject* an assertion? It is to refuse to accept it, and thus prevent the conversational score from being changed as proposed in the assertion.[[11]](#footnote-11) An appropriate use of ‘No’ in response to a proposal would be sufficient. However, we must be careful to distinguish two ways that conversants can object to the proposal of a speaker, i.e. we must distinguish the following two speech-acts:

ASSERT(~p)

REJECT(ASSERT(p))

Rejecting an assertion that p is not equivalent to asserting that ~p; in fact, it isn’t to assert anything at all. An assertion that ~p is itself a proposal to reduce the context-set by intersecting it with the proposition that ~p – it purports to close the issue whether p by answering in the negative. But the act of rejecting the assertion that p is not a proposal to reduce the context-set. Instead of purporting to close an issue it purposely keeps it open.

Now, this is all exactly parallel to the simple language-game I described in section 2.2, just as Lewis would have it. The only difference is that the first language game I described focused on directing, rather than asserting. The role I introduced for rejecting directives is just like how Stalnaker describes rejecting assertions. And in fact Lewis 1979b introduces a similar language game where a master commands a slave using prescriptive language, in which the act of granting permission for someone to do something is identified as rejecting a command. This is exactly why I set up the game of directives and permissions as I did, and I intend to fill it out just like the Lewis-Stalnaker theories would suggest.

In addition to the context-set, the conversational scoreboard also includes a *permission-set*: a set of possibilities each of which could be normatively ideal given what the conversants regard as requirements. If the proposal involved with directing that p succeeds, the permission-set is reduced to the p-possibilities compatible with other requirements mutually recognized in the conversation, and there could be negotiation about which requirements are recognized.

Permission first gets a place in this set-up for the purpose of taking back a directive. Suppose the group accepts a directive that x do A but later decides to take it back. It can reverse the effect of its previous directive by granting permission that x not do A, or as I prefer to put it: permitting that x not do A. That is essentially just a belated way of rejecting the earlier directive. Just as rejecting an assertion refuses to let its assertive proposal succeed, rejecting a directive refuses to lets the directive proposal succeed and it thereby effectively permits what the directive would have rendered forbidden. To permit that p just is (and is definable as) to reject the directive that ~p. It is not a directive proposal, and so must be distinguished from the proposal to add the opposite directive content to the group’s policy. A negative directive tries to reduce the permission-set so as to make a certain negated proposition a requirement, but an act of permitting doesn’t try to reduce the permission-set at all. These are two different ways of objecting to a directive that p.

REJECT(DIRECT(p)) = PERMIT(~p)

DIRECT(~p)

So, just as speakers can assert and reject assertions as they negotiate what is mutually presupposed, they can direct and permit as they negotiate which requirements are mutually recognized. These acts are proposals to change one or another part of the conversational scoreboard; that is, they propose to change the conversational context, where the context includes at least the context-set and the permission-set.

Stevenson’s idea that ethical language is a tool for the readjustment of competing interests fits well with the conversational negotiation inherent in the language-game conceit. What he calls the “dynamic use” of an ethical sentence can be understood as an act of proposing that someone take an interest in something, i.e. as a directive for what someone is to do. Moreover, his notion of emotive meaning, which is supposed to “fit” language for its “dynamic use”, can be explained in terms of context-change-potential.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Although Lewis and Stalnaker weren’t trying to fashion a new way of doing semantics, they inspired others to do so. Dynamic semantics locates a sentence’s meaning in the context-change-potential associated with that sentence by linguistic convention. The speech-act view clarifies further that this notion of context-change-potential is fundamentally illocutionary, since it comes from the consideration of how speakers’ communicative acts affect a conversation.

*3.2: Rejection and Disagreement*

In this section I wish to clarify two things: (i) the kinds of disagreements that can arise in conversational negotiation, and (ii) the effect that an act of rejecting has on a conversational context. This will lead me to clarify how changes in context are represented in set-theoretic terms, and to respond to Schroeder’s worries about B-type inconsistency.

The meanings appealed to by the speech-act view are fundamentally things that speakers do in conversation. Recall that to reject a speech act of asserting or directing, is to object to it and thus to prevent its success in changing the context as it proposed to do. Obviously, there is an antagonistic relationship between a speech-act and rejections of it. But this antagonism is different in kind from the more familiar phenomenon that we usually just call disagreement.

The rules of the language-game implicitly distinguish two ways that conversants can disagree with each other. One the one hand, two conversants can *disagree-in-content* by performing speech-acts of the same kind with contradictory contents (e.g. one asserts that p and the other asserts that ~p, or one directs that p and the other directs that ~p). The conversation could conceivably change such that both of their proposals become successful. But that would register contradictory propositions in some part of the conversational record. This would eliminate all possibilities in either the context-set or the permission-set. Either way, this is a failure of the conversation’s purposes. If the context-set becomes empty, the collective inquiry has failed to locate the actual world in the space of possibilities – nothing could be actual. If the permission-set becomes empty, we have failed to locate an ideal world – anything that happens is forbidden because it will inevitably violate a successful directive.[[13]](#footnote-13)

This is a kind of A-type inconsistency. The conflict in any disagreement-in-content derives from the incompatible truth of their propositional objects.

On the other hand, two conversants can *disagree-in-force* by performing speech-acts which have the same content but which propose to do opposite things with it (e.g., one asserts that p and the other rejects the assertion that p, or one directs that p and the other rejects the directive that p). The conversation cannot proceed with each of their proposals being successful. This kind of conflict inheres in what the speakers are trying to do with the proposition that p: one speech-act proposes to add content to a part of the conversational record, and the rejection refuses to let that happen. This kind of conflict also has a simple and precise explanation: it simply cannot be that the relevant part of the conversational record (i.e. the context-set or the permission-set) both contains and does not contain p-worlds. So, the speech-act and its rejection cannot both be successful in how they propose to change the context.

This second type of conflict does not derive from the incompatibility of the propositional objects, but rather from the impossibility of both speech-acts being successful. It thus isn’t a form of A-type inconsistency. It isn’t a conflict in how the world might be, but rather is a conflict that inheres in what speakers do. It isn’t a conflict in describing the facts but rather a conflict in coordinating how the discussion proceeds. Furthermore, in the case of directives and permissions, there is a distinctively nondescriptive form of conflict that doesn’t derive from any act of describing.

Although both kinds of disagreement just described are overtly pragmatic, they correspond to semantic relations which the speech-act view uses to explain the inconsistency of sentences. That’s because the basic semantic approach of the speech-act view is to assign a speech-act to a sentence as its conventional meaning, with the semantic relations between sentences deriving from the features of those act-meanings. (1) and (2) are inconsistent because the speech-acts they’re suited for disagree-in-force, whereas (1) and (3) are inconsistent because the speech-acts they’re suited for disagree-in-content.

The act of rejecting is what provokes attention to ways that illocutionary forces can conflict. The act of rejecting is a reversal of the proposal that it rejects. It is an un-doing of the effect of the rejected speech-act. But it is also a bona fide speech-act on a par with other speech-acts like asserting and directing. I’ll now refine the original notion of rejection to clarify two important features.

First, a speech-act can be rejected after some time has passed since its proposal was made and accepted or, more controversially, even before any speaker has offered the proposal being rejected. Let’s concentrate for a moment on rejecting assertion. If the rejecting happens after the rejected assertion’s proposal has already been counted successful in the conversation, then the effect of rejecting is to enlarge or increase the context-set: possibilities that were removed from the context-set (and which are compatible with the current presuppositions at the time of rejecting) are added back in. Thus, some possibilities in the context-set have been expressly designated as ways the actual world might be, while others simply haven’t been addressed. This brings me to the second important feature of rejecting.

If the language-game is set up so that conversants have the power to veto each other’s proposals, and if the conversational scoreboard is supposed to track the significant facts about the communicative enterprise, then the scoreboard should keep track of rejected speech-acts. The vetoed possibilities are *protected* by the act of rejecting in the sense that any future proposal to eliminate them from the context-set must overcome an obstacle, either by persuading the conversant protecting them or else by cutting that player out of the game. There is more than one way for a context to keep track of such distinctions, but I’ll do so here by marking the protected possibilities **in boldface**. The following diagram shows what happens to an initial context-set CS upon a successful act of asserting that p, i.e. it becomes CS`, and then again the context changes into CS`` by an act of rejecting the assertion that p. This serves to illustrate how an act of rejecting the assertion that p both renders the assertion that p unsuccessful (by replacing possibilities into the context-set) and *also* protects possibilities in which it is false that p.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Let p = {w3, w4}, and let CS = {w1, w2, w3, w4}

CS [ASSERT(p)] = CS` = {w3, w4}

CS` [REJECT(ASSERT(p))] = CS`` = {**w1**, **w2**, w3, w4}

This also illustrates the significance of rejecting an assertion that no one has yet performed in the conversation. Such a rejection would not add possibilities to the context-set, but it would change the conversational record by distinguishing certain possibilities as protected. For example, a speaker could directly change CS to CS`` by rejecting the assertion that p, perhaps even as the initial speech-act in a conversation.

Rejecting directives happens in the same kind of way, although focused on the permission-set rather than the context-set. I assume, following Lewis 1979b, that all the possibilities in play start out as members of the permission-set until they’re removed, e.g. by a successful directive, and thus rendered forbidden. But then we need to distinguish expressly permitted possibilities from those that haven’t been addressed yet. Thus, it can make sense to grant permission even for something that was always implicitly permitted. While such an utterance *wouldn’t* *replace* any possibilities into the permission-set, because it wouldn’t serve to take back any directives already accepted, it *would* serve to protect certain possibilities and thus create an obstacle for a conversant to render them forbidden by so directing.

The following diagram shows what happens to an initial permission-set PS upon a successful act of directing that p, i.e. it becomes PS`, and then again it changes into PS`` by an act of rejecting the directive that p.

Let p = {w3, w4}, and let PS = {w1, w2, w3, w4}

PS` = PS [DIRECT(p)] = {w3, w4}

PS`` = PS` [REJECT(DIRECT(p))] = {**w1**, **w2**, w3, w4}

This also illustrates the significance of rejecting a directive that no one has yet performed in the conversation. Such a rejection would not add possibilities to the permission-set, but it would change the conversational record by distinguishing certain possibilities as protected. For example, a speaker could directly change PS to PS`` by rejecting the directive that p, perhaps even as the initial speech-act in a conversation.

This section has introduced important details regarding the crucial notion of rejection which help to respond to part of the negation problem mentioned in section 1. It is one thing to say nothing about whether John is to keep his promise and it is another thing to overtly object to a proposal that would require John to keep his promise. The latter involves doing something, i.e. protecting the option of his breaking it. One might go further and protect contradictory options, leaving it open that he may, or he may not, keep his promise, which is the position of permitting both options. This last position is represented here as PS```.

PS``` = PS`` [REJECT(DIRECT(~p))] = {**w1**, **w2**, **w3**, **w4**}

# Section 4: Dynamic Semantics for Normative Sentences

*4.1 What makes the speech-act view count as a version of dynamic semantics?*

Geach alleged that nondescriptivists violate ‘the Frege point’, but this certainly isn’t true of the speech-act view developed in this paper. This view takes Frege’s distinction between force and content as a foundational insight. The meaning of every well-formed sentence has two components, force and content, which can be isolated by comparing the salient similarities and differences in the following two sentences.

(4) John, keep your promise!

(4a) DIRECT(that John will keep his promise)

(6) John will keep his promise.

(6a) ASSERT(that John will keep his promise)

These sentences have the same *content*, since they share a common topic: the information or state of affairs that the sentence is about. Yet they differ in *force*, because the mood (i.e., clause-type) by which one presents its associated information shows that it *is to be made true* whereas the mood by which the other presents the same information shows that it *is the case*. [[15]](#footnote-15)

The force of a sentence suits it to be used in a certain way and therefore restricts the primary options for what a speaker can use it literally to do. The speech-act view is a version of dynamic semantics because the meanings it assigns to sentences are potentials for changing the context, i.e. functions that “update” the context by changing it in a particular way.[[16]](#footnote-16) Think of a conversation as broken up into discrete states or time-slices. The context of a conversation (at a time) is a snapshot of the conversational scoreboard. When a speaker performs a speech-act, she proposes to put the conversation into a new state and thus change the conversational score. Therefore, a sentence’s potential for changing the context and its conventional speech-act potential are one and the same. These meanings can be specified formally in terms of how they change a default context C, composed of a context-set CS and a permission-set PS as shown below.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Let C = {CS, PS} = {{w1, w2, w3, w4}, {w3, w4, w5, w6}}

Let p = {w3, w4}

(7) C [ASSERT(p)] = {{w3, w4}, PS}

(8) C [DIRECT(p)] = {CS, {w3, w4}}

A descriptive sentence’s assertive potential is thus its capacity to update a context by reducing the context-set. The effect of asserting that p in C is to eliminate from the context-set any possibilities in which it isn’t true that p, as shown in (7). A prescriptive sentence’s directive potential is its capacity to update a context by reducing the permission-set. The effect of directing that p in C is to eliminate from the context-set any possibilities in which it isn’t true that p, as shown in (8).

My suggestion is to introduce deontic ‘must’ into this semantic framework as an indicator of directive force. The conversational effect of a basic deontic ‘must’ sentence like (1) is specified in (8), letting p be the proposition that John will keep his promise. It is successful when all the possibilities in the permission-set are ones in which John will keep his promise, which means that it is mutually recognized in the conversation as a requirement that John will do so.

The notion of rejecting is introduced as another compositional ingredient in the meaning of a complex sentence. If a sentence has the speech-act potential for rejecting an assertion, it has the capacity to reverse the change proposed by the rejected assertion. So, its update-function would not reduce the context-set but could instead increase it. Instead of eliminating possibilities, it protects them. The essential effect of successfully rejecting the assertion that p is to protect certain possibilities in the context-set in which it is true that ~p, as shown in (9). This protection will be indicated **in boldface**, as introduced in section 3.2.

(9) C [REJECT(ASSERT(p))] = {{**w1**, **w2**, w3, w4}, PS}

Similarly, if a sentence has the speech-act potential for rejecting a directive, it has the capacity to reverse the reduction of the permission-set proposed by that directive. So, its update-function could potentially increase the permission-set. The essential effect of successfully rejecting the directive that p is to protect certain possibilities in the permission-set in which it is true that ~p, as shown in (10).

(10) C [REJECT(DIRECT(p))] = {CS, {w3, w4, **w5**, **w6**}}

This shows us what it means to externally negate a basic deontic ‘must’ sentence. Adding external negation to (1) produces a sentence suited for rejecting (1)’s proposal. So, the meaning of (2) is specified by the potential for changing a context as in in (10), letting p be the proposition that John will keep his promise. Such a proposal is successful when certain possibilities in the permission-set are protected. Which possibilities, exactly? The ones that best satisfy the conversation’s other recognized requirements, and in which John doesn’t keep his promise.[[18]](#footnote-18)

*4.2: Is the speech-act view committed to saying that ‘not’ is ambiguous?*

The speech-act view recognizes two kinds of negation, each of which could be meant by a negation word like’ not’, depending on what it is being applied to. So, it is committed to something like an ambiguity of negation-words like ‘not’.

A speech-act with force *F* and content that *p* can be negated in two ways: either negation can apply to the entire speech-act, and thus negate or reverse its force, as in *NOT[F(p)]*, or negation can affect only the speech-act’s content, as in *F(~p)*. I use the symbol ‘~’ to mean propositional-negation (e.g., the set-complement-function). To negate a speech-act, on the other hand, is to reverse its force, i.e. to change its force into some kind of rejecting.

Is this a burdensome commitment? Only if it is unmotivated. But the distinction introduced in section 3.2 between disagreements-in-content and disagreements-in-force can motivate these two roles for negation in a dynamic framework. While it may be somewhat marginal, we do use negation-words to reject non-assertions. It makes sense to reject a directive by saying ‘no’. I’ve shown how rejecting is not simply a pragmatic or meta-linguistic negation, since it is on a par with asserting and directing, in terms of its potential to change a context. Of course, it is a further step to allow negation-words and modals like ‘may’ to have conventional uses to reject. But that’s an essential step for the speech-act view.

Moreover, *any* direct response to the negation problem on behalf of a view that claims declarative sentences can have nondescriptive meanings will need to make sense of a kind of negation that itself is nondescriptive. What makes the speech-act view stand out here is that it provides details about how this works and answers the difficult questions that have become part of the negation problem for expressivism and other forms of nondescriptivism.

# Section 5: Normative Thoughts

The speech-act view is overtly an account of language. But what about normative thoughts? What state of mind does one have in virtue of mentally accepting a sentence like (2)?

The responses to the negation problems offered in this paper can be transferred to an account of normative thought by constructing a psychological interpretation of the same kind of formalism and semantic framework that the speech-act view offers for normative sentences. Instead of a simple appeal to folk-psychology of beliefs and desires, we could instead understand a state of mind as having a structure similar to that of a conversational scoreboard. Perhaps it is best to think of a state of mind as a “mental profile” which is an organized grouping of sets of worlds, with one set keeping track of the worlds not ruled out by the thinker’s beliefs and another set keeping track of the worlds not ruled out by her decisions. These would parallel the functions of the context-set and the permission-set, respectively.

A key feature of this suggestion involves jettisoning the expressivist idea that sentences merely express mental states, in favor of a view on which sentences express *transitions* between mental profiles. To mentally accept (1) is to change one’s mental profile in the relevant way, and likewise for mentally accepting other sentences like (2) and (3). In this way, the notion of rejecting developed in this paper could be extended from public, communicative acts of rejecting sentences (i.e. the transitions in context they’re suited for) to private, mental acts of rejecting sentences (i.e. the transitions in mental profiles they’re suited for). To think to oneself *that it is not the case that John must keep his promise* is to reject the transition that would narrow the correlate of the permission-set. It serves to protect some worlds in which John doesn’t keep his promise, so that they are expressly kept as options going forward in one’s practical deliberation.

Here might seem to be a disanalogy, however. At the level of language, it makes sense for one speaker to add an obstacle to another’s eliminating possibilities. But that could seem a schizophrenic way of viewing a conversation in one’s one mind, so to speak. In fact, however, it does make sense for a thinker to merely permit some option expressly, and that should at least have the effect of changing her mental state so that it not only fails to eliminate the option but marks it with a positive judgment such that any future decision to eliminate that option would be a change of mind. Thus, the notion of ‘adding an obstacle’ is needed even at the mental level to explain facts about what counts as a change of mind. A comparison of one’s full mental state at one time and then at another time may indeed look somewhat schizophrenic since we do change our minds in this way.

If we have come this far, transferring the way rejection works for the speech-act view to an account of normative thought, then we might consider whether we have abandoned the expressivist’s approach or instead have refined it. I certainly have not argued against it outright, although I opted to take a ‘language first’ rather than the expressivist’s ‘mind first’ approach. But at this point we might consider reversing this order of explanation: one might say that the linguistic acts of directing and permitting amount to expressing the relevant transitions in mental profiles, and that the conversational context is to be understood as an interpersonal version of such a mental profile. This would go for a ‘mind-first’ rather than ‘language-first’ approach that nevertheless fits with the structure and style of semantic explanation developed in this paper.

Thus, I can remain officially neutral whether language or mind should be the primary focus for semantic theory. The main line of argument in this paper follows the ‘language first’ approach, and this could be developed further in the way that Hare 1967 suggests when Hare claims that private normative thoughts are like silent speech-acts of commending. But, as I’ve just explained, one might prefer the expressivist’s ‘mind first’ approach. The speech-act view’s responses to the negation problems can be preserved on either approach.

# Section 6: Bucking a Recent Trend

Finally, I will comment on a recent trend that purports to defend nondescriptivism without anything like the nonstandard assumptions that have been suggested in this paper.

Since Frege-Geach worries pertain to compositional semantics, a nondescriptivist might simply try to embrace the compositional resources used by truth-conditional and other descriptivist semantics. This is less of a solution to the problems than it is a side-step that avoids them. Several authors have taken this broad strategy of incorporating key descriptivist claims into a larger philosophical outlook that can live up to ideals and purposes behind nondescriptivism. Since they appease Frege-Geach worries, rather than directly responding to them with an alternative approach to compositional semantics, let’s call them “the appeasers”.

There are distinct threads hidden in this outline of appeasement. One thread points out that even if compositional semantics is based entirely in truth-theoretic or other descriptivist resources, this is compatible with insisting that the *use* of such words and sentences in conversation contrasts interestingly with the representational uses of descriptive words and sentences. Thus, Yalcin 2007, 2010 suggests that while the compositional semantic values of epistemic modals look very much like a descriptivist would have it, they are to be evaluated relative to an index (“a nonfactual parameter”) that he insists plays a nonrepresentational role: it serves to focus the coordination of the information states of those participating in the conversation. This lets Yalcin say that an utterance of the relevant sentence does not express a proposition and does not purport to represent the world.[[19]](#footnote-19) In a similar vein, Charlow 2013 suggests that while the *semantics* of normative words such as the deontic modals are best specified using abstract set-theoretic objects that look like denotations, their *meanings* and their characteristic *uses* are interestingly nonrepresentational.

Another thread of appeasement relies upon a distinction between semantic issues and metasemantic issues. For example, Chrisman 2012 and Ridge 2014 both allow that normative semantic contents are propositions and can be evaluated as true or false, but they pair this with a nonrepresentational story about why normative sentences express the propositions that they do and what it means to evaluate them as true. Ridge suggests that the use of a sentence to express a noncognitive attitude is what explains why it expresses the proposition that it does. Chrisman suggests an inferentialist metasemantic story, rather than one about expressing attitudes. These metasemantic explanations are supposed to be compatible with normative anti-realism even while agreeing substantially with descriptivist semantics.

Essentially, the appeasers aim to show how an ingenious combination of descriptivist semantics with nondescriptive ideas in pragmatics or metasemantics can accommodate the metaphysical outlook of an anti-realist. But the cost of appeasement is to lose some of the bite of the original ideas behind nondescriptivism. My appeal to Stevenson at the start of this project shows how some of the original emotivist ideas require a departure from descriptivist semantics. Stevenson wasn’t just searching for some account of language that could accommodate antecedent commitments about what exists. Instead, he starts with innovative ideas about language and communication that motivates an alternative account of linguistic meaning. Moreover, if it really is the *use* of normative language that makes it nondescriptive, then it makes sense to look, as emotivists and prescriptivists did, to other forms of language that have nondescriptive meanings, such as imperative sentences. Yet, it isn’t desirable to have a nonsemantic (pragmatic or metasemantic) account of how imperative meanings are nondescriptive; it is imperative meanings themselves that are nondescriptive.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Of course, the general strategy of appeasement has long been available to proponents of descriptivism against the early challenges from emotivism and prescriptivism. The more recent gestures of appeasement are not obviously saving the nondescriptivist project rather than sacrificing it. Those authors might retort that their semantic materials are not descriptive but rather *static*. But that fits into my broader point here, since they cling to a descriptivist static semantics for normative language. A metaethical nondescriptivist, as I’ve argued, should advocate a non-static, dynamic semantics in order to vindicate some of the original ideas supporting such a view. This can make good on the ideas (i) that normative meanings are nondescriptive; (ii) that these meanings are compositional ingredients in the meanings of complex sentences; and (iii) that sentences can bear relations of nondescriptive, yet semantic, conflict to each other.

# Conclusion

According to the speech-act view, the meanings of normative sentences are specified in terms of their potential to change the context of a conversation, and so are the meanings that result from embedding them under negation. This is an important first step towards addressing the larger embedding problems for nondescriptivist semantics for normative language.

Although I have tried to show the promise of the speech-act view, I have not argued against all competing accounts. The aim of this paper has been instead to show that nondescriptivists in ethics can make progress with their distinctive approach to normative meanings, even in the face of imposing problems with negation.

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1. Such claims are made, respectively, by Stevenson 1937, Hare 1952, and Gibbard 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Nondescriptive theories have been proposed about many other types of language too, but my attention will be restricted to ethical and more broadly normative language, a central debate amongst the others. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Hybrid expressivist views like that offered by Ridge 2006 promise to use descriptive resources to solve the negation problem. But this paper is focused on how nondescriptive resources can solve the problem and so I will not address hybrid approaches. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Gibbard 2003, p. 7, says “The term ‘expressivism’ I mean to cover any account of meanings that follows this indirect path: to explain the meaning of a term, explain what states of mind the term can be used to express.” Unwin 2001 raises the negation problem for Gibbard 1990. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Dreier 2006 discusses such views, examples of which are in Blackburn 1988 and Horgan and Timmons 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Examples of such views include Blackburn 1984 and Gibbard 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. You are hereby invited to look back at sections 2 and 3 of Stevenson’s article! [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Hare 1952, sec 1.7 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. I’ve used different phrasing here because the most salient reading of ‘John may not keep his promise’ is not intended. What is intended is: It is permissible that John not keep his promise. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Stalnaker 1978, p. 88, also suggests conceiving of a conversation as a language game, and the idea has been influential. Roberts 2004 develops the scorekeeping set-up into a theory of “dynamic interpretation” for sentences of different moods or clause-types. Portner 2004, 2007 develops a notion of a “To-do list” that registers the dynamic effect of imperative utterance as well as determining the orderings associated with priority modals. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. More precisely, the score will only change minimally so as register what becomes mutually presupposed. The fact that the assertive proposal was made becomes part of the Common Ground, but the rejection prevents the proposal from succeeding in adding the asserted content to the Common Ground. See Stalnaker 1978, fn 9, for his details about rejecting an assertion. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Recall my warning from section 2.1 that Stevenson’s intended sense of ‘dynamic’ is not the same as our contemporary notion of ‘dynamic semantics’. He wanted to draw attention to non-assertive uses of normative language. Our contemporary sense of ‘dynamic’ means something different than ‘non-assertive’; it now means something like ‘related to change in conversation’, and there are both assertive and non-assertive dynamic changes in conversation. It is the non-assertive dynamic changes that are important for the connection with Stevenson’s ideas. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. It would be overly simplistic to say that *no* sense can be made of what to believe or what to do if contradictory assertions or commands were simultaneously accepted, since one should surely follow the other requirements recognized in the conversation and proceed as if the other mutually presupposed propositions are true. But this issue raises a complication in the conversational set-up that I choose to ignore here for the sake of simplicity. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The formalism used in this diagram and throughout the paper specifies speech-acts in terms of force (in capital letters, e.g. ‘ASSERT’) and content (in lower case letters, e.g. ‘p’). Changes in context are indicated using the brackets so that ‘C [Fp] = C`’ signifies that context C changes into C` upon performance of the speech act Fp. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Note that the force of sentence and the force of an utterance are different, though related. The notion of sentential force is given some elucidation by Chierchia and McConnell-Ginet 1990, p. 163-170, and Portner 2009, p. 262. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Veltman 1996 for the classic statement of update-style dynamic semantics. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Recall that changes in context are indicated using the brackets so that ‘C [Fp] = C`’ signifies that context C changes into C` upon performance of the speech act Fp. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. I am purposely sliding over an issue here raised by Lewis under the moniker “A Problem about Permission”. In short, the problem is to specify which possibilities are reintroduced by an act of permitting. Van Rooy 2000 shows how to fill in the details of a response to Lewis on which the reintroduced possibilities are those ranked best by (what I’m calling) the contextually recognized requirements. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See Yalcin 2010, p. 35, Yalcin 2007, p. 1010-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. However, see Kaufman 2012 and Charlow 2013 for their attempts at bringing imperative meanings into the same sort of semantic framework for declarative meanings. It is noteworthy that such attempts have to either play down how different imperatives are or else modify traditional understandings of declaratives in order to account for both in the same way. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)