

# PRAGMATIC PARTICULARISM

Ray Buchanan and Henry Ian Schiller

University of Texas at Austin

## Abstract

For the *Intentionalist*, utterance content is wholly determined by a speaker's meaning-intentions; the sentence uttered serves merely to facilitate the audience's recovering these intentions. We argue that Intentionalists ought to be *Particularists*, holding that the only "principles" of meaning recovery needed are those governing inferences to the best explanation; "principles" that are both defeasible and, in a sense to be elaborated, *variable*. We discuss some ways in which some theorists have erred in trying to tame the "wild west" of pragmatics and context-sensitivity -- including recent work that makes essential appeal to the information structure of a discourse -- and in so doing, offer a general recipe for defending the Particularist picture of utterance content and its recovery that we favor.

## 1. Introduction

It is a matter of controversy how much plausibly remains of the grand Gricean project of *reducing* the semantic to the psychological. In its most ambitious incarnation, proponents of this program offered a notion of an agent's meaning something by an action – linguistic, or otherwise – that they claimed could be fully analyzed in terms of their propositional attitudes, including their communicative intentions. Insofar as this notion of *speaker-meaning* could be analyzed in terms that themselves made no essential appeal to public language semantic properties, it was thought that this would then provide a basis for the reduction of linguistic expression-meaning. The guiding idea was, roughly, that all public language semantic features could be reduced to facts concerning conventional regularities linking linguistic

expression types with certain types of acts of speaker meaning (allowing that this linking might be mediated by an internally represented grammar à la Chomsky).

Whatever you might make of the problems and prospects for this grand reductionist project, it is important to appreciate that a Gricean account of *pragmatics*, developed by Grice, Loar, and Schiffer, remains plausible. This picture, which we will call *Intentionalism*, should be at least somewhat familiar to anyone who has kept up with recent work in the philosophy of language. Despite some disagreements on the details, all Intentionalists agree on the following:

Intentionalism: (i) the content(s) of S's utterance of  $\sigma$  is what S meant in producing it; (ii) what S meant in producing  $\sigma$  is determined solely by their intentions and other propositional attitudes that are 'intrinsically specifiable in non-semantic terms' (Schiffer 2017, p. 68); and (iii) where the (intended) function of the sentence uttered is merely to help facilitate S's audience to recognize what they meant by it.

According to the Intentionalist, linguistic communication is, by and large, a rational endeavor in which a speaker seeks to give her audience evidence that will, by their lights, put the audience in a position to recognize what they meant. This intentionally-provided evidence will typically include the standing, context-invariant meanings of the words she utters, in tandem with whatever specific facts about the context might be relevant. If things go well, this will allow the hearer to infer what the speaker meant. Utterance *content* is grounded in the speaker's intentions (and other relevant propositional attitudes); utterance *interpretation* is a matter of an inference aimed at the recovery of those intentions.

Like others, we find this basic Intentionalist picture appealing. But by our lights, this picture of meaning and communication is not merely a plausible first pass at how best to think of pragmatics: we think that this picture is basically *complete*, in a sense to be elaborated. What the Intentionalist says about

the (non) role of sentence meaning in the metaphysical determination of utterance content goes for *every* feature of the speaker's utterance other than the fact that the speaker produced it with the particular meaning intentions that she did. Moreover, we will argue that attempts to add further principles and structure to the basic Intentionalist picture of utterance content and its recovery have been explanatorily redundant, or worse. This claim might sound surprising since Intentionalism is often presented as part and parcel of a larger "Gricean" framework for doing pragmatics; a framework couched in terms of principles that are claimed to play some sort of essential role in either the determination of utterance content or in the recovery thereof. "Griceans" of this variety oftentimes talk in relatively serious terms about utterance content as being *determined*, in part, by operative pragmatic principles, and of requirements that utterance content be *derivable*, or *calculable*, from such principles in tandem with 'what is said'. Though some of this is no doubt encouraged by Grice's own discussion of these matters (see Section 4), an Intentionalist should reject these principle-based approaches, as they are ultimately antithetical to her basic insights about utterance content and the process by which it is recovered. The need to sever Intentionalism from such appeals to principles is especially timely as some theorists have argued against Intentionalism by attacking such appeals.<sup>1</sup>

When it comes to utterance interpretation, Intentionalists ought to be *Pragmatic Particularists*.<sup>2</sup>

Just as the Moral Particularist denies the existence of, and need for, explanatory moral principles (cf

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<sup>1</sup> See Lepore & Stone 2015.

<sup>2</sup> After the submission of this paper, we became aware of an important precedent to our view due to Eric Swanson. In 'Omissive Implicatures', Swanson argues that the (putative) phenomenon of implicating one thing by *not* saying something else helps to suggest a more general "pragmatic particularism" wherein explanation in pragmatics ought to seek to shed 'light on a phenomenon but not with the aim of giving necessary and sufficient conditions for it, or of saying how the elements of the explanation interact with other facts that might be relevant in other circumstances and contexts' (ibid. 125-126). We couldn't agree more. In correspondence, Eric has told us that he is not yet willing to sign on the more sweeping claim Wild West-style particularism that we endorse here (and our repudiation of the need for explanatory pragmatic principles), nor does he accept the Intentionalism that we take to motivate our view (in fact, he takes the phenomenon of omissive implicature to refute Intentionalism). Those differences notwithstanding, we find this convergence encouraging. We highly encourage the reader to have a careful look at Eric's excellent 2017 piece.

Dancy 1983, 2004), the Intentionalist should deny the need for explanatory principles of pragmatics. Pragmatics is the Wild West and the Intentionalist ought to embrace it, rather than seek to tame it.

This paper proceeds as follows. In Sections 2 and 3, we begin by distilling the basic tenants of Intentionalism that underlie and unify the picture of pragmatics found in Bach (2005, 2013), Loar (1981), Neale (2005, 2016), and Schiffer’s work from the 1970s. In presenting the Intentionalist’s picture of utterance content, focusing on the (non) role of sentence meaning therein, we draw out an important consequence of the view: what goes for the role of sentence meaning goes for every feature of the speaker’s utterance other than her communicative intentions: namely, that such features play no role in determining the content of the speaker’s utterance. In Section 4, we turn to issues concerning the recovery of utterance content, arguing that Intentionalism naturally leads to a Particularist conception of pragmatics; a conception that significantly downgrades the role of pragmatic principles in utterance interpretation, as well as the correlative talk of pragmatic algorithms, mechanisms, and calculability. In section 5, we then turn to an illustration of the way in which some theorists have erred in trying to tame this pragmatic ‘wild west’ by discussing some recent work by those who appeal to facts about the information structure of a discourse, including *questions under discussion*, in the attempt to explain contextually-determined aspects of “what is said”. In so doing, we sketch a general recipe for how Intentionalists ought to defend their view against rival conceptions of pragmatics.

## **2. Towards Intentionalism**

If you only knew the standing semantic meaning of (1), you would not be in a position to understand a speaker’s utterance of it, even if you knew she was speaking literally:

(1) His horse is ready.

But what exactly would you be missing? Among other things, you would need to know the referent of the pronoun 'his', the relevant relationship between the person referred to and the relevant horse (is it a horse she owns, that she bet on, etc.?), and what, exactly, this horse is ready for (a race, a photo shoot, etc.?).

More generally, there is a gap between what we know in advance about a sentence and that which we need to recover if we are to understand an utterance of it. The existence of such a gap invites two foundational questions. The first is *epistemological*. It asks how agents are able to bridge the gap between what they know about the phonology, syntax, and standing semantic features of their language, and what they need to recover if they are to understand an utterance. In short, how is successful linguistic communication achieved? Following Neale (2005, 2016), let's say that a theory that answers this epistemological question is *a theory of interpretation*. The second, *metaphysical* question concerns the nature of the intentional acts we perform in using language, and the nature of that which our audiences must recover if they are to understand those acts. This question asks what, exactly, does an act of linguistic meaning consist in? Such an act has both force and content and to successfully interpret it, we must come to recognize both. The metaphysical question then is this: what determines that which a hearer needs to grasp in order to understand an utterance?

Why be an Intentionalist about utterance content? Perhaps the primary motivation for Intentionalism is the initial plausibility of its answer to the metaphysical question. *Prima facie*, in order to understand a speaker's utterance of (1) - or any other sentence - you must come to know what *she meant in uttering it*. If you think that what a speaker means is fully grounded in her propositional attitudes including her communicative intentions, you are an Intentionalist.

The Intentionalist builds on the platitude that linguistic communication is, by and large, a rational, cooperative endeavor in which the hearer wants to understand, and the speaker seeks to be understood. In the hopes of bringing about this understanding, the speaker intentionally provides her audience with

evidence that will, by her lights, put her audience in a position to recognize *what she means* by her utterance. *Speaker-meaning* is simply a special case of the more general notion of an *agent's* meaning something by her action, including her non-linguistic actions such as winking, or thumping the table.

Though it is debatable how, exactly, to analyze this notion of speaker-meaning, it is plausible that the correct story will ultimately recover much of the structure and conditions proposed by Grice and Schiffer, including:

(Condition) S meant something by u only if, for some audience A, and some feature C of u, S produced u intending (i) to produce a certain response in A, and (ii) A to recognize that S intends (i) at least in part, on the basis of their recognition that u has C.

In the case in which a speaker *means that p*, some Intentionalists hold that the intended response must be to bring about the *belief* that p; others might require that the speaker intend that A take *her* to believe that p. Instead, some will hold that S must (merely) intend for her audience to *entertain* that p. Though there is further disagreement about how one could add to the foregoing so as to arrive at a sufficient condition for speaker meaning, the crucial point in connection with the Metaphysical question is that speaker-meaning is claimed to be fully grounded in psychological facts about the speaker; psychological facts that themselves are ‘intrinsically specifiable’ in terms that do not make recourse to public language semantic properties.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. Content Generation

What *metaphysical* role does sentence meaning play in an act of speaker-meaning? And how, for an Intentionalist, does this relate to familiar talk of “the content of an utterance”? As Bach (2013) argues, talk of ‘utterance content’ is potentially ambiguous between (i) the standing semantic profile of the

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<sup>3</sup> See Davis (2002) for an important Intentionalist-friendly alternative to the Gricean picture of speaker-meaning. See the other references in fn. 13 for some important non-Intentionalist friendly alternatives.

sentence uttered and (ii) the intentional speech act of the speaker producing a bit of language with some purpose. In the prior sense, “utterance content” means roughly ‘the semantic content of the sentence uttered’, where this is a matter of certain features of the sentence that the speaker and hearer mutually know it to have in advance of the speaker’s deploying it. In order to fully appreciate the Intentionalist picture, it is crucial to disentangle (i) and (ii) and understand how they are related.

For the Intentionalist, there is no interesting notion of ‘utterance content’ (in the sense of (ii)) that goes beyond what the speaker meant; utterance content just is what the speaker meant by her utterance (ibid.). Moreover, when a speaker means more than one thing in uttering what she did, there is no such thing as the content of her utterance; there are just the specific contents that she meant by her utterance, where these are determined by her communicative intentions. The standing meaning of the sentence uttered is merely part of the means by which the speaker expects to achieve her communicative ends. Crucially, these semantic features of the linguistic signal **never** determine what the speaker meant by uttering it; what she means is determined by, and solely by, what she intends. As Schiffer once put it:

What a speaker means supervenes entirely on her communicative intentions, regardless of what the sentence she utters means.... the role of sentence meaning is to make known the speaker’s communicative intentions... (Schiffer 2006: 57).

The meaning of a sentence-type does not, and cannot, determine what a speaker means by using it, any more than the fact that a particular tool was designed to sand wood can determine whether you are using it to sand your dining room table or as a paperweight. The functional features of a tool might help to **facilitate** what one is doing in using it, but it can’t determine what one is actually doing.

It is crucial to see that Schiffer’s point about the (non) role of sentence meaning in determining speaker-meaning can, and should, be generalized to **all** known-in-advance features of an utterance. For

example, the fact that ‘Some students passed’ is mutually known to standardly implicate that not all the students passed can no more determine what the speaker’s intentions were in uttering it than can the literal meaning of the sentence. But notice, this point applies to any feature of the speaker’s utterance other than the fact she produced it with the intentions that she did. The fact that a would-be conversational contribution *p* is *relevant*, or *informative*, or *an answer to a question*, or *would render a foregoing piece of dialogue coherent*, or *is about an especially salient object*, or *is regularly used to implicate such-and-such*, or *is something your audience will assume you believe if you are being cooperative*, etc. cannot plausibly make it the case that you meant *p* by uttering what you did. After all, none of these facts can make it the case you had the intentions you did in producing your utterance. For the Intentionalist, utterance content is determined by, and *only* by, the speaker’s intentions. Hence, the Intentionalist should balk at any theory on which some, or other, aspect of utterance content is determined by anything extrinsic to the speaker’s intentions, including appeals to context (assuming, as is plausible, that contexts are not fully grounded in the communicative intentions of the speaker).

Does the standing meaning of a sentence uttered, or any of these other known-in-advance features, ‘constrain’ speaker meaning? Intentionalist sometimes speak this way, and we are happy to follow suit so long as this is **not** taken to be a claim about the metaphysical determinants of speaker meaning. We should even be cautious in claiming that sentence meaning provides any “direct” pressure on a rational speaker’s formation of her meaning-intentions. It is a *speaker’s beliefs about what the sentence she utters means* – beliefs that may be incorrect – rather than the sentence meaning itself, that plays a role in the speaker’s formation of a rational, communicative plan. The Intentionalist should hold that what a sentence *in our language* means is independent of the specific facts about what a speaker and her audience might understand it to mean. Maybe sentence meaning is determined by conventional regularities, maybe by being generated by a Chomskyian internally represented grammar, maybe by God’s will. Who knows? However it is determined, it can diverge from what the speaker takes it to mean.



Insofar as a rational speaker is acting with the goal of being understood – say to get her audience to entertain that  $p$  – she will do whatever she can to give H evidence that will, in tandem with everything else H knows about her and the relevant situation, put H in a position to successfully infer that she so intends. The speaker’s understanding of what the words she utters mean in her language will typically figure in her choice of those words in just that context, given her desired end of getting her audience to recognize what she intends to communicate. There is nothing unique to linguistic communication to be found here; quite generally, *any time* a rational agent is engaged in means-end practical reasoning, her beliefs about the required means to her desired end will put rational pressure on the overall shape of her plan.

In light of the foregoing, the Intentionalist should claim that a speaker counts as “speaking literally” when using a bit of context-insensitive language S when and only when she uses S to mean what she takes S to mean in her linguistic community. Notice that a speaker who mistakenly believes that ‘cats’ means the same as ‘dogs’ is speaking literally if she utters ‘Cats bark’ meaning that dogs bark (i.e., she is not speaking figuratively, or ironically, or in any other way non-literally just because she is confused). A *competent* speaker, however, is one whose “take” on what her words mean is suitably consonant with that of the ambient linguistic community of which she is a part.

We think these two points concerning literal speech and the rational constraints on meaning-intentions help to diffuse a worry that is sometimes raised against Intentionalism. Intentionalism leads to a consequence that might initially seem implausible; namely that a speaker could, in principle, mean anything whatsoever by an utterance so long as they have the right intentions in producing it. For instance, by uttering “I’m hungry”, a speaker could mean that the day he finished writing Hamlet, nine ravens flew over Shakespeare’s house. In response to this observation, an Intentionalist should insist that a rationally formed meaning-intention is subject to all of the same demands of rational intention

formation, more generally.<sup>4</sup> For example, one minimal such constraint is that one must intend to do A only if one believes that it is possible for them to do A. Putting this constraint together with the Intentionalist thesis that a speaker's meaning that p requires intending that her audience entertain that p on the basis the evidence she has provided by her utterance, it follows that a rational speaker will mean that p only when she believes it is as least possible that her audience will entertain it. Very elaborate stage setting aside, a *rational* speaker will not, and cannot, mean anything about Shakespeare's house by uttering 'I'm hungry' as she has no good basis for thinking her hearer will interpret her as such. A rational speaker can not just mean anything she likes by her utterance, if she is speaking with the goal of being understood. Moreover, a rational speaker who is *competent* (in the sense elaborated above) is constrained even more as her (correct) understanding of how her interlocutors use their shared language will put even further constraints on what she can reasonably expect to convey by her own use of those words in a particular context.<sup>5</sup>

#### **4. Towards Pragmatic Particularism**

What role does standing meaning play in the epistemological story of how our audiences come to recognize what we mean? The Intentionalist's answer should already be relatively clear in light of the foregoing. The standing meaning of the sentence uttered is a bit of evidence that the speaker intentionally provides her audience so as to help put them in a position to successfully infer what she means in using it; it is a consideration – one among possibly many – that might favor the hypothesis that the speaker meant such-and-such in uttering what she did. Likewise for the other mutually known-in-advance features of the

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<sup>4</sup> See Neale (2016) for more on how speaker meaning is itself bound to certain rationality constraints on intentions, more generally.

<sup>5</sup> Of course, the Intentionalist *is* committed to the possibility that a speaker could mean some proposition, say, about Shakespeare's house by uttering 'I am hungry' if (i) she is sufficiently confused (albeit about how her audience understands the words she utters or their capacities for mind-reading, more generally) or (ii) she has special reason for thinking her audience will understand her as such in the context (if, for example, there has been very elaborate stage-setting for her remark). We see this commitment as a defensible consequence of Intentionalism.

linguistic signal and the context. That a sentence-type is regularly used to mean that *p* will provide your audience with defeasible evidence that you meant *p* in uttering it.

As Davidson (1986) emphasized, this evidence of what the speaker meant is *always* defeasible.<sup>6</sup> Of course, these features of our utterance will usually provide our audience with some evidence of at least the general type of thing we might have meant in producing them. But this specific evidence can be defeated by the overall evidence we have available regarding the speaker, her background propositional attitudes, and any particularities about the context of utterance that might be relevant. The fact that ‘Lululemon’ is standardly used to mean ‘fancy athletic leisure pants’ might favor a certain interpretation of a speaker’s utterance of ‘I just bought some Lululemons’. But if you have additional evidence that she was at the grocery store buying the makings for a lemon meringue, lemonade, and a lemon tart, you might take her to have a mistaken understanding of the word and to have meant (roughly) that she just bought some kind of lemon at the store. As Davidson points out, we have no difficulty in quickly making adjustments on the fly, on the basis of the overall evidence we have in the context, in an attempt to divine what the speaker meant.

This thesis –Davidson’s Thesis – is not sufficiently appreciated, in part due to the fact that Davidson himself presented it in tandem with some grandiose rhetorical flourishes (e.g., ‘there is no such thing as language’). But the thesis seems to us obvious. For one thing, all evidence is defeasible. But even if you are wary of the more general claim regarding evidence and defeasibility, you should be sympathetic here given the holistic, abductive process of utterance interpretation.

For the Intentionalist, utterance interpretation consists in an ampliative inference; an inference to the best explanation (IBE) of why the speaker uttered what she did, in the exact manner that she did. The evidence that the speaker provides is *always* compatible with her having meant any number of different things even if she is actually speaking perfectly literally (and means just what the words she utters mean).

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<sup>6</sup> See Camp 2016 for a wonderful discussion of Davidson’s observation.

The hearer's task is to infer the best hypothesis regarding what the speaker meant given all of the relevant available evidence. For the Intentionalist the task of the interpreter is to successfully recover the speaker's communicative intentions via an IBE that proceeds from the evidence the speaker has intentionally provided.

In the linguistic case, as elsewhere, there is no reason to expect a remotely tractable, humanly specifiable algorithm for determining what, exactly, it takes for a hypothesis to be the best of the lot. We can gesture to the fact that the best explanation is often the one that is simplest, or the one that fits in best with our backlog of our beliefs and expectations, or the one that is most 'lovely' (Lipton 2004). But, of course, these requirements are so vague they give us almost no serious guidance in any specific case. The reason why no one has yet been able to give a plausible algorithm for IBE that improves upon the foregoing appeal to vague, under-specific, and highly context-sensitive explanatory virtues such as simplicity, is that there is nothing less vague or more specific that can, or need, be said.<sup>7</sup>

Even if there is no general algorithm for determining the best, or most plausible, hypothesis, there is no serious reason to doubt that we can use IBE to successfully gain knowledge across a wide variety of domains. When it comes to mind-reading – coming to know about the mental states of others, including their beliefs, desires, and intentions on the basis of their behavior – it is not clear that there is a serious alternative method. At best, "simulation" – imaginatively putting yourself in the shoes of another and reasoning about what you'd think or do – can only serve to constrain the range of hypotheses that are relevant; IBE is still required. In the linguistic case, simulation may likewise constrain the range of hypotheses to be considered; 'what would I have meant if I'd uttered 'His horse is ready' in this context?' But, here, as elsewhere, when we mind-read, IBE is still required insofar as the simulation renders more

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<sup>7</sup> In recent years, there has been a renewed interest in understanding the relationship between IBE and Bayseiansim. For an account that we are sympathetic to see Weisberg (2009). For now, suffice it to say that attempts to locate IBE in the Bayesian framework have done nothing to touch the point in the text regarding the intractability of the explanatory features relevant to the determination of the 'best' hypothesis.

than one interpretative possibility live (and it always will).<sup>8</sup> Even if hitting upon the hypothesis that is the best explanation of someone's specific behavior – linguistic, or otherwise - might require considerable skill, and sometimes luck, this doesn't mean that you are not rationally entitled to believe it.

To claim that the hearer's knowledge of what the speaker meant is arrived at by inference is **not** to make any claim about the specific *causal* processing that leads her from the sensory input of the speaker's communicative display to her belief that the speaker meant that such and such. Rather, the claim at hand fundamentally pertains to the structure of reasons that underwrite the hearer's interpretation.<sup>9</sup> Even if you seemingly instantaneously arrive at the (warranted) belief that Rosa-Linda is home on the basis of seeing her car parked outside, the underlying structure of the reasons that justify your belief can nevertheless conform to an IBE-inference. The fact that you are not always phenomenologically aware of having to 'work out' what your interlocutor means does not undercut the claim that linguistic interpretation is a species of IBE.

In the foregoing IBE-driven picture of utterance interpretation we have made no essential appeal to pragmatic principles. This omission is by design as we think such would-be principles of pragmatics play, at best, a limited role in the successful recovery of utterance content. Consider, for example, Grice's much discussed 'Cooperative Principle' and its attendant maxims (hereafter, 'CP').<sup>10</sup> According to many theorists, this principle plays an essential role in the epistemology of utterance interpretation (especially in connection with conversational implicature), the rough idea being that your audience ought to interpret you as meaning/implicating that which they must take you to believe in order to preserve the supposition

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<sup>8</sup> Our ability to simulate one another is a crucial part of the explanation for how mind-reading – including utterance interpretation – can be so reliable even if (as we argue below) there aren't robust principles to guide us. See Dogramaci (forthcoming) for an important discussion of the connection between simulation, mind-reading, and the reliability of our explanations/predictions of human behavior.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Bach (2013) and Schiffer (2001).

<sup>10</sup> Roughly put, the CP is a principle adherence to which requires a speaker to contribute that which is required by the accepted purpose of the conversation (where this contribution will typically be relevant, sufficiently informative, and unambiguous). See Saul 2002 for some discussion of the normative role of implicatures calculated from the maxims.

that they are acting in accordance with the CP (i.e, being relevant, informative, etc.). Further (following Grice 1975) it is claimed the correct interpretation of the speaker's utterance is then required to be "calculable", or "derivable", from the fact they said what they did in tandem with the assumption that they are acting in accordance with the CP. But, as Davis (1998), Lepore and Stone (2015), and many others, have pointed out, the claim that implicatures must be capable of being "calculated" in this way is much too demanding. There simply is never any one thing that the hearer "must"-in-the-epistemic-sense take the speaker to have meant in order to preserve the supposition that she is being cooperative (see Davis's (1998) worries on 'Determinacy'). For present purposes, however, the key point is that the requirement of calculability/derivability could not possibly be more antithetical to the Intentionalist insights about the abductive, IBE-driven nature of interpretation. It would be absurd to suggest, for example, that an agent can only come to know via IBE that her friend is in pain on the basis of her yelping and recoiling her hand from the stove if there was some way of deriving that conclusion from general principles linking pain-behavior and pain; so too we claim for IBE-driven utterance interpretation. IBE simply is not a species of deductive inference from hidden/suppressed principles.

Grice himself wrestled with issues regarding the status of his proposed principles of pragmatics, at one point suggesting that "anyone who has an interest in communication" is obliged to follow them (1975: p. 48), though quickly admitting he had no idea how to show this to be the case. Much closer to the truth is a remark he made in unpublished material to the effect that these rough and ready maxims/heuristics amount to little more than a reminder of what 'a decent chap should do' if they are seeking to be understood (Chapman 2005: 102). *That* much is correct. As best we can see, would-be pragmatic principles, such as Grice's CP, play a role similar to that of any rough-and-ready heuristic we might rely on (for example, if you want to be healthier, eat raw green foods rather than processed fried foods). Quite generally, we can defeasibly expect that someone speaking to us will be seeking to communicate something that is, by their lights, of interest, relevant, or at least something they feel is

worth communicating. In trying to infer what they meant, the fact that a particular proposition is, say, relevant to your interest in antique furniture – an interest that you mentioned something about just a moment earlier – might offer a consideration in favor of taking them to have meant it. But this particular consideration has to be weighed against anything else whatsoever that might be of importance in the context of utterance and background facts you presume about the speaker’s beliefs, desires, etc., and can easily be overridden.

The foregoing point regarding defeasibility leaves open the possibility that familiar pragmatic principles are nevertheless plausible as, to borrow Dancy’s terminology, “contributory principles”; i.e., principles that, although defeasible, specify considerations that invariably *count in favor* of an action. For example, even if there are cases in which, all things considered, it is best to lie, the principle that lying is wrong might still be correct if understood as a contributory principle: i.e., a principle that specifies a feature of an action (it’s being a lie) that invariably counts against doing it (even if that consideration can be defeated by other considerations in the relevant context). Returning to the issue of utterance interpretation, we might then ask: even if the explanatory feature F singled out by a particular pragmatic principle - say, relevance - can sometimes be defeated, isn’t it still possible that F nevertheless invariably counts in favor of taking the speaker to have meant something that possesses F?

In short, no. We claim that, for any context C, feature F (e.g., relevance) and proposition *p*, such that F presents decisive evidence that the speaker means *p*, there will be another context C\* in which F proves decisive evidence *against* this hypothesis. If, for example, Pablo has seemingly been on a lifelong mission of only making the most banal, unsurprising, irrelevant conversational contributions possible, the fact that a particular proposition is, say, informative or relevant could count against the hypothesis that that is what he meant at Thanksgiving dinner. (Likewise, consider the boy who cried ‘Wolf!’.) The CP – and indeed any putative pragmatic principle we can think of – fail even as “contributory” principles of

interpretation. That is, these principles fail to specify explanatory features that invariably count in favor of a particular interpretative hypothesis. A would-be explanatory feature - *relevance, salience, consonance with the context-invariant meaning*, etc. - can make an epistemological difference in one case, and a “different difference” in another. The analogy here is with the Particularist in the moral domain: a moral feature of an action – e.g., *that it was a lie* - can make a difference to what one should do in one context, and a “different difference” in another.<sup>11</sup> According to the Moral Particularist, once we appreciate that the question of whether a consideration favors a particular act is an irreducibly context-sensitive matter, we should no longer expect to find exceptionless, context-invariant moral principles. Likewise, we have been arguing when it comes to utterance interpretation. We ought to be *Pragmatic Particularist*.

Summarizing to this point, the theory of interpretation for the Intentionalist is a special case of IBE-driven mind reading in which we are seeking to discern the reasons and purposes for which the speaker uttered what she did, when she did, how she did. This process will require the full resources of the theory of mind and a bit of good luck in specific cases, in just the way that all reasons-explanations do. But, like the Particularist more generally, we just don't see the need for any serious explanatory role (even of the contributory variety) for such principles. According to the Pragmatic Particularists, for any utterance *u* and feature *F* that figures in the hearer's interpretation thereof, *F* can only play a defeasible, variable explanatory role; there can be other contexts in which *F* is defeated or its explanatory valence has flipped. Any putative pragmatic principle that suggests otherwise should be rejected.<sup>12</sup>

We cannot possibly hope to fully establish the Particularist thesis above, given the enormous number of accounts that have been offered purporting to show that we need more by way of further

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<sup>11</sup> See Dancy (1983), (1993), and (2004).

<sup>12</sup> Pragmatic Particularists count among Neale's so-called “pessimists” - such as Fodor (2001), Davidson (1986), and Chomsky (1986).



pragmatics principles, or structure, or algorithms, or mechanisms. After all, virtually any theorist who has seriously claimed that some aspect of utterance/speech act content is even partially determined by “context” would count as our opponent; not just those such as Lepore and Stone (2014) who at least seem tempted to claim meaning intentions play no role in the determination of ‘what is said’. What we *can* do, however, is offer a general recipe for defending the Pragmatic Particularist picture, as well as briefly illustrating some of the ways in which theorists have recently erred by attempting to supplement (or replace) the Intentionalist picture with explanatory/predictive principles pertaining to discourse structure and information, including increasingly influential appeals to “questions under discussion”.

## **5. Discourse Structure, Questions, and Intentionalism**

In motivating the Cooperative Principle, Grice emphasized:

Our talk exchanges do not normally consist of disconnected remarks, and would not be rational if they did. They are characteristically, to some degree at least, cooperative efforts. (1975.)

Like all cooperative endeavors, ‘talk exchanges’ take place against a common ground comprised of mutually recognized assumptions concerning anything that might be relevant to the purpose at hand. In conversation, we will usually recognize ‘to some extent, a commonly accepted purpose or set of purposes, or at least a mutually accepted direction’ (ibid.). Sometimes, it will be obvious in advance what the purpose of the conversational exchange is. But sometimes the mutually accepted purpose of a conversation may, as Grice suggested, be fixed by an explicit question. If Rosa asks Pablo ‘Where can I get a proper bagel in Texas?’ at least ‘some possible conversational moves would be excluded as conversationally unsuitable’ (ibid.). If Pablo were to volunteer information about where to get a bagel in

NY, or where bears hibernate, he would be acting uncooperatively; he would be intentionally failing to provide information that he believes would be relevant to helping to answer Rosa's question.

One need not explicitly ask a question to raise it to salience. Sometimes a sideways glance will suffice to get a "question under discussion"; other times, we might rely on intonation. For example, consider the difference between utterances of (4) and (4') with focus on the bracketed material:

(4) [Bogdan]<sub>F</sub> is going to the barbecue.

(4') Bogdan is going to the [barbecue]<sub>F</sub>.

If a speaker utters (4), she will most likely be taken to as providing an answer to the question 'Who is going to the Barbecue?', whereas, if the focus is on 'barbecue': 'Where is Bogdan going?'. Generally, if a speaker provides her audience information that could be seen as responsive to a question Q, that is itself some evidence that either she already took Q to be "under discussion", or that she would like it to be.

These intonation/focus based expectations are sufficiently robust that they are notable when not met. It would be odd to answer (5a) by uttering (5b):

(5) a. Who is coming to the barbecue?

b. # Bogdan is coming to the [barbecue]<sub>F</sub>.

This is because (5b) conventionally signals a speaker's interest in addressing a different question.

Speakers can intentionally exploit these conventional features of intonation/focus to give their audience evidence of their desire to raise a question in a conversation.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> See Roberts (2012) and the citations therein for some of the important work in focus and intonation.

The Intentionalist can welcome the important work done on intonation, focus effects, etc. and, where possible, build it into her account of the standing-features of the utterance. These features, like sentence-meaning, can sometimes help facilitate the speaker's meaning what she does on a particular occasion. QUD-related standing-features can also be (defeasible) evidence that your audience might rely on in figuring out what you meant. She should say the same for any further aspect of the information structure of a context that might itself be determined (even in part) by QUDs, such as discourse coherence.

More generally, Intentionalists should celebrate the impressive body of work in formal pragmatics focusing on QUDs and discourse structure so long as (i) the highly idealized, limited nature of the proposed models is emphasized, and (ii) as Craige Roberts suggests (2017), these models are offered as merely one part of a more global, holistic, abductive theory of utterance interpretation. An Intentionalist must, however, be skeptical of anything more than this. In particular, the Intentionalist should reject the claim that QUDs play any role in the metaphysical determination of utterance content, or that they play any sort of essential role in utterance interpretation. As such, an Intentionalist should be skeptical of much of the recent work done in the philosophy of language that would encourage us to think otherwise.

In recent years, a number of theorists have made essential appeal to discourse structure - and to QUDs in particular - in their account of the determination of pragmatic aspects of utterance content. Here we will focus on an important recent attempt to provide a QUD-based account of *what is said* due to Schouybe and Stokke (2016).

Start by considering the following case due to Bach (2001):

(6) Jack and Jill are engaged.

As Bach observes, it is plausible that the compositionally-determined, context-invariant meanings of the components of (6) and the semantic significance of their syntactic configuration deliver a truth-conditionally evaluable proposition. In what follows, let's call a proposition arrived at in this manner from a declarative sentence S, the *minimal content* of S.<sup>14</sup> But, as Bach stresses, it is dubious that this minimal content should be taken as what a speaker *uses* (6) to express in a context in which she has just been asked 'Are there any couples present who are getting married this year?' Rather the speaker will have intuitively conveyed that Jack and Jill are engaged *to each other*. Likewise, if you ask Oscar what building materials you should use to ensure that the girders of your bridge can withstand car traffic and he utters (7) he will likely be expressing a 'contextually-enriched' proposition to the effect that steel is strong enough *to support the bridge*.

(7) Steel is strong enough.

Since there is no intuitive sense that speakers are speaking non-literally in such cases, it is tempting to identify these 'enriched' propositions with what the speaker said, or stated. This familiar phenomenon of saying something that goes beyond the standing meaning of the sentence you have uttered raises a notoriously difficult theoretical question that S&S seek to answer in terms of QUDs - why *that* enrichment, rather than some other?

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<sup>14</sup> According to so-called *semantic minimalists* such as Borg (2004, 2019) and Cappelen & Lepore (2005), 'all well-formed declarative sentences (relativized to a context of utterance)' will express such a minimal content 'in virtue of the standard lexico-syntactic constituents of those sentences alone' (Borg 2019, p. 513). As Borg nicely puts it, 'what you see is what you get' when it comes to minimal content: 'the [minimal] content of a sentence is exhausted by the words and structure its surface shows it to contain' (Borg *ibid.*). Though many theorists have been skeptical of the claim that we can always find such a truth-evaluable, minimal content for all declarative sentences (see, for example, Bach (2006)), S&S are not. Rather, they worry that such minimal contents cannot plausibly be identified with 'what is said' by the sentence in the context. According to S&S, although 'the truth conditions of sentences relative to context often coincide with the "minimal" content', we should reject the thesis that the minimal content is *always* coincidental with "what is said"; S&S's own positive theory purports to show how, and why, "what is said" can be at variance with the minimal content of the uttered sentence. For more on semantic minimalism, see Borg (*ibids.*) and Cappelen & Lepore (*ibid.*), as well as Camp (2007) and Recanati (2006) for a helpful critical discussion.

Roughly put, Schoubye & Stokke hold that a proposition will count as ‘what is said’ by an utterance just in case it is appropriately related to the context-invariant meanings of the words uttered and an answer, or partial answer, to the QUD operative in the context. More specifically, they claim:

What is said by a sentence  $S$  relative to a context  $c$  and a question  $q_c$  (where  $q_c$  is the QUD in  $c$ ) is the weakest relevant proposition  $\phi$  such that  $\phi$  either entails or is entailed by the minimal content of  $S$  in  $c$  (Schoubye & Stokke 2016: 783).

where (i) the “minimal content” of  $S$  is a truth-conditionally evaluable proposition that is the compositionally-determined ‘semantic value’ of its parts, (ii) a proposition is relevant in a context  $C$  iff it answers, or partially answers, the operative QUD in  $C$ , and (iii) a proposition  $p$  is ‘weaker’ than  $q$  iff  $q$  entails  $p$  but not conversely.

Following S&S, let us think of a conversation in broadly Stalnakerian terms: a conversation is, in effect, a game of collaborative inquiry between participants, supported by a jointly-accessible body of information, or a *common ground* (Stalnaker 2014). We can then characterize the common ground of a conversation as the set of propositions mutually accepted, or presupposed, by speaker and hearer, and the *context set* as the set of possible worlds compatible with that common ground. The QUDs represent the *goals* of this collaborative game: figuring out how the world is, and thereby reducing the context set to a single possible world (the actual one).

In these terms, we can then model the conversational contribution made by asking a question as a matter of adding additional structure to the worlds in the context set; specifically, it is a matter of partitioning among the worlds in the context according to the content of the question. For example, if among the worlds in the context set are  $p$  worlds,  $q$  worlds, and  $r$  worlds, then a question with  $p$ ,  $q$ ,  $r$  as

mutually exclusive answers will partition things up accordingly. Answering the question updates the discourse context to include all and only those worlds compatible with that answer (cf Murray 2014).

For example, we can take a QUD, say, ‘Who in this room is engaged to each other?’, to induce a partition between those worlds in which for any pair a,b of individuals in the room (including Jack and Jill) a and b are engaged, and the worlds in which they are not engaged. Relative to this QUD, the proposition that Jack and Jill are getting married to each other is the weakest proposition that entails the minimal content of (6). A similar story can be told for (7). In these cases, ‘what is said’ entails, but is not entailed by, the minimal content of the words the speaker has used. In other cases, however, S&S allow that what is said can itself be entailed by the minimal content of the sentence uttered as in the case of (8) uttered in response to the question ‘How bad is Oscar’s paper cut?’:

(8) He is not going to die. (Bach 2001)

Here, what the speaker intuitively expresses is that Oscar is not going to die *from that cut*; a proposition entailed by the minimal content of (8).<sup>15</sup>

While S&S couch their official analysis in terms of ‘what is said by a sentence in a context’, we take this as a harmless labeling of a more basic speech-act theoretic notion of ‘what the speaker said by using that sentence in the context’. We suspect that S&S should have no objection to this given (i) that in their own discussion they use ‘what is said’ and ‘what the sentence can be used to express’ interchangeably and (ii) that the (very) compelling data they use to motivate their account turn on intuitions regarding the contextual variability of what speakers literally mean by uttering a sentence.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> S&S make this allowance for cases in which the contextually enriched material falls within the scope of a downward entailing operators, e.g., ‘He is **not** going to die from that cut’. See Section 5.1 (ibid.).

<sup>16</sup> An additional reason for suspecting that S&S are trying to account for a speech-act theoretic notion of ‘what is said’ is that it is unclear what else they could be after (they clearly aren’t, for e.g., offering an account of ‘what is said’ by S in the sense of specifying what S compositionally contributes to larger constructions in which it occurs).

S&S's account of what is said is elegant and (as will emerge below) it calls our attention to some important connections between QUDs and utterance interpretation. Moreover, their account should be appealing to any theorist who finds the Intentionalist picture of utterance content presented in Section Two as not sufficiently constrained by the lexico-syntactic features of the sentence uttered by the speaker. But is it correct as a foundational account of a speech act theoretic notion of what is said? We have serious doubts that it could be. Insofar as (a) the notion of 'what is said' is tied to assertoric speech act notions such as *saying*, *stating*, *telling*, etc., and (b) the QUD is not simply one aspect of the speaker's communicative intentions, the foregoing suggestion is founded on a confusion; in particular, a confusion of the evidential and background motivational considerations regarding why the speaker stated what she did with the metaphysical determinants thereof.

Our skepticism doesn't just flow from the Intentionalist's first principles; it is intuitive. Quite generally, when confronted with the claim that some factor F, which is extrinsic to (i) the speaker's meaning-intentions and (ii) the standing meaning of her words, figures essentially in the determination of utterance content, the Intentionalist must show that varying F while holding (i) and (ii) fixed makes no difference to the force or content of the speech act. Here, for example, assuming the QUD is extrinsic to the communicative intentions of the speaker and to the compositionally-determined semantic value of the sentence uttered, we can vary the former, while holding the latter fixed. To generate counterexamples, we then take any case in which a competent speaker literally utters a declarative sentence in the indicative mood and hold fixed her meaning intentions while varying the QUD as you like. As best we can see, you will have thereby fixed what she said/stated in the speech-act theoretic sense; what potentially varies with the QUD is merely whether the speaker is, or is not, being helpful.

Consider, for example, a competent speaker, Rosa, who utters (9) intending to get her audience, Carla, to actively entertain *that it is hot in San Marcos, Texas* on the basis of their recognition of her efforts:

(9) It's hot.

Even in a context where it is already mutually known that it is hot in San Marcos - and there is consequently no open QUD regarding the matter - won't Rosa still have said/stated that it's hot in San Marcos? If so, what is said need not be an answer or partial answer to an operative question. Likewise, suppose that while at the outset of a meal at a local restaurant, Carla asks Rosa 'How are things with your Uncle?', or whatever other question you like. Though Rosa understands Carla's question, she nevertheless volunteers (10) intending for Carla to entertain that her (Rosa's) food is too cold to eat:

(10) It's too cold.

We think it is clear that in this case Rosa said that her food is too cold to eat even though this response is in no sense answering an antecedently given QUD. Such cases show, we claim, that what a speaker says - even in cases of contextual underdetermination - simply need not be an answer to the QUD. A speaker might, for whatever, reason say something that is not responsive to the current interests of her and her interlocutor (as in cases of conversational interjections) While such a speaker might, in some very general sense, be uncooperative, they are not, for that reason, barred from saying what they mean. Anyone privy to a political debate in the last 20 years can attest to the fact that there is no metaphysical bar on a speaker saying something that is overtly non-responsive to a mutually understood QUD; some politicians have made a career out of systematically saying things that are unresponsive to the questions raised by their interlocutors.

The foregoing consideration also threatens the sufficiency of S&S's account. Suppose that in uttering (9) Rosa's meaning-intentions are held fixed as before, but her audience who has just explicitly



asked her ‘How are things with your uncle?’ takes her as having said that *it is hot where her uncle lives* (assuming this is not in San Marcos). This proposition meets S&S’s conditions; it is an answer to the operative QUD that entails the minimal content of the sentence uttered. But is it something Rosa said? Though Carla should not be *blamed* for taking the speaker as having said that (more anon), but is her interpretation correct? First, notice that in this example, the speaker clearly did not (by stipulation) intend any such thing; rather, what *she* meant was that it is hot *in San Marcos*. This is clearly something a competent speaker *could* literally mean in uttering (9) and her utterance was not, in any way, non-literal (it wasn’t metaphorical, figurative, or the like). Hence, Rosa *literally meant* that it is hot in San Marcos and we think that anything you literally mean by an utterance should count as something you said/stated therein. This thought is further supported by the fact that there is a clear sense in which the speaker’s audience would have failed to understand her utterance of (9) if she failed to entertain that it is hot in San Marcos. Understanding an assertoric speech act, such as an act of *saying*, requires grasping both the force and content thereof. In this case, Carla grasps the former, but misunderstands the latter, and with that the speaker, Rosa, herself. In short, the Intentionalist can give a plausible story about why Carla *will reasonably, but mistakenly* take Rosa to have stated something false about how things are where her uncle lives. Consideration of cases like this one suggests that the fact that a particular proposition has the status of (partially) answering a QUD (call it ‘answer-status’) can sometimes be part of the reason why a cooperative speaker was initially motivated to make the particular contribution that she did (more below), but crucially it does not plausibly figure in the *metaphysical* account of what determines what her conversational contribution was.

In the foregoing examples, we claim that competent, yet less than ideally cooperative, speakers can say things that are non-responsive to the mutually understood QUD. Interestingly, however, there are also cases in which the speaker is intending to answer the mutually understood QUD that are problematic for S&S’s account. Suppose that Carla has just asked Oscar (i) ‘What non-alloyed material is strong

enough to build my radio transistor out of?’ to which Oscar replies by uttering (11) in the (mistaken) belief that aluminum is not an alloy:

(11) Aluminum is strong enough.

Even though Oscar has (intuitively) said *that aluminum is strong enough for her radio transistor*, that proposition will not count as even a partial answer to the QUD on the model provided by S&S. Given the standard Hamblin-style semantics for questions that S&S assume, the relevant QUD, (11a), introduces a ‘set of alternatives’ that can be arrived at via abstracting over the Wh-element and then applying the resulting property to each entity in the domain’ (Hamblin 1973):

(11a) What kind of non-alloyed material is strong enough for the radio transistor?

In this case, that would give us the following set of set of possible worlds::

{ {w | Copper is strong enough to build her radio transistor in w}, {w | Iron is strong enough to build her radio transistor from in w}, ... }

A full answer to (11a) would entail an evaluation of true/false at each world in this set; a partial answer to at least one. But since (unbeknownst to our speaker) Aluminum is an alloy, what he has intuitively said will not entail an evaluation of true/false in any world in the alternative set of (11a). If this is correct, what is (intuitively) said need not be an answer (or partial answer) to a mutually recognized QUD even when both the speaker and hearer are jointly intending to address it.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> To respond by claiming that Oscar’s contribution does count as an answer because he intended it to do so would be to a short step from collapsing the S&S framework into a version of Intentionalism.

We think the foregoing points are enough to raise doubt about S&S's account as a story about "what is said", at least if that notion is intended to be answerable to our intuitions about what speakers say, state, assert, etc..<sup>18</sup> But even apart from the counterexamples, we think that the story regarding QUDs and their potential role in pragmatics that you would expect given Intentionalism is simply more plausible. As we see it, the insights provided by S&S's account are more reasonably seen as one part of the epistemological story concerning utterance interpretation.

The important kernel of truth in the model provided by S&S is that a proposition's having the status of an answer to an operative QUD is sometimes very good evidence regarding what the speaker said. For example, in the case involving Carla's utterance of (9) above, it seems perfectly *reasonable* for her audience to take her as having said something that is an answer to her question (namely, that it is hot where her Uncle lives) even though we argued that is not what she actually stated. It is crucial, however, to not overly generalize from this point. For one thing, our epistemic access to anything resembling a QUD for a speaker's utterance oftentimes proceeds via way of our antecedent grasp of what she meant/said (as in virtually all cases of discourse initial assertions). It is precisely because questions are not invariably given in advance of our interpretive efforts that we have a conventional means of making questions explicit. Moreover, even when there is plausibly an antecedent QUD, the evidence it provides of what is said is defeasible - for example, it can be defeated by evidence the speaker is being uncooperative, speaking figuratively, giving voice to a spontaneously occurring thought or concern ("Did you remember to shut the lights?"), etc.. Further, this evidence is also *variable* in that it is possible for there to be cases in which the fact that a proposition has answer-status to a QUD actually counts against the speaker's having meant it. Suppose that the elder stateswoman, Sen. Evasive, has a very well-known track record of misleading and evading questions from reporters. Given this background, the fact that she would be directly answering your question if she meant that p is thus evidence that she must be

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<sup>18</sup> See (Grindrod & Borg 2019) for important additional criticisms of S&S's account.

meaning/stating something else. Such cases might be unusual. But, rare or not, they suffice to show that having answer-status is of variable relevance to interpretation, just as the Particularist would expect.

For an Intentionalist, it is unsurprising that speakers oftentimes tailor acts of meaning to suit what they believe to be the current interests of their hearer. If you know your audience is or would be interested in discussing whether Q and you have information on the matter that might help to settle the issue, you will, if feeling helpful, take that into consideration in planning your subsequent communicative contributions. Sometimes, we mean what we do, when we do, in part for the more general purpose of answering a question we take our audience to have in mind. That is, as Grice remarked about the CP, simply part and parcel of “what a decent chap should be expected to do”. The role of QUDs in the theory of meaning and interpretation should be understood accordingly; that a proposition answers an operative QUD is merely one consideration (among others) that can sometimes favor the hypothesis the speaker meant it - literally, or otherwise.

## 6. Closing

In the foregoing, we have argued that Intentionalists should be Particularists; they should embrace the Wild West. The Intentionalist thesis about the (non) role of sentence meaning in the metaphysical determination of utterance content needs to be understood to apply to every other aspect of the speaker’s utterance (other than that the speaker produced it with the communicative intentions she did). That it was *relevant*, or *informative*, or *interesting*, or *pertaining to a mutually understood topic*, and so on; these features do not enter into the metaphysical grounds of utterance content. And while our focus here has been with Intentionalism, we strongly suspect that *any* plausible view of speaker-meaning and utterance content will ultimately lead to the Wild West.<sup>19</sup> Reflecting on the defeasible, and variable, role that

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<sup>19</sup> Even those who deny that speaker meaning is to be understood as *fully* grounded in speaker’s intentions will acknowledge that utterance interpretation requires the recognition of some, or other, aspect of the speaker’s mental life or her reasons for uttering what she did. It is, we think, a short step from this acknowledgment to the Wild West,

features such as relevance play in utterance interpretation should make us suspicious of the search for robust, explanatory, predictive principles that offer much by way of improvement on the Gricean platitudes concerning what, as Grice himself once put it, ‘a decent chap should be expected to do’.<sup>20</sup>

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but we will have to wait for another occasion to show this. See, for instance Brandom (1994), Davis (2002), Kukla & Lance (2009), Michaelson (forthcoming) for some important alternatives to the Gricean, Intentionalist story.

<sup>20</sup> Thanks to Samuel Cantor, Jonathan Dancy, Sinan Dogramaci, Daniel Drucker, Daniel Harris, Megan Hyska, Al Martinich, David Sosa, Meg Viers, and an anonymous referee for this journal for crucial feedback on drafts of this paper. We would also like to thank the participants in Ray's Spring 2015 graduate seminar on Action Theory, as well as those in attendance at Ray and Josh Dever's Spring 2020 course 'Language, Action, and Decision'. An earlier version of this material was presented at the 2020 Central APA. We would like to thank Karen Lewis for her fantastic comments and criticisms that helped shape our final draft. .

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