**‘Good Vibrations’**

Henry Schiller

Critical Notice of *The Politics of Language* by David Beaver and Jason Stanley

**Meaning and Manipulation**

Good intentions can be undermined by the social and political contexts in which intentional action occurs. Consider an architect working on plans for a detached, single-family home in a suburban development in the USA. Passionate about architecture, they take pride in building comfortable, functional dwellings. Nevertheless, various aspects of the home—from its layout to its location ten miles from the nearest grocery store—*reinforce car-centric and individualistic ideologies* that the architect may even explicitly avow. The builders, structural engineers, and carpenters who have contributed to the project are all active participants in this ideology too, whether they like it or not.

In *The Politics of Language*, David Beaver and Jason Stanley make the case for thinking that being part of a linguistic community is a bit like building a house in Pflugerville, Texas. Even when we wish to communicate in a straightforward and helpful way, there may be all sorts of unintended side effects to our speech. One upshot of this is that otherwise well-meaning individuals can make unintended contributions to the spread of ideologies through their participation in apparently innocuous conversational activities. Indeed, the pernicious effects of our language may fly completely under the radar of conscious awareness. But language can also be strategically manipulated in order to take advantage of this capacity for arational influence.

One project of *The Politics of Language* is to draw on work from across the cognitive and social sciences to explain how these practices are enabled and sustained by arational, sub-doxastic and automatic cognitive mechanisms that have been studied in relative isolation from one another. With respect to this synoptic project, I think the book is a major accomplishment: a sweeping and important piece of what Philip Kitcher calls *synthetic philosophy*, and a cross-disciplinary triumph that—in my opinion—should be read by philosophers of science and sociologists interested in the scientific study of language and linguistic practices.

But it is the book’s *other* project—that of developing a heterodox theory of linguistic communication broad enough to include these things—with which this critical notice is concerned. And while I think there is still a lot to love here, my praise is occasionally more circumspect. Philosophers of language who are interested in the compositional, functional, and rational aspects of meaning may not feel as though they have much to discover in this book. And this to me is a bit of a shame, because (and now I’m speaking for my own community of practice) we *do* engage in more-or-less exactly the narrow-minded and myopic explanatory practices that Beaver & Stanley accuse us of.

Beaver & Stanley present their own theory in contrast to what they call the ‘standard model’—and sometimes the ‘content-delivery model’—of linguistic communication. They characterize this with a collection of maxims that guide most contemporary theorizing about language (Ch. 9, § 2: pp. 361-362). On the standard model, we assert sentences in order to convey an intended meaning, which can be inferred from the *sentence’s* meaning evaluated at the context in which the assertion was produced.[[1]](#footnote-1) Assertions occur in the course of joint inquiries, which are organized around questions about the way the world is, which we aim to answer by establishing joint commitments to propositions (the information we mutually take for granted as true).[[2]](#footnote-2)

Standard theories of meaning and communication are aimed at capturing intuitions about (a) what it’s possible to *infer* from a well-formed utterance (usually captured in judgments about truth and felicity) and (b) what kinds of communicative actions we perform during a conversation in order that we be understood. This view of communication has the benefit of tightly integrating semantics with pragmatics (interpretation being driven by the very body of mutually accepted information to which it contributes) and each of these things with a version of rational psychology. But there is a lot that is missingfrom the standard model as I’ve stated it.

What’s *missing* from these theories can be summarized as: any systematic effect of language use that falls outside the purview of what we intentionally use *semantic* material to do when we converse. A bit more elaborately: how the use of language enables (and reinforces) changes in mental and social systems on the basis of non-doxastic / non-inferential sensitivities to non-semantic information. This includes various ways in which social meaning (roughly, the information conveyed by features of a language about the social identity and social location of its users) and valence framing (how the way a set of options is described makes a difference to one’s preferences from among those options) rely on subdoxastic processes.

Beaver & Stanley present an alternative view that captures these data, first discarding the notion of successful communication as an update to a shared body of information, and replacing it with a more general form of calibration between individuals and their (social) environment. The technical term that Beaver & Stanley give to these patterns of behavior and thought are *attunements*. Attunements connect us to things, and what makes a pattern of behavior, thought, or feeling an attunement to something is a kind of predictable pattern of covariation between the agent and the presence of the thing (p. 70).

We can be attuned to all sorts of things. Someone who pulls the lever in the trolley problem is behaviorally attuned to consequentialist thinking. I can become attuned to a particular power tool as the result of noticing one, or your pointing to one; but I can also be attuned to a practice of using the term ‘power tool’ (e.g. by being disposed to have thoughts about power tools—or recognize that you have thoughts about power tools—in the presence of the use of the term). Or I can be attuned to power tools *in general*: to use an example from the book (p. 70), I am attuned to power tools if the presence of one in my perceptual space activates certain affordances regarding its use. We can be attuned to groups, practices, and ideologies depending on how one’s state evolves in their presence.[[3]](#footnote-3) When you utter something like “There’s a power tool over there” if I am attuned to the practice of using English words to express thoughts—which according to the authors is a matter of my being disposed to change state in accord with the thing to which the action attunes me, presumably via some process of recognizing that action—then this will activate certain patterns of thought in me, bringing my thoughts into alignment with yours.[[4]](#footnote-4) We can become jointly or collectively attuned to something. Crucially, this kind of alignment is *not* necessarily mediated through rational inference.

Certain phenomena *by convention* function to attune us to things. Those things to which conventional practices attune us are deemed their *resonances*, which is the generalized meaning concept developed in this book. Thinking of the resonance of an action as just whatever that action attunes us to, this enables us to give a technical definition of a resonance: the resonance of any given aspect of a practice (be it a word, action, etc.) is just the set of things it makes more likely within the context of a practice. An agent’s attunements to some practice or action are thus themselves resonances of that action (or practice). Later in the book, Beaver & Stanley summarize their view as follows:

Words have resonances, all the things that are found in the contexts in which they are used. People and collections of people have attunements, which are ways of behaving, thinking, and feeling about things. When people have attunements to a word, that means not only that they have theoretical knowledge of what the word means and how it fits into the grammar, but also that they have practical knowledge. That means both that they use the word and react to use of the word in ways that are appropriate to the community of practice within which the word is found.

Beaver & Stanley claim that the resonance view is a generalization of standard theories of communication (see e.g. 14, 237, 293-4). Meaning qua informational content generalizes to resonances, which can be things as varied as propositions, objects, practices, etc. The inferential notion of uptake—on which propositional meanings are computed from utterances in a context—can be generalized to *any* kind of learning process that reliably recurs in the presence of a stimulus (e.g. reward/reinforcement learning). Finally, the idea of a context as the set of propositional contents shared among the beliefs of participants can be generalized to the collective attunements of individuals.

Because of the particular focus of this book (on social and political aspects of communication), there are many aspects of meaning and communication that have been of interest to linguists and philosophers which don’t get a lot of attention in this volume. This includes non-conventional aspects of meaning and communication: it is not clear, for instance, how the resonance view handles conversational implicatures which do not depend on conventionalized practices (i.e., truly one-off inferences about meaning intentions). I’ll set this issue aside, however, and focus on one of the book’s more directly critical elements: an argument against the ‘neutrality’ of semantic content.

**Neutrality and Rational Communication**

It is a presupposition of much work in linguistic semantics that we can *isolate* an utterance’s truth-conditions from the other sorts of effects that it might have. One objection that Beaver & Stanley level against the standard model is that truth-conditional content is *not* in-principle isolable. They put this point in terms of the *incoherence* of ‘neutral’ content. On one understanding—and here I think Beaver & Stanley will agree with me—neutral content is just content that is individuated in terms of its evaluability as *true* or *false*. Possession of such content depends on a capacity for distinguishing between different ways the world could be, based on the arrangement of objects within it.

It's true that the incoherence of this notion of neutral content would be bad news for philosophy of language, but fortunately this isn’t the case. Neutral content in this sense is, I take it, the basic currency of rational thought and deductive inference. We aren’t given any arguments that should make us call these things into question.

 Neutrality, then, could mean a lot of things; to get a grip on how its incoherence might undermine theories of meaning, we can restrict ourselves to a plausible option:[[5]](#footnote-5)

**Neutrality:** That an isolable propositional meaning plays a distinctive explanatory role in fruitful theories of communication (i.e., by contributing to a register of propositional information with which we must contend in dialogue) though it does not necessarily explain all the communicative upshots of a speech act.

Beaver & Stanley start with the observation that predicates like ‘cruel’, ‘vindictive’, and ‘selfish’ express “inherently evaluative” concepts (300).[[6]](#footnote-6) This can be inferred from the fact that concepts like these have *no neutral counterpart*. They conclude that the concepts these terms denote are thus invariably involved in evaluative judgments. But these observations—they argue—extend to even apparently neutral terms like ‘dog’, ‘yawl’, and ‘beech’, each of which encodes perspectives of its own. Terms like ‘dog’ and ‘canine’ may *look* like neutral counterparts of a term like ‘cur’, but (as they rightly point out) in fact come loaded with varying degrees of pretension and negative connotation. Thus we can conclude that all expression involving such terms (indeed all thought) is inherently perspectival, and neutral communication therefore not possible.

I agree that terms like ‘dog’ and ‘beech’ can carry all sorts of social implications. I’m just not so sure about what conclusions we should draw from this. For one thing, the apparently perspective-laden nature of some uses of the term ‘dog’ could be attributed to polysemy, with ‘dog’ denoting different concepts in different contexts of use (Pietroski 2018), or tokening a concept that is itself extensionally variable across contexts (Quilty- Dunn 2021).

But it also isn’t clear to me where perspective is to be located in communication. For all that is said in this chapter, it could be that *inquiries*, rather than individual speech acts, are the sources of non-neutrality in language; a position that is compatible with the standard view. When you inquire about what kind of animal is on the porch and I say ‘It’s a dog’ it could be true that I express a thought with inherently perspective-laden content. But the point of doing so is staking a truth-conditional commitment (i.e. drawing attention to the way the world is) versus an evaluative or perspectival one. That is, while you may hold me to account for my choice of word, relative to the inquiry in question my commitments can be cashed out in terms of truth conditional information.

Plainly, when we token concepts like ‘cruel’ in judgments like (1) and (2) we do give voice to inherently evaluative attitudes, and participate in “a practice of condemning” an action or person.

1. Rita is a rather cruel person.
2. Rita isn’t cruel, she’s just misunderstood.[[7]](#footnote-7)

But what is such a practice if not a kind of moral inquiry?[[8]](#footnote-8) The claim that certain of our terms *belong* to certain kinds of inquiry is certainly a very interesting one—not unrelated to Kaufmann’s (2018) claim that imperative sentences conventionally encode certain practical inquiries—that is, statements like these require you to take a stance (e.g. express condemnation) with respect to some system of evaluation, where such stance-taking serves a function of resolving inquiries (cf: Roberts 1996), either within or about evaluative systems.

Beaver & Stanley require a much stronger claim to be true: that any act of speech or thought tokening a thick moral concept like ‘cruel’ or ‘vindictive’ commits you to such an evaluation. But this is less than obvious, as these concepts can be tokened in opaque contexts with no apparent commitment to an evaluation, as is the case when I dispassionately say “Sheila doesn’t think that Rita is cruel”. Such uses seem to convey something about someone else’s evaluations (or lack thereof), rather than one’s own. This suggests that even explicitly evaluative concepts can be utilized in the course of merely conveying information, and that it is *inquiries* rather than concepts that commit us to certain evaluations and perspectives. Non-neutrality is a feature of *inquiries* rather than judgments.[[9]](#footnote-9)

This also makes the lack of a neutral counterpart a bit of a red herring: ‘cruel’ could be said to denote precisely those individuals and actions that a given system of evaluation produces a certain set of judgments about. What it would take for me to determine precisely who belongs in the extension of your use of the term ‘cruel’ would involve identifying its precise function within a system of evaluation (i.e., what is the function of a cruelty judgment as opposed to a mean- ness judgment?) as well as the precise contours of your moral system. That’s hard to do, but at the same time it’s an ineliminable aspect of communication: if your moral stance is sufficiently removed from mine have to understand your evaluations of cruelty in terms of my best guess about exactly this kind of information. Communication is often less than fully successful, and we make do with coarse grained information *about* this sort of stuff in settling all sorts of inquiries.

Indeed, neutral content has all sorts of important functions. Isolating truth-conditional content from other sorts of information conveyed by utterances gives us some purchase on a variety of social phenomena: e.g., the intuitive distinction between an instance of lying and an instance of misleading (Michaelson 2016), or the core set of facts for which a speaker is ‘on the hook’ and can be held to account (Brandom 1994).

**Meaning and Explanation**

This last comment points to an important virtue of the standard account. Among the things that a theory of linguistic communication should explain is how linguistic interpretation can come to drive rational behavior. If you tell me that we’re out of cat food, then part of the explanation for why I subsequently go to the pet store and buy more cat food is a belief I’ve formed about how much cat food we have left (none). The content of this belief is—not coincidentally—the *content of your communicative intention*: on the standard content-delivery model, it is in virtue of inferring your communicative intention that I come to form this belief. Moreover, this explanation *generalizes* in that explanations/predictions of my behavior will vary in systematic ways depending on the content of the utterance in question. Facts about the meaning of an utterance form the *basis* for propositional attitudes that figure into rationalizing explanations of action.

Beaver & Stanley take the phenomena that theories of communication are on the hook for explaining to be more varied than just the recovery and acquisition of propositional attitudes. This includes, for instance, the way in which a slurring term may cause harm to the target of a slur (e.g. by frightening them), but may have a somewhat different effect on a member of one’s community of practice (e.g. inculcating them into a racist practice). The resonance theory of meaning is an informational one, through and through, and I think that pushing on the question of what exactly it is to be sensitive to information is an important thing to do. But it wasn’t clear to me how the special theoretical tools of this book fit into these explanations—I’ll try to make my confusion clear in this section.

Plausibly, the term ‘Jew’ has in its extension Jewish people, insofar as it can be reliably used to denote that socioethnic group. As Beaver & Stanley rightly note, the standard term for a socioethnic group can take on new resonances when this term is tokened in a practice “within which slurs are used to refer to Jewish people” (383). Relative to this community of practice, then, a resonance of the term ‘Jew’ will be the attitude of disdain towards Jewish people, and the term *possesses* this resonance precisely *because* it is used to signal disdain. So among the resonances of the term ‘Jew’ will be the target socioethnic group (this resonance corresponds to the term’s ‘neutral’ denotation), the different communities of practice in which the term has different associations, and the associations themselves (both the negative attitudes of the speaker and those that the use of the term inculcates in its audience). As far as an explanation of the apparent *badness* of certain uses of the term ‘Jew’, this seems pretty good to me.[[10]](#footnote-10)

But when it comes to explanations of how such uses contribute to the production of intentional behavior, resonances as such can be more or less inert. Someone who is the target of a slur may be *hurt* by the use of a slur and—setting aside complicated questions raised by the intentions behind its use—this pain may be the result of emotional, attentional and affective sensitivities triggered by its use. But what relationship must these affective attitudes bear to the ideological resonances of the use of the slur in order for us to consider the former a kind of ‘uptake’ of, or based on, the latter?

If my attunement to a use of a term is just what that term reliably causes, and if the presupposed resonances of that term are just what its use reliably signals, then it doesn’t seem like there needs to be any *particular* relationship between these two things in order for us to say that the former is an ‘interpretation’ of the latter (on our generalized notion of interpretation). In other words, such a response can be broadly correlated with other resonances of the use of the term within a slurring practice (and thereby make the respondent attuned to those things) without the response being *driven by* a sensitivity to those other sresonances. Even if these affective responses move in lockstep with the demeaning attitudes inherent to the practice (perhaps because they have a mutual cause), the causal mechanisms that link these things are left opaque by the theory—but these are the things we are really interested in.

Consider two explanations given in the book: the explanation of how we adjust to presuppositions in cases of valence framing and the explanation of the harmful- ness of slurs. In each of these cases, there is appeal made to the resonances of particular terms:

[W]e can reframe the framing discussion in our own terms, by saying that the difference between the conditions is one of reso- nance: the saving lives wording has different resonances than the people dying wording. In these terms, probably the most important difference between the wordings concerns the fact that people have different emotional attunements to uses of “saving lives” than to uses of “people dying”; that is, the first has an emotionally positive resonance, and the second has an emotionally negative resonance. We can also say, relatedly, that the two wordings have different attentional effects. Whereas “saving lives” draws attention to a positive aspect of the outcome, “people dying” draws attention to a negative aspect of the outcome.

The resonances of the slur include these attentional and emotional effects on members of the target group, a range of attunements belonging to the presupposed discriminatory ideology, a demarcation of in-group and out-group, and power differentials between these groups. (388)

In each of these explanations, I’m not sure what we gain by appeal to resonances *in addition to* appealing to things like attentional effects and associations that ride on top of traditional notions of content.

Now, I really want to emphasize that I agree with Beaver & Stanley that in each of these cases it’s pretty difficult to explain what’s going on in terms of doxastic update on some propositional information,[[11]](#footnote-11) and I am very sympathetic to their positive proposals. But what is of interest here is the underlying cognitive mechanisms that explain/drive our attunements.

In fact, we could go even further and point out that one such underlying cognitive mechanism is the *interpretation of propositional meanings*, or even a mechanism of intention recognition (cf: Harris 2019). Abstracting away to the resonance level may cause us to lose sight of this. Meaning interpretation is thus one path via which we become attuned to resonances, and is often something we do in spite of engaging in a kind of meta-communicative recognition of the resonances of speech acts.

This is not to say that I want us to abandon the resonance ideology: I’m more optimistic about its prospects for enabling certain kinds of predictions about how individuals are likely to become attuned to particular practices. I also think it can be clearly of interest to a certain kind of generalization we might be inclined to make. It seems especially useful for locating otherwise possibly innocuous sets of claims in pernicious ideologies. But Beaver & Stanley describe their endeavor in terms of “a worthwhile intellectual exercise to attempt to approach the theory of meaning without reference to ‘content,’ and without some of the assumptions commonly associated with its use” (63-4). I think this is to throw out the rational baby with the idealizing bathwater: content is an important link between theories of meaning and theories of reasons and rationality.

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1. Semantic content is sometimes thought to constitute the strongest or most central kind of commitment a speaker can make, but there is much disagreement over the relationship between the compositionally tractable aspects of meaning and the content of an assertoric commitment. For instance, whether semantic content is constitutive of our communicative commitments or merely serves as evidence of our intentions. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Granting a conservative extension in order to cover things like imperatives, we might hold that some such inquiries are resolved by the adoption of properties that serve as the contents of intentions / pro-attitudes rather than propositions (Roberts 2023). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In fact the authors define ideologies in terms of attunements, as sets of collective attunements belonging to communities of practice (see p. 388). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Beaver & Stanley sometimes claim to capture this kind of update in terms of attuning us “cognitively to properties of the external world” (299). But then they also describe the resonances of words in terms of the thoughts they express (228) which seems to suggest that what straightforward speech attunes us to is *properties of thought*, and not the external world. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Often Beaver & Stanley appear to be arguing against a much stronger position: that *all* of the communicative upshots of a speech act are explained by an isolable propositional meaning—one that can be algorithmically recovered from the use of a sentence in a context—and moreover the state of mind *expressed* by the speech act performed in conveying that content is characterized by its possession. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. My discussion here will run roughshod over differences between terms and concepts, eschewing the practice of denoting concepts like ‘dog’ with capitalized letters (i.e. DOG). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Not to mention all the things you might be able to infer about me, the writer, on the basis of my choice of example. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The concepts need not even be tokened: the response in (4b) could have easily been ‘No, she’s just misunderstood’ and the same evaluative perspective would have been expressed. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Even here we could dig our heels in and complain that perspectival requirements are just very strong evidential ones. Paradigm perspectival terms like ‘tasty’ and ‘beautiful’ appear to require some stance taken by the speaker… until they don’t, as when a chef observes the reaction of a group to their cooking and concludes “It’s delicious”, or when someone about to enter a museum, observing the line to the gallery growing longer and longer, concludes “The painting must be very beautiful” (must here serving as a link to an epistemic conclusion). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Though I have my reservations: for one thing, the damage of a slur is notoriously difficult for us to articulate in any precise manner, and may apparently vary from person to person and context to context (though I base this latter point mostly on personal correspondence). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This isn’t to say—I think—that such explanations are incoherent. Contemporary work that broadly falls under the classification of Rational Speech Act theory appears to be an attempt at providing such explanations, for instance. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)