

Talking About: A Response to Bowker, Keiser, Michaelson

Elmar Unnsteinsson

Forthcoming in a Special Issue of *Inquiry* (2024)

Draft only, comments welcome

Abstract

I respond to comments from Mark Bowker [↗](#), Jessica Keiser [↗](#), and Eliot Michaelson [↗](#) on my book, *Talking About*. The response clarifies my stance on the nature of reference, conflicting intentions, and the sense in which language may have proper functions.

1 Introduction

How do we use language to refer to whatever we have in mind? The question is deceptively simple. The complications are right there, however, for everyone to see. The question invokes *language*, *language use*, *reference*, and *human minds*, and we should not pretend to know the whole truth about any of these things. In *Talking About*, however, I try to answer the question by integrating a great deal of both classic and current work—in philosophy, cognitive science, and elsewhere—and by making some very specific assumptions about the four troublemakers, again; *language*, *use*, *reference*, *minds*.

The central notion is pragmatic competence. This is the capacity to perform speech acts with a suite of specific audience-directed intentions. The capacity is grounded and explained by the normal operation of some biological, cognitive mechanism in humans. Aliens and AIs might certainly have something similar or functionally equivalent but still, the target is to understand the human capacity. The capacity to perform speech acts in which one refers to a single object

^{*}(✉) elmar.geir@gmail.com

is a very sophisticated aspect of pragmatic competence. I argue that such acts of reference have a proper function, namely, that they provide evidence of a referential intention. I think referential intentions are real phenomena in human brains, basically, they are sometimes part of the initial planning stages of utterance production. Moreover, I argue that such intentions can, in certain very specific circumstances, be irredeemably confused. Strictly speaking, on my view, those who are confused in this way will fail to refer to anything by the relevant utterances, because the intentions fail to determine any single object as the referent.

This is all very abstract, of course, and might seem rather irrelevant to our original question. On the contrary, I believe this forms the basis of a highly fruitful research program into language, its use and misuse, and mental representation. This basis is constructed from the pieces that were needed to develop an empirically sensible answer to the original question. And, anyway, I try to argue that the notion of confusion, which I alluded to, has been central to the peculiarly *philosophical* approach to this question since the dawn of analytic philosophy. Very roughly, it will turn out that the examples of reference most interesting to philosophers, are ones which *edenic intentionalism*—the label for my theory—says are not good examples of reference at all. They lead us down a very narrow path of unmotivated proposals which are doomed to have little uptake outside of the puzzle-driven provinces of philosophy.

I am exceedingly grateful to my three commentators, for presenting three independent and detailed challenges to the theory presented in *Talking About*. The challenges are well articulated and interesting and they strike at three pillars of my view: *reference*, *confusion*, and *function*. I will address each challenge in turn and—spoiler alert—reemerge completely unharmed. Or so I think at least. Each challenge gives me the opportunity, however, to add important details or background to the relevant arguments and ideas, which are often not spelled out sufficiently in the book itself.

2 The Remnants of Reference

Mark Bowker presents a challenge to my notion of reference. As I see it, the challenge has two aspects. First, he argues that there is nothing left for reference to do, once the edenic intentionalist has explained what happens in cases of confusion. Since we need not assume that the speaker referred to anything, when the speaker was relevantly confused, but can still explain why the hearer

could arrive at better or worse interpretations, we have all we need. Reference simply drops out of the picture. Second, he also points out that the theory seems to place too much of a burden on speakers, in assuming that they must provide *optimal* evidence for a referential intention when, of course, various mangled or otherwise mismanaged utterances would seem to do a perfectly adequate job of conveying the intended message.

I'll start by noting that I am very sympathetic to the underlying force of the worry, and I believe that my response is simply a clarification of the original view. The basic picture of reference in *Talking About* is one which explains reference in terms of acting with an intention to refer. Certainly, we are still allowed to idealize in giving formal semantic models and assume that expressions simply refer to objects. But the idealizations earn their keep by modeling aspects of the mind which explain pragmatic and linguistic competence. But I also want to take seriously the possibility that sometimes the intention itself is internally conflicting and fails to determine a single object, even when hearers have no trouble assigning some object or other, and no practical problems arise. My proposal is that, in such cases, the act of referring fails to serve its proper function. And that function is to provide evidence of a referential intention. When the action does not malfunction in this particular manner, we can identify the referent as whatever the speaker intended to refer to.

Still, I'm not confident that my interpretation of Bowker is correct. For example, after discussing Kripke's example of referring to Jones or Smith raking the leaves, he asks: "If we can explain the speaker's communicative intentions and the audience's interpretation, what need do we have for a further theory of reference?" (Bowker 2023). Again, I agree with the reductionist aspirations, but it seems like we would at least want to have something to say about (i) the relationship between the intention and the corresponding action, and (ii) the differences between cases where the interpretation is true and cases where it is false. Some might think that spelling this out amounts to a 'further theory of reference,' for the act might have referential properties and coordination might be an important success condition on the speaker's performance. Whether we call this a further theory is, it seems, mostly a verbal issue.

Edenic intentionalism has much to say about both topics. As I argue in chapter 3, the relationship between representational states, like intentions, and representational acts is complicated and interesting in its own right. Much is to be gained by keeping the two phenomena separate in theorizing about pragmatic competence and its mechanisms. But more to the point, if intentions are psychological and ultimately biological phenomena, they should tend to malfunction in

all sorts of ways in guiding action. I think this helps us to discover new constraints, within a broadly reductionist and intentionalist program, on successful coordination. The very earliest stages of speech production, planning, and design, might become corrupt in interesting ways.

The example of ‘Francis Bacon,’ which I discuss in chapter 6 and Bowker uses to explain combinatory confusion (Bowker 2023: 3–4), is helpful to illustrate the point. Speaking to two people at the same time, it is entirely possible, even if unlikely, for me to utter (1) with two referential intentions.

(1) Francis Bacon is famous.

Say my audience consists of A and B. I may thus intend A to take me to be referring to the philosopher and B to take me to be referring to the painter. I have then two distinct, audience-directed intentions. They are distinguished both by their target audience, A or B, and by their target referent, the philosopher or the painter. It is no problem to identify success and failure of audience-directed reference in this case, it is merely different for different members of the audience.

Moreover, it makes little difference to assume that I misspoke and uttered (2) instead, holding everything else fixed.

(2) Franklin Bacon is famous.

Surely, it could then be more difficult for the audience to recognize my referential intentions, but if they can understand that I’m talking about two men called Francis Bacon, then they will have interpreted my utterance correctly. There is an identifiable mistake because, presumably, my target was to utter (1) and not (2) (Unnsteinsson 2017). This can be a mistake in lexical selection or only in pronunciation, but if the intention was to utter (1) and to refer to the two men named Francis, the audience gets it right by carrying on as if (1) was actually uttered. People do something like this all the time, mostly without awareness, compensating for wrongly selected words or badly executed articulations. But, obviously, this makes our theory of what constitutes a correct interpretation much more complicated. For example, what should we say if the audience simply starts believing, in virtue of hearing (2), that they’ve been wrong and Francis is really named Franklin? Well, *something* went wrong, but they still seem to have recognized my referential intentions.

The real motivation behind edenic intentionalism, however, is a more radical mistake. Could we somehow collapse my intended audience, when I utter (1), to a single person and, also, make me unaware that my referential intention really

determines two distinct people? That may sound implausible but, on reflection, it seems possible. On my official view, this can happen if the speaker implicitly believes that the two Bacons are identical. That hypothesis raises puzzles of its own, which I address in chapter 2, but Bowker sets those aside. Let's instead pretend that I simply continue to have two distinct referential intentions but now they are only distinct in virtue of having different target referents. I am not aware of having two such intentions. In the original case, I would probably be aware of this, since my two intentions are directed at different audience-members. Notice that it is perfectly coherent to suppose that I am aware of the difference in this new example. I could stipulate in advance that when I utter 'Francis Bacon' in (1), it is intended to refer equally to the philosopher and the painter. Unusual, yes, but not incoherent.

To put the point as generally as possible, the incoherence is due to a fundamental conflict in my plan of action. My plan, in uttering 'Francis Bacon' in (1), is to make my audience attend to a single individual, the single person I think of as the bearer of that name. Officially, I think this derives from the fact that a normal utterance of a singular term has the characteristic or proper function of referring singularly, but let's put that aside for now. This part of my plan is inconsistent with having two referential intentions with respect to my utterance of 'Francis Bacon.' One intention determines the philosopher and the other determines the painter. But my plan was for my act of referring to be evidence of a *single* referential intention, which determines only a *single* individual. Thus, my two intentions make it impossible for me to actually further my overall plan. Consider a simple analogy. The day comes when you conceive a dislike for your donkey. His name is Sam. Thus you instruct me to shoot Sam, with one shot, and I adopt this as my plan. When I draw the gun, however, and for no known reason, rational or otherwise, I somehow form two intentions; to shoot Sam and to shoot Bam. I have these two intentions in pulling the trigger and it is not really possible to shoot both in a single shot. My overall plan is incoherent and cannot be satisfied.

I hope it is now clear why I propose that, when we encounter inconsistencies of this sort, we should not assign any single object as the referent of the act of uttering 'Francis Bacon.' We *could* assign two referents, but I don't think this strategy makes much of a difference. Even if my audience understands me perfectly, in the sense that they recognize that I have two intentions where my 'plan' in some broader sense, was to have only one, it's not as if we can talk straightforwardly about communicative success. The act itself was dysfunctional in such a way as to fail to determine its own conditions of success. This is why I label this

type of dysfunction ‘constitutive’ rather than merely ‘contextual’ or ‘external’ (see chapter 5). I also think this shows that I am not committed to a ‘further theory of reference’ in the sense intended by Bowker. When we, as theorists, assign referents to utterances, they are fully determined by the intentions and plans of the speaker. So, there is no referent over and above the speaker’s intention and the audience’s interpretation. I have tried to put the point very generally here—without recourse to mechanisms and their functions, for example—but the result is unmistakable; there is no referent when those plans and intentions are internally conflicting.

Finally, I will briefly address Bowker’s point about optimality. Clearly, speakers very often fail to provide the most useful or appropriate evidence for their audience to infer what they mean. This is the case for the malapropism in (2) (‘Franklin Bacon is famous’). Being suboptimal, however, does not lead to failures of reference or meaning. But optimality is definitely something cooperative speakers aim for, in the concrete sense that in uttering (2) I would normally have misspoken and intended to produce (1). So, there is little reason to think that inadvertently providing less-than-perfect evidence for a communicative intention has any effect on what the speaker means or refers to. That is to say, the communicative intention and the speech act are still coherent enough to determine what the speaker means on a given occasion. Now, why talk about optimality at all then?

Well, for one thing, we somehow need to exclude speakers who intentionally provide useless or irrelevant evidence for their intentions. This is basically what happens in Humpty Dumpty cases. The speaker must at least not believe that the speech act in question stands absolutely no chance of conveying whatever they intend to convey by that speech act. But is 1% chance enough? Well, as I try to explain chapter 5, section 3.3, this kind of question misses the point. True, you will be an extremely bad communicator if you are generally happy about producing utterances which have a very low probability of being correctly understood. So, this affects your pragmatic competence *broadly construed*. There is a more narrow possibility however, namely where the speaker is wired in such a way that they generally aim to produce evidence that they take to be useless to the audience, relative to their communicative intention. Such a speaker will fail to acquire pragmatic competence *narrowly construed*, because they do not have the normal capacity to produce speech acts with the appropriate set of audience-directed intentions.

3 The Things We Intend

Jessica Keiser (2023b) develops a seemingly compelling argument against certain aspects of my theory of confusion. Very graciously, however, she acknowledges that the broader picture, i.e., edenic intentionalism and the theory of referential competence, would remain intact even if she were right. The role of the theory of confusion is, as she puts it, ‘defensive’ and its details can be modified without much explanatory loss. I agree with this latter point, but I still think that her arguments are not on target.

But there is also something else I agree with her about. She points out that being confused is not sufficient for reference failure and that this must be what I had in mind by adding that the speaker needs to be ‘relevantly’ confused in my characterization of the Edenic Constraint. And, very helpfully, she suggests that the force of ‘relevantly’ must have something to do with *conflicting referential intentions*. That is to say, confusion only corrupts the act of referring if it gives rise to an actual conflict in the intention to refer. So far, I am in complete agreement, and perhaps the point is not stated clearly enough in the book itself.

On this basis, however, Keiser mounts a serious challenge. Or so it may seem. Roughly, she agrees that *certain cases* of combinatory confusion give rise to the requisite conflict. But certain other cases don’t and, more pressingly, no cases of separatory confusion give rise to conflicting intentions. Again, she thinks this is less of a problem than it may appear at first, because edenic intentionalism can stand perfectly well on combinatory confusion alone. As I said, however, I still want to defend my picture of confusion as such.

Now, we should not quibble about cases, especially since Keiser takes issue with many of my own judgments about various scenarios I describe in the book. She agrees that combinatory confusion *can* give rise to relevantly conflicting intentions, so I put to one side the point that there are cases where this does not seem to happen, only to emphasize that this was part of the theory all along. She claims, however, that separatory confusion *does not* give rise to relevantly conflicting intentions. What is her argument for this? The basic point is that we would have to ascribe ‘implausibly complicated’ intentions to speakers. Since speakers do not in fact have such complicated intentions, there is no such thing as reference failure in virtue of separatory confusion. For example, Lois simply will not have the intention to refer to some unique object o such that $o = \text{Superman}$ and $o \neq \text{Clark Kent}$, even in some cases where she falsely and actively believes that $\text{Superman} = \text{Clark Kent}$.

This is where we disagree. To state the nature of our disagreement more care-

fully, my view is that Lois *can* truly have such a conflicting intention, but also that the false belief is not by itself a sufficient condition for the conflict. Furthermore, I believe that the relevant intentions are not implausibly complicated and, in fact, that they are just as complicated as the ones we need for the combinatory case, at least for normal adult speakers. Moreover, they are just as complicated as Keiser herself would require if she were to spell out her own position at the end of her response. Basically, she holds that singular reference requires the speaker to intend to refer *only* to the object in question, and that no other intention is necessary. In particular, the speaker can have this *only*-intention, without any extra intention about *not* referring to salient objects which are *not* identical to the object. As we will see, I do not think this is a stable position.¹ Keiser's argument provides a perfect opportunity, however, to try to present edenic intentionalism in a way which manifests the relevant equivalence of the two kinds of conflict. I now recognize that this is not obvious in the book itself—and of course there also are interesting differences between the kinds of confusion—but it is an important part of the theory.

Let's focus on the content of a particular utterance, intended by the speaker to refer to a unique object. In line with pre-edenic intentionalism, we assume that the singular content of the utterance, if it has any, is fixed by the speaker's singular referential intention. This means that the speaker performs the act and intends some target audience to recognize the act, among other things, as evidence for an intention to refer to a unique object. Now we can ask, what must the mechanism of referential competence be like to explain how the speech act uniquely determines the relevant object? Notice that I have shifted the attention from the intention itself and to the characteristic or normal function of the underlying mechanism. It may seem like I'm changing the subject. And I am, but for good reason.

At a first pass, the mechanism must satisfy two constraints. The first constraint states that the speaker is free to intend anything which they take to be

¹In a somewhat similar vein, I would argue that Heck (2024: 29n67) fails to show that Frege cases do not require "any attitude about identity." Heck gives an alleged counterexample, aimed at one of my papers (Unnsteinsson 2019), where two speakers *wonder* whether *x* and *y* are the same (Heck 2024: 29). To my ears, that is an attitude about identity. Also, Heck's claim that *a* and *b* will differ in cognitive value or content (2003: 88; 2024: 4), in natural language sentences of the form *Fa* and *Fb*, is only plausible if the relevant thinker or speaker does not already believe that *a* is identical to *b*. Otherwise, they *can* very easily be cognitively equivalent, which was all I needed for my point that Frege puzzles require some assumptions about identity-attitudes. But see Unnsteinsson (2018) and chapters 1 and 2 of *Talking About* for more detail, for inquisitive attitudes do indeed raise some interesting issues in this context.

identical to whatever they already intend by the utterance. Call this constraint **COMBINE**. By contrast, the second constraint states that the speaker is *not* free to intend anything which they take to be non-identical to whatever they already intend. Call the second constraint **SEPARATE**. These are constraints on the normal operation of the mechanism of referential competence in the sense that speakers who, in virtue of how they are cognitively constituted, violate the constraints, will thereby lack said competence. Speakers who are built to form intentions in violation of the **SEPARATE** constraint will tend not to have normal or easily satisfied referential intentions. That is, they will allow for a radical inconsistency, such that they may intend one object ‘uniquely’ while intending some other object, which they take to be distinct, by the very same ‘unique’ intention. Now, let’s try to spell this out more precisely, with emphasis on the kinds of intentions which the mechanism *allows*.

UNIQUENESS

S intends *o* uniquely by uttering *U*, only if

[**COMBINE**] $\forall x(S \text{ believes } x = o \rightarrow \Diamond(S \text{ intends } x))$

[**SEPARATE**] $\forall y(S \text{ believes } y \neq o \rightarrow \Diamond(S \text{ intends not } y))$

Notice that this formulation of **SEPARATE** is slightly stronger than the earlier statement. The speaker is not allowed to intend what is distinct. But the speaker is allowed to form an intention not to refer to the non-identical object. This stronger constraint applies with equal force to the proper function of the relevant mechanism. Note, also, that Keiser does not really contradict this proposal explicitly. She would add that speakers do not actually form the kinds of intentions allowed by the **SEPARATE** constraint.

The disagreement can now be stated precisely. Edenic intentionalism holds that the two constraints apply to referentially competent speakers, regardless of whether they ever actually form the types of intentions specified in the consequents. In each case, the belief makes the formation of the corresponding intention possible. As mentioned before, however, the belief might sometimes not be causally efficacious enough to bring about the difference in the intentional state. Edenic intentionalism also holds that, as a matter of fact, competent speakers will sometimes form intentions in accordance with the consequent in either constraint.

Keiser seems to endorse what I have said about **COMBINE** but has doubts about **SEPARATE**. But the two constraints seem to be exactly alike when it comes the cognitive capacities or effort required in the formation of the intention. True, the

latter constraint introduces negation—more properly, the intended avoidance of an object—but, as we will see, this is not an extra burden for normally competent speakers.

Let's consider a few examples to illustrate the point. I am confused about Francis Bacon as before, and think of the painter and the philosopher as one person. Call them Bacon 1 and Bacon 2 respectively. Assume that I utter 'He' in (3) intending to refer uniquely to o such that $o = \text{Bacon 1}$.

(3) He is famous.

There will be another object x , such that $x = \text{Bacon 2}$. If I believe that $x = o$, I will (possibly) intend to refer to x uniquely. Thus I intend to refer uniquely to Bacon 1 and to refer uniquely to Bacon 2. Not quite as unique as I was after. But, admittedly, the extent to which I actually have an intention to refer to Bacon 2 seems to be determined, at least in part, by the nature or relative activation of my belief. In the extreme case, if my 'belief' is merely a dispositional state, in that I am disposed to form the belief when I finally become acquainted with Bacon 2, it is unlikely that the intention is formed (see Unnsteinsson (2018) for more examples of this kind).

Now, what about SEPARATE? Say I separate JFK and John F. Kennedy and we are talking about US presidents. 'JFK' and 'John F. Kennedy' are both highly salient. I utter 'He' in (4) intending to refer uniquely to o such that $o = \text{John F. Kennedy}$.

(4) He was presidential.

There will be an identical object y , such that $y = \text{JFK}$. If I believe $y \neq o$, I will possibly intend not to refer to y uniquely. If we are also talking about Nixon, I will also possibly intend not to refer to Nixon with 'He.' This is part of the description of the proper function of the mechanism which explains the capacity for unique reference. Suppose, for reductio, that SEPARATE is not part of UNIQUENESS. Then, whenever I intend to refer uniquely to o by uttering 'He,' and I believe that some y is *not* identical to o , I will be free to intend to refer uniquely to y *as well*, by the same utterance-part. But unique determination is *not* free in this way. The freedom in question would rather be essential to the intention to determine exactly two objects, for example.

Here is another way to look at this. SEPARATE is concerned to deny (5) and COMBINE is concerned to deny (6), where *SB* abbreviates 'S believes' and *SI* abbreviates 'S intends.'

- (5) $\forall y(SB(y \neq o) \rightarrow \diamond(SI(y)))$
 (6) $\forall x(SB(x = o) \rightarrow \diamond(SI(\neg x)))$

So, SEPARATE rules out a certain y -directed intentional state, given a particular identity-of- y -belief. And COMBINE rules out a different state, given another identity-belief. This is just to point out that SEPARATE can be formulated as ruling out the formation of an intention to refer to y rather than as making possible the intention to refer *not* to y .

Keiser is certainly right to point out that often the belief in question will not be causally relevant enough to make the corresponding intention conflicting. My point is rather that this can happen and, moreover, that the belief can be equally (ir)relevant in COMBINE and in SEPARATE. Again, if my conflation of the two Bacons is merely dispositional, triggered by certain very rare situations, the belief is perhaps powerless. Similarly, if we imagine that ‘JFK’ is not at all salient in the conversation, and my non-identification of the referent of ‘JFK’ and ‘John F. Kennedy’ is incidental and dispositional, it is hard to see any resulting conflict in the referential intention itself. Note that, in this context, ‘dispositional’ belief is merely being disposed to believe, not a belief state partly or wholly constituted by a disposition.

It is also true that SEPARATE is slightly more complicated than COMBINE, but only insofar as the concept of difference is more complicated than the concept of sameness. There is compelling empirical evidence for the view that infants represent the abstract concept of sameness. The evidence is less compelling, for infants, when it comes to difference, and there is some reason to think that it is composed from negation and sameness. This would explain the added complexity (for recent discussion and data, see Hochmann 2021 and Hochmann, Mody and Carey 2016). But normal adults clearly represent both concepts very easily and, more importantly, they are both involved in the representation of uniqueness. Singular reference is one kind of unique determination which, as we have seen, by its nature excludes non-identical objects. Crucially, however, the mechanism of referential competence does not require an explicit representation—for example, concrete token in the language of thought—whose explicit content is the sameness or difference of the objects (Unnsteinsson 2024b goes into more detail on this point).

Here I feel compelled to give more examples, because they seem to be what originally motivated the worry. These are supposed to illustrate the ordinariness of the type of intention required by the SEPARATE constraint. Consider two examples of uniqueness which is not due to any *referential* intention. First, another

day comes when you conceive a dislike for your donkey. Now Bam is the subject of your displeasure. You urge me to shoot Bam and I reluctantly oblige. While taking my aim, another donkey repeatedly gets in the way, so I need to readjust while desperately suppressing my emotions. I am disgusted by my own violent intent. The donkey who is constantly getting in the way is Sam. I definitely do not intend to kill Sam, she has always been my favorite donkey. It seems fair to say that when I shoot, I intend thereby to hit Bam and I intend not to hit Sam. Moreover, it seems undeniable that my intention *not* to hit Sam is a real feature of my overall planning state. I actively and maybe even consciously intend to make sure that the bullet does not hit Sam, and this explains many potential features of my intentionally controlled behavior. Any doubt makes me nervous and less likely to shoot.

The second example makes use of the analogy with memory, which plays a big role in *Talking About*. Say that I see an old acquaintance walking on the other side of the street. She does not notice me and I only vaguely remember her. Bored, I form the intention to remember her name. I know that it starts with 'W.' 'Whitney' immediately comes to mind but I know that's wrong. I feel like 'Whitney' now blocks my access to my memory, because it constantly reappears when I try to remember her real name. My intention is *not* to remember the name Whitney but some other name that starts with 'W.' The name was Wendy. Again, it seems undeniable that I intended to remember 'Wendy' and intended not to remember 'Whitney.'

Finally, it is easy to see how these examples can be altered to create the mental state of separatory confusion. Assume that Bam = Sam, while I still believe (falsely) that there are two separate donkeys. This will obviously end in disaster, especially if 'Sam' is my favorite donkey but killing 'Bam' doesn't bother me as much. If I follow my own plan 'successfully,' I will intentionally kill Bam/Sam (under the guise 'Bam') while intending not to kill Bam/Sam (under the guise 'Sam'). In the memory example, assume that the first name that comes to mind, 'Whitney,' actually is the name I was looking for all along. I just don't recognize that this is so. In such a case I will confusedly but actively intend not to remember the name that happens to be the one I intend to remember. How wonderfully confused but also perfectly mundane. It should not bother us very much that we don't have a very clear answer, relative to the time of confusion, to two questions: What donkey did I intend to shoot? And what name did I intend to remember? Edenic intentionalism is the view that we should adopt the same attitude to the intention to refer.

Let's now apply this to reference more explicitly. Assume that Lois takes

herself to love Superman and hate Clark Kent. She is sitting in a café, scribbling randomly in her notebook. Her thoughts continue to go back and forth; one moment she's thinking how much she loves Superman, the next she's overwhelmed by how much she hates Clark. She writes (7) in her notebook.

(7) I hate him!

I take the *act of writing* to be an utterance, leaving marks on the page. She definitely intended to refer to Clark by the act of writing 'him' in (7). But I want to say that, quite *possibly*, she also intended to refer to Clark such that Clark \neq Superman. That is to say, by the performance she also intended *not* to refer to Clark, i.e., to someone who is not Clark. It is in the nature of her overall plan that she would *avoid* referring to Superman and *seek* to refer to Clark by writing 'him' in (7). Imagine, for example, that she gets distracted after writing 'hate,' starts to think lovingly of Superman while watching some birds fly, and then has to complete her sentence. A momentary glance at the page even makes her automatically entertain the unwanted thought that she hates *Superman*. With regained composure, her *avoidance* of Superman in adding 'him' is robustly intentional.

As already noted, Keiser argues that this is not so. On her view, Lois intends to refer *only* to Clark. She does not, at the same time, intend to refer not to Superman. But if Keiser's notion of *only*-reference allows that the speaker can intend only x , while also intending some y , such that the speaker believes that $x \neq y$, it hardly seems coherent. Such a speaker would fail to instantiate normal referential competence. At the very least, pragmatic competence is so constituted as to allow for the intentions specified in the two constraints on UNIQUENESS. Also, it is worth noting that 'only' is among the most controversial expressions in linguistic semantics (Horn 2009). Still, it is standardly taken to have an 'exclusive implication,' so that 'only x is F ' implies 'nothing other than x is F ' (e.g., Roberts 2011). By the examples adduced above, it seems like speakers can, if the circumstances are right, intend their utterance to have this implication. If so, they will sometimes intend not to refer to whatever they take to be non-identical to the *only* object they intend. For both combinatory and separatory confusion, nothing more is needed for edenic intentionalism to stand on its own feet.

It is very easy to lose track of the bigger picture when focused on details and made-up examples. So, I'll briefly explain why, according to edenic intentionalism, this result is significant. In presenting classic Fregean puzzles about, say, the identity of Hesperus and Phosphorus, theorists always make the kinds of assumptions I have been spelling out above. That is to say, we are told to focus on

a single identity, ‘ $a = b$ ’ or two sentences with co-referring terms, ‘ a is F ’ and ‘ b is F ’. Then we are asked to consider their relative cognitive significance. So, this always involves an explicit comparison between information states where some apparently new information is added. What does ‘Clark flies’ add to Lois’ information state, assuming that she already knows that Superman flies? What does ‘Superman = Clark’ add to her information state, assuming that she believes it is false? It is built into the presentation of these kinds of puzzles that two expressions or information states are very relevant or salient. Or so I argue in *Talking About*. More importantly, the false non-identity attitude involving those two expressions is absolutely crucial to the very motivation of the puzzles. The attitude also needs to be more robust than some merely incidental disposition or action. So, the assumptions were there all along, that is, the assumptions needed for (separatory) confusion to introduce conflict into the corresponding referential intention. My conclusion is that, whatever interest these puzzles have, they do not call for a theory which assigns *unique* objects as referents to the relevant acts of referring performed by confused speakers. This is compatible with thinking that, when there is no conflict or disruptive confusion, the referent is determined by the referential intention.

4 Language and Other Things

Eliot Michaelson takes a deep dive into the metaphysics of language and its functions. So, I will try to dive there with him, although it may be hard to coordinate our buoyancy. In brief, I think he makes many valuable suggestions—especially about the importance of sociolinguistic variation and the interesting affinity between my view and Keiser’s (2023a)—while the more critical remarks seem less problematic than advertised. Specifically, once the notions of *function* and *language* have been clarified and properly understood, Michaelson’s remarks will mostly appear as welcome suggestions about what philosophers of language should focus on.

So, I shall start by explaining the sense in which traits can have multiple proper functions. Then I will distinguish four senses of the word ‘language,’ only one of which is a biological trait. The other three senses are further removed from the claims made in *Talking About* than Michaelson seems to suggest. Second, I will reject Michaelson’s argument that confused uses of language appear to serve some cognitive function as such. Finally, I will correct a common misconception about the relation between Chomskyan grammatical competence

and pragmatic competence. This provides an opportunity to point out that sociolinguistic variation is not incompatible with a communicative hypothesis, far from it, but constitutes one of the many interesting linguistic phenomena we need to explain. My project in *Talking About* was not aimed at giving such an explanation, however.

4.1 Functions and Languages

Cognitive mechanisms are biological traits. I assume a generalized selected effects theory of function *for* biological traits, at least the traits I am concerned with. Roughly, on this view, a proper function of a device is any activity that causes the differential retention or reproduction of the device in a population (Garson 2017: 524). The theory is certainly not uncontroversial but, as I argue in *Talking About*, even instrumentalists about function should allow that *some* functions are etiological in this sense. That is all I need. And, obviously, it does not follow that other things cannot have functions in some related sense; human artifacts, the universe, the word ‘unicorn,’ or whatever. Further, traits can in principle have an indefinite number of functions, all of which can be *proper*, *normal*, or *characteristic*. These expressions make clear that the activity in question must contribute to the retention of the trait in the population. Some activities contribute more than others. Also, some activities are functional in a more minimal sense—genuinely *performed* by the organism on some occasion, in virtue of its biological makeup—without making any contribution to trait-maintenance.

Traits can have multiple proper functions in at least two different ways. First, traits can be originally selected for one role but actively maintained for another. Both will count as the trait’s proper functions although, as Ruth Millikan points out, the first might only be interesting to the paleontologist (Millikan 1993: 47, see also her 1984: 32). Second, the trait can be actively maintained in the population for more than a single role. Examples of such traits in biology are rampant and, arguably, we should expect even more examples for cognitive mechanisms. Millikan mentions the example of wings in birds. For some birds the wings have the proper function of enabling flight and, in addition, the proper function of mantling. Human noses do not have the proper function of holding eyeglasses in place, since no genetic changes in human ancestry are plausibly traced to this activity (1993: 48).

Now turn to a few standard assumptions about *language*. It’s high on the list of the most slippery words in the cognitive sciences. We should start by talking only of natural languages, namely languages which can be acquired or

learned by humans as their first language. This excludes the languages of mathematics or logic, and innate languages of thought, for example. Then we can make three generally recognized distinctions between ways in which speakers ‘know or have (a) natural language.’ First, the speaker may be endowed with a language-acquisition device, i.e., a language faculty. Second, the speaker may have acquired some natural language rather than none at all. Third, the speaker may have acquired a *particular* language, like English or Icelandic, as opposed to some other language, like Russian or Irish. Each of these three senses has been used to argue for significant cognitive effects of ‘language.’ Chomskyans standardly argue for the cognitive relevance of the language faculty (see Dupre 2020). Vygotskians do the same for knowing some language or other (e.g., Clark 1998, Lupyan 2016). And Whorfians have long been seeking evidence for cognitive differences between speakers of different natural languages (e.g., Malt 2020, Lupyan and Bergen 2016).

The only reason why there is no empirical work on whether any of these three senses of ‘language’ gives rise to *communicative* differences between subjects, is because it is so utterly obvious. So, none of this work goes against the dogma that communication is a function of ‘language,’ even if it may add other functions. Remarkably, this obvious but pertinent point is not mentioned very often.

To put my cards on the table, I think the evidence for a *cognitive* function becomes weaker as we move down the list of three. But even for latter-day Whorfians, the empirical data is impressive although the cognitive effects are less dramatic than advertised. In my view, the work tends to show that words are effective activators for categorial concepts which, plausibly, enhances cognitive control. Cognitive control involves the maintenance of information in working memory and the inhibition of dominant responses, and linguistic labels seem useful for these tasks (Vygotsky) (e.g., Morasch, Raj and Bell 2013). And it may then also matter *which* concepts acquire labels and which do not (Whorf). Regardless, we should see all three groups as providing some reasons to think that ‘language’ has a cognitive *proper function*. But the distinctions are strictly orthogonal and ‘language,’ in any of the three senses, might very well have been selected *originally* for cognition and then *retained* for communication, or vice versa. Retention may also be due to both cognitive and communicative activities, to different degrees.

And yet, already we should start to feel that the terminology is foundering. Language is *not* a biological trait unless we focus on the Chomskyan interpretation. Moreover, in *Talking About*, I don’t argue for any claim about the proper

function of ‘language’ in any of the three senses. I do, however, argue that communication is the proper function of pragmatic competence and I argue that cognition is probably *not* its proper function. Pragmatic competence is the capacity to perform speech acts with audience-directed communicative intentions and it is a trait. Natural languages supercharge this capacity by adding the enormous resources of syntax and semantics. Perhaps those resources are provided by the language faculty, which might be part of our biological endowment in virtue of its outsized contribution to the development of distinctively human forms of cognition. My argument in the book does not require any commitment on that point however. Relatedly, I need not deny the possibility that pragmatic competence has *also* been retained in the species because of its beneficial effects on cognition.

What then gives me the right to focus only on communication? As Michaelson points out, I ultimately adopt this proper function as a ‘working hypothesis.’ But it may be unclear what this amounts to, so I want to spell this out more precisely. There are two aspects. First, other theories of the nature of speech acts do not provide a different, incompatible function for the underlying capacity. Second, the hypothesis furnishes compelling answers to well-known problems and puzzles, answers which are not obviously provided by other functional hypotheses, despite Michaelson’s claim to the contrary. These points simply invite controversy by their level of abstraction from the data; hence the working hypothesis.

Let’s start with the first aspect. In chapter 4 of *Talking About*, I argue that the most direct and obvious competitor to the intentionalist and functionalist theory of speech acts is *expressionism*. Basically, the expressionist would hold that pragmatic competence is the capacity to *express thoughts*, regardless of audiences or communication. I try to show that this view, when properly developed, would collapse into intentionalism. This is because expressing thoughts is in general intentionally produced activity directed at minded creatures. So, the cognitive mechanism of thought expression is already recruited by our communicative capacities, and we should only posit one mechanism for both activities (see also Unnsteinsson 2023c). Thus, I say, the mechanism of pragmatic competence has a communicative proper function. Sure, the mechanism may also be retained for its cognitive effects, but we have not found a positive argument to support this view and, moreover, it is compatible with the idea that communication is either more or equally important to the mechanism’s retention. I also hold that other theories of speech acts—conventionalism for instance—are similarly vulnerable if they are taken to involve functions which are incompatible with communication. Notice, however, that proponents of said theories need not be quite so happy to

acquiesce in talk of proper function. This is a mistake of a more general nature, as I think mechanisms and their functions represent the only territory open to theories of speech acts. Otherwise the subject matter of the theory tends to be a box of unbridled speculation.

Second, the function remains a working hypothesis because it needs to be judged by its ultimate explanatory power, once developed in sufficient detail. This is more difficult when many distinct functions are assumed and the particular benefits of edenic intentionalism are not forthcoming on other assumptions (more on this shortly, for Michaelson disputes the point). The major consequence I argue for is a plausible resolution of various puzzles due to the mental state of confusion. If we place the mechanism of speaker meaning within the broader context of communicative goals, plans, and intentions, we are able to understand exactly what kind of malfunction is produced by confused reference. This explains both the past fascination and the actual relevance of the puzzles. Past fascination was due to the conflicting judgments people are disposed to make in response to various cases, which seemed like a perfect test to adjudicate between theories, usually before the theories had been developed in sufficient detail for this to work. But the conflicting judgments—sometimes called ‘intuitions’—are predicted on a more basic theory of the mental state giving rise to conflicting intentions; a mental state in which objects are gerrymandered by the identity relation. The actual relevance of the puzzles is that they are windows into the underlying mental state itself.

Michaelson might accuse me of avoiding the real basis of his critique. And yes, in one sense that is what I have done. For he would appear to add a *fourth* sense of ‘language’ to our list, when he speaks of the proper functions of the *use* of some particular natural language. Call this a ‘token-function’ to keep it separate from the other three. If proper function is ‘a bunch of hooey’ as he puts it, then this fourth sense is hooey upon hooey. That is, if this fourth sense is not based on or somehow reduced to the function of a *trait*. The analogy with memory is helpful yet again. Surely, the human capacity to store memories can have a proper function—it is a trait—just like the capacity for language. But the other senses are less clearly functional. What is the function of having some memories rather than none at all? What is the function of having some particular collection of memories rather than some other collection? The first question corresponds to the Vygotskian option about language and the second to the Whorfian. Particular memories do not have functions which are independent of the function of *memory*. Likewise for language. The ‘function’ of English will at least be compatible with the function of the cognitive capacity for language. And Michaelson offers

no argument against assigning proper functions to such biological capacities.

Now, let's add Michaelson's token-function to this proliferation of functions. What would be the function of activating a particular memory of my mother on given occasion? Well, I might do it to feel good, out of habit, to imagine a conversation with her, and so on. Whatever the 'use' of a token memory-activation happens to be, it is going to be compatible with, or parasitic on, the basic function of memory itself. This is true whether or not the proper function of memory is non-veridical or multifarious (see pp. 102–3 in *Talking About*). Why would we talk about the functions of token memory-activations at all then? Surely, it might provide some hints about the proper function of the underlying capacity. That is, if it were plain obvious that token memory-retrievals—my current memory of my mother, say—were generally incompatible with the assumed veridicality function of memory, then we might revise our theory. But we would revise our theory of the function of *memory* and only secondarily, if at all, of token memory-activations or traces. Only the former should count as a biological trait.

Turn again to language. It is certainly true that if the point, use, or function, of most token utterances were incompatible with the communication hypothesis, revisions might be in order (remember that most sperm cells fail to perform their function). But nothing of the sort is argued or suggested by Michaelson, it seems to me. The communication hypothesis is compatible with particular *uses* of language having a multiplicity of purposes. And even if sociolinguistic variation is not explained by the hypothesis, the two are not incompatible; at worst the theory is incomplete. Token English utterances *are* certainly used, very much, to communicate. But also to annoy, attack, denigrate, calculate, amuse, think, remember, sing, and the list goes on. These are not countervailing purposes and any use I can think of is at least compatible with the theory that the *capacity* to use English, or any natural language, is based on some communicative proper function. As should be clear by now, I accept that this capacity could be retained in the population in virtue of serving other functions as well, although the only one which seems both different and general enough is thought or cognition (not singing, etc.). Finally, edenic intentionalism does assign proper functions to tokenings—because confusion can disrupt the proper function of a particular act of reference—but only when there is a corresponding theoretical commitment to the function of the underlying cognitive mechanism.

4.2 Confusion and Cognition

Now I will address a more specific point Michaelson has raised. Very roughly, he holds that it may be an ‘equally important proper function of language use’ that it is used to clarify our thoughts (Michaelson 2024). Then, on my behalf, he claims that a confused utterance might be an instance of the speaker’s thought ‘becoming clear via the outward manifestation of her mentation’ (ibid). This is an interesting suggestion and I agree that something very much like this can happen. That is, we use natural language to modify, evaluate, ponder, and clarify our own thoughts. But this is compatible or even explained by the communicative function of pragmatic competence, although I will not argue for the point here (but see Balcarras (2023) and Unnsteinsson (2023c); Alshanetsky (2019) is a valuable discussion which seems closer to Michaelson’s viewpoint). We can be our own audience. Harnessing the powerful resources of our capacity to plan and design utterances, to be understood by ourselves or imagined others, can have obvious cognitive and social benefits, but it can also simply be enjoyable in and of itself (ask poets who hide everything they’ve written).

Michaelson writes that edenic intentionalism is committed to the claim that, due to the confusion, a confused speaker cannot mean anything by her utterance. The audience would be making a mistake, he says, if they think she meant anything at all. This is not correct. There is a specific singular proposition which the speaker cannot mean or intend by a particular utterance on that occasion. But she utters a sentence type which has some meaning in the language and, presumably, she means whatever the sentence type means. And many other things as well (she means to assert rather than to request, to implicate something, etc.). Most importantly, she means for the listener to recognize that she has an effective intention although, on the edenic theory, the effective intention is corrupt in a specific way. Regardless, the audience can recognize the speaker as intending or trying to communicate something. Success is relative to plans and speakers have many plans.

The correction shows that Michaelson’s case for introducing a cognitive function to make sense of what the confused speaker means is weaker than it seems. The radical consequences alluded to are not actual consequences of the intentionalist alternative. Even so, Michaelson might be right to argue that the cognitive function hypothesis provides the most satisfying explanation. This would indeed be a challenge to edenic intentionalism, because confused utterances would seem to provide some evidence for the cognitive proper function of the mechanism of pragmatic competence (e.g., as understood by an expressionist).

So, let's consider Michaelson's example. My daughter is confused about her teddy bear; there were two teddies, but she thinks there is only one, and she calls him Malcolm. She holds Malcolm-1, Malcolm-2 is nowhere in the vicinity, and she says 'Malcolm really needs a wash.' Use (M) to label this utterance. Michaelson claims that edenic intentionalism predicts that reference fails because, he thinks that my daughter is *never* in a position to refer to one of the teddies rather than the other. But this is not a prediction of the view. My responses to Bowker and Keiser have indicated some of the reasons for this, but Michaelson's challenge presents an opportunity to make two additional points of clarification.

First, on the BELIEF MODEL of identity confusion, developed in chapter 2, the combinatorily confused speaker must stand in some mental, representational relation to each of the two objects individually. So, there is a sense in which the objects are separated in cognition. This is undeniable, for the speaker will sometimes be in perceptual contact only with one of the objects and not to the other. In such a situation, if the speaker uses a demonstrative to refer to the object determined by their perception, they will be able to refer to an object about which they are confused. Just imagine a case where my daughter sees Malcolm-1 in some distance but, because it is so dirty, does not recognize her teddy bear immediately. In that case, she might ask, 'Is *that* my teddy?' or 'What is *that*?' and, plausibly, refer successfully to Malcolm-1 by uttering 'that,' even if we assume the EDENIC CONSTRAINT.

Second, and more to Michaelson's point, it is very unclear how (M) is an instance of the thought-clarifying function of our linguistic capacities. I agree that the context—since only Malcolm-1 is near—is one which makes it reasonable for the audience to treat only Malcolm-1 as the referent. But the speaker's thought is just as confused as before; she presumably has not advanced to the belief that 'Malcolm' names two teddy bears rather than one (or none, if she happens to have read my book). So, (M) did not rid her of her confusion. What else could the clarification of the thought consist in, such that the clarification is brought about by uttering (M)? She presumably believes that 'Malcolm' needs a wash before, during, and after (M). She also falsely believes that Malcolm-1 is identical to Malcolm-2 at all those times.

Michaelson adds that,

...part of what might make a particular language, or set of linguistic conventions, appealing to us is precisely the resources it makes available to dissolve our confusion in cases like this one. (2024)

It is not plausible that linguistic competence has the elimination of identity con-

fusion as its proper function. But it is certainly true that natural languages which tend to decrease confusion rather than increase it are probably more appealing to us! So, as a general matter, the idea is worth considering, but it is compatible and possibly explained by an underlying communicative function.

In this context, it is worth commenting briefly on Michaelson's remarks on the features of natural language which appear to be direct *impediments* to communication. Ambiguity is a standard example here (e.g., Hauser et al. 2014: 8). First, as I have stressed, particular natural languages can be *used* to do all sorts of things, like singing or just trying to be silly, even if the biological trait or mechanism of linguistic competence has a communicative proper function. This may explain many such impediments. I'll say a little more about this in the next section when turning to sociolinguistic variation. Second, even if a device has a particular function, that very function can be part of the explanation, on a given occasion, why the device fails to perform that function. This may sound incoherent but it is not. According to the adaptive theory of human menopause, a prolonged period of individual infertility is explained by its contribution to reproductive fitness (e.g., Henrich 2015: ch. 8). If rational belief is designed to be responsive to evidence, this may be part of what makes some beliefs unresponsive or resistant to evidence, because of a backfire effect or because the evidence is preemptively undermined (e.g., Begby 2021). David Balcarras (2023) argues for this point at some length with respect to the communicative function of the language faculty and develops other examples in detail, which are more strictly analogous perhaps.

Third, many of the examples of alleged impediments to communication are not so straightforward. As Piantadosi et al. (2012) have argued, ambiguity may very well be explained by its direct contribution to communicative efficiency, provided that contextual cues are strong enough to guide interpretation anyway. This is not surprising if we take care to consider human limits on memory and processing capacity.

Where do conflicting referential intentions fit into this complicated picture? Well, they can definitely be impediments to communication, this much seems clear, even if theorists disagree about individual cases. They are not impediments to many other uses of language, like singing, making friends, or even communicating something *other* than the counterfactual singular proposition one would have meant on a better day. The fact that the impediment occurs is partly explained by the communicative function of the mechanism of pragmatic competence. So far, so good.

4.3 Pragmatic Competence and Sociolinguistics

In this final subsection, I'll address two more concerns raised by Michaelson. One about Chomsky and another about sociolinguistic variation. First, as I have argued, the type of proper function at issue in *Talking About* is one which applies to traits, cognitive mechanisms in particular. Thus I agree with Chomsky that something like the first sense of 'language' is the one on which we should focus. But, obviously, the Chomskyan language-acquisition device, or language faculty, is different from so-called pragmatic competence. To fix the terminology, Chomskians develop theories of *grammatical* competence, which is not at all the same thing as *pragmatic* competence. Something seems amiss.

Moreover, Michaelson argues that Chomsky and I are concerned with "a very different cluster of phenomena." But he pushes the point too far when he states that

...nowhere in Chomsky will one find an appeal to anything like a suite of relevant intentions to try and characterize the target phenomenon. Chomsky's target is a competence effectively stripped of all its interactional social aspects. (2024)

The only truth in this is that Chomsky focuses much more on grammatical competence. But he is in fact the person responsible for the very idea of pragmatic competence. Since this seems not to be well known, and my own proposal is directly influenced by Chomsky's, I'll make a few remarks about where 'pragmatic competence' comes from. In his middle period especially, Chomsky proposes pragmatic competence as a rich conceptual system of intentions and interpretations. In *Rules and Representations*, he writes that

A system of rules and principles constituting pragmatic competence determines how the tool [of language] can effectively be put to use. Pragmatic competence may include what Paul Grice has called a "logic of conversation." We might say that pragmatic competence places language in the institutional setting of its use, relating intentions and purposes to the linguistic means at hand. (1980: 224–5, footnote citing Wittgenstein, Austin, and Searle has been omitted)

Again, in his *Essays on Form and Interpretation*, we are told that

A person who knows a language normally knows how to use it to achieve certain human ends. We may say that he attains a system

of “pragmatic competence” interacting with his grammatical competence, characterized by the grammar. Thus we distinguish grammatical and pragmatic competence as two components of the attained cognitive state. (1977: 3)

My own theory of pragmatic competence is consciously created on the basis of this Chomskyan spin on a very Gricean idea, the seeds of which are also expressed in work by Carston (2002: 10) and Neale (2005: 188–9). See Allott and Wilson (2021) and Mao and He (2021) for recent discussions of this history. But more generally, and regardless of his remarks on pragmatic competence in particular, Chomsky’s broadly mechanistic perspective on explanation in cognitive science and Grice’s early methodological orientation, have influenced the theory in *Talking About* (Chomsky 1980, Grice 1974). This orientation is updated by new work on mechanisms and biological functions. Needless to say, however, edenic intentionalism is not anticipated by either theorist and in tension with much else of what they propose.

Within sociolinguistics, Dell Hymes’ (1977) early work was very influential and his notion of ‘communicative’ competence is in fact similar to Chomsky’s. Michaelson ends his commentary by going through some interesting facts about sociolinguistic variation which seem not to be explained by edenic intentionalism. But he also implies or asserts that this variation is incompatible with the basic Gricean picture of speech acts which I assume in the background. I hope it is clear by now why I think this is not true. Sociolinguistic variation is a fascinating topic which needs to be addressed and even if it is not explained directly by extant work in philosophy of language, this is merely a reminder of the work that remains. So, for example, even if we define a notion of ‘speaker meaning’ according to which it is determined by a complex suite of intentions whose primary objective is to achieve the production of some propositional attitude in an audience, this is not the only thing we do with language. Neither is it the only kind of *meaning* we need for a complete theory (see *Talking About*: 125–31). Talk of propositional attitudes is also part of a very useful idealization, because there certainly are other mental states which are reliably produced, intentionally or not, by the normal execution of speech acts.

This opens up such a vast and interesting area of research that I cannot do it justice here. But I will make a few brief remarks which might point in the right direction.

Consider a shorter version of one of Michaelson’s examples.

- (8) Bob needs to urinate.

(9) Bob needs to go pee-pee.

Michaelson suggests that such variation is surprising on the assumption that communication is the proper function of ‘language.’ This is because, he claims, the variation could then only be the product of randomness in the development of a ‘language’ (2024). Nothing is farther from the truth (but I have not disambiguated ‘language’ here). Even when confined to the bare basics, pragmatic competence plays some role in the explanation. For example, it is part of any normal communicative intention that the utterance is designed to be as useful as possible for the target audience, to figure out what the speaker means. A child is more likely, *ceteris paribus*, to understand (9) than (8), and the latter will normally be considered more appropriate to the context of a doctor-patient interview. Is this due to randomness? Clearly not. In this particular case, it is probably due to common beliefs about politeness, formality, informality, and the linguistic capacities of children, among other things. These kinds of beliefs and practices seep into the language itself, for example in speakers’ use of different dialects, accents, case markers, honorific address, spelling, and (seemingly co-extensive) lexical items.² But they are also relevant to more abstract features studied by sociolinguists, like register or genre, about which I’ll say more in a moment.

Staying within familiar Gricean territory, it is worth pointing out that the presumed predictions about (9) and (8) are not set in stone. First, the utterances will possibly differ in natural meaning and indirect meaning (e.g., implicature). They also allow the audience to infer different, unintended information about the speaker. Second, relative to a given idiolect at a time it is not necessarily the case that the VPs are coextensive. Sometimes this gets lost when the distinction between public language and idiolect is merely implicit. So, for example, Modern Icelandic has two verbs for consuming nutrients, ‘éta’ and ‘borða.’ In the mouths of some speakers the former is only performed by nonhuman animals and the latter only by humans. Perhaps ‘eat’ and ‘dine’ are a bit similar, and ‘urinate’ and ‘go pee-pee’ may also manifest such differences with respect to age. But this is more plausible when relativized to idiolects, because the public language meaning—arguably an abstraction over idiolect meanings—normally admits of exceptions to idiosyncratic rules. So, it can be true that a cow dines even if that’s

²Spelling is perhaps the least discussed example, but see Unnsteinsson (2022) for a case study about the Icelandic author Halldór Laxness, whose idiosyncratic spelling is essential to his fiction, but completely lost in translation. Shockingly, however, the editors ‘corrected’ his spelling in the most recent republication of his oeuvre, against his expressed wishes and artistic vision when he was alive, in pursuit of national language standardization.

an odd expression. Anyway, speakers are sometimes wrong to assume that two expressions—or translations into different languages, dialects, and idiolects—are coextensive (see Pagin 2020 for an insightful discussion).

Still, it is true that the intentionalist and functionalist framework I have argued for needs to be extended in certain ways to fully explain the relevant type of variation. But the extensions are, in my view, both natural and fruitful. Daniel W. Harris and I have recently been working on a theory of conversational *genre*, according to which there are basic and nonconventional distinctions between conversation types. We posit a limited number of such distinctions, for example to explain differences between casual conversations and more serious interactions. One distinction, for example, is between cooperative and adversarial conversations, and another between factual and make-believe conversations. We propose that these distinctions are explained by the nature and interaction between the conversation plans of interlocutors. And, very roughly, we claim that genres help to explain why certain speech acts come naturally in certain contexts and not in others. Speakers need to signal the switch in genre, for example, if they suddenly need to be taken seriously in a completely casual interaction. Finally, cognitive facility with variations in genre is part of normal pragmatic competence, augmenting our capacity to communicate by introducing the interpretive resources of recurring patterns in conversation plans.

There is no space here, of course, to spell out the theory. But I mention this, with a broad brush, to introduce my final point. Michaelson is certainly right to insist that we use English

...to build and express our personae, to facilitate a broad sense of familiarity and solidarity, to subtly drop shade on our acquaintances, to initiate and end the social practice of conversation, to give voice to pure joy and wonderment, and a great deal else besides. (2024)

At least, this is all true when we focus on the token-function of language, i.e., the purpose of a particular utterance on a given occasion of use. Still, it is important to note that we can do all of these things—build our personae for example—by recruiting our communicative capacities. That is, the persona I communicate to others or myself is part of the persona I build or create. And variation in genre is part of what explains the subtle shifts and useful versatility of natural languages which make this possible. However, we are also creatures with beliefs and desires, regardless of how we communicate, express or give voice to those beliefs and desires. So, our representational actions do not determine who we are, even

if they may determine much of what others think about us.³ The secrets I tell no one about, and try to erase from my unthinking conduct, are not part of my persona. But they are part of me all the same. More deeply still, there are beliefs and desires that I probably try to hide from myself as much as from others. Still other attitudes are simply inaccessible to my conscious awareness. The distinction between representational action and representational state, as developed in *Talking About*, is significant in this context. Roughly, the question of authenticity should only be raised for expressive action and should not permeate our very being or identity.⁴

5 Conclusion

Since Wittgenstein many have been convinced that there is a deep connection between the meaning of an expression and its use or function. Today the edict does not possess the same power of illumination; to the contrary. The notion of use is rendered useless by its bewildering reach. To take Grice's example, do I *use* 'mother' when I place a brass plaque in the form of that word on a stack of papers to keep them in place? Grice said surely not; I am less certain (1989: 366–7).

The notion of use is properly replaced by a family of narrower constructs which, taken together, explain a great deal about language and expression. Pragmatic competence is the primary notion but we should also appeal to cognitive mechanisms and their proper functions. Generally and roughly, competent speakers produce normal speech acts in virtue of their capacity to make utterances with a set of audience-directed intentions. So-called 'misuse,' for example, can then be explained in terms of the various kinds of mismatches or errors that can happen in planning, producing, and articulating the utterance. Confusion occurs at the planning phase, in the formation of communicative intent. Mispronunciation happens at later stages. The notion of misuse is too coarse-grained, just like use itself, to be of much help in this context. The functionalist perspec-

³This suggests a slightly different perspective on sociolinguistic variation than the one proposed by Ethan Nowak in a series of important papers to which Michaelson alludes (e.g., Nowak 2019, 2022, *forthcoming*; see also Eckert 2012).

⁴Elsewhere I have tried to develop a theory of expressive or communicative authenticity (Unnsteinsson 2023a, 2023b, 2024a). But this theory calls for a new perspective on the nature of the attitude of desire, especially its non-representational and non-expressive properties. This is the main focus of my current research; extending the picture of mental representation developed in *Talking About*.

tive on intentionalism also implies that errors can be common and unremarkable. We often fail to do *exactly* what we planned. And sometimes the plan itself is at fault. That makes the errors no less real and no less interesting from a theoretical perspective.

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