

# Meta-metasemantics, or The Quest for the One True Metasemantics

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## Abstract

What determines the meaning of a context-sensitive expression in a context? It is standardly assumed that, for a given expression type, there will be a unitary answer to this question; most of the literature on the subject involves arguments designed to show that one particular metasemantic proposal is superior to a specific set of alternatives. The task of the present essay will be to explore whether this is a warranted assumption, or whether the quest for the one true metasemantics might be a Quixotic one. We argue that there are good reasons—much better than are commonly appreciated—for thinking the latter, but that there nevertheless remains significant scope for metasemantic theorizing. We conclude by outlining our preferred option, metasemantic pluralism.

Keywords: metasemantics, demonstratives, reference, pluralism, particularism

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# 1 Introduction

What determines the meaning of a context-sensitive expression in a context? Most philosophers have assumed that there will be a unitary answer to this question.<sup>1</sup> Some have allowed that there might be different answers for different expressions.<sup>2</sup> Few have considered the possibility that one and the same expression might not admit a single answer.<sup>3</sup> Our aim here will be to show that there are good reasons—much better than is commonly appreciated—for giving up on the thesis that even paradigm context-sensitive terms like demonstratives should receive a unified answer to the question of what determines their meanings, or ‘semantic values’ as we will call them, in context.

We think that various stories philosophers have told about which contextual features fix the meaning facts about various sorts of context-sensitive expressions are subject to a common set of difficulties. While most metasemantic theories are in one way or another responsive to these difficulties, few are built to openly acknowledge as much. Once the issues we are concerned with have been brought to light, we think that it will become clearer why certain sorts of views have dominated the discussion, and why certain under-explored options might prove worthy of further investigation.

At the risk of spoiling the suspense, our basic diagnosis is that disputes about the

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<sup>1</sup>See Fodor and Lepore (2004) and King (2014a) for explicit commitments to this view.

<sup>2</sup>See Glanzberg (2007), for example.

<sup>3</sup>Those who accept this possibility typically do so in a limited way; Richard (2004), for example, argues against a unitary answer in the case of only a few specific expressions. See Nowak (2020) for an account of demonstratives that aims to prepare the ground for the kind of broader pluralism we defend here.

various metasemantic proposals in a given area arise at least in part because each of the following appears to be a platitude about meaning, specifically about the sort of meaning that accrues to expressions and sentences in context (to fix our terminology, we shall use ‘what is said’ as our sentence-level analogue of ‘semantic value’). Yet it turns out to be extremely difficult to offer a metasemantic theory that vindicates both:<sup>4</sup>

- (i) When it comes to ambiguous and overtly context-sensitive terms, speakers generally have a sort of privileged access to what they have said.<sup>5</sup>
- (ii) Speakers can nonetheless be mistaken about what they have said.<sup>6</sup>

Importantly, we do not take the tension between (i) and (ii) to be obvious; indeed, it will require substantial work to elucidate. Once that work is done, however, we think it becomes clear that many of the central contributions in metasemantics trade on the intuitive pull of one or the other of these platitudes, and that the resulting views typically privilege one at the expense of the other. If we are right, then debates that initially appear to be about cases turn out to be better understood as debates about how to balance the competing demands of our two platitudes.

As we illustrate below, philosophers have typically responded to the tensions lurking here by finessing the issue, developing sophisticated theories that vindicate

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<sup>4</sup>An anonymous referee points out that tension between the goal of explaining intuitions about the truth conditions of sentence or the referents of referring expressions, on the one hand, and the communicative potential or social effects of our utterances, on the other, might play a complementary role to the one we allege for our platitudes. We agree, though we lack the space to adequately explore these connections here.

<sup>5</sup>This platitude tends to be presupposed more often than it is explicitly articulated. For some exceptions, see Fodor and Lepore (2004) and Recanati (2004).

<sup>6</sup>Advocates of (ii) include Wittgenstein (1968), MacKay (1968), Putnam (1973), Kaplan (1978), and Burge (1979)—though none endorses the thesis at quite this level of generality.

one of our platitudes directly while either relegating the other to the background or re-interpreting it in some weakened form. Our aim here is not to criticize any particular method of reinterpreting or relegating, but rather to register a pair of concerns regarding the way the dialectic has unfolded in the literature.

First, we worry that philosophers engaged in these debates often privilege certain sorts of examples over others—stipulating that they are the ‘central cases’—without offering any real justification for this choice. Second, we worry that many debates in metasemantics appear to be driven by the tacit assumption that there must be a unitary answer to the question ‘What determines the semantic value of an expression in a context?’ We argue that dropping this assumption opens up space for a range of views, which we call *metasemantic pluralism*, that have been almost entirely overlooked in the literature.<sup>7</sup> In fact, there is much more to be said in favor of such views than one might have anticipated. One advantage they offer is that one need no longer engage in arguments about which cases are the ‘central’ ones *simpliciter*; rather, one can allow for centrality to vary relative to the question that one is interested in answering.

In order to make it feasible to address these topics in the course of a single essay, we focus our discussion primarily on metasemantic proposals pertaining to the simple demonstratives ‘this’ and ‘that’.<sup>8</sup> Demonstratives are a natural case to examine, given their status as paradigm context-sensitive terms and the wide variety of metasemantic theories that have been developed for them. At the end of

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<sup>7</sup>Again, however, see Nowak (2020) for a view that would count as pluralist in our sense.

<sup>8</sup>We’ll speak throughout as though the semantic values of demonstratives are objects, but we are open to their being something else (i.e. complex quantifiers, variables). See King (2014b) for a similar simplifying assumption.

the paper, we return to the question of whether the conclusions we draw for the metasemantics of demonstratives can be extended to other context-sensitive terms as well.<sup>9</sup>

## 2 Two Platitudes About Meaning

In this section, we expand on each of our two purported platitudes about meaning, explaining why we take each to have widespread appeal.

*(i) When it comes to ambiguous and overtly context-sensitive terms, speakers generally have a sort of privileged access to what they have said.*

When someone tells you something that you fail to understand, the natural thing to do is to ask them to clarify. For instance, suppose that Quijano is talking to Sancho. Pointing at his tired old nag, Quijano utters (1):

(1) This is Rocinante.

Sancho is confused. He has known the horse for a long time, and it has never been called by this name before. Could Quijano be talking about something else? To gain some clarity, Sancho might ask ‘Sir, what are you talking about?’ Regardless of how he answers, it is natural to treat Quijano’s response as authoritative, given that he is the person who produced (1).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>An anonymous referee raises a question about whether the considerations we adduce in favor of pluralism about context-sensitive expressions might extend to expressions that do not appear to vary over contexts, as well. We think that there may be interesting possibilities to be explored along these lines, but a proper investigation will have to wait for another occasion.

<sup>10</sup>To put the same point differently: in a sense, both Quijano and Sancho know *that Quijano said whatever it is that he said*. In contrast to Sancho, however, and in virtue of his being the speaker,

One appealing explanation runs as follows: speakers' intentions determine the meanings, in context, of terms like demonstratives, perhaps within certain limits. Assuming that we generally have privileged access to our own mental states—including our intentions—this means that speakers will be in a particularly good position to know what those terms mean.<sup>11</sup> To be clear, (i) needn't commit us to the claim that speakers' intentions determine the meanings of demonstratives in context. All that (i) requires is that, whatever the determinants of reference are for terms like demonstratives, speakers must generally be in a better position to access them than other participants in the conversation will tend to be.

Of course, we don't mean to suggest that one's knowledge of what one intends is infallible. Fallibility is fully compatible with (i). What matters is just that, science fiction cases aside, speakers tend to have better access to their intentions than listeners do. That seems to be true about meaning as well—particularly when it comes to the meanings, in context, of ambiguous and other highly context-sensitive terms.

*(ii) Speakers can nonetheless be mistaken about what they have said.*

To see how our second platitude works, consider a slightly modified version of Kaplan (1978)'s Carnap-Agnew case: Quijano, sitting in his study, points behind himself to where his portrait of Rocinante usually hangs. However, the portrait has been replaced by one of Rocinaún, the greatest steed in La Mancha.<sup>12</sup> Simultaneous

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Quijano should be in a position to know what it is that he said under a more substantive description as well.

<sup>11</sup>See Fodor and Lepore (2004) for reasoning along these lines.

<sup>12</sup>In the original case, at Kaplan (1978, pg. 239), a picture of Rudolf Carnap has been swapped for one of Spiro Agnew without the speaker's knowledge.

with his gesture, Quijano says:

(2) That is a portrait of my steed.

Following Kaplan, we find it natural to think of Quijano as having said something false here—specifically, something false about the portrait of Rocinaún. If that's right, then Quijano will be mistaken both about what he said, since he believes himself to have been talking about the portrait of Rocinante rather than Rocinaún, and about the truth value of his statement.

While Kaplan's case only shows that one can use a demonstrative in such a way as to mistakenly say something false, the converse also appears true. Consider a slight variation on the previous case, where Quijano instead says:

(3) That is a portrait of the greatest steed in all of La Mancha.

Since Rocinaún is in fact the greatest steed in all of La Mancha, we take it that Quijano's utterance of (3) is true. Speakers, it would seem, can be mistaken about the semantic values of the demonstratives they utter in all sorts of ways.

### **3 Familiar Metasemantic Theories**

The standard procedure for defending a metasemantic proposal about a putatively context-sensitive expression is to describe a set of hypothetical contexts of utterance, claim that they elicit certain person-in-the-street intuitions about truth conditions, and then conclude that those intuitions reveal the systematic dependence

of semantic values on whichever features of context were permuted across the hypothetical cases. So, for example, consider the following sentence:

(4) That is the Knight of Mirrors.

Intuitively, (4) is true when uttered by Sancho pointing at the Knight of Mirrors and false when uttered by Sancho pointing at the Knight of the White Moon. A theorist interested in defending a metasemantics for demonstratives based on the speaker's gestures (for example) can point to this difference in making her case. She can say: 'Look, as we vary the object ostended by the speaker, our intuitions about the truth conditions of (4) change in a predictable way. So, we should conclude that the semantic value of a demonstrative in various contexts is fixed by the speaker's gestures.'

There are two clear problems with this argument sketch. One is that it does nothing to establish that it is the speaker's gestures, as opposed to a different feature of the context (e.g. the speaker's intentions) that happens to vary together with her gestures, that is responsible for producing the intuition about truth conditions.

A second problem concerns the relationship between ordinary speaker intuitions about the truth conditions of sentences in a context, on the one hand, and claims about the semantic values of expressions that figure in those sentences, on the other. While we take it to be obviously true that intuitions about the truth conditions of certain sentences provide an important source of evidence for claims about the semantic values of the expressions involved, we take it to be just as obviously true that both truth conditions and semantic values are sophisticated the-



oretical postulates, and thus not the sort of thing about which we should expect people to have direct, veridical intuitions. This raises the possibility that our intuitive judgments about cases might be best explained by positing a possibly complex relationship between a range of semantic values and particular inquisitive environments.

Most of the literature on demonstratives—and indeed, on putatively context-sensitive expressions in general—is aimed at solving the first sort of problem. Theorists proceed by developing more and more sophisticated examples, intended to elicit more and more fine-grained judgments about the truth conditions of target sentences in various circumstances. Although this work has produced a rich ecosystem of hapless hypothetical language users, it has yet to produce a consensus about what sort of metasemantics is actually right for demonstratives.

We suspect that the reason for this may be that pre-theoretical intuitions about meaning simply aren't systematic in the way that standard theorizing about metasemantics assumes them to be.<sup>13</sup> Where philosophers have eagerly taken up the question 'Which mapping from features of context to semantic values is correct for demonstratives?' they have not adequately considered a possibility our second problem raises, i.e., the possibility that there might not be any one mapping that fits the intuitive bill.

For many years, the most prominent divide in this literature separated proponents of what we might, speaking broadly, call INTERNALIST and EXTERNALIST metasemantic theories. On an INTERNALIST theory, the semantic value of a demonstrative depends

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<sup>13</sup>See also Bach (2001), who advises similar caution.

entirely on the speaker’s mental states.<sup>14</sup> So, for example, various INTERNALIST theories might hold that the semantic value of a demonstrative is whichever object the speaker of the context intends to refer to, or whichever object she has at the center of her attention, or has at the center of her visual field.<sup>15</sup>

EXTERNALIST metasemantic theories, on the other hand, claim that what goes on in the head of a speaker who utters a demonstrative is irrelevant where its semantic value is concerned. So, for the EXTERNALIST, semantic values are fixed by speaker-independent features of the context. For example, theories which hold that the semantic value of a demonstrative is wholly determined by the speaker’s gestures are paradigm EXTERNALIST theories. A theory that makes the semantic value of a demonstrative whatever the actual audience takes the speaker to be referring to would also count as EXTERNALIST, as would a theory that holds that demonstratives pick out whatever a normal listener would take the speaker to be referring to.<sup>16</sup>

The point of departure for most contemporary thinking about demonstratives was Kaplan’s (1977) proposal, the presentation of which we simplify here slightly:

$$(5) \quad \llbracket \mathbf{that} \rrbracket^{c,w} = \llbracket \mathbf{dthat} \delta \rrbracket^{c,w_c}$$

In his narrative remarks, Kaplan says that the ostensive gesture that accompanies a demonstrative is formally represented by means of the ‘demonstration constant’

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<sup>14</sup>We do not mean to suggest that a theory that is INTERNALIST in our sense is internalist in the sense of e.g. Putnam (1973).

<sup>15</sup>Cf. Russell (1948), Bertolet (1980), Davies (1982), and Kaplan (1989). For a recent version of the view, see Radulescu (2019).

<sup>16</sup>See Quine (1968) and McGinn (1981) for gesture-type theories and Romdenh-Romluc (2002, 2006) for listener-response type views. Speaks (2016) has recently argued that gesture-type EXTERNALIST theories will inevitably collapse into INTERNALIST ones—due, basically, to underdetermination problems. In this line of argument, he is prefigured by Kaplan (1978) and Reimer (1992), both of whom use such worries to motivate HYBRID views. We turn to such views shortly.

$\delta$ . Demonstration constants have the same semantic type, and play the same semantic role as, definite descriptions. Schematically,  $\delta$  contributes something like the definite description ‘the object which the speaker of the context is pointing at in the context’. Kaplan’s operator **dthat** takes us from this description to its satisfier, where there is one. For our purposes, the important thing to notice about this proposal is that it is the demonstration which fixes the semantic value of any particular use of a demonstrative.

In standard cases, the object to which a speaker takes herself to be referring will be the object that satisfies the description Kaplan associates with demonstrations. As many philosophers have noted, however, this is not guaranteed. By building the notion of satisfaction into the picture at the ground level, Kaplan’s view makes it easy to see how a speaker could be mistaken about the semantic value of a demonstrative expression she produces, and thus mistaken about the truth conditions of her demonstrative sentences. So the view, along with other forms of EXTERNALISM generally, makes it easy to see how our second platitude could be true.

Most of the extant responses to EXTERNALISM focus on particular versions of the thesis. So, for example, against views that take a speaker’s gestures to be the metasemantically important features of a context, philosophers often point out that demonstratives can be used without a corresponding demonstration. If a goat walks into the room, Quijano might exclaim:

(6) To arms Sancho! That is no goat, but a vile gorgon disguised as a goat.

In this case, Quijano will be taken to have said something about the goat with-

out ever pointing to it. While we of course agree that demonstratives can be felicitously used without demonstrations, we think problems like this do not really reveal much about the fundamental shape of the theory; the basic outline of the gesture-based view can be preserved by, for example, offering a metasemantic theory which makes the speaker's gesture crucial if there is one, and which reverts to some measure of salience if there is not.<sup>17</sup>

This is not to say that we find a metasemantics based on the speaker's gestures unproblematic. Indeed, we think a much more serious problem lurks behind the counter-examples that have been described in the literature, a problem that is also inherited by more sophisticated versions of EXTERNALISM. In brief, the architecture of the gesture proposal—and indeed, of EXTERNALIST theories more generally—makes it hard to see how the speaker could have any sort of privileged access to what she says.

Consider a scene in which a group of people are gathered on the street to play a high-stakes version of the shell game. The person running the game slides the shells around, stops, and asks the player which shell she would like turned over. The player gestures in an imprecise way and says 'that one'. Before the host turns any shell over, Quijano and Sancho, who have been looking on, step in with a disagreement. They have placed a bet on whether the player will guess the right shell or not, but now they disagree about what her demonstrative referred to. If the gesture theory is right—or if some other version of EXTERNALISM is—the player's opinion about this should be just one opinion among many. But, manifestly, this

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<sup>17</sup>For a view along these lines, see Mount (2008).

is not how ordinary speakers will respond to the scenario. Ordinary speakers will say—and we of course agree that this is natural—that if you want to know which shell to turn over, you should ask the speaker what she meant.<sup>18</sup>

This problem is avoided by INTERNALISM about the metasemantics of demonstratives. Theorists who say that the semantic value of a demonstrative in a context is determined by the speaker's intentions have no difficulty explaining why we would defer to the speaker in a case where we are uncertain about how to proceed. In doing justice to the intuition that meaning involves privileged access, however, INTERNALISM makes it hard to see how speakers could get things wrong.

On the simplest versions of INTERNALISM, in fact, speakers become almost infallible. Consider the INTERNALIST view described by e.g. Kaplan (1989) and Salmon (2002):<sup>19</sup>

- (7)  $[[\text{that}]]^{c,w}$  = the object that the speaker of  $c$  intends to be the referent

Now consider a variation on our shell game example. Imagine that the speaker clearly points to the leftmost shell. The game host turns that shell over, to reveal the empty pavement, and the speaker protests 'No, I meant the one on the right!' Of course, even if we suppose that she *did* in fact mean the one on the right (and suffered a moment of bodily dissociation, or a passing motor impairment, or whatever), that fact would seem to cut no intuitive referential ice. Everyone will take her to have said something about the shell she pointed at, and this sense will persist even if she should furnish a doctor's note showing that she confuses left and

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<sup>18</sup>If any uncertainty lingers at this point, have the speaker turn the shell over herself.

<sup>19</sup>Note that Kaplan (1989) hedges here, fully endorsing (7) only for 'perceptual uses of demonstratives' while leaving open that it might apply to other uses as well (pg. 582).

right, that she has a motor impairment, and so on.

While we lack the space to work through all of the various twists and turns in the literature, it seems to us that many of the major points of conflict essentially involve the question of how to juggle the competing demands of our two platitudes—that is, of how to balance respecting the speakers’ privileged access to what she has said while preserving her ability to misidentify that content.

The desire to strike a balance between these demands has, we suspect, led to the recent popularity of HYBRID metasemantic theories—or theories on which facts about the speaker and speaker-independent aspects of the context *jointly* determine the semantic values of demonstratives. Many philosophers, for example, have held that a speaker’s referential intentions determine a candidate value, but that this object qualifies as the semantic value only when certain further conditions are met. If those conditions are not met, the semantic value of the demonstrative is undefined. According to one such view, developed in Stokke (2010), the speaker must make her intention clear to her actual audience. On another, developed in King (2013), the speaker’s intended referent counts as the semantic value only if an attentive, rational English speaker who knows the common ground of the conversation would recognize the speaker’s intention.<sup>20</sup>

This sort of HYBRID metasemantic theory offers a way of capturing the intuition that speakers have privileged access to the things they say: if a context-sensitive expression has a well-defined semantic value, it is a value set by the speaker’s

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<sup>20</sup>Other philosophers have characterized ideal listeners in slightly different manners while pursuing much the same idea. See Nowak and Michaelson (2020) for a more extended discussion.

intentions. On the other hand, HYBRID theories also appear to have the resources to make sense of the intuition that speakers can be mistaken about what they are referring to: if a speaker fails to do enough to make her intentions public, her use of a demonstrative will likewise fail to refer.

That said, HYBRID metasemantic views of this sort can only make good on our second platitude by reimagining it in a weaker form than the one that originally struck us as platitudinous. The sense in which a speaker can be wrong about what she says is, according to such HYBRID theories, the sense in which someone might fail to say anything at all in spite of having uttered a well-formed sentence. In other words, on this picture, a speaker might be mistaken about *whether* her demonstrative took on a semantic value at all, but not about *which* value it took on—not unless she misunderstands her own intentions. We think the platitude demands something stronger. It is a part of our ordinary conception of meaning, we think, that people can actually say something different from what they take themselves to have said. That is substantially different from being capable of being wrong only about whether one has said anything at all.

Consider our second shell game scenario once again. After the great reveal, the player sincerely protests: ‘Not that one! I meant the one on the right!’ The observers all agree that her gesture was unambiguously to the shell on the left. Do they take her to have said nothing at all? Would a person in the street, told the facts of the case, have that intuition? We assume the answer is clearly ‘no’. The sense in which the speaker gets things wrong here is more substantial than that—arguably, she said something about a certain shell, even though she both intended to and,

indeed, took herself to have said something about a different one.

We have now reached our interim conclusion: none of the families of metasemantic views currently on offer manage to fully vindicate both (i) and (ii), each of which we take to represent a fundamental element of the ordinary folk conception of meaning. INTERNALISM makes sense of speakers' privilege. EXTERNALISM makes sense of speakers' fallibility. HYBRID metasemantic theories balance these two demands against each other, but manage to sustain that balance only by substantially weakening the kind of fallibility to which speakers are susceptible. While none of this is meant as a knock-down argument against any of these views, we do take it to give us at least some reason to question whether any of them is on the right track.

#### 4 A Way Out of the Worry?

So far, we have offered reasons for thinking that no single metasemantic theory will issue in results of the sort that our ordinary, pre-theoretical thinking about meaning leads us to expect. But is that really a problem for someone who wants to defend one or another of the views we have looked at? One obvious strategy in the face of a pair of incompatible desiderata is, of course, to embrace one of them and offer an error theory for the other.

For example, we can imagine the proponent of a HYBRID theory admitting that, even if her analysis does not quite capture the most obvious pre-theoretical sense of speaker fallibility, it can still deliver something close. 'Look', she might say, 'although strictly speaking it's true that my theory doesn't allow speakers to pick



out the wrong object by mistake, I have already identified a sense in which they can go wrong—they can fail to pick out anything at all! To that I can now add: in many cases where someone fails to refer, although they do not accidentally refer to a different object, they will *take* themselves to have done so. In these cases, in addition to the *real* facts about reference, we also have the *perceived* facts. Some of our judgments would appear to be guided by the latter.’

We do not find this kind of dodge very promising. For one thing, an exactly parallel maneuver is available to friends of EXTERNALISM and INTERNALISM. The EXTERNALIST can explain away the fact that her view misses the intuition about privileged access by saying: ‘Look, the real determinant of semantic values is EXTERNALIST. But that hardly entails that speakers will take their gestures to fix reference, as opposed to their intentions! After all, speakers are the ones who make the gestures, so it would be natural for them to think of their intentions as playing a key role. What’s more, in cases where there is uncertainty about which object the speaker was pointing at, listeners will tend to defer to speakers. So, even if the speaker gestures at one object, everyone will proceed as though she referred to something else (i.e. what she intended to refer to).’

Similarly, the INTERNALIST can take a hard line and say: ‘Well, I insist that the speaker in fact *did* refer to what she had in mind even in cases where we take it she failed. But since she made it impossible for any ordinary listener to see as much, everyone is bound to act as though she didn’t. Attention to that fact is clouding our judgments with respect to these cases.’<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Fodor and Lepore (2004) offer almost this exact defense of INTERNALISM in response to these very sorts of worries at pg. 87. See also Donnellan (1968).

In other words, we think that as long as you are willing to offer a kind of error theory, you can make any of these three metasemantic pictures compatible, in some weakened sense at least, with both of our platitudes. By itself, we do not take this to show that there is nothing substantive that might be said to favor one over the others.<sup>22</sup> The point we want to press is different: such debates have typically presupposed that there must be a single answer to the question of what fixes the reference of demonstratives, and hence that we are probably stuck trading off one of our platitudes versus the other. But we can see no reason to think that our hand is forced in this way. So instead of continuing down this path, we turn now to consider what we take to be an unjustly overlooked alternative: metasemantic pluralism. Developed in the right way, we will argue, metasemantic pluralism can fully respect both of our platitudes.

## 5 Particularistic and Pluralistic Metasemantics

In §3, we argued that no single metasemantic position vindicates our platitudes (i) and (ii) in the direct sense in which we take them to be platitudinous. In §4, we took up the idea that the defender of one or another of those positions might respond by offering an error theory to explain away intuitions about whichever member of the pair her position misses out on. Now we turn to the variety of ways in which the intuitive data might be explained without endorsing a single metasemantic theory along the lines of those we explored above.

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<sup>22</sup>See Bach (1992) and Michaelson (2016) for two possibilities.

On one alternative, which we might call *metasemantic particularism*, we could accept that the intuitive truth conditions associated with a sentence in a context are a faithful reflection of the semantic value of the sentence in the context. We could accept, in other words, that intuitions about demonstrative reference indeed track facts about the semantic values of demonstratives in context. But, as particularists, we would insist that there is nothing general that can be said about how those semantic values are determined. Sometimes, reference-fixing proceeds by way of the speaker's intentions. Sometimes, by what the audience takes to have happened. Sometimes, by other means entirely.<sup>23</sup>

Probably the staunchest defender of metasemantic particularism has been Travis (1989, 1996). To be clear, Travis focuses mostly on predicates, not demonstratives like we have. Still, we can see no reason for thinking that the view shouldn't apply here. Here is Travis on the general shape of his proposal:

Understanding requires sensitivity. Understanding words consists, in part, in sensitivity to how they fit with the circumstances of their speaking. Part of that is sensitivity to how they need to fit in order to be true. So adequate sensitivity requires grasping what truth is, and how that notion applies in particular cases. (Travis 1996, pg. 460)

By 'understanding' here, we take Travis to mean 'correct understanding'; so understanding is factive in this context. What correct understanding requires is a sensitivity to the standards of truth that are in effect in any given context. Es-

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<sup>23</sup>This might be because there are no such principles, or because no finite stock of them can explain all the semantic truths, or perhaps for another reason still. See Ridge and McKeever (2016) for a helpful overview of the various options in the moral case.

entially, one is to work back from those standards to the meanings of particular terms. While this is compatible with the further thought that we can productively characterize how these standards vary across contexts, Travis makes clear that he is unsympathetic to such a picture (Ibid., pg. 460). Instead, he seems to think that the complex set of factors at work here—ranging from the sorts of objects in question to our particular interests in the relevant context—will admit of few, if any, productive generalizations.

Applied to some of the problematic cases above, a Travis-style treatment of demonstratives would presumably hold that the standards of truth in a case like our (1) will be such that the semantic value of Quijano's utterance of 'this' will be his tired old horse. In both (2) and (3), the semantic value of Quijano's utterance of 'that' will be the portrait of Rocianaún. In our shell game example, the Travis-style theorist can claim that this is a sort of situation where the speaker will usually be in a good position to understand her own use of a demonstrative—but not when her sensory-motor system goes awry.

The only real generalization that holds is that the semantic values of demonstratives will depend on the standards of truth in force in the context in question. But little can be said about when some particular standards are going to be in force in a context.<sup>24</sup>

Like many others before us, we find this sort of view unsatisfying. In particular, we find Travis' explanation of the relevant sort of 'sensitivity' to be rather opaque.

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<sup>24</sup>See also Gauker (2008) for a variant on this sort of view according to which demonstratives' semantic values are determined by all-things-considered judgments—which can themselves take account of factors like salience.

Without a clearer grip on this notion of sensitivity, we are unsure how the theory could really be thought to vindicate our intuitions on these various cases; the explanation on offer for each, it seems to us, is a bit too schematic.

We will endeavor to do better. On the view we ourselves find more appealing, *metasemantic pluralism*, the semantic values associated with demonstratives in a context sometimes underdetermine the truth conditions of sentences involving those demonstratives. In other words, we take there to be a sense in which INTERNALIST, EXTERNALIST, and HYBRID approaches may all be correct. Each of these theories may well provide a demonstrative with a semantic value in context. Typically, these will all provide the same value, but when they do not we take it that each of these theories—and possibly others as well—provides an available semantic value for the demonstrative. Which of these is the ‘real’ semantic value, metaphysically speaking? The pluralist rejects this question; all of these values are real. The better question is: which one we are likely to focus on? On the particular sort of pluralism we advocate, the answer to this question depends on what we are trying, often tacitly, to explain when we ask about reference or truth. Different explanatory projects will call for different kinds of semantic value.

Philosophers often appear to dismiss metasemantic pluralism out of hand. Compare Speaks (2017), for example, who says of the famously problematic Carnap-Agnew case: ‘Though opinions differ about the right thing to say about the case of Carnap & Agnew, we can all agree that in that scenario the demonstrative does not refer to *both* the picture of Carnap and the picture of Agnew’ (pg. 720). This

perspective is widely shared by parties to the debate.<sup>25</sup> But we are aware of no compelling argument for it. One of the aims of a pluralistic metasemantics is to offer a way of vindicating the thought that there is a sense in which the demonstrative picks out Carnap, as well as a sense in which it picks out Agnew.

In contrast to Travis-style particularism, then, metasemantic pluralism holds that the best explanation of the intuitive demonstrative data is not that there is no order to them, but rather that, as they are usually presented, questions regarding ‘truth conditions’ or ‘semantic values’ are typically underspecified. Sometimes, the idea runs, when we elicit judgments on truth conditions or semantic values, it’s clear that what we are really interested in is how we should expect a reasonable listener to react. Other times, it’s clear that what we are really interested in is the sorts of responsibility the speaker bears for the listener’s subsequent beliefs, reasons, and other mental states. The former interest is more likely to support an EXTERNALIST theory, in our sense, given that we are generally unable to access others’ intentions and other mental states directly; rather, we must instead try to access those by means of interpreting their gestures and various other features of the context. The latter sort of question, on the other hand, is more likely to point to an INTERNALIST or HYBRID theory. That’s because we typically take responsibility to attach more squarely to intentional actions, rather than unintentional ones, and these sorts of theories yield notions of what is said that are clearly intentional.

An example will help to illustrate the idea. Let us consider once again Quijano’s utterance of (2) while pointing behind himself at the portrait of Rocianaún. If what

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<sup>25</sup>For a notable exception, see Unnsteinsson (2016).

we are interested in is settling a bet about what Quijano ‘said’, then it looks like we might want to appeal to an EXTERNALIST theory: Quijano pretty clearly said something about the actual portrait behind him, the portrait of Rocinaún. Likewise, this looks to be the notion of ‘what is said’ at issue when it comes to determining a certain sort of social responsibility for our utterances; a listener will be justified in correcting Quijano for his mistake, even if she is able to infer what he was trying to get across.

On the other hand, we might be interested in whether Quijano was speaking sincerely in uttering (2). In that case, a pure INTERNALIST theory is likely to look more appealing. The reason for this is that insincerity is generally thought to involve a mismatch between a speaker’s attitudes and what the speaker says or otherwise intentionally communicates—with a failure to believe the relevant content being the paradigm sort of mismatch.<sup>26</sup> If we take the semantic value of Quijano’s utterance of ‘that’ to be actual portrait behind him, as the EXTERNALIST would have it, then we risk predicting that he has spoken insincerely. After all, Quijano is likely to have no beliefs at all about the portrait of Rocianaún.

What the metasemantic pluralist suggests, in effect, is that we should not think about the project of predicting semantic values in context as something to be done full stop, but rather as something to be done relative to a set of explanatory aims. To fully flesh out the view, more would need to be said about which explanatory projects we should be engaged in, which of these might subsume others, and how exactly to think about the interaction between explanatory aims and partic-

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<sup>26</sup>See Stokke (2014) for a recent, and very helpful, discussion of these issues.

ular metasemantic theories. Nevertheless, we trust that the basic outline is clear enough.

It would be a mistake to object to this kind of pluralism by claiming that it fails to make specific predictions about truth conditions or semantic values. True, the view will not make predictions about semantic values simpliciter in the way that most of its competitors do. But that is not due to any flaw in the theory; it is a direct result of denying that making such predictions can be made in the absence of knowing what sorts of explanatory projects we, *qua* theorists reflecting on these speech acts, are interested in understanding. Once we have clarified our own explanatory aims, we are optimistic that it will generally become clear which of the competing notions of ‘meaning’ or ‘semantic value’ will prove relevant to our inquiry.

Before considering how our view can account for our original platitudes, we should take care to distinguish it from a different sort of metasemantic pluralism recently defended by Heck (2014):

Whether or not uttered demonstratives “objectively” refer, speakers who utter demonstratives will intend to speak about particular objects, and their audiences will interpret their utterances as being about various objects, with successful communication requiring (at least) agreement. The question I have been asking is: Once this broadly psychological story has been told, what role is there left for the “objective” referent of the demonstrative? I see none[...] Rather, values are assigned to the contextual parameters by the speaker and her audience, and the process through which they determine what values to assign



is not governed by “a uniform rule” but is shaped by a common goal: successful communication, which requires them to agree. (Ibid., pp. 358–9)

As we read them, Heck takes there to be a single overarching question to which metasemantic theories are answerable: how does communication take place?<sup>27</sup> To answer this question, they claim that we need to distinguish between what we might call the *speaker’s construal* of an utterance and the *listener’s construal*. Communication requires that these two construals line up with each other. But there is, according to Heck, no real sense in asking: which of these is, or what else might be, *the referent*, *the semantic value*, of a demonstrative in context? There is just what the speaker takes the demonstrative to refer to and what the listener does—end of story.

Like us, then, Heck takes it that there is no single answer to the question of what value a demonstrative will take on in context. This is why we classify them, along with ourselves, as a metasemantic pluralist. In contrast to us, however, Heck takes it that there *is* a single overriding question that metasemantic theories are trying to answer: namely, how does communication take place? Heck argues that this question alone is sufficient to push us to reject the thesis that, in any context, a demonstrative can be assigned to at most one semantic value.

While we agree with Heck on this last point, we reject their general outlook on

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<sup>27</sup>Note that, if one is convinced that there can only be one true metasemantics, then it will be tempting to read Heck as a ‘nihilist’ about reference, or what we have been calling semantic value—as denying that there is any such thing. We take them, on the other hand, to be denying that there is any *one* metasemantic story, something which is of course compatible with there being multiple such stories, each with a role to play in explaining communication.

the goals of metasemantic inquiry. Heck asks what more there is left for a notion of ‘objective reference’ to explain once we have distinguished the speaker’s construal from the listener’s construal. We answer: questions like ‘Was the speaker being sincere? Did she lie? How is a reasonable listener likely to have interpreted this utterance? How would we interpret this utterance if we needed to settle a bet regarding its truth or falsity?’ It may be that either the speaker’s or listener’s construal would suffice to help us answer each of these questions, but that hardly seems obvious.

Of course, there is no deep bar to Heck’s revising their position so as to acknowledge a wider range of interesting metasemantic projects—beyond just explaining communication and communication failure—for which additional notions of reference, or semantic value, may prove necessary. Holding fixed their present position, however, two differences between our respective views are worth highlighting.

First, consider what Heck will have to say about our second platitude. The speaker’s construal is properly INTERNALIST, so that will help to vindicate the platitude about privileged access. But how, on Heck’s view, could a speaker ever be mistaken about what she says? We can imagine them saying that speakers can be mistaken in the sense of not realizing how others will interpret their words. Of course, we grant that this is a possibility—we certainly can be mistaken about what others will take our utterances to mean. But is this really all that was meant by our second platitude? We doubt it.

A second important difference between our view and Heck’s is that we can allow

that both the speaker *and* the listener can be mistaken about what a given use of a demonstrative referred to. For Heck, there is only the speaker's construal of what she said and the listener's construal. So there is no further standard against which both of their construals might be judged. In contrast, on our preferred version of metasemantic pluralism, we can grant that there are contexts where the relevant notion of what the speaker said is determined neither by what she was trying to get across, nor by how the listener interpreted her, but by something else entirely.

To see why we might want to say such a thing, consider once more our (2). Suppose that Quijano takes himself to be referring to his (now absent) picture of Rocinante and, for whatever reason, Sancho takes him to be referring to his beloved, the incomparable Dulcinea del Toboso. According to Heck, all there is to be said is that they don't agree in their construals. Pace Heck, we take there to be a robust sense in which both are wrong about the reference here. This is the kind of reference—a kind which seems to run along EXTERNALIST lines—that we take to be crucial to settling a bet regarding the truth or falsity of Quijano's utterance.

In contrast to Heck's theory, our version of metasemantic pluralism can straightforwardly vindicate both our initial platitudes. There are some metasemantic questions, questions about communicative targets or sincerity, for instance, which call for an explanation in terms of either an INTERNALIST or HYBRID theory. It is with respect to these sorts of contents, the contents germane to answering these questions, that speakers have a sort of privileged access. Then there are other metasemantic questions, questions about the sorts of responsibility that speakers bear for their

utterances, or how an ordinary listener might be expected to respond, which call out for explanation in terms of an EXTERNALIST theory. It is with respect to these contents that speakers—and listeners too—can be genuinely mistaken.

The mistake that we, as theorists, can all too easily make is to come to believe that our commitment to each of our initial platitudes was being driven by our having tacitly internalized the one true metasemantics. Our task as theorists, then, would be to bring this metasemantics to light. When we give up on this initial assumption, when we hang up our swords and put our questing days behind us, explaining the appeal our initial platitudes suddenly becomes a much more feasible task. The key is to embrace the idea that there are multiple, though often coextensive, notions of semantic value and what is said available—each suited to different explanatory projects.

In ‘good’ cases, where communication succeeds, the speaker manages to gesture at whatever she intends to gesture towards, etc., these different notions will all overlap. This can lead us to posit, mistakenly, that there must be a single answer to the question: what, if anything, is the semantic value of a given use of ‘this’ or ‘that’? What consideration of ‘bad’ cases reveals is that there are a number of distinct explanatory projects in which different notions of semantic value will figure. We have urged taking this observation at face-value. Rather than arguing about which of these projects delivers the ‘real’ notion of reference, we have proposed accepting that our judgments on cases are likely to reflect the explanatory interests that we, *qua* theorists, bring to these cases. In a great many cases that have been of interest to philosophers, the relevant demonstratives will be mapped to multiple

distinct semantic values, with these different values corresponding to different explanatory enterprises. The right question, then, is not ‘What did this use of ‘this’ or ‘that’ mean?’ but rather ‘Given that we are interested X, which notion of meaning are we interested in? And what does this use of ‘this’ or ‘that’ mean in the relevant sense?’

## 6 Conclusion

Above, we argued that no single metasemantic proposal is likely to meet all of the demands of our ordinary, pre-theoretic notion of meaning—at least with respect to demonstratives. Although insufficient space remains to explore just how widely the considerations we’ve mustered here will extend to other sorts of context-sensitive terms, and perhaps even beyond them, we will close by briefly extending them to the case of quantifier domain restriction.

Imagine that Quijano and Sancho crest a hill to discover a valley flecked with grazing goats. As they descend towards a meandering stream at the bottom, Quijano pauses to eye one goat sharply, then another. Suddenly, Quijano flies into a rage. Drawing his sword and rushing towards an imperturbable goat, he shouts:

- (8) This goat is a vile gorgon! That goat is a vile gorgon! Every goat is a vile gorgon!

Sancho groans, taking Quijano to be announcing a new quest that will require the extermination of every goat in the valley. We imagine that most people, confronted

with the scenario, would agree that it is natural to treat Quijano's utterance of (8) as though it involved such a restriction of the domain.

One of the reasons the phenomenon of domain restriction has attracted such attention from philosophers, however, is that the contextual mechanisms whereby the restriction is provided are open to dispute. Suppose that Quijano actually intended to commit himself not merely to the extermination of all the goats in the valley, but to global capricide. Then a tension arises: what should we take to be said by (8) in the context described?

From the perspective of our first platitude, there will be a pressure to treat the quantifier as restricted by Quijano's intentions. Someone inclined to take this line will be able to point to a number of considerations in support: if Quijano and Sancho should succeed in eliminating all of the goats from the valley, Sancho might expect the quest to be considered complete, but Quijano will not offer congratulations. Why? Because he takes himself to have announced a more demanding objective.

Someone inclined to place more weight on our second platitude, on the other hand, might take Quijano to have expressed only a commitment to a local cleansing, regardless of his intentions. Again, there are certainly things that could be said in support of such a reading: Sancho himself takes Quijano's speech this way, as would (we imagine) a typical listener.

Instead of trying to provide a single answer to question 'What did Quijano *in fact* say?', we would prefer to replace the question with a series of more precise ques-

tions, tailored to suit different kinds of inquiry. If we are interested in the question of whether or not Quijano is speaking sincerely, then it makes sense to treat his intentions as the source of the domain restriction. If we are interested in the local coordination equilibria, then it makes sense to treat listeners' dispositions as more important than Quijano's intentions. And there may be other things besides—we see no point in trying to identify a fixed class of projects at the outset.

If our arguments above are successful, we think they show that philosophers who want to give a systematic account of what is said, of the sort of meaning that arises in context, face a difficult choice. On the one hand, they can pick certain aspects of the pre-theoretic notion and argue that these are the truly fundamental ones, relegating others to the periphery. This is a choice that we take to be implicit in the work of theorists who defend INTERNALIST, EXTERNALIST, and HYBRID metasemantic views. We hope that our discussion here will put pressure on philosophers tempted by these views to do more than simply point to a range of data that their preferred theory covers well and attempt to explain away the rest. We think that defending a particular unitary metasemantic proposal should require demonstrating that one particular facet of our ordinary conception of meaning is somehow more explanatorily fundamental than the rest.

On the other hand, we can imagine someone deciding that what our arguments reveal is not that one element of our pre-theoretic notion of meaning is more fundamental than the others, but that our pre-theoretic notion of meaning—and even the philosopher's more refined notion of 'semantic value'—was really amalgamated from a range of different concepts which, with adequate work, can be teased

apart.<sup>28</sup> We have offered reasons for preferring the latter view and differentiating between, as a first pass, meaning *qua* first-personal mental report and meaning *qua* publicly-accessible object. Together with those, we saw reason to posit meaning as coordinated-upon-content, meaning as a safe coordination equilibrium, and perhaps as other things besides. In our view, the most interesting questions are how many different sorts of meanings we should ultimately posit, how these various types of meaning are related to each other, and what sorts of explanatory projects they can most productively figure into. We hope that by giving up on the quest for the one true metasemantics, we can collectively refocus our attention on questions like these. Alternatively, we could just keep tilting at windmills.

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<sup>28</sup>For a different sort of argument towards this same end, see Harman (1968).



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