

Meaning without Content:
On the Metasemantics of Register

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Abstract: What, exactly, is the difference between words such as ‘dead’ and ‘deceased’? In this paper, I argue that such differences in register, or style, ought to be construed as genuine differences in non-truth-conditional meaning. I also show that register cannot plausibly be accounted for in terms of either presupposition or conventional implicature. Register is, rather, an instance of what I call pure use-conditional meaning. In the case of register, a difference in meaning does not correspond to a difference in the contents speakers intend to convey.

Keywords: register, style, conventional implicature, presupposition, non-at-issue content, use-conditional items

1 Introduction

One of Frege’s most important contributions to the philosophy of language is, on Dummett’s view, his distinction between three ‘ingredients of meaning’ (Dummett 1981, 83-4). Two of these ingredients are almost universally acknowledged as semantically essential: sense and (illocutionary) force. The third ingredient bears, in Frege’s writings, a confusing variety of names such as ‘colouration’ (*Färbung*), ‘illumination’ (*Beleuchtung*) or ‘wrapping’ (*Umhüllung*)¹, and Dummett has offered ‘tone’ as a translation. Though I find that terminological choice of Dummett’s not particularly happy, I will follow him here since the present paper is not concerned with exegetical matters.

There are all sorts of complicated issues surrounding that Fregean notion², but Frege’s main idea seems to be this: ‘tone’ is his term for any linguistic phenomenon that is irrelevant to matters of truth. ‘Tone’, thus understood, is of course quite a heterogeneous category, covering poetic effects arising from rhyme or rhythm, items carrying conventional implicatures (such as ‘but’), and also the expressive contents conveyed by words such as ‘cur’ or ‘alas’. Now in what follows, I will focus on a particular phenomenon that Dummett has often presented as

¹ See Frege (1892, 31) and (1897, 150).

² For recent discussions of that notion see Horn (2007, 2013), Picardi (2007), Sander (2019, 2020).

the paradigm of tone. Consider the following pairs of words Dummett (1991, 122) has offered as examples:

(a) *dead* vs. *deceased*, (b) *woman* vs. *lady*, (c) [French] *vous* vs. *tu*, (d) *rabbit* vs. *bunny*, (e) *womb* vs. *uterus*, (f) *enemy* vs. *foe*, (g) *meal* vs. *repast*, (h) *politician* vs. *statesman*

And here is how he characterizes the difference between the members of each pair.

The choice between such twins serves to convey, and sometimes also to evoke, an attitude to the subject or, more particularly, to the hearers. It serves to define the proposed *style* of discourse, which, in turn, determines the kind of thing that may appropriately be said. We may speak to one another solemnly or light-heartedly, dispassionately or intimately, frankly or with reserve, formally or colloquially, poetically or prosaically; and all these modes represent particular forms of transaction between us. These complex social aspects of linguistic interchange are signalled by our choice of words; and, in so far as it is capable of serving to give such a signal, that capacity is part of the meaning of a word. When a dictionary notes, after its definition of a word, ‘archaic’, ‘vulgar’, or the like, it is, quite properly, indicating its tone.

(Dummett 1991, 122)

I have presented a longer quote of that passage since it contains, I think, some genuine insights and offers a generally nuanced and plausible picture of what Dummett calls ‘style’:

i) On Dummett’s view, differences in style are differences in lexical meaning: ‘dead’ and ‘deceased’ aren’t synonyms. There is, however, no truth-conditional difference between these words; the difference is a mere matter of tone.

ii) The difference in meaning between each of the twins is somehow tied to ‘complex social aspects of linguistic interchange’ and to certain standards of appropriateness.

The exact nature of that link between meaning and appropriateness will concern us in much of what follows, but as a first step it seems plausible to say that, in many cases, particular standards of propriety are, as it were, built into the meaning of such words. It is, arguably, part of the meaning of words that are considered vulgar that such words ought not to be used in more formal social contexts, while they may be perfectly appropriate in other situations or when talking to members of a different social group. Similarly, words that form part of an elaborated code may sound too ‘posh’ in certain informal contexts, while in other contexts speakers may even be required to use such words. Generally, then, the usage of stylistic alternatives seems to be subject to rules of the following form:

(Rule) When being in social context C, use / don’t use words belonging to register R!

Dummett’s insight is that differences in style are differences in an essentially social dimension of meaning, but he is not very explicit about how exactly such meanings are related to what speakers intend to communicate. One might even say that Dummett misses the full potential of his insight by falling back into an expressivist jargon according to which choosing a stylistic option serves to convey and evoke ‘attitudes’, which is plainly reminiscent of emotivist accounts of moral discourse. But such an account would blur the distinction between style and the expressive dimension of language use. Compare the following two sentences:

(1) The bow-wow was snoring the whole afternoon.

(2) The cur was howling the whole night. (Frege 1897, 152)

Suppose (1) is being uttered by Albert (A), and (2) by Berta (B). When uttering (2), B conveys, or expresses, one of her non-doxastic attitudes. Since ‘cur’ plausibly serves to convey something like an emotive state, what is conveyed by that word cannot be faithfully

cast in a propositional mould (such as ‘I hate the dog’)³, but the emotive attitude still seems to be part of the encoded content of (2) and is thus something that is communicated by an utterance of (2).

The nursery language employed by A, in contrast, does not appear to involve anything emotive. Thus, an expressivist account of style in general is plainly a non-starter.⁴ However, the ‘attitudes’ Dummett is talking about might be attitudes of a different kind. In typical cases, speakers use words such as ‘bow-wow’ because they are talking to a particular kind of audience, and when Dummett claims that the ‘choice between such twins serves to convey ... an attitude ... *to the hearers*’ (emphasis added), he may have been thinking just of the essential audience-directedness of such words. But even on that assumption, Dummett’s claim would still betray a confusion between what words *convey* and the *reasons* for choosing a specific style: that A is talking to a child makes his utterance of (1) felicitous, but it is plausibly not part of what A intended to convey by his utterance.⁵ (Why should A communicate, by whatever means, to a child that he is talking to a child?)

But now we seem to have reached a kind of dead end. If speakers who choose the word ‘bow-wow’ neither convey a propositional nor some kind of expressive content, then it may appear mysterious how there could be a difference in meaning between that word and its neutral counterpart ‘dog’. Indeed, we shall see that many semantic or metasemantic theories cannot account for that difference since they are based on the assumption that there can be no difference in meaning without a corresponding difference in communicated content. This is most evident in the case of Grice’s overall account of meaning. Grice’s main tenet is that

³ Cf. Potts (2007) who, after initially offering some propositional paraphrases of that kind, opts for specifying the semantic contribution of expressives by what he calls ‘expressive indices’.

⁴ One might claim that, by choosing a more formal register, you express respect to your addressee, but ‘expressing respect’ appears to be vastly different from expressing an emotive state.

⁵ The confounding of felicity conditions and communicated contents is one of Bach’s (2006, 27) ‘top 10 misconceptions about implicature’. Of course, there are cases where register serves communicative purposes. For instance, in the (non-fictional) book title ‘A Teeny-Tiny History of Philosophy’, the word ‘teeny-tiny’ is also, or primarily, a way of sneakily informing adults that the book is intended for an immature audience.

‘what words mean is a matter of what people mean by them’ (Grice 1989, 340), and what people mean by their words is, in turn, explicable in terms of complex audience-directed intentions. The various modifications and refinements of Grice’s original proposal need not concern us here since, in the case of stylistic differences, even Grice’s core requirements do not seem to be met. On Grice’s view (1989, 123), an utterer S, speaking to an addressee H, will not mean p ⁶ unless one of the following two conditions is fulfilled:

(C1) S intends H to form the belief that p .

(C2) S intends H to think that S believes that p .

But as far as such beliefs are concerned, there seems to be no difference whatsoever between ‘The dog was snoring’ and ‘The bow-wow was snoring’. When using the latter sentence in a conversation with a child C, A plainly does not intend C to form the belief that C is a child or that C thinks that A believes C to be a child. Nor is there any other ‘particular response’ (1989, 92) such as an action A intended to produce in C. Accordingly, if sentence meaning is explained in terms of stable communicative intentions within a social group, then the former and the latter sentence ought to have the same linguistic meaning. Grice’s general account of meaning is thus insensitive to more subtle differences in meaning such as register.

We shall see that much the same could be said about almost any semantic or metasemantic theory. This is no wonder since theories of meaning have been strongly focussed on truth-conditional content, and though, more recently, expressive meaning on the one hand and various sorts of non-at-issue contents on the other have received a lot of attention, the phenomenon of register has been largely ignored from a semantic perspective.⁷ This is

⁶ Or, more exactly, mean $\vdash p$ (see Grice 1989, 118), but here I shall ignore illocutionary force as an element of Gricean meaning.

⁷ While register has been an issue in sociolinguistics (see, e.g., Hudson 1996, 45-9) and also in literary theory, there are very few works that discuss register as a semantic phenomenon: Dummett (1981, 84-9; 1991, 121-2); Predelli (2013, ch. 5); Kortum (2013, 65-74). For works on adjacent or overlapping phenomena such as connotation, honorifics, and taboo words see, respectively, Allan (2007), McCready (2019), Pinker (2007, ch. 7). In the next section, I will say more on how ‘register’, as I understand that word, differs from these phenomena.

unfortunate since register is not only an interesting issue in itself; it may also be vital to understanding phenomena that have been widely discussed. For instance, Diaz-Legaspe, Liu and Stainton (2020) have recently argued that using slurs is essentially a matter of opting for a derogatory register. (Anderson's and Lepore's (2013) 'prohibitionism' about slurs, further developed by Lepore and Stone (2018), offers a somewhat similar perspective on slurring words.)

The main focus of this paper is, however, metasemantic. In what follows, register will primarily serve as a test case, and I will argue that there is only one plausible account of differences in register. Words such as 'bow-wow' are, on my view, 'pure use-conditional items', and if that view is on the right track, then any semantic theory for natural language needs to involve a use-conditional component.

2 Register and the varieties of usage

Up to now, I have just offered a couple of examples of register, but since terms such as 'register', 'style' or 'usage' are said in many ways, I should say a little more about how what I call 'register' here differs from some adjacent phenomena. Instead of attempting to define that term, I will start with a criterion of difference for register:

(CDReg) Two lexical items differ in register if (a) they are truth-conditionally (or expressively)⁸ equivalent and if (b) they differ with respect to the social contexts (broadly understood, including situations as well as types of addressees) in which they may be appropriately used.

⁸ Words that convey essentially the same expressive content may differ in social acceptability and thus in register ('damn' vs. 'fucking'). More generally, alleged differences in expressive strength (cf. Potts 2007, 177) perhaps ought to be construed as differences in offensiveness.

Register, thus understood, presupposes the existence of lexical alternatives. Accordingly, some specifications of ‘usage’ that can be found in dictionaries have nothing to do with register in the sense intended here. First, usage may have to do with how frequently words are used. *Obsolete* words (if they are indeed obsolete) are trivially words contemporary speakers cannot choose to use and thus aren’t examples of register. Essentially the same goes for *rare* terms. Though rarity may be correlated to a higher degree of formality, rarity in itself does not have to do anything with register: a language may contain two strictly synonymous words, one of which is used less often than the other, but which do not differ as to social propriety. Second, usage may concern the region in which words are used. *Dialectal* variants (such as ‘lift’ vs. ‘elevator’), however, are related to each other essentially in the same way that interlingual synonyms (such as French ‘chien’ vs. English ‘dog’) are related, and synonymous terms cannot differ in register.⁹

Third, there are cases where the use of a word is restricted to experts within a particular field. But in the case of such *technical* terms (if they are indeed purely technical), speakers generally do not have a choice. There isn’t a colloquial, let alone a vulgar, counterpart to a logical term such as ‘orthomodular lattice’. In contrast, think of the various words speakers may use in order to talk about human reproductive organs: in this case, ordinary speakers do have a choice between clinical-sounding terms, often derived from Latin, on the one extreme and vulgar words on the other side of the spectrum.

Next, there are two other aspects of ‘style’ (broadly construed) which I will largely ignore in what follows, without denying that they may be construed as examples of register. First, I will not discuss honorifics such as the distinction between formal and informal pronouns (for

⁹ This is, of course, not the whole story. Speakers who are aware of dialectal variants (and who know that the same goes for their addressees) may decide to use a particular variant to identify themselves as members of a certain group via such a shibboleth. I am not sure how to characterize such forms of ‘communication’, but in any case, this does not appear to be an example of Gricean meaning. There is, after all, a natural correlation between your origin and the words you use. See Grice’s (1989, 218) discussion of similar cases.

instance, German ‘du’ vs. ‘Sie’). Register and honorification are plainly related phenomena¹⁰, but in order to stay focussed on the main issues I shall stick to examples such as ‘dead’ vs. ‘deceased’. Second, I will focus on examples that are clearly non-expressive, thereby excluding ‘derogatory’ terms such as slurs (cf. Diaz-Legaspe et al. 2020), which may be taken to involve expressive contents. And just to be on the safe side, I shall also ignore swear words and other offensive terms.¹¹

In spite of these restrictions and provisos there are, I think, plenty of examples of register. For instance, nearly all of the examples of differences in ‘style’ Dummett has offered will also count as examples of register. So let us see whether certain prominent theories of meaning can account for that phenomenon. I shall begin, in the next two sections, by considering two fundamental objections to the view for which I will be arguing here.

3 A mere matter of sociolinguistics?

In the introduction I talked about Dummett’s two insights concerning register. The first insight is that register is essentially tied to issues of social propriety. I can’t think of any objection to that claim, at least if we restrict the notion of register in the way proposed in the last section. According to the second insight, register is a non-truth-conditional aspect of linguistic meaning. This claim involves two sub-claims each of which may be called into question. One might argue that, contrary to first appearance, register can be accounted for in terms of truth-conditional content, and one might also argue that register has nothing to do with meaning in the first place.

¹⁰ One might even claim that register is a kind of honorification (McCready 2019, 6) or, alternatively, that honorifics form a subcase of register (Diaz-Legaspe et al. 2020, 158).

¹¹ Coprolalia and certain kinds of selective aphasia may be taken to show that swear words as well as slurs work quite differently from ordinary terms. For an overview, cf. Pinker (2007, 334-9).

Let us start with the latter objection. Since, as noted in the introduction, register has not received much attention from a semantic point view, there are few scholars who have explicitly discussed the question of whether register is a case of meaning proper. Dummett, as noted above, has maintained that our choice of words may signal ‘complex social aspects of linguistic interchange’ which are thus ‘part of the meaning of a word’ (1991, 122). Now one might claim that register, while being tied to such aspects of interchange, is nevertheless not a genuine case of meaning. A similar idea has been advanced by Iten:

At least in the case of the *tu/vous* (or *du/sie*) distinction, the conventions governing when each expression should be used are strongly reminiscent of such social conventions as how one should greet people of different social standing ... In other words, unlike Levinson ..., who proposes that the difference between *tu* and *vous* is a matter of conventional implicature, I doubt that the difference is one of linguistic meaning proper at all. (Iten 2005, 102)

In this passage, Iten is discussing honorifics (or, more specifically, the T/V distinction), but, as noted in the last section, honorification and register appear to be kindred phenomena. Thus, her claim can easily be transposed into the following claim about register: ‘Yes, there are social conventions governing, say, the use of “meal” and “repast”, but not any old convention concerning the use of certain words is a matter of meaning proper. Such differences are a matter not of semantics but of sociolinguistics, comparable perhaps to the difference between RP and a broad regional accent.’

Since neither Dummett nor Iten offer arguments for their respective claims, relying instead on their intuitions about the notion of meaning, or meaning ‘proper’, let us look at an argument Katz has offered. Katz proposes a general criterion for distinguishing sentence meaning and contextual meaning. Sentence meaning is the kind of meaning known to ideal speakers in

‘null contexts’, where such contexts may in turn be explained in terms of an ‘anonymous letter situation’:

The anonymous letter situation is the case where an ideal speaker of a language receives an anonymous letter containing just one sentence of that language, with no clue whatever about the motive, circumstances of transmission, or any other factor relevant to understanding the sentence on the basis of its context of utterance. (Katz 1977, 14)

And here is what that criterion is supposed to tell us about (certain) cases of register:

For instance, the use of words like ‘bunny’, ‘doggie’, and so forth is governed by a convention of appropriateness that requires the speaker or the audience to be a child ... Insofar as utilizing this convention requires contextual information about the speaker and audience not available in the null context, our meaning and use equation excludes it from the domain of semantics. (Katz 1977, 21)¹²

A lot could be said about Katz’s ‘anonymous letter’ test, but fortunately we can ignore these issues since even if the criterion were reliable, it would not necessarily show that register is not a case of meaning. Without knowing anything about the context, an ideal speaker may infer that somebody who uses the word ‘bunny’ is either a child or addressing a child (see Gazdar 1979, 3-4). So Katz seems to be confounding the conventions in themselves with their utilisation: while utilizing a convention will often require knowing certain things about a context, our knowledge of the convention in itself, and the meaning that is determined by it, does not. Consider an analogy taken from the field of honorifics. In order to find out whether you ought to address a person whose name is ‘Thomas Smith’ and who works as a professor in a classics department as ‘Thomas’, ‘Tom’ or ‘Professor Smith’, you have to know a fair bit

¹² Note that Katz’s claim is much more general than is suggested by his two examples. He also mentions obscene words and slurs as examples.

about the (social) context. But it would be absurd to claim that, therefore, the two sentences ‘Tom is a brilliant classicist’ and ‘Professor Smith is a brilliant classicist’ have the same sentence meaning.

Katz’s argument is ultimately unsuccessful. So in order to avoid a dialectical stalemate in which scholars just insist on their intuitions, it would be nice to have an argument *against* the claim that ‘bow-wow’ and ‘dog’ are synonyms.¹³ And I think there is such an argument (though, of course, not a knockdown argument) if we accept a tenet that is in essence due to Frege (1892, 28, 36):

(Sub) If two expressions E_1 and E_2 are synonymous, then we may substitute (*salva veritate*) one for the other in indirect speech.¹⁴

(Sub) seems eminently plausible. If, in a content clause following verbs such as ‘say’, ‘assert’ or ‘claim’, we substitute a word for a synonym, then that substitution does not appear to be relevant to the truth of the complex sentence. (One may doubt, of course, whether natural languages contain genuine synonyms, but think of pairs such as ‘begin’ and ‘start’. If ‘A said that B started collecting stamps in 2010’ is true, then ‘A said that B began collecting stamps in 2010’ is true as well.) Now an obvious consequence of (Sub) is that in cases where such a substitution would turn a true sentence into a false one, the original word and the substituted word cannot be synonymous. But now think of pairs such as the following:

(3) Darwin claimed that dogs are descended from wolves and jackals.

(4) Darwin claimed that bow-wows are descended from wolves and jackals.

¹³ Couldn’t one argue that register is a case of meaning because a sentence such as ‘The bow-wow is snoring, but I am not talking to a child’ is odd? I don’t think so. Moore sentences are similarly odd, but that plainly does not yet show that the proposition that I believe that dogs bark is part of the linguistic meaning of ‘Dogs bark’.

¹⁴ In Frege’s original version of (Sub) ‘synonymous’ is to be replaced by ‘have the same *Sinn*’. Given Frege’s insistence that words such as ‘cur’ and ‘dog’ differ only in tone, but not in sense, his version faces quite a few counterexamples (see Textor 2011, 144-5; Sander 2019, 375) to which (Sub) seems immune.

The truth of indirect speech reports generally appears to be sensitive to all sorts of tonal differences, including differences in register.¹⁵ (3) is a true sentence since it ascribes to Darwin a claim he actually made (in his *Descent of Man*), but as far as I am aware Darwin never made any claims about bow-wows. So, (4) is false, and thus ‘bow-wow’ and ‘dog’ do not have the same meaning.¹⁶

4 A matter of truth-conditional content?

Let us now turn to an objection to the second subclaim mentioned above. Couldn’t one argue that, on closer inspection, differences in register are differences in truth-conditional content?¹⁷ As far as I see, such a claim has never been advanced, but there have been numerous attempts to reduce what appears to be a case of non-truth-conditional content to ordinary at-issue meaning. For instance, Bohnert (1945) has argued that an imperative such as ‘Keep this car properly lubricated!’ can be ‘translated’ into the disjunction ‘Either this car is properly lubricated or it won’t run’. On Tsohatzidis’s (2007) view, the distinction between French ‘tu’ and ‘vous’ is truth-conditionally relevant and not a mere matter of tone (cf. Horn 2013, 169). Finally, Horn (2008) has claimed that sentences of the form ‘A is a [slur]’, which may be thought to convey a non-at-issue content, have roughly the same meaning as ‘A is a [neutral counterpart] and ought to be treated badly because of being a [neutral counterpart]’.

It would be theoretically attractive to reduce register to ordinary at-issue-content, but this strategy does not seem to work. The first problem for such an account has already been mentioned: there is no plausible candidate for a communicative content that is conveyed by

¹⁵ For similar reasons (‘IQ test’), Bach (1999) has claimed that alleged conventional implicature devices such as ‘but’ are part of what is being said.

¹⁶ Of course, one might claim that (4) is true but misleading since the sentence suggests that Darwin himself used the word ‘bow-wow’, but I find it hard to convince myself that (4) is true in the first place.

¹⁷ It is perhaps worth noting that some of Dummett’s examples of ‘style’ do not only differ in register, but *also* in truth-conditional content. The descriptive conditions for being a statesman appear to be stricter than the conditions for being a politician.

items such as ‘bow-wow’. But assume, for the sake of argument, that the only salient difference between ‘dog’ and ‘bow-wow’, i.e. that these words are subject to different standards of propriety, were also what is being conveyed by them. On that assumption, the sentence

(1) The bow-wow was snoring the whole afternoon.

might be rendered as the following conjunction:

(1a) The dog was snoring ... and I am addressing a child.¹⁸

(1a) not only sounds odd as a paraphrase of (1), it also leads to a severe problem. If (1a), or something similar, were the correct analysis of (1), then the negation of (1) ought to be rendered as follows:

(1b) The dog wasn’t snoring ... or I am not addressing a child.¹⁹

But in contrast to (1b), the negation of (1) still ‘implies’ that S is addressing a child. If a sentence such as (1) indeed conveyed the content that S is addressing a child, then it would be a projective content, which is incompatible with an analysis in the style of (1a). So the idea that there is a truth-conditional difference between ‘dog’ and ‘bow-wow’ seems hopeless.

Even if we assume that a word such as ‘bow-wow’ carries a distinctive communicative content, it would be a content that is alethically inert. Using (1) when you are talking, say, to Queen Elisabeth would be inappropriate, but what you are saying would still be true. And that observation nicely leads us to a possible account of register that may be construed as a particular version of the truth-conditional approach, but also, more commonly, as an alternative. On an *inferentialist* account, understanding a word is constituted by knowing the

¹⁸ Needless to say, nursery language is also appropriate when the speaker is a child, but in what follows I shall ignore that complication.

¹⁹ Frege (1892, 40) offers a similar argument with respect to the existential presuppositions carried by names.

inferential rules governing it. Such a view was first championed by Gentzen, who claimed that the introduction rule for some logical operator is, as it were, a definition of it (1935, 189). Since then, numerous scholars such as Dummett (1991, ch. 9) and Brandom (1994) have elaborated on Gentzen's seminal idea.

As I just noted, inferentialism may be seen as what you get when you combine a truth-conditional account of meaning with an epistemic notion of truth (cf. Dummett 1991, 304), but what is important here is a point where inferentialism might differ from truth-conditional theories proper. One may, after all, advance the claim that certain expressions are inferentially relevant while being alethically inert. On such an account, championed by Kaplan (ms) and Predelli (2013, ch. 7), two sentences may differ in their inferential profile while having the very same truth-conditions.²⁰ For instance, on Kaplan's view, the following argument is valid since it preserves what he calls 'truth-plus'; the (alleged) conclusion contains no piece of information that would go beyond the information supplied by the premises:²¹

- (5) (a) Kaplan was promoted.
- (b) I despise Kaplan.
- (c) That bastard Kaplan was promoted.

I do not think that there can be such a thing as a logic of expressive content, but for present purposes let us simply assume that Kaplan's idea is on the right track. On that assumption, one may wonder whether the Kaplanian account of expressives can be transposed into a similar account of register. Consider the following 'argument':

²⁰ See also Dummett's (1981, 454) inferentialist treatment of 'Boche'. On his view, that word licenses the inference of 'A is German' *and* 'A is barbarous and more prone to cruelty than other Europeans' from the premise 'A is a Boche'. Since 'barbarous' and 'cruel' are arguably thick terms, I am not sure whether Dummett regards the second conclusion as partly expressive or just as an empirical claim.

²¹ More exactly, Kaplan (ms, 22) says that he has the 'inclination' to regard the argument as valid. Kaplan would probably resist being called an inferentialist, but combining a use-conditional account of items such as 'that bastard' with the claim that there is a logic of expressives seems to come close to a broadly inferentialist account.

(6) (a) The dog was snoring the whole afternoon.

(b) I am talking to a child.

(c) The bow-wow was snoring the whole afternoon.

While (5) might appear decently plausible, (6) sounds terribly odd, the main reason being that the specific meaning of ‘bow-wow’ is misrepresented, in (6b), as a content that is being conveyed. But let us assume, again, that my intuitions in this respect are misguided. Perhaps, by opting for a particular register, you do in fact communicate something about the social context in which you are situated. Even on that assumption, I am strongly inclined not to regard (6) as a genuine argument in the first place – let alone an argument whose pattern might be constitutive of the meaning of ‘bow-wow’.

The reason for that is straightforward. Compare (6) to the paradigm of a comparatively successful inferentialist account. The introduction and elimination rules in a calculus of natural deduction accord, as Gentzen (1935, 176) noted, with actual argument patterns, most notably with the patterns occurring in mathematical proofs. It may then be tempting to maintain that our knowledge of the meaning of logical operators *is* nothing else than our (tacit) knowledge of these rules. Now (6), in contrast, does not correspond to any real-life argument. There is nothing ‘natural’ about such a pseudo-inference; (6) seems more like an artefact generated by a misguided theory.²² And if there aren’t such argument patterns, then our understanding of ‘bow-wow’ plainly cannot be constituted by reasoning according to them.

5 Presupposition and implicature

²² I think much the same could be said about (5). We do not ordinarily deduce a partly expressive conclusion such as (5c) from a descriptive statement about our attitudes such as (5b).

Given what I have argued in the last two sections, I think it's safe to say that what I called 'Dummett's insight' is indeed an insight: register is an example of non-truth-conditional meaning. Now, traditionally, two notions have been employed for describing such meanings: (lexical) presupposition and (conventional) implicature²³, and in what follows I shall briefly argue that neither of these notions fits the phenomenon of register.

I should start, however, with a rather large caveat. Presupposition and implicature have been extremely controversial issues for quite some time now, and the controversies concern not only these two notions in themselves but also their relation. Abbott (2006, 2) has called presupposition and implicature 'close neighbours', but perhaps things are even worse than that: with respect to many linguistic items such as expressives, gendered pronouns, appositives, or words such as 'also' and 'even', the two notions resemble twins who, unlike Patty and Selma, are extremely difficult to tell apart.²⁴ Now obviously, I cannot do justice to such a convoluted debate here. So the strategy I am adopting will be to focus on some paradigmatic examples of presupposition and implicature. If it then turns out that register is, in important respects, unlike these examples, we will have a good reason for extending our toolbox.

Let us start with the idea that register is a matter of presupposition. I do not know any proponents of that very claim, but Schlenker's (2007) work on 'expressive presuppositions' comes close to such an account. One of his examples of such presuppositions is the distinction between French 'tu' and 'vous', and we have already seen that honorification and register are closely related phenomena. Here is Schlenker's 'lexical entry' for the (supposedly) 'prototypical' expressive 'tu' (where '#' indicates presupposition failure):

²³ Since I am not concerned with either conversational implicature or with pragmatic presupposition here, I shall drop the adjectives in what follows.

²⁴ One might argue, moreover, that the distinction between these two phenomena is rather artificial. Compare Potts (2015, 192-3) and Sander (2022).

(7) $[[tu]](c)(w) \neq \#$ iff the agent of c believes in the world of c that he stands in a familiar relation to the addressee of c . If $\neq \#$ $[[tu]](c)(w) =$ the addressee of c .
(Schlenker 2007, 238)

Since, according to (7), a ‘presupposition failure’ essentially amounts to infringing on certain standards of social propriety, we just need some minor modifications to get a similar entry for ‘bow-wow’:

(8) $[[bow\text{-}wow]](c)(w) \neq \#$ iff the agent of c believes in the world of c that the addressee of c is a child.

Now the first thing to note is that (8) can easily be transformed into a largely uncontroversial specification of felicity conditions:

(8a) ‘bow-wow’ is felicitous in c iff (the agent of c believes that) the addressee of c is a child.

And that alternative approach raises the question of whether talk of ‘presupposition (failure)’ has any explanatory value here. While I do not wish to deny that a significantly broadened notion of presupposition may include items such as ‘tu’ and ‘bow-wow’²⁵, it also seems clear to me that such a large category would blur many important differences between the two aforementioned words on the one hand and standard examples of presupposition triggers (such as factives and change of state verbs) on the other.

There are quite a few salient differences, but I shall focus on two of them. First, consider the following example:

(9) The dog started snoring in the afternoon.

²⁵ Schlenker himself notes that his ‘expressive presuppositions’ differ in some respects from ‘standard presupposition triggers’ (2007, 239).

(9), or somebody who utters (9), presupposes that the dog had not snored before the afternoon, and that presupposition is a necessary condition for the truth of (9). Register, in contrast, seems alethically inert: uttering (1) when you are not talking to a child is plainly weird, but you might still express a true proposition about the behaviour of a particular dog.

The second point is this: though paradigmatic presupposition triggers convey projective contents, there are numerous linguistic contexts in which these presuppositions evaporate.

Now compare the following two sentences:

(10) Dora believes that the dog started snoring in the afternoon.

(11) David believes that the bow-wow was snoring the whole afternoon.

An utterer of (10) is plainly not committed to the truth of the content clause or to anything presupposed by it. (The sentence might be true, after all, if there is no salient dog in the first place.) In contrast, (11) still suggests that the speaker is addressing a child.²⁶ Apart from quotation marks and register incongruities, which typically have humorous effects, there appears to be no linguistic contexts that could neutralize that aspect of the meaning of ‘bow-wow’. Register is thus an example of what Potts (2005, 42) has called ‘scopelessness’.

So there are at least two respects (alethic inertia and scopelessness) in which register differs from standard examples of presupposition triggers. Since, however, scopelessness is one of the hallmarks of what Potts has called ‘conventional implicature’ (or, for short, ‘CI’), this may suggest that register is, in fact, an example of CI. But before coming to Potts’s fairly un-

Gricean account of that notion, let us have a brief look at Grice’s original idea. The notion of

²⁶ It is also worth noting that presuppositions can be directly cancelled or suspended (“Carla doesn’t regret learning cursive because in fact she never learned it”). In contrast, attempting to cancel commitments carried by register would result in rather weird utterances (“The bow-wow isn’t snoring because I am not talking to a child”).

CI is, in Grice's works, a rather tangential issue, mentioned only a few times. Here is what is perhaps the locus classicus:

(i) In some cases the conventional meaning of the words used will determine what is implicated, besides helping to determine what is said. (ii) If I say (smugly), *He is an Englishman; he is, therefore, brave*, I have certainly committed myself ... to its being the case that his being brave is a consequence of ... his being an Englishman. (iii) But while I have said that he is an Englishman, and said that he is brave, I do not want to say that I have *said* ... that it follows from his being an Englishman that he is brave, though I have certainly indicated, and so implicated, that this is so. (iv) I do not want to say that my utterance of this sentence would be, strictly speaking, false should the consequence in question fail to hold. (Grice 1989, 25, numerals in brackets added)

Now, at first glance, Grice's characterization may seem applicable to register. Register is, first, a matter of the conventional meaning of certain words (i), and second, it is alethically inert (iv): infringing on certain standards of propriety makes an utterance infelicitous but not false. What about Grice's distinction between *saying* on the one hand, and *committing yourself, indicating, and implicating* on the other (ii, iii)? Somewhat surprisingly, Grice never offered a definition of 'implicature'. He did offer a characterization of 'conversational implicature' (1989, 30-1), but all he tells us about the notion of implicature in general is, essentially, that 'implicate' is to do 'general duty' for a larger 'family of verbs', the members of which include 'imply', 'suggest', and 'mean' (1989, 24). However, given Grice's overall project in the theory of meaning (briefly mentioned before), it seems clear that he thought of implicature as a particular kind of non-natural meaning (see Neale 1992, 523), and since meaning_{NN} is, for Grice, a matter of having certain communicative intentions, it seems clear that register is not an instance of implicature: it would be bizarre to claim that when you are

using nursery language in a conversation with a child, you thereby intend to communicate to the child that you are talking to a child, although this is indeed one of your commitments.

Grice's original notion of implicature, then, does not seem to cover the phenomenon of register.²⁷ So let us look at Potts's alternative account. On Potts's view, there are four 'abstract properties of CIs':

- a. CIs are part of the conventional meaning of words.
- b. CIs are commitments, and thus give rise to entailments.
- c. These commitments are made by the speaker of the utterance 'by virtue of the meaning of' the words he chooses.
- d. CIs are logically and compositionally independent of what is 'said (in the favored sense)', i.e. independent of the at-issue entailments. (Potts 2005, 12)

Once again, there appears to be only a partial fit. Register is, plausibly, a matter of meaning (a.) that is independent of truth-conditional content (d.). Now whether property (b.) and, consequently, property (c.) apply to register depends again on what is meant by 'commitment'. Intuitively, a speaker who employs nursery language when talking to a hearer H is indeed committed to the fact that H is a child. Such commitments, however, seem very unlike the commitments incurred by Potts's standard examples of CI. On Potts's view, there are essentially two linguistic phenomena that give rise to CIs: 'supplements' such as non-restrictive relative clauses on the one hand, and various of kinds of 'expressives' (including certain honorifics) on the other. Now compare the following three sentences and their respective commitments:

- (1) The bow-wow was snoring the whole afternoon.

²⁷ Moreover, Grice's explanation of CIs in terms of 'higher-order speech acts' (1989, 362) seems rather implausible with respect to register.

(1a) S is talking to a child.

(12) Ames, who stole from the FBI, is now behind bars. (Potts 2005, 13)

(12a) Ames stole from the FBI.

(13) That bastard Conner was promoted. (Potts 2005, 157)

(13a) S has a negative attitude towards Conner.

In the case of (12) and (13), the commitments correspond to something that is communicated by these utterances: in uttering (12), you communicate, and arguably also assert (see Potts 2005, 26), that (12a); and in uttering (13), you express your dislike of Conner. In cases like these, then, the commitments, understood as conditions for felicitously uttering a sentence, are part of the overall communicated content. (1a), in contrast, is indeed a condition that has to be met for felicitously uttering (1), but, as argued above, (1a) does not seem to be part of what is intentionally conveyed by (1).

Now of course one may use ‘conventional implicature’ as an umbrella term for all kinds of non-at-issue commitments. It is, after all, not verboten to define a technical term according to one’s theoretical purposes. However, such a broad notion would again blur many important differences between expressives and supplements on the one hand, and register on the other. Accordingly, I think we ought to extend our pragmatic toolbox by adding a separate non-traditional category, more on which in the next section.

6 Pure use-conditional items

The idea that meaning is *generally* a matter of use, and not a matter of representation, was rather popular in the middle of the 20th century, but since then it has largely gone out of fashion. And the main reason for this is that even sophisticated versions of the use-conditional

approach, such as Dummett's (1991) justificationism or Brandom's (1994) inferentialism, are plagued by all sorts of problems. So the equation of meaning and use is, arguably, implausible with respect to meaning tout court. One might argue, however, that Wittgenstein's seminal idea offers a rather plausible perspective on certain *parts* of our vocabulary. On such an account, championed by Kaplan in a still unpublished manuscript (ms), meaning may be a multi-dimensional issue. For instance, in order to grasp the overall meaning of sentences such as 'That bastard Kaplan was promoted' we need a 'Semantics of Meaning' as well as a 'Semantics of Use'.

How does Kaplan's account relate to the notion of conventional implicature (or, for that matter, to what scholars with a background in relevance theory call 'procedural meanings')?²⁸ Is 'semantics of use' just another word for 'conventional implicature'? Kaplan (ms, 21) himself suggests that at least *some* 'use-conditional items'²⁹ (henceforth: UCIs) are also examples of conventional implicature, 'but' being an example. But given all the items Kaplan discusses, it seems clear that a Semantics of Use covers significantly more items than the notion of implicature.

A first example are indexicals (or demonstratives). On Kaplan's later view (ms, 2-3), what he effectively did in his earlier work (1989) was to offer a Semantics of Use for items such as 'I', 'she', or 'this'. But it would be rather odd to claim that a speaker S, when uttering the sentence 'He was wounded', thereby *conventionally implicates* that S is referring to the male to which S is pointing, though that would accord with the Kaplanian 'character' of 'he' (cf. Kaplan 1989, 518). Second, consider a farewell phrase such as 'goodbye', the semantic contribution of which plausibly cannot be accounted for within a Semantics of Meaning.

²⁸ For a brief discussion of how the relevance-theoretic notion of procedural meaning is related to Kaplan's 'semantics of use', see Wilson (2016).

²⁹ I have borrowed that term as well as the abbreviation 'UCI' from Gutzmann (2015, 10).

However, by uttering that item one plausibly does not conventionally implicate something; its linguistic meaning seems more akin to the meaning of illocutionary force indicating devices.

Since Kaplan's remarks on 'goodbye' are quite instructive with respect to UCIs in general, let us stay with them for a while. Here is what Kaplan says about that word.

A Semantics of Use can accommodate, in a natural way, some things a Semantics of Meanings cannot, e.g. the semantics of 'Goodbye.' The simple rule of use for 'goodbye' – that it is an expression used upon parting – is a rule which I claim we all know (in the sense of having the kind of competence that grounds our dispositions).
(Kaplan ms, 9)

I think that Kaplan gets things exactly right here. Everything we might say about the linguistic meaning of 'goodbye' can be captured by a 'simple rule' of the following form:

(Goodbye) When talking to an addressee H, use 'goodbye' if and only if you and H are parting from one another.

Kaplan's parsimonious semantics of 'goodbye' is instructive primarily because he successfully resists the urge of saying more about that word. More specifically, Kaplan does not attempt to characterize the meaning of that item in terms of what speakers might express by employing it. It is instructive to compare (Goodbye) to a significantly less parsimonious reconstruction of the rule for the speech act of greeting, due to Bach and Harnish (1979, 52):

(Greeting) In uttering *e*, S greets H if S expresses:

- i. Pleasure at seeing (or meeting) H, and
- ii. The intention that H believes that S is pleased to see (or meets) H ...³⁰

³⁰ Bach and Harnish add a second option according to which a speaker just has to intend that 'his utterance satisfy the social expectation that one express pleasure at seeing ... someone' (1979, 52).

Greeting and saying goodbye to somebody are parallel speech acts that ought to be analysed in roughly the same way. In many cultures, a conversation, or some other kind of social interaction, usually begins with some sort of conventionalized greeting, and it ends with a farewell phrase. Accordingly, we should either supply a rule for greeting that is as parsimonious as the Kaplanian rule (Goodbye) (for instance: ‘hello’ is an expression used when you are seeing someone you know), or we ought to treat ‘goodbye’ in an expressivist manner, which would correspond to Bach’s and Harnish’s rule (Greeting).

I think we should take the first route. There may be some ‘acknowledgments’ (as Bach and Harnish call speech acts such as thanking, greeting, condoling etc.) that indeed express certain feelings. One might argue, for instance, that condoling someone without feeling some kind of ‘sympathy’ (Bach & Harnish 1979, 52) would be insincere and thus infelicitous, but I do not think that there is such a thing as an insincere greeting. Bach and Harnish seem to misconstrue the social cement of phatic communication in an expressivist manner.³¹

Since, however, items such as ‘goodbye’ are not within the scope of this paper, I shall not pursue that matter any further here.³² What is important about Kaplan’s rule for ‘goodbye’ is that it may serve as a *model* for how to treat register. The key point is that register (and plausibly also ‘goodbye’) are examples of what I shall call ‘pure use-conditional items’ (PUCIs). Why ‘pure’? Authors such as Kaplan (ms), Predelli (2013) and Gutzmann (2015) have offered quite a few examples of use-conditional items: expressives, vocatives, nicknames, slurs, modal particles etc. Now compare register to two examples of such UCIs, the expressive ‘that bastard’ and the German modal particle ‘ja’:

³¹ I am using the term ‘phatic’ as introduced by Malinowski in his supplement to Ogden and Richard (1946: 315). Phatic speech is ‘a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words.’ For a plausible account of greetings in terms of ‘social recognition’, more specifically in terms of either initiating an engagement or ‘welcoming or at least accepting the initiation of an engagement’ see Goffman (1963, 213).

³² Of course, greetings and farewells, like other items, come in various registers (‘Hi’ vs. ‘Good morning’ etc.).

(14) That bastard Kaplan was promoted. (Kaplan ms, 22)

(15) David ist ja ein Zombie.

David is MP a zombie.

‘David is a zombie (as you know).’ (Gutzmann 2015, 218)

In (14), ‘that bastard’ expresses the speaker’s attitude towards Kaplan, and in (15), the modal particle ‘ja’ conveys that the information carried by the rest of the sentence is or may be known to the addressee. Now the important thing is that the semantic contribution of these two items can be construed in terms of actual content, i.e. in terms of the mental states or the propositions a speaker intentionally communicates. (14) communicates one of the speaker’s non-doxastic attitudes, and (15) communicates the propositional content that the addressee may know that David is a zombie. These contents are, of course, projective or non-at-issue, but they may still be construed in broadly representationalist terms.

In the case of register, in contrast, there are differences in meaning without differences in communicated content, and everything we might say about such differences can be captured by simple rules of the following form:

(Rule) When being in social context C, use / don’t use words belonging to register R!

In order to see the contrast between UCIs in general and PUCIs in particular more clearly, it is perhaps useful to describe it in terms of understanding some linguistic item. In the case of the two non-pure UCIs, understanding may be characterized as knowing what an utterer intended to communicate:

(14*) An addressee H fully understands (14) only if H knows that an utterer of (14), S, communicates S’s non-doxastic attitude towards Kaplan.

(15*) An addressee H fully understands (15) only if H knows that an utterer of (15) communicates (the propositional content) that H may know that David is a zombie.

Register, in contrast, does not appear to be characterizable in that way. Understanding a sentence such as (1) rather involves knowledge of propriety conditions:

(1*) An addressee H fully understands (1) only if H knows that ‘bow-wow’ ought to be used when and only when talking to a child.

7 Conclusion

I have been arguing here that register is a kind of non-at-issue meaning that cannot plausibly be accounted for in terms of either presupposition or conventional implicature. Register rather ought to be construed as an example of pure use-conditional meaning. PUCIs have frequently been either ignored or misconstrued as carrying emotive meaning, but if I am right their meaning specifically concerns social issues (like social roles and social contexts).

If your paradigm of a meaningful sentence is something along the lines of ‘Jones slowly buttered a piece of toast’, then you may safely ignore the sociolinguistic dimension of meaning with which I have been concerned here. However, philosophy of language has changed over the last decade or so in a way that may be described as a ‘political turn’ (Drainville & Saul, forthcoming). Philosophers, as well as linguists, have become increasingly interested in various kinds of (potentially) bad language such as bullshit, lies, generics, slurs, and dog-whistles (cf. Cappelen & Dever 2019). Since the literature on these issues has become quite large, I cannot do justice to it here, but I should perhaps voice my suspicion that a certain part of the literature consists of rather unsuccessful attempts at stuffing these newly discovered items into the boxes (such as implicature or presupposition) most scholars are

accustomed to. Perhaps it's time to devise and employ some new tools,³³ and the notion of PUCI might be a useful one to understand some of the, as Dummett put it, 'complex social aspects of linguistic interchange'.

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³³ In a recent paper, Beaver & Stanley discuss how the theory of meaning might have to change in order to be able to cope with all kinds of problematic language. Merely adding some new tools is the most conservative option they discuss (2019, 534).

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