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## THREE METHODOLOGICAL FLAWS OF LINGUISTIC PRAGMATISM

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### 1. Introduction

Paul Grice distinguished “what is said” by an utterance from what the speaker “implied, suggested, meant” by the utterance (1989: 24). He illustrated this in a famous example: a philosopher writes a reference in which he *says* that a student’s English is excellent and his attendance regular but what the philosopher *means* is that the student is no good at philosophy (p. 33). Ever since it has been very clear that we need some such distinction. Related to this, we must distinguish the “semantic” properties of an utterance from its “pragmatic” ones, in some senses of these vexed terms. There is now an exciting and influential philosophical movement that emphasizes the pragmatic over the semantic. The seminal work of the movement is probably Dan Sperber and Deidre Wilson’s *Relevance* (1995). I follow Stephen Neale (2004) in calling the movement “Linguistic Pragmatism” or “Pragmatism” for short. My concern in this paper is to identify three common flaws in the methodology by which Pragmatism assigns items to one side or the other of the semantics/pragmatics divide.

The *First Methodological Flaw* is that Pragmatism mostly proceeds by appealing to intuitions. Neale sums up the methodology:

Our intuitive judgments about what *A* meant, said, and implied, and judgments about whether what *A* said was true or false in specified situations constitute the primary data for a theory of interpretation, the data it is the theory’s business to explain. (2004: 79)

Robyn Carston thinks that the various criteria in the pragmatics literature for placing “pragmatic meanings” into “what is said”, “in the end...all rest...on speaker/hearer intuitions” (2004: 74). François Recanati claims that “‘what is said’ must be analysed in conformity to the intuitions shared by those who fully understand the utterance” (2004: 14). This reliance on intuitions is not, of course, peculiar to Linguistic Pragmatism: it is the *modus operandi* of philosophy of language in general. Nonetheless, it is quite mistaken. I shall not be arguing this here because I have done so at length elsewhere (1996, 2012).

If Linguistic Pragmatism is not to proceed by consulting intuitions, how should it proceed? I offer an answer in a recent paper, “What Makes a Property ‘Semantic’” (2013). My argument in the present paper does not depend on that answer but, for the record, here is a summary. We need a *theoretical basis* for distinctions like Grice’s. I argue that the basis is to be found by noting that languages are representational systems of symbols that scientists attribute to species to explain their communicative behaviors. We then have a powerful theoretical interest in distinguishing, (a), the representational properties of an utterance that arise simply from the speaker’s exploitation of a linguistic system from, (b), any other properties that may constitute the speaker’s “message”. I call

the former properties “what is said”, and “semantic”, and the latter, “what is meant but not said”, and “pragmatic”. This theoretical basis then provides an argument for the traditional view that what is said is constituted by properties arising from linguistic conventions, disambiguations, and reference fixings. From that same basis, I argue in *Overlooking Conventions: The Trouble With Linguistic Pragmatism* (forthcoming) for the controversial view that many of Pragmatism’s striking examples exemplify semantic rather than pragmatic properties. This view counts against Pragmatism’s thesis of the “semantic underdetermination” of “what is said” and is in the spirit of the tradition that Pragmatism rejects.

This paper is concerned with methodology and does not require a stand on these controversial matters of substance. Even less does it require a stand on the vexed issue of terminology. However, it is important to note one thing: the controversy I have mentioned is over *the properties of utterances*. Everyone, in the footsteps of Grice, distinguishes among these properties in *something like* the way I have done. Everyone classifies some of them as “semantic”, in some preferred sense, and calls the study of those properties “semantics”. Then, it is common to use ‘pragmatic’, as I do, to cover properties of an utterance that are *not* semantic, in that preferred sense, and yet contribute to a message conveyed; for example, Gricean “implicatures” and certain expansions and contractions. And it is common to use ‘pragmatics’ for the study of these pragmatic properties. Indeed, it is this use of ‘pragmatics’ that must feature in arguments about how to draw the semantics/pragmatics distinction (see, for example, Bach 1999; Carston 2007).

Whatever one’s preferred sense of ‘semantic’, if “pragmatics” and “semantics” are understood in this way, they offer different accounts of the properties of utterances. So it is appropriate to think of them as *rivals* of some sort. But there should be no rivalry when “pragmatics” is understood in another way as *the study of the interpretative processes involved in communication*: And the latter way of understanding “pragmatics” is also common in the literature.<sup>1</sup> Thus, Sperber and Wilson say, “the study of the interpretation of utterances belongs to what is now known as ‘pragmatics’” (1995: 10). Understood in this way, “pragmatics” is concerned with the ways that hearers come to understand the messages conveyed by speakers (and, to a lesser extent, the ways that speakers choose how to communicate messages). This study of the processes of interpreting utterances is a very different matter from the study of the “semantic”, or indeed “pragmatic”, properties of the utterances interpreted.

Nonetheless, the study of the “semantic” properties of utterances and the study of communication are, of course, related. Where organisms have a language, as humans do, the properties of symbols in the language must be center stage in a theory of communication among the organisms. For, it is largely, even if not entirely, because symbols of the language have those properties, and because the organisms have the capacity to exploit those properties in sending and receiving messages, that communication occurs. So pragmatics, as the theory of communication, must start by assigning “semantic values” to symbols in the language in question. But the theory of communications requires much more than this description of the semantic properties of the symbols in that language.

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Pragmatic’ and ‘pragmatics’ have distressingly many uses in the literature, as Bach nicely demonstrates (1999).

So ‘pragmatics’, as commonly used, is ambiguous, referring sometimes to the study of communication and sometimes to the study of the “pragmatic” properties of utterances. This ambiguity does not get the attention it deserves, which is presumably related somehow to the confusion of “the metaphysics of meaning” with “the epistemology of interpretation” to which we will now turn. This confusion is the *Second Methodological Flaw* that I shall identify.

## 2. The Metaphysics of Meaning and the Epistemology of Interpretation

Consider the “meaning-properties” of an utterance in as broad a sense as you like, covering all its “semantic” and “pragmatic” properties, in whatever preferred sense. So the properties we are concerned with include conventional properties, “what is said”, “what is meant”, “what is implicated”, and so on.<sup>2</sup> Now, what *constitutes* one of those properties is one thing, how the hearer *discovers* the property, another. The property is constituted by what the *speaker* does, by the conventions she participates in, the objects she has in mind, or messages she intentionally conveys.<sup>3</sup> That is where we look for the “metaphysics of meaning”. And what needs emphasizing is that none of these meaning-properties is constituted *in any way at all* by what the *hearer* does in trying to *interpret* what is said or meant. The hearer’s problem is an epistemic one and pragmatic in the sense of the theory of interpretation. Grice made very clear that something like his “Cooperative Principle” and its associated maxims must play a role in the hearer’s decision about what the speaker implicated but did not say: using the principle and maxims, the hearer can derive the speaker’s meaning by a “pragmatic inference”. Later, Pragmatists have demonstrated that something like that principle – perhaps the “Principle of Relevance” (Sperber and Wilson 1995) - must play a role also in the hearer’s interpretive decision about what is said. Some such principle, along with contextual clues, will guide her in figuring out what conventions the speaker is using (including what language or dialect the speaker is using), what objects the speaker has in mind, and so on. The processes that the hearer uses to interpret an utterance might indeed provide *evidence* about a meaning-property but they do not *constitute* it. The hearer might do everything right, acting in accord with all appropriate communicative principles, and still get the wrong interpretation: she might *misunderstand*.<sup>4</sup> In light of this, we can detect a serious

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<sup>2</sup> It seems appropriate to put scare quotes around all these key technical terms because they have various senses in the literature. However, the practice is wearisome and I shall now mostly cease it because the differences between these various senses is not significant to my argument.

<sup>3</sup> This is not to say, of course, that the conventions themselves that the speaker participates in are constituted solely by her. They are constituted by the interdependent linguistic dispositions of the speech community that she is a member of. Exactly how they are so constituted is a difficult matter.

<sup>4</sup> I have made these points often before. Thus, an early paper (1976) is critical of David Lewis’ solution (1970) to the problem posed by the fact that a proper name type typically has many bearers. What makes it the case that a token of such a name designates one of the bearers not another? Lewis’ solution is that the reference is determined by the contextual “coordinates” of the token’s production. I argue: (i) that what makes it the case that the token has its referent is a matter of what the speaker has in mind, which is in turn constituted by a certain causal relation to the referent; (ii) that the coordinates – such features of the external context as time, place, and audience – have no role in making it the case that that token has that referent (except possibly

confusion in the literature. It is the confusion of the metaphysics of meaning with the epistemology of interpretation: a failure to keep theorizing about the properties of utterances sharply distinct from theorizing about communication. A symptom of the failure is a focus on the hearer rather than the speaker when discussing meaning.

We have noted that Pragmatists think that conventions, disambiguation, and reference fixing semantically underdetermine what is said. According to Robyn Carston, in a helpful survey, Pragmatists believe that “pragmatic inference (that is, maxim-guided inference) is required to make up the shortfall” (2004: 67). We shall see in a moment that Carston is right that they do believe this. But this belief is badly mistaken. If there is a shortfall, it is made up, just like the standard disambiguation and reference fixing, by something noninferential that the speaker has in mind; thus, to take a favorite example, the implicit reference in an utterance of the elliptical ‘It is raining’ is to a place the speaker has in mind. *Pragmatic inferences, of which Gricean derivations of implicatures are an example, have absolutely nothing to do with any shortfall in the constitution of what is said.* Pragmatic inference is something the hearer may engage in to interpret what is said.

The confusion is striking in the following passage from Stephen Levinson, quoted by Carston (p. 68):

Grice’s account makes implicature dependent on a prior determination of “the said”. The said in turn depends on disambiguation, indexical resolution, reference fixing, not to mention ellipsis unpacking and generality narrowing. But each of these processes, which are prerequisites to determining the proposition expressed, may themselves depend crucially on processes that look indistinguishable from implicatures. Thus what is said seems both to determine and to be determined by implicature. Let us call this *Grice’s circle*....Then truth-conditional content depends on most, perhaps all, of the known species of pragmatic inference... (Levinson 2000: 186-87)

Carston endorses this interdependence of saying and implicating: it is “an inescapable issue once one accepts that the proposition expressed (what is said) is heavily dependent on pragmatics (the underdeterminacy thesis) and puts this together with the standard Gricean assumptions” (2004: 69). Yet the appearance here of a circle and interdependence arises simply from equivocation. (a) What is said (the proposition expressed) may indeed be determined, in the sense of *constituted*, by whatever disambiguates, fixes reference, unpacks ellipses, and so on. But the states of the speaker that do those jobs are not “pragmatic inferences”. Pragmatic inferences determine what is said only in the *epistemic* sense that a hearer may use them to figure out what the speaker has said.<sup>5</sup> (b) Implicature is dependent on the “prior determination of ‘the said’”, according to Grice,

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playing a role in constituting what the speaker has in mind); (iii) that the role of the coordinates is epistemic, providing clues to the audience of what the speaker has in mind; (iv) that the clues might mislead and so the audience misunderstands. See also Devitt 1981, Devitt and Sterelny 1999.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Determine’ is a tricky word. Aside from its constitutive and epistemic senses, it also has a causal sense; for example, “the banking collapse determined the recession.” Bach lists its constitutive-epistemic ambiguity among “Some Dangerous Ambiguities” (2005: 43)

only in the sense that the hearer's inference to *discover* what the speaker implicates starts from an assumption of what the speaker said.<sup>6</sup> Levinson and Carston seem to misunderstand conversational implicature. For Grice, the proposition implicated is not constituted by anyone's performance of a pragmatic inference, hearer or speaker. The proposition is the content of the thought that the speaker means to convey by implication (1989: 31-2).<sup>7</sup> (What makes this conveyance an *implicature* is partly the speaker's thought about the hearer and the inference.)

This having been said, there is a sign that Grice himself may have been a bit confused about conversational implicatures. For, a few pages after the just-mentioned account, he remarks: "Since, to calculate a conversational implicature is to calculate what has to be supposed in order to preserve the supposition that the Cooperative Principle is being observed, and since there may be various possible specific explanations, a list of which may be open, *the conversational implicatum in such cases will be a disjunction of such specific explanations*" (1989: 39-40; emphasis added). Yet, although the hearer may have a disjunction of possible explanations to choose from in figuring out an utterance's implicatum, the speaker has already made one of those disjuncts the actual implicatum. Or does Grice perhaps have in mind that the speaker has not settled on one of the possible implicata?<sup>8</sup>

Carston, Levinson, perhaps even Grice, are far from alone in confusing the metaphysics of meaning with the epistemology of interpretation. Among major players in the Pragmatism debate, so far as I can tell, only the following explicitly identify the distinction in question and insist on its observance: Kent Bach (1999, 2005), Stephen Neale (2004, 2012), and Jerry Fodor and Ernie Lepore (2004).

(1) Consider Jason Stanley and Zoltan Szabo (2000), for example. Following her discussion of Levinson, Carston describes their "solution" to the interdependence problem that she claims to have identified as if they share her view of the nature of this alleged problem (2004: 70). Indeed, as Bach demonstrates (2000: 270-1), Stanley and Szabo do seem to equivocate over 'determine', conflating what constitutes what is said with how the hearer tells what is said.

(2) Consider Sperber and Wilson. (a) In an early paper discussing Grice, they claim that "at least two aspects of what is said (what proposition is expressed) – disambiguation and the assignment of reference - are not semantically but pragmatically determined: they are not explicitly given by semantic rule but implicitly determined by context and the maxim of relevance" (Wilson and Sperber 1981: 157). But the contributions of disambiguation and reference assignment to what is said comes from what the speaker has in mind not the maxim of relevance. That maxim bears on the hearer's attempt to figure out what is said. (b) Similarly, in their trail-blazing book, *Relevance*, Sperber and Wilson talk of "the pragmatic processes that contribute to explicit truth-conditional content" (p. 258; see also p. 9)), having in mind inferential processes in the hearer (see also 2005: 477, 494). But the only processes that

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, the opening premise in Stephen Neale's detailed working out of the sort of inference in question (1990, pp. 82-3).

<sup>7</sup> Thanks to Prashant Parikh for a criticism that prompted this presentation of Grice's view.

<sup>8</sup> Thanks to Kent Bach and Stephen Neale for advice on this paragraph.

contribute to this content are in the speaker and they are not inferential nor, in any interesting sense, pragmatic. (c) Finally, they write as if what an utterance says is to be identified with what a hearer, using their “Principle of Relevance,” interprets it as saying (1995: 184-6). But a hearer might use that Principle, indeed use any pragmatic principle of interpretation, and still be mistaken about what is said.

(3) Consider, Anne Bezuidenhout’s wonderfully explicit article, “Truth-Conditional Pragmatics” (2002), speaking not only for herself but for a group including Carston, Sperber and Wilson, and Recanati. She nicely describes the intuitive case for a Pragmatism that is at odds with the semantic tradition in holding the underdetermination thesis: “truth-conditional content is underdetermined by sentence meaning” (p.116). She goes on to explore what else must go into determining truth-conditional content. So her concern is with the metaphysics of content/meaning. (a) Yet, in gesturing toward what does the determining, she talks of “background knowledge” that includes knowledge of “one’s conversational partner”, knowledge of “the general principles governing conversational exchanges”, and the like. She comments that she is here “simply invoking the standard sorts of contextual factors that those working in pragmatics have thought play a role in the comprehension and production of verbal utterances” (p. 117). And so she is. But these factors bear on the epistemology of interpretation; they have nothing to do with the metaphysics of content/meaning. (b) Later she talks of “sense/content” being created in context by “a joint action of the conversational partners” (p. 118). Elsewhere she talks of content “being negotiated between...interlocutors” (2006: 9). Conversation is of course a joint action that may well involve negotiation as a speaker seeks the best way to convey messages and a hearer struggles to understand the messages. But the content of any utterance the speaker does produce is *constituted* solely by what the speaker does in producing it and not in the least by any negotiations that led to its production (discourse anaphora aside).

(4) In a paper titled “The Pragmatic Circle” (2008), Kepa Korta and John Perry note the familiar fact that “we don’t get to what is said without resolving ambiguities, and the reference of proper names, indexicals and demonstratives.” They introduce the expression “near-side pragmatics” for the Gricean reasoning alleged to resolve these. They go on:

Near-side pragmatics...is pragmatics in the service of determining, together with the semantical properties of the words used, what was said. But this raises the specter of ‘the pragmatic circle.’ If pragmatics seeks explanations for why someone said what they did, how can there be near-side pragmatics? Gricean reasoning seems to require what is said to get started. But then if Gricean reasoning is needed to get to what is said, we have a circle. (p. 349)

This description of a “circle” is reminiscent of Levinson’s, including the equivocation over ‘determining’: if the initial “determining” claim is to be true it has to be epistemic, yet to generate the circle it has to be constitutive.<sup>9</sup> Korta and Perry take this spurious problem very

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<sup>9</sup> The mistaken view of what constitutes what is said seems to be suggested by Perry’s much earlier discussion of weather reports (Crimmins and Perry 1989: 699-700): the suggestion is that the reference of “unarticulated constituents” is constituted by how hearers would understand the utterance in the context.

seriously: they take it to show that what is said cannot be “a starting point for pragmatic reasoning” (p. 351) and so they seek another. They find this in a “reflexive content”:

while the reflexive content is not *what is said*, it provides a description of what is said, that serves the purpose of allowing Gricean reasoning about why something, meeting the description, was said. In this way, we avoid the pragmatic circle.” (p. 350)

The reflexive content is thought to play this role because it is constituted solely by the language used – its conventional properties – and perception of the utterance. Hence it is thought to be available to any competent hearer prior to Gricean reasoning. The hearer can then use this content as a basis for reasoning about what is said and the message conveyed. This is a plausible story of how the hearer solves her epistemic problem. But it has nothing to do with avoiding a pragmatic circle. Whatever goes into what is said beyond conventional properties – for example, reference fixing - is not a matter of pragmatic reasoning. So there can be no circle. And if Gricean reasoning was indeed “needed to get to what is said”, and so there was a circle, Korta and Perry would not have removed the circle. For, the hearer needs something like Gricean reasoning even to apply his linguistic competence to the utterance. Indeed, Korta and Perry make this very point parenthetically themselves! They indicate that “we may use [considerations of relevance] to determine which words we actually heard, and which syntactic structures are being employed” (p. 349).

(5) Finally, Robert Stainton claims: “Non-asserted content is inferentially arrived at content” (2005: 388). Later, he claims that “‘pragmatic processes’ (e.g. general-purpose inference, on the basis of all available information) supposedly play a role in the determination of what is asserted.” In this way, “truth conditions are affected by pragmatics” (p. 445). So, Stainton thinks that inferential processes constitute both the asserted content (my “what is said”) and the non-asserted content (my “‘what is meant but not said”). In fact they constitute neither. They play a role in the hearer’s attempt to *discover* those contents. Elsewhere, Stainton notes the distinction that I am emphasizing between metaphysical and epistemic determinations of content yet strangely defends the practice of ignoring it. I shall consider this defense in the next section.

In light of all this I conclude that there is a widespread and serious confusion in Linguistic Pragmatism of the metaphysics of meaning with the epistemology of interpretation.<sup>10</sup> Is this conclusion too hasty? Perhaps, what I am calling a confusion is really a principled position.<sup>11</sup> I think not. Here are two indubitable facts about communication. (1) A speaker typically produces an utterance to convey a message to a hearer. (2) A hearer typically responds by attempting to grasp the message. Consider (1). As a result of the speaker’s action the utterance will have certain properties that are relevant to her attempted communication, the sort of properties theorists call “what is said”, “truth-conditional content”, “implicature”, and so on. Consider (2). The hearer attempts to grasp the message by identifying those properties. If all goes well, the properties he assigns to the utterance will be ones it actually has: so he will *understand* it. If all does not go well, he will assign other properties and he will *misunderstand* it.

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<sup>10</sup> Other examples include Green 1989: 94; Recanati 2004; Taylor 2001 (a critical discussion of Recanati); Saul 2002; Capone 2012; Parikh 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Thanks to Carrie Jenkins for raising this possibility to me.

The hearer's process of assigning these properties may involve "pragmatic inferences" and a mass of background knowledge, as the Pragmatists have nicely demonstrated. But the hearer's attempt to identify the communication-relevant properties of an utterance cannot make it the case that it has those properties any more than a person's attempt to identify an echidna can make it the case that it is an echidna (*pace* idealists). An utterance has all its relevant properties in virtue of what the speaker did in producing it; in virtue of her attempt to convey the message by means of the utterance and in virtue of the consequent process of producing the utterance. The message is solely hers, constituted by her intentional act. Of course, there will be a story about what led to that intentional act rather than any other, a story that will involve background knowledge and perhaps pragmatic inferences. But that causal story is beside the point of what constitutes the message conveyed by whatever act she chooses to perform. We can go further. There will be a story about what led the hearer to assign properties to the utterance in the process of interpretation, properties that constitute the message he receives (perhaps not the one sent). And Pragmatists have told quite a lot of that story. But that causal story is beside the point of what constitutes the message received.<sup>12</sup>

How are we to explain the Pragmatists' intrusion of claims about a hearer's interpretative processes into a theory of meaning/content? I wonder whether the mistake has arisen from failing to keep the problem of meaning – the nature of the representational properties of linguistic symbols - in clear focus and sharply distinct from the problem of communication. This failing is doubtless reflected in the earlier-noted ambiguity of 'pragmatics', sometimes referring to the theory of interpretive processes and sometimes to the theory of nonsemantic (pragmatic) properties of utterances. For, a theory of communication must put a lot of emphasis on the hearer. We note that Sperber and Wilson's book, *Relevance* (1995), which is so influential among Pragmatists, is primarily a theory of communication and only in passing a theory of meaning.

### 3. The Evidential Link between Interpretation and Meaning

According to the last section, the *Second Methodological Flaw* of Pragmatism is confusing the metaphysical and epistemic determinations of content. Reinaldo Elugardo and Robert Stainton ("E&S") acknowledge the distinction between these sorts of determination but

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<sup>12</sup> It is worth noting that the appeal to "salience", which is so common in the semantic tradition, reflects a similar confusion. Thus it is often thought that what makes a demonstrative refer to an object is that the object is particularly salient in the context; recently, for example, Jeffrey King's "condition 2" (2013) is, in effect, a salience requirement. (Reimer 1991 is a helpful exploration of such requirements.) Yet salience has no proper place in semantics; its place is in the theory of communication. For, salience is determined by the context that is *both external to the speaker's mind and apparent to the hearer*. So it is crucial to how the hearer *interprets*. But semantic properties like the reference of demonstratives are determined by what the *speaker* has in mind, and the only reference-determining role for the external context is its role in constituting that mental state. A speaker has a conversational obligation to see that what she has in mind is salient or is made salient to her hearer but it is not constitutive of the meanings of her words that she fulfill that obligation.



then, surprisingly, claim that it does no “undue harm” to ignore it! They claim that doing so is not a “mere confusion” and that the topics are “inextricably linked”:

A key determinant of content, in the metaphysical sense, is speakers’ intentions. And... we insist that the intentions that a speaker can have are importantly constrained by her reasonable expectations about what the hearer can figure out.... Thus it is that what the hearer can figure out (something epistemic), ends up constraining what a speaker can intend – which, in turn is part of the metaphysical determinants of utterance content. So, epistemic determining indirectly impacts on metaphysical determining after all. (2004: 445-6)

I have heard similar remarks from other Pragmatists. I suspect that E&S’s view is widespread among Pragmatists.

A detailed criticism of this interesting attempt to defend the indefensible would take much more space than I am allowed. I shall briefly indicate three ways in which E&S’s defense needs to be “tidied up” and then discuss its two major failings in a bit more detail.

*Tidying Up:* (1) A speaker *S*’s communicative intention is constrained not by any expectation *S* may have of what a hearer *H can* figure out about content but rather by any *S* may have of what *H cannot* figure out. (2) To get the desired link from what *H cannot* figure out, via *S*’s expectations, to *S*’s intentions, the defense needs the unstated premise that what *H cannot* figure out about content constrains what *S expects H* cannot figure out. (3) The defense starts with the claim that *S*’s (actual) intentions are a determinant of content but the substance of the defense is about what *S can* intend.<sup>13</sup> Correcting for all this, E&S’s conclusion should be that what *H cannot* figure out about content constrains what could be a metaphysical determinant of content.

*Major Failings:* (A) What do E&S mean by “constrains”? What “impact” do they allege that epistemic determining has on metaphysical determining? I take it that “constrains” must be understood metaphysically if the defense is to serve its purpose. Indeed, the constraint on intentions, discussed in (1), *is* metaphysical. But if the unstated premise mentioned in (2) is to be true, “constrains” can only be epistemic: what *H cannot* figure out *is evidence for* what *S expects* that *H cannot* figure out, assuming that *S* has some insight into *H*’s abilities. So E&S defend the confusion of metaphysical and epistemic *determination* by confusing metaphysical and epistemic *constraint*! And the most that E&S should conclude is that what *H cannot* figure out about content is *evidence* of what could not be a metaphysical determinant of content. But this evidential link certainly does not justify confusing the two sorts of determination.

(B) In what sense of “content” might this defense seem convincing? It might, if “content” is construed as *the message that S is intentionally conveying*: *S cannot intend to convey a message that S expects H cannot grasp*. But what *S* intends to convey, the *speaker meaning*, is not the metaphysical issue in contention because everyone pretty much agrees about the intended

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<sup>13</sup> It is worth noting also that the defense presupposes that *communicative* intentions determine contents. In my view, intentions *to express thoughts* do so (2006: 125-41; 174).

message in the examples that are discussed. The metaphysical issue that *is* in contention is the constitution of the convention-exploiting what is asserted/stated/said. What bearing does the defense have on *that* issue? E&S claim that the defense applies to it: “This lesson about utterance content in general presumably applies quite directly to the determinants of what is asserted/stated/said” p. 446). So E&S think, after my tidying up, that the defense shows that what *H* cannot figure out about what is asserted/stated/said constrains what could be a metaphysical determinant of what is asserted/stated/said. This is quite unconvincing. First, consider the metaphysical constraint in (1). *S* could surely intentionally communicate the message that *q* by, as a matter of fact, asserting/stating/saying that *p* even if *S* expects that *H* could not figure out the message that *q* from figuring out that one is asserting/stating/saying that *p*. *S* could believe that *H* might figure out the message *somehow*. Second, and more important, it seems very dubious that ordinary speakers have these complicated expectations about interpretive processes in hearers. Note that these expectations involve a difficult theoretical distinction between what is asserted/stated/said and the message. Furthermore, the expectations would be about processes that theorists themselves are still struggling to discover. In understanding an utterance, a hearer must use contextual clues in two ways: (a) to understand what is asserted/stated/said; (b) to figure out the message, given what is asserted/stated/said. These are processes that theorists are struggling to distinguish. So, it would be surprising indeed if ordinary speakers have expectations about them.

In sum, (A), at most E&S have demonstrated an evidential impact of epistemic on metaphysical determination. That is no excuse for confusing the two determinations. (B), perhaps we should accept that what *H* cannot figure out about a message is evidence of what could not be a metaphysical determinant of the message. But the message is not really in contention. What is in contention is what is asserted/stated/said. And E&S have not shown that what *H* cannot figure out about *that* – even if we knew what he cannot! – would provide significant evidence about the metaphysical determinant of *that*.

This is not to deny, what I earlier allowed, that the interpretative processes in a hearer, particularly the distinction between processes (a) and (b), might provide evidence about the metaphysics of meaning. But if they did so it would not be via the expectations of speakers about those processes. And the little we now know about the processes throws very little light on the metaphysics.

E&S exaggerate in saying that the epistemology and the metaphysics are “inextricably linked”. More seriously, repeatedly calling attention to the epistemology in discussing the metaphysics is indeed a “mere confusion” given how little light discussions of what a hearer can figure out casts on the metaphysical issue. Pragmatic inferences *always* may play an epistemic role in telling what a speaker means but *never* play a metaphysical role in constituting that meaning. Ignoring the distinction has led Pragmatists to think far too easily that meanings are pragmatically constituted. The *Second Methodological Flaw* is very real.

The *First Methodological Flaw* that I identified in section 1 was Pragmatism’s reliance on intuitions in theorizing about language. The discussion of the last two sections has revealed a particularly troubling reliance: taking intuitions about interpreting to be insights into meaning whereas, in fact, these intuitions throw little if any light on meaning.

#### 4. Modified Occam's Razor

Grice urged a "Modified Occam's Razor": "Senses are not to be multiplied beyond necessity" (1989: 47). This brings with it the authority of the original Occam's Razor: "Entities are not to be multiplied beyond necessity." And it deserves that authority if it is understood, on the model of the original, as advising against positing a sense, a conventional meaning, *unless it is needed for the best explanation* of the message conveyed by the utterance.<sup>14</sup> That is certainly one natural construal of Grice's Razor given his related suggestion that we should not allow "the supposition that a word has a further (and derivative) sense unless the supposition that there is such a sense *does some work*" (*ibid*; emphasis added). But, so far as I can see, that construal, which we should all embrace, has played hardly any role in the debate. The construal that has been active in the debate is very different and constitutes the *Third Methodological Flaw*.

Given the context in which Grice introduces the Razor, it is naturally understood as advising against positing a sense *wherever there is a Gricean derivation of the message*, without any consideration of whether that derivation is part of the best explanation of the message. And that seems to be what Grice is advising in the following passage:

one should not suppose what a speaker would mean when he used a word in a certain range of cases to count as a special sense of the word, if it should be predicable, independently of any supposition that there is such a sense, that he would use the word (or the sentence containing it) with just that meaning. (pp. 47-8)

Recanati, who accepts the Razor (1993: 285), construes it along those lines: the Razor requires that

the analyst who observes that a sentence has two different interpretations when uttered in different contexts...must, if possible, ascribe this difference to a property of the context of utterance rather than to an ambiguity in the sentence itself. (2004: 157)

Similarly, Carston, who thinks that the Razor "is much used by philosophers of language, including those who give pragmatics an extensive role in establishing truth-conditional content" (2002: 218 n. 50), takes the Razor to entail

that, instead of positing a linguistic ambiguity to account for multiple interpretations of a linguistic expression, pragmatic principles and inferences, which are independently motivated, should be employed, wherever possible. (2002: 184-5)

And she has this to say about the Razor when discussing negation in particular:

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<sup>14</sup> However, even construed in this way, the Razor needs to be wielded with care. In particular, the *mere fact* that explanation E1 posits an implicature whereas explanation E2 posits a sense is no basis at all for preferring E1 to E2. Nature does not provide us with a reason for always favoring parsimony with senses over parsimony with implicatures. Here I draw on Ben Phillips (2012) who is even more skeptical of the role of Grice's Razor in this debate than I am.

if we can give a pragmatic account of what is going on, that is, if we can derive the understandings of negative sentences by pragmatic inference from a single semantics, then that is preferable to positing two or more senses. (p. 277)<sup>15</sup>

Bach takes the Razor to show that although appeals to ambiguity are tempting they are unwarranted “where one standard use of a sentence can be explained, with the help of conversational principles, by another standard use which uncontroversially corresponds to a literal meaning” (1987: 78; see also: 69). Finally, Georgia Green nicely sums up the thinking that underlies this construal of the Razor:

the possibility of accounting for meaning properties...of linguistic expressions in terms of conversational inferences rather than semantic entailments or grammatical ill-formedness was welcomed by many linguists as a means of avoiding redundant analyses on the one hand and analyses which postulate rampant ambiguity on the other. (1989: 106)<sup>16</sup>

Grice’s Modified Occam’s Razor, as this is commonly construed, cannot be right because *it would make all metaphors immortal*. The metaphorical meaning of a word is derived from its conventional meaning. Over time, a metaphorical meaning often becomes regularized and conventional: the metaphor “dies”. Yet a derivation of what is now a new conventional meaning from the old conventional meaning will still be available. Indeed, it will be center stage in the diachronic linguistic explanation of the presence of this new meaning in the language. So the use of the word with that new meaning would still “be predictable, independently of any supposition” that it has another sense. It would remain possible to ascribe the differences in interpretations of utterances of a sentence containing the word “to a property of the context of utterance rather than to an ambiguity in the sentence itself”; and possible “to account for multiple interpretations” by employing “pragmatic principles and inferences”. It would still be the case that the “standard use” of a sentence with the metaphorical meaning “can be explained, with the help of conversational principles, by another standard use which uncontroversially corresponds to a literal meaning”. Yet, obviously, metaphors do die and words become ambiguous. The common construal of Grice’s Razor is mistaken.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, Carston herself doubts the validity of the Razor: “I am uneasy with the assumption that a monosemous analysis is always to be preferred to a polysemous one”. Nonetheless, she goes to say that “the ‘if at all possible, go pragmatic’ strategy that [the Razor] entails is one that I generally follow myself” (p. 219 n. 50).

<sup>16</sup> Charles Ruhl’s (1989) “MONOSEMANTIC BIAS” is similar to the common construal of the Razor. D. A. Cruse (1992) is a nice critical discussion of Ruhl but still finishes with: “It is no doubt right to minimize the number of lexical entries” (p. 599). See also, Jay Atlas (1989). Saul Kripke’s oft-quoted description of positing ambiguities as “the lazy man’s approach to philosophy” (1977, p. 268), and Zoltan Szabo’s disapproval of “ordinary language philosophy’s rampant postulations of ambiguity” (2006: 32) are in the spirit of the common construal.

<sup>17</sup> I first used this argument to defend the view that definite descriptions are ambiguous against the Gricean view that their referential uses are to be explained pragmatically (1997: 127). I later developed the argument and accompanied it with another (2004: 284-5). This other was, in effect, a *reductio ad absurdum* of the sort of thinking behind the common construal of the

The common construal loses sight of why we posit a language in the first place. A language is a representational *system* constituted by linguistic *rules*. We posit this system of linguistic rules because it provides the best explanation of communication, whether among bees or humans (2013). With each lexical rule comes a sense. If the lexical rule really is part of the best explanation of communication then positing that sense does accord with Grice's Razor, *properly construed* on the model of Occam's Razor. And the same explanatory consideration that leads us to posit one linguistic rule for a word, hence one sense, may lead us to posit another. There is no theoretical basis for the miserliness about senses recommended by the common construal.

A community's regular use of an expression with a certain speaker meaning is good evidence that it has that meaning conventionally in the community. This evidence is not conclusive, of course: other explanations of the regularity are possible. Still, contrary to the common construal of Modified Occam's Razor, wherever there is the regularity, and that regularity seems to be accepted within the community, the onus is much more on those who want to deny a sense than on those who posit one. It may well be hard to tell whether to posit one but that Razor should have no role in telling.

D. A. Cruse rightly observes that "questions concerning polysemy and monosemy are some of the most fundamental in lexical semantics" (1992: 577). The application of Modified Occam's Razor, as commonly construed, has led Pragmatists to overlook cases of polysemy. They have drawn attention to hitherto unnoticed examples of the content of expressions varying in context. I think that many of these expressions are polysemous, having several related conventional senses. Where a word is ambiguous in this way, its content varies in context because speakers have varying senses in mind. Then, whatever sense a particular speaker has in mind gets into the convention-governed what is said. So it is a semantic property not a pragmatic one.

## 5. Conclusion

I have identified three methodological flaws of Linguistic Pragmatism. The *First*, argued against elsewhere, is reliance on intuitions for evidence. The *Second* is the confusion of the metaphysics of meaning with the epistemology of interpretation. The *Third* is Modified Occam's Razor, as commonly construed. I think that these flaws have been significant in causing the mistaken thesis of "semantic underdetermination". But arguing that must be left to another time (forthcoming).

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Modified Razor. It is built around a character I call "a fundamentalist Gricean". The fundamentalist uses a Gricean argument about the beginnings of language to claim that *there are no conventional meanings at all: it is pragmatics all the way down*.

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