

## An Invitation to Social and Political Metasemantics

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In an appendix to *1984*, George Orwell described *Newspeak*, a language designed to advance the social and political ends of the totalitarian Ingsoc regime. Orwell discusses various linguistic features of Newspeak, including its syntax; but the most important feature of Newspeak is the meanings of its words: “Its vocabulary was so constructed as to give exact and often very subtle expression to every meaning that a Party member could properly wish to express, while excluding all other meanings” (1949/2000: 312-3) In short, the idea behind Newspeak is that a political group can bring about its political ends by making it the case that the language contains words with certain meanings, and lacks words with other meanings. And Big Brother isn't the only one who has thought meaning-making an important tool for social and political change; those with more admirable social and political aims have shared this idea. For example, the anonymous authors of the 1990 pamphlet “Queers Read This” emphasise the political need for a word which “unlike GAY, doesn't mean *male*”, because “when spoken to other gays and lesbians it's a way of suggesting we close ranks, and forget (temporarily) our individual differences because we face a more insidious common enemy” (1990).

Are they right? Can making it the case that our words have some meanings (or that our language lacks words with other meanings) play a role in bringing about social and political ends? If so, exactly how does this work – what relations obtain between the facts that determine what we mean and the social and political facts? These are the questions that I engage with in this chapter. I begin in section I by introducing some terminology and setting out the scope of discussion in the chapter. In section II, I consider ways in which facts relevant to the determination of meaning might be thought to be socially and politically significant. Section III considers the role of normative facts in meaning determination, and section IV concludes by laying out some broadly ethical questions about meaning-making – questions mostly neglected in the literature that deserve further attention.

There is a great deal of work across a range of philosophical traditions that is relevant in some ways to these issues, but there has been to my knowledge no attempt to systematise these issues in the context of contemporary theorising about the foundations of meaning. My main aim in this chapter, therefore, is not so much to defend a particular view as to provide a systematic framework for thinking about the points at which the foundations of meaning might be socially and politically significant, and ways in which the social and political facts might bear on the foundations of meaning. My hope is that doing so will bring some neglected issues of interest both to philosophers of language and to theorists engaged with social and political issues to the fore.

### I. Background

It is commonplace in discussions of linguistic meaning to distinguish what words (and sentences, and other representational entities) mean, from what makes it the case that words mean what they do (e.g., Kaplan 1989: 573-4). We all know that the name “Barack Obama” refers to a particular person; that is a *semantic* fact, a fact about the meaning of the name. But semantic facts of this kind call out for explanation. Words mean what they do only in virtue of various attitudes and activities of speakers, and their relations to their environments; and it is a substantive question in the philosophy of language which attitudes, relations, and activities matter. Does “Obama” mean what it does because of certain beliefs that we associate with the name? Because of historical facts, for example about the intentions of Obama's parents at his christening ceremony or the signing of his birth certificate? Because of facts about the dispositions of speakers (or perhaps some privileged group of expert speakers) to apply the name? Or something else entirely?

*Semantics* is the study of what words (and other expressions) mean, and *metasemantics* is the study

of what makes it the case that words have the meanings they do. Thus, it is a semantic fact that “Barack Obama” refers to Barack Obama; and if “Barack Obama” refers to Barack Obama in part because of the intentions of Obama's parents in filling out his birth certificate, then that is a metase-mantic fact. Among the semantic facts, we can distinguish those that concern *particular* utterances or patterns of usage, or conventional meanings of particular words in a community – facts like, *that when I said “the man with the martini”, I was referring to Jones*, or *that “dog” in English is correctly applied to dogs*. If semantic facts are not primitive, each such particular semantic fact will have an explanation – as it might be, *that when I said “the man with the martini”, I was referring to Jones because I intended to refer to Jones*, or *that “dog” in English is correctly applied to dogs because there exist conventions among English-speakers according to which utterances of sentences involving “dog” are systematically correlated with beliefs about dogs*. Call facts of this kind *particular metase-mantic facts*.

The facts that Orwell points to as politically important have a somewhat different form; he emphasises that in Newspeak, there are words with certain meanings, and no words with others. These are quantified claims, not claims about particular words. But we can nonetheless look for explanations of these quantified semantic facts: for example, it might be that there is no word in Newspeak that means *freedom* because there is no word that is conventionally used by speakers of Newspeak of using to express attitudes about freedom, and this in turn might be true because the government has banned the expression of such attitudes. If that is so, then it is a *quantified metase-mantic fact*.

Several points of clarification are in order. First, what are we talking about when we talk about *meaning*? The word “meaning”, and related words such as “definition”, are used in a number of ways, both in ordinary English and in philosophy – especially those areas of philosophy that are concerned with the social and political significance of language.<sup>1</sup> There are many worthwhile intellectual projects exploring the explanations of why representational entities have the meanings they do, in many different senses of “meaning”; exploring any significant proportion of them would be the project of a lifetime, rather than a chapter. I therefore restrict my attention to notions of meaning in the tradition of truth-conditional semantics (i.e., the tradition that traces its roots to Frege, Tarski, and Carnap, and that has been developed by Montague, Kaplan, Kripke, Lewis, Davidson, Partee, Heim, and Kratzer, among many others). These include notions of truth and truth-conditions (at a point of evaluation), of reference, of intension and extensions, of correct application, and of compositional semantic value. (See Rabern and Ball 2018 for discussion.)

Second, when we say that a certain semantic fact obtains *because of* a certain other fact, we might have different kinds of relation in mind. For example, one could imagine that after a blow to the head, I begin to call cows “dogs”; and some theorists might think that if my disposition to use the word in this way is suitably robust, “dog” as I use it has taken on a new meaning, one on which it is correctly applied to cows. If that’s right, it is true both that (i) “dog” (as I use it) refers to cows

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1 Just to mention one example germane to the topics at hand, Cameron and Kulick (2003) speak of words (as well as styles of dress, ways of speaking, and other phenomena) as “indexing” or “signalling” certain attitudes, identities, or other phenomena, where this means that those words (etc.) tend to be associated with those attitudes, identities, or phenomena; and they regard this as a kind of meaning. For example, they write, “Although the two terms, ‘homosexual’ and ‘gay’, have the same referential meaning – they identify the same group of people – their meanings in actual usage are not identical. The selection of one or the other can signify the difference between conceptualizing homosexuality as deviance or sickness, and conceptualizing it in other and more positive ways: as an alternative personal and/or political choice, for instance, or simply as one ‘natural’ variant of human sexuality, less common than heterosexuality but not by that token deserving condemnation.” (2003: 26) This is certainly a difference worth exploring; but to the extent that it is true (*contra* the views of the authors of *Queers Read This*, quoted above) that “homosexual” and “gay” have the same “referential meaning” – are correctly applied to the same actual and possible individuals, make the same contribution to truth conditions, etc. -- exploring it is beyond the scope of this chapter.

because I was hit on the head, and (ii) that “dog” (as I use it) refers to cows because I have robust dispositions to apply call cows “dogs”. But (i) and (ii) are pointing to very different kinds of explanation of the same semantic fact. Similar examples are familiar: the water is hot because (i) I lit a fire underneath it or (ii) its molecular kinetic energy is high; the prisoner is a thief because (i) she grew up in difficult socioeconomic circumstances or (ii) she stole the diamonds. Very roughly, in each case (ii) is telling us something about the underlying nature of the fact, while (i) is telling us about its causal history. Call the (i)-claims *causal explanations* and the (ii)-claims *constitutive explanations*. I will not attempt to make this distinction precise, but will take for granted that it is reasonably clear in the cases of interest. (See Dasgupta 2017 for discussion.) In general, metasemantic theory is primarily interested in constitutive explanations, and that will be our focus in what follows, though we will turn our attention in one or two places to causal claims about how one might bring it about that a particular constitutive explanation obtains.

Third, discussions of these issues often take it for granted that meaning is fixed by widespread beliefs or patterns of use, so that (for example) if (at a certain time) every English speaker is disposed to apply the word “fish” to whales, or if every English speaker believes that whales are in the extension of “fish”, then it is correct to apply the word “fish” to whales. For example, Bettcher (2012) claims that in many uses in the “dominant cultural context”, the expression “trans woman” means “a man who lives as a woman”, on the grounds that “that meaning is accepted by many people and, indeed, often by the media, law enforcement agencies, domestic violence and homeless shelters, and so forth” (2012: 285), and goes on to defend the claim that “trans woman” as it is used in the trans community has a different meaning. Bettcher's view is intriguing and may be right; but if we are concerned with meaning in the truth-conditional sense just described, the metasemantic principle on which her argument relies (viz. that if a particular claim about meaning is accepted by many people including relevant authorities, it is true) it is neither obviously correct nor something we can take for granted without argument. For example, one metasemantic view has it that meaning is determined in part by metaphysical “naturalness”; another has it that words mean what a fully informed and rational judge would take them to mean, taking into account the history of usage and empirical facts as well as present beliefs and patterns of use (Bigelow and Schroeter 2009, Schroeter and Schroeter 2009); another has it that meaning is determined by our judgments at the end of inquiry, once all the evidence is in (Ball 2019). On any of these views, meaning can come apart from what speakers at a particular time believe or accept, and from their patterns of usage (so that, for example, on these views it would be possible that speakers in the dominant cultural context are simply mistaken about the meaning of “trans woman” even as they use it, and that in fact speakers in the dominant cultural context use “trans woman” with the meaning Bettcher claims it has in the trans community); and this is a theoretical possibility that we will keep open for the sake of discussion.<sup>2</sup>

Fourth, I began this discussion by suggesting that the semantic facts are not fundamental; they “call out for explanation” in terms of the actions of speakers, their relation to their environment, and so on. But it does not follow from this that every good explanation of a semantic fact will appeal exclusively to non-semantic facts. Syntactically complex expressions provide one simple class of examples: plausibly, the fact that “Dogs bark” means that dogs bark is to be explained by appeal to further semantic facts (i.e., facts about the meaning of “dogs” and the meaning of “bark”). Likewise, many theorists maintain that facts about the meanings of words are ultimately to be explained in terms of facts about attitudes such as belief. But on one plausible view, beliefs are themselves mental representations, and as such will have semantic properties (e.g., Fodor 1975);

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2 One might also be reminded here of more familiar externalist views: for example, Putnam's (1975) famous claims that cats might turn out to be robots, and that pencils might turn out to be organisms rather than artifacts.

and though many theorists find it plausible that the semantic properties of mental representations are ultimately explicable in non-semantic terms, this remains the subject of some controversy (e.g., Bealer 1997). I will take it that explanations of facts about word meaning in terms of facts about mental representations can count as good metasemantic explanations. Many of the mechanisms that we will discuss may also be relevant to the metasemantics of mental representations, but our discussion will focus on language.

Fifth, I have spoken freely of “facts”; but the nature of facts is the subject of much metaphysical dispute. I have no heavy-weight notion of fact in mind; I take facts to be true propositions, and I make no particular assumptions about the nature of propositions other than that they can be true and false.

Sixth, the topic of this chapter is the *social and political*. I will leave these notions intuitive; I hope that it will be clear that the issues discussed are social and/or political in some sense.

With these clarifications in mind, we can distinguish three ways in which metasemantics might be relevant to the social and political.

- First, the obtaining of a particular metasemantic fact might have certain social and political consequences. (This seems to be what Orwell and the authors of “Queers Read This” had in mind; the idea was that by making it the case that words have certain meanings, we could bring about particular political ends.)
- Second, we can ask what role social and political considerations can play in metasemantics. For example, suppose that it would be just if a word had a certain meaning. Could this play a role in making it the case that it does have that meaning, and if so, how?
- Third, we can ask normative questions about metasemantic projects: would it be right to try to make it the case that a particular word has a particular meaning? Suppose (as many views have it) that some people have power to determine the meanings of words – power that others lack. Under what circumstances is it permissible to exercise this power? If we can shape the meanings of others' words, do we need to get their consent before doing so?

These three sets of topics are the subjects of the three subsequent sections of this chapter.

## II. Social and Political Consequences

Can the metasemantic facts have social and political consequences? In answering this question, we need to be clear about exactly what “metasemantic facts” we have in mind. We have considered claims of the following form:

*s because e,*

where *s* is a semantic fact and *e* is the fact that explains *s*.<sup>3</sup>

We should distinguish three things:

1. The *semantic explanandum* (*s*)
2. The *metasemantic explanans* (*e*)
3. The *metasemantic fact* proper (i.e., the fact that the explanans explains the explanandum -- *that s because e*)

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<sup>3</sup> One notion of explanation is *factive*; if it is the case that *s because e*, then it is also the case that *s* and the case that *e*. Defending particular semantic or metasemantic views is no aim of this chapter; but I need examples to discuss. I will therefore often mention various semantic claims as though they are true, and various metasemantic claims as though they were explanations, even though strictly speaking I do not mean to be taking a stand on whether they are genuine explanations or mere hypotheticals.

Each of these three things might be thought to have social or political consequences, and we will examine each in turn.

### II.1 The Semantic Explanandum

On one reading, the examples with which we began – Orwell’s Newspeak and the use of “queer” – it is the semantic fact – the explanandum – that seems to be of primary interest. The idea behind Newspeak is that if Big Brother were able to bring about (for example) the quantified semantic fact that there is no word for political freedom, people would become unable even to conceive of freedom and hence would be more easily politically subjugated; likewise, the authors of *Queers Read This* propose that by bringing about the particular semantic fact that “queer” picks out gay men and lesbians, one could make gay men and lesbians see themselves as a unified group in a way that promotes social action. If that is the right way to understand these cases, they are concerned primarily with the semantic fact, and less (or not at all) with what makes it the case that these semantic facts obtain.<sup>4</sup>

Such claims about the significance of semantic facts are strictly speaking outside the scope of a chapter on metasemantics. However, it will be important to understand some of the reasons why certain semantic facts might be thought to have social and political significance, both to understand these cases better, and to facilitate discussion when we turn our attention to the metasemantic explanans. Several possible reasons of this kind are suggested by the passage on the word “queer” from *Queers Read This*:

Well, yes, "gay" is great. It has its place. But when a lot of lesbians and gay men wake up in the morning we feel angry and disgusted, not gay. So we've chosen to call ourselves queer. Using "queer" is a way of reminding us how we are perceived by the rest of the world. It's a way of telling ourselves we don't have to be witty and charming people who keep our lives discreet and marginalized in the straight world. We use queer as gay men loving lesbians and lesbians loving being queer.

Queer, unlike GAY, doesn't mean MALE.

And when spoken to other gays and lesbians it's a way of suggesting we close ranks, and forget (temporarily) our individual differences because we face a more insidious common enemy. Yeah, QUEER can be a rough word but it is also a sly and ironic weapon we can steal from the homophobe's hands and use against him. (1990)

One thing to note about this passage is that several of the putative features of “gay” and “queer” are not matters of *meaning* or *semantics* in the sense that is the focus of this chapter (the truth-conditional sense). For example, on one plausible way of individuating words, occurrences of “gay” which are roughly synonymous with “happy and carefree” are occurrences of a different word than the occurrences of “gay” which are the primary focus of the pamphlet. If the fact that these two words sound the same makes it the case that “gay” brings to mind being happy and carefree, and hence that being “gay” seems inconsistent with feeling angry and disgusted, that is not really a matter of semantics.

There are various ways of speaking of these extra-semantic phenomena of what words “call to mind”, their historical associations, and so on: “connotation”, “colour”, “lexical effects”. To my knowledge, there is no adequate, systematic treatment of these phenomena in the literature (and in any case there are almost certainly many different phenomena that ought to be theoretically distinguished). They are certainly not to be ignored – the association of “queer” with a homonym roughly synonymous with *strange*, and its history as a term of abuse and the memories that this is likely to trigger in the pamphlet’s audience, are crucial to the pamphlet’s case. But it seems that

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4 There are familiar general reasons to doubt that semantic facts are explanatory; for example, arguably semantic facts are not causally efficacious (e.g., Kim 1998). I will not engage with these issues here, but will simply assume that explanatory appeals to semantic facts are in some cases legitimate.

these do not bear directly on the contribution that these words make to the truth conditions of occurrences of sentences in which they appear. I therefore set them aside.

Why, then, might the fact that the word “queer” has a certain conventional meaning, or the fact that there is a word with that meaning, be important? Why, in particular, is it important to have a word that applies both to lesbians and to gay men? I think that pamphlet is best read as making a generalisation about human psychology: roughly, that regular use of a word causes one to pay attention to what everything in the extension of the word has in common, and what distinguishes entities in the extension of the word from others. (See Leslie 2017 for some related patterns of argument.)

This may well be a truth about human psychology; and if it is, then one can see how semantic facts might have social and political effects: for example, making it the case that there are words that pick out particular groups might play a role in making those groups politically unified blocs. But if that is a truth about human psychology, it seems like a contingent one -- the kind of thing that we can easily imagine failing to obtain. Might there be a deeper connection between semantics and psychology?

One might think that Orwell’s idea relies on such a connection. He writes, “The purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc, but to make all other modes of thought impossible” (1949: 312). This suggests that the designers of Newspeak believe that one’s language determines one’s “world-view”, and makes certain “modes of thought” possible and others impossible. Orwell does not give a precise account of what he has in mind by “world-view” or “modes of thought”. One plausible reading would have Orwell presenting the designers of Newspeak as endorsing something in the vicinity of what twentieth-century philosophers and linguists call *the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis* – itself a notoriously difficult idea to formulate precisely, but which can usefully be seen as combining two doctrines:

- *Linguistic determinism* – the claim that one’s language influences or determines what one believes, in such a way that speakers of different languages will tend to possess different (and potentially incompatible) beliefs precisely because they speak different languages.
- *Linguistic relativism* – the claim that one’s language influences or determines what concepts one possesses, and hence what thoughts one is capable of entertaining, in such a way that speakers of different languages frequently possess entirely different conceptual repertoires precisely because they speak different languages

Entering in to the many empirical and philosophical debates about Sapir-Whorf would take us far beyond the scope of this chapter (see Swyer 2003 for discussion). But we will pause to note that proponents of Sapir-Whorf have reason to think that semantic facts are socially significant, since the semantic facts shape our mental states and play a role in determining what we believe; and that some thought in this vicinity seems to be in the background of much thought about the social and political significance of language.

We have so far focused on ways that semantic effects may impact on human minds. But some theorists have claimed that semantic facts have ontological consequences, because these facts are in part constitutive of social reality. To get a sense of why these claims are plausible, consider mortgages. Mortgages exist, but they do not exist independently of human activity; they are brought into being by things people do, and they can only be brought into being in a suitable social environment (i.e., one that includes conventions governing property ownership, money, contracts, and so on). Arguably, the existence of a way of talking about mortgages is crucial to making it the case that there are mortgages. (See Searle 1995 for one attempt to make this case.) At least, it is certainly difficult to imagine a scenario in which there are mortgages but no way of talking about them.

No doubt mortgages have social and political effects, but the relation between the semantics of “mortgage” and these effects is rather indirect. In other cases, however, language plays a role in bringing into existence phenomena that have direct and deep social effects – or so some theorists claim. Catherine Mackinnon, for example, writes, “words of sexual abuse are integral to acts of sexual abuse” (1993: 58). One way of reading Mackinnon’s suggestion here is that certain actions are constituted in part by the existence of certain words; certain kinds of abuse just could not exist without words bearing particular meanings. (Indeed, the relationship is particularly close in this case since the acts of abuse involve speech acts in which the words are used.) If this kind of claim is correct, then the existence of certain semantic facts plays a direct role in making it the case that certain socially significant phenomena exist.

We have essayed a wide variety of possible social effects of semantic facts; let me therefore summarise the main categories of effect that we have discussed:

1. Contingent effects on human psychology (e.g., the idea that having a word that groups gay men and lesbians together will make salient to them what they have in common)
2. Linguistic determinism and linguistic relativism (e.g., the idea that without a word that means “freedom” we could not entertain thoughts about freedom)
3. Social ontology (e.g., the idea that words for acts of abuse are in part constitutive of those acts)

To be clear, I do not take this section to have established that all – or indeed, any – of these alleged phenomena are genuine. Instead, I have aimed to bring out some ideas that may be suggested by the idea that metasemantics may be socially and politically significant, but which are not really metasemantic phenomena at all (but should rather be thought of as semantic phenomena). This was important for two reasons: first, to the extent that these phenomena are real, we may want to exploit them (or to prevent others from doing so) to advance our social and political ends, and in order to do this we will need to understand metasemantics. (I return to this point in section II.3, below.) Second, I want to distinguish these (alleged) consequences of semantic facts from the consequences of metasemantic facts – the metasemantic explanans and the metasemantic fact proper – to which we now turn.

## *II.2 The Metasemantic Explanans*

We have already noted that there are many metasemantic views in the literature. Exactly what one takes the social and political significance of the metasemantic facts to be will depend on exactly what one takes those facts to be. The sorts of facts supposed to be metasemantically significant on some views have relatively little, or relatively indirect, social and political import. (For example, on Putnam's well-known view, the fact that water is a natural kind plays a role in explaining the fact that “water” refers to water. But the fact that water is a natural kind has little direct social and political significance.) Other views will appeal to a wide range of facts, and some of these may be deeply significant. We may divide these into four broad classes:

1. Facts about speakers' mental states and actions
2. Facts about social structures
3. Further (socially and politically significant) semantic facts
4. Normative facts (e.g., facts about what is just and unjust)

We will return to the possible metasemantic role of normative facts in the next section. In this section, we will address the other three classes in turn. Our aim is not to develop a comprehensive catalog of metasemantic views that might have some social or political significance; rather it is to illustrate how the kinds of facts appealed to in metasemantics might be socially and politically significant by giving examples from prominent metasemantic views, and thereby to set the stage for

the normative questions in metasemantics that will be the topic of section IV.

### *II.2.1 Facts about speakers' mental states and actions*

The idea that the facts about the semantics of natural languages (such as Swahili or British Sign Language) are to be explained in terms of the mental states of speakers of these languages is familiar from the work of Grice (1989) and many others. Many controversies remain about the details of which mental states matter: Grice pointed to intentions, but there is dispute about exactly which intentions are relevant (e.g., Recanati 1986); and others might think that beliefs or other states play the crucial role.

Now it is beyond doubt that our mental states in many typical cases have social and political consequences: our social and political structures are in large part a result of our actions, and our actions are in large part a result of our mental states. For example, if I believe that women are inferior to men, and intend to ensure that they are socially subordinated as a result of this belief, that may cause me to advocate for certain oppressive legislation. If facts like these play a role in metasemantic explanations, the metasemantic explanans will be socially significant in some cases.

However, there is little reason in general to think that mental states that are so obviously socially significant are also metasemantically significant. (Misogynist attitudes and the like can play a role in *causal* metasemantic explanation – for example, such attitudes might cause us to introduce negative words for women – but on most views, they will not play a role in constitutive metasemantic explanation.) And in general, our views on the potential social significance of attitudes implicated in the metasemantic explanans will depend on our views about what those attitudes are. However, it is plausible that on widely-held metasemantic views, the mental states relevant to metasemantics will be potentially socially significant. For example, consider the Gricean view that meaning that *p* is a matter of having the intention to cause your interlocutor to form the belief that *p* on certain grounds. It is plausible that intending to cause others to believe certain propositions is morally problematic in part because its social and political effects: for example, one ought not form the intention to cause others to believe that people of a certain racial group are inferior. If that is right, then the mental states that play a role in metasemantics on at least one very prominent view are normatively evaluable in part at least because of their social and political significance.

Of course, one might question whether it the *intention* to cause others to form certain beliefs is itself problematic, as opposed to the *actions* one might undertake as a result having that intention. And some metasemantic views may emphasise actions over the mental states that cause them. But as in the case of mental states, our views whether the actions that are implicated in metasemantics are themselves particularly socially significant will depend on which actions we take to be metasemantically significant, and many of the most obviously socially and politically significant actions will have at most only indirect causal effects on metasemantics. Still, it is not hard to imagine potential social consequences of actions that play a constitutive metasemantic role according to prominent views in the literature: for example, “dubbing” or “baptising” a phenomenon (i.e., introducing a name for it, which plays a central role in “causal chain” views inspired by Kripke 1980) may bring that phenomenon to prominence, or indicate its importance.

### *II.2.2 Facts about social structures*

A variety of social facts might be thought to be metasemantically significant. For example, it is widely maintained that experts play a special role in metasemantics (e.g., Putnam 1975, Burge 1978). One version of the idea has it that the opinions or practices of experts determine what words

mean, even in the mouths of non-experts. On this view, it might be that the word “molybdenum” refers to the chemical element with atomic number 42 because certain chemists systematically apply that word to that element; and that this determines what “molybdenum” means throughout the linguistic community, even as used by those non-experts who may be unaware that molybdenum is a chemical element, unable to tell molybdenum from aluminium, and so forth.

There are numerous ways that one might try to make the idea more precise; but any view in the vicinity is going to need to say more about what makes one an expert. Plausibly, expertise in the relevant sense is not merely a matter of knowledge; on most views, one who knows a lot about chemistry but is completely socially isolated or ignored is not going to be in a position to fix the meaning of “molybdenum”. Instead, expertise in the relevant sense is at least in part a matter of enjoying a certain social status: for example, being such that other speakers are willing to accept correction from you and adjust their views in response to your testimony, or such that other speakers will intend to use words in the way that you use them.

This makes social facts – facts about who is listened to, who is accorded status, authority, or power – relevant to metasemantics; on this style of metasemantic view, the metasemantic explanans will consist in part of facts about social structures.<sup>5</sup>

### *II.2.3 Socially and politically significant semantic facts*

In section II.1, we considered various respects in which the semantic facts might be socially significant; and in some cases these socially significant semantic facts may play a metasemantic role (as when the meaning of a complex expression depends on the meaning of its constituents). But other kinds of socially significant semantic fact have been considered in the literature. Consider the following passage from Dale Spender: “The semantic rule which has been responsible for the manifestation of sexism in the language can be simply stated: there are two fundamental categories, *male* and *minus male*. To be linked with male is to be linked to a range of meanings which are positive and good: to be linked to minus male is to be linked to the *absence* of those qualities, that is, to be decidedly negative and usually sexually debased” (1980: 23).

There are several ways this thought might be systematised: perhaps what is at issue is not a matter of semantics in our sense at all (but a matter of “connotation” or some such); or perhaps Spender's rule is best thought of as a *metasemantic* rule (i.e., a rule that dictates that when a new word is introduced to the language, it must be given a meaning that involves one of the features) rather than a semantic rule. But let's suppose that the right gloss is genuinely semantic: Spender is pointing to a set of facts about the semantics of English – to a first approximation, that the meaning of English words is at least in part a matter of “features” assigned to them, and that there are a pair of such features, one of which means (roughly) “male and good”, and another of which means “not male and bad”.

One might ask metasemantic questions about this (alleged) semantic fact: is it true because of misogyny in our society? Or perhaps it is simply a feature of the language faculty to be explained in evolutionary terms? But regardless of the explanation, the fact itself is of clear metasemantic significance – it will play a role in the explanation of the meaning of other expressions – and at the same time of clear social significance, to the extent that it reflects widely held attitudes or plays a role in explaining the existence of those attitudes.

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5 It is a consequence of this style of view that changing meanings may require changing social organisation. See Tirrell 1993 for some interesting discussion of related issues (which also bears on the issues to be discussed in section IV, below).

## II.2.4 Conclusion on the Metasemantic Explanans

We have noted that several widely-held metasemantic views (Grice's, Kripke's, Burge's) appeal to attitudes, actions, and phenomena that are socially and politically significant. This makes the normative evaluation of the metasemantic explanans potentially an important task, and we will begin to outline some of the relevant issues in section IV.

### II. 3 The Metasemantic Fact Proper

Consider again the claim that some semantic fact  $s$  is explained by  $e$ . We have now discussed the possible social significance of semantic explanandum, and the possible social significance of the metasemantic explanans  $e$ . What further significance can be accorded to the metasemantic fact proper – the fact  $s$  explains  $e$ ?

A natural response is: none at all. Once we have accounted for the social effects of the semantic explanandum and the social effects of the metasemantic explanans, there is nothing further that could be explained by the metasemantic fact proper. After all, the metasemantic fact proper (at least to the extent that we are construing it being about a constitutive explanation) is a fact about the obtaining of an obscure metaphysical relation between two more ordinary facts. A fact like *that* (it might be thought) could not possibly be socially significant.

I want to consider two possible replies to the idea that the metasemantic fact proper cannot be socially significant. The first reply contests it directly. Consider Fricker's (2007) examples of *hermeneutical epistemic injustice*. The examples begin with thinkers who lack the cognitive resources necessary to make sense of their own experiences: for example, women in the mid-twentieth century who experienced sexual harassment, but lacked a word or conceptual category for this experience. Thinkers in such a position are unfortunate; but as Fricker observes, a lack of hermeneutical resources is not ipso facto an injustice ("Different groups can be hermeneutically disadvantaged for all sorts of reasons, as the changing social world frequently generates new sorts of experience of which our understanding may dawn only gradually; but only some of these cognitive disadvantages will strike one as unjust" (2007: 151)) Fricker proposes that what distinguishes the cases of hermeneutical disadvantage that are *unjust* is that they involve "hermeneutical marginalization" – exclusion from the practices that play a role in putting us in a position to understand our experiences.

Now it is not the case that every example of hermeneutical epistemic injustice (as Fricker presents it) directly involves metasemantics. (For example, some of Fricker's cases involve subjects who have words that would apply to their situation, but are precluded by background facts and attitudes from applying those words to their own case.) But there are a range of cases in which the kind of fact that Fricker is pointing to is precisely a (quantified) metasemantic fact. What was unjust about the situation in the mid-twentieth century is not the fact that there was no standard expression for "sexual harassment"; it is rather that there was no expression for sexual harassment precisely because the victims of sexual harassment were denied positions of authority that would have put them in a position to create such an expression – and that is a quantified metasemantic fact (albeit at least in part a causal one). If Fricker is right, then the metasemantic facts are in part constitutive of certain facts about justice.

The second reply to the idea that the metasemantic fact proper cannot be socially significant concedes the point that the metasemantic facts themselves, but insists that investigating the metasemantic facts proper is a task of critical importance to the socially concerned philosopher of language – and to anyone who wants to effect social change. This is because given the discussion

above made it plausible that:

(A) The semantic facts have important social effects.

But given (A), and plausible assumptions (that different semantic facts have different effects, that the semantic facts can be changed, and so on), it follows that:

(B) By changing the semantic facts, one can bring about social change (for good or ill).

(B) is what seems to have been presupposed by Orwell and the authors of *Queers Read This*.

However, in general we are not in a position to change the metasemantic facts directly. We cannot just push a button and make it the case that a particular word has a particular meaning. If we want to change the semantic facts, we must do so by changing the facts on which they depend; and to be in a position reliably to change the semantic facts will therefore require knowing how the semantic facts depend on other facts. For example, an Orwellian totalitarian regime will only be in a position to try to make it the case that there is no word for freedom if they have some idea of what factors tend to make it the case that there is a word for freedom. In other words, they will need to know (or at least reasonably believe) metasemantic facts to the effect that “*freedom*” refers to freedom because \_\_\_\_\_ --- and if we want to stop them, we need to know these same facts. In short, from (B) we can infer the following:

*The Social Utility of Knowledge of Metasemantic Fact:* To the extent that semantic facts have social and political effects, those who wish to bring about (or to prevent) social change should aim to know the metasemantic facts.

It might be objected at this point that what is useful is not knowledge of *constitutive* metasemantic facts, but *causal* metasemantic facts. (If Orwell’s totalitarian regime knew that they could make it the case that there is no word for “freedom” by hitting everyone on the head, that would serve their purposes perfectly well, even if the relation between blows on the head and meaning is merely causal and not constitutive.) This is strictly speaking correct, but it overlooks the fact that in many cases, one cannot know the causal metasemantic facts without knowing the constitutive metasemantic facts, at least in broad outline. If we cause a word to have a certain meaning, we do so by causing some fact to obtain that constitutively explains the word’s having that meaning; so if we want to cause a word to have a certain meaning, we will (in typical cases) need to know what facts would (if they obtained) be constitutive of its having that meaning.

### III. The role of social and political considerations in metasemantics

Consider the question of whether the word “marriage”, as used by typical English speakers in 1980, could correctly be applied to relationships between same-sex couples. (To be clear, the question is not whether any same-sex couples were then married (the legal facts prevented that, at least in most parts of the world); the question is whether the idea that a same-sex couple could be married even made any sense, given the meaning of “marriage” – whether, for example, enacting a law purporting to legalise same-sex marriage would involve changing the meaning of “marriage”.)

There are familiar facts about speakers' use at the time that suggest that “marriage” could not be correctly applied to same-sex couples: for example, the fact that virtually all speakers believed that it could not, the fact that they withheld application of “marriage” to same-sex relationships, and so on. But it is also familiar that many people now regard this situation as unjust: given the background facts, it is unfair if “marriage” cannot be correctly applied to same-sex relationships. The question I want to engage with in this section is: what is the metasemantic significance of facts like this? Can facts about justice (or related normative notions, such as fairness, right and wrong), play a role in making it the case that a word has a particular meaning – and if so, what role? There are three main possibilities; in discussing them I will focus on the example of justice, but the conclusions should be generalisable to other normative notions.

First, the facts about justice might play a role in explaining some semantic fact in a *derivative* way. The explanations in question may be derivative in one of two senses: (i) they may rely on some other semantic fact that links a particular word with justice, or (ii) they may be instances of a general metasemantic fact of which considerations of justice are one example among others. To take a trivial example of (i), suppose that the word “just” may correctly be applied to (say) a particular law in part because that law is just. That may be a correct metasemantic explanation; but if so, it is correct only because of an antecedent semantic fact: that the word “just” is correctly applied to things that are just. An example of (ii) would be the idea that “just” is correctly applied to things that are just because there is a reliable pattern of speakers applying it to things that are just. If that is correct, then the explanation of why “just” is correctly applied to things that are just will allude to things being just and speakers judging them so. But if a story like this is correct about “just”, it is presumably correct because it is an instance of a very general metasemantic fact that has nothing in particular to do with justice – for example, a fact to the effect that for any word *w*, what *w* is correctly applied to is determined in part by the facts about how speakers in fact apply *w*.

These derivative metasemantic explanations are of relatively little interest. The second possibility is that the facts about justice play a causal role. Arguably, the facts about justice are not themselves causally efficacious. But it is extremely plausible that our beliefs about what is just and unjust are causally efficacious. And these beliefs may have an effect on our metasemantically explanatory attitudes or actions. For example, if we become convinced that it is unfair to withhold the word “marriage” from same-sex relationships, that may cause us to begin to apply the word to same-sex relationships; and this may in turn constitute a change in what we meant by “marriage”, or play a role in shaping what we meant by “marriage” all along.

Such causal metasemantic explanations that allude to our beliefs about justice may be of practical interest, if we want to change the semantic facts; but it is not clear that they are particularly significant from the point of view of metasemantic theory. But there is a third possible way that facts about justice could be involved in metasemantics – a way that, to my knowledge, has been neglected in the literature. On this third possibility, there could be constitutive metasemantic explanations that appeal to facts about justice, which are neither derivative on other semantic facts, nor instances of general metasemantic rules.

I can think of two broad ways this might go. The first is if the facts about justice are constitutive of some other kind of fact on which meaning depends. As an example, consider the view that meaning is fixed by the views of experts. What makes someone an expert? One view is that it is simply being in a position of authority, a position in which one is listened to; and sad experience tells us that one can be in such a position no matter how little one cares for justice. But there are alternative ways of thinking about expertise: for example, one might think that the true expert must show a certain sensitivity to considerations of justice, so that the opinions of an unjust person could never do metasemantic work even if that person is in a position of authority. And one might likewise see justice as involved in the mechanisms postulated by other metasemantic views: for example, it might be that justice is in some cases constitutive of metaphysical naturalness.

The second way that facts about justice might enter in to substantive metasemantic explanations is not via a connection between justice and some other metasemantically significant notion, but directly: perhaps (for example) our judgments and opinions fix what we mean, but only if those judgments and opinions are just; or perhaps the facts about justice are one among many factors – alongside the views of experts, our patterns of usage, the facts about naturalness, and so on – that can play a role in making it the case that our words have a particular meaning. I know of no explicit

attempt to defend a view of this kind in the literature.<sup>6</sup> But it has some appealing features: for example, those of us who are tempted to think that the meaning of “marriage” never precluded its application to same-sex couples (even if speakers in the past all confidently asserted that same-sex marriage was a contradiction in terms, ruled out by definition) might find vindication in the idea that facts about justice play a meaning-fixing role.

#### IV. Conclusion: Normative Reflections on Metasemantics

Consider again the Burge-inspired view that the linguistic usage of experts in the community play a special role in fixing meaning (and set aside for the moment the possibility mentioned above that the relevant notion of expertise requires justice). Suppose a group of relevant experts enters into a conspiracy to make our views and utterances false by changing their own usage of certain words. For example, perhaps they decide to use the word “arthritis” in such a way that it cannot correctly be applied to any disease of the ankles (so that “arthritis” picks out swelling in non-ankle joints). Or worse, suppose that the experts shift their usage of some socially significant word: perhaps they all agree to use “marriage” in such a way that it cannot be correctly applied to same-sex couples.

Now it is an interesting question whether, or under what circumstances, such a meaning-making conspiracy would be possible. (The discussion in the previous section will obviously bear on the answer to this question.) But many metasemantic views allow that there are considerable asymmetries in the power of different speakers to contribute; so many theorists show allow that something like this could happen. It seems that in that case the experts have done something wrong. Even considering a case like “arthritis” – a case that does not matter to people's self-conceptions, and which has relatively few social consequences – there is something troubling about the experts' arbitrarily choosing to make so many of our utterances and views false. And cases involving socially important words like “marriage” are more troubling still.

What exactly is wrong with the experts' actions here? Our answers to this question will turn in part on our views about deep issues in normative ethics – issues about what makes actions in general right and wrong. But several obvious possibilities raise interesting questions for further research. Perhaps the consequences of the experts' actions are what matter – for example, that their actions make it the case that many of our utterances are false? Perhaps; but it seems that the same consequences might result if the experts change their views in the course of scientific research on arthritis, or (perhaps *per impossibile*) the course of well conducted, good-faith philosophical or legal inquiry into marriage, and adjusting their judgments accordingly, and it is pretty clear at least in the case of “arthritis” that we would not regard such change of view as morally problematic. (We may have a different view about the case of “marriage” – or perhaps still more, cases of terminology that people use to express deep aspects of their identities and self-conceptions (terms related to gender, race, sexuality, and the like).) Alternatively, perhaps it is that the experts are shaping what the rest of us mean without our consent? But again, it is plausible that this happens all of the time in the course of research; why is consent not required if experts change their judgments as a result of scientific study?

This chapter aimed to develop a framework for thinking about social and political issues related to metasemantics. We have distinguished (1) ways that metasemantic facts may be socially and

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6 Saul (2012) discusses some relevant issues, but her main concerns are methodological, about what theorists should do – for example, how should semantic theorists respond to the claim that a given semantic view is unjust? If facts about justice play a metasemantic role, that would obviously have methodological consequences; but other considerations may also bear on methodology. (For example, a theorist who holds anti-realist views (in the sense that she denies that the aim of semantic theorising is to state semantic fact) might take considerations of justice into account even if they play no metasemantic role.)

politically significant from (2) ways that socially and politically significant facts may bear on metasemantics. Our discussion of (1) distinguished the potential social significance of (1a) the semantic explanandum from the significance of the (1b) metasemantic explanans and (1c) the metasemantic fact proper. Our discussion of (2) set aside various relatively uninteresting ways in which considerations of justice might figure into metasemantics before distinguishing (2a) views on which justice feeds in to some familiar factor that might play a metasemantic role (such as expertise or naturalness) from (2b) views on which justice is directly metasemantically relevant. And we concluded by considering (3) ethical issues associated with metasemantics. Many issues remain unresolved, and many relevant issues are entirely undiscussed in the context of contemporary thinking about metasemantics. The title of this chapter is meant to be taken seriously; I hope that it provides a framework on which future discussion can be built.

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