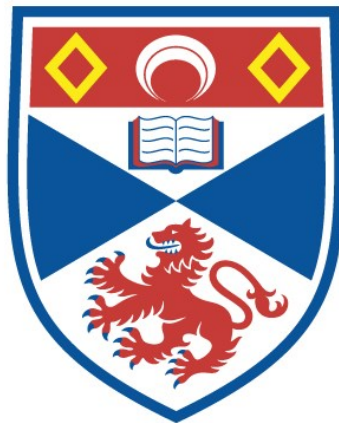


# The verbal dispute about verbal disputes

Niklas Becker

A thesis submitted for the degree of MPhil  
at the  
University of St Andrews



2022

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# The Verbal Dispute about Verbal Disputes

*“And here I desire it may be considered, and carefully examined, whether the greatest part of the disputes in the world are not merely verbal, and about the signification of words; and whether, if the terms they are made in were defined, and reduced in their signification (as they must be where they signify anything) to determined collections of the simple ideas they do or should stand for, those disputes would not end of themselves, and immediately vanish.”*

- John Locke (1689/1847, bk. III, chap. IX, 7)

## Abstract

Whether a dispute is verbal is important to figure out because it appears to make a huge difference for how the dispute should be resolved. To figure out whether individual disputes are verbal and to figure out how to resolve them, it is crucial to answer what it is for a dispute to be verbal. I defend a pluralistic answer to the question of what verbal disputes are: There are at least two phenomena that equally deserve to be called “verbal dispute”. The first phenomenon is the phenomenon of “talking past each other”, which I analyse in pragmatic terms. The second phenomenon is the phenomenon of “not *really* disagreeing”, which I analyse in doxastic terms. Both notions of “verbalness” respect certain features, but not others of how the expression “verbal dispute” is used. Furthermore, both notions are important to use since both make a difference for how best to proceed if a dispute is “verbal” in the sense in question.

In section 1, I outline why it is important to develop a good analysis of what verbal disputes are. In short, it is important because whether a dispute is verbal appears to make a difference for how to best resolve them. And resolving disputes in philosophy and academic disciplines more broadly is important to make progress. In section 2, I outline the method I use to establish my analyses of verbalness and argue for adopting this method for arguing for (and against) analyses of verbalness. In section 3, I consider a range of phrases typically used to describe what is distinctive about verbal disputes and boil them down to two central markers of verbal disputes: “talking past each other” and “not really disagreeing”. In section 4, I argue that both markers come apart and one may be present without the other, so these two markers of verbalness do in effect express two independent

phenomena. In section 5, I consider existing approaches to the question of what verbal disputes are, consider which of the two phenomena these existing analyses are meant to capture and how well they do indeed capture the phenomenon in question. Building on how these existing approaches can be improved, I argue in section 6 for my analyses of pragmatic verbalness (“talking past each other”) and doxastic verbalness (“not really disagreeing”). In section 7, I argue that the dispute about verbal disputes is itself pragmatically and doxastically verbal. In section 8, I reply to a range of potential objections to my account of verbal disputes.

## 1. Introduction

In this section, I summarise the topic of verbal disputes, outline why it is important to discuss and briefly sketch the position I am going to defend in the rest of the paper.

### 1.1 *The Topic of Verbal Disputes*

In some disputes, the parties don't seem to be really disagreeing. Instead, they seem to be talking past each other. Following how these terms have been used in the debate about verbal disputes<sup>1</sup>, here is how I am going to use “dispute” and “disagreement”: A “dispute” is to be understood in behaviouristic terms, it is roughly whenever one party asserts a sentence “S” and another party denies the same sentence “S”<sup>2</sup>. In contrast, disagreement is roughly a conflict in mental attitudes<sup>3</sup> between the parties involved. Here is a paradigmatic example of a dispute lacking an actual disagreement and in which the parties talk past each other:

We are both aware that a bookshop down the road sells books on certain spiritualist, but not on certain philosophical topics. With the spiritualist meaning of "metaphysics" in mind<sup>4</sup>, you

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<sup>1</sup>For example by Chalmers (2011)

<sup>2</sup>It is useful to focus on such simple cases involving just one disputed sentence for the discussion here. Of course, a real definition of "dispute" shouldn't exclude cases in which each party asserts and/or denies a plurality of sentences (see for example Mácha (2017) for an approach to verbal disputes including these cases).

<sup>3</sup>Some may want to restrict this to conflicting beliefs. As Inga Vermeulen pointed out, this may be too narrow as "expressivists, who hold that moral claims do not have propositional content, have argued that while disagreement requires a clash of attitudes, these attitudes need not be propositional" (2018, p. 335). Still, for the remainder of this thesis, I primarily discuss disagreement in terms of beliefs.

<sup>4</sup>In a certain sense, one may have the spiritual meaning of "metaphysics" *in mind* – namely in the sense of merely thinking about it – while still using "metaphysics" to refer to philosophical topics. This isn't the reading of "in mind" intended here. On the intended reading, what the parties intend to or believe to be talking about when using



assert "The bookshop down the road sells books on metaphysics". With the philosophical meaning of "metaphysics" in mind, I say "No, that bookshop doesn't sell books on metaphysics." (This example, as well as its subsequent variations, were largely inspired by Jackson's Kermit-Gonzo case (2014, p. 34))<sup>5</sup>

We are disputing, but we don't really disagree about the bookshop. Rather we talk past each other since we intend to say something on different matters (namely on the availability of *different* sorts of books). For this phenomenon, philosophers have coined the term "verbal dispute"<sup>6</sup>.

I think the case above is a fairly paradigmatic example of a verbal dispute and I use this case and varieties of it throughout the rest of the paper. To get the phenomenon better into view, here is a list of further, relatively uncontroversial examples of verbal disputes (assuming a standard context):

- A dispute over "Bats are birds" (Locke, 1689/1847, bk. III, chap. XI, 7)
- A dispute over "Glasses are cups" (Hirsch, 2005, p. 69).
- A dispute over "The man goes round the squirrel.", given that the man in question "walks rapidly around a tree, while a squirrel moves on the tree trunk. Both face the tree at all times, but the tree trunk stays between them." And given that making a distinction between different candidate meanings of "going round" resolves the dispute (James, 1907/1975, pp. 27–28).<sup>7</sup>
- Alan Sidelle lists a range of disputes inside and outside of philosophy that may be claimed to be verbal. Here are just a few of questions outside philosophy that may give rise to verbal disputes, according to Sidelle:

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"metaphysics" is in some sense partly constituted by what they have "in mind". It is difficult to say more at this stage, without moving on from an intuitive understanding of the case to providing an analysis of what makes the case verbal.

<sup>5</sup>An opponent may have a realist understanding of such examples of verbal disputes. On a realist understanding, the parties have a substantive disagreement about whether spiritualist books or philosophical books instantiate the property of being about metaphysics. I think this realist understanding is implausible for this case, but it hardly matters at this point as the example is mainly for exposition. This case is useful for showing what verbal disputes are *supposed* to be – even if it turned out that the case isn't verbal.

<sup>6</sup>Other researchers (especially in psychology) use the term "verbal dispute" to roughly refer to conflicts that are spoken, rather than physical. Throughout this paper, the philosophical notion of "verbal dispute" is meant.

<sup>7</sup>This example was popularized by Chalmers (2011).

- *Are whales fish?*
- *Is country C a democracy?*
- *Is X fat? bald? living in poverty? a person?*
- *Is Sedna a planet? Is Pluto a planet?*
- *Is proposed policy P socialist?*
- *Is the economy in a recession? Depression?*
- *Is Jane - the crystal gazer who believes in "spirituality," but not a traditional God - an atheist?*

(Sidelle, 2007, pp. 84–85)

The list could be continued with further examples. The point is that there seems to be some distinctive kind of dispute here. It is distinctive in virtue of various features we may point towards: We may say that the parties engaged in such disputes appear to be not really disagreeing or that the parties appear to be talking past each other or that in these disputes it appears perfectly rational for both parties to make their opposing assertions despite having the same empirical evidence. Furthermore, the bookshop case which I used above to introduce the topic appears to be not unusual, it seems a perfectly paradigmatic case of this kind of dispute.

## **1.2 Why it is important to discuss Verbal Disputes**

Discussing verbal disputes is important because it appears that whether our dispute is verbal makes a huge difference for how we should proceed as disputants. Intuitively, there is some defect in a dispute being (merely) verbal. If we are talking past each other, we arguably need to clear up some misunderstanding<sup>8</sup>. Applied to the bookshop case: I should clarify that I wished to convey that certain philosophical books are missing in the bookshop and you should clarify that you wished to

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<sup>8</sup>The intended meaning of "misunderstanding" throughout this paper is roughly miscommunication. "Misunderstanding" is also sometimes used to refer to a failure to understand or correctly apprehend a matter or issue (no matter whether verbal communication is involved) – this meaning is not intended here.

convey that the bookshop sells certain spiritualist books. Resolving this dispute appears to require clearing up this misunderstanding. Furthermore, since we are not really disagreeing about the bookshop, our dispute is, at least in some intuitive sense, pointless: Once the misunderstanding is cleared up, it is apparent that we do not disagree about which books are sold down the road. The only thing we might still disagree about is the meaning of "metaphysics" (in this context). There is no substantive disagreement *concerning the bookshop*. Once a dispute is found to be verbal, it appears that all we need to do is clearing up a misunderstanding and the original dispute evaporates – maybe with some residual disagreement about language. In summary, it seems that, if a dispute is verbal:

- Clearing up a misunderstanding is necessary to *really* resolve the dispute or it is at least how the dispute should be resolved.<sup>9</sup>
- Clearing up a misunderstanding is sufficient to resolve the dispute (disregarding residual disagreements about language).
- Verbal disputes are (in some sense) pointless with regards to their apparent subject matter.

Of course, these consequences of a dispute's verbalness for how to proceed are still very imprecise here and there may be exceptions as well as further caveats to add. The point is that, if a dispute is verbal, there are some consequences like these for how we should proceed to resolve the dispute.

Consequences of a dispute's verbalness for how to proceed, are what I call "methodological upshots". Whether a dispute is verbal has consequences, like the ones sketched above, for how we should proceed to resolve it. So, there are methodological upshots to diagnosing a dispute as verbal. Such methodological upshots make the notion of "verbal dispute" important. Having a concept of "verbal dispute" enables us to conveniently identify (roughly) pointless disputes in which we

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<sup>9</sup>Initially, one may think that clearing up the misunderstanding is necessary for *any* resolution of the dispute. But this is mistaken. Suppose we enter the bookshop and find (as we both expected) that it sells books on spiritualist topics, but also (to our surprise) that it sells philosophical books concerning mereology, time, personhood etc. As a result, I say: "You were right, the bookshop sells books on metaphysics" – we did not clear up our misunderstanding but (at least superficially) the dispute is resolved. Still, in such a case it appears that it would have been better to clear up the misunderstanding, so the point that it's better to clear up the misunderstanding still stands. For a discussion of similar cases and the relation between one-sided resolution and verbalness, see Rott (2015).

(roughly) need to clear up a misunderstanding.

In many everyday disputes, not much may hinge on whether the dispute is resolved. In the bookshop example of section 1.1, we might have become engaged in the dispute because someone asked us whether the bookshop sells books on metaphysics. We may then simply tell them to check for themselves and never bother to resolve the dispute. In everyday life, there may be lots of potentially verbal disputes which are simply not very important to resolve. So, even given that verbalness makes a difference for how to resolve a dispute, one may worry that resolving disputes is not that important and therefore figuring out what verbal disputes are may not be that important. The point however is not to figure out what verbal disputes are to be better at resolving everyday disputes. This would be unrealistic, even if one succeeds at figuring out what verbal disputes are, uptake of this correct view would likely be low among laypeople. The point is to figure out what verbal disputes are to be better at resolving disputes in academic disciplines and especially in philosophy. The charge of verbalness is common in philosophical disputes: “almost every philosophical dispute has been diagnosed as verbal at some point” (Chalmers, 2011, p. 3). But even in other academic disciplines or across disciplines, disputes are sometimes verbal or at least claimed to be<sup>10</sup>.

Here are just a few disputes in philosophy which are (sometimes) claimed to be verbal<sup>11</sup>:

- The dispute between nihilists and universalists in mereology.  
(They use the existential quantifier differently)
- The dispute between compatibilists and incompatibilists about freedom and determinism.  
(They use “freedom” differently)

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<sup>10</sup>For example, Flage argued that different disciplines use the term “critical thinking” differently and thus engage in verbal disputes regarding the term (2001). Within disciplines, there are also often significant disputes concerning what the object of inquiry is (e.g. What is the economy? What is law? What is communication? What is culture? What is alive?) and those disputes sometimes appear to be verbal. Granted though, those disputes often straddle the boundary between these disciplines and philosophy. Verbal disputes may also arise when researchers use a key term differently – e.g. researchers may use the term “innate” differently and may thus engage in verbal disputes about whether a trait or behaviour is “innate”.

<sup>11</sup>Most of these examples are again from Sidelle (2007, pp. 84–85). The example of mereology is from Hirsch (2005, pp. 68–69)

- Disputes over “Knowledge requires justification”.  
(They use “Knowledge” differently)
- Disputes over “Knowledge requires internal justification”.  
(They use “Knowledge” differently)
- Disputes between functionalists and identity theorists in the philosophy of mind.  
(They use “mental state” differently)

The point is not that these disputes or similar disputes really are verbal. The point is that they are claimed to be verbal and that it is not implausible that they are verbal. And if any of these disputes are verbal, we arguably need to resolve them differently from ordinary disputes. So, to be good at resolving these disputes, we should:

- Figure out what verbal disputes are, so we can figure out whether these disputes are verbal.
- Figure out how a verbal dispute could, should or must be resolved differently from ordinary disputes, so we know what to do if a dispute is verbal.

The methodological upshots of a dispute's verbalness make the notion of "verbal dispute" central to philosophical and relevant to some non-philosophical research and theorizing. When a debate is identified as verbal, the upshots of verbalness apply and it is argued that all there is to do to solve the debate is to clear up what each party intends to say with the same words. Clearing up the notion of verbal dispute is of central importance to evaluate this type of argument. We need to figure out what verbal disputes are to evaluate what to do if a debate is verbal or claimed to be verbal.

### ***1.3 The View I am going to defend***

In this section, I briefly sketch the position I am going to defend in the rest of this paper. I take a pluralistic stance on verbal disputes: I argue that there are at least two phenomena that deserve to be called "verbal dispute". One phenomenon will be identified and analysed in pragmatic<sup>12</sup> terms, it is

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<sup>12</sup>"pragmatic" is meant in terms of the pragmatic/semantic distinction.

the phenomenon of "talking past each other". My analysis of this phenomenon places central weight on the parties intending to convey different propositions with the same sentence. The other phenomenon will be identified using doxastic vocabulary, it is the phenomenon of "not really disagreeing". My analysis of this phenomenon places central weight on the parties not really disagreeing about what they take to be the subject matter of the dispute. The two phenomena are distinct as I will provide clear cases of "talking past each other" without "not really disagreeing" and vice versa in section 4. Furthermore, each of these notions of verbalness has its own, distinct methodological upshots. Much of the intractability of the debate about what verbal disputes are can fruitfully be explained in this framework: Many theorists only talk about one of the two phenomena and as a result, the debate about what verbal disputes are is itself verbal – it is an example of both notions of verbalness.

## **2. Method**

The central goal of this paper is to provide an account of what verbal disputes are. The general goal is to provide a conceptual analysis of "verbal dispute" – or in my case to provide two distinct analyses of "verbal dispute" and argue that they are equally legitimate insofar as we should employ and distinguish both notions to resolve disputes.

In this section, I argue for adopting a specific method of arguing for or against analyses of "verbal dispute". I argue that the standard method of cases can't be naively applied to the notion of "verbal dispute" since it is a technical term, not a natural, intuitive expression. After considering and rejecting two other routes of establishing analyses, I argue that the best way to argue for an analysis of "verbal dispute" is to use natural expressions like "talking past each other" and "not really disagreeing", which are used to describe intuitive features verbal disputes are supposed to have. We can then compare candidate analyses against our dispositions to apply these natural expressions and thereby identify potential counterexamples to our candidate analysis. The method is continuous with the classic method of cases, except for using intuitive, natural surrogate expressions instead of the technical term "verbal dispute".

The method of cases is standard for arguing for (or against) conceptual analyses in philosophy. The following characterisation is inspired by Ackerman's work on conceptual analysis (1981): The method works as follows: We take an expression that is intuitively and pre-theoretically used by competent speakers, e.g. "moral righteousness", "knowledge", "belief", "justice", "trust", "remember", "experience" etc. Then we collect paradigm cases for which we are disposed to apply these expressions, figure out what they all have in common and try to come up with a candidate analysis of the concept expressed. For example, we may find that all cases to which we are disposed to apply "knowledge" seem to be cases of *true belief*. We then test this candidate analysis by looking for counterexamples. That is, we look for cases to which we are disposed to apply the candidate analysis but not the analysed expression (e.g. true belief without knowledge) or vice versa (e.g. knowledge without true belief). We may find that in some cases, a belief is true 'by chance' and we are disposed to not apply "knowledge" then. Taking the counterexample into consideration we then come up with a new candidate analysis, e.g. *justified, true belief* and then we come up with new counterexamples (Gettier cases) and so forth. Once we can't find any counterexamples we may have completed the task of finding a true analysis.

The method of cases is fundamentally flawed for providing an analysis of "verbal dispute". The method requires an *intuitively, pre-theoretically used expression*. The method requires a reservoir of pre-theoretic dispositions to apply the expression in question. It works with expressions like "knowledge" and "moral righteousness" because laypeople intuitively apply these expressions to cases and we can use these dispositions to argue for or against analyses. This kind of strategy can hardly be employed here since "verbal dispute" is a technical term. Laypeople have relatively little competence using the expression, few have many dispositions to apply it to cases. The only people frequently using the expression with intuitions about its correct application are philosophers – and they don't use it pre-theoretically. The classic method of cases isn't enough to justify an analysis of verbal disputes.

An opponent may argue that the method of cases may not require *pre-theoretic* intuitions for usage. Instead, the method could focus on the theory-informed use of "verbal dispute" by philosophers.

The problem with that approach is that the theories those philosophers have of verbal disputes will inevitably be the standard those philosophers try to meet when using the expression “verbal dispute”. Thus, unless there is a severe mismatch between the endorsed theory of verbal disputes and their usage of “verbal dispute”, the most popular theory of “verbal dispute” would automatically be the right theory of verbal disputes. Whichever theory of verbal dispute is most popular wouldn’t be popular because it is true. Rather, that theory is true because it’s popular. Endorsing the method of cases for theory-informed usage has undesired consequences like this. When the method of cases fails, we must look for other ways to establish an analysis of verbalness. We must employ some standard of correctness, such that if an analysis meets it, we accept it as a good analysis. Since “verbal dispute” is a technical term, introduced by experts, we may look for hints by way of looking at how it was introduced. Maybe “verbal dispute” was introduced by stipulating a definition, so someone introduced the expression, saying “Let’s call disputes verbal if and only if ...”, giving some suitable description. Then it would be easy to give an analysis since all we need to do is to identify the original, stipulative definition, and this would be, *quite trivially*, a true analysis. Or maybe the expression was introduced by pointing to paradigm examples and stipulating that “verbal dispute” refers to the most natural property these paradigm examples have in common. In this case, all we need to do is to identify these original examples and figure out the most natural property they have in common.

Considering this approach, let’s look at what appears to be the first usage of the expression “verbal dispute” with its philosophical meaning. To the best of my knowledge the following passage by Locke is the original introduction of the expression “(merely) verbal dispute”:

*And here I desire it may be considered, and carefully examined, whether the greatest part of the **disputes** in the world are not **merely verbal**, and about the signification of words; and whether, if the terms they are made in were defined, and reduced in their signification (as they must be where they signify anything) to determined collections of the simple ideas they do or should stand for, those disputes would not end of themselves, and immediately vanish.*



(Locke, 1689/1847, bk. III, chap. IX, 7)

The passage follows a discussion of the dispute over whether bats are birds – an example of a plausibly verbal dispute. Given this passage, the following two features define a verbal dispute for Locke:

- The dispute is in some sense “about the signification of words”.
- If those words were well defined to signify “determined collections of simple ideas”, these disputes would “vanish”.

Of course, the method would continue by carefully considering the appropriate reading of these two (at this point rather vague) features in context. While it is surely an interesting project to look at how to best interpret Locke’s passages on these disputes, I don’t think it is a very promising strategy to find the best analysis of verbal disputes.

A method of looking for an original stipulative definition and of identifying original, introductory examples is flawed. The reason why it is flawed is that the method is too tied to the expression “verbal dispute” while possession of an intuitive concept of verbal disputes appears to be independent from the expression “verbal dispute”. Consider, for example, this quote from David Hume:

*“It might reasonably be expected in questions which have been canvassed and disputed with great eagerness, since the first origin of science and philosophy, **that the meaning of all the terms, at least, should have been agreed upon among the disputants; and our enquiries, in the course of two thousand years, been able to pass from words to the true and real subject of the controversy.** [...] From this circumstance alone, that a controversy has been long kept on foot, and remains still undecided, **we may presume that there is some ambiguity in the expression, and that the disputants affix different ideas to the terms employed in the controversy.** [...] if the question regard any subject of common life and experience; nothing, one would think, could preserve the dispute so long undecided, but **some ambiguous expressions, which keep the antagonists still at a distance, and hinder***

*them from grappling with each other.* ” (my emphasis) (Hume, 1748/2000, p. 80)

I think it is evident from this quote that Hume possessed not only an intuitive idea but at least a rudimentary theory of verbal disputes, despite lacking – or at least not using – the expression. It is this intuitive idea of disputes in which the disputants “affix different ideas to the terms employed in the controversy” and fail to reach “the true and real subject of the controversy”. Furthermore, he notes that this kind of dispute has what I call a methodological upshot: It can explain why a controversy is “long kept on foot, and remains still undecided”, in short, why it is intractable. Since the *concept* of verbal disputes seems to be intuitive and since it has been used and expressed without the *expression* “verbal dispute”, an analysis of “verbal dispute” should attempt to provide an analysis of this intuitive concept and disregard the exact circumstances under which the expression “verbal dispute” was introduced to conveniently express this concept.

I ultimately reject the approach of looking at the original introduction of the expression “verbal dispute” because the original introduction of “verbal dispute” is an uninteresting standard of correctness for analyses of verbal dispute. Hume appears to intend to talk about the same interesting and intuitive phenomenon we intend to talk about when we use the expression “verbal dispute”. Trying to figure out exactly what this *intuitive* phenomenon is (or whether it is just one or rather two) is an interesting project. Simply following the original introduction of the expression “verbal dispute” is not as interesting.

In the previous paragraphs, I argued against simply following the introduction of the expression “verbal dispute”. I argued that possession of an intuitive concept of verbal disputes is independent from the expression “verbal disputes” and argued that analysing this concept is more interesting than merely following the original introduction of the expression.

Thus, I endorse the methodological approach of providing an analysis of the intuitive concept of a verbal dispute, based on expressions of markers of verbalness. Further support for this approach can also be drawn from the recent debate about the right analysis of “verbal dispute”. Theorists in the debate tend to not simply look at when people are disposed to apply the expression “verbal dispute”

or how it was originally introduced. Instead, they tend to employ intuitively used and pre-theoretical expressions, using them as markers of verbal disputes. For Chalmers, “pointlessness” and that the disputants seem to be “not really disagreeing” are central markers of verbal disputes (2011). For Jackson, the central marker is that the disputants are “talking past each other” (2014). For Jenkins, there are two central markers, “not really disagreeing” and that the appearance of disagreement is in some sense “due to a difference in language” (2014). The list will be extended in section 4 when I discuss which markers are best employed for advocating an analysis of verbal disputes. The moral drawn here is that each of these theorists employs intuitive *markers of verbal disputes* to defend their analysis. This suggests that what we are after, in looking for an analysis of verbal disputes, is an intuitive concept, which is expressed in natural expressions like “talking past each other” and “not really disagreeing”.

The fact that there are multiple such candidate markers of verbalness begs the question: Which are the right ones? Crucially there might not be a unique set of correct markers. Several sets of markers may be equally legitimate. And even if we successfully establish one set of markers as correct, they could still be combined in different ways (conjunction, disjunction...). So, several sets of markers may be equally legitimate and the markers of one set can be combined differently. This leaves space for pluralism, because each way of combining the markers of one of these legitimate sets of markers would constitute a legitimate analysis of “verbal dispute”. Several equally legitimate sets of markers of verbalness and the ways in which the markers of each set can be combined give rise to several, equally legitimate analyses of verbalness.

Some markers may still be better than others, even if there isn't a unique legitimate set of markers of verbal disputes. For example, a marker expression should apply to all commonly used examples of verbal disputes and not apply to commonly used examples of non-verbal disputes. A marker expression should be relatively intuitively and pre-theoretically used. It should be relatively precise rather than vague. I will turn to these and other features of the right markers of verbalness in the next section when I argue for the best set of markers.

An opponent may point out that we could focus instead on paradigmatic examples of verbal disputes that have been employed throughout the literature and debate of “verbal disputes” to argue for an analysis. We may think of common, paradigmatic examples, together with naturalness, as fixing the extension of “verbal disputes”. In this picture, a dispute counts as “verbal” if and only if it has the most natural property that is present in common, paradigmatic examples of verbal disputes and that is absent in paradigmatic examples of non-verbal disputes<sup>13</sup>. This picture is intriguing, and I will appeal to paradigmatic examples insofar as commonly accepted examples of verbal disputes should have the marker of verbal dispute that is under consideration. I will also appeal to paradigmatic examples insofar as commonly accepted counterexamples should lack these markers. But I think an approach solely based on paradigmatic examples is insufficient since it is questionable how these paradigmatic examples were identified in the first place. Many theorists in the debate introduced their favourite paradigmatic example of verbalness, so if these examples count as paradigmatic, then how were these cases identified? It seems we must follow some intuitive features of “verbal” disputes to identify paradigmatic examples. It seems that theorists, by employing markers like “not really disagreeing”, “talking past each other” etc., express some intuitive features of “verbal” disputes, which they use to identify what they consider to be paradigmatic cases of verbalness. A method of advocating for or against an analysis of “verbal disputes” needs to consider already accepted paradigmatic examples. But since each paradigmatic example depends on having accepted some marker of verbalness first, primary attention should be given to the markers of verbalness that are used to identify paradigmatic examples in the first place. A method for arguing for (or against) an analysis of verbal dispute has to employ marker expressions like “talking past each other” and “not really disagreeing” to express the intuitive kind of dispute we are after. The best analysis of verbal disputes should (at least mostly) conform to our dispositions to apply these intuitive expressions and can be measured against them. This method is similar to a Canberra plan method (see Braddon-Mitchell & Nola, 2009, Chapter 1 for an

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<sup>13</sup>In this picture, the reference of the expression “verbal dispute” is fixed through paradigmatic examples and naturalness. One may think it is fixed similarly to how the extension of “water” is fixed by both samples and naturalness, given a Putnam-style natural kind externalism. (Putnam, 1974, 1975)

introduction): We proceed by first collecting platitudes concerning verbal disputes like “In verbal disputes, the parties are talking past each other.” and “In verbal disputes, the parties are not really disagreeing”. In a Canberra plan method, we would then look for natural properties (or joints in the world) that make (most of) these platitudes true. Then we look for an analysis that conveniently expresses this property. But the method employed here is not an ideal example of the Canberra plan, as I place less weight on empirical research or the “naturalness” of the property in question and instead mainly consider paradigmatic examples of “verbalness” and how they are identified with marker expression. In a nutshell, we collect platitudes concerning verbal disputes, consider which intuitive property (or in my case: properties) of disputes make (most of) these platitudes true and then develop an analysis of this property.

In summary, I use the following method for establishing my view that there are at least two legitimate analyses of “verbal dispute”:

1. Collect platitudes or markers concerning verbal disputes. Cluster them together since often there is more than one expression for a given marker. Consider which expression in a cluster expresses each of the markers best. The marker expressions should apply to commonly accepted, paradigmatic examples of verbal disputes (and not apply to paradigmatic examples of non-verbal disputes).
2. Consider the relations between different markers. Are they independent? Does one entail the other? Are they co-extensional? If they are independent, there may be more than one target phenomenon.
3. Consider the degree to which existing analyses in the literature respect the identified markers or platitudes concerning verbal disputes. Identify ways in which these analyses can be improved to better respect the identified markers. When different approaches seem to respect different markers, they could be intended to capture different target phenomena.
4. Based on the ways existing approaches can be improved, establish an improved analysis of verbal disputes – or in my case several improved analyses for different target phenomena.

In the following sections, I follow these steps to establish my view that there are (at least) two legitimate analyses of verbal dispute – a pragmatic notion, intuitively captured with the phrase “talking past each other”, and a doxastic notion, intuitively captured with the phrase “not really disagreeing”. They will be equally legitimate insofar as we should employ and distinguish these notions to resolve disputes optimally.

Of course, others may be proponents of a different methodology to find an analysis of “verbal dispute”. While I argued that the alternative methods considered in this section are less interesting than the one I adopted, proponents of alternative methods may disagree. Ultimately, I think many proponents of alternative methods may still agree with me that the methodology I follow here to argue for analyses of “verbal dispute” constitutes an interesting project in its own right.

### **3. Intuitive Markers of Verbal Disputes**

In this section, I discuss a range of intuitive markers of verbal disputes. First, I consider intuitive phrases ordinary people would use to describe what is distinctive about paradigmatic examples of verbal disputes, compared to paradigmatic examples of non-verbal disputes. We may think of these phrases as being used to identify what paradigmatic examples of verbal disputes are in the first place. Applying these phrases to verbal disputes (E.g. "In verbal disputes, the disputants are talking past each other.") should generate platitudes rather than controversial theses. I furthermore cluster these phrases together when they appear to express the same marker.

#### ***3.1 "Talking past each other" – Verbal Disputes involve***

##### ***Miscommunication***

There is a range of phrases commonly used to describe and identify paradigmatic verbal disputes which express that there is some difference in language or some barrier to communication between the two disputants. For example, consider the following phrases:

- The disputants are "talking past each other" (see Jackson, 2014, p. 32; Belleri, 2018, p. 691; Vermeulen, 2018, p. 338).

- The disputants "use language differently"<sup>14</sup>
- The disputants "mean different things with their words"
- The disputants "disagree about the meanings of words" (see Chalmers, 2011, p. 7)
- Verbal disputes are "about the signification of words" (Locke, 1689/1847, bk. III, chap. IX, 7)
- Verbal disputes "hinge on a misunderstanding"
- Verbal disputes "arise due to confusions concerning words/meanings/language" (see Vermeulen, 2018, p. 332)
- Verbal disputes hinge on "matters of language/words" (and not "matters of fact").<sup>15</sup>
- Verbal disputes "concern language" (rather than what language is about) (see Mácha, 2017).
- To solve a verbal dispute, "the disputants need to attend to language".<sup>16</sup>

In summary, these phrases suggest that there is, between the disputants, some difference in language, presumably concerning the bits of language used in the dispute<sup>17</sup>, that somehow hinders communication and that needs to be resolved to solve the dispute. They are intuitively used by laypeople as well as philosophers when discussing paradigmatic examples of verbal disputes. These phrases apparently reflect the same underlying theme of verbal disputes being marked by a difference in language and a failure of communication between the disputants.

While these phrases all go some way to capture an intuitive, distinctive feature of paradigmatic examples of verbal disputes, they do not capture it equally well. The focus here is to identify a feature – a marker – which should be as intuitive as possible in identifying paradigmatic cases of

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<sup>14</sup>For example, Hirsch appears to use a related phrase to mark verbal disputes: "Nothing is substantively at stake in these questions beyond *the correct use of language*" (my emphasis) (2005, p. 67). Similarly, Jenkins says that "the two parties do not disagree about the subject matter(s) of their (putative) dispute, but merely present the appearance of doing so owing to their *divergent uses of language*" (my emphasis) (2014, p. 11).

<sup>15</sup>E.g. Chalmers says they "are only disagreeing about linguistic matters" (2011, p. 1)

<sup>16</sup>E.g. Hirsch argues that "the proper way to resolve these questions is by appealing to common sense or ordinary language" (2005, p. 67).

<sup>17</sup>Though this point is already controversial as Jenkins argues that the relevant bit of language doesn't need to be used in the dispute (2014).

verbal disputes. A good phrase expressing such a marker:

**1. Requires little to no theory and few to no background assumptions**

The main reason for this condition is that the markers should not be tainted by theorizing concerning verbal disputes. The markers are the *starting point* for theorizing about verbal disputes, so they should themselves be pre-theoretic. Furthermore, the more a marker relies on particular theories or background assumptions, the more it is in danger of being controversial.

**2. Belongs to everyday, non-expert language**

This is justified by the same reason as the first condition. Expert language tends to incorporate theories and background assumptions – it is tainted by theorizing. Furthermore, everyday language expressions are better since they are applied intuitively. And such intuitions to apply marker expressions are needed as a standard for correctness for analyses of verbalness.

**3. Expresses a symptom. It should not diagnose a cause, provide an explanation, or recommend a way to resolve the dispute.**

The reason for this condition is that markers of verbalness should be used to *identify* paradigmatic cases of verbal disputes. In a sense, the marker should be express the symptom of verbalness, so it can be used to identify verbalness. Diagnosing a cause, providing an explanation or recommending a way to resolve a dispute, is already beyond merely identifying paradigmatic cases of verbalness – it is already in the business of theorizing about verbal disputes.

**4. Is be relatively precise (rather than vague or ambiguous).**

This condition is probably the least controversial. The more imprecise, vague or ambiguous the marker expression is, the less useful it is to identify paradigmatic cases of verbalness.

Given these conditions, I think that "talking past each other" is the best phrase to express what I call the miscommunication-marker of verbal disputes. "Talking past each other" requires little to no



(overt) theory to intuitively recognize in a case. The phrase appears to express a symptom rather than attempting to analyse, explain or diagnose what is going on. In comparison with other phrases like "the parties use language differently" (differently in what way?) it is relatively precise. And it belongs to everyday, non-expert language. In contrast, a range of phrases appear to suggest particular causes for this phenomenon of talking past each other: That the disputants "use language differently", "mean different things with their words", "disagree about the meanings of words" and that verbal disputes "arise due to confusions concerning words/language" all appear to provide explanations or identify potential causes for why the disputants are "talking past each other". That one needs to "attend to language" to resolve a verbal dispute is recommending a therapy rather than expressing a symptom. Many of the listed phrases also fail because of their vagueness. For example, that verbal disputes hinge on "matters of language/words"(and not "matters of fact") is too vague to be useful.

The closest competitor phrase to "talking past each other" appears to be that verbal disputes "hinge on a misunderstanding". It is also close in meaning since to talk past each other is arguably to have a misunderstanding. I still prefer "talking past each other" because it suggests no causal connection or counterfactual dependence, unlike the word "hinge" suggests. Also, the expression "talking past *each other*" suggests a sort of symmetry that appears to be present in verbal disputes. Of course, the other phrase may be assimilated, one could say that the disputants of a verbal dispute "misunderstand each other". But even then, I worry that "misunderstand each other" may be too broad because "misunderstand" is also sometimes used when a speaker misrecognizes which *word* or *sentence* another speaker utters. Such cases seem far from paradigmatic cases of verbal disputes and while they are naturally described as misunderstandings, one wouldn't usually say that the parties are "talking past each other".

“Talking past each other” on my understanding expresses a pragmatic (rather than semantic) phenomenon. The key feature appears to be *miscommunication* or *misunderstanding*. It is about a mismatch between how each party wants to be understood and how the other party really understands them. It concerns what each party intends to convey and how the other party

misidentifies what they intend to convey.

An opponent may of course argue that a competitor phrase of "talking past each other" is better than I thought. I still think that an opponent could probably still agree that "talking past each other", considered in isolation, is a phrase that meets the criteria (little theory, few background assumptions, everyday language...) well enough. Others may think that other phrases are just as well or better at capturing the miscommunication marker of verbal disputes but they may still agree that using "talking past each other" is at least not a bad phrase to use for expressing this marker.

In summary, one marker of verbal disputes is the marker of miscommunication. Of the phrases considered, the phrase "talking past each other" appears to capture this symptom best at an intuitive level.

### ***3.2 "Not really disagreeing" – Verbal Disputes lack Object-Level***

#### ***Disagreement***

There is a range of phrases commonly used to describe and identify paradigmatic verbal disputes which express that the parties appear to be not really disagreeing:

- The parties of a verbal dispute "do not have a factual/real/substantive/genuine disagreement"(see, for example, Jenkins, 2014, p. 13; Vermeulen, 2018, p. 332).
- The parties "are not really disagreeing about the domain of concern" (Chalmers, 2011, p. 1).
- If a dispute is verbal, then "nothing hinges on it" or "nothing turns on this" (Chalmers, 2011, p. 10).
- Verbal disputes are "pointless" (Chalmers, 2011).
- Verbal disputes "do not concern matters of fact" (rather they concern matters of language).
- In a verbal dispute "there is no disagreement in the content" of the claims (Sidelle, 2007, p. 89).

- When a dispute is verbal, "both parties may be right"<sup>18</sup>.
- A verbal dispute is "not about what is the case" (but "only about how to describe what is the case").

All these phrases suggest that the disputants of a verbal dispute "do not really disagree" – at least not about the object-level or subject matter of their dispute. These phrases all appear to refer to roughly the same phenomenon of people having a dispute (one asserts "S", the other denies "S") but not really disagreeing about the subject matter of "S". For example, in the bookshop case, you utter "The bookshop sells books on metaphysics." and I utter "The bookshop doesn't sell books on metaphysics.". But we both believe that the bookshop sells books on spiritualist, but not on philosophical topics, so we do not really disagree about what the bookshop sells – we just describe the same situation differently.

As in the previous section, I now consider which of these phrases expresses the marker of lack of object-level disagreement best. As before, the phrase should:

- require little to no theory and few to no background assumptions
- express a symptom. It should not diagnose a cause, provide an explanation or recommend a way to resolve the dispute
- be relatively precise (rather than vague)
- belong to everyday, non-expert language

Given these criteria, I think the phrase "not *really* disagreeing" captures the marker best. It is more precise than "pointlessness", "nothing hinges/turns on this" as the latter phrase is sometimes used to express that a *real disagreement* is not relevant, not important, or unresolvable. For example, a dispute among laypeople about whether human beings will be on Mars in 20 years or 30 years might be called "pointless" since there is no way of knowing now and since it doesn't make much

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<sup>18</sup>Eli Hirsch appears to think of verbal disputes in this spirit when he (very roughly) argues that in a verbal dispute, each party may accept that the other party speaks the truth on a charitable interpretation. (2005)

of a difference for laypeople today. But it is still a case of real disagreement and not verbal.

"Not *really* disagreeing" also belongs to everyday, non-expert language and more so than phrases involving "substantial" or "substantive". Similarly, phrases employing terms like "object-level" or "subject matter" are less common in everyday language. Furthermore, "not disagreeing about the object-level / the facts / the subject matter" may be thought of as more closely explaining or analysing what is meant by "not *really* disagreeing" – especially for clarifying what the intended meaning of "really" in "not really disagreeing" is.

There are three problems with the phrase "not *really* disagreeing":

First, it may be used when at least one of the disputants is not speaking sincerely. E.g. In a dispute about whether humans will be on Mars before or after 2040, all disputants might believe that it will be before 2040 but one of them plays devil's advocate and argues that it will be after 2040. The disputants are *not really disagreeing* but the dispute seems still non-verbal. In response, note that most phrases in the list have problems with insincere utterances (maybe except for "pointlessness" and "not substantial"). For now, I restrict the discussion to cases of sincere disputes, that is to cases of disputes in which the parties believe what they take themselves to assert. I reconsider the issue of sincerity in section 8.2.

The second problem is that some might say that the disputants of a paradigmatic verbal dispute *are really disagreeing*: They disagree about how to use one or more expressions used in the dispute. E.g. in the bookshop case, we might disagree about how to use the word "metaphysics" and whether it refers to a philosophical discipline or spiritualist topics. But on the intended reading of "*really*", this doesn't count as a case of "*really* disagreeing" as the subject matter of the dispute isn't the meaning of "metaphysics", but the range of books sold in the shop. There is a trade-off here between a more precise phrase – "not disagreeing about the object-level / subject matter" – and a more everyday, intuitive phrase – "not *really* disagreeing". I stick with "not *really* disagreeing" since I think "not disagreeing about the object-level / subject matter" is already in the business of providing a more in-depth analysis. It is already in the business of theorizing and analysing the

intended meaning of "not *really* disagreeing" rather than staying on the level of identifying and expressing an intuitive marker of verbal disputes.

The third problem with "not really disagreeing" is that it is a negated phrase. It shares this feature with most other phrases considered above. Using a negative phrase as a marker expression of verbalness may raise eyebrows because one may think that an intuitive feature, used to identify cases of verbal disputes should be positive – a *feature* – instead of negative – the *lack of a feature*. Initially, following this line of thought, one might be tempted to find a positive surrogate expression. This may seem simple since "*not* really *disagreeing*" appears doubly negated. Maybe we can simply replace it with "really agreeing". However, it is a mistake to think that a lack of disagreement is the same as the presence of agreement. Consider the following case:

With the spiritualist meaning of "metaphysics" in mind, you assert "The bookshop down the road sells books on metaphysics". You believe it sells books on certain spiritualist topics but you suspend belief concerning whether it sells philosophical books. With the philosophical meaning of "metaphysics" in mind, I say "No, that bookshop doesn't sell books on metaphysics", believing that it doesn't sell certain philosophical books but suspending belief concerning whether it sells certain spiritualist books.

Now, it appears that this is a case of not really disagreeing. After all, for us to disagree it would be necessary for us to have conflicting mental attitudes, or in this case more specifically conflicting beliefs. But our beliefs are perfectly consistent here. And yet this isn't a case of agreement either. For to agree about a matter would be to believe the same about the matter and this is not the case due to suspension of belief. Furthermore, the case above also seems intuitively verbal. This favours "not really disagreeing" over "really agreeing" as a marker of verbal disputes.

Also, in the case of "not really disagreeing", I think it is well justified to use a negative phrase as a marker expression. One way to see this is that the thing that is distinctive about verbal disputes is the lack of a feature that is *usually* present in disputes – namely disagreement. The phrase "not really disagreeing" marks verbal disputes in opposition to a marker of *normal* disputes – namely the

presence of disagreement. It isn't surprising that the marker of this feature is negative because what is distinctive about verbal disputes is the lack of a feature of *normal* disputes.

I argued that there is a lack of disagreement marker to verbal disputes, which I think is best expressed with the phrase “not *really* disagreeing”. The phrase has some problems – the importance of right reading of “*really*”, its inapplicability to non-sincere disputes and its negativity which stems from being defined as the lack of a marker of normal disputes. But ultimately, as long as one is aware of these issues, it seems that “not *really* disagreeing” is an intuitive marker that is well usable to identify paradigmatic cases of verbal disputes.

### **3.3 Methodological Upshots of Verbalness – a third Marker?**

In the previous two sections, I identified two markers of verbal disputes: The marker of miscommunication, expressed by the phrase “talking past each other” and the marker of lack of disagreement, expressed by the phrase “not *really* disagreeing”. Some may think there is a third marker, related to methodological upshots of verbalness. This marker is related to the significance of verbalness for how (and whether) one can or should resolve such a dispute. Here is a range of phrases that might be thought to express such a third, methodological marker:

- Verbal disputes are “faultless” disputes.
- In verbal disputes, “both parties may be right” (in some sense).
- In verbal disputes, “there is no fact of the matter”.
- Verbal disputes are “indeterminate”.
- Verbal disputes are “pointless” or “not worth pursuing”.
- Verbal disputes are “intractable” or “resist resolution through ordinary empirical evidence”.
- Verbal disputes evaporate once the parties agree on the meaning of all the expressions involved.

One may argue that this methodological significance of verbalness deserves to be considered a

marker of verbalness since this methodological significance is the purpose of having a concept of verbal disputes. The purpose of the notion is to single out a set of disputes which should, can or must be resolved differently.

Nevertheless, I resist the pull to give these methodological phrases often used in the context of verbal disputes the status of a marker. To me, methodological upshots of verbalness is *why it is important to clarify what a verbal dispute is*. Such upshots are not involved in singling out *which* disputes count as verbal in the first place. In other words, they are too much of a *consequence* of verbalness, rather than fixing what verbalness is. Methodological upshots are too much about recommending a therapy rather than singling out a symptom. In a nutshell, I think that methodological upshots of verbalness aren't good markers of verbalness since a marker of verbalness needs to express *what is going on* in a verbal dispute instead of expressing what we should do if a dispute is verbal.

There is a second reason for me to rule out these methodological upshots as markers of verbalness: They are controversial whereas a marker of verbalness ought to be relatively trivial. As I already noted earlier (section 3.1), markers of verbalness should be intuitive features of verbal disputes. This is not the case for saying that verbal disputes are “faultless” or “indeterminate”, that “both may be right” or that “there is no fact of the matter”. On the contrary, notable theorists<sup>19</sup> have argued that verbal disputes can be and often are faulty, determinate, that only one (or neither) may be right or that there is a fact of the matter. Consider, for example, the following case by Jackson (2014, p. 35), between a native English speaker (Fozzy) and a native German speaker (Guido) who mistakenly thinks that the word “billion” in English expresses  $10^{12}$  (like the German word “Billion”):

“Fozzy: There are currently more than seven billion people living on earth.

Guido: No way! There are less than seven billion people on earth.”

Obviously, Guido is at fault in this case. Only Fozzy is right. Furthermore, there is nothing special about this case, verbal disputes can easily occur when one (or even both) parties are mistaken about

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<sup>19</sup>Consider for example Rott (2015), Jenkins (2014), Vermeulen (2018), and Mácha (2017).

what a term in the discussion means. In such cases, there is “a fact of the matter”, the case is “determinate”, it isn’t “faultless” and only one party is right.

In summary, I reject a methodological marker of verbalness for two reasons: Such a marker would be too much about recommending a therapy rather than about identifying verbal disputes in the first place. And second, these phrases are too controversial and questionable, whereas marker expressions should relatively trivially apply to verbal disputes.

Nevertheless, there is something important to be drawn from these considerations. The purpose and importance of a notion of verbal dispute stems from its usefulness to distinguish a kind of dispute that should be resolved differently from ordinary disputes. We reasonably expect a good analysis of “verbal dispute” to single out a kind of dispute that is methodologically significant in some way. Therefore, whether or not a candidate analysis of verbalness singles out a kind of dispute that should be resolved differently from other disputes is an important consideration. *Ceteris paribus*, notions of verbal disputes that come with methodological consequences for how to resolve such disputes are preferable.

### ***3.4 "Talking past each other" and "not really disagreeing – a naïve***

#### ***Theory of Verbal Disputes***

In the previous sections, I argued that talking past each other and not really disagreeing are markers of verbalness. In this section, I sketch a naïve proto-theory of verbal disputes incorporating both features. Ultimately, I reject this naïve theory because the two markers – not really disagreeing and talking past each other – are independent: One can occur without the other.

A naïve proto-theory built on the previous sections would say that a dispute is verbal roughly when the parties are talking past each other and roughly when the parties are not really disagreeing. It is a proto-theory because the phrases used here – “talking past each other” and “not really disagreeing” – are still very imprecise and vague. A full-fledged approach in the spirit of this proto-theory would identify necessary and sufficient conditions for a dispute to be verbal that respect the markers of



"not really disagreeing" and "talking past each other" – at least in most cases. In a nutshell, the naive proto-theory of verbal disputes sketched here makes two claims:

1. "Verbal dispute" is roughly co-extensional with "dispute in which the parties are not really disagreeing"
2. "Verbal dispute" is roughly co-extensional with "dispute in which the parties are talking past each other".

Philosophers who theorized about verbal disputes often used proto-theories similar to the one sketched above as a starting point. The closest we get to someone taking this proto-theory as a starting point is probably Jenkins, who starts with two themes incorporated in a dispute being verbal: "Not really disagreeing" (2014, pp. 13–14) and "it is some difference about language which underlies, generates, and/or even perhaps constitutes that dispute" (2014, p. 15). More importantly, she mentions these properties in the context of considering "some properties which have been or could be considered *diagnostic* or *symptomatic* of a merely verbal dispute" (2014, p. 13) [my emphasis] – in other words, she uses them as *markers* of merely verbal disputes. Admittedly the wordy and vague "it is some difference about language which underlies, generates, and/or even perhaps constitutes that dispute." is different from my "talking past each other". But it appears similar enough in spirit to my phrase, such that her view can be construed as starting from a version of the above-sketched proto-theory.

Most other theorists still use at least one marker that is at least similar to these two markers.

Chalmers mostly uses "pointlessness" and "not really disagreeing" as markers of verbal disputes (2011). Jackson appears to use "talking past each other" as his marker of verbal disputes (2014).

Belleri uses "talking past each other" as well as "using the same term with different meanings" and "what seems like a disagreement (an exchange typically featuring the assertion of contradictory contents) is really no such thing" (2018). The point drawn here is that taking such a proto-theory as a starting point for developing a theory of verbal disputes appears methodologically continuous with these existing approaches.

If I was to construe simply a new direct approach to verbal disputes, I would probably follow the lead of these researchers on verbal disputes and use "not really disagreeing" and "talking past each other" as starting points for a theory of what verbal disputes are. I would take it as my starting point that a dispute is verbal (roughly) if and only if the parties are talking past each other and (roughly) if and only if the parties are not really disagreeing. But as I am going to show, this would be seriously flawed: Since I employ two intuitive markers of verbalness, we need to first question the assumption that both markers are roughly co-extensional. As I am going to argue, the markers are independent: There are disputes in which the parties are not really disagreeing and yet not talking past each other. And there are disputes in which the parties are really disagreeing but still talking past each other. And importantly, it is in principle unclear whether such cases should be classified as verbal or not.

#### **4. "Talking past each other" and "not really disagreeing" come apart**

In the previous section, I identified two markers of verbal disputes: Talking past each other and not really disagreeing. Here, I argue that these markers are independent: There are disputes in which the parties are really disagreeing but still talking past each other. And there are disputes in which the parties are not really disagreeing and not talking past each other. Furthermore, I argue that it is pre-theoretically not determined whether such cases are verbal or not.

##### **4.1 "Talking past each other" and "really disagreeing"**

In this section, I argue that there is a considerable class of disputes in which the parties are talking past each other but also really disagreeing. Therefore, the proto-theoretical assumption that the two marker expressions "talking past each other" and "not really disagreeing" are roughly co-extensional must be rejected. Moreover, I argue that we have little evidence to pre-theoretically classify cases of talking past each other, while really disagreeing either as verbal or as non-verbal.

There are cases of talking past each other, while also really disagreeing. Consider the following, altered version of the bookshop case:

You believe that the bookshop down the road sells books about certain spiritualist and certain philosophical topics. With the spiritualist meaning of "metaphysics" in mind, you assert "The bookshop down the road sells books on metaphysics".

I believe that the bookshop down the road neither sells books about certain spiritualist, nor books about certain philosophical topics. With the philosophical meaning of "metaphysics" in mind, I say "No, that bookshop doesn't sell books on metaphysics."

In this case, we are talking past each other: You intend to convey that the bookshop sells *spiritualist* books, but I think that you intend to convey that it sells *philosophical* books. I intend to convey that it doesn't sell *philosophical* books, but you think that I intend to convey that it doesn't sell *spiritualist* books. Our communication appears to be defective in the same way as in the original example: You intend to talk about spiritualist books, I intend to talk about philosophical books, but we believe to intend to talk about the same kind of books.

Yet, we are also clearly disagreeing about the bookshop. You believe the bookshop sells spiritualist books and I believe it doesn't sell spiritualist books. You believe the bookshop sells philosophical books and I believe it doesn't sell philosophical books. If we look at what you take to be the matter of controversy (whether it sells spiritualist books), we disagree about that. And if we look at what I take to be the matter of controversy (whether it sells philosophical books), we disagree about that as well. Our beliefs about the kinds of books sold in the bookshop conflict and this conflict is precisely the kind of conflict that is a disagreement: You believe *p* and I believe not-*p*. You believe *q* and I believe not-*q*.

The existence of cases of talking past each other while really disagreeing has already been pointed out by others and when discussed they are often not settled as verbal or non-verbal. Such a case lies at the heart of Rott's puzzle about verbal disputes (2015). Similarly, Inga Vermeulen considers a case of two people disputing over "John has bought a beamer", one intending to talk about a video projector, the other intending to talk about a car. But as the latter realizes the misunderstanding, she says: "I thought you were talking about a car! You mean that John has bought a video projector!"

*But actually no, he did not buy a video projector either.*” (Vermeulen, 2018, p. 342).

Interestingly, both Rott and Vermeulen acknowledge that this sort of case is difficult to sort as either verbal or non-verbal.<sup>20</sup>

An opponent may worry that this sort of case may not be aptly described by saying that both parties “really disagree”. Consider that neither the disagreement about philosophical books nor the one about spiritualist books is manifested in the dispute. For a disagreement about  $p$  to be manifested in the dispute, both of the conflicting beliefs – your belief that  $p$  and my belief that  $\sim p$  – need to be what we believe to express in asserting and denying “S”. This is simply not the case here. Neither of the two disagreements manifests itself in the dispute. The opponent may say that the parties “really disagree in a dispute” if and only if there is a disagreement that manifests itself in the dispute.

I have two responses to this worry. The first is to shift the burden of proof. It is natural to describe the case above as a case in which the parties are “really disagreeing”. Clearly, there is a broader notion of a real disagreement being present in a dispute and this broader notion applies here. For this broader notion, it suffices that at least one party believes the negation of what the other party believes to express in saying “S”. The opponent offers a narrower reading of “real disagreement”, but the opponent provides no reason for preferring their notion over the broader notion. There would be such a reason if the case sketched above (which falls under the broad notion, but not the narrow one) would be an *obvious, intuitive, or paradigmatic* case of a non-verbal dispute. This would give us reason to prefer the narrow notion of “real disagreement” since it would better line up with what we consider to be cases of verbal disputes. But this is simply not the case: In my experience, no one who has an understanding of the expression “verbal dispute” would classify cases like this as *paradigmatic* cases of non-verbal disputes. Of course, some classify the case as non-verbal, but those who have this opinion, would usually still not consider it to be a

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<sup>20</sup>Vermeulen considers the case to be “partly verbal” (2018).

Briefly, Rott’s puzzle shows from four intuitive principles (and from considering two variations of his case) that such cases would have to be both verbal and non-verbal and thus that at least one of these four intuitive principles must be faulty. But since Rott does not commit to which of the principles is faulty, he ultimately doesn’t settle the case as verbal or as non-verbal. (see Rott, 2015)

*paradigmatic, obvious* or *intuitive* example of a non-verbal dispute.

Of course, this first response merely establishes that my broader notion of “really disagreeing” is – for all we know now – at least just as legitimate as the opponent’s more narrow notion. It doesn’t yet establish that my broader notion is preferable.

My second response to this worry is that a broader notion of real disagreement is better for the purpose at hand because it is more useful to delineate a whole class of cases that are neither paradigmatically verbal nor paradigmatically non-verbal. Namely cases like the altered bookshop cases above, cases in which we are (broadly) really disagreeing but also talking past each other. These cases are neither clearly verbal nor clearly non-verbal. It is more useful to use a broad notion of “really disagreeing” to describe these cases. Apparently, intuitive usage and paradigmatic examples of verbal and non-verbal disputes are *partly* guided by a broad rather than narrow notion of “really disagreeing”, insofar as cases that fall under the broad notion are never paradigmatically or intuitively verbal.

A reader might wonder whether the following sort of case is a case of real disagreement in my sense or not:

You believe that the bookshop down the road sells books about certain spiritualist and books about certain philosophical topics. With the spiritualist meaning of “metaphysics” in mind, you assert “The bookshop down the road sells books on metaphysics”.

I believe that the bookshop down the road sells books about certain spiritualist, but not books about certain philosophical topics. With the philosophical meaning of “metaphysics” in mind, I say “No, that bookshop doesn’t sell books on metaphysics.”

In this case, we disagree about whether the bookshop sells a certain sort of philosophical books (I think it does, you think it doesn’t), but we agree that the bookshop sells spiritualist books. In general, in the envisioned sort of case, there is disagreement on what one party takes to be the disputed proposition, but there is no disagreement on what the other party takes to be the disputed proposition.

For the purpose at hand, a useful notion of real disagreement should encompass this case. With this case, we are in a very similar situation as with the earlier case in which there is disagreement about both, about what one party and about what the other party takes to be the disputed proposition. And mostly for the same kind of reasons: The purpose of my notion of real disagreement is to encompass a class of cases in which the parties are clearly talking past each other, but which are neither paradigmatically verbal nor paradigmatically non-verbal. And this is true about this case, it is neither paradigmatically verbal, nor paradigmatically non-verbal and it is clearly a case of talking past each other.

In this section, I presented examples of cases in which the parties of a dispute are talking past each other, but they are also really disagreeing. These cases are not intuitively, paradigmatically or obviously verbal. They are also not intuitively, paradigmatically or obviously non-verbal. The markers of verbal disputes don't help answer whether these cases are verbal or non-verbal because they give us conflicting verdicts. Insofar as these disputes are cases of talking past each other, they appear to be verbal, insofar as there is real disagreement, they appear non-verbal. At least pre-theoretically these cases are neither settled as verbal nor settled as non-verbal.

#### **4.2 "Not talking past each other" and "not really disagreeing"**

As established earlier, I use “not really disagreeing” and “talking past each other” as marker expressions of verbal disputes. I argued that there are disputes in which the parties are talking past each other while really disagreeing. In this section I argue that these markers of verbalness can also come apart vice versa: There are cases of disputes in which the parties aren't talking past each other – and yet they are also not really disagreeing.

Consider the following case, which is a simplified version of the Secretariat case originally introduced by Ludlow and more recently discussed by Plunkett and Sundell (see Ludlow, 2008; Plunkett, 2015; Plunkett & Sundell, 2013):

Secretariat is a racehorse and both A and B are aware of this.

A and B have the following dispute:

A: “Secretariat is an athlete.”

B: “No, Secretariat is not an athlete.”

We may stipulate further that both parties are fully aware of each other making these utterances only in virtue of disagreeing about whether the expression “athlete” covers animals. It is not the case that B simply thinks that Secretariat’s race results were too bad to call him an athlete. Rather, B thinks that to count as an “athlete”, one has to be a human being. Moreover, it is perfectly obvious to A that this is the reason for B’s utterance.

In this case, there is no miscommunication. Both speakers are perfectly aware of what the other intends to convey. A intends to convey that some animals do belong to the extension of “athlete”. B intends to convey that no animals belong to the extension of “athlete”. And crucially, both parties are aware of what the other party intends to convey. The parties are simply not talking past each other. They are successfully communicating. They are using first-order sentences to advocate for a view about the meaning of an expression used in these sentences, but since they are aware of doing this, they are successfully communicating.

Still, the parties don’t have a *real* or *object-level* disagreement. They may agree on all the results Secretariat achieved throughout his career as a racehorse. They may agree on every little detail about Secretariat. They may even agree that there are two categories – a broad notion of “athlete” that encompasses some animals and a narrow notion that only contains human beings. The parties simply do not disagree about the world<sup>21</sup>, but disagree about how to describe it. They have a disagreement concerning some expression used in the dispute, much in the way in which the parties disagree about the meaning of “metaphysics” in the paradigmatically verbal bookshop case. Given that we didn’t count mere disagreement about an expression used in a dispute as “real disagreement” previously, we should also consider this case as a case of “no real disagreement”. It would only be a “real” disagreement if it was a disagreement about the right kind of issue – namely

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<sup>21</sup>Well, the parties do not disagree about the *language-independent* world. Of course, language and the meaning of the expression “athlete” are themselves part of the world.

about Secretariat – in virtue of which the parties are disagreeing.

Note that the category of cases in which the parties are not really disagreeing but also not talking past each other doesn't only encompass classic examples of metalinguistic negotiations like the Secretariat case. It contains a range of cases in which what it literally said comes apart from what a speaker intends to convey. Consider for example the following case:

Anne and Bea are preparing a curry for some friends. After each having tried, they say:

Anne: "This curry is not spicy."

Bea: "No, this curry is spicy."

Let's stipulate that Anne's and Bea's personal preferences in terms of spiciness are identical and that they experienced the degree of spiciness in the bits they tried as exactly equal<sup>22</sup>. Let's also stipulate that Anne and Bea know that they prefer the same degree of spiciness through frequently eating together. Now, if this was the whole story, it would be hard to see how their dispute arose. Let's stipulate that Anne and Bea disagree about what degree of spiciness would best accommodate their guests. Anne thinks they all like very spicy food and by saying "This curry is not spicy", she in effect suggests adding more spice to accommodate their guests. Bea believes their guests prefer their curry less spicy and in saying "No, this curry is spicy", she in effect suggests not adding any more spice. Let's furthermore suppose that Anne and Bea are immediately aware of each other suggesting adding, respectively not adding spice.

It seems this isn't a case of a metalinguistic negotiation as Anne and Bea are not disagreeing about the meaning of "spicy". They are simply using descriptive sentences about the spiciness of the curry to express their views on whether to add more spice. And since they are aware of this, they are not talking past each other. Since they also don't disagree on the spiciness of the curry, they in effect *don't really disagree* about the object-level of their sentences – rather they use these sentences to convey something else and disagree about that.

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<sup>22</sup>Since they experience the same level of spiciness and since they enjoy the same levels of spiciness, the dispute doesn't arise due to "spicy" being a predicate of personal taste.



The key takeaway at this point is that there can be a mismatch between what is literally said and what is conveyed. And if what is intended to be conveyed is successfully conveyed, there is no talking past each other. But due to the difference between what is conveyed and what is literally said, the parties involved may not really disagree on what is literally said. This sort of situation gives rise to disputes in which the parties are a) not really disagreeing and b) not talking past each other.

Having established that there are cases of not really disagreeing while not talking past each other, I now argue that these cases are neither paradigmatically verbal nor paradigmatically non-verbal. Of course, we can't classify them as verbal or non-verbal based on our two markers of verbal disputes since one of them (not really disagreeing) applies, while the other (talking past each other) doesn't apply. But we also have to consider that such cases are neither mentioned as paradigmatic cases of verbal disputes nor are they mentioned as paradigmatic cases of non-verbal disputes in the literature. Plunkett and Sundell (2013) have written most extensively about a subset of these cases, namely about metalinguistic negotiations. And even they seem to somewhat shy away from explicitly classifying them as verbal or non-verbal. They contend that these disputes are not pointless and the lack of pointlessness compels them to say that these disputes are not "merely" verbal (ibid. p.27). Since they draw heavily on Chalmers (2011), it seems that they roughly assume his approach to what "verbal" and "merely verbal" disputes are (see Plunkett and Sundell, 2013, p.23). For Chalmers (2011), a verbal dispute is (roughly) a dispute that arises wholly in virtue of a disagreement about the meaning of one of the words used in the dispute. And for Chalmers, a "merely verbal" dispute is roughly a verbal dispute in which the meanings of words don't particularly matter to the disputants (ibid. p.2). Given Chalmers' theory of verbal disputes, metalinguistic negotiations appear to be cases of verbal disputes that are not merely verbal. Still, Plunkett and Sundell never explicitly say that these are "verbal" disputes. The fact that these disputes aren't pointless seems to make them reluctant to describe these cases as cases of "verbal disputes".

It also doesn't appear to be the case that there are clear intuitions about whether metalinguistic

negotiations (and similar such cases) are cases of verbal disputes or not. People who are putting them in either category do so with little confidence and rather uneasily – at least in comparison with cases in which both markers (not really disagreeing and talking past each other) are present or compared to cases in which both are absent. Those who pick a side (either verbal or non-verbal) for metalinguistic negotiations (and similar cases) appear to often do so because it fits their (rough) theory of what verbal disputes are. It seems they make the data (their intuitive judgments of cases), fit the theory (their maybe implicit analysis of what verbal disputes are), rather than the other way around.

### 4.3 Summary

Paradigmatic cases of verbalness typically have both markers of verbalness (not really disagreeing and talking past each other) whereas paradigmatic cases of non-verbal disputes exhibit neither marker. On a whole, the paradigmatic cases don't settle whether to pick a theory that makes metalinguistic negotiations (and similar cases of not talking past each other while not really disagreeing) verbal or whether to pick one that makes them non-verbal. Similarly, paradigmatic cases don't settle whether to pick a theory that makes cases of talking past each other while really disagreeing verbal or whether to pick one that makes them non-verbal. The following diagram illustrates the current stage of where we are:

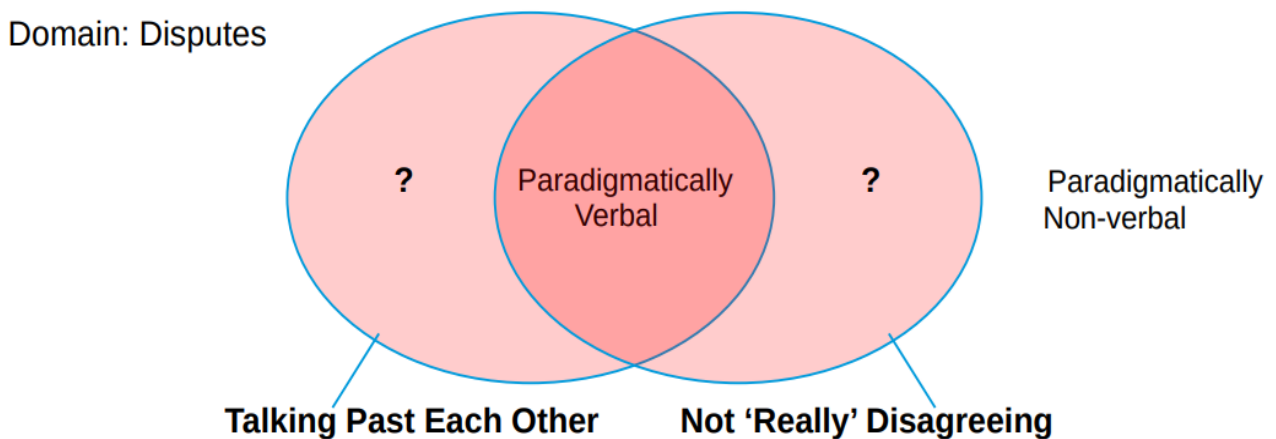


Figure 1: General Venn diagram Verbal Disputes

Of course, other factors than data alone determine which theory is best. We may have reasons to prefer one analysis of verbal disputes over another even when they both account for all paradigmatic cases. We may consider theoretical virtues such as the simplicity of the analysis. We may also consider that the purpose of having a notion of verbal disputes is to conveniently pick out a kind of dispute that should be resolved differently from ordinary disputes. If one analysis fits this purpose or a theoretical virtue better, then, *ceteris paribus*, it seems preferable.

So, here is where we stand: There are two markers of verbal disputes. Talking past each other and not really disagreeing. When both are present, it seems to be a paradigmatic case of a verbal dispute. When both are absent, it seems to be a paradigmatic case of a non-verbal dispute. When only one of them is present, it is not initially clear whether the case is a case of a verbal dispute or not. Further considerations like the simplicity of an analysis or theoretical purposes of the notion of "verbal disputes" might still settle these cases.

However, to properly address these issues, it is first necessary to develop analyses of talking past each other and of not really disagreeing, so we can compare their simplicity and their aptness for the purposes of a notion of verbal disputes. Developing such analyses should be informed by already existing analyses of verbal disputes. So, in the next section, I turn to influential analyses of verbal disputes in the literature and note potential for improving them. Then, in the section after, I provide analyses of talking past each other and of not really disagreeing and defend that to resolve disputes, it is better to employ both notions.

## **5. Existing Analyses of Verbal Disputes**

In this section, I discuss a range of existing analyses of verbal disputes, so I can build on their strengths and improve on their weaknesses when presenting my approach. When discussing existing analyses in this section, I primarily focus on two questions:

- Which markers are used to identify the target phenomenon? How do they relate to the markers I use and are they plausible as markers of verbalness?

- How well does the proposed analysis capture the target phenomenon? Are there counterexamples?

The discussion of these existing approaches is divided into two parts. I first discuss *doxastic approaches* – that are approaches which primarily identify verbal disputes as disputes which lack the right kind of “real” disagreement. I then discuss *pragmatic approaches* – that are approaches which primarily identify verbal disputes as disputes which involve a certain kind of pragmatic miscommunication we intuitively express by saying that the parties are “talking past each other”.

## **5.1 Doxastic Approaches: Carrie Jenkins and David Chalmers**

In this section, I discuss two *doxastic* approaches to verbal disputes – that are approaches which identify verbal disputes primarily by saying that they lack the right kind of “real” disagreement.

### **5.1.1 Jenkins' Approach to Verbal Disputes**

In this section, I first identify the markers on which Carrie Jenkins bases her approach on verbal disputes. I then discuss and evaluate her analysis of verbal disputes.

#### **5.1.1.1 Jenkins' Markers of Verbal Disputes**

Jenkins argues that we should "characterize a merely verbal dispute as occurring when the two parties do not disagree about the subject matter(s) of their (putative) dispute, but merely present the appearance of doing so owing to their divergent uses of language" (Jenkins, 2014, p. 11). This suggests that she thinks of verbal disputes at least partly in terms of "not (really) disagreeing about the dispute's subject matter" – this is roughly what I mean by "not really disagreeing". Hence, her approach is doxastic.

As a base for her approach, Jenkins "consider[s] some properties which have been or could be considered *diagnostic* or *symptomatic* of a merely verbal dispute." (original italics) (Jenkins, 2014, p. 13). In other words, she starts with what I call "markers of verbalness".

The first marker she considers is the "idea of absence of disagreement, or at least of 'real' or 'substantive' disagreement" (Jenkins, 2014, p. 13). She clarifies that the disagreement in question

must be relevant to the dispute and that it should be disagreement over a nonlinguistic matter (Ibid.). This is due to some issues with the intuitive idea of "not really disagreeing" which need to be "tidied up": "When properly tidied up, the condition of non disagreement concerning certain non-linguistic matters will be important for understanding what it takes for a dispute to count as merely verbal." (Jenkins, 2014, p. 14).

The second apparent marker Jenkins identifies is the "idea that, when two parties are engaged in a merely verbal dispute, it is some difference about language which underlies, generates, and/or even perhaps constitutes this dispute" (Jenkins, 2014, p. 15). The idea is something like the following: Not only do the parties have a dispute despite not really disagreeing – they also have a dispute *for a specific sort of reason* and that reason lies in some difference in language.

Unfortunately, Jenkins offers little to clarify the idea of a difference in language giving rise to the dispute. At this point, it becomes questionable whether this idea of a linguistic difference giving rise to the dispute is really a *marker* of verbalness. It seems too vague to be useful in identifying paradigmatic cases of verbal disputes: It leaves the crucial question open of *what kind of linguistic difference* needs to give rise to the dispute to be verbal. For example, explicit disputes about language are easily counted as arising in virtue of linguistic differences, but they are surely not all verbal. Furthermore, one may note that this idea is more than merely a "symptom" of a verbal dispute – it appears rather as the first sketch of an explanation of why they arise.

Jenkins notes a further theme: "The third theme I want to consider is centred on the idea that when a dispute is merely verbal it will be possible to cash out the parties' apparently opposing views in alternative ('neutral') vocabulary, such that the parties will agree about the matter when expressed in those alternative terms." (Jenkins, 2014, p. 20). In a nutshell: A verbal dispute can be expressed in alternative vocabulary such that the parties agree on the matter.

I am sceptical of regarding this idea of potential resolution in alternative vocabulary as an independent *marker* of verbalness. First, it appears very closely related to "not really disagreeing". After all, it is due to their lack of real disagreement, that they can agree in alternative vocabulary.

And second, there are too many problems and caveats one would have to add to make this even remotely useful to identify paradigmatic cases of verbalness:

- Jenkins herself acknowledges that the parties may lack the alternative vocabulary to phrase their views such that they agree (Jenkins, 2014, p. 20).
- Jenkins also notes that the disputants may be irrational and simply in virtue of this fail to agree on the matter, even when phrased in the alternative vocabulary (Jenkins, 2014, p. 20).
- The parties could have misconceptions about the *alternative* vocabulary, such that they only verbally agree in the alternative vocabulary.
- Lack of disagreement is broader than presence of agreement. When party A rephrases her view in alternative vocabulary, party B may respond that he is unsure about the matter (B suspends belief) and vice versa – They do not really disagree, but due to suspension of belief, they also can't sincerely agree in alternative vocabulary.

While Jenkins considers a normative rephrasing of this idea – that the parties *should* agree in the alternative vocabulary – she concludes that even this can't deal with all problems. I agree with Jenkins when she concludes "that there is some kind of defeasible connection between a dispute's being merely verbal and there being some alternative vocabulary available to the parties such that expressing their positions in that neutral vocabulary would render it normatively appropriate (in some to-be-specified sense) for the parties to resolve their dispute" (Jenkins, 2014, p. 21).

In summary, Jenkins builds her approach to verbal disputes based on the idea that the parties of a verbal dispute do not really disagree, though the sense in which they do "not really disagree" needs to be further analysed. Furthermore, Jenkins employs the idea that a verbal dispute arises in virtue of some difference about language. This is too vague and too explanatory to be a marker of verbalness. Finally, she considers the idea that the parties of a verbal dispute can agree in alternative vocabulary, but this comes with too many problems, such that there is at best a defeasible connection. In summary, it is the lack of the right kind of "real" disagreement that primarily identifies verbal disputes for Jenkins.

### **5.1.1.2 Jenkins' Analysis of Merely Verbal Disputes**

Jenkins argues that we should "characterize a merely verbal dispute as occurring when the two parties do not disagree about the subject matter(s) of their (putative) dispute, but merely present the appearance of doing so owing to their divergent uses of language" (Jenkins, 2014, p. 11). Later, she elaborates:

"MVD: Parties A and B are having a merely verbal dispute iff they are engaged in a sincere prima facie dispute D, but do not disagree over the subject matter(s) of D, and merely present the appearance of doing so owing to their divergent uses of some relevant portion of language." (Jenkins, 2014, p. 21)

In summary, it appears that Jenkins proposes the following conditions as individually necessary and jointly sufficient for a dispute to be merely verbal:

1. There is a "prima facie" dispute. The "prima facie" probably is there to accommodate the views according to which the parties of a merely verbal dispute are "not really disputing" (Jenkins, 2014, p. 12). In a nutshell, this is the condition that the parties engage in typical dispute behaviour.
2. The prima facie dispute is "sincere" – that is arguably something like the parties believing what they take themselves to assert.
3. The parties "do not disagree over the subject matter(s)" of the dispute. This is arguably that the party's beliefs about the subject matter(s) are not in conflict with each other (see Jenkins, 2014, p. 13)
4. The parties present the appearance of disagreeing "owing to their divergent uses of some relevant portion of language". Jenkins elaborated the same idea here: "Merely verbal disputes, then, are ones in which the dispute arises *only* in virtue of the parties' divergent uses of language." (original italics) (Jenkins, 2014, p. 20).

I agree with the first condition, although since I stipulate the meaning of "dispute" in behavioural

terms (see section 1.1), Jenkins' "prima facie disputes" are just "disputes" in my approach.

I revisit the issue of sincerity in section 8.2. It doesn't need to concern us here.

The third condition gives rise to a more extensive discussion, so let's briefly consider the fourth condition first. The fourth condition roughly states that a difference in the uses of a relevant portion of language must wholly explain why the (prima facie) dispute arises. It appears that the fourth condition suffers from a considerable unclarity on what "divergent uses of language" amount to. It is doubly unclear, first due to unclarity what "uses" amount to and second due to unclarity on what it takes for uses to "diverge". It is tempting to think of uses in terms of all the utterances of the portion of language by each party. But then again, in the paradigmatically verbal bookshop case of section 1.1, we may imagine both parties to regularly apply "metaphysics" to both, the philosophical subdiscipline and the spiritual topic. It is perfectly possible that there isn't any difference in usage of "metaphysics" between the parties except for this very dispute. And the mere difference of usage of "metaphysics" in this dispute can't be enough since this would generate divergent uses in *every* dispute. In light of this objection, one might attempt to refine Jenkins' approach. One could understand "divergent uses" in terms of dispositions to use, but this doesn't help either: In the paradigmatically verbal bookshop case of section 1.1, both parties may be disposed to systematically apply "metaphysics" to both the philosophical discipline and to spiritualist topics and yet the case can still be verbal. Another way to resolve this may be to appeal to the *beliefs* of the parties concerning the *correct* uses of the expression. But when both parties believe that "metaphysics" can correctly be used to refer to the philosophical subdiscipline and to refer to spiritualist topics, then the parties appear to not have divergent uses, despite being engaged in a verbal dispute over "The bookshop sells books on metaphysics". In summary, I can't see a satisfactory reply to this problem: Verbalness is simply possible despite no substantial divergent uses of the crucial portion of language.

The third condition seems broadly acceptable to me, but it comes with the crucial problem of what the subject matter(s) of a dispute are. Is it whatever the parties believe to be expressing when



making their utterances? Is it what they intend to convey? Is it the meaning their utterances have in their language? Is it the states of affairs that would make their utterances true? Is it the states of affairs the parties believe to make their utterances true? What Jenkins is missing is a definition of what subject matter is.

Jenkins clarifies the notion of subject matter in three ways: First, she does clarify that "subject matters here need to be reasonably finely individuated" (Jenkins, 2014, p. 22). Second, she clarifies that "the subject matter(s) of a prima facie dispute cannot straightforwardly be identified with the subject matter(s) of any or all of the statements sincerely made during the course of that prima facie dispute" (Jenkins, 2014, p. 24). Of course, these first two suggestions don't narrow it down very much. Her third clarification is more interesting: "the parties' intentions, interests and other mental states seem very important for determining the subject matter of a prima facie dispute. However, I take it that which ones—and in what ways they are relevant—is often a vague matter, and that it is correspondingly often somewhat indeterminate what exactly a dispute's subject matter is" (Jenkins, 2014, p. 25). This clarifies that we need to focus on the mental states of the disputants: What do they *intend* to convey? Which view are they *believing* to express? - the answer to questions like these determine what the subject matter(s) of a dispute are. Jenkins explicitly mentions "intentions" and "interests" as important mental states for determining the dispute's subject matter. So, it seems natural to look for what each party *intends* to convey or is *interested* in communicating. Let's call this *pragmatic subject matter*.

Jenkins allows for other mental states to be important. Another, somewhat Chalmers-inspired way to look for the subject matter of a dispute would be to consider what each party *believes* to be expressing in making their utterances (see Chalmers 2011). Jenkins doesn't explicitly mention beliefs here but given that she places primary importance on mental states, it seems legitimate to appeal to beliefs. Let's call this *doxastic subject matter*.

That Jenkins has flexibility or ambiguity in her account concerning "subject matter" allows her to dissipate some of the pull of the framework of thinking of verbal disputes in terms of "talking past each other". Jenkins argues that a sincere dispute is verbal when the parties do not disagree about

*some sort of* subject matter. Importantly this subject matter may be *pragmatic subject matter* or *doxastic subject matter* (or some further kind of subject matter). Accordingly, when pragmatic subject matter and doxastic subject matter come apart and when there is disagreement on only one of the levels, then we ought to be confused about whether the dispute is verbal or not. And this appears to be precisely correct in cases in which the parties are not talking past each other, but also not really disagreeing (on the doxastic subject matter). Reconsider the Secretariat-case or the Curry-case of section 4.2. In these cases, the parties disagree at the level of what they intend to convey (e.g., about whether "athlete" applies to racehorses or about whether to add more spice to the curry). But at the level of what they believe their utterances to mean, there is no real disagreement. Accordingly, we are confused about whether to call the case a "verbal dispute" since there is disagreement on one level of subject matter, but no disagreement on another level. In Jenkins' account, these cases would be something like boundary cases of verbalness.

This strategy doesn't accommodate cases in which the parties are talking past each other and really disagreeing though. In the bookshop case of section 4.1, the parties are talking past each other – one intends to convey something about philosophical books, the other intends to convey something about spiritualist books – while there are also really disagreeing about each of these kinds of books. There appears to be disagreement no matter whether we pick pragmatic or doxastic subject matter, so this should count as a clear case of a non-verbal dispute. Jenkins appears to have no explanation for why we are somewhat reluctant to call these cases non-verbal.

In summary, given the approach Jenkins ends up with and given the flexibility in the expression "subject matter", Jenkins appears to capture something like this with her analysis:

### Verbal Disputes according to Jenkins (2014)

Domain: Disputes

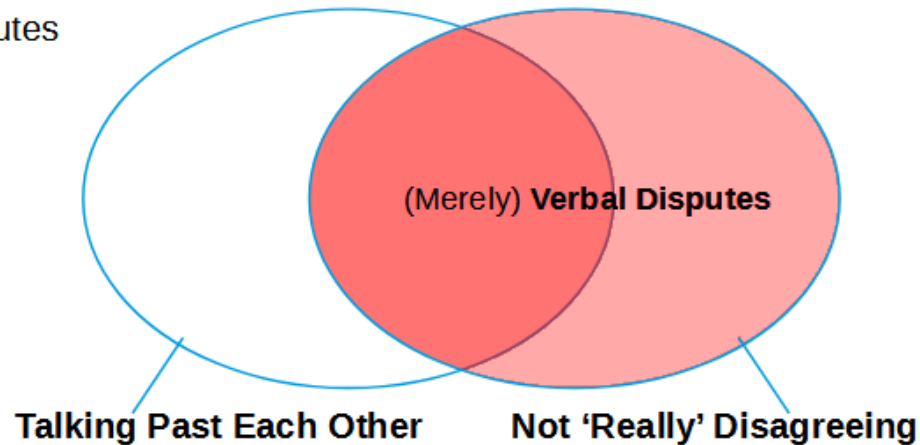


Figure 2: Jenkins Venn diagram Verbal Disputes

The light red on the right indicates how Jenkins' approach has flexibility with regards to metalinguistic negotiations and similar cases. And according to her approach, a dispute is merely verbal when the parties have a sincere dispute without disagreeing on its subject matter, but merely present the appearance of disagreement due to different uses of language. The appeal to "subject matter" and "divergent uses" of language are rather underspecified. In the case of "subject matter", this introduces flexibility into Jenkins' account which she can welcome because it enables her to allow for some plausible boundary cases of verbalness. But in the case of "divergent uses", her approach is in dire need of further clarifications since there appear to be plausible cases of verbal disputes without divergent uses.

When presenting my approach in section 6, I present a view of verbal disputes in a lack-of-disagreement framework which avoids this problem: I don't appeal to "divergent uses" and, in my approach, it's perfectly plausible for a dispute to be verbal without any substantial difference in usage.

## 5.1.2 David Chalmers' Approach

In this section, I first identify the markers on which David Chalmers bases his approach on verbal disputes. Then, I go on to discuss and evaluate his approach.

### 5.1.2.1 Chalmers' Markers of Verbal Disputes

David Chalmers employs three central markers of verbal disputes: Not really disagreeing, linguistic resolution and pointlessness.

First and foremost, he uses the marker of "not really disagreeing". He starts his essay on the topic, saying:

"Intuitively, a dispute between two parties is verbal when the two parties agree on the relevant facts about a domain of concern, and just disagree about the language used to describe that domain. In such a case, one has the sense that the two parties are *"not really disagreeing"*: that is, they are not really disagreeing about the domain of concern, and are only disagreeing over linguistic matters" (Chalmers, 2011, p. 1)

Secondly, in discussing a paradigmatic case, he introduces the idea that a linguistic resolution has the potential to evaporate the dispute over the non-linguistic domain:

"Once we resolve an issue about language, the dispute over the nonlinguistic domain evaporates, or at least should evaporate. This potential evaporation is one of the central marks of a verbal dispute." (Chalmers, 2011, p. 1)

This second marker is questionable when the original dispute is explicitly over a linguistic domain since there is simply no "dispute over a nonlinguistic domain" to evaporate. Simply imagine an explicit dispute over "'Tisch' means table.", with one party asserting this sentence and the other denying it. Imagine it to be a genuine dispute among non-German speakers, one of whom is mistaken about what the German word "Tisch" means. Such a dispute appears to be non-verbal. On one reading, the potential evaporation marker applies here: Once a linguistic issue is resolved, the dispute would evaporate. On another reading, however, the marker does not apply: There is no

dispute *over a nonlinguistic domain* to evaporate. Given this problem, it seems best to restrict the scope of this marker to disputes which are not explicitly about language. This restriction becomes important in the next section: we shouldn't apply this marker to test whether alleged counterexamples of explicitly linguistic disputes are verbal.

Finally, Chalmers introduces pointlessness as a third marker of verbal disputes:

"verbal disputes have a familiar and distinctive sort of *pointlessness*. I will not try to precisely define this sort of pointlessness, but I will use it as a heuristic guide to the presence of a broadly verbal dispute." (Chalmers, 2011, p. 10)

However, it is important to note that Chalmers acknowledges that there are disputes in which an underlying linguistic issue has serious practical consequences (2011, p. 2). The marker of pointlessness seems to work in one direction only: Not every verbal dispute exhibits pointlessness. But if a dispute exhibits this "familiar and distinctive sort of pointlessness"<sup>23</sup> (Chalmers, 2011, p. 10), it is verbal.

In summary, Chalmers uses three markers:

- (1) A dispute is verbal (roughly) if and only if the parties are "not really disagreeing".
- (2) A dispute is verbal (roughly) if and only if resolving a linguistic issue suffices or should suffice to evaporate the dispute over the nonlinguistic domain. (barring disputes that are explicitly about language)
- (3) If a dispute exhibits a "familiar and distinctive sort of pointlessness", it is verbal.

It appears that these three markers are so intimately related, that it is questionable whether they are really three markers or rather three expressions of the same marker.

(1) and (2) appear to be intimately related because it is the lack of real disagreement of (1) that becomes apparent once a linguistic issue is solved – if there would be real disagreement, the dispute

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<sup>23</sup>Chalmers acknowledges the existence of other sorts of pointlessness, hence the emphasis on the "familiar and distinctive sort of pointlessness" of verbal disputes. E.g. "a dispute about whether the number of odd digits in the first 10100 digits of pi is odd or even" is pointless in some other way, without being verbal (Chalmers, 2011, p. 10).

would not evaporate. The relation appears explanatory: The lack of real disagreement explains the potential for evaporation. (1) and (3) appear intimately related since what gives rise to the "familiar and distinctive sort of pointlessness" is probably precisely that the parties don't really disagree.

There is "no point" in the dispute since there is not really anything at issue between the parties.

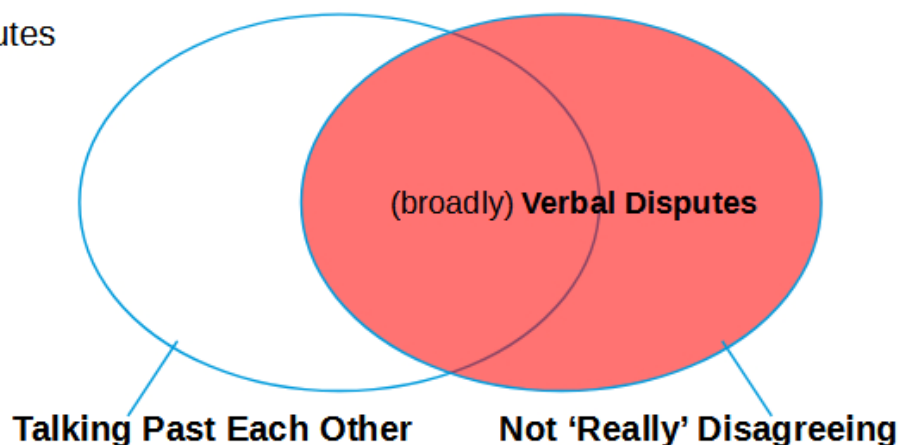
Again, the relation appears to be explanatory: The lack of real disagreement explains the distinctive pointlessness of the dispute.

Taken together, these markers are very intimately related to the point where it seems to make more sense to speak of a single lack-of-real-disagreement marker that may manifest itself in potential evaporation and in the impression of pointlessness.

So, this diagram describes what Chalmers (roughly) appears to capture with his notion of "Verbal Disputes":

### **Verbal Disputes according to Chalmers (2011)**

Domain: Disputes



*Figure 3: Chalmers Venn diagram Verbal Disputes*

In summary, Chalmers' approach focuses primarily on verbal disputes as marked by the intuitive idea that the parties are "not really disagreeing".

#### **5.1.2.2 Chalmers' Approach to Verbal Disputes**

Chalmers is careful to not call it an analysis, but he expresses his view when he introduces the following as an "approximation" or "gloss" of verbal disputes:

A dispute over *S* is (broadly) verbal when for some expression *T* in *S*, the parties disagree about the meaning of *T*, and the dispute over *S* arises wholly in virtue of this disagreement

regarding T. (Chalmers, 2011, p. 7)

Chalmers specifies that the "in virtue of" is to be read in an explanatory manner (2011, p. 8): A dispute over S is verbal when the parties disagree about the meaning of some expression T in S, and this disagreement wholly explains why the dispute over S arises.

This analysis appears to support the view that Chalmers is mainly interested in capturing verbal disputes as disputes that lack real disagreement. For in the notion he defends, there is no "real" disagreement underlying the dispute. Since a disagreement about language *wholly* explains the presence of the dispute, there is no space left for "real" (or "object-level") disagreements to play any explanatory role<sup>24</sup>.

Before going into my critique of Chalmers' approach, I briefly consider the criticisms his approach received from others.

Jackson provides an alleged counterexample to Chalmers' approach:

"Gonzo: The bookstore downtown sells books on metaphysics.

Kermit: No, that bookstore doesn't have any books on metaphysics." (Jackson, 2014, p. 34)

"The 'metaphysics' dispute between Kermit and Gonzo arises in response to the question of a third party, 'Is there anywhere nearby to buy books on metaphysics?' Kermit and Gonzo might have exactly the same beliefs about the meaning of 'metaphysics'—both might give it the philosophers' sense, for example—and yet they might make conflicting assumptions about what the third party takes 'metaphysics' to mean when he poses the question. Gonzo might assume that the third party has the spiritual use in mind, while Kermit might assume that he has the philosophical use in mind." (Jackson, 2014, p. 38)

I am sceptical of Jackson's interpretation of this case. His intended reading is that it doesn't fall under Chalmers' approach, despite being a case of verbalness.

First, as Jackson acknowledges himself (2014, p. 38), it is possible to interpret this case as falling

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<sup>24</sup>Barring cases in which an object-level disagreement plays a role in explaining the disagreement over the meaning of the expression T. Chalmers acknowledges such cases, but still considers them to be verbal. (2011, p. 13)

under Chalmers' analysis since we may think that Kermit and Gonzo disagree on what *token utterances* of "metaphysics" in this context mean. Jackson may respond by simply stipulating that all parties involved believe that "metaphysics" in this context has its philosophical meaning, but that they are merely making different assumptions about what the third party (and each other) is interested in communicating. E.g. Kermit might think that the others are interested in communicating about spiritualist books. Thus, despite his beliefs that "metaphysics" only expresses its philosophical meaning and that the bookshop sells the right kind of philosophical books, Kermit pragmatically uses "metaphysics" to convey his belief that there are no spiritualist books in the bookshop in question. The problem with this interpretation however is that it would thereby be a case of an insincere dispute: Kermit asserts a sentence, despite believing it to be literally false. As I discuss in section 8.2, cases of insincere disputes are hard to deal with for any approach of verbal disputes and Jackson's approach is no exception. Chalmers could simply restrict the scope of his analysis to sincere disputes and thereby avoid Jackson's alleged counterexample.

Jenkins (2014) also offers two alleged counterexamples to Chalmers' approach. Here is one of these two alleged counterexamples:

Two trained philosophers might argue as follows. The first might say, 'Nobody cares at all about whether a subject can completely rule out the possibility that he is being deceived by an evil demon. Scepticism is mistaken.' And the other could reply 'Unless a subject can rule out all not-p possibilities, his position with regard to p is epistemically defective. Scepticism is not mistaken.' Supposing this dispute to be a merely verbal one which arises in virtue of a disagreement about the meaning of the word 'knows', this is a case in which parties to a merely verbal dispute never explicitly use the portion of language which underlies it.

(Jenkins, 2014, pp. 16–17)

Jenkins asks us to suppose that this example is a verbal dispute and goes on to argue that it doesn't fall under Chalmers' analysis since the crucial term over whose meaning the parties disagree is not used in the dispute. While a case like this may often be a substantive dispute among



epistemologists, there is at least in principle no reason why it can't be sometimes verbal in the way Jenkins argues. We may imagine the two speakers to come from two slightly different linguistic communities, which differ with respect to how they use "knowledge". In such a scenario it would seem that the dispute can exhibit the usual markers of a paradigmatic verbal dispute – the parties are talking past each other, not really disagreeing etc.

I argue that this case is no counterexample to Chalmers. Contrary to Jenkins interpretation, there is a term used in the dispute over whose meaning the parties disagree. Jenkins asks us to suppose that the dispute arises wholly in virtue of disagreeing over the meaning "knows". But then it appears they would also disagree over the meaning of "scepticism" since both speakers would arguably define "scepticism" in terms of "knows". E.g. they might define "scepticism" in terms of "impossibility to know anything about the external world" or something similar. In any case, it would appear that the dispute over "Scepticism is mistaken." arises in virtue of disagreeing over the meaning of "scepticism". Their disagreement over the meaning of "scepticism" in turn is wholly in virtue of their disagreement over the meaning of "knows". Since there still is a term in the disputed sentence over whose meaning the parties disagree such that the dispute arises in virtue of this disagreement, the case appears to fall under Chalmers analysis.

Jenkins provides another alleged counterexample to Chalmers approach:

"MICK: I can give you a bring to wear on your finger, so 'bring' must be a noun.

MARK: No, you can't do that: there's no such thing as a bring." (Jenkins, 2014, p. 16)

Allegedly it falls under Chalmers' approach since the dispute arises wholly in virtue of a disagreement over the meaning of the term "bring". It doesn't appear verbal though: We have the sense that the parties are really disagreeing since the disagreement in question (over whether "bring" is a noun) is also explicitly stated in the dispute.

However, I think one can resist the pressure to assume this case falls under Chalmers' approach.

One simply needs to reflect a bit on the role of the apparently object-level sentences "I can give you a bring to wear on your finger" and "No, you can't do that: there's no such thing as a bring" play in

this dispute. I think it makes the most sense to interpret these sentences as contributing evidence to what is at issue, namely whether "bring" is a noun. These sentences appear to be evidence for the issue at hand, in virtue of containing the word "bring". Therefore, I think it makes the most sense to interpret these sentences as implicitly metalinguistic. What Mick says is best interpreted as: "“I can give you a bring to wear on your finger” *is a true sentence*, so 'bring' must be a noun.” Similarly, what Mark says is best interpreted as saying "No, *this sentence is false*, there is nothing *that is the referent of "bring"*". Interpreted in this way, the word "bring" is never *really* used in the dispute, it is only mentioned. The word “bring” is used, but there is no disagreement about its meaning, its meaning is the word "bring". So, the dispute doesn't really fall under Chalmers' approach since there is no word used in the dispute over whose meaning the parties disagree and such that the dispute arises wholly in virtue of this disagreement. At best, this case shows that Chalmers approach needs to be clarified such that the term over whose meaning the parties disagree must be used rather than mentioned. And it shows that one must be careful not only to look at quotation marks when assessing whether an expression is used or mentioned.

However, Jenkins' alleged counterexample provides a recipe for a more convincing counterexample. What we need is a dispute in which one term is used and which also explicitly disputes the meaning of the very same term. Consider the following dispute:

Lucy: "The meaning of "meaning" is intension."

Isabelle: "No, the meaning of "meaning" is not intension."

In response to this counterexample, a proponent of Chalmers' approach can't simply argue that the term "meaning" is only mentioned – it is rather obviously used as well as mentioned here. So, there is a term used in the dispute such that Lucy and Isabelle disagree over its meaning and the dispute appears to arise wholly in virtue of this disagreement. Yet, at the same time, the parties also *really disagree* over the domain of the dispute and their dispute appears not pointless – two of Chalmers markers don't apply, so he shouldn't count it as verbal. As I outlined in the previous section, Chalmers' third marker of verbalness shouldn't be used here – since the dispute is explicitly about

language, it doesn't make sense to ask whether "the dispute over the nonlinguistic domain" (2011, p. 1) would evaporate if a linguistic issue was resolved.

Since Chalmers' approach is only meant as an "approximation" or "gloss" rather than a full-fledged analysis, this case may not be problematic for Chalmers. Still, this case should give us reasons to look for better approximations of verbal disputes in a lack-of-real-disagreement framework.

Finally, Vermeulen (2018) offers alleged counterexamples to Chalmers' approach. She notices that the same sort of pointless disputes without real disagreement may arise when the parties don't disagree on the meaning of individual terms but disagree on how they are combined to express a proposition. In this vein, she offers the example of a dispute which arises due to syntactic ambiguity<sup>25</sup>:

Muriel "I've seen a thief with our telescope." (I've seen a thief through my telescope)

John "No you haven't. The telescope is upstairs right where it belongs. (You have not seen a thief carrying our telescope) (Vermeulen, 2018, p. 338)

In this case, the parties don't disagree on the meaning of any individual term of the disputed sentence. Instead, they disagree on how to combine the meanings of the terms to get the meaning of the sentence. Still, the dispute appears verbal in the sense of "not really disagreeing". The parties do not appear to disagree on the object-level, their disputes are intuitively pointless and resolving a linguistic issue (resolving the syntactic ambiguity) should resolve the original dispute.

In reply to these counterexamples, Chalmers may simply note that his approach is meant as an approximation and for some cases, it can go amiss. Still, these cases should give us reasons to look for better approximations.

In summary, Chalmers' view faces two challenges based on these criticisms by other theorists:

- It needs to identify cases as non-verbal when the meaning of a term that is used in the dispute is also the explicit topic of the dispute.

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<sup>25</sup>Vermeulen also offers a case due to scope ambiguity (over "The teacher of Alexander might not have been a teacher.") (2018, p. 339). For brevity, I focus only on the syntactic ambiguity case.

- It needs to identify cases as verbal when the dispute arises in virtue of disagreement on the meaning of the disputed sentence without disagreement on the meaning of any of its terms (e.g. due to syntactic ambiguity).

A proponent of Chalmers' view may question whether these two cases are too marginal to be worth considering. They may point out that all we really need is an approximation that is good enough to be usable when it matters. Chalmers delivers this and acknowledges himself that it is a gloss or approximation rather than an analysis. I think this is a fair response to these cases. Yet, in section 6.1, I present an analysis of (doxastically) verbal disputes which should offer all of the benefits of Chalmers' approximation while also identifying these two sorts of cases correctly. A proponent of Chalmers' view may point out that it is only a marginal improvement. It may be marginal, but it's still an improvement.

Furthermore, there is a more general worry for Chalmers' view when we consider its potential as an analysis of verbalness. When viewed as a heuristic or approximation of verbalness in a lack-of-real-disagreement framework, it might not concern us too much if some bits of the view are rather vague or imprecise. Chalmers views his approach as a mere approximation or gloss and thereby vague or imprecise vocabulary need not concern Chalmers too much. Still, other things being equal, more precise vocabulary would be preferable.

The worry then is that Chalmers appeals to the "meaning" of a term and an explanatory "in virtue of" may be too vague, imprecise, and flexible. Chalmers does outline some constraints on the notion of meaning, namely that it needs to be "substantive" (rather than deflationary), that it should not require speakers to be able to verbally articulate it and that it should allow for variation in meaning for context-dependant terms. But ultimately, he leaves the notion at an intuitive level (Chalmers, 2011, p. 8). Similarly, he discusses the "in virtue of" and indicates that it should be read as an explanatory relation. But ultimately, he does acknowledge that "one may have to take something in this vicinity as primitive" (Chalmers, 2011, p. 8).

It appears that it is worth looking for improvements to Chalmers' view. Such improvements should

resolve the counterexamples of syntactic ambiguity and of disputes that explicitly discuss one of the meanings of the disputed sentence. And such an improvement would ideally be less vague and more precise than Chalmers' appeals to "meanings" and an explanatory "in virtue of". I provide such an improved view in section 6.1.

## **5.2 Pragmatic Approaches: Brendan Balcerak Jackson and Inga Vermeulen**

### **5.2.1 Jackson's Approach to Verbal Disputes**

In this section, I identify "talking past each other" as Jackson's central marker of verbal disputes, identify the analysis of "verbal disputes" he defends and critically evaluate his approach.

#### **5.2.1.1 "Talking past each other"**

In his paper "Verbal Disputes and Substantiveness", Jackson is not only concerned with figuring out what verbal disputes are. He also discusses the effectiveness of a charge of mere verbalness as an argumentative tool for deflationists to argue that metaphysical disputes are pointless, not substantive or just settled by language. Stemming from this interest in the deflationary thrust of this sort of argument, he adopts "talking past each other" as his central marker of verbal disputes:

“to have a proper grasp of this sort of linguistic deflationism, we must have some idea of what it is that makes an apparent dispute merely verbal. Deflationists typically rely on a model of merely verbal disputes that treats them as cases in which it would be natural to describe the parties as simply "talking past each other.”” (Jackson, 2014, p. 32)

I think we should be sceptical of Jackson's assumption that “deflationists typically rely on a model of merely verbal disputes that treats them as cases in which it would be natural to describe the parties as simply "talking past each other””. Deflationists have, with "not really disagreeing", another framework available. Thus, we should be sceptical of Jackson's conclusions that "the charge that a given metaphysical dispute is merely verbal, by itself, gives us no reason to see the question or questions under dispute as non-substantive, or to see their answers as somehow being settled

merely by a choice about how to use language" (Jackson, 2014, p. 33) – at least to the degree that his arguments depend on thinking of verbal disputes in terms of "talking past each other" rather than in terms of "not really disagreeing".

Jackson offers little to further elucidate "talking past each other" and leaves the phrase at an intuitive level. Early on in his paper, he specifies that "the sentence under dispute contains some semantically ambiguous expression, and one party endorses the sentence under one reading while the other endorses its negation under a different reading" (Jackson, 2014, p. 33). However, he moves on to reject the view that the parties' utterances must have different literal meanings for a dispute to be verbal: "the mere verbalness of a dispute is not always traceable to a difference in the literal meaning of the sentence under dispute for the two parties" (Jackson, 2014, p. 35). Thus, for Jackson, it is ultimately false that a "semantically ambiguous expression" is required and this makes his gloss not very helpful in clarifying "talking past each other".

The notion of "talking past each other" can be further clarified at an intuitive level (e.g. identifying "talking past each other" as a kind of mutual miscommunication in which the parties intend to convey different matters with the disputed sentence – see section 3.1), but Jackson offers little in this regard.

In summary, it appears that Jackson builds his approach on verbal disputes on the proto-theory that verbal disputes are disputes in which the parties are talking past each other:

## Verbal Disputes according to Jackson (2014)

Domain: Disputes

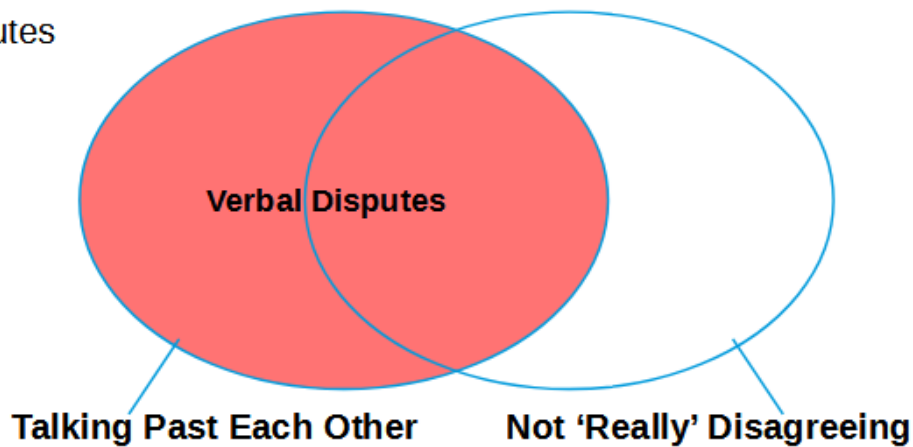


Figure 4: Jackson Venn diagram Verbal Disputes

### 5.2.1.2 Jackson's Analysis of Verbal Disputes

Based on "talking past each other", Jackson presents the following analysis of verbal disputes:

"I [...] argue that we should see mere verbalness as a certain kind of discourse defect that arises when the parties differ as to what each takes to be the immediate question under discussion" (Jackson, 2014, p. 31).

And later, he says:

"a merely verbal dispute is a conversational exchange with a specific kind of defect. It shares with cases of genuine dispute the fact that the parties endorse contradictory sentences. But unlike cases of genuine dispute, we cannot identify a mutually agreed-upon question that both parties attempt to address, or at least cannot do so without moving to a level of generality at which the answers the parties intend to offer do not conflict. *There is no question under discussion to which the parties offer conflicting answers.*" (my emphasis) (Jackson, 2014, p. 42)

Given these quotes, this seems to summarize Jackson's view:

A dispute is verbal if and only if there is no question that both parties attempt to address such that the parties intend to offer conflicting answers to it.

In other words, for every question both parties intend to address, the parties do not intend to give conflicting answers. The parties would maybe intend to give conflicting answers to some questions, but any such question is intended to be addressed by at most one of the disputants.

As Vermeulen noted, "this account leaves the crucial point of how to identify the question under discussion, at best, highly implicit" (Vermeulen, 2018, p. 345). The analysis, as it stands, crucially depends on how questions are individuated – *when are two parties attempting to address the same rather than different questions?* Recall the bookshop case from section 1.1, in which the parties are talking past each other and not really disagreeing. Both parties believe that the bookshop sells spiritualist, but not philosophical books. With the spiritualist meaning of "metaphysics" in mind, one party asserts that the bookshop sells books on metaphysics, with the philosophical meaning of "metaphysics" in mind, the other party denies it. Let's apply Jackson's analysis: Is there a question, such that both intend to address it and such that they intend to offer conflicting answers? It seems the question "Does the bookshop sell books on metaphysics?" is such a question. Jackson has to deny that the question "Does the bookshop sell books on metaphysics?" is a single question which both parties attempt to address and on which they offer conflicting answers.

Jackson appears to individuate questions by appeal to more than merely the disputed sentence – for a dispute over S, we can't simply say that the disputants attempt to answer the question of whether S. "There is no simple recipe for determining which question the parties are attempting to answer at any given point in a conversational exchange. It certainly cannot always simply be "read off" of the linguistic meanings of the parties' utterances" (Jackson, 2014, p. 41). Unfortunately, Jackson doesn't only acknowledge that "there is no simple recipe for determining which question the parties are attempting to answer" – he also offers little to make it simpler for us to understand how to determine which questions a party of a dispute attempts to answer.

Vermeulen, based on roughly the same considerations, suggests to read Jackson as distinguishing questions semantically: "there is prima facie a question parties to a verbal dispute over a statement S both attempt to answer and give conflicting answers to, namely, the question of whether S. For



Balcerak Jackson's account to work, we should therefore individuate questions based on their content rather than via the utterance type." (2018, p. 345). This suggestion is progress, but one has to be careful with the details: On a semantic externalist framework, both parties mean the same thing when disputing "The bookshop sells books on metaphysics" and they address the same semantically individuated question of whether there are books on metaphysics in the bookshop. The key to avoiding this problem appears to lie in considering that Jackson's analysis is about *attempting to address* one question rather than another. It doesn't matter which semantically individuated question each party *actually addresses* in making their utterances. It matters which semantically individuated question each party *attempts to address*. The bookshop case is identified as verbal in this framework since even if "metaphysics" only refers to the philosophical discipline, the question of whether the bookshop sells certain philosophical books is *attempted to be addressed* by only one party. The other party attempts to address the question of whether there are spiritualist books in the bookshop. Thus, on this reading, there is no question, such that each party intends to address it and such that the parties offer conflicting answers.

Further support for this semantic individuation of questions can be drawn from how Jackson applies his criterion to cases. Jackson appears to individuate questions disputants attempt to address by appealing something like readings, understandings or perceived or believed meanings of questions. In discussing his version of the bookshop case, Jackson says:

"Given what we know about the case, it is plausible that Gonzo intends to address a question about books with one sort of subject-matter, while Kermit intends to address a question about books with another sort of subject-matter. We can label the subject matters they each have in mind—for example, by calling them 'metaphysic<sub>G</sub>' and 'metaphysic<sub>K</sub>' respectively."  
(Jackson, 2014, p. 45)

Thus, it appears that in this case "questions each party attempts to address" are individuated by appealing to the parties different intentions concerning what to convey with their uses of "metaphysics". On a whole, it appears that disputants in Jackson's theory intend to convey an

answer to a semantically individuated question with their utterances. In this sense, the parties of the bookshop case do not attempt to answer one question for which they offer conflicting answers.

There are certain semantically individuated questions only one party attempts to answer (e.g., the question of whether the bookshop sells certain philosophical books). And there are more general questions both attempt to address, but then they do offer non-conflicting answers (e.g., the question of which kinds of books are sold in the bookshop).

### **5.2.1.3 Evaluating Jackson's Approach**

Given the previous sections, Jackson's analysis is best understood as an attempt to capture verbal disputes as marked by "talking past each other".

A weakness of Jackson's approach is that it appears to not be precise or clear enough. In Jackson's approach, a dispute is verbal if and only if, there is no question that both parties attempt to address such that the answers the parties intend to offer do not conflict. While I offered some elucidation on what Jackson might mean by "attempting different questions" in the previous section, it is still not a terribly clear notion. Even when we individuate questions semantically, we must be careful with the details to achieve the desired results. For example, it seems that we might run into trouble with this approach if we combine it with a Burge-style social externalism about mental content (see Burge, 1979): Despite at least one of the parties having a misconception about metaphysics, they would, on pain of externalism, still attempt to address the same, semantically individuated question of whether the bookshop sells books on metaphysics. The *content of the very intention to address a certain question rather than another* may be externally determined and on pain of this, both parties may intend to answer whether there are books on *philosophical* metaphysics – even though one party has a misconception about what "metaphysics" means. This is not supposed to indicate that Jackson's approach can't work on pain of externalism – it just illustrates that for his approach to work, we need a proposal for how it is determined which question each party attempts to address.

"Attempting to address different questions" might still help as a heuristic to identify verbal disputes in a "talking past each other" framework. But given the unclarity in the details, it might not be much

clearer than the proto-theory of simply identifying verbal disputes as disputes in which parties are "talking past each other". One should prefer something clearer, more precise when providing an analysis – at least *ceteris paribus*.

I also worry that there may be counterexamples to Jackson's approach. It appears possible for disputes to fall under Jackson's analysis despite the parties not talking past each other. Consider the following version of a bookshop case:

Someone who appears to be interested in spiritualist topics asks Anne and Bea (two philosophy students): "Does the bookshop down the road sell books on metaphysics?"

Anne: "Yes it does sell books on metaphysics."

Bea: "Well, it doesn't sell books on *metaphysics* – but you will find the books you are looking for there."

This is a dispute since Bea denies what Anne says. But on the intended reading, the parties are not talking past each other: Bea perfectly well understands that Anne just pragmatically uses "metaphysics" to refer to books about spiritualist topics. And we may add that Anne, being a philosophy student, also perfectly well understands that Bea is using "metaphysics" to refer to philosophical books. There is simply no talking past each other since the parties are perfectly well aware of what each other is intending to convey. Given this, one may deny that the case is a verbal dispute – or at least one may be reluctant to sort it as verbal. Yet, the dispute is captured by Jackson's analysis since there is no question such that the parties both attempt to address it and such that their answers differ. It appears that what is missing from Jackson's approach is a condition that ensures that the parties mistakenly believe to address the same question – a condition guaranteeing that they do not only address different matters but also that do not recognize that they are doing so. In summary, there are two problems in Jackson's approach that need to be addressed. First, (*ceteris paribus*) we should prefer an analysis that is a bit more precise instead of appealing to the still not very clear notion of attempting to address different questions. And second, the analysis should contain a condition to ensure that the parties do not only intend to convey different matters but that

they also mistakenly believe to be addressing the same matter, such that they are actually talking past each other.

## 5.2.2 Vermeulen's Approach to Verbal Disputes

In this section, I consider and evaluate Inga Vermeulen's (2018) approach to verbal disputes. First, I establish which markers of verbal disputes she uses. Second, I outline and explain her analysis of verbalness in a dispute. And finally, I evaluate her view.

### 5.2.2.1 Vermeulen's Markers of Verbalness in a Dispute

Inga Vermeulen uses a variety of phrases to describe salient features of paradigmatically verbal disputes. I argue that despite this variety in phrases, there are just two markers in Vermeulen's approach: "not really disagreeing" and "talking past each other".

Vermeulen's starts by noting that "some disputes just do not seem to get anywhere" (2018, p. 331). This seems to be a consideration of the methodological significance of a dispute's verbalness: If a dispute is verbal, it tends not to lead anywhere, it resists being resolved. Yet, this feature is neither sufficient nor necessary: A dispute might not go anywhere because neither party has enough evidence to resolve it. And sometimes, verbal disputes seem to go somewhere, in the sense of getting resolved since encountering new evidence may change the mind of one of the parties, such that the parties switch to merely verbal agreement. For example, in the bookshop case of section 1.1, I might find that the bookshop sells philosophical books and say "You were right, the bookshop sells books on metaphysics". That a dispute "doesn't get anywhere" is at best a rough guide to verbalness.

Prima facie, Vermeulen appears to identify verbal disputes partly through the paradigmatic example of a dispute over "Most students meet their supervisor biweekly" that hinges on the ambiguity of "biweekly" (fortnightly / twice a week) (2018, p. 332). Yet, this case seems to be used to merely highlight the salient features that are really used to identify verbalness:

"Peter and Paul simply mean something else by "biweekly" and hence *talk past each other*.

Paul means fortnightly whereas Peter means twice a week. *They appear to be disagreeing*

*when they really aren't*. Their dispute is what philosophers have come to call “merely verbal.”” (my emphasis) (Vermeulen, 2018, p. 332).

Vermeulen’s introduction of the label “merely verbal” suggests that these two features – talking past each other & not really disagreeing<sup>26</sup> – are what she takes to identify verbal disputes. Now, one might also place some weight on the parties meaning “something else” by the same term. However, this notion would be in considerable need for clarification: At an intuitive stage it is not clear whether the meaning of “biweekly” in both parties’ utterances needs to be literally different (a semantic difference) or whether they intend to convey different things by saying “biweekly” (a pragmatic difference) or in them having different beliefs about the meaning of “biweekly” (a doxastic difference). In contrast, “not really disagreeing” and “talking past each other”, seem to be intuitively usable and can be clarified at a relatively intuitive level (as I did in sections 3.1 and 3.2)

Further support for the view that Vermeulen thinks of verbal disputes in terms of “not really disagreeing” and “talking past each other” can be drawn from her discussion of a case of syntactic ambiguity as a counterexample<sup>27</sup> to Chalmers’ view: “Muriel and John are *talking past one another* and *this leads them to mistakenly believe that they are in disagreement when they really are not*. The dispute has *the two core features of a verbal dispute*.” (my emphasis) (Vermeulen, 2018, p. 338). Labelling “not really disagreeing” and “talking past each other” as “the two core features” implies that they do enjoy a special status. Furthermore, since she uses them in an argument against Chalmers’ account, Vermeulen appears to take them to be something like standards against which one can measure approaches to verbal disputes: An approach should at least sort all cases to which both markers apply as “verbal”.

Having identified “talking past each other” and “not really disagreeing” as Vermeulen’s markers of verbalness, let’s consider the relation between the two in Vermeulen’s view.

Vermeulen appears to think that cases of talking past each other while really disagreeing are not

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<sup>26</sup>Of course, Vermeulen also says that “they appear to be disagreeing”. But “appearance of disagreement” seems just to mean that the parties are engaged in a dispute: What one party asserts is denied by the other.

<sup>27</sup>See section 5.1.2.2 for a discussion of the example’s effectiveness against Chalmers view.

“merely” verbal but considers them to be verbal in a broad sense only:

“At the first and least defective stage of verbalness are disputes over a statement S in which parties talk past one another, but also disagree on some relevant issue. These are in the vicinity of what Chalmers calls partly verbal disputes (see above). My first pass proposal captures these disputes” (Vermeulen, 2018, p. 347).

“At the second, more defective stage of verbalness are disputes over a statement S in which parties talk past each other and do not genuinely disagree on any relevant issue. This is the sort of verbal dispute my amended proposal captures” (Vermeulen, 2018, p. 347).

That her amended proposal captures the second sort of case, suggests that she thinks the second sort of case is more important. Merely verbal disputes, in her approach, are the intersection of “talking past each other” and “not really disagreeing. Cases of “talking past each other” while also “really disagreeing” belong to a broader class of cases. In her approach, these cases are maybe “somewhat” or “partly” verbal (they are at the “least defective stage of verbalness”), but not “merely” verbal.

Vermeulen doesn’t address cases in which the parties aren’t really disagreeing while not talking past each other. This comes down to her reading of “really disagreeing”, on which there can’t be cases of sincere disputes in which the parties aren’t talking past each other without real disagreement. But to bring this out, we need to consider her analysis of merely verbal disputes.

### **5.2.2.2 Vermeulen's Analysis of Merely Verbal Disputes**

This is Vermeulen’s analysis of wholly verbal disputes:

“Amended proposal: A dispute over a statement S—where one party utters S and the other not-S—is verbal when: (1) Parties use the same utterance-type S with different speaker’s meaning such that what A means by uttering S (p) does not conflict with what B means by uttering not-S (not q), and A and B do not have beliefs whose content conflicts with what the other one means (not p and q respectively). (2) Each party ascribes the negation of their own speaker’s meaning to the other (not p and q respectively)” (Vermeulen, 2018, p. 343).

So, it appears that for a dispute to be verbal, the following conditions need to be met:

1. Both parties “mean” something different when uttering the disputed sentence S. More specifically, they use S with different speaker’s meaning.
2. What one party “means” when asserting S should not conflict with what the other party “means” when denying S.
3. The beliefs of either party do not conflict with what the other party “means” in asserting or denying S.
4. Party A thinks that party B believes the negation of what party A means in asserting/denying the disputed sentence – and vice versa.

The first condition needs further clarification with regards to the crucial notion of “speaker’s meaning”. Vermeulen provides two clarifications:

- “To describe the speaker’s meaning, I will use Grice’s scheme: By uttering S, A means that so-and-so” (2018, p. 342).
- “The speaker’s meaning is what a speaker intends to convey by uttering S” (2018, p. 341).

This clarifies that speaker’s meaning is a pragmatic phenomenon. It concerns what speakers intend to communicate in uttering the disputed sentence. It isn’t about what they really say or about what they believe to be saying.

The second and third conditions establish that between the speakers of the dispute there is in some sense no real conflict. The second condition clarifies that there is no conflict between the speaker’s meanings of the parties. The third establishes that there is no conflict between the speaker’s meaning of either party and the beliefs of the other party. In short, these two conditions appear to be what Vermeulen means when saying that the parties of a verbal dispute are “not really disagreeing”. Vermeulen understands “not really disagreeing” as a lack of disagreement on the level of what the parties intend to convey. In this sense, Vermeulen’s understanding of the lack-of-disagreement marker of verbalness is notably different from my intended understanding since my focus is more

on a lack of disagreement on what the parties believe to be saying.

The difference between my understanding of “nor really disagreeing” and Vermeulen’s understanding has consequences for the relation between “talking past each other” and “not really disagreeing”. Given my understanding of the phrase, there can be cases of not talking past each other while not really disagreeing. Reconsider the case of the metalinguistic negotiation over the racehorse Secretariat of section 4.2: One party says: “Secretariat is an athlete.”, the other denies it but they are aware of implicitly disputing the meaning of “athlete”. On my reading of “not really disagreeing”, they are not really disagreeing: They neither disagree on the level of what is actually said, nor on the level of what they believe their statements to mean since they agree on everything about Secretariat, how well he did in all his races etc. But on Vermeulen’s reading, the parties are “really disagreeing” since they disagree on what they intend to convey – namely on whether the term “athlete” applies to non-human animals.

Vermeulen doesn’t address cases of not talking past each other while also not really disagreeing. The reason appears to be that on her reading of “not really disagreeing”, there can’t be such cases. To see this, suppose that in a dispute, the parties are not talking past each other. Since they are not talking past each other, what one party intends to convey by asserting “S” is the same as what the other party intends to convey in denying “S” – they assert and deny *the same* pragmatic content. Since what one party intends to convey is thereby the negation of what the other party intends to convey, there is automatically a conflict between what they intend to convey. Furthermore, if they are intending to convey something they genuinely believe, there is also a conflict between what either party intends to convey and what the other believes. At best, there can be cases of not talking past each other while “not really disagreeing” when the parties are insincere and even then, there is real conflict between what the parties intend to convey.

Given this reading of “not really disagreeing” as not disagreeing over pragmatic content, the following diagram illustrates what Vermeulen appears to intend to capture with her approach:



## Verbal Disputes according to Vermeulen (2018)

Domain: Disputes

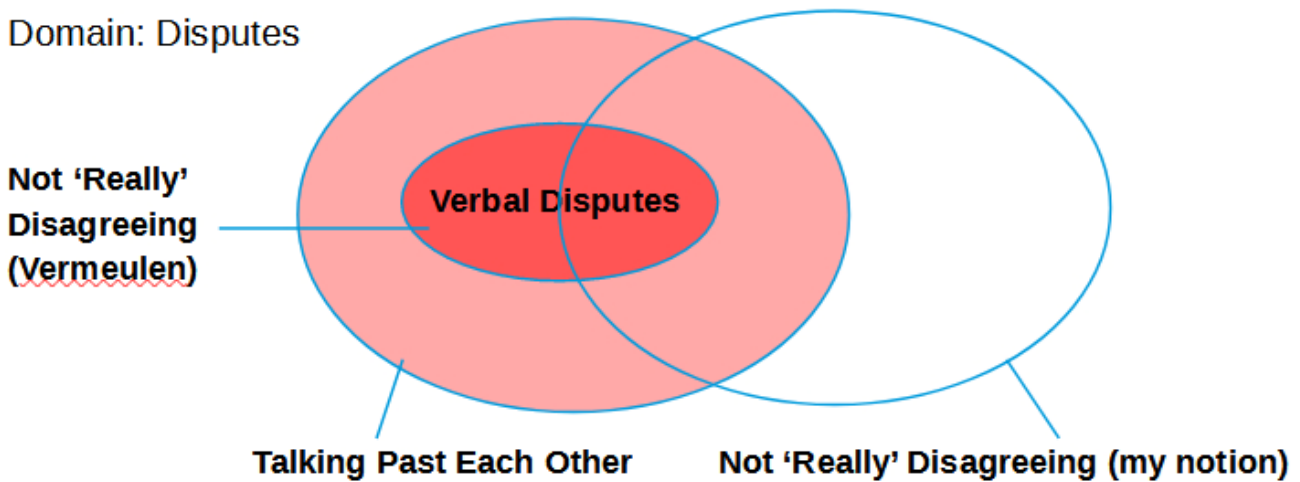


Figure 5: Vermeulen Venn diagram Verbal Disputes

The light red vs. dark red indicates that she thinks of merely talking past each other as the “first and least defective stage of verbalness” (Vermeulen, 2018, p. 347). Combining this first stage with “not really disagreeing” over pragmatic content gives the second stage, captured by her amended proposal. Note that “not really disagreeing” in her approach is completely encompassed by “talking past each other” since her notion of “not really disagreeing” appears to require talking past each other (at least assuming the dispute is sincere). The third level of verbalness (in which both parties assert true pragmatic contents) is not pictured here (see Vermeulen, 2018, p. 347).

This still leaves the fourth condition of Vermeulen’s approach. It states that party A needs to take party B to mean the negation of what A is intending to convey – and vice versa. This condition seems fine to me as it secures that the party are really “talking past each other” – they are not successfully communicating since they take each other to use the disputed sentence with the same speaker’s meaning, while they use the disputed sentence with different speaker’s meanings. If this condition was not contained in the approach, we might worry about cases in which the speaker’s meaning differs between parties, but in which the parties also immediately realize this difference and thus successfully communicate.

### 5.2.2.3 Evaluating Vermeulen's Approach

In this section, I evaluate Vermeulen’s approach. I focus on her reading of “not really disagreeing” and how this reading hinders her from acknowledging that there is something verbal about

metalinguistic negotiations and similar cases.

As outlined in the previous section, Vermeulen's reading of "not really disagreeing" differs from mine. This raises the question: Which is preferable for analysing verbal disputes? I argue that my reading (in terms of what the parties believe to be saying) is preferable to Vermeulen's reading (in terms of what the parties intend to convey). To see this, let us consider a case in which there is no talking past each other, while the parties "do not really disagree" according to my notion, while they "do really disagree" given Vermeulen's notion. Let's use the Secretariat case of section 4.2: Two parties have a dispute over "Secretariat is an athlete" simply due to disagreeing over whether the expression "athlete" correctly applies to non-human animals. Furthermore, they are completely aware of this and just pragmatically use "Secretariat is an athlete" (and its negation) to convey how they think "athlete" is correctly used and understand that the other party is doing the same.

There is a nagging intuition that there is something at least close to verbalness going on in this case. Pre-theoretically, one would be reluctant to call this case "non-verbal". Even if we come eventually to the conclusion that it makes more sense to sort the case as non-verbal, it surely shouldn't count as *paradigmatically* non-verbal. The problem with Vermeulen's approach is that it would identify this case as a paradigmatically non-verbal dispute: *Neither* of Vermeulen's markers applies: The parties are not talking past each other, and they are really disagreeing on pragmatic content. At least we should expect Vermeulen to explain why we mistakenly think that there is something verbal about this case, despite her markers not applying. In contrast, on my reading of "not really disagreeing" we can explain why we are reluctant to immediately sort this case as either verbal or non-verbal – one marker, namely "not really disagreeing" applies, while the other, namely "talking past each other" doesn't apply.

Still, to the degree to which her approach operates within a talking-past-each-other framework, it is fairly successful. Her notion of talking past each other as a) the parties using the disputed sentence with different speaker's meaning but b) taking the other party to use it with the same speaker's meaning seems to fairly accurately capture what it means to talk past each other. It is a notable improvement upon Jackson's approach since there appears no appeal to something as vague as

“attempting to address different questions”. The notion of Gricean speaker’s meaning she uses is a much more established notion.

Finally, let’s briefly consider an aspect in which Vermeulen thinks her approach is an improvement upon the alternatives:

“To the extent that these accounts capture the relevant phenomenon, they do so by bringing in heavy theoretical machinery. I attempt to show that we can capture the full range of cases with an approach that is theoretically lightweight and compatible with a range of views on contentious issues.” (Vermeulen, 2018, p. 332).

The space here is too limited to consider the degree to which alternative approaches bring in more “heavy theoretical machinery” and contentious assumptions. But there is space to consider the degree to which her account is guilty of this charge too. Her account appears to appeal to at least two somewhat contentious notions:

- Vermeulen requires speakers to usually have speaker’s meanings – so speakers must (at least usually) have intentions to convey something with their utterances.
- Vermeulen requires beliefs about what the other party intends to convey in their utterances.

Is it plausible that speakers generally have such intentions to convey something with their utterances and beliefs about what the other party intends to convey? Or, at least, do all speakers involved in verbal disputes have such intentions and beliefs? Maybe. But these assumptions and the pragmatic framework in the background don’t appear much less contentious than Chalmers’ appeal to beliefs about the meanings of terms. And Vermeulen criticises Chalmers’ appeal as too contentious (Vermeulen, 2018, p. 340), despite her own appeals to intentions and beliefs about these intentions. Now, maybe there is an argument to be made for her assumptions being less controversial than Chalmers’ – but she doesn’t make this argument. Thus, one shouldn’t be convinced yet that Vermeulen’s approach is really more lightweight than competing views.

In summary, Vermeulen’s approach seems to capture verbal disputes in a talking-past-each-other

framework and does so better than Jackson's account. But her reading of "not really disagreeing" as not disagreeing over pragmatic content doesn't appear to be a good marker of verbalness. Many cases (e.g. metalinguistic negotiations) are thereby not falling under either of her markers, despite not being paradigmatically non-verbal. Finally, it is questionable whether her account is really more lightweight than alternatives. Still, this leaves her approach in pretty good shape and improvements would primarily need to focus on the issue about the right reading of "not really disagreeing".

### **5.3 Conclusion: Challenges for existing Approaches**

In the previous sections, I surveyed some influential approaches to verbal disputes. The survey is far from complete but several themes emerged.

Notably, each of these approaches primarily focussed on one of the markers of verbalness.

Chalmers and Jenkins primarily focussed on verbal disputes as disputes without real disagreement.

Jackson and Vermeulen primarily focussed on verbal disputes as disputes in which the parties are talking past each other. Vermeulen's view might be most controversial here since she also discusses "not really disagreeing". Still, her pragmatic reading of "not really disagreeing" sets her apart from Chalmers and Jenkins and puts her closer to Jackson's approach.

We might even consider sorting these approaches into two camps: A *doxastic* camp (Chalmers, Jenkins), whose main tenet is that verbal disputes lack an appropriate conflict in *beliefs*. And a *pragmatic* camp (Jackson, Vermeulen), whose main tenet is that verbal disputes involve *miscommunication* (or talking past each other).

This schism into two camps naturally leads to considering a pluralistic account that would propose both *pragmatically verbal disputes* and *doxastically verbal disputes*. Developing and defending such a pluralistic view is the main goal of the next section.

In this section, I also considered some challenges of these views and noted some difficulties with each of them. In developing and defending a pluralistic account in the next section, I improve upon these challenges.

## 6. Doxastic Verbalness and Pragmatic Verbalness

In this section, I propose two notions of verbalness. One notion is analysed in doxastic (and semantic) vocabulary, it is what we roughly express, by saying that disputants are “not really disagreeing”. The other notion is analysed in pragmatic terms, it is what we intuitively capture by saying that disputants are “talking past each other”.

### 6.1 Doxastic Verbalness

In this section, I propose an analysis of “verbal disputes” as identified by the marker that the parties of a verbal dispute are “not really disagreeing”. I call this “doxastic verbalness”.

The two analyses considered in section 5.1 primarily focused on a lack of real disagreement. As a starting point, let’s reconsider these analyses and their challenges:

Jenkins provided an analysis of verbal disputes in a lack-of-real-disagreement framework:

"MVD: Parties A and B are having a merely verbal dispute iff they are engaged in a sincere prima facie dispute D, but do not disagree over the subject matter(s) of D, and merely present the appearance of doing so owing to their divergent uses of some relevant portion of language." (Jenkins, 2014, p. 21)

As I outlined in section 5.1.1, the exact meaning of “subject matter” is purposefully underdetermined here since this gives Jenkins flexibility to deal with some contentious cases – in particular with regards to metalinguistic negotiations. There is less reason to make such a move if one develops a pluralistic framework since metalinguistic negotiations (and similar cases as summarized in section 4.2) would count as doxastically, but not pragmatically verbal. Hence, it seems that the use of the rather vague “subject matter” is questionable.

Furthermore, I noted two further problems with Jenkins’ approach in section 5.1.1:

- An improvement of Jenkins’ approach should address why we are reluctant to call cases of talking past each other while really disagreeing “non-verbal”, despite their status as clearly non-verbal in Jenkins’ approach. In a pluralistic framework, this issue is simply solved by

holding that such cases are not doxastically, but pragmatically verbal.

- An improvement of Jenkins' approach should clarify what is meant by "divergent uses" of a "relevant" portion of language.

As I have argued in section 5.1.1, Jenkins' argument for holding that the relevant portion of language may not be used in the dispute at all fails since in her alleged counterexample (a dispute over "scepticism is mistaken" due to disagreement over the meaning of "knows"), the disputed sentence contains a word ("scepticism") over whose meaning the parties arguably disagree. Given this consideration, it seems appropriate to go back to Chalmers' approach and to identifying the portion of language used in the dispute as the relevant portion of language.

The following is Chalmers' approximation of verbal disputes:

A dispute over S is (broadly) verbal when for some expression T in S, the parties disagree about the meaning of T, and the dispute over S arises wholly in virtue of this disagreement regarding T. (Chalmers, 2011, p. 7)

In section 5.1.2, I noted two challenges for this approach. First, a dispute may fall under "not really disagreeing" when there is no disagreement on any individual term, but on how to combine the terms to get to the meaning of the sentence. In this spirit, Vermeulen put forward two counterexamples, based on scope ambiguity and syntactic ambiguity (2018, pp. 338–339). An improvement should identify these cases as verbal. And second, Chalmers' approach appears to have trouble when the dispute is explicitly discussing a meaning of one of the terms used in S – in this spirit, a dispute over "The meaning of "meaning" is intension." would count as verbal in Chalmers' approach even if it intuitively is not.

How could Chalmers' approach be improved to better approximate the considered counterexamples? In response to Vermeulen's counterexamples, it seems like it was a mistake by Chalmers to focus on disagreement on the meaning of *individual terms* since such disagreement isn't necessary to disagree on the meaning of a *sentence*. Hence, a first improvement would move to the level of sentences:

A dispute over S is (broadly) verbal when the parties disagree about the meaning of S, and the dispute over S arises wholly in virtue of this disagreement. (Based on Chalmers, 2011, p. 7)

This suffices to deal with Vermeulen's counterexamples, her cases based on syntactic ambiguity and scope ambiguity would now be sorted as verbal.

At first, this proposal also appears to deal with the improved version of Jenkins counterexample – the dispute over the "The meaning of "meaning" is intension". Of course, due to disagreeing about the meaning of "meaning" and due to the disputed sentence mentioning meaning, the parties of the disputes would disagree over the meaning of the disputed sentence. But it isn't the disagreement over the meaning of the *sentence*, which is giving rise to the dispute. It is merely the disagreement over the meaning of the word "meaning" that gives rise to the dispute. Since the dispute doesn't arise *in virtue* of a disagreement over the meaning of the disputed sentence, it doesn't count as verbal – and this is the desired result.

However, there is a counterexample in the same spirit at the level of sentences. Consider a dispute over "The meaning of this sentence is a set of possible worlds". One can imagine two philosophers of language seriously disputing this sentence in a way that seems non-verbal. But it would fall under the improved version of Chalmers' analysis above: There is a disagreement over the meaning of the disputed sentence. And that disagreement is giving rise to the dispute. It seems like one needs a different approach to deal with cases in which a dispute is explicitly about the kind of thing that usually gives rise to verbal disputes.

For improving Chalmers' approach, let's revisit the central marker of "not really disagreeing". Chalmers approach seems to focus on what, *instead of real disagreement*, is giving rise to the dispute. This seems a rather indirect approach. If we intend to capture disputes with a lack of "real" disagreement, it appears that we should focus directly on what "lack of real disagreement" amounts to and specify what verbal disputes are in those terms. Given these considerations, here is an improved analysis of verbal disputes in a lack-of-real-disagreement framework.

A dispute over "S" is doxastically verbal if and only if, for every proposition p such that at least one party believes "S" to express p, the parties do not disagree on p.

This approach appears to capture all the cases Chalmers' approach correctly identifies as well as cases of syntactic ambiguity and scope ambiguity since it operates at the level of sentences.

Furthermore, it appears to identify the disputes over "The meaning of "meaning" is intension." as non-verbal: The first party believes it to express the proposition <The intension of "meaning" is intension.> - which is a proposition these parties would arguably disagree on. It even identifies the improved counterexample of a dispute over "The meaning of this sentence is a set of possible worlds" as non-verbal. Arguably, for at least one of the two philosophers of language, this sentence expresses a proposition over which they disagree, so it isn't verbal.

However, there is a new problem with this approach: It seems to imply that any dispute in which neither party believes the sentence to express any proposition would automatically count as verbal. Consider Wittgenstein-inspired sceptics about meaning, who don't believe sentences to have any meaning, but just say that they are useful in language games. Two such sceptics could engage in a dispute and any such dispute would count as verbal: Since neither of them believes the disputed sentence to express any proposition, it would be vacuously true that they do not disagree on any proposition either party believes to be expressed by the disputed sentence.

In response, one may consider simply adding an ad-hoc condition that at least one party believes the disputed sentence to express some specific proposition p. But this overcompensates: Now *every* dispute among Wittgenstein-inspired sceptics counts as non-verbal – even disputes over "Glasses are cups", where they merely use "glasses" differently. What we need is a phrase that captures the way even sceptics about propositions take themselves to assert something or the way even they act as if they believe they assert propositions. Hence, I propose the following analysis:

**Doxastic Verbalness, final analysis:**

A dispute over "S" is doxastically verbal if and only if, for every p such that at least one party takes themselves to assert (or deny) p in uttering "S" (or its negation), the parties do



not disagree on p.

Typically, what one party takes themselves to assert in uttering "S" is the proposition they believe to be expressed by "S". But the phrase "taking oneself to assert p" is meant to apply more broadly. It is meant to capture how even a Wittgenstein-inspired sceptic takes themselves to assert something in uttering a sentence "S" – even when they don't believe to express a proposition. It is meant to encompass how even sceptics usually act as if they believe their utterance to express a proposition. Of course, some sceptics may deny that they take themselves to assert anything in uttering "S". But it is questionable whether we should believe the sceptic in reporting this. Someone who defends their view, presents arguments, and has certain associated beliefs that are relevantly connected to their utterances seems to take themselves to assert something – even if they explicitly tell us otherwise. What a speaker "takes themselves to assert" is meant to capture how, when a speaker is sincere, there is an intimate relation between one of their beliefs and their declarative utterance. It captures how, for a sincere speaker, there is a relation between the speaker's belief that grass is green and their assertion "Grass is green". It is hard to elucidate the notion any further without appealing to beliefs in what is expressed by the utterance, which would be contentious. But I think it is clear enough to be useful here. In ordinary contexts, it just is the proposition the speaker believes to assert in uttering S. The notion of taking oneself to assert something in uttering S, should apply in a parallel way to sceptics about meaning, without appealing to contentious vocabulary.

This analysis more directly defines verbal disputes in terms of what the parties lack disagreement about. This seems much more fitting to the overall framework: It focuses on what the "real" disagreement is that the parties of a verbal dispute lack. A "real" disagreement would be a disagreement over what either party takes themselves to assert.

Given that the presented analysis of doxastic verbalness solves counterexamples to and worries associated with Jenkins' and Chalmers' approaches, I argue that it is an improvement upon their views. It also seems more adequate, since it helps understanding what the "real" disagreement

would be that the parties of a verbal dispute lack.

## **6.2 Pragmatic Verbalness**

In this section, I outline an analysis of verbal disputes as marked by “talking past each other”. I call this “pragmatic verbalness” since it appears to be marked by some kind of pragmatic miscommunication.

The two analyses considered in section 5.2 primarily focused on “talking past each other”. As a starting point, let’s reconsider these analyses and their challenges.

In section 5.2.1, I summarized Jackson’s view as follows:

A dispute is verbal if and only if there is no question that both parties attempt to address such that the answers the parties intend to offer do not conflict.

The main problem I noted with this view is that it is imprecise. It isn’t very clear what counts as “attempting to address different questions”. Even after clarifying that questions need to be individuated semantically (rather than syntactically), it remains relatively vague.

A further worry about Jackson’s approach was that it misses a condition that ensures that the parties aren’t only addressing different questions but are also unaware of doing so. As I argued in section 5.2.1, there are cases in which the parties are attempting to address different questions but are perfectly aware of doing so and successfully communicate – such that they are not “talking past each other”.

Given these problems, we may hope for Vermeulen’s approach to do better. The following is her analysis of verbal disputes:

“Amended proposal: A dispute over a statement S—where one party utters S and the other not-S—is verbal when: (1) Parties use the same utterance-type S with different speaker’s meaning such that what A means by uttering S (p) does not conflict with what B means by uttering not-S (not q), and A and B do not have beliefs whose content conflicts with what the other one means (not p and q respectively). (2) Each party ascribes the negation of their own

speaker's meaning to the other (not p and q respectively)" (Vermeulen, 2018, p. 343).

The first worry about this proposal is that the no-conflict conditions in this approach are unnecessary for the present purpose. By "no-conflict conditions", I mean the conditions that the speaker's meanings of the parties do not conflict and that A and B do not have beliefs which conflict with what the other one means. The focus here is to assess the plausibility of Vermeulen's proposal for capturing *pragmatic* verbalness, that is verbalness as marked by "talking past each other". Importantly, we do so in the context of developing a pluralistic approach that also contains an analysis of *doxastic* verbalness, that is verbalness as marked by "not really disagreeing". It seems that the no-conflict conditions in Vermeulen's approach are contained to follow some of the motivation of the lack-of-disagreement framework. But in the context of developing this pluralistic approach, we don't need to worry about the motivation of the lack-of-disagreement framework since we have *doxastic* verbalness to deal with this.

The idea to drop the no-conflict conditions for pragmatic verbalness can be supported by considering a case in which the parties are talking past each other, while there is a conflict in speaker's meaning and a conflict in relevant beliefs. Consider the following dispute:

Dora: "There are fewer than a billion people in the world."

Paul (a native German): "No, there are more than a billion people in the world."

(case based on a similar case by Jackson, 2014, pp. 34–35)

Suppose that in this case, there is no mismatch between believed semantic content and pragmatic content: It just so happens that each intends to convey what they believe to be the literal meaning of the sentence. Now, Paul mistakenly believes that "billion" in English refers to  $10^{12}$  – due to "Billion" in German expressing  $10^{12}$ . Paul, in this dispute, intends to convey that there are more than  $10^{12}$  people in the world. Dora intends to convey that there are fewer than  $10^9$ . There is surely miscommunication here, they are talking past each other in the sense of intending to convey different matters without being aware of it. But at the same time, what they intend to convey does conflict and what each party intends to convey conflicts with what the other believes. It appears that

this case is not *paradigmatically* verbal. It seems to belong to the sort of case where one notion of verbalness doesn't apply (the parties are really disagreeing), but another applies (the parties are talking past each other). Now, since we are trying to capture "talking past each other" here, it appears that we should drop the no-conflict conditions and thus count this case as pragmatically verbal. The improved version of Vermeulen's analysis would thus look like this:

A dispute over a sentence S is pragmatically verbal if and only if:

- (1) Parties use S with different speaker's meaning – one meaning p, the other meaning not q.
- (2) Each party ascribes the negation of their speaker's meaning to the other party (not p and q respectively). (Based on Vermeulen, 2018, p. 343).

At this point, let's reconsider the worries I noted in section 5.2.2 when discussing Vermeulen's proposal:

- Her reading of "not really disagreeing" as not disagreeing over pragmatic content doesn't appear to be a good marker of verbalness. However, here we are only concerned with pragmatic verbalness and thus only with "talking past each other", so this worry doesn't apply here.
- It is questionable whether her approach is theoretically more lightweight than alternatives, given the appeal to speaker's meaning. This worry however isn't much of an objection, but rather pointing out that an alleged advantage of her view is more controversial than it may appear.

In summary, neither of these worries is problematic here.

Another worry that there is an implicit appeal to propositions (in using the letters "p" and "q") and that as Vermeulen points out, this might be problematic since speakers may intend to convey non-propositional contents in some cases. Expressivists about moral language would deny that the content of statements like "We should donate \$100 to charity." is propositional (Vermeulen, 2018, p.335). And arguably what each party intends to convey in such a dispute may be not propositional. But this problem appears fixable. We simply need to avoid this implicit appeal to propositions in the

analysis:

**Pragmatic Verbalness, final analysis:**

A dispute over a sentence S is pragmatically verbal if and only if:

- (1) Parties use S with different speaker's meaning.<sup>28</sup>
- (2) Each party ascribes the negation of their speaker's meaning to the other party. (based on Vermeulen, 2018, p. 343).

And I endorse this analysis of pragmatic verbalness.

On reflection, this analysis of pragmatic verbalness appears intensionally adequate. Pragmatic verbalness is the notion of verbalness as marked by “talking past each other”. Talking past each other is concerned with miscommunication. It is thus adequate that the analysis is split into two conditions, one guaranteeing that the parties intend to convey different things with the same words and one guaranteeing that the speakers are taking each other to be conveying the same thing with the same word, such that they are actually misunderstanding each other. In this sense, the analysis seems very fitting for the more intuitive expressions – “talking past each other”, “miscommunication”... – we use to describe the phenomenon.

### **6.3 Pluralism – both Analyses are legitimate**

After having presented my two analyses of pragmatic and doxastic verbalness, I now explain in what sense I maintain that both analyses are equally legitimate analyses of verbal disputes.

Let's say that a view about verbal disputes is “pluralistic” when it maintains that there are two or more non-co-extensional analyses of “verbal dispute”, which are in some sense or other equally legitimate. In my overall theory, the two analyses of verbal disputes of the preceding two sections are meant to be equally legitimate, but not co-extensional, so my view is pluralistic. But on the face of it, pluralism sounds like it is inconsistent. It may seem like I defend the following three claims

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<sup>28</sup> Of course, in almost every dispute the parties are using S with different speaker's meaning, simply in virtue of one asserting and the other denying it. Here, it is meant that the parties use S with different speaker's meaning, disregarding that one is asserting it and the other is denying it.

together:

- (1) A dispute is verbal if and only if it is pragmatically verbal.
- (2) A dispute is verbal if and only if it is doxastically verbal.
- (3) It is not the case that a dispute is pragmatically verbal if and only if it is doxastically verbal.

And – due to the symmetry and transitivity of the biconditional – these three claims are inconsistent. To avoid the contradiction, I now turn to more precisely analysing in what way my view can uphold that (1) and (2) are “equally legitimate” while defending (3) without giving rise to a contradiction.

### 6.3.1 Semantic Pluralism – Is “Verbal Dispute” ambiguous?

On a first pluralistic proposal the expression “verbal dispute” is ambiguous, just like the word “bank”. This would straightforwardly block the inconsistency. (1) would be true *on one disambiguation* of “verbal dispute”, while (2) is true *on another disambiguation*. It is just like the sentence “John is at the bank.” can be true when “bank” is taken to mean the financial institution and “John is not at the bank.” can be true when “bank” is taken to mean the riverbank.

Semantic pluralism is an interesting proposal. But I am neither going to defend it nor rule it out here. The kind of evidence we would need to convincingly argue for ambiguity in the case of “verbal disputes” goes beyond the scope of this project. To accept this view, we would need evidence that the expression “verbal dispute” has two meanings: doxastic verbalness and pragmatic verbalness. It appears that we would need something like the following things as evidence:

- Information about (present and historical) usage patterns of “verbal disputes” (maybe especially expert usage).
- Information about how “verbal dispute” was introduced.
- Data on when competent speakers are disposed to apply “verbal dispute” to cases.
- Data on the inferential role of “verbal dispute”.

- Information about disputes and particularly about which natural kinds they fall into (if we presuppose natural kind externalism).

And even if we obtain these pieces of evidence, this wouldn't be the end of the story since using this data to support semantic pluralism would depend on controversial meta-semantic assumptions: How exactly does meaning supervene on usage patterns, expert usage, natural "joints" in the domain etc.? Arguing from usage patterns, natural joints and inferential patterns to the ambiguity of "verbal dispute" requires making assumptions about how meaning supervenes on these facts.

Due to these problems, I won't commit to semantic pluralism. Still, I do think that most of the kinds of evidence considered above would at least allow for semantic pluralism.

### 6.3.2 Prescriptive Pluralism

The semantic pluralism considered above is descriptive: It is concerned with describing the present-day meaning of "verbal dispute". Instead of advocating a descriptive pluralism, one can instead advocate for a *prescriptive* pluralism about the meaning of "verbal dispute". A naive version of such a prescriptive pluralism would advocate that "verbal dispute" *should* be ambiguous between doxastic and pragmatic verbalness. But this naive version is easily dismissed: It is rarely advantageous for an expression to be ambiguous since ambiguity tends to cause misunderstandings. A more sensible prescriptive pluralism would be the following view:

We should replace talk involving "verbal disputes" (whatever "verbal disputes" means) with talk that explicitly distinguishes doxastically verbal disputes and pragmatically verbal disputes.

This blocks the contradiction since each of the analyses only proposes one phenomenon we *should* talk about instead of talking about "verbal disputes". This is a revisionary project: Instead of just talking about "verbal disputes" it is better to distinguish pragmatic and doxastic verbalness. Indeed, since I argue that we should change the way we talk about disputes and thereby change how we represent disputes, we may think of this project as advocating for "improving our representational devices". Thereby, we may consider it an example of Conceptual Engineering as defined by

Cappelen (2018, p. 3). We may also think of pragmatic and doxastic verbalness as two legitimate precisifications of the rather vague concept of verbal disputes – roughly in line with the idea of Carnapian explication (see Leitgeb & Carus, 2020).

There are different versions of prescriptive pluralism, depending on the reasons for why we should change the way we talk about the domain in question. Let's briefly consider two *prima facie* reasons for changing the way we talk about a domain:

### 1. Metaphysical prescriptive pluralism

The idea is that there are several natural joints in the domain. The most accurate and natural description of the domain would make multiple distinctions for multiple joints in the domain.

### 2. Practical prescriptive pluralism

The idea is that, given certain practical goals and our current situation, making a certain set of distinctions about the domain would allow us to achieve our goals better.

A practical justification of pluralism about verbal disputes seems preferable. There are two reasons for preferring the practical justification here:

First, the purpose for talking about verbal disputes (whatever they are) is evidently practical. As I already noted in section 1.2, we are interested in the topic of verbal disputes because whether a dispute is verbal has methodological upshots: It makes a difference for how best to proceed to resolve the dispute. "A good deal of methodological significance is attached to discovering whether a dispute is merely verbal or not" (Jenkins, 2014, p. 11). It seems that the purpose of having a concept of verbal disputes is primarily practical: It should help us identify disputes that need to be resolved differently from 'normal' disputes and it should help us specifying in what way these 'other' disputes need to be resolved. If the purpose was to find the most accurate and natural way to describe disputes, then metaphysical pluralism may be in order. But the main purpose isn't to find the most natural way to catalogue disputes – The purpose is to get better at resolving them.

Practical pluralism also seems preferable due to a worry about metaphysical pluralism:



Metaphysical pluralism works well when empirical evidence can give us good reasons to say that the most natural way to make a distinction is one way rather than another. We may consider examples from physics (moving from “Newtonian mass” to “resting mass” and “relativistic mass”), from geology (moving from “jade” to “nephrite” and “jadeite”) or from biology (it has been argued recently that there is not one, but four giraffe species (Fennessy et al., 2016)). In all these examples, we engaged in substantial scientific inquiry and found evidence that what we considered one kind of thing is a collection of different kinds of things. The worry now is two-fold: First, we don’t have the same kind of rigorous empirical evidence in the domain of disputes. And second, it isn’t even clear whether we can have such evidence here. It is relatively clear that species, minerals, or physical units can fall into natural or especially unified categories. It’s less clear that disputes fall into natural or especially unified categories.

Thus, this is the view I settle on: For practical reasons, carefully distinguishing pragmatic and doxastic verbalness is better than merely talking about “verbal disputes”. The practical reasons in questions are what I call “methodological upshots” of pragmatic and doxastic verbalness. When a dispute is pragmatically verbal, it makes a difference for how best to resolve it. When a dispute is doxastically verbal, it makes a difference for how best to resolve it. In the next section, I consider the respective methodological upshots of pragmatic and doxastic verbalness.

#### ***6.4 Methodological Upshots of Pragmatic and Doxastic Verbalness***

In the previous section, I accepted practical pluralism as the most promising justification for proposing two equally legitimate analyses of verbal disputes. It is promising because the purpose of having one or more concepts of verbalness is practical: It should help us resolving disputes. The idea is that both, whether a dispute is pragmatically verbal and whether it is doxastically verbal makes a difference for how to resolve the dispute in question. These consequences for how to resolve a dispute is what I call “methodological upshots”. In this section, I establish the distinct methodological upshots of doxastic verbalness and pragmatic verbalness.

### 6.4.1 The Methodological Upshot of Doxastic Verbalness

We can already at an intuitive level discuss the methodological upshots of verbal disputes in a lack-of-real-disagreement framework. When two parties are not really disagreeing while disputing *S*, then it seems that the very dispute over *S* is in some sense pointless. Of course, in a dispute over *S*, there may be implicit issues over which the parties disagree. Maybe the parties have a merely metalinguistic disagreement over *S*. Maybe they use *S* pragmatically to convey something else (e.g. maybe they use “The curry is spicy.” to convey that one shouldn’t add more spice). But in many such cases, there is at least an intuitive feeling that the best way to resolve the dispute is to switch to an explicit discussion of what is really at issue between the speakers. Everything else is just likely to result in misunderstandings. This doesn’t mean that there can’t be good reasons to leave it implicit in some contexts. In political contexts, a discussion over what is torture or over what is terrorism may hinge on a purely metalinguistic disagreement about what “torture” or “terrorism” should mean in a just society (examples from Chalmers, 2011, p. 2). But phrasing it as a point about the prescriptive semantics of these two terms is rarely effective in political debates. However, when we ask how to best resolve a dispute, we often seem to be primarily concerned with epistemic goals: In resolving a dispute, we are interested in gaining knowledge and discarding false beliefs. And in such epistemic contexts, it seems best to capture as clearly as possible what is actually at issue between the parties.

Further elucidation of the methodological upshots of doxastically verbal disputes can be drawn from Chalmers (2011) and Jenkins (2014), who both analyse verbal disputes primarily in terms of a lack of “real” disagreement. Chalmers notes that “verbal disputes have a familiar and distinctive sort of pointlessness” (2011, p. 10). He doesn’t further explain the notion of pointlessness, but at the very least, we can assume that pointless disputes are in some sense not worth having. He puts this idea more clearly in the notion of potential evaporation: “Once we resolve an issue about language, the dispute over the non-linguistic domain evaporates, or at least should evaporate” (Chalmers, 2011, p. 1). The idea roughly is that once a merely linguistic issue is resolved, there is nothing left to discuss. Jenkins puts the point somewhat more carefully: “It is of methodological importance to

understand what counts as a merely verbal dispute, when we should conclude that a dispute is merely verbal, and whether it is appropriate to end discussion upon reaching that conclusion” (2014, p. 11). Merely solving some linguistic issue suffices to resolve the dispute. While this idea has some merit, it also has the familiar problem that some disputes are explicitly about language and they are trivially resolved through resolving a linguistic issue, even though they aren’t verbal. If doxastically verbal disputes are not worth our time and verbal disputes can be resolved through merely resolving a linguistic issue as Chalmers and Jenkins suggest, then it becomes evident why it is practically useful to have a notion of doxastic verbalness in our philosophical toolbox. As Chalmers puts it: “The diagnosis of verbal disputes has the potential to serve as a sort of universal acid in philosophical discussion, either dissolving disagreements or boiling them down to the fundamental disagreements on which they turn” (2011, p. 3). The idea is that this concept helps us determining whether a dispute is worth having and if it is worth having, it helps us to better pin down what is actually at issue.

To draw out the methodological consequences of doxastic verbalness, let’s reconsider the analysis I advocated for in section 6.1:

A dispute over "S" is doxastically verbal if and only if, for every p such that at least one party takes themselves to assert (or deny) p in uttering "S" (or its negation), the parties do not disagree on p.

Importantly, we also assumed (for now) that the parties of the dispute are speaking sincerely. By sincerity, I mean that the party who asserts “S” believes what they take themselves to be asserting in uttering "S" and that the party who denies “S” believes the negation of what they take themselves to deny in uttering a negation of “S”. Given this background assumption, we can infer that what one party takes themselves to assert can’t be the same as what the other party takes themselves to deny. For, if it were the same, then, by sincerity, they would disagree on it. In a nutshell, party A believes to assert p by uttering S and B believes to assert not-q by denying S and  $p \neq q$ <sup>29</sup>. Furthermore, p and

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<sup>29</sup>Note that p and q may be non-propositional.

q also don't conflict in the sense that would suffice for disagreement.

What we can infer from these considerations is that the parties of a doxastically verbal dispute don't have *the right kind of disagreement* for their dispute. Of course, there can be background disagreements, most notably disagreements on what the disputed sentence S means. But given what they take themselves to be asserting, their dispute is defective insofar as there is not the right kind of conflict between the parties. The belief each party takes themselves to be expressing doesn't conflict with the belief the other party takes themselves to express.

One might wonder how serious this sort of defect really is. A dispute over "Waterboarding is torture." may hinge on a disagreement about the meaning of "torture". But in such a case it may be relatively clear that the disputants implicitly discuss how we, as a society, should act with regards to waterboarding. And disputing over "Waterboarding is torture." is simply a politically effective way to do this.

Yet, even in cases in which there are countervailing considerations, there is a sense in which the dispute is not explicitly discussing something that is really at odds between the parties. In the dispute over "Waterboarding is torture", the crucial point is not whether waterboarding inflicts pain. The point is whether it should be treated as a case of torture – for example, whether it should be covered by certain international conventions. In a sense, even though the disputants wouldn't be talking past each other (they perfectly understand what they discuss implicitly), they would be talking past what is really at issue between them since the crucial points of conflict are left implicit.

In more paradigmatic examples of doxastic verbalness, the idea that the parties fail to explicitly discuss what is really at issue between them appears often more pressing. Consider the original bookshop case. The parties don't disagree about which sorts of books are sold. At best, the only thing that is really at issue between them is whether "metaphysics", in this context, refers to spiritualist or philosophical topics. Presumably, the parties of this dispute don't care much about this semantic question, so upon recognising that the dispute is merely verbal, they should leave it at that.

Given the considerations of the previous two paragraphs, it appears that when a dispute is doxastically verbal:

1. The dispute, in its original form, is defective insofar as there is no disagreement on the level of what either party takes the disputed sentence to express.
2. What is really at issue between the parties is usually either at the level of what is conveyed or a metalinguistic disagreement about some aspect of the meaning of the disputed sentence (or both). That is, what is really at issue between the parties is left implicit
3. The dispute is not worth having in its original form unless there are countervailing reasons to leave what is really at issue implicit. Instead, the parties should move to an explicit dispute about what is really at issue between them (or, if they don't care about what turns out to be the issue, stop disputing).

In a nutshell, what each party takes themselves to express, is actually not at issue. What is at issue between the parties is instead implicit. Given this situation, the parties usually should move on to an explicit discussion of what they actually disagree on – unless there are countervailing reasons to leave it implicit and unless they don't care much about what turns out to be at issue between them. Furthermore, if the parties don't care much about what turns out to be at issue between them – e.g. if the parties don't particularly care about language and their dispute hinges on a disagreement about language – then the dispute is pointless and upon figuring out what is really at issue between them, the parties have no reason to continue disputing.

### **6.4.2 The Methodological Upshot of Pragmatic Verbalness**

In this section, I outline methodological upshots of pragmatic verbalness, that is what we should do if a dispute turns out to be pragmatically verbal. I first consider the question at an intuitive level. I then discuss methodological upshots in the approaches of Jackson (2014) and Vermeulen (2018). Finally, I outline my view, based on my analysis of pragmatic verbalness.

One can already draw some methodological consequences of pragmatic verbalness at an intuitive level. There are markers of verbalness which focus on the phenomenon of miscommunication – or,

more intuitively called, “talking past each other”. Talking past each other seems to be a sort of mutual misunderstanding: The parties believe that the other party intends to convey the same thing with the disputed sentence “S”, while both parties really intend to convey different things. Thus, it appears that we should try to resolve the misunderstanding. Once the misunderstanding is removed, both parties may more clearly see what is at issue between them – if there is anything at issue between them.

Let’s turn to methodological upshots that have been proposed by theorists who think of verbal disputes in pragmatic terms.

Jackson (2014) proposes that a dispute is verbal when there is no question both parties attempt to address such that the answers they offer conflict. Based on this, Jackson resists making any broadly deflationary methodological inferences from a dispute being verbal. “The charge that a given metaphysical dispute is merely verbal, by itself, gives us no reason to see the question or questions under dispute as non-substantive, or to see their answers as somehow being settled merely by a choice about how to use language.” (Jackson, 2014, p. 33). Jackson’s thrust appears largely negative. Jackson doesn’t discuss much which methodological consequences *do apply* if a dispute is verbal, he argues mainly against alleged methodological consequences of verbalness: “I argue that mere verbalness is insufficient to establish either indisputability or indeterminacy” (Jackson, 2014, p. 31).

But still, given Jackson’s analysis, there appear to be some positive methodological consequences: If there is no question both attempt to address such that they offer conflicting answers to the question, then we can infer two things:

- Questions that are general enough such that both parties do attempt to answer them are not disputed since the parties do not offer conflicting answers to them. Given this agreement, there is no reason to dispute these questions.
- For each question just one party attempts to address, the parties may or may not disagree on it. So, these questions are potentially worth disputing.

Similar to the intuitive considerations, the thrust appears clarificatory: The parties need to clarify which question they each attempt to answer. Questions so general that their answers aren't in conflict are not worth disputing. Upon realising that they have been attempting to answer different questions, they should turn to discuss how to answers these different questions – which may lead to disputes on these specific, clarified questions.

Vermeulen proposes that a dispute is verbal if and only if the parties use the disputed sentence with different speaker's meaning and each speaker's meaning does neither conflict with the other speaker's meaning, nor with the other speaker's beliefs (2018). Based on her approach, she distinguishes three stages of verbalness, from least to most defective (*ibid.* p. 347):

1. The parties use the disputed sentence with different speaker's meaning, but also happen to disagree on either speaker's meaning.
2. The parties use the disputed sentence with different speaker's meaning and neither these speaker's meanings conflict, nor does either speaker's meaning conflict with the beliefs of the other party.
3. The parties use the disputed sentence with different speaker's meaning and neither speaker's meaning conflicts with the beliefs of the other party. Both speaker's meanings are also true.

These different levels of verbalness appear to be associated with different consequences for how to proceed: “Distinguishing between these varieties of verbalness furthermore allows us to specify what kind of substantive issues remain to be discussed once the linguistic confusion is resolved” (Vermeulen, 2018, p. 331). Thus, according to Vermeulen, at any of the stages of verbalness, a linguistic confusion needs to be resolved. Whether there are still substantive issues to discuss depends on the stage of verbalness. Presumably, on the first stage, after resolving the linguistic confusion (that is after clarifying their speaker's meanings) the parties should resolve their remaining disagreement. However, on stages 2 and 3, there is no such a disagreement remaining, so there appears no substantive issue to discuss (of course there may still be merely linguistic issues to discuss). Thus, in Vermeulen's approach, the methodological upshot is first clarificatory: The

speakers need to clarify what they intend to convey, such that they grasp the other speaker's meaning. Then, if there is disagreement on this clarified issue, it is a substantive remaining issue to discuss. But, in a fully verbal dispute in Vermeulen's account, there won't be such a disagreement, so there remains no substantial issue to discuss.

Let's turn to methodological implications of pragmatic verbalness in my approach. Given my analysis, a dispute over a sentence *S* is pragmatically verbal if and only if the parties use *S* with different speaker's meaning and each party ascribes the negation of their speaker's meaning to the other party. Given this analysis, the speakers misunderstand each other: Parties A and B use the same sentence with different speaker's meaning, but A also takes B to use the disputed sentence with the same speaker's meaning as A (and vice versa).

To properly resolve a dispute in which the parties are misunderstanding each other, it appears that the parties should clarify their positions to remove the misunderstanding. As in Vermeulen's approach, it then remains to be seen whether there remains a disagreement on the clarified speaker's meaning.

So, intuitive considerations, the existing theories and my approach are largely in agreement about the methodological significance of pragmatic verbalness: If a dispute is pragmatically verbal, the parties need to clarify and remove their mutual misunderstanding and then see if there is a remaining issue, once the misunderstanding is resolved.

### **6.4.3 Conclusion**

In summary, both doxastic verbalness and pragmatic verbalness come with distinct methodological upshots. If a dispute is doxastically verbal, what either party takes themselves to assert is not at issue, so what is really at issue between the parties is at best highly implicit. Unless there are countervailing reasons to leave it implicit, the parties thus should move on to an explicit dispute about what really is at issue between them, where this might be a metalinguistic issue. Or – if the parties happen to not care much about what turns out to be at issue between them – the parties should stop disputing. If a dispute is pragmatically verbal, the parties should clarify their positions



to clear up a misunderstanding. While resolving the dispute is possible without clarification, it is intuitively better if clarification is reached, such that the parties realize what each other intended to convey.

This, in turn, justifies prescriptive, practical pluralism. Since both notions of verbalness come with distinct, but equally important consequences for how best to resolve the dispute, it is useful to have both notions of verbalness in our toolbox to resolve disputes better.

## 7. The Verbal Dispute about Verbal Disputes

Having my approach in place, it is time to reconsider the debate about what verbal disputes are. In this section, I argue that the central dispute between pragmatic approaches and doxastic approaches is pragmatically and doxastically verbal. This doesn't mean that the whole debate over verbal disputes is pragmatically and doxastically verbal, just that a core element of the debate is.

First, let's consider more accurately the dispute I wish to discuss here. Roughly, I wish to consider the following dispute:

### **Proponent of a pragmatic approach:**

*“A dispute is verbal when ... .”*

– where “...” is a set of conditions in pragmatic terms, that is in terms of what the parties intend to convey, wish to address etc.

### **Proponent of doxastic approach:**

*“No, a dispute is verbal when ... .”*

– where “...” is a set of conditions in doxastic terms, that is in terms of what the parties fail to disagree about.

For example, Vermeulen (2018) and Jackson (2014) seem to be proponents of pragmatic approaches, whereas Chalmers (2011) and Jenkins (2014) appear to be proponents of doxastic approaches. This is a central dispute in the debate, but there are many further disputes within the debate. For example, there are also disputes between different doxastic approaches (and between

different pragmatic approaches) over what verbal disputes are. There are disputes over what methodological consequences verbalness has, etc. These disputes are not covered here, and I wish to take no stance on whether they are pragmatically or doxastically verbal. I focus only on the dispute between the pragmatic camp and the doxastic camp over what verbal disputes are.

### **7.1 The Dispute over Verbal Disputes is doxastically verbal**

Let's first consider whether the dispute over verbal disputes is *doxastically* verbal. For a dispute to be doxastically verbal, it needs to be the case that the parties do not really disagree – given my analysis, they need to not disagree on what either party takes themselves to be asserting (or to be denying). I argue that this is the case: The dispute between pragmatic and doxastic approaches about what verbal disputes are is itself doxastically verbal.

To argue that there is no real disagreement beyond a disagreement on the meaning of “verbal disputes” here, I help myself to a method advocated by Chalmers (2011) – the subscript gambit. Roughly speaking, the method works as follows: Instead of using the phrase “verbal dispute”, we introduce two new expressions – “verbal dispute<sub>pragmatic</sub>” and “verbal dispute<sub>doxastic</sub>”, which we stipulate to mean the same as the respective analyses, proposed by the pragmatic and doxastic side. Then we ask both the pragmatic and the doxastic side to specify what they disagree about in terms of the new vocabulary. Surely, both sides would agree that there is the sort of dispute that fits the analysis of the other side and that we can introduce terms to speak about this sort of dispute. Furthermore, both parties would agree that “verbal dispute” simpliciter either means the same as “verbal dispute<sub>pragmatic</sub>” or the same as “verbal dispute<sub>doxastic</sub>”. Therefore, both parties must agree that the new vocabulary (without the expression “verbal dispute” simpliciter) must be able to express everything that the old vocabulary could express. This is such since both parties would agree that we just replaced “verbal dispute” with a synonymous expression and furthermore added a new expression into the language. Therefore, on both side's views, any disagreement that was expressible in the old vocabulary must also be expressible in the new vocabulary.

With the subscript gambit, it is hard to see what the disagreement between the proponent of a

pragmatic analysis and the proponent of a doxastic analysis is supposed to be. They can agree that both verbal disputes<sub>pragmatic</sub> and verbal disputes<sub>doxastic</sub> exist. At best, the parties disagree about which of them is more significant in some way or another. But, as I am going to show, this is not plausible. Let's consider a range of ways in which verbal disputes<sub>pragmatic</sub> and verbal disputes<sub>doxastic</sub> may be not equally significant:

### 1. Natural significance

In this picture, one of the two kinds of disputes is more natural than the other. This sort of proposal has some merit in metaphysical or ontological disputes (see Sidelle, 2007, who argues that such debates are not verbal due to natural kind externalism). But this proposal seems a bit implausible in the case of the dispute about verbal disputes – to the best of my knowledge, none of the approaches presents arguments for considering verbal disputes<sub>pragmatic</sub> to be more natural, fundamental or unified than verbal disputes<sub>doxastic</sub> – or vice versa.

### 2. Dispositional significance

In this picture, one of the two kinds of disputes is more significant because it maps more accurately when we are disposed to apply the expression “verbal dispute” and the parties disagree which of them it is. This approach seems plausible for disputes over analyses of everyday notions like “knowledge”, but it appears to be an untenable position to take here. There is little intuitive usage of the expression “verbal dispute” and that usage is usually not pre-theoretic. Furthermore, the employment of marker expressions like “talking past each other” and “not really disagreeing” to identify paradigmatic cases, indicates that merely mapping dispositions to apply “verbal dispute” is not what the parties have in mind. And finally, disagreement on which notion of verbalness better maps our dispositions to use “verbal dispute” seems to be only a metalinguistic disagreement – it is a disagreement *about how we are disposed to talk about disputes*, it is not a disagreement *about disputes*. So, this approach runs the risk of making the dispute doxastically verbal.

### 3. Most salient concept

In this picture, psychological facts make either kind of dispute more significant than the other. Paradigmatic cases of “verbal” dispute are saliently different from “normal” disputes – and this salience doesn’t have to reflect naturalness, it may simply reflect human psychology. The parties may disagree over whether “talking past each other” (pragmatic) or “not really disagreeing” (doxastic) is the most salient difference between paradigmatically “verbal” disputes and “normal” disputes. However, it seems implausible that either notion is *generally* more salient than the other. The persistent disagreement between pragmatic approaches and doxastic approaches is itself indicative that one difference is more salient for some people but another difference is more salient for other people.

#### 4. Practical significance

In this picture, having a concept of one of the two kinds is more practically important to resolve disputes. This is implausible: as I argued in section 6.4, both notions have their distinct methodological upshots. Furthermore, even if one of them was a bit more practically significant than the other: Unless the other is useless to resolve disputes, it would be best to have both notions, so pluralism seems hardly avoidable.

#### 5. “Verbal disputes” expresses a bedrock concept

Chalmers (2011) also considers the idea that despite the parties not being able to phrase their disagreement in the new vocabulary, there may still be a substantial disagreement. He considers disputes over what is morally good and concludes that the subscript gambit may in such cases lead to a situation in which the parties aren’t able to express their disagreement, but intuitively there is still a disagreement. Since the disagreement is not expressible in more fundamental vocabulary, Chalmers coins this a dispute over a “bedrock concept”.

This approach seems plausible when the notion under discussion is especially fundamental – Chalmers mentions moral righteousness, existence and consciousness. It appears a bit far-fetched to suppose that “verbal dispute” is similarly fundamental.

Above, I considered a range of topics on which the parties might “really disagree” and none of them

seems plausible. But even if they were plausible, an additional worry applies to all of them (maybe except for Chalmers' bedrock concept approach): Suppose the parties really disagree about which notion of verbalness is more natural, more practically significant, more in line with our dispositions to use "verbal disputes" and more psychologically salient. It remains questionable whether the parties of the dispute believe that the *literal content* of their respective claims is the claim that one notion is more significant in any of these ways (or in a combination thereof). Doxastic verbalness requires real disagreement on what the parties take themselves to be asserting (or denying). But do the parties take themselves to be literally asserting something about naturalness (or about one of the other notions employed above)? I am highly sceptical that the parties of the dispute have these such unusual beliefs about the meanings of their proposed analyses. On the face of it, none of them takes themselves to assert anything about naturalness, practical significance etc – at least not with their respective analyses.

To make a convincing case that the dispute over verbal disputes is doxastically verbal, what remains to be shown is a plausible story for how the dispute arises, such that it arises without real disagreement: As far as I can see, the different approaches usually employ markers like "not really disagreeing" and "talking past each other" to delineate the phenomenon in question. It appears to be a tacit assumption that these different markers (roughly) delineate the same kind of dispute. But as we have seen in section 4, this is not the case: The markers do diverge considerably. And when only one kind of marker applies, we are unsure whether the dispute in question is really "verbal" or not. Based on the mistaken tacit assumption that the different markers (mostly) coincide, the parties assumed to be talking about one thing – when really, there are two phenomena to talk about here. In summary, on the most plausible construal, the dispute between pragmatic approaches and doxastic approaches over verbal disputes is doxastically verbal. At least in absence of another plausible story on what exactly they disagree about, this seems the conclusion we should accept.

## ***7.2 The Dispute over Verbal Disputes is pragmatically verbal***

In this section, I argue that the dispute between pragmatic approaches and doxastic approaches is

pragmatically verbal. That is, intuitively, that the parties are talking past each other and not successfully communicating. More accurately, I argue that the parties use the disputed sentence with different speaker's meaning but attribute the negation of their speaker's meaning to the other party.

On the simplest construal, both parties are intending to convey what they believe to be the literal content of their respective analyses of verbal disputes. But given that they propose different analyses of verbal disputes and given that they believe that these analyses aren't co-extensional, it is difficult to see how they could agree on the meaning of "verbal disputes" – after all, one side believes it picks out a pragmatic phenomenon and the other side believes it picks out a doxastic phenomenon. Furthermore, we may assume that both sides agree that the phenomenon the other side is describing exists. In this picture, the dispute is just as pragmatically verbal as a dispute over "Glasses are cups" or "Books about spiritualist topics are books about metaphysics": The parties are talking past each other due to using one expression ("verbal dispute", "glasses", "metaphysics") with different speaker's meaning.

So, if the dispute should be not pragmatically verbal, it appears that we must assume the parties are intending to convey something other than what they believe to be the literal contents of the disputed sentences. In the remainder of this section, I consider and reject a few such proposals. But given the context of this dispute, we should be sceptical of such proposals in general: The dispute over verbal disputes happens in philosophical journals, that is in a context in which clarity and being explicit about what one is arguing for is a norm the respective theorists aim to meet. A non-literal interpretation in this context risks being uncharitable because it assumes that the author expressed their view implicitly rather than explicitly – despite aiming to meet a standard of clarity.

A range of proposals for the pragmatic content were already considered in the previous section. The parties could pragmatically use their respective analyses to convey which notion of verbal dispute is more natural, more practically useful, more aligned with our dispositions to use "verbal dispute" or more psychologically salient. As I concluded in the previous section, each of these proposals is implausible. But from a pragmatic perspective, there is a further worry: One party might intend to

convey that one notion of verbalness is more natural, while another party might intend to convey that another notion of verbalness is more practically useful. It could well be that each party intends to convey something other than the literal meaning of their respective analyses, but it may still be the case that what one intends to convey is so different from what the other intends to convey, that they are still talking past each other. So, by these considerations, it seems highly likely that the parties are talking past each other.

One possible option for what both parties might intend to convey with their analyses wasn't considered in the previous section: The parties might intend to convey metalinguistic claims. With their respective analyses, both parties might intend to convey that the meaning of "verbal dispute" is (or should be) such that it makes their respective analyses true. This was not considered when it comes to doxastic verbalness since it would be merely a disagreement about language, so the parties would still count as not really disagreeing about disputes. However, if both parties intend to convey such a metalinguistic statement, then they may not be talking past each other.

The metalinguistic pragmatic approach seems somewhat more plausible than the other approaches. But it still fails, for interpreting the parties as intending to convey merely metalinguistic claims with their respective analyses appears to be a rather uncharitable interpretation. First, it would be uncharitable because it would mean that the parties are not expressing themselves clearly – and in the context of publishing in philosophical journals, this is a norm they aim to meet. But furthermore, it would be uncharitable because of the arguments the respective views are presenting. If claims they intend to convey were *descriptively* meta-semantic – about the current meaning of "verbal dispute" – then we should expect more appeal to how members of the linguistic community, particularly experts, use the term. But there is little appeal to such usage and the employment of marker expressions like "talking past each other" or "not really disagreeing" indicates that the parties intend to convey more than the mere present meaning of "verbal dispute". So, maybe the parties are intending to convey something *prescriptively* meta-semantic instead? This would mean that they intend to convey which meaning the expression "verbal dispute" *should* have. But again, this seems not to sit well with the kind of arguments each side is presenting. For example, in the

debate, we find little appeals to which notion of verbalness is more useful to resolve disputes in praxis<sup>30</sup>. To the best of my knowledge, there is generally little appeal to which concept of verbalness we *should* have or *should* use. Hence, if we suppose that the parties intend to convey which meaning the expression “verbal dispute” should have, we find remarkably little of the right kind of arguments to support this claim in the debate. Therefore, it would be quite uncharitable to interpret the parties as intending to convey what the meaning of “verbal dispute” is or should be since this would mean that the parties make few of the right kind of arguments to support these metalinguistic claims.

In summary, the most plausible interpretation is that the parties intend to convey what they take to be the literal meaning of their respective analyses of verbal disputes. But, due to their apparent disagreement on the meaning of “verbal disputes” – a disagreement that manifests itself already at the level of intuitive markers of verbalness – they can hardly intend to convey something about the same kind of dispute when using “verbal dispute” in their respective claims. Therefore, on the most plausible interpretation, the parties in the dispute over verbal disputes are talking past each other – and their dispute is pragmatically verbal.

### **7.3 Summary: The Verbalness of the Dispute over Verbal Disputes**

In summary of the preceding two sections, the dispute between the pragmatic and doxastic camps over what verbal disputes are is pragmatically and doxastically verbal. They are not really disagreeing about disputes since they may agree that both pragmatic and doxastic verbalness exist and since it isn't plausible to construe their respective views as claiming that either is more significant in any of the ways considered. And they are talking past each other since they intend to convey something about different phenomena – namely pragmatic and doxastic verbalness

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<sup>30</sup>Except for Vermeulen (2018), who argues that her approach is better than Jackson's (2014) because it enables us to distinguish three different levels of verbalness which appear to come with different consequences for how to proceed. However, this is somewhat beside the point since this is a debate over which pragmatic account is better (as opposed to whether to adopt a doxastic or pragmatic account of verbal disputes). In other approaches (Chalmers, 2011; Jackson, 2014; Jenkins, 2014), practical considerations appear usually as *consequences* of the approach – it is rarely argued that one approach is better *because* it has such methodological upshots.



respectively.

This result fits well with a pluralistic approach to verbal disputes. Pluralism about verbal disputes, as defined in section 6 holds that there are at least two equally legitimate analyses of “verbal dispute”. If the dispute about what verbal disputes are is verbal due to the different parties talking about different phenomena, then this fits very well with any view saying that different phenomena can legitimately be called “verbal dispute”.

## **8. Objections and Replies**

In this section, I discuss three objections to my view and respond to them.

### **8.1 Demandingness**

The first objection is a demandingness objection: An opponent may observe that my approach requires speakers to have sophisticated beliefs about what they assert (and deny) with their utterances (for doxastic verbalness) as well as sophisticated intentions to convey something with their utterances (for pragmatic verbalness). However, the worry is that ordinary speakers often don't have such sophisticated beliefs and intentions when speaking.

Inga Vermeulen appears to raise a version of this worry when she criticises other approaches for their controversial theoretical commitments (2018, p. 340). Her critique of Chalmers' approach appears to also apply to my view of doxastic verbalness:

The basic assumption regarding linguistic competence underlying his account, as Chalmers (2011: 522) acknowledges, is that whenever speakers use a term, they do so with beliefs about the meaning of the term. This seems to be required if disagreement about the meaning of terms can in general arise in disputes in which we use terms, but do not explicitly talk about them. However, the assumption that linguistic competence requires speakers to have (tacit) beliefs about the meaning of terms is controversial. (Vermeulen, 2018, p. 340)

In my approach, for a dispute to be doxastically verbal, there must be things (usually propositions) the speakers take themselves to assert (or deny) with their utterance of the disputed sentence (or its

negation). This sounds very much like my approach requires speakers to have beliefs about the meanings of their utterances. And I acknowledge that this is a questionable assumption to make.

In the following paragraphs, I offer five reasons to think that Vermeulen's worry is less serious than it appears. This is phrased largely as a defence of my view, but – aside from the third reason – these defences also seem available to Chalmers' view.

First, while taking oneself to assert or deny something in uttering a sentence arguably mostly amounts to some sort of beliefs about the meaning of the sentence, these beliefs may be false, and it would be unproblematic for my view. Indeed, many cases of verbal disputes arise when at least one party has false beliefs about the meanings of the expressions involved. While my view is committed to say that speakers typically use sentences and expressions with beliefs about their meaning, these beliefs may be often be mistaken. Hence, my view doesn't require speakers to have *the right* beliefs about meanings to count as linguistically competent. It only requires that speakers often have such beliefs and whether they are right or wrong or whether the speakers count as competent in virtue of or despite these beliefs is entirely a different matter.

Second, my view isn't committed to any particular view about the relation between linguistic competence and taking oneself to assert/deny something in uttering a declarative sentence.

Linguistic competence may require very little, it may require no beliefs about the meanings involved. And yet, as long as such beliefs are common enough, this doesn't seem to spell much trouble for the view that doxastic verbalness arises in virtue of such beliefs.

Third, "taking oneself to assert/deny something (specific) in uttering a sentence" is in two respects broader than having beliefs about the meaning of each of the expressions involved. First, it is broader insofar as taking oneself to assert *p* with a *sentence* doesn't appear to require taking oneself to express anything with its component expressions. And second, insofar as *taking oneself* to assert something specific may be broader than *believing oneself* to assert. For example, taking oneself to assert that snow is white may cover cases in which someone thinks of "asserting that snow is white" as a mere pretence we engage in when making declarative utterances. Thus, "taking oneself to

assert/deny *X* in uttering a sentence” is broader than having beliefs about the meaning of each of the expressions involved and my view is thereby somewhat less demanding than it appears.

Fourth, given the consideration of the previous paragraph, taking oneself to assert *X* in making declarative utterances appears widespread. Cases of people making declarative utterances without something like this appear hard to think of. There are cases in which the people involved lack the appropriate linguistic competence (infants or someone repeating something in a language they don’t know), but these cases appear hardly involved in plausible cases of doxastically verbal disputes. Pragmatics is no help since conveying something other than the literal meaning of a sentence usually works *in virtue of* the literal meaning the sentence is taken to have. Something like this appears suitably common. And even if there are rare exceptions, what remains to be shown is that these exceptions can give rise to doxastically verbal disputes.

Fifth and finally, suppose that an opponent finds an alleged counterexample of a doxastically verbal dispute in which there is no specific *X*, such that either party take themselves to be asserting or denying *X*. Even then, one may be able to explain the appearance of doxastic verbalness for such a case: Some disputes are hard to imagine not being verbal – for example a dispute over “Glasses are cups” are hard to imagine not being verbal. We may explain this by saying, that *if* there was an *X* such that either party takes themselves to assert/deny *X* by uttering the disputed sentence, then it would count as doxastically verbal (at least for plausible candidates for *X*). This may help us explain how a dispute can appear verbal: Had the parties taken themselves to assert or deny something specific in the dispute, it would usually count as verbal.

Based on the above considerations, it seems relatively safe to conclude that demandingness is not a terribly serious problem for my approach to doxastic verbalness.

Yet, an opponent may raise a similar worry about pragmatic verbalness: My approach requires the parties of a pragmatically verbal dispute to have intentions to convey something, only then can they intend to convey different things with the disputed sentence. However, intentions to convey something with an utterance seem extremely common. In speaking, it seems like we virtually

always want “to get something across”. Of course, we may still inadvertently say something or communicate something we didn’t want to say or communicate. But this at best shows, that we a) sometimes get something across we didn’t intend and b) sometimes don’t get across what we intended. This appears to point to such intentions usually being present. Furthermore, even if there are rare cases of people speaking without such intentions, what the opponent would need to show is that, despite this lack of intentions to convey, such a case can be a pragmatically verbal dispute.

I conclude that demandingness, while it appears a worry for my approach, is not really a serious problem for my approach.

## **8.2 *Insincere Utterances and Verbalness***

In the previous sections, I restricted the scope of my approach to sincere disputes. There are probably some thorny issues with regards to defining what sincerity amounts to. But, as a first pass, we may say that a dispute is sincere when both parties believe to assert truths. An opponent may question how good an approach to verbal disputes can be if its scope is so considerably restricted. In this section, I argue that this restriction is unproblematic and sketch how the approach may be extended to include non-sincere disputes.

It is important to note what I mean by restricting the scope of my analyses to sincere disputes. It is not meant to say that insincere disputes are automatically, doxastically and/or pragmatically non-verbal. It means neither that these cases are automatically, doxastically and/or pragmatically verbal. Instead, I mean is that my approach, as it is, is simply silent on the question.

The restriction to sincere disputes appears unproblematic from a practical perspective. We want to find out what verbal disputes are to identify whether disputes in philosophy and scientific inquiry are verbal and what to do if they are. These disputes in science and philosophy are typically sincere, so my notions of doxastic and pragmatic verbalness are applicable to the domain we are interested in. This makes the limit in scope practically almost irrelevant since troubles with insincere disputes won’t usually appear when using these notions.

It is important to note that other approaches to verbal disputes also share problems with insincere disputes in one way or another. Chalmers' (2011) approach requires parties to have beliefs about the meanings of the expressions used to have a verbal dispute. But this appears to be problematic in insincere contexts: Two characters in a play might have a verbal dispute and yet the actors or actresses playing them might have different (or even no) beliefs about the meanings of the expressions used. Or, when one party plays devil's advocate, they might pretend to believe that an expression has a certain meaning while believing the expression has a different meaning. Yet, such a case apparently can be verbal in some sense: If the party who plays devil's advocate had the semantic beliefs they pretend to have, then it would be a verbal dispute.

In Vermeulen's approach, a dispute can only be verbal, if the parties don't have beliefs that conflict with what the other party intends to convey (= with the other party's speaker's meaning) (2018, p. 343). Again, this is problematic in insincere cases. When one party is playing devil's advocate, they might not have any beliefs that conflict with what the other intends to convey and thereby fulfil this criterion for verbalness. But as devil's advocate, they may pretend to have such beliefs and thus it would seem incorrect to classify the dispute as verbal.

Jenkins' approach also has trouble with insincere disputes (2014). Given her approach, it is a condition for verbalness that the parties don't disagree about the dispute's subject matter. However, if one of the parties is playing devil's advocate, then this condition might be too easily fulfilled: The party playing devil's advocate wouldn't be disagreeing with the other party about the subject matter, but they are pretending to disagree. It seems fallacious to immediately classify this case as verbal merely due to this lack of disagreement.

In summary, problems with insincerity seem widespread – while it may be a problem for me, it doesn't seem to be a reason to prefer another approach over my approach since other approaches are in the same boat<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup>I am not entirely sure to what degree insincerity is a problem for Jackson's approach (2014). It may seem that he can avoid this problem. According to him, a dispute is verbal when there is no question both parties attempt to address, such that the answers they (intend to) offer conflict. Crucially, the answers they (intend to) offer may not line up with what the parties believe, hence devil's advocates seem unproblematic. However, Jackson's approach appears to come with its own flaws (as discussed in section 5), the main one being the open question of what counts as

Of the approaches discussed in section 5, only Jenkins discusses the issue of sincerity. She deals with the problem much like I do, namely by restricting the scope of her approach to sincere disputes. However, she also offers a brief remark concerning how to extend the approach to sincere disputes:

We can say, for instance, that the devil’s advocate analogue of the merely verbal Tim/Tom case is something that would be a merely verbal dispute if only it were sincere. (Jenkins, 2014, pp. 23–24)

Building upon this suggestion, it seems to like one could adopt the following counterfactual principle to extend the scope of an analysis of verbalness to insincere disputes:

**Counterfactual Expansion:** An insincere dispute is verbal if and only if the dispute would be verbal if only it were sincere.

Combined with an analysis of sincere verbal disputes, this expands the scope to insincere verbal disputes. However, it is not obvious whether it does identify the right insincere disputes as pragmatically or doxastically verbal. Consider a dispute over “All birds can fly”. Suppose the party arguing for this claim is being insincere and pretends to believe that “bird” refers only to creatures that can fly, such that penguins and kakapos are not covered by “bird”. There are two ways to turn this into a sincere dispute: We could have the insincere party really having this odd semantic belief about the word “bird”. Or we could have the insincere party believing that all documentation of penguins and other flightless bird species is fake and part of a conspiracy. It isn’t obvious whether the dispute would be the former dispute or the latter dispute if it had been sincere. For example, the insincere party might have believed in the no-flightless-birds conspiracy for years and only recently changed their mind. In this case, it seems plausible that, had the dispute been sincere, it wouldn’t be verbal. Nevertheless, the dispute in its insincere version still seems verbal.

Given that the counterfactual proposal seems questionable, I adopt another way to expand the scope

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attempting to address the same or different questions.

of my approach to insincere disputes:

**Pretence Expansion:** An insincere dispute is verbal if and only, for every insincere party, had they really the view they are pretending to have, then the dispute would be verbal.

In a nutshell, insincere disputes are verbal when they are verbal within the scope of the pretence of the insincere parties. It seems relatively trivial that insincere disputants are engaging in a kind of pretence: They pretend to have a view they actually don't have. This covers the range of insincere cases, from ordinary lying to devil's advocate and actors in plays. The idea is that if they had the view they are pretending to have, then the dispute would be verbal. This is more accurate than the counterfactual proposal since it is specified *in what way* we move from an insincere dispute to a sincere one: We need to let the insincere party really have the view they are merely pretending to have and thereby make it sincere. This appears to successfully identify whether an insincere dispute is (pragmatically or doxastically) verbal. This proposal seems not only usable to expand my approach, but also usable to expand any of the considered approaches to insincere disputes. Thus, the issue of insincere disputes appears solved.

In summary, the issue of insincere disputes is:

- Practically almost irrelevant since the serious disputes in philosophy and science we are interested in are typically sincere.
- Not unique to my approach, but affects most approaches, so there is no reason to prefer another approach over this issue.
- Solvable since we may expand the scope by saying that if the parties really had the views they are pretending to have, then it would be verbal.

Thus, this issue of insincere disputes is unproblematic for my approach.

### **8.3 Is a Cluster View better?**

An opponent of my approach may worry that there is one view – let's call it the cluster view – that accounts for all the data just as well as my view. According to this view, the “verbalness” of a

dispute is a cluster of two features, namely “talking past each other” and “not really disagreeing”. Disputes that have both features are fully verbal, disputes that have only one are “somewhat” or “half-way” verbal and disputes that have neither feature are not verbal.

The key difference to my view is that my view is pluralist whereas the cluster view is monist. Given the cluster view, there is *only one* phenomenon of verbalness, delineated by both “talking past each other” and “not really disagreeing”. The problem that these two markers don’t line up is solved by giving cases that exhibit only one marker an intermediate status between being verbal and being not verbal. There is one phenomenon of verbalness, but (roughly speaking) its boundaries are a bit fuzzy.

The idea of the opponent’s worry is roughly correct. This cluster view appears to account for the data discussed in section 4. People are somewhat reluctant to call disputes that exhibit just one marker “verbal” – and they are also reluctant to sort them as “non-verbal”. There are multiple ways of dealing descriptively with this issue. One could describe “verbal dispute” as ambiguous or semantically underdetermined. But one could also hold that “verbal dispute” has just one meaning, but the meaning is a cluster of properties, such that disputes that exhibit just a subset of these properties, are just somewhat verbal. So, given this data, the cluster view seems just as adequate as my pluralistic view.

However, the cluster view raises the question of what “talking past each other” and “not really disagreeing” amount to. These phrases are useful enough to mark the phenomenon we are interested in. But for the purpose of providing an approach to what verbal disputes are, we should look for something more precise. At the current stage, the view is at best a good heuristic, but not a developed approach to what verbal disputes are. However, if the view needs to specify what “talking past each other” and “not really disagreeing” amount to in the context of verbal disputes, then it looks very much like the approach needs analyses of pragmatic and doxastic verbalness. At this point, my view would come in to provide these and it becomes questionable whether there is really a substantial difference between my view and the cluster view.



Ultimately, the cluster view is only a view about the current meaning of “verbal disputes” – it may provide an accurate account of that. That is to say that it is a merely *descriptive* view. I argue that my analyses are the better proposal from a *prescriptive* perspective. The cluster view advocates for considering the verbalness of a dispute as a cluster of two phenomena. As I argued in section 6, each of the two phenomena comes with its distinct methodological upshot – to remove a misunderstanding in the case of pragmatic verbalness and to move on to what is really at issue between the parties in the case of doxastic verbalness. The main advantage of using pragmatic and doxastic verbalness as separate concepts is that enables us to identify these methodological upshots and be better at resolving disputes. In comparison, a cluster view can’t do all this work. It can identify the cases of fully verbal disputes and in these cases, both methodological upshots apply. But it sorts cases of *only* pragmatic verbalness together with cases of *only* doxastic verbalness in the same “somewhat verbal” category. However, these cases are substantially different as they come with different methodological upshots. And an approach that lets us keep track of these important methodological differences seems preferable. Thus, it appears better to simply use two separate concepts here, those of pragmatic and doxastic verbalness.

Thus, I conclude that the opponent’s worry can be dismissed. A cluster view may be descriptively just as adequate as my view. But it also has to solve what core features it tracks that contribute to verbalness and in answering this question it becomes apparent, that the differences with my view are rather insignificant and are outweighed by the similarity that the groundwork is done by pragmatic and doxastic verbalness. And finally, to identify how we should proceed if a dispute is verbal in one sense or another, it appears that it is better to have both concepts separately, pragmatic and doxastic verbalness, rather than a single, cluster concept of verbalness. Thus, all things considered, my view appears preferable.

## 9. Conclusion

There are disputes in which the parties appear to be not really disagreeing. Instead, they appear to be talking past each other. Paradigmatic examples include disputes on “Whales are fish.” or “Glasses are cups” or “The bookshop sells books on metaphysics” (when the disputants mean different subject areas by “metaphysics”). Such disputes appear distinctive in various ways. For example, in such disputes, it seems like the parties can rationally endorse their opposing views despite having the same empirical evidence on the matter. Such disputes often seem to hinge on language. But most importantly for practical purposes: The best way to resolve such disputes appears to be crucially different from the best way to resolve ordinary or ‘normal’ disputes. For this distinctive kind of dispute, philosophers have coined the term “verbal dispute”.

It is important to clarify what verbal disputes are and how they are different from “ordinary” disputes because whether a dispute is “verbal” makes a difference concerning how to best resolve them to make epistemic progress. “A good deal of methodological significance is attached to discovering whether a dispute is merely verbal or not” (Jenkins, 2014, p. 11). Clarifying what it is that makes a dispute “verbal” is hence important to A) clarify how such disputes need to be resolved differently from “normal” disputes and to B) clarify when exactly these methodological differences apply to a case.

My main thesis is that for effectively resolving disputes, it is better to use two notions instead of a single concept of verbal disputes: We need to keep track of doxastically verbal disputes in which the parties are intuitively “not really disagreeing”. And we need to keep track of pragmatically verbal disputes in which the parties are intuitively “talking past each other”. Each of the notions thereby tracks a different marker of verbalness in a dispute, markers that are used to identify paradigmatic cases of verbal disputes. I argued that these two markers – “not really disagreeing” and “talking past each other” – can come apart (see section 4), a fact which has been mostly overlooked in the debate so far. Since the markers come apart, a single analysis of verbal disputes can’t stay fully true to both markers. By employing two analyses – one of pragmatic, one of doxastic verbalness – my approach

can do justice to both markers, something the approaches of Chalmers, Jenkins, Jackson and Vermeulen<sup>32</sup> fail to do. And, unlike their views, my approach can explain why we are reluctant to call a case “verbal” as well as reluctant to call it “non-verbal” whenever only one of the markers applies.

Given my analysis, a dispute is doxastically verbal if and only if, for every  $p$ , such that at least one party takes themselves to assert (or deny)  $p$  in uttering “ $S$ ” (or its negation), the parties do not disagree on  $p$ . As I have argued in section 6.1, this avoids a range of counterexamples to and worries associated with the doxastic approaches of Chalmers and Jenkins. As a consequence of my analysis, if a dispute is doxastically verbal, what either party takes themselves to assert is not at issue between the parties, so what is really at issue between the parties is at best highly implicit. Unless there are countervailing reasons to leave it implicit, the parties thus should move on to an explicit dispute about what really is at issue between them. Since doxastic verbalness comes with this significant methodological upshot, it is important to keep track of, to resolve such disputes effectively.

Given my analysis, a dispute is pragmatically verbal if and only if the parties use the disputed sentence with different speaker’s meaning and each party ascribes the negation of their speaker’s meaning to the other party. As I have argued in section 6.2, my analysis is clearer than Jackson’s and overcomes the problem that his approach lacks a condition to ensure that the parties aren’t only “addressing different questions” but are also unaware of doing so – such that they are actually “talking past each other”. Furthermore, the analysis avoids the unnecessary no-disagreement conditions of Vermeulen’s approach (since lack of disagreement belongs to doxastic verbalness). Given my analysis, if a dispute is pragmatically verbal, the parties intend to convey different matters with the disputed sentence, but think they are intending to convey the same matter as their opponent. Thus, they misunderstand each other. If a dispute is pragmatically verbal, the parties

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<sup>32</sup>As I outlined in section 5.2.2, Vermeulen’s approach comes closest to staying true to both markers, but the notion of “not really disagreeing” she employs is different from mine and I’ve argued (*ibid.*) that my understanding of the phrase is preferable within the debate concerning verbal disputes.

should clarify what they intend to convey to clear up their misunderstanding. While resolving the dispute is possible without clarification, it is intuitively better if clarification is reached, such that the parties realize what each other intended to convey.

So, each notion of verbalness comes with its own methodological upshot for how to best resolve a dispute that is verbal in the sense in question. This justifies the practical pluralism of my position: To be better at resolving disputes we should employ and distinguish both notions: Pragmatic and doxastic verbalness.

Furthermore, as an interesting consequence of my view, I have argued that the dispute over verbal disputes is itself – both pragmatically and doxastically – verbal. In a nutshell, when using “verbal dispute” in the debate, one side of the debate believes to be talking about and intends to convey theses about pragmatically verbal disputes, while the other side intends to convey theses about and believes to be talking about doxastically verbal disputes. Clearing up this misunderstanding between both sides should help here. Also, the parties should move on to the things that are really at issue between them – such as which notion of verbalness is more significant in one way or another.

Finally, I have shown that my approach can deal with three objections: First, I argued that my view is not too demanding: While I appeal to what parties take themselves to assert or deny in uttering a disputed sentence, I have argued that speakers usually take themselves to assert (or deny) a specific thing with their declarative utterances. I also appeal to speaker’s meanings and hence to intentions to convey matters with one’s utterances, but I have also argued that these are common among ordinary speakers. Hence, my approach is not too demanding. Second, I have shown that my approach can deal with insincere disputes, which is a class of cases a range of approaches have trouble with. Third, I addressed the worry that a cluster view can also accommodate all the data. A cluster view would say that there is only one notion of verbalness, but that this notion is a cluster of the two properties of talking past each other and not really disagreeing. Disputes that employ only one of the properties of the cluster thus would be “halfway” or “somewhat” verbal. I have argued that my view outcompetes a cluster view since the cluster view can’t keep track of the different

methodological consequences of pragmatic and doxastic verbalness.

In conclusion, when arguing about whether a dispute “is verbal”, we should be careful to distinguish pragmatic and doxastic verbalness, so we can draw the appropriate methodological consequences for how to resolve the dispute in question.

## **10. Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank my supervisors Dr. Patrick Greenough, Prof. Jessica Brown and Prof. Peter Sullivan for their helpful feedback and for insightful discussions at various stages of this project.

I would also like to thank my fellow student Duccio Calosi who also provided helpful comments and feedback.

I would also like to thank the audience of my talk on this topic in the Friday Seminar at the University of St Andrews, for their questions and objections.

I am also grateful for the funding I received from the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung e.V. (engl: Heinrich Böll Foundation). Without their support, this work wouldn't have been possible.

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