



Project
MUSE[®]
Scholarly journals online

WORDS IN THE WORLD: HOW AND WHY MEANINGS CAN MATTER

SALLY McCONNELL-GINET

Cornell University

Why do people care about the meaning(s)/significance associated with a word? Does it make sense to advocate or to criticize a certain form-meaning association? This article argues that words do real cognitive and social work as they are deployed in social practice and that it is primarily through words and their histories of use that culture links to language. It is not semantic representations as such that matter but the (mostly extralinguistic) reference and conceptual baggage words acquire in their discursive world travels. Lexical significance shifts and is contested as part of shifting and contested customs, institutions, and ideologies.*

1. INTRODUCTION. ‘Oh, it’s just semantics’, ordinary folks are inclined to say when there are disputes over whether some word is applicable to a given situation or whether using a particular word might be advisable in a given context.¹ Arguments over words, including exhortations to stop using them in certain ways or start using them in others, are often summarily dismissed. Even linguists sometimes respond ‘Oh, that’s only a linguistic convention’ when someone protests the exclusivity of generic masculines like some uses of English *he* and *man* or the inclusive use of *marriage* to designate certain long-term committed relationships of two people of the same sex.

The implicit assumption behind such dismissive responses is that which forms convey which meanings is essentially arbitrary and thus not a matter for sensible folks to worry about. Some lexical items may have uses that support somewhat different meanings, often related, but mental dictionaries can always incorporate multiple entries. Such views are partly right, but those offering them often seriously underestimate the cognitive, social, and historical dimensions of linguistically mediated communication. Of course, all linguists think words (and language more generally) matter in some sense, but they, that is, we, often assume that questions about what is accomplished (or not) in

* This article is a revised version of my January 2007 LSA presidential address in Anaheim, CA. It has benefited from the comments of faculty and students at Cornell, where I tried out some of these ideas at a linguistics department colloquium in December 2006, from questions and comments a number of people raised after the talk in Anaheim, and from helpful comments on earlier written versions from Carl Ginet, Karen Jones, Brian Joseph, Miriam Meyerhoff, Elizabeth Closs Traugott, and an anonymous *Language* referee. I am also grateful for Richard Boyd’s comments on a version of my discussion of his work. Sadly, none of these people can be blamed for the article’s remaining shortcomings.

¹ Brian Joseph suggested I enter ‘just semantics’ into Google, which I did, getting about 83,700 hits. Here’s a posting from Moonbird at 11:54 pm, March 10, accessed on April 5, 2008, at <http://www.metafilter.com/31701/WeWha-The-Zuni-ManWoman>.

I see biological gender as fairly fixed, but our emotional/psychological/spiritual relationship with gender as something of a continuum, or a gradient. It is just semantics in my view . . . third gender is just a way of saying ‘I somehow don’t entirely relate to the cultural role of the gender I’ve been born into’. Jeez, what else is there?

And here’s another which, like many, contrasts *just semantics* with *real* (*important* and *substantive* are other frequently occurring contrasts): ‘But it is not just semantics. It’s a real problem. You hear people constantly using “Mexican” to refer to nationality, ethnicity, and cultural identity, when technically these are three different non-interchangeable terms.’ This comes from Mario H. Lopez, ‘Communicating conservatism: Reaching Hispanic communities’, June 1, 1999, accessed on April 5, 2008, at <http://www.affbrainwash.com/archives/007414.php>.

the course of linguistic exchanges are ‘just’ matters of language use that are completely separate from questions about language itself.

Not all linguists, of course. Dwight D. Bolinger entitled his December 1972 LSA presidential address and the paper derived from it ‘Truth is a linguistic question’. As his abstract makes clear (1973:539), Bolinger was proposing that linguists can (and indeed should) shed light on just how people can manipulate language to mislead others.

Truth is the most fundamental of all questions of appropriateness in language. Communication presupposes non-concealment among interlocutors, which logically excludes all forms of deception, not merely propositional lies. The lie, broadly conceived, is therefore a proper object of study for linguists, and a necessary one at a time when lying is cultivated as an art. As members of society, we have an obligation to contribute our skills in this as much as in other ways. Happily, a number of linguists have begun to respond by investigating the lies implicit in presuppositions, deletions, indirections, and loaded and jargonesque elements in the lexicon.

Bolinger eloquently dissected the ‘doublespeak’ then being employed to justify the increasingly unpopular war in Vietnam, arguing that the government’s linguistic practices tried to obscure the awful truths of that conflict.

Bolinger 1980 offered an eminently readable and highly enlightening discussion of the (potentially negative) social impact of a wide range of meanings. The book’s title speaks of language as a ‘loaded weapon’, playing on the slogan ‘guns don’t kill people, people do’. Loaded language can indeed, Bolinger was claiming, hurt in ways that its users may well not intend. His thesis was that certain conventional meanings could be what philosopher Richard Boyd (2006) has dubbed ‘malignant meanings’, meanings that produce bad effects, social or intellectual. Were Bolinger writing now, he would have new examples from the political arena to dissect, such as *internal nutrition* for ‘forced feeding’ or *collateral damage* for ‘civilian deaths’. He might also consider vocabulary from other realms, such as debates over whether *queer* can or should ever be ameliorated in reference to those who claim minority sexual orientations (see McConnell-Ginet 2002). Although the emphasis in much work, including my own, has been on potential harm done by language, I think the case can also be made that ‘loading’ linguistic forms with certain kinds of meanings can facilitate the positive work language does, for example, as a tool in productive intellectual inquiry. I point in that direction in this article but leave further development for future work.

Proposals that meanings matter in the sense of playing a role in the causal structure of the world remind many linguists of views attributed to the ninth president of the LSA, Edward Sapir, the renowned anthropological linguist. With his student Benjamin Lee Whorf, Sapir proposed that different languages afford their speakers different (sometimes radically different) perspectives on the external world they share. Inspired by the so-called Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, there was considerable work exploring the nature of the connections between language and thought in the first half of the twentieth century, with renewed interest in the past couple of decades. Few if any linguists, psychologists, or anthropologists any longer think that people are cognitively ‘imprisoned’ by the conventions operative in their native language. (And it is not clear that Sapir or even Whorf, whose ideas were perhaps more radical, held such a view.)²

² See Lucy 1992a for a detailed and informative discussion of empirical research on the influence of language structure on habitual cognitive processes; the companion volume, Lucy 1992b, offers a model for comparative linguistic research, drawing on Lucy’s own research among Yucatec Maya speakers in Yucatan, Mexico. An important conference on linguistic relativity in the early 1990s gave rise to Gumperz & Levinson 1996, which includes contributions from many of the most influential scholars working in this area. Levinson 2003 offers an account of ongoing work conducted by him and his colleagues at the Max Planck Institute and elsewhere on spatial coordinate systems in language, culture, and thought. These are just a few examples of the highly sophisticated and very interesting work on linguistic relativity that began to emerge in the late

Many, however, think that language does indeed have some effects on people's thinking and actions. Others dismiss this possibility out of hand, sometimes because they think (mistakenly, in my view) that it is incompatible with views of the language faculty as to a significant extent innate and thus essentially the same for all human beings. Some have so interpreted Pullum's (1991) debunking of the claim that Eskimos have vastly more words for snow than folks living in more temperate climes. Ordinary folk are similarly divided on the influence of language on thought (and, presumably, action), though perhaps for different reasons. One online poll I accessed on December 28, 2006, showed a nearly even split on whether language determines thought (157) or thought determines language (152).³

Sapir and Whorf were primarily concerned with such high-level abstract meanings as those associated with plurality, tense, or aspect, which certainly do show important differences crosslinguistically. And at least Whorf seemed to believe that speakers of a single language shared a coherent worldview resulting from the resources available to them in that language. But, as Kay (1996) observes, even within a single language there are often resources available for expressing quite different worldviews and very different perspectives on a single situation: for example, English passive vs. active or *buy* vs. *sell*. I follow Kay's lead in focusing on the multiplicity of resources a single language can offer, but my emphasis is on what words are used to mean and how their uses are (and have been) construed. Thus what I am doing in this essay is orthogonal to many Sapir-Whorf discussions in two ways: the focus is, first, on the communicative impact of words, lexical items, rather than on more structural aspects of meaning, and, second, on alternative lexical interpretations that may compete within a single language. And, unlike most analysts, I emphasize cases of intentional (attempted) semantic change. I do so not because such cases are typical—they certainly are not—but because they bring out especially vividly ways in which meanings (or more precisely, meaning-form connections) serve some interests better than others, a principle that is important in understanding semantic shifts more generally.

This article draws from two rather different strands of my own linguistic work: on the one hand, formal semantics, pragmatics, and philosophy of language, and, on the other hand, more sociolinguistic work, especially on matters of language, gender, and sexuality. I begin with three case studies from English where, arguably, meanings do matter, that is, have substantive effects. The first is that of the so-called generic masculine forms (most notably, certain uses of *he* and of *man*), the second is that of the noun *marriage* (hotly debated in recent public discussions in the United States), and the third is that of the adjective *altruistic* (in its use in discussions in the scientific discipline of evolutionary psychology). In all three cases, there have been critical debates about prevalent linguistic practices, some of them implicated in ongoing change. Such debates raise the question of the relation of language to social practice, which I address briefly.

These cases set the stage for my theoretical points. They immediately support distinguishing three components of what I call LEXICAL SIGNIFICANCE:⁴ SEMANTIC REPRESENTATION, REFERENCE, and what I call CONCEPTUAL BAGGAGE. I say 'lexical significance' and

twentieth century. As I note below, my emphasis here is not crosslinguistic diversity but conflict and change within a language and society.

³ I accessed the poll at <http://forums.delphiforums.com/n/main.asp?webtag=UsingEnglish&nav=messages&msg=532.1&prettyurl=%2FUsingEnglish%2Fmessages%2F%3Fmsg%3D532%2E1>.

⁴ LEXICAL SIGNIFICANCE replaces WORD-MEANING COMPLEX, which I used in my presidential address and in earlier versions of this article. Hearers' and readers' misunderstandings of conceptual baggage, which is not part of meaning but is part of communicative significance, have led me to make this change.

not ‘lexical meaning’ for two reasons. First, conceptual baggage must definitely be distinguished from meaning (of expressions, utterances, or speakers). Second, reference, though fundamental for accounts of informational content, is arguably not determined (or not always determined) by what language users know about a word—on some views of meaning it may be at least somewhat independent of meaning. Below, I sometimes sloppily write *word meaning* when I am really speaking of the fuller ‘lexical significance’.⁵ After briefly considering the puzzles raised by linguistic assumptions of the conventionality and the functional equality of languages, I argue that much of a word’s content and significance must be seen as loaded into it during the course of its deployment in social practice, loading that underlies (sometimes, as noted above, unintended) communicative effects in situated discourse.

2.1. GENERIC *he*. English is not a language in which nouns are assigned grammatical gender that then determines the form of any anteceded pronouns (and perhaps adjective and determiner forms as well). Rather, I learned in introductory linguistics, gender is a semantic phenomenon in English. What this means is that pronominal form is determined not by arbitrary assignment of an antecedent noun to a grammatical gender class but by the sex of those potentially designated by that antecedent noun. So a word like *mother*, which by virtue of its meaning arguably designates only females, takes feminine forms of pronouns it antecedes—that is, *she*, *her*, *her(self)*—whereas a word like *father*, designating males, takes masculine forms—that is, *he*, *his*, *him(self)*. But what about the many antecedent nominals whose meaning does not indicate the sex of those designated?

Those of us educated several decades ago learned to use *he/his/him(self)* in sentences like those in 1.⁶

- (1) a. Anyone_i who thinks he_i needs more time for the report should contact his_i TA.
- b. When the child_i finds that he_i cannot depend on someone to pick him_i up whenever he_i cries, he_i may find other ways to amuse himself_i.
- c. [No student]_i thought he_i could solve the problem on his_i own.

Standard English language textbooks used to claim that *he* (and the noun *man*) could always be interpreted to cover female as well as male referents if both sexes were allowed by an antecedent noun,⁷ but actual usage did not bear that claim out, as 2 shows. (I use the pound sign (#) to mark bizarreness without committing myself to the source of the oddness.)

- (2) a. #Everyone_i is looking at me, isn’t he_i? [cp. aren’t they_i?]⁸
- b. #Someone_i called and refused to leave his_i name, but I think it was your girlfriend Ellen.

⁵ I discuss my categories and their labels in more detail in §4, noting why I have chosen to avoid some more familiar terms like STEREOTYPE or PROTOTYPE and why I want to avoid using MEANING as the cover term.

⁶ As is customary, I coindex pronouns and their antecedents, leaving open the precise semantic significance of that coindexing.

⁷ Dennis Baron (1986:100) cites Wilson Follett (1966) in *Modern American usage*, who says that ‘by a long-standing convention the masculine pronouns serve to denote both sexes after a genderless word’. A survey of how this matter is handled by English-language textbooks over the twentieth century would be useful but is beyond the scope of this article.

⁸ Elizabeth Traugott (p.c.) makes the plausible suggestion that what is wrong with the pronoun in the tag has more to do with number and the implicit plurality of *every* than with gender. I think she is certainly right that number is involved, but to my ear (i) sounds somewhat better than 2a, though perhaps not perfect.

(i) ?Every team member’s father is looking at you, isn’t he?

- c. #If [my mother or father]_i/[one of my parents]_i calls, tell him_i; I'll be back in an hour.

The examples in 3 also seem odd, though not quite so crashingly bad as those in 2.

- (3) a. ?#[Either spouse]_i should feel free to invite his_i; college roommate to spend the weekend.
 b. ?#To get [a reliable housecleaner]_i, you should pay him_i; at least \$20 an hour.

Although not discussing such examples, McCawley 1968 noted that consistent usage of the generic masculine in sex-indefinite contexts would be far less problematic than switches apparently conditioned by something like salience of potential female referents as in 3 (it should be noted that 2a seems odd even if those in the contextually given domain for quantification are all male; see n. 8). Notice that *they*, *this*, or *them* (or 'em) can be used easily in any of these sentences, and that *she* would be very likely with the specific *someone* in 2b, *her* fairly likely with the stereotypically female *housecleaner* in 3b.

A number of psycholinguistic experiments in the 1970s showed that putatively generic masculines were not being reliably interpreted as gender-inclusive.⁹ Interestingly, there were significant gender and attitudinal differences in who used the masculine forms in sex-unknown or sex-neutral contexts; men were the most frequent users, women with feminist attitudes the least frequent. There were also significant differences in how those forms were interpreted, with women more likely than men to interpret them as genuinely sex-neutral. Bem & Bem 1973 compared responses of potential applicants to job ads using *he* and other masculine generics with responses to ads for the same job that avoided the masculine forms: high-school and college-age female subjects were significantly less likely to view the jobs described using *he* and its kin as ones they would apply for.

Not everyone was thereby completely deterred: I myself even sometimes applied for—and on occasion got—jobs listed under Help Wanted—Male in the sex-segregated help wanted ads of my college days. Well into the 1960s, job ads were standardly categorized according to sex, with higher level and better-paying jobs mostly listed under Help Wanted—Male. Of course that's why uppity girls like me zeroed in on that section. There were some jobs listed as Male or Female but occasionally identical jobs were advertised under both male and female listing, often with separate pay scales. Long after such overt sex-typing of the labor market had ended, generic masculines in job ads could and did implicitly convey employers' assumptions that successful applicants would be male. I am quite sure I was not exempt from being steered by both the overt labels and by the subtler sex-typing implicit in descriptions using generic masculines.

For the past couple of decades, the trend, at least among academics and most of the mainstream media, has been to use other options in sex-inclusive or indeterminate contexts: singular *they* (my general favorite), alternating generic *she* and *he*, generic

Even so, I agree with her that number is important here, so this example is not as good for my point as the remaining ones.

⁹ See Martyna 1980 for a useful summary of not only her own but also others' work in this area; see also Frank & Treichler 1989, Matossian 1997, and Newman 1997 for more recent and more linguistically focused discussion.

she (widely used in recent philosophical literature),¹⁰ *s/he* (pronounced just like *she*?), and *he or she* (or *she or he*). And for many years neologisms have been proposed: for example, Marge Piercy uses *tey*, *tem*, and *ter* in her novel, *On the edge of time*. Frank and Treichler (1989) discuss these and other possible alternatives to *helman* language, proposing that people who want to be understood generically (or sex-indefinitely) adopt multiple strategies.¹¹ Pluralizing antecedents and rephrasing so as to avoid pronouns altogether are among the other options available in generic contexts. For specific sex-indefinite reference sometimes pronouns can be avoided, as in 4a, but otherwise singular *they*, as in 4b, is the only currently available option.

- (4) a. Someone called but left no name.
b. Someone_i called but they_i didn't leave their_i name.

What is going on here? It seems that there is (or was) a general ambiguity in the use of generic masculine forms: on one sense, one acceptable 'meaning', their reference is restricted to male humans, whereas on the other they potentially allow humans of both sexes. But this referential ambiguity is problematic since there are many contexts where the forms tend to be understood as masculine even if their users might (sincerely) claim to be using them generically or sex-indefinitely. Examples like those in 1–3 suggest that generic or sex-indefinite uses of pronominal *he* are sometimes virtually impossible;¹² 5 shows that *man* sometimes is similarly tenaciously masculine.

- (5) a. A man came in.
b. How many men were in the room?

If I, who am not a male human being, were the only one in the relevant context for evaluating for 5a who came in then 5a would be judged literally false. Similarly, in appraising the truth of an answer to 5b neither I nor other females in the contextually relevant room would count.¹³ Such phenomena cast doubt on the claim that masculine generics ever lose completely their ties to male-only reference.

Black and Coward (1981) were among the first to point out that the tendency to take maleness as the default human condition is not just a matter of *he* or other words with

¹⁰ As Brian Joseph reminds me, generic *she* itself has as much exclusionary potential as generic *he*, making it quite a different kind of option from the others mentioned. Indeed, generic *she*, being a marked choice, may strike many as excluding males far more overtly than generic *he* excludes females. In most contemporary contexts, generic *she* announces its producer's concern about matters of gender, often jolting readers or hearers. The jolt, many producers hope, may help make vivid the noninclusiveness of more standard generic masculines. So users often view generic *she* not as a long-term possibility but as an effective strategy for illuminating current gender assumptions.

¹¹ This general stance, eschewing directives and emphasizing thoughtful attention to what language choices might communicate, informs the LSA's own gender-neutral language policy, adopted in the late 1980s in response to proposals from COSWL (Committee on the Status of Women in Linguistics) and revised several times by the LSA Executive Committee. Neither Frank and Treichler nor the LSA Guidelines advocate neologisms, but a *Language* referee notes that contributors to online discussion boards of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* sometimes use *hu* (nominative) and, less often, *hum* (accusative) and *hus* (genitive) as genderless pronominal forms.

¹² Of course in many of its uses *he* does not actually itself refer but is semantically like a bound variable, so the reference in question involves possible values to assign to the variable in the course of interpreting some quantificational expression.

¹³ At present I am ignoring what are arguably figurative uses of the masculine generics as in (i), attributed to Lord Baden-Powell after meeting with a group of African leaders.

(i) The only man in the room was that woman.

I return to them later.

a history of double-duty as masculine and as generic forms, an observation Frank and Treichler repeat. Generics with no masculinity attributed to them in standard semantic accounts can also function sex-exclusively, as the examples in 6 show.¹⁴

- (6) a. In the night, the villagers all left in canoes, leaving us behind with the women and children.
 b. [The new settlers]_i found life difficult on the prairies and worried as winter approached about the health of their_i wives and children.

No semanticist would claim that *villager* or *settler* is ambiguous between masculine and sex-indefinite interpretations, and yet to understand utterances like these we have to leave any female (or nonadult) referents out of their intended reference. And the examples in 7 make clear that it is not only women and children who may be excluded by what Frank and Treichler dub ‘false generic’ uses of literally inclusive forms.¹⁵

- (7) a. [The people in this town]_i behave very civilly to local Negroes unless those Negroes try to move into their_i neighborhoods.
 b. [Addressed to a quadriplegic passenger by an airline employee]
 We’ll have to get the people off the plane first before you can disembark.

The bottom line: although avoiding *he* and *man* in generic or sex-indefinite contexts can be an important part of an overall strategy to increase the visibility of potential female referents in contexts where they have often been ignored and thus to promote nonlinguistic goals of gender equity in employment and other arenas, there is no quick and easy purely linguistic fix.

The (once fully) conventionalized linguistic ambiguities of masculine generics are not the whole picture, but they do seem to matter, helping support less standardized but quite extensive discourse practices that conflate a general category with some prominent subgroup of individuals belonging to the category. Such practices help obscure exclusion of certain kinds of people in various domains by appropriating general forms for reference that is interpreted noninclusively.¹⁶ Not surprisingly, the generic masculine has been the target for what Cameron (1995) calls ‘verbal hygiene’ efforts, in this case, various kinds of policies designed to disrupt the ideologically loaded equation of (normal) human beings with those who are male.

2.2. DEFINING *marriage* FOR POLITICAL, LEGAL, AND SOCIAL PURPOSES. In 8–10, three definitions of *marriage* recently proposed in legal contexts are given; added italics pick out the most centrally definitional part (8 and 9 include other material indicating intended scope of the definition).

- (8) *Defense of Marriage Act* (DOMA) HR 3396 (passed 342–67, July 12, 1996); S 1740 (passed 85–14 September 10, 1996); signed by President William J. Clinton, September 21, 1996.

¹⁴ Example 6a is inspired by a French example from Claude Lévi-Strauss’s *Les Bororo*, quoted as an epigraph in Michard-Marchal & Ribéry 1982, which is cited by Livia (2001:87). As Livia notes, Lévi-Strauss’s use may have been tongue-in-cheek. Example 6b is my invention but reminiscent of many similar sentences I encountered in 1950s history texts.

¹⁵ Example 7a is invented, though it is based on my memory of similar examples I heard during my North Carolina childhood, with *Negro* then being the polite term for referring to Americans of African descent; 7b was heard on a National Public Radio broadcast a few years ago.

¹⁶ As the examples in 6 show, age-exclusive reference may be conveyed, and the examples in 7 illustrate that other power-laden categories such as race and able-bodiedness can also get treated as if those dominant in the category comprised its totality.

In determining the meaning of any Act of Congress, or of any ruling, regulation, or interpretation of the various administrative bureaus and agencies of the United States, *the word 'marriage' means only a legal union between one man and one woman as husband and wife, and the word 'spouse' refers only to a person of the opposite sex who is a husband or a wife.*

- (9) Proposed federal marriage amendment (FMA) (SJR30 defeated 50–48, July 14, 2004; HR256 defeated September 30, 2004; 227 for, 186 against, with 290 needed for passage)

Marriage in the United States shall consist only of the union of a man and a woman. Neither this Constitution, nor the constitution of any State, shall be construed to require that marriage or the legal incidents thereof be conferred upon any union other than the union of a man and a woman.

- (10) Extract from decision of Supreme Judicial Court (4–3), Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Goodridge, November 18, 2003.

We construe civil marriage to mean the voluntary union of two persons as spouses, to the exclusion of all others.

A fourth definition, from a *Washington Post* column by William Saletan, appears in 11. Saletan was responding to social conservatives' criticisms of Mary Cheney, lesbian daughter of the vice president who was then pregnant. The column heading, 'Numbers show men, not lesbians, as problem parents', conveys concisely Saletan's observation that the key risk factors identified in studies of how children fare are not nonbiological or same-sex parents but men: sometimes biological fathers, sometimes stepfathers, sometimes mothers' live-in boyfriends. He ends by proposing, tongue firmly in cheek, a pro-children constitutional amendment defining *marriage*, given in 11.

- (11) Marriage in the United States shall consist of a union involving at least one woman.

So why do people care? Because, as I argue at some length in McConnell-Ginet 2006, the word *marriage* is not only deeply embedded in local, state, and federal laws but also figures prominently in family traditions and rituals and a wide array of other social practices, including those of moral appraisal and of religious custom. There is a rich discursive history of the word, parts of which some might want to repudiate, parts of which some who have not been included want to claim, parts of which others want to keep for themselves. I return briefly in §5.2 to the struggle over the word *marriage* and, concomitantly, over the institution of marriage.

2.3. DEFINING *altruistic* FOR SCIENTIFIC PURPOSES. I choose this example because it figures prominently in philosopher Richard Boyd's (2006) critique of inferential practices and what he calls 'malignant' meanings in the relatively new field of evolutionary psychology, successor to the sociobiology of the 1970s. Evolutionary psychology seeks evolutionary accounts of certain behavioral tendencies among contemporary humans and the motivational complexes that might account for them. So, for example, consider the fact that some human beings act altruistically. What do we mean by *altruistic* when we apply it to actions of contemporary humans? The standard interpretation is that they are acting in order to benefit others rather than themselves, perhaps indeed acting in ways that they can recognize might work against their own immediate self-interests. It is the motive for an action that makes it altruistic—making the promotion of the welfare of (some) others one's primary reason for acting. People who regularly act altruistically (and have a good sense of the effects their actions will produce) might

well often act in ways that in fact jeopardize their own well-being. One might speculate that such individuals, at least in evolutionary circumstances, might frequently act in ways that impair their reproductive success. So one might reason that evolutionary pressures would have eliminated the genetic patterns producing those tending to have and act from altruistic motives. Yet we see many people who seem to act altruistically. It is this apparent puzzle that the evolutionary psychologists try to address.¹⁷

The word *altruistic* is applied by evolutionary psychologists, Boyd observes, both to behavior that benefits kin (or: more particularly, that did benefit kin in the circumstances during which homo sapiens evolved) and also to individuals' motives for behaving in ways that benefit kin. Indeed, *altruistic* is just one of many words that have this dual use: the same form often labels both a behavior producing certain results (in evolutionary circumstances) and motives for engaging in such behavior (assuming that the motives were to produce the results in question). Scientists argue that the behavior enhanced the chances that the genes of one who so behaved (under assumed conditions in which homo sapiens evolved) would continue in future generations and thus that evolutionary forces would favor those who so behaved. But, as Boyd points out, motives for behavior cannot be read off from the behavior—that is a central lesson to be taken from Chomsky's (1959) review of Skinner and other critiques of behaviorism. And even if they could be, motives of our long ago ancestors in their particular circumstances need have no connection with the motives that move us in our contemporary quite different situations. So though our ancestors who behaved in ways that promoted the well-being (and, importantly, the reproductive success) of their kin may well have enhanced (albeit indirectly) the transmission of their own genetic make-up, we cannot conclude either that they were indeed acting in order to benefit their kin—that is, their motives cannot be inferred from the behavioral results—nor that altruistic (other-helping) motives found in contemporary humans arise from evolutionary selection for the kin-helping (by hypothesis, indirectly self-serving) motives that might have moved earlier humans.

The meaning here is 'malignant', Boyd argues, because inferential practices in evolutionary psychology conflate what ought to be seen as very different phenomena under the word *altruistic*, borrowed from ordinary language but given, as happens so often in science, a new technical use.

- (12) a. behavior benefiting kin (in evolutionary circumstances)
- b. behavior motivated by interest in benefiting kin (in evolutionary circumstances)
- c. behavior benefiting others (not necessarily kin and in contemporary circumstances)
- d. behavior motivated by interest in benefiting others (not necessarily kin and in contemporary circumstances)

Equating 'others' with 'kin' is sometimes defended by observing that in the very small-scale societies typical of evolutionary circumstances, others generally were indeed kin.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Closs Traugott pointed me to Richard Dawkins's introduction to the third edition of *The selfish gene* (2006 [1976]), published to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the original publication of this ground-breaking work exploring evolution and what we might call the biology of altruism. As she noted, Dawkins here explores his reasons for using *selfish* as a modifier of *gene* in the title; other candidates that might have been possible, he muses, were *immortal* and *cooperative*. Interestingly, although the words *altruistic* and *altruism* occur several times in his discussion, *The altruistic gene* is not mentioned as an alternative title though *The altruistic vehicle* is. Dawkins (2006 [1976]:ix) notes that it is important to 'think clearly about the distinction between "vehicles" (usually organisms) and the "replicators" that ride inside them (in practice genes)'; he admits to having been guilty of blurring the distinction.

That could be so but it would not follow that in large-scale societies where others are often non-kin a motivational push to help kin would be transmuted into one to help others. And in any circumstances it is deeply problematic to read off from the effects of behaviors the motives behind them.

It is of course not just the word *altruistic* whose meaning is malignant: it is the whole array of confused discursive practices in which that word and related ones figure that leads to arguably 'bad science'.

3. LANGUAGE IN SOCIAL PRACTICE. These three case studies illustrate the deep embedding of language in the many social practices in which it is deployed. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992, 2003 draw on the notion of COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE developed by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991; see also Wenger 1999) to illuminate the interaction of gender and language, and Eckert 2000 argues eloquently that linguistic variation must be viewed AS social practice. What I am proposing is that certain aspects of meaning arise, are sustained, and are sometimes transformed in social practice.

Communities of practice are, roughly, groups of people who interact on a fairly regular basis around some collective endeavor, in the course of which they develop and maintain regular ways of talking and of doing other things, social practices. Much communication is not within a local community of practice, but arguably most learning happens there, including developing communicative practices usable in interactions with strangers outside one's local communities.

The general idea of regular engagement in certain kinds of practices is one that many analysts have drawn on to account at least in part for success in linguistic communication. For thinking about meaning, we can take from the idea of a community of practice the important insight that people may differ in their positions as practitioners—some may be newcomers and complete novices and others far more experienced, with some perhaps deemed as the experts toward whom others orient for guidance.

Consider medical practice in the United States. Some of us are primarily consumers, while others are dispensers; some troll the internet for medical information, while others don't have such access or are not interested. Medical students, doctors, nurses, nurse practitioners—all are differently positioned, although consumers—patients—often draw relatively few distinctions among care providers, maybe only between doctors and everyone else they encounter in health care facilities. The medical care providers all belong to various communities of practice centered on medicine and health; some patients, such as those with serious chronic conditions requiring long-term treatment and care, may become part of those communities, while others just encounter them as outsiders.

Philosopher Tyler Burge (1988) offered a famous example some years ago of a man who thinks that aches and pains that do not result from injury are all called arthritis and speaks of the arthritis he is suffering from in his thigh. When told that medical experts use *arthritis* to denote only joint-located conditions, this person is likely to defer to those experts and come to believe that he was actually wrong when he uttered 'I have arthritis in my thigh', even though what he THOUGHT he was saying, what he intended his words to MEAN, when he produced that utterance—namely that he had pains in the thigh not related to injury—was indeed true. The moral: what you say, that is, the content your utterance expresses, is not just a matter of what you mean, of what you intend to say. It can, in some cases at least, depend in part on external factors of which you may be unaware, in particular on the communicative practices of others, to some of whom you may defer because of their status within some relevant community of practice.

Burge's hypothetical aching person complaining of arthritis intended, Burge assumes, to speak conventionally in using *arthritis*, to enter into established, medically sanctioned communicative practices. And that is why he might well utter 13a rather than 13b.

(13) a. I was wrong—I don't have arthritis in my thigh.

b. What I said didn't mean that I have arthritis in my thigh.

That is, Burge's medically ignorant sufferer takes himself to have been talking about—referring to—arthritis even though it turns out that his concept of arthritis doesn't mesh with the criterial one toward which he and others in the various relevant communities of practice to which he belongs or which he encounters orient themselves for diagnosis and treatment. He defers to the experts on what *arthritis* means.

Children, of course, enter communities of practice such as families as complete novices, initially dependent on others to help them acquire facility with prevailing social practices, including various linguistic conventions of meaning and usage. But even the infant is not a blank slate. As Elizabeth Spelke and other cognitive psychologists working with young children have shown (see, for example, Spelke 1998 and Hespos & Spelke 2004), human beings are born already endowed with rich cognitive resources, including a rich stock of preassembled concepts that in the second and third years of life they readily attach to the bursts of sound or other material (e.g. hand shapes and orientations) they also seem predisposed to take as realizing words, basic units of meaning.

Of course they sometimes make mistakes: my niece's daughter Brooke responded to her preschool teacher's 'Oh, Brooke, your sweater is adorable' with 'No it isn't—it's purple'. And, as importantly, they will in the course of their ongoing development and their ongoing engagement with others in social practice develop and refine their initial conceptual repertoire on the basis not only of their own direct experience but also through others' linguistically conveyed testimony. Color concepts are certainly in part innate but they get refined and sharpened.

For some words they acquire—for example, *marry* and perhaps *adorable*—children may first enter little more than a placeholder, set up a file folder for storing information that gets associated with the word: who deploys it, in what circumstances, to what effect, in relation to what else. Grownups often say things like 'When you grow up and get married' or 'when you are married and have your own family', presenting marriage as the (inevitable) accompaniment to maturity and the route to independence from parents. Such stuff gets filed, some eventually discarded,¹⁸ new material added.

Wittgenstein (1958) famously enjoined 'don't ask for the meaning, ask for the use', and certainly the use of a word in social practice is critical for establishing and sustaining its meaning. At the same time, we cannot simply equate the meaning of a word with its use. The use of the word *arthritis* to speak of pain not caused by injury does not shift the meaning so that *arthritis* can refer to thigh-located pain. As Putnam (1975) put it, there is a 'division of linguistic labor' that makes some usages weigh more than others.¹⁹ And we cannot equate meaning with word uses if we want to be able to explain

¹⁸ As becomes clear in the discussion of conceptual baggage in §4.3, discarding early acquired ideas may often involve submerging them so that they function mainly below the level of conscious awareness.

¹⁹ In the case of medical phenomena, where categorizing interests are in, for example, effective diagnosis and treatment, it is usually not terribly contentious to recognize expertise and allow some to regulate others' usage of terminology. But for social institutions like those that *marriage* labels, expertise or semantic authority is far more dubious. And even in fields like medicine, there can be disputes that present themselves as terminological but are linked to substantive disagreements over bodily phenomena and health care. See, for example, Martin 1987, for discussion of various ways of talking about women's reproductive anatomy and processes.

how on the basis of understanding the words and syntactic structures of a language, language users can interpret indefinitely many sentences they have not encountered previously. Word uses are not the right sort of thing to combine systematically to produce sentence meanings or sentence uses. So what do we mean by *meaning*?

4. *Meaning* AND MEANING. *Meaning* is a quite contentious word. It is a term that not only figures in everyday discourses of many kinds but also is central in many quite different disciplinary practices, among linguists and also anthropologists, psychologists, literary scholars, philosophers, and computer scientists. There is no definitive answer to the question of what *meaning* means, but I do want to suggest some ways linguists can usefully think about word meaning/significance to accommodate the kinds of phenomena I have mentioned above. My goal is not to regiment uses of *meaning* but to offer a general framework to frame and make sense of a range of complementary research traditions (often thought of as competing) on the communicative effects of words and how they are achieved.

As I noted briefly in the introduction, I find it useful to distinguish (at least) three components of what I call lexical significance: semantic representation, reference, and conceptual baggage. There are connections among them, but each offers a different perspective, as indicated in 14.

- (14) a. Mind-oriented: semantic representations
 b. World-oriented: reference
 c. Interactionally oriented: conceptual baggage

I CHOOSE SIGNIFICANCE rather than MEANING as the cover term because I want to emphasize that the third component, what I am calling conceptual baggage, is not part of either what words mean or what people mean in uttering them. But nonetheless conceptual baggage has important communicative effects and sometimes even helps produce semantic shifts. For these reasons, it cannot be kept completely separate from meaning and indeed some analysts include stuff I would categorize as conceptual baggage in their 'semantics' (see e.g. Fillmore 1982). Looking at reference and conceptual baggage, I argue, gives the most insight into what are seen as shifts in meaning or disputes over which words and meanings 'ought' to be deployed. These latter two components of lexical significance are both grounded in social practices of language use, whereas semantic representations, the first component, involve more centrally the language faculty as such.

4.1. SEMANTIC REPRESENTATIONS. Semantic representations of words cover such matters as semantic type characteristics, argument and event structures, pragmatic parameters, relativization to various indexical components, and other aspects of the semantically relevant linguistic properties of words. I speak of semantic representations as mind-oriented because, arguably, they are (at least to a considerable extent) represented somehow in language users' minds and are part of what language users 'know' when they have fully acquired the word.²⁰ They certainly play a role in the compositional mapping from syntax to truth-conditional meaning (perhaps underdetermined).²¹

²⁰ Like other kinds of linguistic knowledge, knowledge of semantic representations may be implicit and not necessarily directly accessible.

²¹ In earlier versions of this article, I labeled these aspects of meaning COMPOSITIONALLY DRIVEN CONCEPTUAL MEANING, but that terminology obscures the fact that I really am talking here about semantic representations of the kind linguists have proposed. Precisely what these look like is of course still very much debated.

Much linguistic work in lexical semantics has focused on semantic representations, and they figure prominently in linguistic investigations of the syntax-semantic interface. The semantic representation of a word probably includes something about its connections to other words (e.g. that applicability of *tall* to an individual relative to an index entails the nonapplicability of *short* to that same individual relative to that same index): it might involve decomposition into recurring conceptual components. Linguists have often assumed that semantic representations (or semantic knowledge more generally) would include all that would be needed to calculate ENTAILMENTS licensed by sentences in which a word occurs²²—for example, that somehow the semantic representation of *husband* would show that to apply the word to someone entails that the individual is male and a spouse (or if not directly, perhaps through something like a system of meaning postulates). The idea is that part of what one knows when one knows what the English word *husband* means is that the expression correctly applies (perhaps excluding figurative uses) to all and only male spouses (whereas *wife* applies to all and only female spouses). And many semantic analyses of words identify recurring semantic categories to which words belong. Importantly for an overall account of the contribution of words to the semantic value of the sentences in which they occur, words come in different semantic types that enable them to combine with one another (e.g. by applying a functor expression to an expression that is suitable to serve as its argument). One of the important contributions of formal semantics is its increasingly sophisticated articulation of the complex combinatorial character of linguistic meaning. But formal analysis provides us little help distinguishing *female* from *male* or *cat* from *dog*.

There is debate over the extent to which semantic representations as such determine to which actual phenomena words ‘correctly’ apply. In the case of Burge’s hypothetical sufferer of thigh pain, we might say either that the semantic representation he initially had of *arthritis* was mistaken in the criteria for application it included or that criteria for application (whether correct or not, whether determinate or not) are not among the linguistic properties of *arthritis* that its semantic representation includes.²³ Linguists working in formal semantics have often assumed that semantic representations (perhaps augmented by some kinds of semantic rules or specification of semantic relations among expressions) of sentences determine precise and concrete truth conditions of those sentences. This assumption is what justifies using data about truth judgments in hypothetical circumstances to test the empirical adequacy of proposed semantic analyses.²⁴

An apparent weakening of this assumption has come from work on what Lasnik (2005) calls ‘predicates of personal taste’ (e.g. *delicious* or *fun*, given the tremendous variation in what people consider delicious or fun) and what Stephenson (2007) more

²² Formal semantics texts pay considerable attention to the distinction between entailments and other kinds of implications. We can say that sentence S1 entails sentence S2 if and only if the truth of S1 guarantees the truth of S2. Another way to think about the relation of entailment is that the informational content contained in S2 is part of that contained in S1. Or that ‘S1 and not S2’ is contradictory, that is, cannot be true. See Chierchia & McConnell-Ginet 2000 [1990]:Ch. 1 for discussion.

²³ Some of these issues are discussed in chapter 8 of Chierchia & McConnell-Ginet 2000 [1990]. There are some substantive differences in this chapter from the first to the second edition, with the second exploring in some detail possible decompositional analyses of certain word meanings and the first emphasizing the meaning-postulate approach to connections among words. Neither version really explores the philosophical doubts raised in, for example, Quine 1951 [1961] about analyticity—linguistically secured but nonlogical truths.

²⁴ But again, philosophers have often been more skeptical: for example, Lewis (1972) speaks of truth conditions being determined modulo the semantic values of basic expressions.

generally calls ‘subjective semantics’; both Lasersohn and Stephenson posit that evaluation of certain expressions is relative to some ‘judge’—perhaps the speaker, perhaps discourse participants more generally, perhaps some other indicated individual. And Potts (2005) offers an ambitious program for thinking about a variety of kinds of ‘expressive’ meanings under Grice’s (1975) rubric ‘conventional implicature’, going beyond Grice to include, for example, the social meanings of Japanese honorifics, along with such Gricean cases as what *but* conveys beyond *and*. Conventional implicatures do introduce referential content, but on Potts’s model that content is in a separate ‘dimension’ and not treated by conversationalists as ‘at issue’, allowing considerable freedom in the fit between speech situations and appropriate/true expressive content.²⁵

But even such ‘objective’ predicates as Putnam’s example of the tree name *beech* create problems: as Putnam observed, many (most?) people using that word cannot determine whether a given tree is or is not a beech. If the semantic representation of a word includes all and only what constitute semantically relevant linguistic properties of that word, then for many words either not all who are able to use that word successfully have access to its complete semantic representation or its semantic representation does not determine its applicability, its reference. But that does not mean, as some linguists seem to think, that reference and truth are somehow dispensable in thinking about meaning: that, for example, meaning is a completely cognitive or conceptual phenomenon.

4.2. REFERENCE.²⁶ Formal semantics and the philosophy of language have emphasized the referential and informational jobs meaning does. On the most practical level, endowing linguistic forms with referential meaning is what enables us to use language to coordinate our affairs with others, to collaborate on plans and projects. It does this by reliably connecting (some) linguistic forms to stuff in the world and doing so in a way that allows people systematically to express their claims, plans, hopes, and fears about the world. Basic content lexical items must contribute the right type of meaning to serve as the input to a compositional mechanism that can compute something like truth conditions modulo the values of the basic lexical items (with complications for nondeclaratives).²⁷ Reliable connections to nonlinguistic ‘stuff’ and workable input for a systematic compositional system are fundamental—as Cappelen and Lepore (2004) have somewhat contentiously put it, ‘nonnegotiable’—requirements on the meaning of basic content lexical items. Referential meaning embeds language in the rest of life, creating the possibility for socially shared and thereby extended or collectively enriched access to the world.

But how are referential connections made? Putnam (1975) and Kripke (1980) have both argued that it is not something in each individual speaker’s mind that allows that

²⁵ Recently I have seen further work by Potts on expressives (e.g. Potts 2007), which takes a somewhat different (though related) tack. It would be surprising if expressives—expletives or intonation, for example—did not contribute to the effects of conceptual baggage, but I cannot pursue such connections here.

²⁶ I choose to use REFERENCE rather than DENOTATION as shorthand for language-world connections. Given that I tentatively endorse the view that many, perhaps even most, such connections are not (or not completely) mediated by descriptive semantic content, REFERENCE seems the more apt term. It is also more familiar outside circles of specialists in semantic matters.

²⁷ Paul Portner, working both alone and with Raffaella Zanuttini and others, has considerably advanced our understanding of forms like imperatives and exclamatives; see, for example, Portner 2005, Zanuttini & Portner 2003, Portner & Zanuttini 2000. And there is a large literature by formal semanticists on the semantics of interrogatives; see Ginzburg 1996 for a useful overview.

speaker to use a proper name—for example, *Edward Sapir*—to refer to the individual on whom that name was bestowed, that is, Sapir himself, the man depicted in Figure 1.



FIGURE 1. Edward Sapir.

Until I looked for a picture of Sapir I certainly did not store anything in my head that would have picked him out uniquely—and even assuming that Fig. 1 is a picture of Sapir and a faithful one, someone’s looking just like it would not have guaranteed for his contemporaries that the person was indeed Sapir (and not his double).²⁸ I had (and have) certain beliefs about Sapir—for example, that it was he who first wrote the words ‘Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society’ (Sapir 1958 [1929]:69)—but I might find out that actually he passed off as his words that sentence, which in fact originated with, say, Whorf (or with Sapir’s wife or with someone with no relation to him at all).

The Putnam-Kripke story of directly referential names supposes appropriate kinds of causal connections between some original ‘dubbing’ ceremony and subsequent uses to make it the case that those uses of the name refer to the same individual. Roughly, there is an original dubbing of which A_1 is witness (Sapir’s mother, say), followed by A_2 ’s getting the name from her (perhaps via an announcement of the child’s birth) and then using it to say something about him to A_3 (about him in the sense of something whose truth depends on his properties), who similarly transmits the name to A_4 , and so on to A_n , from whom I first heard about Sapir. The idea is that my uses of *Sapir* connect to Sapir himself via my position in such a causally secured name-transmission chain. This kind of causal account of reference for proper names has sometimes been extended to apply to so-called natural-kind terms like *dog*, but then the invocation of

²⁸ And, of course, as Brian Joseph reminds me, ‘looking like Sapir’ is a time-sensitive predicate, as the Sapir of the picture undoubtedly looks rather different from the infant Sapir on whom the name *Edward* was bestowed.

an initial naming to which all subsequent successful uses are somehow causally connected seems less plausible than in the case of the proper name. But, although I cannot offer an account here, there seems to be reason to think that some sort of 'causal' theory of reference can be developed for many different kinds of content words. Their referential reliability could be (more or less adequately) sustained by socially coordinated communicative activities of various kinds; responsibility for keeping the words in question referentially reliable might well be differentially distributed among members of a community. Some words—*unicorn* or *phlogiston* or *democracy*—might turn out to be unreliably anchored in the world, to lack stable referential content that could in principle determine whether discourses in which they figure are true.

Ordinary proper names may seem to have unproblematic reference,²⁹ and it is plausible that things like biological kind terms have a similar, straightforward connection not to individuals but to species and varieties thereof. But there are other sorts of 'kinds': arguably, for example, women and men, gay and straight, are at least as much social as biological kinds, and *marriage* certainly labels a social kind (an institutionalized relation of individuals). More generally, categorizing—identifying general kinds to which individuals belong—happens in the context of pursuing certain interests. Carving out particular referential ranges is typically an interest-sensitive enterprise: particular ways of regulating reference serve certain interests better than others.

4.3. CONCEPTUAL BAGGAGE. It is the category of conceptual baggage that not only formal semanticists like me but also many other linguists would not ordinarily consider part of meaning. I include under this rubric what traditional lexicographers and others have called connotations, but also encyclopedic knowledge, stereotypes or prototypes, and background assumptions, as well as knowledge about social practices in the course of which the word gets used. Much of what has been discussed in frame semantics (see e.g. Fillmore 1982) or in talk of scenarios and scripts I would include here.³⁰ I treat conceptual baggage as part of lexical significance because it can have profound communicative effects, triggering various kinds of (virtually automatic) inferences by interpreters, inferences not always explicitly recognized by interpreters as such and often not intended by speakers. I speak of it as interaction-oriented because its impact may be quite significant as interaction unfolds, even if neither the speaker nor the interpreter(s) is overtly aware of its presence. Conceptual baggage, though not part of meaning as such, is often interactionally very significant even though not just implicit but (sometimes) difficult even to access.

²⁹ I am riding roughshod over many interesting and complex issues about proper names here. Recently John Anderson (2004) has argued that proper names are not nouns but belong to a class of determinatives that includes pronouns. Richard Coates (2006) has articulated a view of PROPERHOOD as essentially a matter of reference that is not mediated by sense, what he calls 'onymic' reference, contrasting it with 'semantic' reference. Of particular interest is his account of names—especially place names—that began life as expressions typically used to secure reference semantically but became expressions used to refer directly (though 'sense' associated with them might be accessed in activities other than referring). Further exploration of causal accounts of reference, both for 'ordinary' proper names and for expressions denoting natural kinds, would benefit from consideration of the crosslinguistic and the historical data offered by Anderson and Coates respectively, as well as of their analyses.

³⁰ Elizabeth Traugott pointed me to Anna Wierzbicka's work on the intertwined histories of cultural ideologies and meanings, which uses the notion of 'cultural scripts'. After writing this article, I learned that Wierzbicka (2006) even uses the phrase 'cultural baggage' which is much like my 'conceptual baggage'. Although Wierzbicka and I come at these issues from very different background assumptions (unlike me, she sees little or no value in formal approaches to linguistics), her research is clearly a rich resource that I look forward to exploring more carefully.

Let me illustrate with an example discussed in Kitzinger's (2005) study using conversation analysis techniques to examine calls to a physician's office. Suppose someone calls and utters the following.

(15) My husband has a terrible headache and is running a high fever.

By examining subsequent moves after such an opening, Kitzinger shows that the answerer typically makes a variety of assumptions just on the basis of the caller's referring to the ill person as *my husband*; 16 lists some of these.

- (16) a. The patient is an adult male married to the caller.
 b. The patient and the caller live together.
 c. The caller knows the patient's medical history.
 d. The caller will assume responsibility for the patient's care beyond making this call on his behalf—for example, driving him to see the doctor or picking up a prescription for him.
 e. The patient and the caller share their primary-care physician.

Kitzinger demonstrates that these assumptions are not made if the caller refers to the patient as *my friend*, and though someone referred to as *my roommate* is assumed to dwell with the caller, that mode of reference does not trigger anything like the full range of marital assumptions—familiarity and responsibility, for example. Of the above inferences, only 16a could be plausibly classified as an entailment, something whose truth is guaranteed by what 15 means.³¹ But no one would argue, I think, that if a person does not live with a man, is unfamiliar with his medical history, or is unwilling or unable to assume responsibility for his care when he is ill, then that man cannot be the person's husband. Though people might wonder about the quality of a relationship lacking such features, these features are not considered criterial, part of what it literally means for someone to be one's husband. Inferring their presence, as the person in the doctor's office so often does, is defeasible and by no means part of truth-conditional meaning. Yet words like *husband* do trigger such assumptions, whereas words like *roommate* or *friend* do not (although of course they trigger other assumptions, though probably less rich ones).

The parsimonious-minded might well think of saying that such conceptual baggage should be considered a matter of Gricean IMPLICATURE—what the speaker means as distinguished from what she says. After all, we need the notion of speaker's meaning for other reasons. But this move will not do the trick in general, because conceptual baggage can trigger inferences even if the speaker does not intend those inferences to be drawn, perhaps has not even considered them explicitly, and might even reject them on such consideration. It is unlikely that Kitzinger's callers meant to convey such background assumptions, although in many cases they probably share them and do not find the triggered inferences problematic if and when they surface.³²

Relevance theory offers the notion of EXPLICATURE, where what is said depends not just on linguistic meaning but is filled in via principles of presumed maximal relevance. (See e.g. Sperber & Wilson 1998 for a relevance-theoretic approach to lexical meaning and Carston's (2002) discussion of enrichment, a form of explicature associated with

³¹ And even it might be disputed, children being married in some contexts and even maleness being taken as unnecessary for husband status in a marriage of two females with roles differentiated along traditional wife/husband lines. Nonetheless, plausibly 16a is indeed entailed by 15.

³² There are hiccups. In one case that Kitzinger cites, some confusion results when the caller realizes that the person answering the doctor's phone has mistakenly assumed that she—that is, the caller—is also registered as a patient of the husband's doctor.

word construal in context.) But explicature cannot do what is needed here. Conceptual baggage is typically not even meant, much less said.

Neither Gricean implicatures nor relevance-theoretic explicatures cover cases like that described by Kitzinger where what is evoked, the inferences hearers draw, is not only not part of what the speaker says but also not part of what the speaker means. (And of course Potts's conventional implicatures are supposed to be determined by semantic representations.) Traugott and Dasher (2002) identify invited inferences as a centrally important source of semantic shifts in word meanings, and they offer a number of cases to support that proposal (see also Kearns 2000 and McConnell-Ginet 1989). It is, however, plausible that the *UNINVITED* inferences triggered by conceptual baggage may also sometimes eventually become part of what semantic representations license.³³ That is, the inferences depend no longer on tacit beliefs or assumptions but just on knowledge of what the word itself licenses, presumably drawing on familiarity with recurring precedents.³⁴

Unlike implicatures or explicatures, conceptual baggage need not be conveyed or communicated. It can have communicative effects without being either said or meant. Contrast an exchange like that in 17, where B has taken A to be implicating something that A does not want to convey, with one like that in 18, where A realizes that B has seized on conceptual baggage that A would like to disavow.

- (17) A: Jane's teaching is terrific. [discussing candidate for promotion]
 B: Her research then is so-so, I take it.
 A: Oh no, I didn't mean [to imply] that.
 [or: I didn't say that.]
- (18) A: Jane lives on a farm now and loves it.
 B: Her husband must hate it—he's an urban person, isn't he?
 A: Oh, he's still living in the city—they visit one another most week-ends.
 [but not: I didn't mean/say that Jane's husband is living with her.]

In 17 A tries to clarify communicative intent, whereas in 18 A simply denies B's assumption without taking any responsibility for its having been activated. Although I have included conceptual baggage in lexical significance, it is frequently brought into play—that is, it leads other participants in the conversation to draw certain inferences, evident from what they later say—without being in any way part of what is meant by a speaker or an utterance. In such instances it is wrong to say that the conceptual baggage has been communicated or conveyed: there is simply a linguistic trigger that leads a speaker's audience to activate certain background assumptions already in some sense available to them.

³³ Elizabeth Traugott corrected my unwarranted suggestion that 'invited inferences' in the sense she and Dasher have in mind must be ones that speakers intend their hearers to draw. Her comment led me to begin working on the difficult problem of how to think about intentions and intentionality in an account of lexical significance, but I cannot develop those ideas here. Conceptual baggage is certainly often quite unintentionally triggered.

³⁴ Clearly there is much more to be said about what it takes for inferences to become licensed by linguistic convention. Indeed, there is a substantial debate about whether there really are any inferences whose legitimacy is solely a matter of linguistic meaning. As noted earlier, Quine (1951 [1961]) raised significant doubts about whether there are analytic truths, and many philosophers of language are skeptical of linguists' assumptions that inferences such as that from being a woman to being human are linguistically secured. What is beyond dispute is that some inferences frequently associated with use of a word are not taken as driven by linguistic meaning, and that many that are now widely viewed as linguistically licensed—as tied to some word's current conventional meaning—were not so viewed by earlier generations of language users.

Of course, a speaker can draw on the conceptual baggage her words bring along in order to convey something to her listener.

(19) A: Where does that guy live?

B: Oh, he's Jane's husband, you know.

In a context where B can suppose that A is well aware that Jane lives in Brooktondale, NY, B's utterance in 19 can count as meaning that the man about whom A asks lives in Brooktondale, NY. This is precisely because B can presume A will be able to access the assumption that husband and wife share their primary residence, an assumption that seems to be part of the conceptual baggage typically evoked by use of *husband*. Notice though that it is not that bit of conceptual baggage—in this case, coresidence of spouses triggered by *husband*—that is conveyed or meant. Rather the conceptual baggage can be presumed readily accessible by virtue of an utterance (in this case use of *husband*) and in a case like 19 can be exploited to help the speaker mean more than what her words strictly say. Often, however, conceptual baggage is simply activated with no overt awareness on the part of either speaker or hearer, either of whom may rely on it in subsequent communication without even noticing that this is happening.

Precisely what conceptual baggage is associated with a given word is hard—perhaps impossible—to specify precisely. It is especially hard since people often draw inferences even where they might want to deny not only a necessary but even a contingent association with a word. Racial labels, for example, often carry racist stereotypes as part of their cultural baggage, potentially triggering biased inferences even from those who would be shocked to have these inferences pointed out to them. But it seems difficult to avoid the conclusion that words serve as pointers to or place-holders for not only language users' semantic representations and their (perhaps limited) knowledge of referents but also their understanding of what is widely presumed about those referents and their place in various kinds of scenarios, including how the words (and also, of course, their referents) figure in various kinds of social practices.

Conceptual baggage, I propose, attaches to a word as it figures in various discourses and is deployed in social and cultural projects. Not every use of a word a person encounters will equally affect its loading of conceptual baggage any more than all uses equally affect semantic representations or what is considered 'authoritative' usage: contributions to conceptual baggage are not democratically apportioned. And it will not be only what an interpreter takes a speaker to have meant by the word but the overall impact on subsequent developments, including inferences other interpreters might draw. Importantly, there is a general past discursive history as well as situated future development that matters to insertion of particular inferential fodder into the conceptual baggage associated with a particular word (or in some cases, perhaps, with a family of words—kinship terminology, for example). Certainly much of what others have called stereotypes or prototypes or scenarios or scripts will be part of what I call conceptual baggage, but I use different terminology because I think lexical significance involves a wider and more diverse range of inference triggers than those more specific notions encompass.

My choice of CONCEPTUAL BAGGAGE to label this heterogeneous component of lexical significance may suggest its marginality or dubiousness. I keep the label in part because such suggestions are right on the mark in the sense that conceptual baggage is seldom part of what expressions, utterances, or speakers mean. Of course, the inferences triggered by conceptual baggage sometimes do important and worthwhile communicative work, enabling people to engage in practical reasoning without needing to become

excessively explicit. Conceptual baggage is indeed often a central part of the significance of what is said and how it is said. At the same time, because of its implicit and often unrecognized character, conceptual baggage can be deeply problematic and can work against many language users' interests. Speakers might not want to activate the inferences triggered by the conceptual baggage particular words bring with them and interpreters might hesitate to endorse them, but their nonexplicit yet virtually automatic character makes them difficult to escape. Conceptual baggage probably changes more slowly than overt beliefs, one of the reasons people often seek to rid themselves of it through what is in an important sense linguistic reform.

5. MEANING DEBATE AND REFORM: WHICH INTERESTS ARE BEST SERVED? Reference and conceptual baggage are the two elements of lexical significance that relate directly to (possibly conflicting) interests served by language use. Taking this perspective (and oversimplifying),³⁵ we can recognize three possible types of change in lexical significance that may be proposed and debated. Figure 2 lays out these possibilities and offers labels for each of the three.

REFERENCE	CONCEPTUAL BAGGAGE	TYPE OF CHANGE
same	different	repackaging/reclaiming
different	same	adaptation
different	different	invention

FIGURE 2. Typology of (possibly contested) changes in lexical significance.

My case studies illustrate these three different kinds of (attempted) change. First, I illustrate repackaging, where the same reference is presented with different conceptual baggage. Using singular *they* for generic or sex-indefinite reference tries to get rid of the masculine conceptual baggage that seems stuck to *he*, to REPACKAGE that referential value in a different form that lacks the suggestion that maleness is the 'typical' case of humanity.³⁶ Second, I show a case of ADAPTATION, where conceptual baggage is supposed to remain (mostly) intact but reference shifts (usually, expands). Those who advocate applying *marriage* to same-sex as well as the traditional mixed-sex unions are hoping to keep (most of) the conceptual baggage of the term—implications of loving commitment, of family, of mutual responsibility for one another and possible children, of legal protections—while extending its reference. They are engaged in adapting and reshaping a social institution to serve evolving social interests: to protect children of same-sex couples, to provide orderly processes for dissolving same-sex unions, to enrich family-centered social practices, and so on. Third, I illustrate INVENTION, where there are substantial shifts in both reference and conceptual baggage (though usually also connections to prior reference and to prior conceptual baggage) in the course of shaping terminology for doing new kinds of work. The use of *altruistic* in evolutionary biology exemplifies terminological difficulties common in science, where in a given domain there is an attempt to carve out suitable referential terrain with respect to which a workable and empirically supported scientific framework of newly formed conceptual baggage can be invented that will help investigators discover more about the world.

³⁵ I briefly point to complications in §5.4.

³⁶ Reclaiming is similar to repackaging in that reference stays more or less unchanged but conceptual baggage is altered. It differs in that rather than switching forms, the same form is used in new ways that (attempt to) disavow unwanted conceptual baggage: for example, *queer* used in proud self-reference by certain gay activists.

5.1. REPACKAGING/RECLAIMING. Some of the most obvious instances of repackaging are EUPHEMISMS: cases where there is no real change in attitudes or actions involving referents but just a new label pasted on the old stuff. Calling forced feeding *internal nutrition* works only so long as people are unaware of which activities actually are referents of the new label. In contrast, there are cases where attitudes toward the actual referent are not really problematic, but a traditional label just happens by virtue of its phonological and graphological identity with a different word to evoke unwanted conceptual baggage: substituting *canola oil* for *rapeseed oil* increased consumption of the product because the negative conceptual baggage associated with the form *rape* was not at all connected to the plant labeled *rape* or the oil produced from its seeds.

Some other cases of repackaging are more complex, simply offering what seems a politer or less direct way to refer to something people continue to view as distasteful: for example, saying *go to the bathroom* rather than *pee* or *urinate*. A friend of mine, tongue in cheek, speaks of going to *iron my shoelaces*.³⁷ Unlike *go to the bathroom*—which can, as Jerry Sadock once pointed out, now happen in the living room or kitchen because frequent repetition has led us to zero in directly on the once indirectly conveyed referent—*iron my shoelaces* still retains a novelty and light-heartedness that allows everyone to pretend they are speaking of something other than ridding the body of messy, smelly wastes.

But repackaging can be far more significant than such cases might suggest. Besides alternative approaches to generics, ethnic labels offer other recent examples. Consider the change for many American English speakers from *Negro* to *Black* to *African American*: all three of these forms persist, with different preferences in different communities of practice. Fillmore (1982) discusses making the line between *girl* and *woman* more nearly equivalent to that between *boy* and *man*.³⁸ As Fillmore noted and many others have observed, anyone who just gets the idea that one word (e.g. *woman* or *African American*) is to be substituted for another (e.g. *girl* or *Black*) will have missed the point. Satirizing such practices, cartoonist Gary Trudeau has one of his characters exclaim at the moment of childbirth, 'It's a baby woman!'. With less obvious awareness, some have produced sentences referring to the renowned *African American leader*, Nelson Mandela.³⁹ As critics of attempts at language reform often observe, changing labels cannot in and of itself effect the desired nonlinguistic changes. But there is considerable evidence that changed labels—repackaging—can indeed be an important component of broader social change—never the whole picture but often an important part.

Disputes over *fetus* vs. *unborn baby* and many similar cases show clearly how much packaging can matter. George Lakoff has made quite a name for himself instructing folks he calls 'progressives' on how to package their vision of society (see e.g. Lakoff 1996). Those who call his intended targets 'bleeding-heart liberals' or the 'loony left' offer a quite different perspective on American political life. Packaging is indeed impor-

³⁷ Brian Joseph reminds me that there are many similar expressions with wider provenance, for example, *see a man about a horse*.

³⁸ Note that examples like these show the need to consider not just words in isolation but in relation to one another, an important point I have glossed over in my discussion.

³⁹ I seem to recall such references in both the *Cornell Sun* and the *Ithaca Journal*, but I have not located citations. On the web, however, I found a free downloadable term paper beginning 'Nelson Mandela is an African American leader who fought for the rights of his people' (<http://www.oppapers.com/essays/Nelson-Mandela/49852>). Or visit <http://www.haverhillpl.org/Teen/study/blackbiog.html>, where under a list of 'Biographies of famous African-Americans', we find *Mandela: An illustrated biography*.

tant: it is a matter of the conceptual baggage attached to the label and attempts to associate that baggage with a particular referent. But shifting labels has a substantive effect only if the new label does not itself acquire the objectionable conceptual baggage of the old: that does indeed often happen but it is by no means guaranteed.

As I noted above, reclaiming is also sometimes attempted. This happens when the same form is retained but is used in new ways that try to subvert and discard its familiar conceptual baggage. In McConnell-Ginet 2002, I discuss the case of *queer*, which can now be used in many contexts without the homophobic conceptual baggage it earlier carried: ‘We’re here, we’re queer, get used to it’. But many gays and lesbians still find its use problematic. Reclaiming only works when it is part of changing attitudes and ideologies—even then, it is difficult and political struggle can complicate the process significantly.⁴⁰

5.2. ADAPTATION. Raymond Williams (1983), a Marxist social theorist with a deep interest in and extensive knowledge of words (their histories, their interrelations, their diverse and sometimes competing meanings), investigates certain English KEYWORDS in order to explore important social and cultural struggles and developments in English life.

Every word which I have included has at some time, in the course of some argument, virtually forced itself on my attention because the problems of its meanings seemed to me inextricably bound up with the problems it was being used to discuss. . . . I called these words Keywords in two connected senses: they are significant, binding words in certain activities and their interpretation; they are significant, indicative words in certain forms of thought. (Williams 1983:15)

Williams’s label is apt for many cases of what I’m calling adaptation, (attempted) changes that are in some sense the opposite of repackaging: essentially the same familiar conceptual baggage is being claimed for somewhat different referents. In general, referential change amounts to an extension to new cases that are in important ways like the more familiar ones. What I have in mind here are cases like the *marriage* disputes where there is substantive disagreement, sometimes overtly discussed but often not, over which phenomena ought to be brought under the rubric of existing labels, labels carrying with them much (though never quite all) of their discursive history and the associated conceptual baggage.

In some parts of Canada and in Massachusetts, for example, *marriage* can now apply to certain committed relationships of two adults of the same sex. A recent obituary in my local paper for a young woman identified her ‘loving wife’ as primary among her survivors, showing the ways in which kinship terminology is being shifted along with changes in relationships. I don’t know whether this couple was legally married but the obituary wording showed very clearly that they took their relationship as an instance of marriage, whether state-sanctioned or not.

From a different arena we have alternative referents for *death*, where technology now offers criteria other than the traditional ones of cessation of breathing and heartbeat (e.g. brain activity) and where technology also offers the possibility of transplanting organs from people who are clearly dying but would not yet count as dead by the traditional tests. As with *marriage*, legal contexts have been very important. The illegality of harvesting organs from a living person is one reason why there has been so much

⁴⁰ For relevant discussion of political impediments to attempted language change in the case of gender-based attempts at reform, see Ehrlich & King 1992.

attention paid to defining *death*, in the sense of establishing criteria for the term's application.⁴¹

Like Williams's keywords, these are paradigm cases of conflict over alternative referents under a familiar label, most of whose conceptual baggage is to stay constant. Only when a familiar word is embedded in a wide range of culturally significant practices connecting to cherished values and institutions are disputes over shifting referents of that word likely to emerge as part of people's substantive struggles with one another about the evolution of those values and institutions in the process of adapting such social kinds to changing circumstances. There is no movement for a constitutional amendment to prevent or require eggplant (aubergines) to be labeled *fruit*—few if any care that much about culinary practices and even for those of us who do, it seems that botanical practices do not create interference. The practices of botanists and of cooks and menu-planners can each proceed without any danger of conflict. In contrast, applying the label *marriage* to the union of two people of the same sex is important and contentious because that label figures in such a wide array of important social practices: not putting eggplant on the after-dinner fruit tray with the oranges and apples does not seem to bother anyone, whereas a significant number of people think that not recognizing gay men's and lesbians' right to enter into the legal and cultural institution of marriage is a serious injustice.⁴²

5.3. INVENTION. The third class of changes includes those in which novel ground is being broken both referentially and conceptually. We may be creating new ways of categorizing familiar phenomena, carving the world at different joints. Or we may be beginning to explore previously hidden or inaccessible regions. Scientific lexicons are especially apt illustrations: sometimes a completely new lexical item is introduced, but our focus here is on those many cases where a familiar form is refined, both referentially and conceptually.

Linguistics offers us many examples where terminological innovation has been important for conducting the business of the field. For example, developing and deploying the notion of the phoneme played an important role in early- and mid-twentieth-century American structural linguistics.⁴³ More recently linguists have found it useful to develop and deploy such terms as these: *theta role*, *VP-shell*, *C-command*, *A-movement*, *functional projection*, *case absorption*, *merging*, *type coercion*, *nuclear scope*, *explicature*, *negative polarity*, *type-shifting*, *sociolinguistic variable*, *crossover*, *grammaticalization*, *Horn scale*, *floating tone*, *epenthesis*, *infix*, and many more. Any reader of this journal can readily offer examples.

And as soon as students enter a linguistics classroom they are instructed in new ways of using such familiar words as *dialect*, *accent*, *language*, or *slang*.⁴⁴ The point is that communities of practice centered on the systematic investigation of language, like other

⁴¹ See Youngner et al. 1999 for relatively recent discussion of how to define *death* from medical practitioners, lawyers, and philosophers.

⁴² Others, I might note, think it might be best to shut down marriage altogether.

⁴³ Brian Joseph reminds me that the Neogrammarians essentially did phonemic analysis and had the notion of the phoneme before that word was around. My point is not that concepts that have not been labeled cannot figure in thinking, even in scholarly thinking, but that once a label is available it becomes far easier to refine and develop the analytic concept. Much intellectual progress, I contend, comes from efforts to refine conceptual apparatus, and those efforts frequently focus on refining definitions of technical terms like PHONEME.

⁴⁴ Of course, that instruction often doesn't work precisely because people come with prior ways of thinking that may have their own utility for purposes other than those in the linguistics classroom.

scientific communities, require specialized vocabulary or special uses of familiar word forms as well as the distinctive methodologies, patterns of argument, and conceptual frameworks that are part of their particular scientific practices.⁴⁵

Trying to understand the use of language in science has been a central project in the philosophy of science. Thomas Kuhn (1970) famously argued that scientific revolutions and the ‘paradigm shifts’ that accompany them result in such radical meaning shifts of key scientific terms that the scientists working in a new paradigm are not talking about the same thing as scientists in the old paradigm the new one is replacing. But as Richard Boyd and other philosophers of science have argued recently, that conclusion is problematic and is by no means inevitable. So long as there is (substantial) referential stability and people in the new tradition can comprehend the older framework and its conceptual baggage, they can and often should be seen as engaging with (essentially) the same subject matter, though of course they may also have expanded the subject matter of their discipline through their new discoveries, both shifting reference and transforming conceptual baggage.

Science involves an array of practices: explicit instruction and training in classrooms and labs through graduate school, doing experiments or making observations, writing and reading papers, going to conferences, and preparing or reviewing grant proposals. Becoming a full-fledged member of a particular scientific community of practice requires, among other things, coming to be able to talk the talk. And in the course of doing research, some scientists participate in changing that talk so as to enrich understanding of the world. It is common to press familiar words into new technical service: sometimes this works well as parts of accompanying conceptual baggage help orient investigators in fruitful directions, but as the discussion of *altruistic* suggests, there are pitfalls.

On the simplest level the kinds of distinctions required for a particular scientific enterprise may be rather different from those needed for other social practices. The English *jade* refers to two green stones of quite different chemical composition. For the mineralogist this referential split constitutes a problematic ambiguity, and geology classes or mineral exhibits will provide distinct labels—*nephrite* (a silicate of lime and magnesia) and *jadeite* (a silicate of sodium and aluminum). But the two differently constituted kinds of stone might appropriately be treated as a single kind for the purposes of jewelers or others interested primarily in the appearance and hardness of stones rather than their internal constitution, presumably the situation of our forebears who were unaware of the internal structure of the stones. Similarly, even though we now know that whales and dolphins are mammals and not, biologically, fish, it could be useful and appropriate for some discourse purposes to continue to categorize such water-dwelling mammals together with tuna, salmon, and the many other fish species that differ from them biologically. And though I don’t follow the federal guidelines that classified ketchup as a vegetable, I certainly do put tomatoes and eggplant in the vegetable rather than the fruit category when planning menus.

Stipulative definitions and new coinages might strike us as unusual kinds of linguistic events, and we certainly do not encounter them in most of our ordinary exchanges. Elizabeth Traugott and Richard Dasher (2002) speak of ‘objectification’ when meanings are being tightened for special purposes like those of scientific or legal processes in which it is important to guard against shifting understanding. But although such regi-

⁴⁵ I speak of plural communities of practice because there are distinct though sometimes overlapping linguistic research traditions; all of them, however, have their own distinctive terminological practices.

menting moves are not encountered every day, as Traugott and Dasher point out, they share more than is often acknowledged with what are quite everyday metalinguistic practices: ‘Oh no, I didn’t mean that X when I said Y—I was trying to say that Z’. Such moves may often involve attempted shifts in both referential content and in conceptual baggage, even if the interests at stake are not so explicitly aimed at discovery or invention as in scientific or other heavily theoretical discourse.

5.4. COMPLICATING THE TYPOLOGY OF CHANGE. Identifying three distinct possibilities for change on the basis of the two interest-sensitive components of lexical significance assumes that those two components—reference and conceptual baggage—are completely independent of one another, which of course they are not. Arguably, what I have called adaptation and invention actually shade into one another. In the adaptation of, say, terminology for a social institution as the social circumstances in which that institution lives change, some conceptual baggage inevitably is lost or added as reference changes. In mobilizing a familiar form to label a newly invented, discovered, or refined category, there is almost always some overlap with earlier reference and conceptual baggage associated with the form, even as new territory is staked out on both referential and conceptual baggage fronts. It is the different emphases of adaptation—conservative with respect to conceptual baggage—and invention—oriented toward new developments and discoveries—that my typology highlights.

6. TWO PUZZLES FOR THE CONSEQUENTIALITY OF MEANING. Linguists have sometimes found it hard to acknowledge the possible consequentiality of meanings because of apparent conflict with two principles we hold dear: first, the conventionality of word meanings, which is equated with arbitrariness, and second, the fundamental equality of all languages, which is equated with their interchangeability. How can something be arbitrary and yet matter? And if resources are interchangeable, how can it matter which ones we happen to have?

6.1. CONVENTION. As philosopher David Lewis (1969) and others have argued, conventions are regularities arising in a community as a solution to a coordination problem. They are arbitrary regularities in the sense that other solutions to the particular problem are perfectly feasible. ‘A rose by any other name would smell as sweet’ is one of the most frequently quoted Shakespearean lines, usually offered in an attempt to dismiss summarily some kind of metalinguistic criticism of a link of form and meaning. A dog by any other name would bark as loud: just choose a form some other language uses to refer to *canis familiaris*: German *Hund*, French *chien*, Spanish *perro*, Turkish *köpek*, Hebrew *kelev*, or whatever. Different conventions, but the difference is completely arbitrary, and thus has no substantive significance.

But not just ‘any other name’ can be pressed into service at any time. Given existing competing conventions, we could not now suddenly begin using *cat* to refer to dogs. Such a convention might arise, of course, given suitable support, in some English-using community of practice rather as we now have conventions to use *bad* instead of *good* in certain youthful communities of practice. Arguably, though, such reversals have the effect they do precisely because they are opposed to well-established and widely operative meaning conventions.

One problem with having *he* as a generic or sex-indefinite pronoun is that people have trouble ensuring that such uses are appropriately distinguished from those where it is interpreted as specifically male. The two distinct conventions interfere with one another, in part because of prevalent problematic practices of taking the typical or

canonical human to be male, conceptual baggage that interferes with attempts at genuinely generic or sex-indefinite usage. We do not find a parallel difficulty with *dog*, which can be used to denote specifically male domesticated canines in contrast with *bitch*, which is used primarily in the talk of animal breeders, kennel keepers, and the like to talk about females of the species.⁴⁶

Similarly, Boyd supports his charge that the meanings of such terms as *altruistic* in evolutionary psychology are malignant by pointing to the equivocation he claims is essential to arguments about the relation of contemporary human psychology to circumstances in which humans have evolved. But meanings in science can be not just benign but positively useful when they help researchers find patterns that might be missed without new approaches to categorizing phenomena.

What matters is not simply arbitrary. As Shakespeare well realized, the practices and history that divided Montague from Capulet mattered enormously. Romeo and Juliet were overwhelmed by the long-standing enmity their different surnames symbolized, but of course the same individuals might have ended up with different names and outside that history, perhaps placed at birth in different homes.

Having conventions to solve certain coordination problems is clearly useful—talk about dogs is facilitated by having some form that refers to dogs, though of course there are alternative forms that can do that job. And sometimes one form works better than another because of other meaning jobs to which candidate forms are also put. It is only the careless equation of ‘conventional’ with ‘completely arbitrary’ that makes it possible to dismiss claims that meanings matter by pointing out that links of form with meaning—especially in this case particular referential content—are conventional.

6.2. LINGUISTIC EQUALITY. Linguists have generally held that languages are equal in the sense that no language is intrinsically limited by its grammatical properties and that any missing lexical resources needed for new endeavors can readily be introduced. I certainly subscribe to both these principles, but some have taken linguists’ commitment to linguistic equality to entail a further principle: that languages are essentially interchangeable so that whatever can be done communicatively at a given time by using one could have been done at that same historical moment by using any other. Walter Benn Michaels (2006) argues that it is inconsistent to claim both that languages are equal and that language extinction involves cultural loss.

Why is it a tragedy if Tlingit disappears? Although we can all agree that it’s a bad thing to try to get people to stop using their language, it’s hard to see why it’s a bad thing if their language disappears. Why? Because the very thing that made it a mistake for the missionaries to stop people from speaking Native American languages (it’s not as if English was better) makes it a mistake to continue to care whether people continue to speak Native American languages (it’s not as if English is worse).

Michaels, of course, would not deny that if culturally important texts have not been translated and their original language vanishes, then those texts are no longer accessible and that would constitute a cultural loss. Nor would he likely deny that speakers might value for its own sake continuing to speak the language spoken by their ancestors. But he is trying to make a different and more fundamental point: namely, that anything that can be said in one language can equally well be said in another, that there is no substantive shift in expressive resources—and potential loss of valuable and valued resources—when one language is abandoned for another.

⁴⁶ Linguists and other observers of language frequently mention this *dog* and *bitch* usage, though probably few of us actually make active use of it.

Philosopher Jerrold Katz's (1978:209) PRINCIPLE OF EFFABILITY in 20 might be thought to articulate a similar position.

(20) Each proposition can be expressed by some sentence in any natural language.

Katz (1978) argued that effability entailed PERFECT TRANSLATIONS. But as he later acknowledged (Katz 1988), this position needs substantial modification as translators often need to pay attention to more than the (literal) propositional content of a sentence. And even in the earlier discussion (Katz 1978:217), he distinguished effability from EXPRESSIBILITY, articulated in 21.

(21) Each thought can be expressed by some utterance of a natural language.

Katz's main concern here is such matters as the length and complexity of sentences that might be required for expressing certain propositions. But, as Grice pointed out, 'manner' of expression itself is communicatively significant. Even if the thoughts literally expressed are equivalent, different things may be meant and different conceptual baggage may well be involved also.

For present purposes, the important thing is that the equivalent potential of all languages does not mean that their expressive capacities must be identical at any given time. Nor does it mean that there might not be benefits (or costs) of linguistic practices established in one community that are absent from another community in which different practices prevail in the same general domain. We need not assume any overall commensurability of languages—any overall sense of Tlingit being 'better' than English or vice versa—to acknowledge that different linguistic practices may serve some purposes or interests better than other linguistic practices.

It is not only that utterances in Tlingit carry distinctive conceptual baggage, which they surely do, given different discursive and cultural histories of Tlingit and English speakers. Even if current speakers of a language cannot access the same conceptual baggage as their ancestors, the very act of using the same or highly similar forms with the same or highly similar referential meanings connects them to their predecessors in important ways, which is one reason language preservation and documentation has been an important goal in many communities.

But let me also remind the reader that there are multiple communities of practice among the speakers of virtually any language that has not been threatened, multiplicity that increases the possibility of competing interests and purposes. It is not that thinking and action precede pushing lexical meanings in one direction rather than another: thought does not proceed unproblematically, with language following automatically to do whatever is needed. Rather, no matter what formal linguistic system their ancestors have provided them for communicative use, people often need to adapt existing lexical items for somewhat new purposes or adopt new ones. Making such changes can aid (or hinder) their projects of intellectual inquiry or of social change.

7. CONCLUSION. The view that emerges from considering alternative meanings in competition is one in which most (perhaps all) of the meaning that might be thought to attach firmly to a linguistic item is the one component I have discussed in least detail: semantic representation. Perhaps all that competent speakers of a language must 'know' about a word is the rather formal semantic properties that enable it to be combined with other words systematically to yield truth conditions for sentences in which it occurs. And these are not full and determinate truth conditions but truth conditions relative to the referential value assigned to the word, which may vary without a distinc-

tively linguistic change.⁴⁷ In a formal linguistic system, the basic meaningful units do not have content assigned to them but only semantic types and the combinatorial principles related to these. The semantic type assigned to *dog* might specify that relative to a domain of discourse the word denotes a subset of that domain—the set of dogs in the domain. Equivalently, one could think of *dog* as denoting a function from the domain into the two values, true and false: the function would yield the value true for each individual in the set of dogs in the domain and false for each individual in the complement of the dog-set. A formal language might further use meaning postulates to constrain possible interpretations of its basic content items, but even such constraints cannot determine content. For example, we might require that nothing can be both a cat and a dog and that both cats and dogs are individuals in the domain of discourse. Such abstract characterizations, however, do not get us very far toward a concept of cat or of dog.

Referential content, I conclude, is basically loaded into lexical items through social practices of language use. Speakers must enter into those practices in order to endow the essentially empty word forms they encounter with referential content. And conceptual baggage even more obviously gets attached—sometimes detached—through the social processes of using words to do various things: to collaborate with others on plans, to recount to one another experiences or feelings, to work with others on enhancing understanding of the world we share.

When groping for linguistic resources to accomplish various goals, we reach for forms that seem to have already been relatively successful at doing something similar. Importantly, we select words from among others that contrast with them, a crucial point that my emphasis on words may obscure. Speakers and hearers alike expect some shifts in reference and in conceptual baggage: we do not require these content-laden and highly significant components of lexical significance to stay completely fixed. And of course we speak and interpret not word by word but in the context of ongoing discourse, during which words can get endowed with reference and conceptual baggage as they are deployed in syntactic relations to other words and in sentences that follow up on other sentences in a developing discourse.

It is the relative emptiness of words—their strikingly formal character—that, I hypothesize, is responsible for their great functional value. I repeat a slogan I have used before: words matter so much precisely because so little matter is firmly attached to them.

REFERENCES

- ANDERSON, JOHN. 2004. On the grammatical status of names. *Language* 80.435–74.
 BARON, DENNIS. 1986. *Grammar and gender*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
 BEM, SANDRA, and DARYL BEM. 1973. Does sex-biased job advertising aid and abet sex discrimination? *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 3.6–18.
 BLACK, MARIA, and ROSALIND COWARD. 1981. Linguistic, social and sexual relations: A review of *Man made language*, by Dale Spender. *Screen Education* 39.111–33.
 BOLINGER, DWIGHT. 1973. Truth is a linguistic question. *Language* 49.539–50.
 BOLINGER, DWIGHT. 1980. *Language, the loaded weapon: The use and abuse of language today*. London: Longman.
 BOYD, RICHARD N. 2006. Reference, (in)commensurability, and meanings: Some (perhaps) unanticipated complexities. Ithaca: Cornell University, MS.
 BURGE, TYLER. 1988. Individualism and self-knowledge. *Journal of Philosophy* 85.649–63.

⁴⁷ As I have emphasized, much of what we call semantic change may actually involve changes in the pragmatic dimensions of lexical significance: reference and conceptual baggage.

- CAMERON, DEBORAH. 1995. *Verbal hygiene*. London: Routledge.
- CAPPELEN, HERMAN, and ERNIE LEPORE. 2004. *Insensitive semantics: A defense of semantic minimalism and speech act pluralism*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- CARSTON, ROBYN. 2002. *Thoughts and utterances: The pragmatics of explicit communication*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- CHIERCHIA, GENNARO, and SALLY MCCONNELL-GINET. 2000 [1990]. *Meaning and grammar: An introduction to semantics*. 2nd edn. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- CHOMSKY, NOAM. 1959. Review of *Verbal behavior*, by B. F. Skinner. *Language* 35.26–57.
- COATES, RICHARD. 2006. Properhood. *Language* 82.356–82.
- DAWKINS, RICHARD. 2006 [1976]. *The selfish gene*. 3rd edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- ECKERT, PENELOPE. 2000. *Variation as social practice*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- ECKERT, PENELOPE, and SALLY MCCONNELL-GINET. 1992. Think practically and look locally: Language and gender as a community-based practice. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 21.461–90.
- ECKERT, PENELOPE, and SALLY MCCONNELL-GINET. 2003. *Language and gender*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- EHRlich, SUSAN, and RUTH KING. 1992. Gender-based language reform and the social construction of meaning. *Discourse and Society* 3.1515–66.
- FILLMORE, CHARLES J. 1982. Frame semantics. *Linguistics in the morning calm*, ed. by Linguistic Society of Korea, 111–37. Seoul: Hanshin.
- FOLLETT, WILSON. 1966. *Modern American usage: A guide*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- FRANK, FRANCINE WATTMAN, and PAULA A. TREICHLER, with others. 1989. *Language, gender, and professional writing: Theoretical approaches and guidelines for nonsexist usage*. New York: Modern Language Association Publications.
- GINZBURG, JONATHAN. 1996. Interrogatives: Questions, facts and dialogue. *The handbook of contemporary semantic theory*, ed. by Shalom Lappin, 385–422. Oxford: Blackwell.
- GRICE, H. PAUL. 1975. Logic and conversation. *Syntax and semantics 3: Speech acts*, ed. by Peter Cole and Jerry Morgan, 43–58. New York: Academic Press.
- GUMPERZ, JOHN J., and STEPHEN C. LEVINSON (eds.) 1996. *Rethinking linguistic relativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- HESPOS, SUSAN J., and ELIZABETH S. SPELKE. 2004. Conceptual precursors to language. *Nature* 430.453–56.
- KATZ, JERROLD J. 1978. Effability and translation. *Meaning and translation: Philosophical and linguistic approaches*, ed. by Franz Guenther and M. Guenther-Reutter, 191–235. London: Duckworth.
- KATZ, JERROLD J. 1988. The refutation of indeterminacy. *Journal of Philosophy* 85.227–52.
- KAY, PAUL. 1996. Intra-speaker relativity. In Gumperz & Levinson, 97–114.
- KEARNS, KATE. 2000. Implicature and language change. *Handbook of Pragmatics 2000*, comp. by Jef Verschueren, Jan-Ola Östman, Jan Blommaert, and Chris Bulcaen, 1–22. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- KITZINGER, CELIA. 2005. Heteronormativity in action: Reproducing the heterosexual nuclear family in after-hours medical calls. *Social Problems* 52.477–98.
- KRIPKE, SAUL A. 1980. *Naming and necessity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- KUHN, THOMAS S. 1970. *The structure of scientific revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- LAKOFF, GEORGE. 1996. *Moral politics: What conservatives know that liberals don't*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- LASERSOHN, PETER. 2005. Context dependence, disagreement, and predicates of personal taste. *Linguistics and philosophy* 28.643–86.
- LAVE, JEAN, and ETIENNE WENGER. 1991. *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- LEVINSON, STEPHEN C. 2003. *Space in language and cognition: Explorations in cognitive diversity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- LEWIS, DAVID. 1969. *Convention: A philosophical study*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- LEWIS, DAVID. 1972. General semantics. *Semantics for natural language*, ed. by Donald Davidson and Gilbert Harman, 169–218. Dordrecht: D. Reidel.

- LIVIA, ANNA. 2001. *Pronoun envy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- LUCY, JOHN A. 1992a. *Language diversity and thought: A reformulation of the linguistic relativity hypothesis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- LUCY, JOHN A. 1992b. *Grammatical categories and cognition: A case study of the linguistic relativity hypothesis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- MARTIN, EMILY. 1987. *The woman in the body: A cultural analysis of reproduction*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- MARTYNA, WENDY. 1980. Beyond the 'he/man' approach: The case for nonsexist language. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5.482–93.
- MATOSSIAN, LOU ANN. 1997. *Burglars, babysitters, and persons: A sociolinguistic study of generic pronoun usage in Philadelphia and Minneapolis*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania dissertation.
- MCCAWLEY, JAMES D. 1968. Lexical insertion in a transformational grammar without deep structure. *Chicago Linguistic Society* 4.71–80.
- MCCONNELL-GINET, SALLY. 1989. The sexual reproduction of meaning: A discourse-based theory. In Frank & Treichler, 35–50.
- MCCONNELL-GINET, SALLY. 2002. 'Queering' semantics: Definitional struggles. *Language and sexuality: Contesting meaning in theory and practice*, ed. by Kathryn Campbell-Kibler, Robert Podesva, Sarah Roberts, and Andrew Wong, 137–60. Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications.
- MCCONNELL-GINET, SALLY. 2006. Why defining is seldom 'just semantics': Marriage, 'marriage', and other minefields. *Drawing the boundaries of meaning: Neo-Gricean studies in pragmatics and semantics in honor of Laurence R. Horn*, ed. by Betty Birner and Gregory Ward, 223–46. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- MICHAELS, WALTER BENN. 2006. Last words: If all languages are equal, why does it matter when one of them dies? *New York Times Magazine*, October 1, 2006.
- MICHARD-MARCHAL, CLAIRE, and CLAUDINE RIBÉRY. 1982. *Sexisme et sciences humaines: Pratique linguistique du rapport de sexage*. Lille: Presse Universitaires de Lille.
- NEWMAN, MICHAEL. 1997. *Epicene pronouns: The linguistics of a prescriptive problem*. (Outstanding dissertations in linguistics.) New York: Garland.
- PORTNER, PAUL. 2005. The semantics of imperatives within a theory of clause types. *Proceedings of Semantics and Linguistic Theory 14*, ed. by Kazuha Watanabe and Robert B. Young. Ithaca, NY: CLC Publications.
- PORTNER, PAUL, and RAFFAELLA ZANUTTINI. 2000. The characterization of exclamative clauses in Paduan. *Language* 76.123–32.
- POTTS, CHRISTOPHER. 2005. *The logic of conventional implicatures*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- POTTS, CHRISTOPHER. 2007. The expressive dimension. *Theoretical Linguistics* 33.165–97.
- PULLUM, GEOFFREY K. 1991. *The great Eskimo vocabulary hoax and other irreverent essays on the study of language*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- PUTNAM, HILARY. 1975. The meaning of 'meaning'. *Language, mind, and knowledge*, ed. by Keith Gunderson, 131–93. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- QUINE, WILLARD VAN ORMAN. 1951 [1961]. Two dogmas of empiricism. *Philosophical Review* 60.20–43. [Reprinted in W. V. O. Quine, *From a logical point of view* (Harvard University Press, 1953; 2nd, rev. edn., 1961), with the following alterations: 'The version printed here diverges from the original in footnotes and in other minor respects: §§1 and 6 have been abridged where they encroach on the preceding essay ['On What There Is'], and §§3–4 have been expanded at points.']
- SAPIR, EDWARD. 1958 [1929]. The status of linguistics as a science. *Culture, language and personality*, ed. by David G. Mandelbaum, 160–66. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- SPELKE, ELIZABETH S. 1998. Nativism, empiricism, and the origins of knowledge. *Infant Behavior and Development* 21.181–200.
- SPERBER, DAN, and DEIRDRE WILSON. 1998. The mapping between the mental and the public lexicon. *Thought and language*, ed. by Peter Carruthers and Jill Boucher, 184–200. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- STEPHENSON, TAMINA. 2007. *Towards a theory of subjective meaning*. Cambridge, MA: MIT dissertation.

- TRAUGOTT, ELIZABETH CLOSS, and RICHARD P. DASHER. 2002. *Regularity in semantic change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- WENGER, ETIENNE. 1999. *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- WIERZBICKA, ANNA. 2006. *English: Meaning and culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- WILLIAMS, RAYMOND. 1983. *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society*. Rev. edn. New York: Oxford University Press.
- WITTGENSTEIN, LUDWIG. 1958. *Philosophical investigations*, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell.
- YOUNGNER, STUART J.; ROBERT M. ARNOLD; and RENIE SCHAPIRO (eds.) 1999. *The definition of death: Contemporary controversies*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press.
- ZANUTTINI, RAFFAELLA, and PAUL PORTNER. 2003. Exclamative clauses: At the syntax-semantics interface. *Language* 79.39–81.

Department of Linguistics
Morrill Hall
Cornell University
Ithaca, NY 14853-4701
[smg9@cornell.edu]

[Received 25 October 2007;
accepted 14 February 2008]