

Review by Daniel W. Harris ([danielwharris.com](http://danielwharris.com)), Hunter College, CUNY. This is the penultimate draft of the review, and differs from the published version in its pagination and other minor details; the published version is forthcoming in *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*.

Burgess, Alexis & Brett Sherman, *Metasemantics: New Essays on the Foundations of Meaning*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. xiv + 367. US\$74.00 (hardback).

*Metasemantics* collects thirteen original papers on foundational issues in the philosophy of language, plus a substantial introductory essay by the editors and a brief preface by Scott Soames. Both editors and all but three of the contributors are within fifteen years of receiving their PhDs, and their work is among the best by early-to-mid-career philosophers of language working today. Collectively, these essays give us a view of the philosophy of language as an emerging generation of practitioners sees it.

Several of the volume's chapters do a nice job of showing how state-of-the-art work in the philosophy of language and metaphysics can be mutually illuminating. Michael Caie argues that vagueness and other phenomena that are commonly given supervaluationist treatments would be better be seen as cases of genuine metaphysical indeterminacy. In the first of Mark Greenberg's two chapters, he argues that neither conceptual-role nor covariation theories of intentional content can make sense of what it is for someone to partially possess a concept. In his second chapter, Greenberg draws on recent work on the ground–essence distinction to argue that the theory of intentional content cannot be saved simply by spelling out how intentional states are grounded. In her chapter, Amie Thomason gives a compelling argument that deflationism about truth comes with a commitment to a parallel kind of deflationism about existence. The truth of this conditional is fascinating given the popularity of deflationism about truth, and Thomason closes by arguing that we should accept the total deflationist package. In Matti Eklund's piece, he argues that the ordinary concept of truth shouldn't be replaced with a regimented technical notion, even if—as Eklund has argued elsewhere—our ordinary concept is inconsistent.

Seth Yalcin's essay addresses one of the most central metasemantic questions: what is the subject matter of semantics? Of course, everyone agrees that semantics aims to show how word meanings add up to sentence meanings, but that leaves a lot unsettled. Yalcin argues that semantics is the study of a cognitive competence—

a component of the faculty of language—by arguing that this is the only way to explain the productivity of linguistic meaning. The job of metasemantics, he concludes, is to say what grounds speakers' knowledge of lexical semantic values and compositional principles—states that, in turn, ground their knowledge of sentence meanings.

Yalcin's individual-psychologistic conception of semantics stands in contrast to David Lewis's theory of linguistic convention, which is first-and-foremost an account of the public meanings of whole sentences. Lewis explicitly disavows the psychological reality of grammars, and invokes them to explain sub-sentential meanings only as an afterthought. According to Yalcin, these features of Lewis's account are not coincidental; he argues that that no metasemantic theory that treats semantics as the study of social facts (rather than of a cognitive competence) could explain the productivity of linguistic meaning.

Yalcin seems to ignore the possibility that he and Lewis are at cross purposes. Yalcin's aim is to explain what is for a speaker to understand a language, whereas Lewis's aim is to explain what it takes for a population to coordinate on the same language in a way that accounts for their ability to communicate with it. Although Yalcin seems ambivalent about the role of "communication facts" in providing evidence for semantics (20) and "stress[es] the gap between semantic theory and a theory of communication" (30), still he must admit that coordination of meaning between speakers plays a crucial role in making linguistic communication possible. But his own conception of semantics has nothing to tell us about coordination, and so it seems that it would have to be augmented by a theory of public meaning of some kind.

Two of the chapters in *Metasemantics* address the rise of dynamic semantics. Karen Lewis's chapter concisely summarizes her reasons for thinking that we needn't go dynamic on account of anaphora or counterfactual conditionals. (Her paper left me hoping for a sequel about embedded non-indicatives, deontic and epistemic modals, and some other phenomena that have recently garnered dynamic-semantic treatments.) Samuel Cumming's chapter eloquently argues that we can borrow the idea of a discourse referent from dynamic semantics in order to construct a theory of discourse content—a notion of content that, according to Cumming, can help to solve the classic problems non-referring and co-referring proper names.

Four other chapters address issues raised by context-sensitivity and lexical semantics. Richard G. Heck, Jr. argues that there is only speaker reference and no such thing as semantic reference. Although this may seem to spell doom for compositional semantics, Heck shows how semantics can be saved by relativizing sentences' truth conditions to speakers' acts of referring. In his chapter, Jeffrey C. King argues that a notion of semantic reference can be saved, and distinguished from speaker reference, so long as we adopt his "coordination account", according to which the semantic value of a context-sensitive expression  $e$  is an object  $o$  just in case the speaker intends  $o$  to be  $e$ 's value and an idealized hearer would correctly interpret this intention. In his essay, Michael Glanzberg argues that if semantics studies a component of faculty of language, then semantics determines at most the structural-functional aspects of the contents of utterances, but that the rich conceptual component of what we normally take to be lexical semantics actually lies outside the scope of semantics entirely. In her chapter, Isidora Stojanovic argues that reference resolution belongs to a category of "prepragmatic" processes that are importantly different from both semantic processes, on the one hand, and pragmatic processes as traditionally conceived, on the other.

In his essay, Alejandro Pérez Carballo defends the surprising view that metaethical expressivism is compatible with a standard semantics of the sort that assigns sets of possible worlds to sentences in contexts. After a lengthy setup, his argument is sketched in the last few pages, as follows. The semantic value assigned to a sentence  $S$  by a semantic theory needn't reflect all of the properties of the mental state  $M$  that  $S$  is used to express. In particular, it needn't reflect whether  $M$  is a representational state. Instead, "the linguistically relevant features of [ $M$ ] will be those that play a role in explaining the communicative effect of an utterance of [ $S$ ]" (138). Although Pérez Carballo avoids commitment about what these communicatively relevant features of a mental state will be, he builds on some ideas from Alan Gibbard in order to run through an example of how standard semantics, supplemented by a popular model of conversation, could be reinterpreted so as to be compatible with metaethical expressivism. The model of conversation is Stalnaker's, in which the conversational effect of asserting a proposition is to intersect it with the context set (the set of worlds compatible with the conversation's common ground). On a flat-footed moral-realist way of interpreting this model, the semantic values of moral claims like 'torture is wrong' are modeled as sets of possible worlds, as are the contents of the thoughts they express. But Pérez Car-

ballo argues that we can reinterpret the model in a way that is compatible with expressivism. The trick, borrowed from Gibbard, is to replace the space of worlds with a space of world-hyperplan pairs, where a hyperplan is a maximally decided contingency plan that specifies what to do in every possible situation. On this sort of model, the semantic value of ‘torture is wrong’ is a set of world-hyperplan pairs each of whose hyperplan coordinates rules out murder, and the conversational effect of asserting ‘torture is wrong’ is to eliminate from the context all world-hyperplan pairs whose hyperplan coordinate is permissive of torture. In a tantalizingly brief footnote, Pérez Carballo offers a proof that any algebra of possible worlds that could model the moral-realist's space of possibilities is isomorphic to a Gibbard-style algebra of world-hyperplan pairs. Pérez Carballo seems to imply (but doesn't explicitly state or defend) the following corollary: an expressivist can take any orthodox, seemingly moral-realist-friendly semantic theory, run it through an isomorphism of this kind, and wind up with a fully-cooked, expressivist-friendly semantics. If this is true, then it is an exciting result that should be of great interest to semanticists and metaethicists alike. But I must confess suspicion that the result is too good to be true, and I wish Pérez Carballo had devoted more than a cursory three pages near the end of his essay to spelling it out and defending it in detail.

Burgess & Sherman spend their introduction attempting to define metasemantics. Initially, they define “basic metasemantics” as the task of discovering the facts that ground semantic facts. But they conclude that this definition casts the metasemantic net too widely, so as to include, for example, the fact that the meaning of a conjunction is grounded by the meanings of its conjuncts, which they deem to be a paradigmatic case of semantics itself. This is a questionable claim about semantics, since semantic theories generally don't entail any grounding claims at all. The idea that the meaning of a conjunction is grounded in the meanings of its conjuncts strikes me as a somewhat controversial interpretive or explanatory claim about the metaphysics of semantic composition, and this makes it sound more like metasemantics than semantics. Still—prompted by the desire to keep semantics and metasemantics separate, Burgess & Sherman “stipulate that metasemantics is in the business of uncovering the *non-semantic* grounds of semantic facts” (7). They note some ways in which this definition is less than ideal, but in order to achieve “the welcome consequence...that semantics and metasemantics are mutually exclusive”, and “in the absence of any better ideas, [they] opt to adopt the amended definition” (8).

I think that Burgess & Sherman fail to appreciate the full consequences of this way of carving up the territory, particularly given the possibility—which they recognize and seem to endorse (8)—that facts about intentional mental states are themselves semantic facts. If so, then any theory ~~strategy~~ that grounds the semantic facts in the thoughts of speakers and speech communities does not qualify as metasemantics. This would eliminate two or three of Burgess & Sherman's four paradigm cases of basic metasemantics (Kripke on names, Lewis on linguistic convention, and maybe Kripkenstein on rule-following), not to mention more than half of their volume's chapters. If this is the alternative to a blurry semantics–metasemantic boundary, it might be better to allow some blurriness. In any case, I am unclear about Burgess & Sherman's reasons for wanting to keep semantics and metasemantics neatly separate.

While I'm lobbying to broaden Burgess & Sherman's conception of metasemantics, I have one more suggestion. They repeatedly say that metasemantics is interested only in metaphysical (read: grounding) explanations of the semantic facts. But why not include causal explanations as well? As Pérez-Carballo notes (126, *fn.22*), some of the classic articulations of the semantics–metasemantics distinction make it sound like metasemantics is at least partly a causal-historical enterprise, and some theories of linguistic convention, including those of Ruth Millikan and Bryan Skyrms, seem to be best understood as causal explanations of how the semantic facts arise and persist.

I am therefore tempted by the following definitions: descriptive semantics builds mathematical models of semantic composition, whereas metasemantics offers interpretations and (causal or metaphysical) explanations of the consequences of these models.