

## Research statement

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My research concerns the nature of communication, the semantics of speech and attitude reports, the nature of linguistic competence, and foundational issues in semantics and philosophy of language. Below are descriptions of my dissertation and other research projects in those areas.

### **Dissertation: *Semantic Variance***

According to standard accounts of meaning and communication, the literal meaning of an utterance is a proposition, and we often communicate with one another thanks to our knowledge of the literal meaning of the utterances we make. For example, if I want to inform you that there are quesadillas on a certain grill, I can do so by making an utterance that literally means that there are quesadillas on that particular grill—for example, I may utter ‘there are quesadillas on the grill’. Normally, according to standard accounts, you will know that my utterance literally means that there are quesadillas on that grill, in which case I will have successfully communicated to you that there are quesadillas on that grill.

My dissertation argues that the participants in a conversation rarely know the literal meaning of the utterances they make. More precisely, it argues for *semantic variance*, the thesis that, for most conversations and most utterances *U* made in those conversations, there is no proposition of the form *U literally means P*—where *P* is a proposition—that all the participants in the interaction *believe*—from which it follows that there is no such proposition they all *know*. The truth of semantic variance raises three key questions: How do we communicate with each other if we don’t know the literal meanings of the utterances we make? What does communication amount to in the first place? What does it take to be competent in the use of a sentence, given that competence can’t require knowing the literal meaning of utterances of it? My dissertation answers the last two questions by offering new accounts of communicative success and linguistic competence. According to my account of communication, there is no unique natural phenomenon that we pick out when we talk about communication; rather, there are several independent features a conversation may have which make it communication-like. According to my account of linguistic competence, to be competent in the use of a sentence is to be able to participate in conversations in which it is uttered that exhibit those communication-like features.

Chapter 1 argues for semantic variance. Roughly, the argument goes as follows. For almost all utterances *U*, there is a huge number of very similar and equally natural propositions *P* such that a language user could easily have believed that *U* literally means *P*; absent further explanation, for any one of those utterances and any two language users, it would be extremely unlikely for there to be a proposition *P* such that those two language users believed that *U* literally means *P*. Defenders of the standard view thus face the challenge of explaining how the participants in a conversation could be in a position to have the exact same beliefs of the form *U literally means P*. I argue that the most promising potential explanations, appealing respectively to notions of metaphysical or psychological naturalness, to Stalnaker’s account of assertion, and to social externalism, all fail to answer the challenge.

Chapters 2 and 3 develop my pluralistic account of communicative success. I consider various ways in which a conversation can be communication-like—i.e. ways in which it can resemble ideal cases of communicative success—despite the truth of semantic variance. Even if there is no proposition that all participants in a conversation take a given utterance to mean, they may be able to (a) exchange relevant information through that utterance, (b) have disputes about the utterance’s truth that are not merely verbal, and (c) achieve certain practical goals thanks to the conversation in which that utterance is made. Making the provisional assumption that there is a proposition the speaker takes a given utterance to mean and a proposition the audience takes that utterance to mean, I analyze the ways in which a conversation can be communication-like in terms of three corresponding relationships between those propositions: the relation of having a relevant entailment in common, the relation of having the same truthmakers or the same falsitymakers, and the relation of determining the same actions as the best ways to achieve a goal given certain circumstances. I use this account to explain the communication-like features of a conversation in cases of *semantic uncertainty*—cases in which speaker and audience don’t have determinate beliefs about what proposition an utterance means.

I show that these ways for a conversation to be communication-like can come apart from one another, which motivates pluralism about communicative success. From the pluralist’s perspective, the aim of a theory of communication should be to understand the different ways in which a conversation can be communication-like, and to identify the factors that produce those communication-like features. An important feature of my view is that certain ways for a conversation to be communication-like depend on how the world is independently of what happens in a conversation.

Chapter 4 considers the consequences of semantic variance for speech reports. As some authors have observed, speech reports can be true even if they do not attribute to the speaker a saying of the exact proposition she literally meant. For example, if Anna utters ‘cardinals are crimson’, we can truly report her as having said that cardinals are red. If semantic variance is true, this must hold more generally: if we rarely know what proposition an utterance literally means, then unless we rarely know whether ordinary speech reports are true, such reports must not require us to attribute the saying of the exact propositions literally meant by the utterance. I offer an alternative account of speech reports. Roughly, speech reports are true if they attribute to the speaker the saying of a proposition relevantly entailed by a proposition which, (i) in the possible world in which the reported utterance takes place and in every possible world sufficiently similar to it, has the same truthmakers (or the same falsitymakers) as the proposition the speaker expressed, and (ii) is not stronger than the proposition the speaker expressed. I use this analysis to solve Dorr and Hawthorne’s puzzle of semantic plasticity.

Chapter 5 investigates the notion of linguistic competence. I suggest that what it is for someone to be competent in the use of a sentence is to be able to use it to have conversations with the various communication-like features characterized in chapters 2 and 3. Since some of those communication-like features depend partly on how the world is independently of what happens in a conversation, the resulting view of linguistic competence is a new kind of externalism, independent of traditional externalist views about meaning and mental content.

## Future research

In the short and medium term, I will continue to advance the research program introduced in my dissertation by studying the consequences of semantic variance for the acquisition of knowledge by testimony. In the long term, I intend to investigate some of the foundational problems semantic variance raises for standard views about the aims and subject matter of semantics. I elaborate on these research projects below. My research independent of the topic of my dissertation concerns the semantics of attitude reports and the nature of semantic interpretation. One of my papers on the first of those topics is currently under review (see <http://martinabreu.net#research> for abstract).

*Knowledge by testimony.* Principles roughly like the following have played a prominent role in the literature on knowledge by testimony: *if a speaker knows that P and asserts that P to her audience, and that audience accepts that P on the basis of the speaker's testimony, then the audience knows that P.* Semantic variance raises a distinctly linguistic problem for principles of this kind: if semantic variance is true, we are rarely in a position to know what propositions the speaker expressed. If this is so, how can the hearer come to believe (let alone know) that P on the basis of the speaker's testimony that P? My working hypothesis is that, though knowledge of propositions can be acquired through testimony, it is rarely transmitted in the strictest sense (i.e. an audience can come to know that Q on the basis of someone's testimony that P, but audiences rarely come to know that P on the basis of someone's testimony that P). In the short term I will investigate the possibility of a new principle for the acquisition of knowledge by testimony based on my analysis of the communication-like features a conversation may have. In the medium term, I plan to investigate the consequences of semantic variance for various views about the justification of knowledge by testimony.

*The subject matter of semantics.* The truth of semantic variance casts doubt on the existence of such a thing as the unique meaning of a sentence: given that we are rarely in a position to know the meaning of ordinary sentences (or utterances thereof), what role could such a meaning play in our psychological life? What could possibly determine the putative meaning of a sentence? How could a sentence's putative meaning figure in plausible explanations of ordinary linguistic phenomena? Absent plausible answers to these questions, we have little reason to think that there is such a thing as the unique, objective meaning of a sentence. If my dissertation's accounts of communicative success, linguistic competence, and speech reports are correct, this casts further doubt on the theoretical usefulness of unique sentence meanings. Observations of this kind spell trouble for a standard view about the aims and subject matter of semantics, according to which the main goal of semantics is to produce a formal system that can predict and describe the meaning of new sentences on the basis of the meaning of those sentences' components. One of my long term projects, continuing my active involvement with researchers in linguistics and psychology, consists in investigating which background ontological commitments are at play in the discipline of semantics, and whether we can understand the practice of semantics without appealing to unique or objective sentence meanings. My working hypothesis is that semantics as it is currently practiced is not committed to the existence of unique or objective sentence meanings, and should instead be understood as the study of the *cognitive mechanisms* that drive sentence interpretation in normal language users.