

Merely Verbal Disputes*

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1. Introduction

Sometimes parties to what once appeared to be a substantive dispute come to agree that the dispute in question was ‘merely verbal’ or ‘merely terminological’. Given that reaching such a verdict will very often end debate, it is of great methodological importance to determine what counts as a ‘merely verbal’ dispute, when it is appropriate to conclude that a dispute is merely verbal, and whether it is right to end a debate upon deciding it has this property. This paper’s aim is to move towards a better understanding of these sorts of issues, primarily by attempting to give characterizing necessary and sufficient conditions for *Parties A and B are having a merely verbal dispute*.

A trend in recent philosophical work on merely verbal disputes, inspired primarily by Hirsch, has been a tendency to focus on the question of whether or not a dispute will or can be *resolved* by certain means: specifically, whether it can be resolved by moving to alternative, neutral, vocabulary. I shall argue that resolvability by such means is not necessarily well correlated with whether or not a dispute is correctly categorized as merely verbal, and is at best a symptom. To *characterize* merely verbal disputes we need to look elsewhere. (In fairness, the extant work that focuses on resolvability by such means does not generally present the resolvability feature as necessary and sufficient or as characteristic; more on this below.)

In this paper I suggest that we characterize a merely verbal dispute as occurring when two parties do not disagree about the subject matter(s) of their (putative) dispute, but merely present the appearance of doing so owing to their divergent uses of language. As will become clear, this is in various ways a rather woolly characterization. But I maintain that this woolliness is not comparable to that of a bad undergraduate essay, but rather to that of a comfy old jumper: something without which the instantiating entity would be less fit for purpose.

It is important to note that I will be talking about token (not type) disputes throughout this paper. This means I can set aside questions about when two token disputes are of the same type, and whether two tokens of the same type can be such that one of them is merely verbal while the other isn’t. While these are interesting questions, I think it is best to leave them until we have a better grasp on the more fundamental – and hopefully more tractable – issue of what it is for a token dispute to be merely verbal. I am also simplifying to the two-party case, in the hope that the extension to multi-party disputes (and, if required, single-party disputes) will not involve too many further complications. And I am taking it that each party is in some sense ‘adopting’ a particular position (as opposed to, say, remaining neutral and waiting to be convinced).

I suspect that many of the claims I make here about merely verbal disputes could be made, *mutatis*

* Acknowledgements: I would like to thank an audience at the University of Leeds, especially Elizabeth Barnes, Ross Cameron, Daniel Elstein, Jason Turner, Pekka Varynen and Robert Williams; an audience at the University of Nottingham, especially Peter King, Matthew Kennedy and Stephen Mumford; and an audience at the University of St Andrews, especially Herman Cappelen, Tamar Gendler and Jonathan Schaffer. All three audiences helped me make substantial improvements to this paper. (There were other individual audience members who asked helpful questions too, and I apologize for not remembering everyone.) I am also grateful to David Chalmers and especially Daniel Nolan for comments and discussions about this topic.

mutandis, about what one might call merely conceptual disputes: disputes in which mental representation plays the role played by language in a merely verbal dispute. But I shall not pursue this issue in this paper. Nor shall I pursue other obviously related issues, such as the question of how we should characterize the phenomenon of two people ‘talking past’ one another.¹

2. *Why It Matters*

When two parties decide that they are having a merely verbal dispute, they are likely to regard the debate as over, for all practical purposes. Similarly, when an onlooker decides that a dispute is merely verbal, he is likely to cease regarding it as important or caring much about the outcome. In order to assess whether this is appropriate, we first need to understand why it happens. Exploring this question brings to light some of the reasons why it is methodologically important for philosophers to understand what it is for a dispute to be merely verbal.

The obvious explanation of the methodological connection between deciding that a dispute is merely verbal and ending it will avert to the fact that merely verbal disputes are generally regarded as being neither substantive, nor important, nor deep. A search through the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* quickly turns up a great many passages in which it is clear that either the author or some other philosopher regards merely verbal (or merely terminological) disputes as lacking in one or other of these properties. I present just a few of these passages as evidence:

If the point were purely terminological then it would be trifling but an important philosophical point is at stake here. (Ridge 2008)

In short, it may well be a merely verbal dispute just which formal systems merit the honorific title of ‘logic’. The substantive point here is that if logicism requires a logic that is so lavish in its existence commitments and so computationally (and hence epistemologically) unruly, then the appeal that the slogan “truths of arithmetic are just truths of logic” had when we had a kinder and gentler vision of logic in mind begins to fade. (Swoyer 2000)

... it’s fair to wonder whether the dispute about ontology is a substantive dispute. Perhaps there is only a terminological issue about which things ought to be granted the label “concepts”. (Laurence and Margolis 2006)

The resulting multiplicity of versions and reformulations of the theory is due to a blend of substantive and terminological differences. (David 2005)

But exactly how rich an organism’s representational structure must be for it to have beliefs, and in what ways, Dretske does not address, regarding it as a terminological boundary dispute, rather than a matter of deep ontological significance. (Schwitzgebel 2006)

Of course, the very word ‘merely’ as it appears in the phrase ‘merely verbal dispute’ is itself suggestive of an attitude along these lines: ‘merely’ is belittling.

Naturally, it seems methodologically appropriate for philosophers to focus their energies towards disputes, questions and problems which are deep, important and substantive, and away from disputes, questions and problems which lack these properties.² Since the property of being merely verbal is so strongly associated with lacking the relevant properties as to allow the step between them to be repeatedly made without comment, the property of being merely verbal is itself clearly

¹ I’m grateful to Elizabeth Barnes and Herman Cappelen here.

² Incidentally, I shall not be going into the question of what exactly the relationship is between merely verbal *disputes*, merely verbal *questions*, merely verbal *issues*, and so on. I am sure the connections are intimate and that philosophers take somewhat similar attitudes to them all. I am also sure there is *some* distance between the notions as ordinarily used. There will be a brief discussion at the end of §3 of a proposal, inspired by Ted Sider, linking verbal disputes and verbal questions. Apart from that, however, I leave these matters aside in order to focus on the more modest task of finding out what a merely verbal dispute is.

of methodological significance.

Sometimes philosophers are even tempted to regard parties who are engaged in a merely verbal dispute as *not really disputing at all* and/or *not really disagreeing at all*. In that respect the phrase ‘merely verbal dispute’ may turn out to be a little like ‘wooden duck’ or ‘fake telephone’: just as a wooden duck is not a real duck, a merely verbal dispute may not be a real dispute. Sider 2006, for instance, includes an entire section headed ‘Genuine Versus Merely Verbal Disputes’. Here are a couple of other passages which suggest that some such view is on the cards:

And if we agree that real disputes are those that, in principle anyway, can be resolved by the introduction of new evidence or the re-assessment of old, then merely verbal disputes are not real disputes in that sense. (O’Connor 2001, p. 207)

In that case, they do not really disagree; they only have a verbal disagreement in the way Earthlings and Twin Earthlings would only have verbal disagreement about the use of “water” when that term has different meanings for them. (Swan 2006)

Given the underlying “factual” agreement between the parties to the dispute and given the compatibility of ideas, it would seem that for Hume in a verbal dispute there is no real disagreement between them and neither party is mistaken. (Steinberg 1987)

I would like to leave open, for the purposes of this paper, the question of whether or not a merely verbal dispute is really a dispute. (I suspect that this itself is partly a merely verbal issue, as I suspect that the word ‘dispute’ is somewhat semantically indeterminate and somewhat contextually shifty.) I shall, however, take the line that they are not *disagreeing* about certain crucial matters, for reasons to be discussed later.

What is the difference between a disagreement and a dispute? I cannot give a full answer, but for my purposes in this paper I shall take it that disputes are to be characterized at least partly in behavioural terms. I tend to think that whether or not you are disputing with someone depends at least partly on whether you are doing things like shaking your head, saying ‘No, you’ve got it all wrong’, banging the table, and so on (or the polite equivalents of those things that we – or at least most of us, most of the time – use in the seminar room). There may be other conditions as well that prevent merely verbal disputes from being genuine disputes; perhaps, for example, some sort of modal robustness in these behaviours, even upon discovering how the other party is using her language, is required. Or perhaps contrary belief about certain matters is also required. I take it that disagreement, by contrast, has *everything* to do with belief and (almost) nothing to do with behaviour.³

For ease of expression and continuity with other writings I shall sometimes talk as if a merely verbal dispute is a dispute, but readers should feel free to translate into uncommitted vocabulary. The point I want to make in this section is just that the fact that philosophers take seriously the possibility that merely verbal disputes are not real disputes and/or do not involve any real disagreement illustrates yet further the methodological importance of the property of being a merely verbal dispute.

The metaphilosophical importance of this property does not by itself imply that metaphilosophers should bother to *explore* that property. For it may be that everyone is already quite adequately aware of what it is and how it connects to other properties (such as lack of depth or substantiveness), knows how to detect it, and furthermore knows perfectly well what to do upon detecting it. Further philosophical reflection may just be a waste of time, notwithstanding the fact that the property itself is of great methodological significance.

³ Thanks to Matthew Kennedy for help with this point.

But I doubt that this is the case. Even setting aside the intrinsic philosophical appeal of coming to a more explicit understanding of what philosophers do, it seems to me implausible that everyone concerned is already so competent as all that. For one thing, there is often (at least apparent) disagreement as to whether or not a dispute should be classified as ‘merely verbal’, some of it explicitly tied to metaphilosophical reflection on what counts as a merely verbal dispute. (Sider 2006, for example, offers a thorough investigation of such a case.) And presumably, whenever we encounter such a dispute, at least one party is mistaken,⁴ and hence less than ideally competent in detecting the property of being a merely verbal dispute. It is both natural and, I think, reasonable to aspire to make progress in such situations by getting a better handle on what exactly it is for a disagreement to be merely verbal.⁵

3. *Some Recent Work*

In this section I shall draw on recent extant literature and consider a number of conditions – some putatively necessary, some putatively sufficient, some putatively necessary and sufficient – on something’s being a merely verbal dispute. I shall also consider suggestions as to features which may be diagnostic or symptomatic of a merely verbal dispute. What will emerge are a number of suggestive themes, which I shall carry forward into the search into the next section and the search for a characterization of the property of being merely verbal.

The first such theme concerns the idea of absence of disagreement, or at least the absence of substantive disagreement. (Note that this need not be understood as enforcing the view that merely verbal disputes are not disputes, since for all we have said there could be disputes that involve no disagreement.) Various of the passages quoted in the previous section evince the prevalence of this point of view.

One thing this should not be taken to entail is that merely verbal disputes are, or even may be, in every respect *faultless*. For one thing, it’s generally agreed that a merely verbal dispute could arise because one party is straightforwardly misusing a portion of language that the other party is using correctly (see e.g. Eklund 2008, p. 143). Nevertheless, absence of disagreement could give rise to certain kinds of faultlessness, although what kinds will depend on how we cash out non-disagreement.

Ways of cashing out this idea of lack of (substantive) disagreement include the following:

- (i) When a dispute is merely verbal the participants have no conflicting *beliefs*.
- (ii) When a dispute is merely verbal the participants agree on all the *facts*.

(It could also be suggested that we cash out non-disagreement by saying the two parties ‘mean different things’ by some word(s) or phrase(s). But this alone, absent something in the vicinity of (i) or (ii), clearly does not suffice for non-disagreement. A could mean *tall for a basketball player* by ‘tall’ and B could mean tall for a jockey by that same word, and still they could disagree on whether Tiny Tim is tall, by either standard: suppose A thinks he is tall by neither, B thinks he is tall by both. More on this issue later in this section.)

Such putative necessary conditions on being merely verbal as are described in (i) and (ii) cannot be read as containing unrestricted quantifiers, since participants to a merely verbal dispute may have

⁴ Unless, perhaps, this dispute is itself merely verbal. I certainly think this *can* happen, as will become clear in the later sections of this paper. Personally, however, I doubt that this is a fair diagnosis of most of these debates, including the one described in Sider 2006.

⁵ Sadly, I cannot promise all the tools to resolve such disputes in what follows. Knowing what a merely verbal dispute is can be at most a step on the road to knowing one when you see it.

conflicting beliefs about, and may disagree on facts about, the meanings of certain terms. (I do not say that this will *always* happen when a dispute is merely verbal, but surely it *sometimes* can.) It seems the quantifiers involved must be restricted to range only over beliefs and facts that are *not about language*.

That alone is not enough of a restriction, though. We surely do not want to claim (and no-one putting forward (i) or (ii) would intend to suggest) that participants to a merely verbal dispute must be in agreement with regard to *everything* other than language. Two philosophers can clearly be engaged in a merely verbal dispute about ontology despite the fact that they do not agree about who won the last FA cup. It is only with respect to certain non-linguistic beliefs and/or certain non-linguistic facts that they should fail to disagree. Which beliefs and/or facts are relevant by this criterion? That is not a straightforward question to answer; we shall return to it later.

For now let us just note that, properly tidied up, this condition of non-linguistic agreement on certain matters between the parties may well be interestingly related to what it takes for a dispute to count as merely verbal. Perhaps it is a necessary condition. But we should also note that it is far from sufficient,⁶ even when we add in that there is some *appearance* of disagreement among the participants. To see why, note that we need to be able to distinguish between merely verbal disputes and other disputes *about language*. Consider the following dispute:

TIM: 'bring' is a noun

TOM: 'bring' is not a noun

Suppose further that by 'noun' Tim intends roughly what normal English speakers intend by 'verb', while Tom attaches the normal English sense to 'noun'. Tim and Tom would then appear to be having a merely verbal dispute about language. (Notice that Tim and Tom can have this dispute whilst agreeing in *all* their non-linguistic beliefs and with respect to all the non-linguistic facts.)

Now suppose Tim and Tom both use the word 'noun' just as you and I do. Now the Tim/Tom dispute is *not* merely verbal, yet, just as before, we can specify that Tim and Tom agree in all their non-linguistic beliefs and with respect to all the non-linguistic facts. Therefore apparent dispute in the presence of agreement on all the non-linguistic facts isn't sufficient for merely verbal dispute. We really want to restrict attention to beliefs and facts about a certain salient portion of language: the portion that intuitively *underlies* or *gives rise to* the dispute. What seems to be required is some distance between this underlying, linguistic, difference, and the (apparent) surface dispute.

The second theme to which I want to draw attention in this section is precisely the idea that, when two parties are engaged in a merely verbal dispute, there is some difference about language which underlies, generates, or even perhaps constitutes that dispute (and/or the appearance of dispute). Chalmers (unpublished talk) offers the following gloss on what counts as a verbal dispute:

A dispute over [sentence] S is verbal when:

(i) for some term T in S, the parties use T differently, or (perhaps tacitly) disagree about the meaning/usage of T.

(ii) their dispute over S arises wholly *in virtue of* this difference/disagreement regarding T.

I.e. a verbal dispute is one in which an apparent first-order dispute arises in virtue of a metalinguistic difference or dispute.

Could these be the necessary and sufficient conditions on merely verbal disputes that we are looking for? I don't think so. Of course they are not – at least not explicitly – *supposed* to be such. Chalmers is trying to give conditions on 'verbal', not '*merely* verbal' disputes. So what I'm saying

⁶ Of course, neither (i) nor (ii) is presented as giving a sufficient condition, but since *we* are in search of one we would do well to consider the respects in which these conditions fail to be such.

here shouldn't be interpreted as a criticism of Chalmers's project.⁷ But it is illuminating to see why they won't serve my purposes.

Recall the non-merely-verbal version of the dispute between Tim and Tom concerning whether 'bring' is a noun. In each case, Tim and Tom seem to be disputing the sentence "'bring' is a noun" (call this sentence S). And it seems that their dispute arises wholly in virtue of a difference in usage of the word 'bring'. Does that make the dispute verbal by Chalmers' lights? I'm not sure, because I'm not sure whether he would count the word 'bring' as being *in S* in the sense he requires. The word "'bring'" is in S, but maybe the word 'bring' is not. If it does, the Chalmers conditions won't serve as conditions for a dispute's being merely verbal. The dispute under consideration is *verbal and nothing else* but that doesn't make it *merely verbal* in the philosophers' sense.

Even if Chalmers were to specify that 'bring' is not in S, we can get the same result by considering the following dispute, conducted Jean and Marco, who are arguing about how to translate 'bring'. Jean thinks it is a noun, Marco thinks it is a verb.

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

MARCO: No, you can't do that: there's no such thing as a bring!

Again, the Jean/Marco dispute is *verbal and nothing else* – it is obviously a dispute motivated by linguistic differences, and indeed in some senses it is 'about' language. But it does not seem to me to fall into the same category as the merely verbal version of the dispute between Tim and Tom, and disputes between those who say geese live by the bank (meaning river bank) and those who say geese do not live by the bank (meaning financial institution). Although the dispute between Jean and Marco meets the conditions offered by Chalmers, it is not entirely comfortable to describe it as a merely verbal dispute.

A moral to be drawn, I think, is that a merely verbal dispute (as philosophers use that phrase) is one where there is an *appearance* of disagreement about something other than the portion of language which is actually responsible for the dispute. (This 'something' could be entirely non-linguistic, or it could be some *other* portion of language; we must allow the latter case in order to allow there to be merely verbal disputes about language, along the lines the merely verbal Tim/Tom dispute.) When I think about Jean and Marco as not even *appearing* to be having a dispute about anything other than the portion of language 'bring' over whose use they differ, I find myself feeling that their exchange does not fall into our target category.⁸

What this suggests to me is that the 'merely' in 'merely verbal dispute' serves a dual purpose. As well as having a belittling effect by indicating lack of depth, importance and/or substantiveness (see §2 above), it serves to indicate a contrast with what you might have expected (namely, a disagreement over something other than the bit of language driving the dispute). Similarly, when you point out a man dressed as a soldier and say that he is merely a costume enthusiast, you both belittle the property of being a costume enthusiast and signal contrast with what your audience might have expected (that the man in question was a soldier).

It is an interesting question whether we might characterize merely verbal disputes by first characterizing verbal disputes, perhaps along the lines suggested by Chalmers, then adding extra conditions to accommodate the 'merely'.⁹ I don't have a view to offer here as to exactly what

⁷ If I were to criticize that project, it would be on the grounds that characterizing *merely* verbal disputes is more philosophically interesting and methodologically pressing.

⁸ In fact, this is a case to which I think the phrase 'merely verbal dispute' is applicable in some contexts but not others. See §5 below for more details.

⁹ Thanks to David Chalmers for suggesting that I discuss this strategy.

counts as a verbal dispute, but I am not confident that the phrase ‘merely verbal dispute’ is so neatly compositional as envisaged by this line of approach. I suspect, for instance, that the ‘merely’ might – at least sometimes – be serving to *take back* some of what is provided by the ‘verbal dispute’, rather than further specifying what *kind* of verbal dispute we are dealing with. (This could happen if, for example, some merely verbal disputes are not disputes but all verbal disputes are disputes.) I suspect that sometimes ‘verbal dispute’ is used by philosophers to mean the same as ‘merely verbal dispute’, but at least on occasions when it does *not* simply mean the same as ‘merely verbal dispute’, there is a risk that it does not stand in a neat compositional relationship to the latter phrase.

Even were I tempted by the compositional approach, I do not think I would use Chalmers’s conditions on verbal disputes, partly because of his focus on disputes *about some sentence S*, which is supposed to contain the term with regard to which the parties differ. As I shall explain in §4, merely verbal disputes can be generated by linguistic differences over terms that are not actually uttered by either party, and it is not clear to me how we could accommodate this datum using Chalmers’s conditions on verbal disputes as the basis for a compositional account of ‘merely verbal dispute’.

All that said, there is certainly *something* useful for our purposes about the Chalmers conditions. I think that the idea of a dispute arising *in virtue of* a difference concerning language can help us a great deal in understanding merely verbal disputes. As Chalmers (unpublished talk) says:

For both verbal and substantive disputes, there may be differences over both first-order and metalinguistic sentences:

“Whales are fish”

“The extension of ‘fish’ includes whales”

“O.J. Simpson is a murderer”

“The extension of ‘murderer’ includes O.J. Simpson”

In the former case, first-order dispute arises in virtue of the metalinguistic difference or dispute. In the latter case, the metalinguistic dispute arises in virtue of the first-order dispute.

But it would be good to be clearer on the sense of ‘in virtue of’ that is operative here, since that locution can be used in a number of different ways. Among other things, philosophers will sometimes use this phrase to indicate relations of identity, supervenience, causal dependence or explanatory dependence.

My best guess is that it is some sort of causal and/or explanatory notion that is at work when Chalmers suggests that in (at least some) merely verbal disputes a ‘first-order’ dispute will arise ‘in virtue of’ a ‘metalinguistic’ one (that is, in virtue of a dispute about language). What seems to happen in the “Whales are fish” case, for instance, is that a difference of opinion as to the extension of the word ‘fish’ causes or explains (or causally explains) the existence (or at least appearance) of a dispute over whether or not whales are fish.

The option of saying that the dispute about whether whales are fish is *identical* to the dispute about extension also has some appeal. I assume we don’t want to say *both* that the disputes are identical *and* that one causes the other, since things don’t cause themselves. But we might have some leeway to say that the disputes are identical and yet one *explains* the other, at least in the sense that one can explain why the two parties to the “Whales are fish” dispute are having a dispute about whether whales are fish by saying it’s because they are having a dispute about the extension of ‘fish’. This is rather like explaining why I have a Bob Dylan fan in my office by saying it’s because I have a colleague in my office.

However, identity by itself wouldn’t capture the full force of the ‘in virtue of’. Identity is symmetric, whereas the ‘in virtue of’ locution which helps us understand what merely verbal

disputes are introduced (by some means or other¹⁰) elements of asymmetry. On balance I think it is probably best to understand the ‘in virtue of’ in an explanatory way, albeit perhaps one that may be compatible with identity. I suggest that in merely verbal disputes, it is some dispute or difference concerning some portion of language that *explains* the existence (or at least appearance) of a dispute about something else.

Manley (2008, p. 14) presents¹¹ the following proposal, picking up on Chalmers’s discussion of disputes that arise purely in virtue of linguistic differences:

a dispute is verbal just in case the speakers only disagree because they semantically deviate from each other

According to this proposal, the parties to a merely verbal dispute may disagree with each other. The thinking behind this, Manley explains, is that both parties are speaking a public language, so the meanings of their each party’s terms are settled a certain way regardless of what each *thinks* her terms mean. Thus the parties can end up expressing genuine contraries with their utterances, even though were each of the utterances to mean what its speaker *thinks* it means, the two utterances would be consistent.

I shall propose in §4 that in a merely verbal dispute the parties *do not disagree* concerning the subject matter of the dispute. My reason for taking this stance is primarily that I want to respect the tradition that gives rise to the first theme of this section. I am also unconvinced by the thought that shared public-language meaning creates genuine disagreement in the way just suggested. Disagreement, I contend, has more to do with what the parties *believe*,¹² what they *think* they are saying, and perhaps with the utterer’s meaning¹³ of their utterances, than what their utterances mean in any shared public language.

Incidentally, I expect that Manley intends his proposal to be read as saying that parties to a merely verbal dispute disagree *if at all* only because they semantically deviate from each other (as opposed saying that they *always* disagree, and this is because they semantically deviate from each other). It certainly should be possible for a merely verbal dispute to arise in cases where the parties’ utterances, considered as bearing their public-language meanings, do *not* express contraries, although the parties *think* they are expressing contrary views. (Perhaps, for example, one of their terms is context-sensitive in a way that neither party has noticed.) In such a situation, it is hard to see how one could cash out the claim that the parties are genuinely disagreeing, given Manley’s conception of what disagreement amounts to.

If we tried to use Manley’s condition to characterize *merely* verbal disputes in the sense I am concerned with in this paper, the proposal would be unsuccessful, since other verbal disputes would be picked up as well. That is to say, we cannot use this sort of criterion to distinguish the merely verbal Tim/Tom case from the non-merely-verbal Tim/Tom case.

¹⁰ Not necessarily by picking out an asymmetric relation; see Jenkins MS.

¹¹ I say ‘presents’ because it is not clear to me that Manley intends to endorse this proposal.

¹² This by itself does not quite settle things: if (for example) we were externalists of the right kind about belief contents, inspired perhaps by Burge 1979, we might end up thinking that what a person believes is very closely tied to what his utterances mean in a public language. I must also specify that in this passage I am taking belief contents to be individuated in way that is much more closely related to the utterer’s meaning of the subject’s utterances than the public-language meaning of her utterances. (In fact I tend towards the view that there are many notions of ‘content’ applicable to beliefs, and that this is just one of them.) Thanks to David Chalmers and Matthew Kennedy for discussion of this point.

¹³ In roughly the sense that I think Grice is trying to capture in (e.g.) his 1968 and 1969. (But note that although I am using the phrase ‘utterer’s meaning’ in roughly Grice’s way, I do not mean to suggest that I fully endorse Grice’s *account* of utterer’s meaning.)

Another concern about using Manley's condition in this way is that semantic deviations can be causally and/or explanatorily responsible for disputes without those disputes being merely verbal. If, for example, Fred and Freda semantically deviate with regard to whether or not the word 'naff' is complimentary, this could lead to their having very different social experiences and hence to their disagreeing on issues like whether most people are friendly. In such a case, were Fred and Freda to meet and discuss the issue of whether most people are friendly, they would disagree, and this disagreement would only have arisen because of their semantic deviation from each other. (Of course, this explanation is 'incomplete' in the sense that more information could be added to it, but the same is true of any real-life explanation.) We need to be a little more specific about what *kind* of explanatory work semantic deviation does when two parties are engaged in a merely verbal dispute.

Before moving on to the third theme of this section, let's consider a putative set of necessary and sufficient conditions for being a dispute's being merely verbal, due to Sider (2006, p. 76). Sider proposes that:

To say that a dispute over sentence Φ is merely verbal is to say that disputants do not mean the same thing by Φ , and that what one says in uttering Φ is consistent with what the other says by uttering $\neg\Phi$.

I take this to be at least an attempt to provide necessary and sufficient conditions; it may be that something more than that is intended. (The 'to say that ... is to say that ...' language has readings on which what is being asserted is that the two locutions under discussion mean the same, in some sense of 'mean'.) However, even considered as merely a set of necessary and sufficient conditions I do not think this can be right as it stands.

Consider the following dispute:

BERTIE: I'm hungry
GERTIE: I'm not hungry

Suppose also that Bertie and Gertie are perfectly well aware that 'I'm hungry' expresses something different in each of their mouths, but each of them *also* mistakenly believes that the state of affairs of Gertie's not being hungry is inconsistent with the state of affairs of Bertie's being hungry (hence the dispute). In this case they are not having a merely verbal dispute: intuitively, the dispute has nothing to do with language, but is simply due to the protagonists' failure to understand which states of affairs are compatible with which others.¹⁴ However, Sider's conditions for a merely verbal dispute are met.

Notice that the sense in which Bertie and Gertie's utterances 'do not mean the same' is exactly the sense that leads to some paradigm merely verbal disputes, where at least one party is not fully abreast of the contextually sensitive behaviour of some term (see Manley 2009, p. 9). So there is no wiggle room in which Sider could argue that this is the wrong kind of 'not meaning the same'.

The moral of this, I take it, is that we will need to incorporate into our criteria for a dispute's being merely verbal some way of ensuring that a dispute only gets classified as merely verbal if, when we abstract away from any disputes arising from (and/or identical to) language-related differences, there is *no residual dispute* between the parties. In the Bertie/Gertie case, there are no language-related differences to abstract away from, but there is a residual dispute, brought about by the participants' mistake concerning the consistency of certain states of affairs.

¹⁴ This residual dispute may be interestingly similar to a verbal disputes in certain ways – I, for one, feel some temptation to view it as not being 'deep' or 'substantive'; as something that should be dissolved rather than resolved. Be that as it may, it is important to be clear about the differences between various kinds of 'non-substantive' disputes.

Merely verbal disputes, then, should be ones where the appearance of dispute arises *wholly* in virtue of divergent use of language. In effect, this moral combines elements of the first theme of this section (the idea that there is no substantive disagreement between parties whose dispute is merely verbal), and the second theme (the idea that a merely verbal dispute arises in virtue of differences concerning language).

A third theme revolves around the thought that in a merely verbal dispute it is possible to cash out the parties' supposedly opposing views in alternative, neutral vocabulary, such that the parties will agree about the matter when expressed in those alternative terms. Sometimes it is also suggested – not obviously equivalently – that merely verbal disputes are *resolvable* by moving to neutral vocabulary.

Eli Hirsch (see e.g. 2005, p. 83) describes a condition of this kind on a dispute's being merely verbal, although he says it is merely a sufficient condition, not a necessary one. According to Hirsch, a dispute concerning a sentence *D* is merely verbal in situations where 'there are two undisputed sentences *U1* and *U2*, one true and one false, such that one side holds that *D* is (*a priori* necessarily) equivalent to *U1* and the other side holds that *D* is equivalent to *U2*'.

Bennett (2009, pp. 53-7) points out that the 'equivalence' ought to be something rather more like *analytic* equivalence than *a priori* necessary equivalence, and she is surely right about this. As she says, in the absence of any criterion of *analytic* equivalence, nothing follows about whether or not the two parties *mean the same* by *D*, and this seems to be important for determining whether or not they are engaged in a merely verbal dispute.

But in any case, let us be clear about why Hirsch's criterion, even suitably amended along the lines suggested by Bennett, fails to be a *necessary* condition for a dispute's being merely verbal. As Chalmers (unpublished talk) notes, the Hirsch condition, construed as a necessary condition, cannot accommodate cases where there seem to be no suitable candidates for *U1* and *U2*. For example, it could happen that the participants to the dispute have no alternative vocabulary available to them in which they can couch a sentence that they would take to be (*a priori* necessarily and/or analytically) equivalent to *D*.

Chalmers thinks that a dispute's being 'resolvable' by moving to neutral vocabulary is a *symptom* of that dispute's being merely verbal. But for similar reasons to those just mentioned, Chalmers does not try to work this symptom up into a necessary and sufficient condition.

One reason to be cautious about the issue of resolvability by moving to alternative vocabulary is that some disputants are irrational, and will *not* resolve their dispute by moving to new vocabulary even when they *should*. (In Hirsch's vocabulary, there could be situations where participants *should* hold that *U1* and *U2* are equivalent to their readings of *D* but irrationally refuse to do so.) Similarly, sometimes a dispute *is* so resolved even though it *should not* have been. (In Hirsch's vocabulary, there could be situations where participants hold that *U1* and *U2* are equivalent to their two readings of *D* but *should not* do so.) This suggests that we will need to consider a normative version of the Hirsch condition or the resolvability symptom even to approximate a necessary or sufficient condition on a dispute's being merely verbal. (Possibly this was what was intended by Hirsch and Chalmers all along, but it can do no harm to make the normativity explicit.)

However, even the normative variant does not get matters quite right, for in some cases there is no way re-frame a dispute such that doing so *ought* to resolve it, even though that dispute *was* merely verbal. This is basically just to repeat Chalmers's response to Hirsch: sometimes there will be no alternative vocabulary that the parties should accept as providing the needed 'neutral' take on the

apparently disputed subject matter.

In addition to this, once we make the normativity in the resolvability test explicit we bring to light the question of what kind of normativity it is supposed to be (epistemic? pragmatic? something more specific?), and although I have (or at least take myself to have) an intuitive idea of what is required here I would not relish – and shall not undertake – the task of trying to make it precise.

I take the moral here to be the rather vague one that there is some kind of defeasible connection between a dispute's being merely verbal and the normative appropriateness, in some to-be-specified sense, of their being alternative, neutral, vocabulary available to the parties such that expressing their positions in that neutral vocabulary would enable the parties to resolve their dispute and/or cease to disagree.

Let me conclude this section by briefly making contact with a discussion in Sider (2009 and MS) which seems not to fit neatly with the three themes identified so far. Sider suggests that a *question* is 'substantive' 'to the extent that the terms in which it is phrased carve at the joints; to the extent, that is, that the question concerns the world's fundamental structure' (MS, p. 7). Whereas any question couched wholly in non-joint-carving terms is said to be 'merely verbal or conceptual' in that 'the only question facing us is: ... [w]hich of two equally good ways to talk is *our* way to talk?'.

The idea, as I understand it, is that when a question is couched in terms that Sider takes to be joint-carving (say, 'electron' or 'charge'), the world's fundamental structure supplies an answer to that question, thus rendering it substantive. Whereas when a question is couched in terms that fail to be joint-carving (say, 'grue' or 'bachelor'), the world's fundamental structure offers no answer to the question, and hence the only thing that settles the question is our decisions about how to use the terms in which the question is couched.

There are many things I could take issue with here, not least the apparent assumption that the world's *fundamental* structure exhausts its *real* or its *mind-independent* structure. Instead, however, I shall just flag something that should be of interest even to someone already committed to the Siderian metaphysics.

I am not sure exactly what we should take the relationship to be between merely verbal *questions* and merely verbal *disputes*. But one hypothesis might be that any two parties disputing a merely verbal question are thereby engaged in a merely verbal dispute. (Indeed, it is hard not to read Sider 2009 as taking there to be some such connection.) But this suggestion works out badly, given the Sider view of when a question is merely verbal.

The problem is that there appears to be a very clear distinction between merely verbal disputes and substantive disputes, with both sides of that distinction clearly occupied, even if we limit attention to disputes couched in what Sider would take to be non-fundamental vocabulary. Clearly, two people can have a substantive dispute about whether there are any bachelors in the nearest cafe. Equally clearly, two people can have a merely verbal dispute couched in the same vocabulary. (Suppose the only male in the nearest cafe is 15-year-old Johnny, and one party thinks 'bachelor' means *unmarried human male* while the other thinks it means *unmarried eligible human male*.)

So Sider's suggestion about what counts as a merely verbal question cannot help us in the most obvious way to address the issue of what counts as a merely verbal dispute. One might take the moral to be that Sider has mischaracterized merely verbal questions, although one could more charitably suggest that the connection between merely verbal questions and merely verbal disputes is more complex than that envisaged. I suspect that regardless of what we should say about the

former, the latter is true.¹⁵

Sider MS suggests an extra condition is also required for a merely verbal dispute: in addition to disputing a merely verbal *question*, the parties must ‘mean different things by the crucial term’. This may help with distinguishing between obvious cases of merely verbal and non-merely verbal disputes about merely verbal questions, though with such a condition in place to do that sort of work it is now unclear why it should be required that the parties to a merely verbal dispute are disputing a merely verbal question. And there seem to be counterexamples in the other direction which this move does not handle: that is to say, there seem to be merely verbal disputes about fundamental questions. If by ‘quark’ A means *electron* whereas B means *quark*, then A and B could get involved in a merely verbal dispute despite the fundamentality (by Sider’s lights) of what they’re talking about.

Merely verbal questions fall outside of my current remit, however; for now I shall just note that I do not think what Sider says gives me reason to include a fourth theme on my list, alluding to the issue of whether or not a dispute is couched in joint-carving vocabulary. As far as I can tell, fundamentality of subject matter – even if one believes in such a thing – is orthogonal to whether or not a dispute is merely verbal.

4. A New Proposal

The discussion of this section is aimed at attempting to capture what philosophers normally mean by a ‘merely verbal dispute’ when they use the phrase without special metaphilosophical reflection; I do not want to *redefine* that phrase. To that end I think it is important to capture the data points suggested by the themes of the previous section.

In offering a characterization of merely verbal disputes, I shall appeal to the notion of a *prima facie dispute concerning a subject matter*. A *prima facie* dispute is something that, at first glance, would appear to be a dispute. Some *prima facie* disputes are not merely-verbal disputes, others are merely verbal disputes. I leave open whether the latter are real disputes. Some *prima facie* disputes may fail to be disputes at all for other reasons: for instance, some *prima facie* disputes occur between actors in a play. In this situation the actors are not actually having a dispute but are merely pretending to.

I propose that we characterize merely verbal disputes by means of the following principle:

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

I intend MVD to be read in such a way that, in the event of *D* consisting in the trading of meaningless words, and hence having *no* subject matter, the condition of non-disagreement is met. Read the definite description in a Russellian way and the negation with relatively wide scope. If there is no subject matter then it is not the case that [there is a unique subject matter about which the

¹⁵ For what it’s worth, I suspect that Sider takes the two to be as close as he does because he takes it that whether a dispute is merely verbal has a lot to do with what the parties’ utterances mean, which in turn he thinks is prone to the influence of reference-magnetism by structural features of the world. I suspect that thinking about things like what the parties *believe*, and what they *take* their utterances to mean, will give us a better handle on what counts as a merely verbal dispute.

parties disagree].¹⁶

I shall come on to the question of how to characterize the subject matter(s) of a prima facie dispute in a moment. For the time being I will work with an informal grasp of what that amounts to.

As I suggested in §3, the word ‘merely’ in ‘merely verbal dispute’ serves not only to imply or implicate lack of substantiveness, but also to signal a *contrast* with what one might otherwise have expected. That’s one reason why there’s a difference between a verbal dispute and a merely verbal dispute. We call something a ‘merely verbal dispute’ to mark a contrast between what you might have thought was going on (disagreement about *D*) and what is actually going on (divergent uses of language). An ordinary dispute which is explicitly about language can be called ‘verbal’ (at least in some contexts) but should not be called ‘merely verbal’, because we do not wish to convey any such contrast. This is one of my key motivations for defending something like MVD, which explicitly embeds the kind of contrast required.

The final clause of MVD is needed to respect theme 2, even in the presence of non-disagreement about the subject matter of *D*. This is because apparent disagreement can arise in the absence of real disagreement for other reasons than linguistic divergence. Mishearings provide an obvious group of cases. One party might say ‘This is Wembley’, the other might mishear him as saying ‘This is Wednesday’, and the latter might then retort ‘No it’s not!’, thus creating apparent disagreement about whether it is Wembley and/or whether it is Wednesday, in the absence of genuine disagreement about either matter.¹⁷

MVD is well placed to accommodate the fact that philosophers are sometimes tempted to describe participants A and B to a merely verbal dispute as not ‘really’ disagreeing, and to clarify what is meant by this. It feels (to me at least) very natural to report the fact that A and B do not disagree about the subject matter of some conversationally salient prima facie dispute by saying that they are not really disagreeing. If challenged on this and presented with the fact that A and B *do* really disagree about *some* things (in particular, how to use certain pieces of language), the natural response is that this does not count. This all makes sense if what we were reporting when we said they weren’t ‘really’ disagreeing was that they do not disagree about the subject matter of the prima facie dispute (provided, of course, that that prima facie dispute did not have those particular pieces of language as its subject matter).

Of course, A and B may be engaged in a prima facie dispute *about* a certain portion of language. This situation arises when two people are having a straightforward disagreement about how a certain linguistic item functions, as in the non-merely verbal version of the Tim/Tom case above. MVD correctly characterizes this type of dispute as not being merely verbal in the sense I’m trying to capture, since in this sort of case the parties do disagree about the subject matter of their prima facie dispute (whether or not ‘bring’ is a noun). Such a dispute is *entirely* verbal in that it is concerned solely with language, but that is not the metaphilosophical notion of a dispute’s being merely verbal that I am interested in.

MVD includes the word ‘sincere’ so that it does not risk incorrectly classifying all sorts of *insincere* disputes as merely verbal disputes. This risk is engendered by my appealing to prima facie disputes in MVD. Imagine two actors playing a scene in which their philosopher *characters* are engaged in a merely verbal dispute. We don’t want to classify the *actors* as engaged in a merely verbal dispute, but were it not for the inclusion of the word ‘sincere’, MVD would so classify them.

¹⁶ That still leaves open the possibility that the other conditions are not met. For example, there could be a prima facie dispute consisting in the trading of meaningless words where the appearance of disagreement is created by means other than divergent uses of language. Thanks to Jonathan Schaffer for getting me thinking about these cases.

¹⁷ I am grateful to my audience at St Andrews for help with this issue.

Slightly more tricky, however, are ‘devil’s advocate’ situations: situations in which a party to a prima facie dispute D does not believe the position he is (apparently) defending in D, but defends it (or at least pretends to) because he wants it to get a fair hearing. Insofar as such a person is insincere, MVD will make it impossible for a prima facie dispute in which one person is playing devil’s advocate to count as a merely verbal dispute. This may seem like an undesirable result; surely we want to distinguish between situations in which one person is playing devil’s advocate in adopting (say) Tom’s role in the Tim/Tom dispute, and situations in which one person is playing devil’s advocate in adopting a position that straightforwardly opposes the other party’s position in a non-verbal way? However, we can respect this difference. We can say, for instance, that the devil’s advocate analogue of the Tim/Tom situation *would* be a merely verbal dispute if it were sincere, while the devil’s advocate analogue of a straightforward non-verbal dispute would not.

Notice also that MVD can handle the case of Fred and Freda (who disagree about whether ‘naff’ is complimentary, and end up with different views about whether most people are friendly). Fred and Freda do disagree about whether most people are friendly, and hence MVD rules that when they dispute this subject matter their dispute is not merely verbal.¹⁸

So far I have tried to show how the proposal MVD respects the fact that the parties to a merely verbal dispute are often described as not disagreeing, or at least not disagreeing about the matter in hand; and that insofar their prima facie dispute arises in virtue of divergent uses of language. This is how I propose to accommodate the first and second themes of the previous section.

The theme of resolvability by moving to other vocabulary does not find such explicit expression in MVD. This is partly because I doubt that the connection with resolvability by such means is intimate enough for explicit inclusion of a condition along these lines to be helpful. I also remain vague on the question of what exactly the relationship is. That said, however, we can certainly expect that *sometimes* two parties whose prima facie dispute is brought about by divergent uses of language can achieve a ceasefire by using neutral language which brings to light their agreement about the subject matter(s) of their prima facie dispute. So I think MVD contains enough to lead us to expect some connection of the appropriate kind between a dispute’s being merely verbal and its being resolvable by moving to neutral vocabulary.

One further advantage of MVD to note is that it explains why disputes end when the participants discover that they are merely verbal. If during a prima facie dispute D, party A comes to realize that she and B do not disagree over the subject matter of D, it is only reasonable for D to come to an end. (It may, of course, be replaced with some other dispute; for instance, a dispute over whether one or other party is using some portion of language incorrectly.)

MVD is not intended to be used as a diagnostic test for whether a dispute is merely verbal. At most it indicates lines of enquiry that could be made to help gather evidence on that point (we might try to find out what the subject matter of D is, and we might try to check whether the parties to D are using language divergently in a way that is liable to create the appearance of disagreement about those matters when really there is none, and so on). I am not confident that we should expect there to *be* any diagnostic test that is both reasonably reliable and straightforward to apply. After all, it is not always easy to tell exactly what people are talking about or how they are using their language.

¹⁸ This is not to deny that there is room for further improvement in MVD through getting clearer still about what kinds of explanation are supposed to be signaled by the explanation-marker words ‘owing to’ in MVD. As it stands, there could still be cases, somewhat analogous to the Fred/Freda case, where there is some strange explanatory connection between the parties’ divergent use of language and the appearance of disagreement between them, but where we don’t want to conclude that the parties are having a merely verbal dispute. However, we have at least made progress by ruling out some of the more immediate problems of this kind.

Alternative diagnostic tests focusing on resolvability by moving to neutral vocabulary à la Chalmers (unpublished talk) are certainly problematic. Even leaving aside the question of what to do in cases where the needed neutral vocabulary is not available, the fact that people sometimes don't regard a dispute as resolved even when they should (and sometimes they do when they shouldn't) means that we cannot rely on people's willingness or otherwise to end a dispute when it is couched in neutral vocabulary as a reliable indicator of whether or not the dispute was merely verbal. And it is hard to see how we could use a *normative* fact – the fact that two parties should or shouldn't resolve their dispute upon moving to neutral vocabulary – as part of a diagnostic test, since it is rather too plausible (at least to me) that judgments as to whether or not a fact of this kind obtains will, in the relevant cases, rely on prior judgments as to whether or not the dispute was merely verbal.

Is it possible for two parties to be engaged in a merely verbal dispute *and* a substantive dispute concerning the same subject matter at the same time? MVD appears to rule this out; presumably parties must *disagree* about a subject matter in order to have a substantive dispute about it, but MVD requires that parties *fail* to disagree about the subject matter of a prima facie dispute *D* in order to count as having a merely verbal dispute. (Let's assume that in order to have a merely verbal dispute about a subject matter *S* parties must be engaged in a prima facie dispute whose subject matter is *S* and which meets the other conditions laid out in MVD.)

I don't think this is a problem. Notice that we can still say that two parties could be engaged in a merely verbal dispute about one subject matter (say, whether there are yellow roses in Alex's garden) whilst also being engaged in a substantive dispute about another very closely related subject matter (say, whether there are roses in Alex's garden). And there are surely some understandings of 'subject matter' on which those count as 'the same subject matter' (both disputes are about *what's in Alex's garden*). It's just that this is not the understanding of 'subject matter' that is operative in MVD. That understanding requires a certain amount of *precision* in the specification of a 'subject matter' (although I would expect it to be an imprecise, indeterminate and shifty matter *how much* precision is required; more on indeterminacy and shiftiness shortly).

So let's now turn to the issue of what constitutes the subject matter(s) of a prima facie dispute. It would be over-ambitious in this context to try to settle this question in a thorough-going way. In any case we should expect a certain amount of indeterminacy in the meaning of 'merely verbal dispute', and it is desirable that MVD be correspondingly somewhat flexible, in part through allowing flexibility as to what counts as a prima facie dispute's 'subject matter'. But a few points of clarification will be useful.

I start with a negative point: the subject matter(s) of a prima facie dispute cannot straightforwardly be identified with the subject matter(s) of the statements sincerely made during the course of that prima facie dispute by the parties to it. This is so even assuming that we have some way of identifying the subject matter of a statement. (This is not a trivial matter, but perhaps we can hope that some proposal along the lines of Lewis 1988, emended to accommodate hyperintensionality, can do the work.)

One reason why not is that a party may make statements which are supposed to *support* her side of the prima facie dispute, but are not themselves supposed to become part of its subject matter (although they may, of course, become the subject matter of a new, or an extended, prima facie dispute). If you and I have a dispute over whether whales are mammals and you make some statement which you think supports your claim, I can disagree with you as to the truth of that statement even if I ultimately come to agree with you about whether whales are mammals. In such a situation, we come to agree over the subject matter of the dispute, even though I continue to reject some of the supporting claims you made during it.

A second reason not to identify the subject matter of a prima facie dispute with that of the statements sincerely made by the parties during that prima facie dispute is that some parts of the subject matter may not be explicitly mentioned by either party, perhaps because it is already obvious to the participants that they are on the table. Imagine a long-standing couple arguing. They may each know what the instigator of the argument is annoyed about without anyone needing to mention it, and can perfectly well conduct a dispute on that point which, as far as explicit statements go, consists solely in the trading and/or dismantling of pieces of putative evidence for one or other side. A third reason for caution is that a party may mis-speak, and/or may take back an earlier statement which she later considers does not correctly express her position.

Next, a positive point: the parties' intentions, interests and other mental states seem very important for determining the subject matter of a prima facie dispute. If the long-standing couple just mentioned are in fact disputing the question of whether they should have moved to Bournemouth last year although neither of them has explicitly mentioned it, this is because they are *occurently interested* in that question, and/or because that they *intend to dispute* that question, and/or because of other mental states of theirs, such as their *desires to dispute* it, their *desires to prove that they are right* on the matter, or perhaps even their merely *attending* to it.

I am not saying that any or all of these interests, intentions or other states are *sufficient* to make their dispute be about the question of whether they should have moved to Bournemouth, just that they are important for determining whether or not that is the subject matter of their dispute. However, I do suspect that it is a *necessary* condition on its being such that the parties – or at least one of them – should be in one of the states just mentioned or some reasonably similar state.

(I am being deliberately vague here, partly because I suspect that it is often at least somewhat indeterminate what exactly a dispute's subject matter is. This will mean, if MVD is correct, that it can be at least somewhat indeterminate whether or not a dispute is merely verbal. I welcome this consequence. It does not, of course, threaten the fact that there will be many clear cases.)

This way of construing subject matters allows us to say that in some merely verbal disputes the underlying linguistic difference does not concern any piece of language that either party actually uses. I think this is a good result. Two trained philosophers may launch straight into attempts to provide evidence for one side or the other of (say) the debate between Cartesian sceptics and their anti-sceptical opponents, without needing to mention what they are arguing in support of. One can say, for instance, 'Nobody except a few philosophers cares at all about whether a subject can completely rule out the possibility that he is a brain in a vat'. And the other could reply 'Unless a subject can rule out all not-p possibilities, his position with regard to p is epistemically defective'.

Supposing the dispute between Cartesian sceptics and their opponents to be a merely verbal one (I'm not setting out to defend that claim here, I merely use it as a putative example), this is a case in which the parties to a merely verbal dispute never explicitly use the portion of language – in this case presumably 'knows' and its cognates – which in fact underlies it.

5. Further Details

One respect in which MVD is woolly is that it employs the phrase 'divergent uses of some relevant portion of language', which raises the question: what kinds of linguistic differences can count here? As I have been stressing, I believe that a certain amount of woolliness is desirable. We should expect the phrase 'merely verbal dispute' as used by philosophers to be somewhat indeterminate in application, as well as being subject to certain kinds of contextual shiftiness (on which more in a

moment).

But again it may be helpful to clarify matters a little. As far as I can tell, pretty much any kind of divergence in usage that is capable of giving rise to the appearance of disagreement about a certain subject matter in the absence of any such disagreement can count. I think, for example, that such linguistic differences as arise when exactly one party uses a term as a pejorative can serve.¹⁹ Consider the following dialogue, in which Nellie uses ‘baldie’ as a pejorative for bald men, while Ellie takes that word to lack pejorative force and to be merely descriptive of bald men. (Neither of them has a negative attitude towards bald men or wishes to be offensive to them.)

ELLIE: Sam is a baldie.

NELLIE [outraged]: Sam is not a baldie, he’s just a bald guy.

I am inclined to diagnose merely verbal dispute here. Ellie and Nellie don’t disagree about whether Sam is bald, nor do they disagree in their attitudes to bald men. We might think of the subject matter of their *prima facie* dispute as being whether or not Sam is bald, or whether or not [Sam is bald and bald men are to be denigrated]. Either way, there is no disagreement about the subject matter, and the apparent dispute between Ellie and Nellie is entirely driven by their different uses of ‘baldie’.

Here is another slightly subtle kind of linguistic difference which I think can give rise to merely verbal disputes. Suppose Peter thinks (incorrectly) that Smita thinks (incorrectly) that ‘adobe’ means *place to live* rather than *mud hut*.²⁰ In fact Smita knows perfectly well what ‘adobe’ means in English. She is unaware of Peter’s misapprehension concerning her. Both believe that Peter lives in a domicile and neither believes he lives in a mud hut. Peter attempts to defer to Smita’s usage of ‘adobe’, believing this to be the easiest way communicate with her. They engage in this *prima facie* dispute:

PETER: I live in an adobe.

SMITA: You do not!

I think Peter and Smita are having a merely verbal dispute, one which is based on a slightly unusual kind of linguistic difference. Peter is (albeit temporarily and in attempted deference to Smita) using ‘adobe’ in a non-standard way, while Smita is using it in the normal way, and this alone is responsible for the appearance of disagreement on the question(s) of whether Peter lives in an adobe and/or whether he lives in an abode.

I also think that linguistic differences which impact only upon such dimensions of meaning as reference, extension or Kaplanian content (as opposed to impacting upon sense, intension, hyperintension or Kaplanian character) can underlie merely verbal disputes. It is fairly easy to generate cases like this if you think that the reference of a name exhausts its meaning. For example, a merely verbal dispute could arise in which the two parties appear to be disagreeing about whether some one individual called ‘Francis’ is a rake, when in fact they are talking about two different men called ‘Francis’, about each of whose characters they are in agreement.

For another case illustrating the same point, suppose Jack and Jill are involved in some protracted discussions concerning, among other things, the necessity of identity, and at one point they speak as follows:²¹

¹⁹ Thanks to Pekka Varynen here.

²⁰ The idea of ‘adobe’/‘abode’ confusion comes from David Lewis originally (see Hawthorne 2004, p. 107, fn. 125). Thanks to Daniel Nolan for suggesting I think about this case.

²¹ Thanks again to Daniel Nolan for help with thinking up this example.

JACK: It is not possible that Robin Hood and Robin of Locksley are distinct.

JILL: Yes it is!

It turns out that Jack takes ‘Robin Hood’ and ‘Robin of Locksley’ to co-refer (which is why he thinks his claim is relevant to their discussion) but Jill believes the two terms refer to different people. Other than that they agree on all aspects of the meanings of these names: for example, should it be relevant to meaning we can specify that they agree that Robin Hood was the chap who ran around stealing from the rich and giving to the poor, and that they agree that Robin of Locksley was the respected nobleman who courted Maid Marian. They also agree that it is not possible for one person to be two distinct people.

Once more, I am tempted to diagnose merely verbal dispute, though with some contextualist qualifications based on observations to follow shortly. Thinking of the subject matter of the prima facie dispute as *whether or not one person can be two distinct people*, we want to say Jack and Jill do not disagree about the subject matter of their prima facie dispute, but merely appear to do so owing to their divergent ways of using the names involved: differences that concern reference alone.

My contextualist qualifications are based on the thought that there is often more than one way to think about ‘the subject matter’ of a prima facie dispute. For instance, in the aforementioned Jack/Jill case, were we to think of ‘the subject matter’ as concerning Hood and Locksley in particular, rather than the more general issue of whether or not one person can be two people, we would probably *not* be inclined to diagnose ‘merely verbal dispute’.

In the previous section I suggested that facts about the parties to a prima facie dispute can affect what counts as its subject matter. Now I want to consider ways in which facts about the *ascriber* – that is, the person *describing* a prima facie dispute as a ‘merely verbal dispute’ – can impact upon what counts as ‘the subject matter’ of a prima facie dispute, and hence impact upon whether it counts as a ‘merely verbal dispute’.

What I have in mind here is to introduce contextualist elements into the story that has emerged so far. I said that:

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

I now want to suggest that the different contexts in which ‘merely verbal dispute’ is uttered can lead to differences in the extension of that phrase. Familiarly, the word ‘tall’ can have the same extension as ‘tall for a jockey’ on some occasions of use and the same extension as ‘tall for a basketball player’ on others. Similarly, I want to suggest, for the phrase ‘merely verbal dispute’.

I envisage a corresponding context-sensitivity in phrases like ‘the subject matter of *D*’, such that MVD comes out true within each context. That is to say, I think that what counts as ‘the subject matter of *D*’, for fixed *D*, can vary when that phrase is uttered in different contexts.

To motivate this view, consider a prima facie dispute which both parties know is motivated by considerations of language, but where those linguistic considerations are not explicitly mentioned. Bill and Bob are arguing about whether ‘rose’ is a noun or a verb. (Neither realizes that both a noun and a verb can be spelled and pronounced that way.) In the course of this argument they have

the following exchange:

BILL: There are such things as roses.

BOB: There are no such things as roses.

An onlooker could easily hear this snippet of conversation and be unaware that Bill and Bob know they are having (some sort of) language-related dispute.

This exchange (considered apart from any surrounding conversation) constitutes a *prima facie* dispute. What are we to say of its subject matter? On the one hand there seems to be a perfectly good use of ‘subject matter’ on which the subject matter of this *prima facie* dispute is whether or not ‘rose’ is a noun. That’s what Bill and Bob’s overall dispute is about, and this exchange is part of that overall dispute.

On the other, there seems to be another good use of ‘subject matter’ on which the subject matter is whether or not roses exist. Rather than try to pick any one use as *the correct* use of ‘subject matter’, I suggest letting both flowers bloom and admitting that exactly what we mean by ‘the subject matter’ of a *prima facie* dispute can vary from context to context.

Consequently, I think we should also be prepared to admit that the extension of ‘merely verbal dispute’ can vary from context to context. Insofar as we are thinking of the subject matter of Bill and Bob’s *prima facie* dispute as linguistic, we should say that they are not engaged in a merely verbal dispute. They are engaged in a *verbal* dispute, but one that is verbal on its face, rather than one that appears to be driven by disagreement about something else.

Meanwhile, insofar as we are thinking of the subject matter of Bill and Bob’s *prima facie* dispute as the non-linguistic one (whether or not roses exist), we should say that they are engaged in a merely verbal dispute. For they do not disagree about the existence of the delightful plants beloved of English gardeners; they merely appear to do so owing to their different uses of the word ‘rose’.

I want to say pretty much the same about the Jean/Marco case of §3 above. It is a little harder to make the corresponding claim about that case, however: since ‘bring’ is not in fact a noun, it is harder to state the supposed non-linguistic subject matter of the Jean/Marco dispute. But I suspect we could think ourselves into a context wherein it will count as having a non-linguistic ‘subject matter’ by focusing on whatever Jean *thinks* ‘bring’ means. (Presumably, given what he says, he thinks it means *ring*, so the non-linguistic subject matter might be whether or not rings exist.)

What I’m trying to flag here is that some of the contextual shiftiness in ‘subject matter’ appears to be due to the fact that sometimes we take the meaning of a speaker’s words in some public language to determine a conversation’s ‘subject matter’ (as when we interpret Bill and Bob as being engaged in a conversation about roses, despite what Bob thinks he’s talking about), whereas on other occasions our use of ‘subject matter’ is more sensitive to what an individual speaker takes his and others’ words to mean (as when we interpret Jean and Marco as talking about rings).

There is (at least) one tricky issue remaining. *If* belief content is to be individuated in a fairly fine-grained way, and *if* failure to disagree requires holding the same beliefs about all relevant matters, then agreeing about the existence of certain delightful plants may not suffice for non-disagreement about whether there are roses. Maybe genuine non-disagreement here requires that Bill and Bob *both* have either the belief *that there are roses* or the belief *that there are no roses*, where these cannot be substituted for beliefs with some other fine-grained content, such as the belief *that there are shrubs or vines of the genus Rosa*.

Imposing such strong requirements on genuine agreement will mean that MVD will deliver the (intuitively) wrong results about most cases that philosophers would ordinarily want to describe as merely verbal disputes however, since almost all of those cases will be like the Bill/Bob case in this respect. So whatever disagreement and agreement amount to (and I cannot address that question here), we had better be careful to ensure that sometimes two people can be in full agreement about a subject matter (for the purposes of applying MVD, at least) without having exactly the same fine-grained beliefs about it.

I should like to finish with a prospect rather than a problem. So let me suggest that the account of merely verbal disputes offered here might be fairly easily converted into an account of what we might call *merely verbal accord*:²² real disagreement about some subject matter about which two parties are (prima facie) agreeing, where the appearance of agreement is driven by linguistic differences between the parties. Our friends Fred and Freda (who disagree about whether ‘naff’ is complimentary, hence about whether most people are friendly) might end up in this situation if they met and both uttered the sentence ‘Other people are really naff’. However, I leave the pursuit of this idea for a later date.

²² I am indebted to Stephen Mumford and Matthew Kennedy here.

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