TWO SPECIES OF MERELY VERBAL DISPUTES

DELIA BELLERI

Abstract: It is common to criticize a debate by alleging that it is a "merely verbal dispute." But how conclusive would an argument based on such allegations be? This article takes the material-composition debate as a case study and argues that the merely verbal dispute objection is less decisive than one might expect. While assessing the dialectical effectiveness of the mere-verbality move, the article also tries to mark some progress in the philosophical understanding and appreciation of the phenomenon itself of merely verbal disputes. Its contribution consists in shedding light on a distinction between the "faultlessness" and "faultiness" of a merely verbal dispute.

Keywords: material composition, merely verbal disputes, metaontology, ontology, persistence.

1. Introduction

Evaluating a philosophical debate may sometimes involve engaging with the question whether it is or is not a "merely verbal dispute." Detractors of the debate may try to show that the participants in the discussion are merely "talking past each other."[1] Their opponents interested in preserving the respectability of the controversy may try to show that the debate is either not merely verbal or, even if merely verbal, not problematically so.

Why would it be problematic that a dispute turns out to be merely verbal? Assuming the rough-and-ready idea of a merely verbal dispute as a case of two speakers talking past each other, for instance by using the same term with different meanings, it seems obvious that if a dispute is diagnosed as merely verbal in this way, *it should be ended*, at least in its current form/formulation. This is because the meaning differences existing between the speakers' utterances make it the case that what seems like a

---

[1] Some of the most cited examples are: the debate between compatibilists and incompatibilists about free will; the debate about the semantic or pragmatic nature of certain linguistic phenomena; the debate concerning the metaphysics of mental states, where identity theorists are opposed by functionalists; the debate about the existence of composite objects. See Sidelle (2007, 84–85) and Chalmers (2011, 532–33).

disagreement (an exchange typically featuring the assertion of contradictory contents) is really no such thing. There is a mere *appearance* of disagreement, a phenomenon that would typically call for an interruption of the exchange, if anything with the purpose of better clarifying the semantics of the terms in question. Carrying on the dispute without correcting this semantic mistake would seem pointless.

There is another, perhaps more philosophically important, sense in which a merely verbal dispute may be problematic: at least in the stereotypical case in which the two speakers mean different things by the same expression, the dispute's mere verbality would seem to imply that, in order to overcome their apparent divergences, the speakers should *simply reach an agreement about which interpretation to assign to the expression* in question. Once the interpretation has been fixed, it is expected that no disagreement about the facts that seemed to have given rise to the dispute will be left. Resolving the dispute therefore seems a mere question of establishing a certain convention or of performing a certain act of verbal stipulation. This is typically deemed a move that does *not turn to anything substantial*: the debate is settled not by determining how the world is but by deciding how to speak.

The latter criticism can be resisted by offering the following considerations: deciding how to speak *does* turn on considerations that deserve being called "substantial," or at any rate considerations that do not involve, for instance, a merely arbitrary choice of vocabulary or a choice of vocabulary that is utterly obvious. Showing the substantivity of the considerations involved in the verbal decision implies pointing at a way in which the dispute, even though merely verbal, is *not problematically merely verbal*. What I aim to do in this paper is emphasize the potential of this kind of response with relation to different ways of spelling out the accusation of mere verbality. If this line of response is viable, then critiques based on mere verbality will look less threatening and more difficult to substantiate.

The plan of the paper is as follows. I start out by offering a clearer formulation of the notion of merely verbal dispute, adopting a characterisation set forth by Carrie Jenkins (2014); this characterisation is also further specified along two lines, where this results in the identification of merely verbal disputes that are "faultless" and merely verbal disputes that are "faulty." The second step consists in introducing a case study, namely, the debate about the mere verbality of the dispute on material composition. Having done the stage setting, I show that the material-composition debate can be, and indeed has been, depicted as both a faultless merely verbal dispute and as a faulty merely verbal dispute. I contend, however, that in neither case does the depiction point to a decisive flaw of the debate. Even if the critics were right and the controversy exhibited the features of a merely verbal dispute in the sense that would be relevant for this paper, I would argue that this is not enough to present a compelling

critique of the material-composition debate. This is because the critic has to engage with the contention that, even if merely verbal, the dispute is *not problematically merely verbal*.

2. Characterising Merely Verbal Disputes

A General Characterisation

Defining what a merely verbal dispute is, is only deceptively simple. This is because we might conflate definitions, or even just characterisations of merely verbal disputes, with *heuristics* to identify them.

One might, for example, reach a mere-verbality verdict about a certain dispute by appealing to the *principle of charity*. Eli Hirsch argues that a dispute is merely verbal if(f) charity compels the participants to conclude that each speaker is asserting a truth in their language, or "idiolect" (Hirsch 2005, 72, 82; 2008, 376; 2009, 238–39). In an exchange where A claims "Glasses are cups" and B claims "Glasses are not cups" (cf. Hirsch 2005, 69–72), if the parties exercised charity, they ought to conclude that they are both speaking the truth in their own versions of English, in which "cup" has different intensions and extensions. This implies that the disagreement is merely verbal. As Inga Vermeulen (2018) points out, however, this account leaves out cases in which a dispute is clearly merely verbal and, for example, one of the two speakers utters a *falsehood*. Vermeulen envisages a case where A is a native speaker of German, who speaks English using the word "beamer" as if it meant "projector," while B is a native English speaker, in whose dialect the word "beamer" is used to denote a BMW. Imagine that A utters, "John owns a beamer," meaning that John owns a projector, and B replies, "John does not own a beamer," meaning that John does not own a BMW. Imagine that it is false that John owns a projector, so A is uttering a falsehood even in her own idiolect. There is still an intuitive sense in which this dispute is clearly a merely verbal one. Thus, while Hirsch's recommended appeal to charity may serve as a heuristic to identify some merely verbal disputes, it would not help to identify others; the criterion is therefore inadequate for definition or characterisation purposes.

There is another purported characterisation proposed by Hirsch (2005, 83), whereby a dispute is merely verbal if there is a sentence D that, according to A, is necessarily *a priori* equivalent to another sentence U1 and, according to B, is necessarily *a priori* equivalent to yet another sentence U2. As Chalmers (2011, 518) and Jenkins (2014, 20) point out, however, necessary *a priori* equivalences (or relevantly similar relationships, like definitional or analytic equivalences) may not always be available, and yet a dispute could nevertheless be judged merely verbal. Thus, this criterion cannot help produce a definition/characterisation either.

Finally, it would seem a good idea to propose that a dispute is merely verbal if, by *banning* the term that is suspected to generate the verbal exchange, no residual disagreement is left between the parties (cf. Sidelle 2007, 89; Chalmers 2011, 526–27). Yet this is problematic too, for in some cases there might be no terms available to substitute the problematic expression with, and yet the dispute might still sensibly be judged as merely verbal (cf. Chalmers 2011; Jenkins 2014). So, again, this would fail to be a necessary condition for a merely verbal dispute to obtain.

A further problem for the philosopher who aims at analysing the notion of merely verbal dispute is to avoid controversial theoretical commitments in their account. Chalmers (2011, 522), for instance, suggests that a dispute is merely verbal iff two speakers disagree about the meaning of an expression S and the (apparent) dispute over S arises only in virtue of this disagreement. It does not, however, seem necessary for a merely verbal dispute to obtain that the speakers have either explicit or tacit *beliefs about the linguistic meaning* of S. Chalmers's proposal appears to carry with it excessive internalistic commitments. As Chalmers admits, then, it would serve better as a heuristics than as a general characterisation.

As a matter of fact, the beliefs of speakers about linguistic meaning per se do not seem central to the obtainment of a merely verbal dispute. This becomes apparent if externalism about meaning is assumed. Then, as Brendan Balcerak-Jackson (2014, 36) notes, there might be cases of merely verbal dispute where the speakers mean the same by the same expression simply because the meaning of the expression is fixed by external factors but fail to really disagree because they are *addressing different questions*. This leads Balcerak-Jackson to characterise merely verbal disputes as *pragmatic* phenomena, where the speakers are misidentifying the issue under discussion and are in fact trying to answer different questions.

More generally, maintaining an externalist approach to meaning and shifting the focus away from the semantics of language allows us to appreciate that the mere verbality of the dispute is plausibly generated by different *ways of using* one and the same term, with the aim of communicating a certain content and—derivatively—of addressing a certain question. Thus, as Jenkins (2014) and Vermeulen (2018) both aptly note, it seems that the ultimate source of a dispute's verbality is the way in which the speakers *use* words and what they "mean" by them, where "meaning" should be understood along the lines of Grice's *speaker meaning*, rather than along the lines of conventional, linguistic meaning. This result emerges with particular clarity from Jenkins's recent systematic study of the notion of merely verbal dispute. The upshot of her investigation is the following characterisation:

(MVD+) A dispute is merely verbal iff: (i) the parties are engaged in a prima facie genuine dispute D on a certain subject matter S; (ii) the parties do not

disagree on S; (iii) they appear to disagree on S *because of divergent uses of language*. (Jenkins 2014, 21; my italics)[2]

Thus, going back to the "cup" example, we can see that the dispute between A and B is merely verbal because it satisfies points (i) to (iii) of (MVD+). First, the parties seem engaged in a genuine dispute about a certain subject matter—say, whether glasses are cups; second, they do not disagree on whether glasses are cups; third, they do not disagree on this subject matter because they use the word "cup" differently, with different speaker meanings. The beamer example is also captured by (MVD+): the parties seem to be having a genuine disagreement about a certain subject matter, namely, whether John owns a beamer; however, their disagreement about this subject matter is merely apparent, and the reason they do not disagree is that they are using "beamer" with different speaker meanings. So far, then, (MVD+) seems to give us what we were looking for: (a) a sufficiently broad and general characterisation of what a merely verbal dispute is, which is (b) independent of the specific heuristics surveyed earlier, which only managed to capture a partial number of cases; and is (c) relatively free of controversial semantic assumptions—at least if one is happy with an intuitive, non-strictly Gricean notion of speaker meaning. I shall therefore take (MVD+) as my starting point.

Faultless and Faulty Merely Verbal Disputes

I wish to suggest that the general characterisation that has just been adopted can be further specified along two axes. There seem to be at least two "species" of merely verbal disputes that derive from the common "genus" that is portrayed by (MDV+) (there may be more, but it is not my interest in this paper to explore their full potential range). I claim that these two species can be distinguished according to how one answers to the following question:

> [*Semantic correctness question*] Are the linguistic uses each party is making semantically correct (in some relevant language L)?

What does "semantically correct" mean here? For practical purposes, I shall henceforth confine myself to the semantic correctness of the use of

---

[2] We should understand the phrase "divergent uses of language" as subsuming divergences in speaker's meaning and reference, but also in "tone" or "colouring," and even in metasemantic assumptions (for example, how to fix the reference of a certain proper name). This allows (MVD+) to track intuitive judgements of mere verbality better than other formulations couched in terms of the more restricted notion of "what the speakers mean" (cf. Szabó 2008; Manley 2009, 8; Sider 2006, 76). The characterisation contains a further clause whose specification in the main text is not strictly necessary for my purposes: "Sentences (i)–(iii) are true in all contexts." This is to ensure semantic stability of the key terms occurring in (MDV+) in all contexts in which (MVD+) is used.

words, or anyway of sub-sentential expressions. I shall adopt the following characterisation:

> [*Semantic correctness*] Use of an expression is semantically correct just in case such use conforms with what, on the basis of usage (of a certain language L), are considered the expression's meaning and content.[3]

I shall understand "meaning" along the lines of a dictionary entry: a suitably stable and general set of conditions (which do not have to be necessary and sufficient) that a competent speaker can (but need not) cognitively entertain. I shall understand "content" along the lines of an extension, that is, an individual or a set of individuals identified in terms of the conditions spelled out by the meaning; this constitutes the world-related component of an expression's semantic profile.[4] Thus, when faced with an utterance of "Stars are shiny," we shall say that use of "star" is semantically correct just in case it conforms with what, on the basis of usage, we identify as the meaning of "star" (say: "energy-irradiating mass of gas located at a remote distance from Earth"), as well as with its content or extension (the celestial objects that actually fall under this definition).

The definition just offered is suitable for context-*in*sensitive expressions—ones whose meaning always determines the same content no matter the context of use. We might, however, want to specify semantic correctness for context-*sensitive* expressions as well. These include terms like "I," "here," "now," and "this," and possibly more—for instance, gradable adjectives like "tall" and "rich," colour adjectives, and verbs like "to rain" might turn out to be context sensitive as well (see Stanley 2000; Szabó 2001; King and Stanley 2005).

I propose that semantic correctness for context-sensitive expressions is split into two components: one that concerns compliance with the expression's stable "meaning" and another that concerns a generically understood adequacy of its "content in context."

---

[3] I shall restrict attention to only *literal* uses. Considering *non*-literal uses as well would probably require *pragmatic* correctness—definable as a use's successful communication of a content that is reasonable given the context of utterance. Even with pragmatic correctness, we could still distinguish between merely verbal disputes that are faultless (because both uses are pragmatically correct) and merely verbal disputes that are faulty (because at least one is pragmatically incorrect).

[4] These characterisations can be coupled with moderately externalistic metasemantics. Meaning may be fixed by a combination of use facts and beliefs shared by the members of a community or by a restricted group of experts, who in turn affect the uses and beliefs within the larger community. Reference may be fixed by a combination of shared referential intentions and causal chains.

[*Context-sensitive semantic correctness*] Use of a context-sensitive expression is semantically correct just in case: (i) it conforms with what, on the basis of usage (of a certain language L), is considered the expression's "meaning" and (ii) the content expressed in context contributes to expressing a proposition that is either true or reasonably held true, given the presumed speaker's conversational aims.

Thus, when confronted with the utterance of "He is German" by Mary, we shall deem her use of "he" semantically correct just in case it conforms with the standard meaning of "he," where this implies she is referring to a male. In addition, and also in order to establish the previous fact, we shall pay attention to whether the content Mary expresses through her utterance of that sentence is either true or reasonably held true, given her presumed aims. So, for instance, if Mary ends up saying something false because the demonstrated person is not a male or if it were not reasonable for her to believe the content she seems to be expressing, we might suspect that her use of "he" is semantically incorrect in that specific context; if she says something true or reasonable from her point of view, then the use will count as semantically correct.[5]

The definitions of semantic correctness just offered would no doubt require further qualification and refinement. This task would, however, exceed the scope of this paper.[6] The characterisations given seem sufficiently clear—at least for the purposes of the present inquiry—to allow us to go ahead and work with them.

Now my suggestion is that disputes which comply with (MVD+) can belong to different "species" of the same genus, because they involve different answers to the *semantic correctness question*, where semantic correctness may be both context insensitive and context sensitive.

The first species meets the criteria spelled out by (MVD+) and additionally gives *a positive answer* to the question "Are the linguistic uses each party is making semantically correct?" I shall call this a *faultless* merely verbal dispute. Here are two examples of this phenomenon: Mary, speaking British English, utters "Footballs are round"; Jerry, speaking American English, replies "Footballs are not round" (the example draws on Manley 2009). As a result of their uses of different idiolects of English, "football" refers to different items in their respective utterances, and the

[5] I say "we might suspect" because the evidence described here lends only *pro tanto* support to the hypothesis that "he" is used incorrectly, for obviously a speaker might be using "he" correctly while simply having false beliefs about the demonstrated person. In order to achieve a safer verdict about semantic correctness, then, more evidence should be gathered.

[6] Here are some open questions: How do we identify a language L (if we can at all)? Is the semantics of L stable enough to allow verdicts of semantic correctness and incorrectness? By means of which methods is semantic correctness and incorrectness exactly determined? How does ongoing semantic change factor into a judgement of semantic correctness? What's the best metasemantics for L (internalism, externalism, a mix of the two)?

disagreement is merely verbal by the lights of (MDV+); yet both uses are faultless, in the sense that they comply with what "football" means in British and American English, respectively. A further example employs the context-sensitive term "nearby": Mary and Jerry are at their city apartment, and Mary says, "A Thai restaurant is nearby." Jerry, thinking that Mary is talking about their beach house, replies, "No Thai restaurant is nearby!" Here, we could presume that Mary and Jerry are each using the word "nearby" correctly, in the sense that they comply with its invariant meaning and at the same time manage to say something true, or at least reasonable given their conversational aims. Given, however, that the contents of their respective uses of "nearby" are fixed by different salient locations for each speaker, the utterances do not contradict each other. The disagreement is merely verbal, although faultless.

The second species of merely verbal dispute complies with (MVD+) while giving *a negative answer* to the question "Are the linguistic uses each party is making semantically correct?" I shall call this a *faulty* merely verbal dispute. To illustrate, imagine that Jerry, a native English speaker, is using "star" to mean any celestial body visible from Earth with the naked eye—with the exception of the moon and occasional comets (the example draws on Szabó 2008). He utters, "Venus is a star." Mary is using "star" with its current meaning and utters, "Venus is not a star." Jerry's use is faulty, since it is not warranted by current theories of what a star is, which inform the standing meaning of "star" in current English. The dispute is merely verbal by the lights of (MVD+), for the prima facie disagreement about Venus does not obtain, given how Jerry uses the word "star." Plus, it is a faulty merely verbal dispute, since his use fails to comply with the standard linguistic meaning of "star." This example involves uses of a term whose semantic correctness is context insensitive, but a faulty merely verbal dispute could also involve the use of context-sensitive terms. Suppose a conversation is happening between a native speaker of English and a beginner, who is still struggling with the use of certain indexical terms. Suppose the beginner occasionally confuses the meaning of "here" and "there." Then a merely verbal dispute could happen where the native speaker utters, "The umbrella is there," meaning to say that the umbrella is located at a relevant distance from both conversationalists (for example, in another room), and the beginner replies, "The umbrella is not there," meaning that it is not in the location (for example, the very room) where the conversation is happening. Supposing the native speaker and the beginner both know that the umbrella is in the other room and there is no other salient umbrella, then the suspicion could arise that the beginner is misusing "there." The use would appear to be faulty because it would seem unreasonable for the beginner to believe the content he seems to be expressing, given the mutual assumptions in the conversation. The dispute would therefore comply with (MVD+) and, in addition, be a faulty one in virtue of the beginner's lexical mistake.

The examples just provided show that both phenomena could fairly easily arise in everyday situations. Yet, my interest here is to talk about philosophical disputes. In what follows, I take a metaontological debate as a case study and show that it involves appeals to both species of merely verbal dispute. I then move on to assess the dialectical effectiveness of critiques that employ these notions. Before we proceed, however, some stage setting is in order. I first briefly introduce an ontological debate, namely, that revolving around the composition of material objects. I then introduce the *meta*ontological debate that centres on the composition controversy, where charges of mere verbality are formulated.

3. Representing a Debate as Merely Verbal: The Case of Metaontology

Let us start with the ground-level ontological debate. The so-called special composition question asks, "When does a plurality of objects compose a further object?" (van Inwagen 1990). The debate is roughly divided among three types of answers to the special composition question. The first type of answer has it that any plurality of objects, no matter how spatially disconnected, composes a further object. This position is known as universalism.[7] According to the universalist, there are, or there exist, not only familiar composite objects like tables, chairs, or mountains but also more "exotic" mereological sums, like the sum of Hillary Clinton's nose and the Eiffel Tower. The second type of answer claims that no plurality of objects ever composes anything. Composition never takes place, and the only existing things are "simples," that is, atomic objects that have no proper parts. This position is known as nihilism (Unger 1979; Wheeler 1979). For the nihilist, there are, or there exist, no tables, chairs, or mountains. None of the familiar composite objects we think we are acquainted with exists; what exists are just arrangements of simples in the shape of tables, chairs, or mountains. The third type of response expresses an intermediate position: composition happens in some cases but not in others. Van Inwagen (1990) is known for holding that composition obtains only when a plurality of objects concurs together to form a life. According to this "organicist" theory, living beings like plants and animals exist, but non-living beings like tables and chairs do not. Other intermediate answers strive to track common-sense judgements concerning composition. One recent proposal advanced by Chad Carmichael (2015) provides a series-style answer to the composition question, such that a plurality of things composes something iff (i) they are either lump-like or bonded or (ii) their activities constitute a unity-imposing event.

We do not need to delve into the details of each proposal; instead, we should focus on a *metatheoretical assessment* of the debate. This is an

---

[7] Lewis 1991; Rea 1998; Van Cleve 1986; Cartwright 1975.

important theme in the current metaontology literature, where practitioners of ontology who take this endeavour as legitimate and substantive are countered by deflationary theorists often appealing to mere-verbality considerations. For instance (as mentioned in section 2), Hirsch argues that, if charity should compel each party to conclude that the other is saying something true in a different "idiolect" or "language," then the dispute is merely verbal. In the composition debate, this implies that if one wishes to give a charitable interpretation of the universalist's speech, one ought to interpret terms like "exist" or "there is" as applied by following very permissive mereological criteria: basically, as long as two objects exist, then a further composite exists. By contrast, if one wants to charitably interpret the nihilist's speech, one should regard the criteria of application of "exist" or "there is" as extremely restrictive—so much so that they allow us to say that only atomic entities exist. In intermediate theories, the conditions of application of the same terms are somewhat more lax: they allow us to say that some objects exist but not others. The resulting picture has different theories adopt *different senses* of "exist" or of "there is," as a consequence of applying charity considerations.

We can see how a Hirsch-style portrayal of the dispute complies with (MVD+): (i) the parties are engaged in a prima facie genuine dispute on a certain subject matter—namely, whether composite objects exist; (ii) the parties do not disagree on the existence of these objects, because they are holding semantically compatible contents; (iii) they appear to disagree because of divergent uses of language, specifically because of divergent uses of the terms "exist" and "there is."

What we have so far is evidence that there is a way of characterising the composition debate that is in accordance with (MVD+). In the following sections, I wish to show that there are two ways of further specifying this characterisation. According to one way, all the linguistic usages involved in the merely verbal disagreement are *semantically correct*, where this amounts to what I shall call a *faultless* merely verbal dispute. According to the other way, not all the linguistic usages are semantically correct, so the exchange is a *faulty* merely verbal dispute. In the sections to come, I (i) shed further light on what it means to say that an ontological controversy is a faulty or faultless merely verbal dispute and (ii) assess how—if at all— pointing this out can serve the deflationary purposes of the theorists who oppose this debate.

4. A Faultless Merely Verbal Dispute

Alan Sidelle (2002) has argued that all the participants in the composition dispute—be they nihilists, universalists, or defenders of intermediate views—use the term "exist" (but "object" as well) in different ways

but also in ways that are *semantically correct*. The dispute is a faultless merely verbal one.

In Sidelle's view, "exist" is semantically indeterminate, and each disputant is using a distinct but nonetheless semantically acceptable precisification for the term. So for instance, when the nihilist says, "Tables do not exist," she is saying something semantically correct and true relative to the nihilist precisification, call it "exist$_N$"; similarly, when the universalist says, "There are tables but also trout tables (mereological sums of a trout and a table)," he is saying something semantically correct and true relative to the universalist precisification, call it "exist$_U$." To quote the final passage of Sidelle's paper: "We should treat this as other cases of indeterminacy, where certain parameters of a term have been specified, but others are left open. . . . [T]here is agreement on the core, formal meaning of the terms, and everyone can understand the views of the opposition as about a common subject matter. . . . [Nevertheless] all of the views are acceptable specifications, insofar as they fit adequately with our ordinary and theoretical judgements: this is why, from the semantic perspective, there is no fact of the matter among them" (2002, 141). Here I take Sidelle to be attributing to the parties in the dispute what I have called *context-sensitive semantic correctness*. Arguably, all the parties are (i) conforming to the common meaning of "exist" (perhaps coinciding with the formal role of the existential quantifier) and (ii) expressing contents that are at least reasonably held true, given each speaker's conversational aims.

While Sidelle's passage illustrates use of the notion of faultless merely verbal dispute for deflationary purposes, it seems clear that this cannot be (and indeed is not) Sidelle's whole strategy. In addition to showing that all uses are semantically on a par, that is, such that they comply with the expression's linguistic meaning as well as with what it would be true or reasonable for the speakers to utter, the deflationist should give reasons to think that the choice between one interpretation of "exist" and the others is purely *arbitrary*. This contention could, however, be opposed by the supporter of the composition debate. For while it may be conceded that all uses are semantically on a par, there may be *non-semantic* reasons to prefer one use rather than another. Clearly, the deflationist would have to counter these non-semantic arguments in order successfully to deflate the dispute.

The first non-semantic consideration might be that if a certain theory adopted one specification of "exist," it would honour more (or more important) theoretical virtues. Most of the arguments in the composition literature indeed seem aimed at drawing attention to theoretical virtues or other kinds of theoretical advantages: for instance, defenders of nihilism stress the fact that their theory avoids certain paradoxes and puzzles (Unger 1979), as well as its ontological parsimony (Merricks 2001). Similarly, the advocates of universalism emphasize avoidance of ontic vagueness (Lewis 1986, 1991; Sider 1997, 2001) and of arbitrariness in the theory (Van Cleve

1986; Rea 1998). Thus, arguing for semantic equivalence is not enough, for it might be contended that one semantic option is superior to the others because of the theoretical advantages that would follow from adopting it.

In order to oppose this contention, the deflationist should be ready to argue, for example, that there is really no fact of the matter about which option is superior (cf. Sidelle 2002, 120), because there is no (absolute) way of comparing the theoretical benefits each theory alleges to offer. It is not my goal here to judge the extent to which this move might be successful. What's worthy of notice is rather that it is *this* further move that allows the deflationary theorist to more directly engage with the controversial claims advanced by the ontologists involved in the composition debate. It might therefore appear more fruitful for the deflationary cause to reduce emphasis on considerations of mere verbality and instead aim at debunking different, non-semantic considerations like those related to the costs and benefits of theory choice.

The second non-semantic argument might be that one of these options has to be favoured because it is metaphysically privileged. For instance, it may be argued that one of the specifications of "exist" is the most "natural" and "joint carving," and (defeasible) evidence may be provided in support of this claim. Some of Ted Sider's work (1997, 2001) may be interpreted as an advocacy of the joint-carvingness of the universalist specification of the existential quantifier (and germane notions/expressions). Again, the deflationist should be ready to face this kind of resistance: the route taken by Sidelle (2002, 135) consists in proclaiming himself at a loss when trying to understand what the proponent of joint carving even *means*. I shall abstain from judging the effectiveness of this move, and again confine myself to emphasizing that it is at *this* juncture that the deflationist seems able to more incisively engage with the contentions advanced by the serious practitioner of ontology. Arguments aimed at showing that the dispute is merely verbal (and faultless as well) would seem to create a detour that distracts from what, for many ontologists, is the crux of the discussion: the alleged greater, objective metaphysical "fit" of their theory—and its attendant linguistic resources—over rival theories.

Before I close this section, it might be instructive to compare the argument just presented with a similar point raised by Balcerak-Jackson (2014) against mere-verbality critiques of metaphysical debates. As he points out, even if the critic were right to contend that a certain dispute is merely verbal (say, in the sense spelled out by (MVD+)), this need not mean that the non-conflicting propositions expressed by each of the disputants do not (aspire to) *answer substantive questions*. So, for instance, it might be the case that a dispute where the universalist claims, "There is an object composed by the Eiffel Tower and my nose" and a common-sense theorist says, "There is no object composed by the Eiffel Tower and your nose" is merely verbal, perhaps because the theorists use the word "object" (or "there is") with different senses. For all we know, however, the two disputants might

be in the business of each answering a substantive question—which, by Balcerak-Jackson's lights, is a question that cannot be answered simply by stating an analytic truth, like a tautology. For instance, the universalist might be trying to answer the following, not obviously *un*substantive, question, "Is it sufficient for two objects to exist in order for them to compose a third object?" where it is not clear that an answer to this question can be provided by means of an act of semantic stipulation, such as for the word "object." Similarly, the common-sense theorist might be in the business of answering the following, again not obviously substance-lacking, question, "Is there any restriction to the spatio-temporal relations that suffice for a composite object to exist?" where again it is not clear that linguistic analysis or conventions help to reach an answer.

In many ways, my argument runs parallel to the one just summarized: I am also prepared to concede that the dispute is merely verbal—and even semantically faultless—but, instead of saying that the disputants might be trying to answer what are in fact substantive questions, I draw attention to considerations that might be deemed substantive and would play a role in selecting one linguistico-semantic option over the others. The task Balcerak-Jackson focusses on and the task I focus on are arguably connected: answering a substantive question might involve offering arguments based on an appraisal of theoretical virtues, where this might be taken to indicate that one answer is more metaphysically fit ("joint carving") than the others; similarly, arguing in favour of a certain semantic option may involve pointing at theoretical benefits, which in turn may be cited as evidence of a desired degree of joint-carvingness. In both tasks, the role of *a priori*, analytic truths is either very minor or altogether absent; the fact that the resolution of the dispute does not (crucially) turn on such linguistic considerations is what ultimately defuses the dialectical threat posed by the mere-verbality critique.

The conclusion of this section—surely to be bolstered by an examination of further examples—is therefore that noticing the equal semantic correctness of all the linguistic uses in the composition debate does not suffice significantly to deflate that debate. In order to secure her deflationary point, the detractor of the composition debate needs to consider and defuse possible counter-moves invoking *non-semantic* reasons why one use should be favoured over others.

5. A Faulty Merely Verbal Dispute and a Futile Metalinguistic Issue

We have already seen how Hirsch (2005, 2008, 2009) deploys charity-related considerations in order to argue that the disagreement between composition theorists is merely verbal. Having concluded that the parties are talking past one another, however, we may take Hirsch to add

that *not all* the linguistic uses made by the involved theorists are seman-
tically correct. The dispute is therefore merely verbal but *faulty*.

In what way are some of the involved linguistic uses semantically incor-
rect? In various passages, Hirsch mentions the fact that some of the dispu-
tants' uses depart from plain English and common sense. As he declares,
proponents of various ontological theories—like universalism and nihil-
ism—have managed to "philosophize their way out of the communal lan-
guage" (2009, 241). Here is a way in which we could make sense of this
claim in terms that are compatible with *semantic correctness*. The issue
appears to concern the semantic profile of the terms "exist" and "there
is" as these are used to speak about composite objects in ordinary lan-
guage. Hirsch assumes that, in ordinary language, "exist" has application
conditions that track ordinary judgements concerning when some objects
compose something else. So we say that chairs, washing machines, and
turkeys exist, but not that trout turkeys exist. Philosophers, however, man-
age to tweak the conditions of use of "exist" (or "there is") in such a way
as to be able to say that also trout turkeys exist or, conversely, that no
composite object whatsoever (so no tables, trout turkeys, and so on) exists.
This, however, implies failing to conform to *semantic correctness* in the
sense that one deviates from what, on the basis of common English usage,
are considered the *meaning* and *content* of "exist." One deviates from the
meaning/sense of "exist" because one uses the term according to criteria
at odds with the criteria adopted in common usage; this reverberates on
the content/extension of the term, to the extent that many more objects, or
many fewer objects, are going to fall into the term's extension. So far, then,
it seems possible to attribute to Hirsch the claim that the composition dis-
pute is merely verbal and faulty.

This claim seems, however, insufficient to dismiss the whole debate
as flawed or even just simply as not worth pursuing. The reason is that
although some of the involved uses may count as semantically incorrect
given current usage of the English language, it might be philosophically
worthwhile to engage in a *metalinguistic argument* aimed at establishing
whether or not we should change the current usage. After all, it seems
possible that the nihilists or the universalists are on to something with
their considerations, which in turn would constitute a reason to move the
debate to the metalinguistic level.

Hirsch seems willing to concede that disputes like the one we have been
analysing be repositioned as metalinguistic exchanges for which idiolect
should be adopted. Commenting on the debate between perdurantism (the
theory that objects have temporal parts) and endurantism (the theory that
objects have no temporal parts and persist "as wholes"), Hirsch indeed
sympathises with the Carnapian idea that the dispute might ultimately just
be about language choice, where by "language" he means the specific idio-
lects that perdurantists and endurantists adopt—call them P-English and
E-English: "There is at bottom nothing to the issue of perdurantism versus

endurantism but the choice of either P-English or E-English" (2009, 243; see also Thomasson 2017 for a recent development of this idea).

In Hirsch's view, however, the solution to the dispute is utterly simple: just go for the option that corresponds to ordinary language. Trying to enforce any of the "deviant" uses would be a waste of time. The metalinguistic dispute associated with the composition debate, or with the endurance/perdurance debate, would therefore be somewhat *futile*.

Let us try to unpack this idea of futility by considering a toy example first. Suppose the following faulty merely verbal dispute arises: Jutta, a German woman whose English is good but who occasionally falls for so-called false friends, uses the word "promotion" in English as if it meant "doctorate" (indeed, this is the meaning of the German word "Promotion"). This can result in an apparent dispute where Nagib says, "Maya got a promotion," meaning that Maya had a career advancement, while Jutta, who does not disagree about the fact that Maya had a career advancement, replies: "Maya didn't get a promotion," meaning that she didn't get a Ph.D. Here, all the conditions posed by (MVD+) are satisfied, so the dispute is merely verbal. I want to add that it is also faulty, because Jutta's use is clearly semantically incorrect. Suppose now the divergence in linguistic use is exposed: Nagib is complying with the ordinary English usage of "promotion," Jutta is failing to comply. Jutta faces the metalinguistic question "Should I stick to my use of 'promotion' or should I adapt to Nagib's use?" Given how the case has been described, it would seem *futile* for Jutta to advocate the semantic correctness of her idiosyncratic use of the word "promotion." What is "futile" in this context would then be the attempt by the party who is using language incorrectly to enforce her use, or at least to have it approved as semantically correct by the opponent. Why would it be futile? Because it seems that the reasons (if any) Jutta might have in favour of this deviant use could not predictably suffice to override the established convention already associated with uses of "promotion" in standard English.

Something similar would seem to hold, in Hirsch's view, for the putative metalinguistic dispute that could arise about the use of "exist" or "there is" among the representatives of different ontological positions. The "deviant" philosophers (universalists, nihilists, and so forth) would be in a similar position to Jutta's: their reasons—if any—to opt for the diverging uses of "exist" and "there is" could not override the established convention already in place and associated with the current use of "exist." Why not? According to Hirsch, the principle of *charity* plays a major role here. We do not want ordinary usage to be overruled, because this would imply the falsity of what ordinary speakers say. In Hirsch's words, "Central to linguistic interpretation is the presumption that the correct interpretation is the one that makes people's use of language as reasonable as possible. In interpreting a language there is therefore an overwhelming, if in principle defeasible, presumption that typical speakers make perceptual assertions

that are reasonably accurate, and that they do not assert relatively simple sentences that are a priori false. The principle of charity to use does not depend on human generosity. It is, as I conceive of it, constitutive of the phenomena of language and meaning" (2009, 240). Following this view, we should therefore presume common-sense statements like "Chairs exist" or "Trout turkeys do not exist" to be true, based on considerations of charity. If we were to adopt the universalist's or the nihilist's sense of "exist," a massive number of statements like these would come out false. This would, in Hirsch's view, violate a constitutive constraint on language interpretation.

The upshot so far is therefore the following: Hirsch contends that the ontological dispute about composition is merely a verbal one and, in addition, a faulty one. Furthermore, he argues that any metalinguistic dispute concerning the meaning of "exist" or "there is" would be futile, because the proponents of deviant uses of these terms could not offer reasons that are able to override ordinary usage.

At this point, though, the opponent of this Hirsch-style brand of deflationism might disagree about the futility of the metalinguistic exchange. Why would the dispute be *non-futile*? Because, one might argue, ordinary language does not enjoy the privilege Hirsch assigns to it, at least not in the conversational context in which the ontologists are involved.

I wish to argue that the "rules" of the conversational context in which the ontologists are interacting do not assign any special privilege to options that are closer to ordinary language. Let us call this specific conversational context "the philosophy room."[8] It seems characteristic of the philosophy room that, when speakers enter it, at least some relevant assumptions as to which uses are semantically correct according to ordinary language are temporarily suspended. I presume that this is motivated by the fact that philosophers need to have some "semantic leeway" and the necessary freedom to manipulate meanings in order to express ideas that are not already adequately articulated in ordinary language, and that might cause confusion and give rise to (apparent) puzzles. Indeed, it might be argued that an excessive observance of the semantics of ordinary language might be an obstacle to the disentanglement of various problems, thus potentially hindering philosophical progress. For these reasons, suspension of the "semantic privileges" customarily granted to ordinary language might even be encouraged rather than simply tolerated.

These considerations suggest that a potential metalinguistic dispute between ontologists is *non-futile*. For once we appreciate that the dispute is occurring in the philosophy room, we see that somebody like Hirsch is just one player among others, who gives priority to a set of goods, values,

---

[8] Note that there is no assumption here that the philosophers are speaking a language different from ordinary English, like, say, Ontologese. The philosophy room is simply a conversational context, where the philosophers might very well continue to use plain English.

and goals whose consideration should be equal to the consideration given to the goods, values, and goals promoted by his adversary. In this picture, it seems to be specifically allowed by the rules of the game, as it were, that the "non-orthodox" proposal could even eventually override the "orthodox" one. So, it seems to be allowed by the rules of the philosophy room that the considerations of the universalist—or the nihilist or the perdurantist—eventually override common sense, where this implies that it might *not* be futile for the proponents of these views to ascend to the metalinguistic level and argue for their favoured linguistic revisions.

This seems possible in principle given the way some of the key negotiated expressions are actually used. Consider the existential quantifier, expressed as "there is"/"there are." It is commonly acknowledged that the domain of the existential quantifier can be restricted and expanded contextually. For instance, I can say, "There are no beers," implicitly restricting the domain of quantification to the objects in my fridge, and my friend can reply, "No, there are beers," implicitly expanding the domain to the beverages stored in the whole flat, including the cellar. Given that contextual domain restriction and expansion is already part of the actual use, it seems that there would be no obstacles to the manipulation of the domain of the unrestricted existential quantifier in the philosophy room. For instance, it would seem semantically possible that the domain be extended to, for example, unrestricted mereological sums or temporal parts; vice versa, it would seem possible that it be restricted in the manner prescribed by the nihilist, so as to contain only atomic objects and no composite ones. So, given the actual use of "there is," the possibility that the universalist, or nihilist, or perdurantist "there is" will prevail seems realizable in principle.

The upshot so far is that there are reasons to think that the dispute between theorists of composition, once it ascends to the metalinguistic level, is not a futile one, because common sense and ordinary language enjoy no privilege in the philosophy room. Yet, one could rejoin that the metalinguistic dispute is *pointless for other reasons*. Consider, for instance, the arguments each party would presumably bring to the table in order to defend his favoured option. As we have seen, these considerations could have to do with the promotion of certain theoretical virtues, such as avoidance of vagueness, non-arbitrariness, parsimony, and so on. The objector could then argue that the dispute is pointless because there is no way of deciding which virtue matters the most, and hence which view should prevail (see, e.g., Bennett 2009). This remains an open avenue, and I shall not address arguments to this effect in this paper. What should be noticed, however, is that an attempt to undermine the material-composition debate would seem to benefit more from non-semantic considerations, such as considerations of epistemic underdetermination, than from considerations that have to do with the mere verbality of the dispute. Similar remarks hold if we suppose that the participants in the metalinguistic debate try to settle which option is best by offering (putative) evidence of the greater

joint-carvingness of their favoured languages. As we have seen, the objector may declare herself at a loss when it comes to making sense of talk of joint-carvingness. I shall not venture an assessment of this move, leaving this path open as well. Suffice it to notice that this move too is independent of considerations having to do with the dispute's merely verbal nature. Once again, the road to a more decisive undermining of the debate would not seem to go via a demonstration of its being a merely verbal dispute (be it faultless or faulty) but rather seem to go via other kinds of allegations—pertaining to epistemic indeterminacy or a suspicion of meaninglessness.

6. Conclusion

The goal of this paper is to assess the dialectical role of objections that target certain ontological disputes by alleging that these disputes are merely verbal. Critiques have been raised according to which the composition or persistence debates are either *faultless* merely verbal disputes or *faulty* merely verbal disputes. In both cases, I have argued that even successfully establishing that the debate is merely verbal in the sense spelled out by Jenkins's (MVD+) characterisation is not decisive. Further work needs to be done by the deflationist in order to undermine the debate. If the debate is considered merely verbal and faultless, the critic should aim at undermining the idea that semantic faultlessness is contrasted by the metaphysical superiority of one linguistic option over the others. If the debate is considered merely verbal and faulty, the critic needs to deal with forms of resistance to this contention that question the privilege of ordinary language. In both cases, the crux of the question lies not in the dispute's verbality per se but rather in some other presumed defect, which is also potentially independent of the very obtaining of a merely verbal dispute.

Institut für Philosophie (room C0208)
Universität Wien
Universitätstrasse 7
1010 Vienna
Austria
delia.belleri@univie.ac.at

Acknowledgments

References

Balcerak Jackson, Brendan. 2014. "Verbal Disputes and Substantiveness." *Erkenntnis* 79, no. 1:31–54.

Bennett, Karen. 2009. "Composition, Colocation, and Metaontology." In *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*, edited by David John Chalmers, David Manley, and Ryan Wasserman, 38–76. New York: Oxford University Press.

Carmichael, Chad. 2015. "Toward a Commonsense Answer to the Special Composition Question." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 93, no. 3:475–90.

Cartwright, Richard. 1975. "Scattered Objects." In *Analysis and Metaphysics*, edited by Keith Lehrer, 153–71. Dordrecht: Riedel.

Chalmers, David John. 2011. "Verbal Disputes." *Philosophical Review* 120, no. 4:515–66.

Hirsch, Eli. 2005. "Physical-Object Ontology, Verbal Disputes, and Common Sense." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 70:67–98.

———. 2008. "Ontological Arguments: Interpretive Charity and Quantifier Variance." In *Contemporary Debates in Metaphysics*, edited by John Hawthorne, Ted Sider, and Dean Zimmerman, 367–81. Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell.

———. 2009. "Ontology and Alternative Languages." In *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*, edited by David John Chalmers, David Manley, and Ryan Wasserman, 231–59. New York: Oxford University Press.

Jenkins, Carrie. 2014. "Merely Verbal Disputes." *Erkenntnis* 79, no. 1:11–30.

King, Jeffrey, and Jason Stanley. 2005. "Semantics, Pragmatics, and the Role of Semantic Content." In *Semantics Versus Pragmatics*, edited by Zoltan Szabó, 111–64. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lewis, David Kellogg. 1986. *On the Plurality of Worlds*. Oxford: Blackwell.

———. 1991. *Parts of Classes*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Manley, David. 2009. "Introduction." In *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*, edited by David John Chalmers, David Manley, and Ryan Wasserman, 1–39. New York: Oxford University Press.

Merricks, Trenton. 2001. *Objects and Persons*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rea, Michael C. 1998. "In Defense of Mereological Universalism." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 58, no. 2:347–60.

Sidelle, Alan. 1997. "Four-Dimensionalism." *Philosophical Review* 106, no. 2:197–231.

———. 2001. *Four Dimensionalism: An Ontology of Persistence and Time*. Oxford University Press.

———. 2002. "Is There a True Metaphysics of Material Objects?" *Philosophical Issues* 12, no. 1:118–45.

———. 2006. "Quantifiers and Temporal Ontology." *Mind* 115:75–97.

———. 2007. "The Method of Verbal Dispute." *Philosophical Topics* 35, nos. 1–2:83–113.

Stanley, Jason. 2000. "Context and Logical Form." *Linguistics and Philosophy* 23:391–424.

Szabó, Zoltan Gendler. 2001. "Adjectives in Context." In *Perspectives on Semantics, Pragmatics, and Discourse*, edited by Istvan Kenesei and Robert M. Harrish, 119–39. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

———. 2008. "The Distinction Between Semantics and Pragmatics." In *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Language*, edited by Ernest Lepore and Barry C. Smith, 361–92. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Thomasson, Amie L. 2017. "Metaphysical Disputes and Metalinguistic Negotiation." *Analytic Philosophy* 58, no. 1:1–28.

Unger, Peter. 1979. "There Are No Ordinary Things." *Synthese* 41, no. 2:117–54.

Van Cleve, James. 1986. "Mereological Essentialism, Mereological Conjunctivism, and Identity Through Time." *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 11, no. 1:141–56.

van Inwagen, Peter. 1990. *Material Beings.* Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.

Vermeulen, Inga. 2018. "Verbal Disputes and the Varieties of Verbalness." *Erkenntnis* 83, no. 2:331–48.

Wheeler, Samuel C. 1979. "On That Which Is Not." *Synthese* 41, no. 2:155–73.