

University of Tartu
Institute of Philosophy and Semiotics

METALINGUISTIC DENIAL AND ITS FELICITY CONDITIONS

Master's Thesis in Philosophy

Gabriele Celli

Supervisor: Alexander Stewart
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0. Introduction

In a conversation, speakers might have to object to the meaning of an expression to communicate their position about a topic at issue. For instance, in a conversation about torture in which some of the speakers consider common ground that waterboarding is not torture, a speaker who does not believe so might decide to object to the meaning of “torture” in use.

A speech act commonly used to object to information believed to be shared by speakers in a conversation is called “denial” (Geurts, 1998). I call denials that object to information about language “metalinguistic denials”. The aim of this paper is to describe the effect of a metalinguistic denial on a context and what has to be in place in that context for a speaker to perform a metalinguistic denial, i.e. the felicity conditions of this act (Back and Harnish, 1979). To do so, I will frame metalinguistic denial in a model of conversations theorized by Stalnaker ((Stalnaker, 1998); (Stalnaker, 1999); (Stalnaker, 2002)).

This paper is composed of four sections. In the first section, I present two examples of metalinguistic denials in similar contexts. The two metalinguistic denials behave differently: whilst one is perceivable as appropriate there, the other one is not. I argue that the difference between these two denials must be encoded in the felicity conditions of metalinguistic denial.

To do so, in the second section, I describe the framework I use to represent denial in general. First, I describe how information is encoded in the model of conversation I adopt. Then, I model the felicity conditions of assertions to juxtapose them later with the felicity conditions of denial. After that, I determine the felicity conditions of denial in general.

In the third section, I argue for the introduction into this framework of contents that encode pieces of information determining the relation between the meanings of two expressions. I call these contents “metalinguistic propositions”. Then, I model the effect of metalinguistic denial on a body of information accepted in a conversation.

Finally, in the fourth section, I determine the felicity conditions of metalinguistic denial. I argue that, in a context, for a metalinguistic denial to be felicitous in a conversation, a proposition encoding an alternative use of an expression has to be in the common ground of the conversation. Otherwise, the metalinguistic denial has to be followed by an explanation introducing that proposition.

1. Metalinguistic Denial: the Examples at Issue.

1.1 *What is Metalinguistic Denial?*

The literature on denial ((Geurts, 1998) ; (Spenader & Maier, 2009)) describes denial as a kind of speech act, that is, an action performed by a speaker, through the utterance of a sentence, whose purpose is to object to information that is common ground among speakers. Based on

this notion, in this section, first, I describe what a metalinguistic denial is. Then, I present two examples of metalinguistic denial that behave differently under the same conditions: one is felicitous while the other one is not. I will spend the rest of the paper providing an analysis that accounts for the difference between these two cases: first, modelling the behaviour of metalinguistic denial. Then, determining its felicity conditions.

A metalinguistic denial is a denial that objects to metalinguistic information, i.e. information about the language used, which is mutually accepted by speakers in a conversation. By “accepted” I mean a non-factive propositional attitude that does not entail that what is accepted is also believed (Stalnaker, 2002 p.716).¹ Depending on how we encode metalinguistic information in our model of conversation, we will model the concept of metalinguistic denial differently. For now, let us consider “a piece of information” as a representation of something treated as a fact by speakers in a conversation. In section 2, I define precisely the effects of denial on a context and how information is encoded in the model of conversations I adopt.

In this paper, I model metalinguistic information about expressions used in a context. I focus on expressions of type $\langle e, t \rangle$, that is, expressions the meanings of which can be modelled as functions from objects to truth values. The set of objects which will be mapped to “true” by the meaning of an expression “X” is called “the extension of ‘X’ ”. Metalinguistic information is information used in a context by speakers to determine the extension of “X” there.

When a speaker uses an expression “X” in a conversation, that person will adopt certain criteria to determine what counts as X there (Plunkett & Sundell, 2013, p.15). These criteria determine the meaning of “X” in a certain context. Informally, we can describe them as the conditions that have to be met by an entity to be in the extension of “X” in a context.

For instance, what falls into the extension of “fruit” might differ in different contexts: in a biology classroom, a criterion for being a fruit is to be an entity that grows from a flowering plant whose purpose is to enclose its seeds. In a kitchen, however, some entities that are considered fruits in the biology classroom will fall out of the extension of “fruit”; for example, while cooking, people generally consider tomatoes or cucumbers as falling in the extension of “vegetable” (not of “fruit”) since that is “an advantage to our culinary practices and gustatory tradition” (Plunkett & Sundell , 2013, p. 22). Due to different uses of the word “fruit”, in different contexts speakers might have different criteria to determine what falls into the extension of that expression.

Usually, among competent speakers, there is at least a partial agreement on what counts as X, or better on what does not count as X, in a certain context. However, there are cases in

¹ It could be that no participant actually believes a piece of information but they all accept it as true since they all think that the other speakers accepted that.

which speakers find themselves in a state of disagreement on the criteria in place, or believed to be in place, even if they share the same set of information about the world in that context. In these cases, speakers might decide to begin a normative metalinguistic dispute (Plunkett & Sundell, 2013, p. 15) which, although it may seem to be about facts of the world (Plunkett & Sundell, 2019, pp. 17-21), actually expresses different views of the speakers on how language should be used in the conversation they are taking part in. When it is so, generally, speakers will use metalinguistic denials to object to information about the language used. Let me provide an example drawn from Plunkett (2015), slightly modified²:

Secretariat Case

At a sports radio show, two speakers A and B are listing the fifty greatest athletes of the 20th century. They begin a dispute about whether Secretariat, a famous racing horse, should be on that list. Both speakers share the same set of facts about sports, horses and Secretariat: how many races he won, how fast he used to run, etc.

- 1) *a. A: Secretariat should be in the list.*
 b. B: Secretariat should not be in the list. Horses cannot be athletes.

As we can see, the disagreement between A and B is not substantial, i.e. speakers do not believe different facts about Secretariat that, given a certain notion of athlete, will affect the presence of Secretariat in the list. B is not providing new information about the world with her speech act since we postulated that both speakers share the same information about sports/horses/Secretariat. B is providing new information about expressions used in this conversation.

A and B are arguing over the criteria used to determine what counts as an athlete in this context. B is saying that, being a horse, Secretariat cannot be considered an athlete. Since it is unlikely that B holds some grudge against horses as a species of the animal kingdom, we can safely infer from (1b) that B is implying that entities described by the word “athlete” cannot be nonhumans. Since the extension of “athlete” and the extension of “horse” are sets of objects that satisfy all the criteria for, respectively, being athletes and being horses, we can say that, for B, the set of athletes does not intersect with the set of horses: as we can infer, she is claiming that the set of athletes is a subset of the set of humans and the set of horses and the set of humans do not intersect. For this reason, after (1b), being a human is a requirement that has to be met to be an athlete. In this sense, (1b) is used to make a metalinguistic claim: one of the criteria for being athletes should exclude nonhuman beings from the extension of “athlete”.

² First introduced by Ludlow (2008).

If speakers agree to change the criteria for being in the extension of “athlete”, then the meaning of “athlete” will be a function different from the one of “athlete” before the performance of (1b). Modifying the set of criteria determining if something counts as an athlete, might have an effect on the extension of “athlete” or not: for instance, if there were no nonhuman entities in this context, the extension of “athlete” would have stayed the same before and after (1b). However, since a set of criteria determine what can be in the extension of an expression, modifying the relation between the extension of athlete and its supersets will cause a variation in what can be in the extension of “athlete”, and that will modify the meaning for “athlete”: B is saying that, in that context, they should be using “athlete” in a way that exclude nonhuman beings even if they are not in a world in which there are currently nonhuman athletes. In other words, she is saying something like “it is not possible for a horse to be an athlete for the way in which we use ‘athlete’ here”.

Briefly, in (1), B is arguing that in this conversation the extension of “athlete” should be a set that excludes nonhuman beings from it, rejecting one of the conversational criteria for being an athlete that was accepted before. To do so, B proposes a new criterion for “athlete” performing the denial (1b), inconsistent with information already accepted—or believed as such—in a conversation.

1.2 Problem at Issue.

I noted that if we slightly modify the Secretariat Case, then the metalinguistic denial seems to lack the information required for it to be a cooperative attempt at communicating something. Let me show this with an example.

Owens Case

At a sports radio show, two speakers A and B are listing the fifty greatest athletes of the 20th century. They begin a dispute about whether Owens, a famous runner, should be on that list. Both speakers share the same set of facts about sports, athletes and Owens: how many races he won, where does he come from, how tall is he, how fast he used to run, etc.

2) *a. A: Owens should be in the list.*

b. B: Owens should not be in the list. Runners cannot be athletes.

In this case, intuitively, it is clearly the case that (2b) fails to provide information that would make the content of this speech act acceptable by other speakers in this conversation. My idea is that that is so because we cannot figure out what way of shaping the meaning of “athlete” or “runners” B is advocating for, if we rely solely on the content denied. In other words, we cannot find an answer to the questions *What does B think an athlete is?* or *What does B think a runner is?* In section 4 I formulate a hypothesis of why this is so, providing reasons in favour of it. I maintain that, contrary to standard denial, for a metalinguistic denial to be

acceptable in a context, speakers need to infer whether there are other criteria denied by that act. The difference between the Secretariat Case and the Owens Case revolves around whether in that context a further criterion that is being denied by B's denial can be inferred. I argue that, if speakers do not share the means to distinguish two alternative uses of an expression "X" in a context, a metalinguistic denial about an expression the meaning of which depends on a specific use of "X" will not be considered acceptable if it is not followed by an explanation providing further information. In other words, the content of that act will be neither accepted nor rejected. I now use "explanation" with its intuitive meaning. In section 4, I will determine a more formal definition of this expression.

Let me provide two further examples to show how the infelicity of certain metalinguistic denials is systematic. The problem that arises with the Owens/Secretariat Cases is strictly linked with the relationship between the content that is being negated and the context: if we find a reason why a content might be contested in a certain context, then no further information needs to be provided after the metalinguistic denial. For instance, let us consider the Racist Case, below.

Racist Case

At a nazi radio show, two speakers A and B are listing the fifty greatest athletes of the 20th century. They begin a dispute about whether Jesse Owens, a famous runner, should be on that list. Both speakers share the same set of facts about Owens: how many races he won, where does he come from, how tall is he, how fast he used to run, etc.

- 3) a. A: Owens should be in the list.
- b. B: Owens should not be in the list. Negroes cannot be athletes.

Although we, and history, obviously disagree with B, this is a Nazi radio show. In this context, we do not need any further explanation to evaluate her speech act. It is plain the way in which we should re-determine the meaning of "athlete", according to B.

Instead below, in the Fungi Case, we see how the felicity of a metalinguistic denial is strictly linked with the linguistic practices that should be in place in a certain context. In this case, we can see how an objection that would be felicitous in a biology classroom will probably be considered infelicitous in that context.

Fungi Case

At a restaurant, two people A and B are looking at their menus. They both share the same set of facts about the world.

- 4) a.A: *What vegetables are you ordering with your chicken? I was thinking porcini mushrooms...*
- b.B: *Mushrooms are not vegetables.*

B is saying that, in this context, mushrooms are not in the extension of “vegetable”. In a biology classroom, B’s utterance would be felicitous and probably she would not have to provide further information after her speech act: although there are still detractors of this notion, it is believed that fungi are not plants –thus, mushrooms cannot be vegetables. However, the criteria for using “vegetable” in a restaurant are different from the ones adopted in a biology classroom since expressions are used for other means there. In a restaurant, B’s speech act would be infelicitous if B does not provide further information for speakers to evaluate whether to accept or reject her speech act.

Briefly, there is a difference between (1b) and (2b) that makes the former acceptable by speakers and the latter not. In order to show why this is so, in section 2, I describe the model of conversations I use to encode information accepted in a context by speakers and the operations that can be done on that information with speech acts. With this model, it will be possible for us to describe the effects of a metalinguistic denial on a conversation and determine the difference between (1b) and (2b) in that context that works for cases of metalinguistic denial in general.

2. Felicity Conditions and a Framework for Modelling Conversations.

2.1 Stalnaker’s Framework and Assertions.

In this section, I represent the effects of denial in a framework for modelling conversations is based on Stalnaker’s work ((Stalnaker, 1998); (Stalnaker, 1999); (Stalnaker, 2002); (Stalnaker, 2004)) to determine the felicity conditions of metalinguistic denial.

In subsection 2.1, I identify the context of a conversation with its common ground and I describe the effect of assertions on it. Then, I describe what “felicity conditions” means in this framework and I outline the felicity conditions of assertion. Finally, in 2.2, I juxtapose the behaviour of assertion in this model with the one of denial to describe the felicity conditions of denial.

In the current literature on speech acts ((Kadmon, 2001), (Stalnaker, 2002), (Asher and Lascarides, 2003), (Stokke, 2015) etc...), the context of a conversation is partially determined as the corpus of pieces of information that are accepted (for the purpose of the conversation) and believed as accepted by all the speakers, and believed to be believed as accepted by all the speakers, etc. That corpus is called the “common ground of a conversation” (hereafter, CG) (Stalnaker, 2002 p.716). Identifying a context with its CG is sufficient for our purposes. The CG of a conversation is composed of three kinds of information: background information, i.e. information about the world, metalinguistic information and information conveyed with a speech act previously performed in that context. Information is encoded in the CG of a conversation as sets of possible worlds in which a certain piece of information is the case. These

sets are called “propositions”. The propositions that compose a CG are called “presuppositions”. Sometimes for the content of a speech act to enter a CG of a conversation, some specific presuppositions need to be put into the CG as well. If these presuppositions are not present in the CG and there is no piece of information there inconsistent with them, then, if that content is accepted by the speakers, it will introduce these presuppositions into the CG as well. This process is known as *accommodation* (Lewis, 1979) (Stalnaker, 2002).

Let us now describe how denials and assertions operate on information in a CG. Stalnaker (1999) maintains that a conversation is the common attempt of speakers partaking in it to discover the features of the world they live in. To do so, speakers need to locate the actual world, reducing the set of worlds that might be the actual one. In a conversation, those worlds are the ones in the intersection set of the CG, called “Context Set”(CS). The main way in which speakers reduce the number of worlds in the CS is by performing *assertions*. An assertion is an utterance of a sentence expressing a proposition α whose purpose is to propose the introduction of α in the CG (Stalnaker, 1999) (Karttunen, 1973) (Karttunen, 1974) (Stokke & Michaelson, 2020). If α is accepted in the CG, it will rule out all the worlds in the CS in which α is false. More formally,

Definition 1. The Effect of an Assertion on a CG.

If C is the CG of a conversation, and $c(\delta)$ is the update of C with a proposition δ expressed by an assertion, then

$$c(\delta) = c \cap \delta$$

is the effect of an assertion expressing δ on C .

In this framework, the felicity conditions of a speech act are the conditions that have to hold in a CG to make an occurrence of a speech act acceptable.

An unacceptable speech act is an act allegedly incomplete or odd that puzzles the speakers of a conversation. That is, an unacceptable speech act cannot perform the action it is apt to perform, and, for that reason, speakers do not know whether to reject or accept the content of that act in the CG. For instance, an act is infelicitous if speakers cannot evaluate properly whether the content of that act is the case or not. It might be rejected for that reason (i.e for the impossibility to evaluate its content properly), or it might elicit a question like *What do you mean?*

The felicity conditions of an act are determined by *i*) propositions already (or not) in a CG, *ii*) the expected effect of the act being performed and *iii*) the proposition(s) expressed with an act. For instance, an acceptable assertion cannot entail information inconsistent with the content of any presupposition.

Otherwise, the intersection between that assertion and the CS would be the empty set, a set with no element in it and, thus, with which the actual world is incompatible. In other words, a context in which there is no way to determine the actual world. Furthermore, the purpose of an assertion is to introduce a new proposition into the CG of a conversation; that way, it will reduce the possible worlds in the CS of a conversation. Therefore, an assertion is also infelicitous if it proposes to introduce a proposition already in the CG.³

Definition 2: Felicity conditions of Assertion.

An assertion expressing a proposition δ performed in a context with CG C is felicitous if

- i) δ is consistent with all propositions in C .*
- ii) δ is not already in C .*

However, the fact that an assertion is acceptable does not mean it will not be rejected by speakers for its content: speakers might believe that, although acceptable, that assertion is false.

2.2 The effects and the felicity conditions of denial.

Reducing a set of possible worlds is not the only conversational move that speakers can do. If a speaker wants to object to information already in the CG, she most commonly will have to perform a denial, like (5b)⁴.

- 5) a. *King Gustav is not worried.*
- b. *King Gustav is worried.*

In (5), first the proposition expressed by (5a) was proposed by a speaker to be part of the CG. Then, if (5a) is accepted, speakers will presuppose that (5a)'s content is the case in all worlds in the CG, i.e. that they are in a world in which King Gustav is not worried. To object verbally to a content in the CG, a speaker will have to utter something that conveys a content that explicitly contradicts it, as (5b) shows. If that denial is accepted, it will correct the CG, replacing the

³ There is a further felicity condition of assertion: the content of an assertion has to be pertinent with the general purposes of the conversation. Let us consider (N)

- N) a. Gabriel is quite quiet today.
- b. I heard he got a bad grade on his last paper.
- c. A bear weight is approximately equal to four-hundred thirty-two ducks.

In this context, (Nc) will probably be rejected as infelicitous. What does the weight of bears in ducks have to do with Gabriel's state? However, that assertion might be consistent with information in the CG. I maintain that, to represent why (Nc) is intuitively inappropriate in this context, we need to represent in our model something more than information in the CG. To draw the specific felicity conditions of different speech acts we need to encode in our current framework the purposes that a conversation aims to reach and how speech acts contribute to reaching these purposes. To do so, I would have to introduce Roberts' Question Under Discussion framework (Roberts, 2004)(Roberts, 2012)(Stokke & Schoubye, 2015). However, since I do not think that pertinence is relevant to model the felicity conditions of denial, I will not introduce this framework. I put in the bibliography the three papers quoted here, if interested in modelling a more satisfying definition of the felicity conditions for assertions.

⁴ There are other factors, like prosodic focus, that indicate that a speech act is a denial. However, for the sake of this argument, it is not necessary to introduce them here. Furthermore, (5a) and (5b) do not need to be adjacent.

denied content with its negation, which is the set of worlds in which the proposition denied is *not* the case. More formally, the following is the effect of a denial conveying $\neg\beta$ on C .

Definition 3: The Effect of a Denial on a CG.

If β, ϵ, α are presuppositions, ϵ and α entail β and c is a CS, of a CG C , such that $c = \beta \cap \epsilon \cap \alpha$, then

$$c(\neg\beta) = \neg\beta \cap \neg\epsilon \cap \neg\alpha = c'$$

As we can see in Def.2, since β is a proposition in c , then, if accepted, a denial conveying $\neg\beta$ will replace β with $\neg\beta$ in the CG. I used “conveying” as an umbrella term that can be read as “expressing $\neg\beta$ ”, “entailing $\neg\beta$ ” and “presupposing $\neg\beta$ ”. Since ϵ and α entail β , these two propositions will be replaced with their negation as well, being their superset not the case. Since a denial replaces a proposition p in the intersection of the CG with one that needs to share no worlds with the former, i.e. $\neg p$ or a proposition entailed to $\neg p$, the resulting CS will not share any world with the previous one. We can now model the felicity conditions of denial.

Definition 4: The Felicity conditions of Denial.

A denial expressing a proposition δ performed in a context with CG C is felicitous if δ is inconsistent with at least one proposition in C .

Denial has a further function, crucial for our analysis of metalinguistic denial: to correct contexts in which speakers believe different propositions to be in the CG. These kinds of contexts are called “defective contexts” (Stalnaker, 1999 p.85). According to Stalnaker, defective contexts are not “problematic” for speakers. That is so because, the more a conversation continues, the more speakers will have chances to either correct or accommodate information wrongly believed as shared among them and get to a non-defective context - or a context “close enough” to be non-defective for the purposes of the conversation.⁵

If a speaker A expresses a proposition needing a further proposition in the CG which is not accepted by other speakers, she can be corrected with a denial that negates the latter proposition. In this case, the denial does not target any proposition in the CG before A’s speech act, but it targets propositions that are believed to be in the CG by A. Let me explain how it works with an example.

- 6) a. A. *Did you hear the news? The King of France is bald!*
b. B. *The King of France isn’t bald – there is no King of France!*

In (6), B decided not to accommodate the proposition

⁵ It has been argued that there might be several cases in which defective contexts cannot “correct themselves” in the way Stalnaker thought they would. This paper does not focus on this issue. If interested in this discussion, see Peet, Andrew (forthcoming).

ω) *There is a King of France*

which has to hold for (6a) to be accepted in the CG. A assumes that either (ω) is in the CG of the conversation or it is compatible with the CG of the conversation. Let us assume that A believed that (ω) was background information that can be safely assumed as shared. If we conceptualize acceptance as “treating a proposition as true in a conversation”, when B does not accept (ω) her denial does not operate on the CG of the conversation since there is not a unique CG. It will negate a proposition in A’s believed CG (let us call it CG_A) making CG_B and CG_A either merge into the same CG, or become “close enough”. I will call the different CGs that are believed to be the one of the conversation in a defective context, “spurious CGs”. In cases such as (6), we can no longer think of denial as having an effect on the CG of the conversation since, if people believe as commonly accepted different propositions, there is not a single CG of the conversation but several spurious ones. When it is so, although the mechanism of denial stays the same, the proposition expressed by the denial has to be inconsistent with a proposition in CG_A .

Briefly, the effects of a denial targeting a proposition not already accepted as the case by all speakers are the ones described with Def.3. However, in cases where the context is defective, the denial will not object to a proposition in the CG but to a proposition in one or more spurious CG_N s where N is a placeholder for an individual constant representing a speaker in the model used. That way, the purpose of a denial performed by a speaker N will be to make the other spurious CGs more akin to the CG_N ⁶.

As we have seen in the previous paragraphs, an assertion updates a CS reducing the range of worlds candidates to be the actual one. Denial instead functions as a correction of a context. It operates a shift from a CS to another one with no worlds in common with the former. For this reason, the proposition expressed by a denial has to be inconsistent with one or more propositions in the CG. In case a denial is performed in a defective context, then that denial has to be inconsistent with one or more propositions in one or more spurious CGs.

However, we also have to take into account that, in a conversation, it might be the case that a speaker X denies a proposition p and X is the only one considering common ground that p . When it is so, all speakers besides X believe that no one believes p to be in the CG. In this case, X is performing a denial for something that is consistent with all the spurious CGs besides her CG_X . X ’s denial will not be acceptable in this context, since for each speaker apart from X , the content of the denial is just an update of the context, and that clashes with the contrastive feature of denial: a denial has to object to something. Since all the CGs except the CG_X are

⁶ I am assuming that N is being cooperative, that is, that N ’s intention is to correct something that she believes to be false. In other words, I am assuming that N is not lying.

consistent with p , X's denial will puzzle the other speakers – no one but X will understand what is going on, i.e., no one will understand why an attempt of correcting a CG is being made.

Furthermore, there might be cases in which a speaker A objects to a proposition p that is in the spurious CG of a speaker B even though B did not express that p . For instance, it might be that A knows B well enough to know that B believes that p is in the CG of the conversation, and so A performs a denial conveying $\neg p$, inconsistent with the CG_B . In these cases, speakers besides A and B might be puzzled by the denial, since they might not understand that an attempt of correcting a spurious CG is being made. This does not happen in cases such as (6), where speakers can perfectly understand the disagreement between A and B even if both (ω) and (ω) are compatible with their CGs.

Briefly if a denial expressing a proposition p is being performed, p is inconsistent with propositions in some spurious CGs and some speakers do not recognize that p is inconsistent with any of these CGs, then it is arguable that the denial is felicitous, since some speakers will not consider that act acceptable. I do not think that, for our current purposes, we need to distinguish between cases in which all speakers understand that the context is defective from cases in which that does not happen. However, let us assume that, for an act to be felicitous, *all* speakers have to find it acceptable. If that is so, in cases in which speakers are in a defective context, a denial objecting to a proposition p is not felicitous if not all speakers understand that p is inconsistent with some CGs of the conversation. We can now re-determine the felicity conditions of denial.

Definition 5: The Felicity conditions of Denial (with defective contexts)

- i) A denial expressing a proposition δ performed in a non-defective context with CG C is felicitous if δ is inconsistent with at least one proposition in C .*
- ii) A denial expressing a proposition δ in a defective context with different spurious CG_n s is felicitous if*
 - ii.i) δ is inconsistent with at least one proposition in one or more CG_n s. and*
 - ii.ii) δ is recognized to be inconsistent with one or more CG_n s by all speakers.*

Even though Def.5 will be helpful for our work in section 4, in section 3.1 I will focus mainly on non-defective contexts to avoid making the argument too complicated.

3. Metalinguistic Propositions and Metalinguistic Denial

3.1 How to model information about the language used.

In section 2, I showed how information is encoded in the CG of a conversation and the effects of assertions and denials on the CG and the CS respectively. In this section, I describe how to model the content objected to in a metalinguistic denial. Then, in 3.2, I argue that the felicity conditions of denial are not sufficient to account for metalinguistic denial.

To describe the behaviour of a denial that objects to the meaning of an expression, we need to determine how to represent pieces of information about expressions in our framework. Pieces of information might become part of the CG in different ways. Some are there from the beginning of a conversation. Others are expressed by the meaning of a sentence uttered, implicated, accommodated etc. However, they are all encoded as propositions. These metalinguistic pieces of information will be propositions as well.

As I said in section 1, the meanings of expressions I am focusing on in this paper are functions of type $\langle e, t \rangle$, that is, functions from objects to truth values. For instance, the meaning of “mother” is a function that, if fed with Medea, the filicide wife of Jason in the Greek literary tradition, will yield the value “true”. This is because Medea is in the extension of “mother”.

In different contexts, entities that can be in the extension of an expression can vary according to the criteria that speakers intuitively accept as shared in that context. These criteria determine what can be in the extension of that expression and what cannot. Let me provide an example. “close the door” might have different meanings in different contexts, depending on whether the criteria in place require that a door has to be locked or not to count as closed. Then, in a context in which two interlocutors saw the same event of a person A slamming the door behind her and going away, the two might disagree on what are the criteria in place determining whether A “closed the door”. These criteria are an informal way to explain a certain degree of context sensitivity that arises in natural language, philosophically known since the time of Wittgenstein: an expression might mean different things in different contexts based on customs and purposes of the conversation.

To model the behavior of metalinguistic denials such as the one in the Secretariat Case, we have to encode these criteria. This way, we can represent how people can modify the meaning of an expression through their speech acts. As we saw in 2.1, speakers do not know which world they are in and, intuitively, they do not know the exact extension of the expressions they use (for instance, they do not know who all the mothers are). I maintain that the criteria that speakers use to determine the extension of an expression can be encoded as propositions. Each one of these propositions represents a feature that all entities have in the extension of that expression in each world in the CS. I call propositions that represent the criteria determining what can fall into the extension of an expression in a CS “metalinguistic propositions”.

I model each criterion as the relation between the extensions of two expressions: one expression has the metalinguistic proposition partially determining its extension, that is, determining a feature that all or some elements in its extension should have. The extension of the other one intersects with/includes the former. For instance, since one criterion to be a

mother is to have children, we might model that criterion as “For every x , if x is in the extension of ‘mother’, then x is in the extension of ‘has children’ ”.

We might think of encoding all the different criteria about an expression as a single metalinguistic proposition in the CG. For instance, in the Secretariat Case, we might encode all the criteria to be an athlete as a single metalinguistic proposition, a conjunction of each criterion with the others, something like (Φ) .⁷

ϕ) *(for every x , if x is an element in the extension of “athlete”, x is an element in the extension of “good at sport”) and (for every x , if x is an element in the extension of “athlete”, x is an element in the extension of “professional”) and (for some x , if x is an element in the extension of “athlete”, x is an element in the extension of “human being”) and...*

There are two reasons why I do not believe this is the right way of modelling metalinguistic propositions: first, it makes our model too imprecise to describe what happens when a metalinguistic denial is performed. A metalinguistic denial targets a criterion for being in the extension of an expression “X”, then *that* causes the intersection of all criteria for being in the extension of “X” to shift. Clustering all criteria in a single metalinguistic proposition would cause any metalinguistic denial to express something like *this is not the meaning of that expression!*, which is not the right outcome we want our model to produce. For example, in the Secretariat Case, “Horses cannot be athletes!” does not express *just* that that intersection of criteria to be an athlete is not the case, but *specifically* that the criterion encoding the fact that some horses can be athletes is not the case. Second, this solution misdescribes the consequences of a metalinguistic denial. If we encode the intersection of all criteria for being in the extension of “X” as a single metalinguistic proposition p , then we would not have a way to operate on a single criterion with a metalinguistic denial. If we adopt this solution, after any metalinguistic denial negating p , speakers do not share any criterion determining how an entity can be in the extension of “X” only because all criteria are clustered together in a single proposition.

I maintain that in a CG there should be a plurality of metalinguistic propositions about a certain expression. Each metalinguistic proposition will encode a single criterion. That way, speakers can modify the extension of an expression by replacing one or more metalinguistic propositions in that CG.⁸ For instance, to represent exchanges such as (7), we need to have in a spurious CG a content about mothers that can be denied without completely negating all criteria for being a mother – i.e. that mothers have children, that mothers are women etc.

7) *a. A: Beatrice is surely his mother. Her baby looks exactly like her.*

⁷ I add some parentheses to represent more clearly the scope of each quantifier.

⁸ In this paper, I mainly focus on metalinguistic propositions of the form “if...then...” in which the extension of the expression in the antecedent is a superset of the one in the consequent.

b. B: *She cannot be a mother if she abandoned her son!*

In (7), B is not simply saying that the meaning of “mother” in place is not the right one. Furthermore, B’s denial does not compromise the presence in the CG of all criteria to be a mother. With the notion of metalinguistic proposition in place, it is possible for us to model a metalinguistic denial such as (7b): in (7), after (7a) was uttered, metalinguistic propositions like (α) and (β) –among others- either are proposed to be accepted or have to be in the CG of the conversation.

- α) *For every x , if x is an element in the extension of “mother”, x is an element in the extension of “woman”.*
- β) *For every x , if x is an element in the extension of “mother”, x is an element in the extension of “beget a child”.*

Since A and B are talking about Beatrice, I am assuming that in the CG there are some propositions encoding information about Beatrice (who she is, what is her relationship with her child, etc.).

After (7a) is accepted, if the metalinguistic proposition (β) was not already in the CG, (β) is proposed to be accommodated into it. However, B does not accept that (β). Therefore, A and B are in a defective context with two spurious CGs, the CG_A and the CG_B . As we have seen with Def.1 and Def.4, (7b) is proposing to replace (β) with ($\neg\beta$) in the CG_A by providing information inconsistent with (β). Furthermore, with the information conveyed by (7b), B is proposing to introduce a different criterion to determine the extension of “mother” in CG_A , something like (γ), which will exclude Beatrice from the set of mothers.

- γ) *For every x , if x is an element in the extension of “mother”, x is an element in the extension of “legal guardian of a child”.*

Concisely, a metalinguistic proposition defines a feature of objects in the extensions of an expression in all worlds in a CG. It does so by determining the relation between the extension of the expression partially determined by that metalinguistic proposition and the extension of another expression.⁹ However, what is the meaning of “woman”? And the meaning of “beget a child”? But also, what is the meaning of “child”? And how do people know what is the relation between “beget a child” and “child” in that context? With the notion of metalinguistic proposition, we can account for both the relationship that holds between the meaning of

⁹ If we endorse this notion of metalinguistic proposition, there will surely be cases of metalinguistic propositions that encode the relation of expressions whose meaning of which is not a function of type $\langle e, t \rangle$. For instance, since the meaning of the verb “love” is a function of type $\langle e, \langle e, t \rangle \rangle$, i.e. a function from objects to a function from objects to truth values, surely a metalinguistic proposition about “love” will not be represented like we are representing metalinguistic propositions in this paper. I will not tackle this problem here. However, I am confident that, if this notion of metalinguistic proposition is accepted, some work will be done on modelling metalinguistic propositions about functions of type different than $\langle e, t \rangle$.

different expressions and for the variation in meaning that expressions might have in different contexts.

Briefly, metalinguistic propositions relate two expressions, which allow us to encode in our model of conversation the relation that expressions have with each other in natural language. For instance, if in a conversation speakers accept that a bachelor is an unmarried person, and they believe that other speakers believe that information as shared, then, in the CG of that conversation, there will be a metalinguistic presupposition similar to “For all x, if x is in the extension of ‘bachelor’ then x is in the extension of ‘unmarried’”. Since generally competent speakers know how to use the word “bachelor”, probably this metalinguistic proposition is going to be either present or accommodated in all conversations.

Nevertheless, there are metalinguistic propositions that easily vary through contexts. For instance, the CGs of, respectively, a Trans-Exclusionist Radical Feminist conference, an Intersectional Feminist conference, a Biology conference, a conversation between two old men in a café and a conversation between two young people at the same café will probably have different sets of metalinguistic propositions determining the meaning of “woman”, without positing that “woman” is an ambiguous term: all uses of “woman” will be more or less “about” the same thing; across these contexts there will be some common metalinguistic propositions about “woman” and some that are peculiar of each context in place.

Metalinguistic propositions might vary both through the course of a conversation, and between different conversations, depending on the social group of the speakers, their gender, their customs, etc. For instance, let us consider (8).

- 8) *a.A: Immigrants don’t have anything by right. Everything is a privilege for them.*
 b.B: That’s bullshit. Immigrants have rights; we have national and international laws stating so!
 c.A: They cannot have rights, only citizens have rights. What you call rights are just duties and privileges [for them].!

Surely, the CG of (8) contains some metalinguistic propositions that determine roughly what “immigrants” and “rights” mean. However, as we can see, A and B have different beliefs on what these expressions mean that they do not share. (8a) expresses that immigrants do not have rights. So if the content “Immigrants don’t have anything by right” was not already in the CG, it is introduced by that speech act, changing the extension of “immigrants”. With (8b), B underlines that the context is defective and objects to that metalinguistic proposition about “immigrants”, using an explanation to support her claim. Then, with (8c), A tries to defend her claim by modifying the meaning of “right” by replacing a metalinguistic proposition of that expression with another, an attempt to make the meaning of “right” in the conversation more similar to what A thinks “right” means.

In this subsection, I showed that introducing metalinguistic propositions into our models allows us to describe what is being objected to in cases of metalinguistic denial. We can now describe how speech acts such as (8b) correct information in a conversation introducing metalinguistic propositions in our model.

3.2 Metalinguistic Denial.

With metalinguistic propositions in our framework, we can finally determine whether the felicity conditions of denial are sufficient to account for metalinguistic denial. Let us recall the Owens Case, now (9).

Owens Case

At a sports radio show, two speakers A and B are listing the fifty greatest athletes of the 20th century. They begin a dispute about whether Owens, a famous runner, should be on that list. Both speakers share the same set of facts about Owens: how many races he won, where does he come from, how tall is he, how fast he used to run, etc.

- 9) a. A: Owens should be in the list.
 b. B: Owens should not be in the list. Runners cannot be athletes.

Since “the list” is the list of fifty greatest athletes of the 20th century, a precondition for Owens to be on the list is that Owens is in the extension of “athlete”. Hence, for (9a) to be felicitous, a proposition encoding the fact that Owens is an athlete has to be consistent with information in the CG of the conversation. In this case, Owens has to be, in all the worlds in the CG, in the extension of “athlete” and in the extensions of the expressions that, according to the metalinguistic propositions in place, are supersets of the extension of “athlete”.

For instance, I think we can safely assume that Owens has to be a sporty person, a professional, etc.¹⁰ Owens is also in the extension of “runner” since Jesse Owens is a sprinter, which is a kind of runner. Therefore, a metalinguistic proposition like (ε) that encodes the relation between “runner” and “athlete” either has to be in the CG, or it has to be compatible with propositions in the CG.

- ε) *For every x, if x is in the extension of “runner” then “x” is in the extension of “athlete”.*

However, B performed (9b), which means (9) is a defective context: (9a) is consistent with the CG_A, but not with the CG_B. (9b) negates the metalinguistic proposition (ε) in the CG_A. If (9b) is accepted in this context, then a proposition like (ζ), that entails (¬ε), will be added in the CG_A and (¬ε) will replace ε.

¹⁰ There might be cases of metalinguistic propositions like “if x is in the extension of ‘athlete’ then x is *not* in the extension of...”. However, for the sake of simplicity, let us forget about them in this paper. I do not think that they are theoretically important for my argument and to include them will further complicate this framework.

- ς) *It is not the case that, for some x , if x is in the extension of “runner” then x is in the extension of “athlete”.*

Then Owens will not be in the extension of athlete since “athlete” will not have any intersection with “runner” anymore and the CG_B and the CG_A will merge i.e. become the same CG , or become “close enough”. Therefore, a metalinguistic denial behaves like a standard denial and satisfies its felicity conditions.

However, this still does not explain our intuitions about what happens in the Owens Case: it is not acceptable to say that runners cannot be athletes without providing reasons why this is so, since the fact that runners are athletes does not seem in any way problematic. The same cannot be said about the Secretariat Case, repeated here as (10).

Secretariat Case

At a sports radio show, two speakers A and B are listing the fifty greatest athletes of the 20th century. They begin a dispute about whether Secretariat, a famous racing horse, should be on that list. Both speakers share the same set of facts about sports, horses and Secretariat: how many races he won, how fast he used to run, etc.

- 10) a. A: *Secretariat should be in the list.*
 b. B: *Secretariat should not be in the list. Horses cannot be athletes.*

Although we might not share the idea, we can understand why someone might not consider horses athletes: because they are not humans. Since we postulated that in the Owens Case and the Secretariat Case, speakers share the same set of propositions about the world, (10b) negates one or more metalinguistic propositions representing the criteria determining what entities can be in the extension of an expression. In this case, the metalinguistic propositions denied are two: the one determining that horses can be athletes and the one determining that nonhuman beings can be athletes, although B is just explicitly denying the former one.

In the Owens Case, the criterion denied is the one determining that runners have to be athletes. However, in this case, something feels odd, that is, speakers have to have more information to determine whether to accept or reject the metalinguistic denial. Obviously, it feels odd to *us*, but I think our intuitions correctly represent the ones of the speakers, if we try to put ourselves in the place of a speaker hearing “runners cannot be athletes” in this context. In the next section, I determine the felicity conditions of metalinguistic denial in a way that accounts for this fact.

3.3 A possible Objection to metalinguistic propositions: regress.

An objection that might arise with this way of encoding information about language is that we risk entering into a regress. As when children keep asking “and what is the meaning of *this?*” *ad libitum*, we risk having infinite metalinguistic propositions in a CG.

To avoid that, I think we can safely assume that competent speakers do not need to have in the CG metalinguistic propositions about all the expressions in the language when they converse. They will just believe as shared the metalinguistic propositions that they need to fulfil the purposes of that conversation. For instance, in a conversation about sea-pollution there might be a certain metalinguistic proposition determining the meaning of “fish” in a way that is not so fine-grained that requires metalinguistic propositions about several “technical” expressions associated with fishes to be in place there. There, if speakers are just chatting about sea pollution, they might even use “fish” in a way that includes aquatic mammals in its extension – without for this reason believing that aquatic mammals are fishes. They simply do not need to believe that more specific information about fishes is shared in the conversation since to exclude or include aquatic mammals in the set of fishes does not matter for the purposes of the conversation. With this assumption, we do not risk an infinite chain of metalinguistic propositions in place in the CG: speakers will determine more or less precisely what information about language has to be in place in a conversation based on the purposes of that conversation.

4. The Felicity Conditions of Metalinguistic Denial.

4.1 What is Needed for a Metalinguistic Denial to be Felicitous?

Why do some cases of metalinguistic denial elicit the question *What do you mean?* and others do not? To answer this question I formulated a hypothesis, based on the assumption that when a metalinguistic denial is performed, if speakers do not identify the metalinguistic proposition denied as differentiating among different uses of an expression in that context, then they will assume that another metalinguistic proposition is being negated with the one explicitly targeted. In this section, first I describe the distinction between standard denial and metalinguistic denial. Then I formulate a hypothesis that motivates that distinction. I describe how to represent the felicity conditions of metalinguistic denial that have to be added to the ones of standard denial.

Intuitively, the reasons why the denial in the Owens Case is infelicitous, whilst the denial in the Secretariat Case is not, depend on the contents denied: in the latter, the speaker listening to the denial can figure out a reason why horses cannot be athletes without a subsequent speech act specifying why this is so, whilst they cannot do the same for runners. With “reasons” I mean a way to identify whether there are other propositions that are the cause for the allegedly false metalinguistic proposition to be in the CG: for instance, in the Secretariat Case, the reason why horses cannot be athletes is that they are not humans. Therefore, the metalinguistic proposition encoding “nonhuman beings can be athletes” is what caused some horses to be in the extension

of “athlete” since horses are nonhumans. However, if we modify the Secretariat Case replacing (10b) with (10b’), here below, we will not need any further reason to evaluate this denial.

- 10) b’. *Secretariat should not be in the list! Nonhuman beings cannot be athletes!*,

As we can see, some metalinguistic denials targeting a metalinguistic proposition intuitively do not need further metalinguistic propositions to be negated, like (10b’), and other metalinguistic denials need other metalinguistic propositions negated as well (like 10b and 9b). In the latter case, there are cases of metalinguistic denials in which we can infer what are the other metalinguistic propositions negated (like in the Secretariat Case or the Racist Case) whilst in other cases of metalinguistic denial we cannot infer this (like in the Owens Case). In cases where speakers cannot infer the reasons why a metalinguistic proposition is being denied, we can notice from evidence that, to be felicitous, they need to be followed by another act that provides these reasons. For instance, let us consider (11), a modified version of the Owens Case¹¹ and (12), a modified version of the Fungi Case.

- 11) a. A: *Owens should be in the list.*
 b. B: *Owens should not be in the list. Runners cannot be athletes, they don’t have a union!*
- 12) *At a restaurant, two people A and B are looking at their menus. They both share the same set of facts about the world.*
 a.A: *what vegetables are you ordering with your chicken? I will take porcini mushrooms...*
 b.B: *mushrooms are not vegetables. Mushrooms don’t do photosynthesis.*

The underlined act, which I call “explanation”, expresses a reason why the denial is being performed: mushrooms are not vegetables because they do not do photosynthesis and runners are not athletes because entities have to unionize to be athletes. This way, a distinction between the two extensions has been drawn: athletes have unions while runners do not. Plants do photosynthesis and mushrooms do not. This explanation provides further information that determines why speakers ought to exclude a group of entities from the extension of an expression. Let us assume that these explanations are compelling in these contexts. If that is so then the denial will be acceptable, and either rejected or accepted. The need for an explanation is systemic, that is, it takes place in every case in which we cannot infer a reason for a metalinguistic denial to be performed.

Intuitively, speakers do not need an explanation every time they cannot infer a reason why a denial of information about the world is being performed. For instance, let us consider (13), here below.

- 13) a. A: *Under the new Biden administration, the US started bombing Syria again.*

¹¹ I skipped the description of the context in the Owens Case for practical reasons: it can be found in (9).

b. B: *Biden is not the president of the US.*

In (13), we do not need a reason to determine that (13b) is acceptable. We might want to understand why B might argue (13b), that is, we might want to find an answer to the question *Why on earth do you think Biden is not the president of the US?*, but we do not need to understand B's reason for saying so in order to reject (13b). For instance, we might believe that (13b) is being performed because that speaker is ignorant, easily manipulated by right-wing media, and thus we figure that she is saying so because she believes in information coming from a dubious authority. However, to evaluate the felicity of (13b), we do not *need* to formulate a precise hypothesis of why B is performing that act. In other words, we do not need to figure out what proposition that determines the presence of *Biden is the president of the US* in the CG is believed to be false by B. That is so because we can determine how CG_B differs from CG_A with the current information we have as precisely as we need to evaluate how operating a correction to CG_A will affect the rest of the conversation: accepting (13b), A will be in a world in which Biden is not the president of the US. The implications of that might vary, but they are consequences of the clear-cut distinction between being in a President Biden world or in a Not-President Biden world.

The same cannot be said with metalinguistic denial: since uses vary through contexts, there is a higher degree of uncertainty on what a metalinguistic denial is objecting to. The consequences of this fact affect what speakers express with their utterances after a metalinguistic denial: determining the reasons why an expression is being objected allows speakers to understand what relations between expressions, besides the one explicitly targeted, will be modified by the denial in that context. For instance, in the Secretariat case, with (10b), B is not simply arguing that we ought not to use “athlete” to denote horses: since we can infer that the reason why horses cannot be athletes is that nonhuman beings cannot be athletes, we will know that, if we accept (10b), we ought not to use “athlete” to denote any entity denoted by “nonhuman animal” in that context. However, in another context, (10b) might be objecting to using “athlete” to denote horses for reasons that will not affect the relation between “athlete” and “nonhuman animal”.

Concisely, If speakers cannot infer a reason why a metalinguistic denial is being performed, they will not know how to relate the two expressions in the metalinguistic proposition denied with other expressions. We will spend the rest of this paper arguing for this conclusion.

4.2 My hypothesis: Contestable metalinguistic propositions.

A fundamental assumption of my work is that speakers are aware that linguistic practices vary through contexts. This is why it can happen through conversations that competent speakers

decide to check (either explicitly or implicitly) what other speakers mean by a certain expression: they do not want to know what is the meaning of that expression “in general”, they want to understand how it is being used in this context.

In some contexts, speakers accept that an expression “X” can be used in different alternative ways depending on a certain metalinguistic proposition being adopted or rejected. For instance, in a discussion between doctors of the benefit of psychoanalysis, speakers might be aware that “health” might have different alternative uses, depending on whether a speaker considers mental health part of physical health. In these cases, while using “X”, or expressions linked to “X”, speakers take a position on whether using that metalinguistic proposition or not to determine the extension of “X”. Let us call these metalinguistic propositions “contestable metalinguistic propositions” (for short, CMP) and “contestable expressions” expressions whose meaning is determined by them.

To describe the felicity conditions of denial I assume that when a speaker denies a certain metalinguistic proposition of an expression that depends on speakers accepting or rejecting a use of a contestable expression, then the reason why that metalinguistic proposition is being negated will be tracked back to the CMP distinguishing among different uses of the contestable expression. In other words, the reason why that metalinguistic proposition is being objected to will be that a speaker is rejecting a certain CMP in favour of an alternative way to use the contestable expression – that is, one that rejects this CMP and all the metalinguistic propositions that entail it.¹² In this subsection and the following one, I explain how, accepting this assumption, it will be possible for us to determine in what cases of metalinguistic denial an explanation following a denial is needed and in what cases it is not.

The point of introducing CMPs in our model is to describe situations in which a use of an expression is consciously chosen among alternative uses that speakers might consider appropriate in a certain context. In contexts in which a CMP might determine the extension of an expression, all speakers have to believe they mutually accept the possibility of it being in place. Hence, in these cases, in all the spurious CGs there has to be a presupposition encoding information about a metalinguistic proposition being a CMP. Let us call them “contestable propositions”.

As I said in section 3, a metalinguistic denial performed in a defective context will object to a metalinguistic proposition in one or more of the spurious CGs of a conversation with the purpose of making the CGs merge into one not-spurious CG again. To do so, a metalinguistic

¹² My hypothesis draws upon Gallie’s work on essentially contested concepts ((Gallie, 1956); (Collier, Hidalgo and Maciuceanu, 2006)). Gallie suggests seven features of essentially contested concepts in a certain context. I will not list them here, since only “reciprocal recognition” and “diverse descriptability” can be applied to metalinguistic propositions.

denial negates a metalinguistic proposition believed by some speakers to be accepted as shared. To determine which propositions are being negated with the one explicitly targeted by the denial, speakers will have to determine how the spurious CG of the speaker uttering the denial and the other spurious CGs diverge. In the Secretariat Case and the Racist Case, repeated here as (14), the metalinguistic proposition negated can be determined by speakers relying solely on the context in which that act is performed.

Racist Case

At a nazi radio show, two speakers A and B are listing the fifty greatest athletes of the 20th century. They begin a dispute about whether Jesse Owens, a famous runner, should be on that list. Both speakers share the same set of facts about Owens: how many races he won, where does he come from, how tall is he, how fast he used to run, etc.

- 14) a. A: *Owens should be in the list.*
 b. B: *Owens should not be in the list. Negros cannot be athletes.*

Since A and B are speaking at a nazi radio show, we expect a speaker in that context to manifest a certain degree of endorsement for racist practices. So we judge (14b) acceptable since we recognize how in that context a certain use of an expression, like “athlete” used in a way that refers also to black people, might be controversial among speakers: speaker might believe that solely white people are athletes since, to be in the extension of “athlete”, you need to be in the extension of “person” and –for them – black people are not persons. In that context, the meaning of “person” might be determined in a way that excludes black people from the extension of people. However, although people in a nazi meeting usually share prejudices about black people, they are aware that it is custom to include black people in the extension of “person”. Hence, in this context, “person” is a contestable expression. For that reason, in contexts like (14), speakers will infer that the metalinguistic proposition that has to be removed in order to exclude black people from the set of athletes is the one that determines that black people are people. That way, they can infer how to modify the CG_A to make it close enough to the CG_B and use the expressions “athlete”, “person” and “black person” in a way that is shared among A and B.

More precisely, in this context the metalinguistic propositions (θ) is being negated with (ζ) after the performance of (14b).

- ζ) *For some x, x is in the extension of “athlete” and x is in the extension of “black person”.*
 θ) *For all x, if x is in the extension of “black person”, x is in the extension of “person”.*

Let us further assume that in the CG of this conversation there is the metalinguistic proposition (η).

- η) *For all x, if x is in the extension of “athlete”, x is in the extension of “person”.*

To model the inference being done in the Racist Case, a contestable proposition about the relation between “person” and “black person” has to be encoded in the spurious CGs of the conversation, since all speakers have to come to more or less the same conclusions about the CMP negated. The contestable proposition will be something like (λ), whilst the CMP is (θ).

- λ) *If a metalinguistic proposition about “black person” and an expression in one or more metalinguistic presuppositions with the expression “person” is objected to, then either that metalinguistic proposition is (θ) or (θ) will be negated as well. Either way, the proposition “It is not the case that for some x , if x is in the extension of ‘black person’, x is in the extension of ‘person’ ” will be introduced in the CG alongside $\neg(\theta)$.*

This way, speakers have a criterion to determine which metalinguistic propositions will have to be removed after a metalinguistic denial. Since (θ) is being negated and a proposition that negates any intersection between the extension of “black person” and the one of “person”, let us call it p , is introduced in the CG, all metalinguistic propositions in (14) that entail p will be negated as well: being (η) the case, (ζ) will be among them.

Briefly, whether a metalinguistic proposition x determines that two extensions intersect or are in a subset relation, if a contestable proposition determines that x is a CMP, then the extensions of the expressions in x do not intersect anymore if a metalinguistic denial related with that CMP is accepted. For short, in the rest of the paper, I will just write that a contestable proposition “negates a CMP”.

A CMP determines what other metalinguistic propositions will be negated if a metalinguistic denial is accepted: the ones that entail the intersection of the extensions related by that CMP being the case. If a CMP is in the CG, a speaker might also directly target it with a metalinguistic denial: for instance, in the Secretariat Case, since the reasons why horses cannot be athletes is that nonhuman beings cannot be athletes, then a metalinguistic denial like (15) might be straightforwardly performed. (15) will target directly the proposition (π), recognized as a CMP in virtue of the contestable proposition (Y).

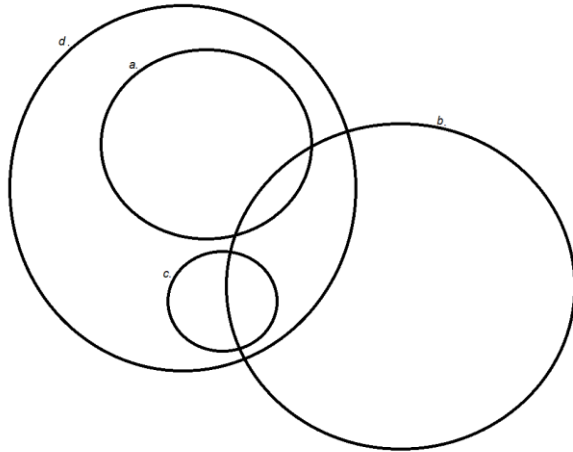
- 15) *Secretariat cannot be on the list! Nonhuman beings cannot be athletes!*
- π) *For some x , x is in the extension of “nonhuman being” and x is in the extension of “athlete”.*
- Y) *If a metalinguistic proposition about “athlete” and an expression in one or more metalinguistic presuppositions with the expression “nonhuman being” is objected to, then either that metalinguistic proposition is (π) or (π) will be negated as well.*

4.3 Felicity Conditions of Metalinguistic Denial: Explanation.

To do a brief recap, I am assuming that, in cases of metalinguistic denial, the proposition negated is not the one targeted by the denial, but a CMP connected with the targeted one by a

contestable proposition. In this subsection, I argue that if speakers cannot identify as a CMP either the metalinguistic proposition which is targeted by the denial or a metalinguistic proposition that is entailed by it, then they will need a speech act following the denial that will negate another metalinguistic proposition.

Competent speakers believe that the way in which the language is used in a certain context is shared among speakers. When a speaker A performs a metalinguistic denial targeting a metalinguistic proposition X and X is not a CMP, then speakers will need to understand how A is using the language here and decide whether to accept that use or not. This requires a certain degree of clarity over what metalinguistic propositions are being negated by that metalinguistic denial in order for speakers to continue communicating. Otherwise, speakers might not share the means to use these expressions there anymore. For instance, let us imagine the following scenario. In a CG we have four extensions, *a*, *b*, *c* and *d*. There will be other extensions as well, although they will not be represented. *a* and *b* intersect with each other. *a* is a subset of *d*. *c* is a subset of *d*. *c* and *b* intersect with each other (see the diagram D1 below).



D1.

Let us imagine that each intersection and subset relation is encoded as a metalinguistic proposition. In this context, a speaker performs a metalinguistic denial expressing that *a* and *b* does not intersect. As we have seen in section 4.2, a contestable proposition in a CG will point to a CMP, which will be removed as well by the denial under the right conditions. For instance, if the metalinguistic proposition encoding the relation between *d* and *b* is a CMP, then we will have to remove the metalinguistic proposition encoding the relation between *c* and *b*.

However, if there is no contestable proposition, then speakers will not have the means to determine which metalinguistic proposition is being negated since we are assuming that a metalinguistic denial targets a CMP *via* a contestable proposition. This will have consequences

for the presence of other metalinguistic propositions in a CG: in D1, if speakers cannot figure out which (if any) metalinguistic proposition entailed by the one encoding the relation between *a* and *b* is being negated, we do not know whether the metalinguistic proposition encoding the relation between *c* and *b* is still in the CG or not. The same will happen if there are different metalinguistic propositions relating *b* and other subsets of a superset of *a*: not having a way to identify the proposition negated will raise the issue of whether other entities that are in one of these other subsets of supersets of *a* and in *b* are still in both. If that is the case, speakers will need to readjust the way in which they use *different* expressions in that context, besides the ones in the metalinguistic denial.

For example, in the Owens Case, the criterion rejected by the metalinguistic denial is, concisely, that runners are athletes. However, to reject a single criterion is not sufficient to continue using “athlete” in the context, if we do not know why runners cannot be athletes: since for us a runner is plainly an athlete here, what does the speaker think “athlete”/“runner” should mean? It might be, for instance, that runners are not athletes because they do not participate in the winter Olympics. In that case though, we will have to rearrange the relations between several other expressions and “athlete” (for instance, tennis players will not count as athletes anymore); the point being, without getting a common ground of criteria being rejected, speakers will not be aware of which content they will be communicating with sentences containing “athlete”, “runner” or expressions the extensions of which are determined by metalinguistic presuppositions entailed by the one denied. Therefore, they need to figure out what is the set of criteria that will be replaced by that metalinguistic denial if accepted.

As we have seen in 4.1, in cases where no CMP is in the CG, like in the Owens Case and the Fungi Case, an explanation has to follow the metalinguistic denial. Then, if successful, the latter propositions are negated and the context will become non-defective. For instance, let us consider the Fungi Case. Let us further assume that speakers there share the following metalinguistic propositions.

- v) *For all x, If x is in the extension of “mushroom”, x is in the extension of “vegetable”.*
- o) *For all x, If x is in the extension of “vegetable”, x is in the extension of “plant”.*
- q) *For all x, If x is in the extension of “plant”, x is in the extension of either “cellulose” or “chitin”.*
- ς) *For all x, If x is in the extension of “plant”, x is in the extension of “capable of photosynthesis”.*

To be felicitous, the metalinguistic denial *Mushrooms are not vegetables* has to be followed by an explanation like (16)

- 16) *Mushrooms are not capable of photosynthesis.*

We can describe an explanation as introducing one or more metalinguistic propositions in one or more spurious CGs that are inconsistent with metalinguistic propositions already there.

As we have seen in 4.2, a CMP is a metalinguistic proposition that determines two alternative uses in a context of an expression whether it is accepted or not in a CG. In cases where the CMP cannot be inferred, the metalinguistic denial points out that there must be a disagreement on how to use an expression in that context, and the explanation will provide the reason why it is so, determining then the alternative use. Hence, the explanation introduces in a CG a contestable proposition that encodes information about the two alternative uses of that expression, making a metalinguistic proposition a CMP. After that, since we have determined what is the metalinguistic proposition that distinguishes between these two uses, that is, the one inconsistent with the explanation, speakers will have the means to determine how to modify their CGs and thus, to determine whether to accept or reject the denial.

If (16) is accepted, mushrooms fall out of the extension of “capable of photosynthesis”. Since all vegetables are plants for (o), and all mushrooms are vegetables for (v), we have found what is the proposition that led speakers to accept that mushrooms were vegetables. That way, it will be possible for speakers to identify what is being changed: if plants are not made of chitin and vegetables are plants then if mushrooms are made of chitin, mushrooms are not plants.

An objection that can be made to this description is: why do we need an explanation to introduce a CMP? It could be argued that, since a metalinguistic denial object to a certain metalinguistic proposition, then the denial is the component that makes a metalinguistic proposition a CMP. I think this objection misdescribes the role of an explanation: an explanation introduce a CMP *because* speakers cannot determine the proposition targeted by the metalinguistic denial with the propositions in place. The role of an explanation is to point out the problematic proposition in a situation in which a request for further information already arose: that is, in a context in which it has been already accepted that the content of the metalinguistic denial cannot target a CMP.

This section is grounded on some strong assumptions on how the language works: the first assumption is that speakers are aware that their use of language is context sensitive. The second assumption is the existence of contestable propositions that determine what metalinguistic propositions are CMPs. Finally, the last assumption is that speakers determine what metalinguistic propositions are being negated by a denial relying on the contestable propositions in a CG. Although I motivated my assumptions, with my current means it was necessary for me to add these elements and mechanics in the model to determine the felicity conditions of metalinguistic denial. Future research will be oriented on determining more clearly

the pragmatics of explanation and the role of contestable propositions in different phenomena of conversations, enriching the current model with Robert's Question Under Discussion framework ((Roberts 2004), (Roberts 2012)), which take account of how conversational moves contribute to the general goal of the conversation. That way, we will provide a more fine grained description of explanation without mainly relying on evidence and assumptions.

5. Conclusions

The aim of this paper was to provide an account of the effects of metalinguistic denial on a conversation and metalinguistic denial's felicity conditions. In the first section, I presented the main features of metalinguistic denial. In the second section, I built the framework of conversation that I used to represent, respectively, denial's effects on a conversation and denial's felicity conditions. First, I modelled the corpus of shared information of a conversation. After that, I determined the felicity conditions of denial, namely, that the proposition expressed by a denial has to be inconsistent with one or more propositions in the CG or, in case the context is defective, with one or more propositions in one or more spurious CGs. Then, in section 3, I encoded information about the relations among expressions used, which I called "metalinguistic propositions", and I showed that relying solely on the felicity conditions of denial we would not be able to determine whether certain metalinguistic denials are felicitous or not. Finally, in section 4, I determined the felicity conditions of denial. First, I described intuitively why it is not sufficient to perform a metalinguistic denial to deny a metalinguistic proposition. Then I account for that intuition in my model: to do so, I described a specific kind of propositions called "contestable propositions" which encodes information about how an expression can be used in different ways in that context. A contestable proposition will determine what metalinguistic propositions will have to be removed from the spurious CGs by a metalinguistic denial, if the right conditions are in place. A metalinguistic proposition p removed by a contestable proposition will be replaced with a proposition that negates any intersection between the extensions of the expressions p is about. If there is no contestable proposition in the CGs of a conversation, then speakers will not have the means to determine what metalinguistic propositions are being objected to by a denial. In these cases, after the metalinguistic denial, an explanation will have to be performed: this act will introduce a contestable proposition, making the metalinguistic denial acceptable. For that reasons, I argue that, for a metalinguistic denial to be felicitous, either in the CG of the conversation there has to be a controversial proposition, that is, a proposition that determining the metalinguistic propositions that will be removed by that denial, or that denial has to be followed by an explanation introducing a contestable proposition.

Abstract

In the literature on denial, not much attention has been paid to metalinguistic denial, a speech act used to object to metalinguistic information in a conversation. The purposes of this paper are to describe the effects of a metalinguistic denial in a Stalnakerian framework of conversations and to determine the felicity conditions of metalinguistic denial.

To fulfil the first purpose, I propose to represent in the framework used metalinguistic information as “metalinguistic propositions”. Each metalinguistic proposition encodes a criterion used to determine the meaning of an expression in a conversation. These are the entities a metalinguistic denial objects to. After introducing metalinguistic propositions, I model the effects of metalinguistic denial on a conversation.

To fulfil the second purpose, we need to represent why, in some cases, a metalinguistic denial needs to be followed by an explanation to be felicitous. In order to do so, I argue we have to introduce propositions that speakers acknowledge as possible points of disagreement in the conversation. I call these propositions “contestable metalinguistic propositions”. I argue that if speakers cannot figure out which contestable metalinguistic propositions are being denied by a metalinguistic denial, an explanation has to follow the denial.

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