Metalinguistic Negotiations and Cross-Linguistic Disputes

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In recent years, David Plunkett, Tim Sundell, and other philosophers have developed views on *metalinguistic negotiation* related to various topics. A metalinguistic negotiation is a dispute where both parties use (rather than mention) a term to show how the term should be applied. For example, consider the following dialog: "This horse is an athlete."–"No, this horse is not an athlete." This can be a dispute about how we should use the term "athlete." In this dispute, the word "athlete" is not explicitly mentioned (i.e., "The word 'athlete' should be used like…"). Plunkett, Sundell, and other scholars have presented philosophical views with the assumption that there are metalinguistic negotiations. They consider that some (or many) philosophical disputes are metalinguistic negotiations and that the characteristics of aesthetic disputes can be explained logically if they are metalinguistic negotiations.

This topic is connected to two related topics. The first is *(merely) verbal dispute,* or *talking past.*[1] Roughly put, a (merely) verbal dispute is a dispute where both parties use the same expression with different meanings, and they have no genuine disagreement about the relevant issue. Metalinguistic negotiations are similar but ultimately different. In a metalinguistic negotiation, there is a difference of meaning, and there is a genuine disagreement that appears.

The other topic is *conceptual engineering* or *conceptual ethics.*[2] ("Conceptual engineering" is likely the more famous term, but Plunkett and Sundell prefer "conceptual ethics.") In general, it concerns revising existing concepts or making new concepts as opposed to utilizing existing concepts or analyzing them. The exact task of conceptual engineering or conceptual ethics is a controversial issue. One possible answer is that it deals with the question of the meaning that a term should have. If there are metalinguistic negotiations, there are cases where such a question is dealt with implicitly.

Herman Cappelen and Kaoru Ando also present a general objection to metalinguistic negotiation views.[3] The objection invokes cross-linguistic conversations,

[1] For a survey of this topic, see Inga Vermeulen, "Verbal Disputes and the Varieties of Verbalness," *Erkenntnis* 83, no. 2 (2018): 331-41, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10670-017-9892-4.

[2] For this topic, see Alexis Burgess and David Plunkett, "Conceptual Ethics I," *Philosophy Compass* 8, no. 12 (2013): 1091-101, https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12086; Alexis Burgess and David Plunkett, "Conceptual Ethics II," *Philosophy Compass* 8, no. 12 (2013): 1102-10, https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12085; Herman Cappelen, *Fixing Language: An Essay on Conceptual Engineering* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[3] Cappelen, *Fixing Language*, 174-175; Kaoru Ando, "Semantics for Moral Discourse: Why Contextualism Is Still Not Dead," (slightly modified version of the paper presented at the annual

such as those of English and Japanese. Consider the following dialog: "Waterboarding is torture."–"いや、水責めは拷問ではない。" According to Cappelen and Ando, this cannot be a metalinguistic negotiation about "torture" or "拷問" because A and B's utterances cannot be about the same term.

In this paper, I will first explain the idea of metalinguistic negotiation and its application to philosophical topics (Sections 1–3). Then, I will present Herman Cappelen and Kaoru Ando's general objection to such applications and consider some possible responses (Sections 4–6). However, my main aim is not to defend metalinguistic negotiation views from the objection. Plunkett, Sundell, and others can hardly be said to give a detailed explanation about how linguistic phenomena like metalinguistic negotiations can occur. I will argue that proponents of metalinguistic negotiation views should provide such an explanation in order to defend their views from the objection.

1. Metalinguistic Negotiation

To begin, I will introduce the concepts of metalinguistic usage, metalinguistic dispute, and metalinguistic negotiation. Plunkett and Sundell use the following example of a metalinguistic usage from Chris Barker.[4]

(1) Feynman is tall.

This sentence is often used to convey information about how tall Feynman is. According to Barker, however, it has another usage.

Consider the following situation. At a party, A asks B, "In this country, what is the standard of 'tall'?" B points to Feynman, and they can see him. B says, "Around here, Feynman is tall." In this situation, B's utterance is an answer to A, who asks about the word "tall," and A and B know Feynman's height. B's utterance of (1) seems to convey information about the meaning of "tall." The meaning of "tall" is "having a degree of height greater than a certain contextually supplied standard." The speaker of (1) in this case seems to communicate information about the standard in the given context, and this communication seems to be about the meaning of "tall." Additionally, "tall" is not mentioned as in "The standard of 'tall' in this country is …" but is used instead. A usage like this is called a *metalinguistic usage*.

Barker presented such a usage of gradable predicates like "tall." According to Plunkett and Sundell, other terms have similar usages.

According to Plunkett and Sundell, there are disputes by metalinguistic usages.

For example, we can suppose that C hears the above-mentioned conversation by A and B and participates in it.[5]

(2) A: In this country, what is the standard of "tall"?
　　B: Around here, Feynman is tall.
　　C: No, Feynman is not tall.

In this situation, C seems to contest B's view about the standard of "tall" in this context. B and C have a dispute through metalinguistic usages. Plunkett and Sundell call such a dispute a *metalinguistic dispute*. In this case, the dispute is about what a term means or how it is used. Plunkett and Sundell call such a dispute a *descriptive metalinguistic dispute*. Metalinguistic usages in descriptive metalinguistic disputes are descriptive ones.

　　According to Plunkett and Sundell, there are normative metalinguistic usages, which are about what a term should mean or how it should be used. A dispute about what a term should mean by metalinguistic usages is called a *normative metalinguistic dispute,* or a *metalinguistic negotiation*. Below I will employ the latter.

　　Plunkett and Sundell favor the following case of the word "athlete" from Peter Ludlow as an example of a metalinguistic negotiation.[6] Consider the following dialog about a racehorse:

(3) A: This horse is an athlete.
　　B: This horse is not an athlete.

Suppose the following facts. A and B share the knowledge of empirical facts about the horse. A always applies "athlete" to humans and other animals, and B always applies it only to humans. They notice such a difference between their usages. Additionally, they do not stop the dispute, even if they are taught by a linguist that "athlete" applies only to humans.

　　In this case, the dispute between A and B seems to be a metalinguistic negotiation, specifically a metalinguistic dispute, because A and B apply the same term in different ways and notice it. In addition, it does not seem to be descriptive because they do not stop the dispute given the knowledge of the term's actual meaning.

2. Conceptual Ethics

Conceptual ethics, according to Plunkett and Sundell, is a domain concerning which expression should have which meaning. They argue that when an issue of conceptual ethics is disputed, there are background issues that do not belong to conceptual ethics. For example, the question of how we should treat animals other than humans is a background issue of the question of whether "athlete" should apply to animals other than humans. According to Plunkett and Sundell, this relationship between two

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[5] Plunkett, "Which Concepts," 834.
[6] Peter Ludlow, "Cheap Contextualism," *Philosophical Issues* 18, no. 1 (2008): 118, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-6077.2008.00140.x; Plunkett, "Which Concepts," 840-1; Plunkett and Sundell, "Disagreement," 16.

questions is due to the *functional role,* or the *resonance* of the term "athlete." The functional role of a term can stay the same through a meaning change. For example, the term "athlete" is related to being treated as an object of praising. Metalinguistic negotiations are motivated by such facts.

The word "ethics" is misleading here because conceptual ethics is supposed to deal with normative questions regarding which expression should have which meaning, whether the "should" is a moral one or not. Plunkett cites Theodore Sider as a philosopher who deals with issues of conceptual ethics.[7] Sider's claim is that reality has a structure, and languages may or may not fit within such a structure.[8] According to this idea, for example, there can be two possible languages where the sentence "There are tables" is true and where it is false, and these two languages can differ in their degree of fitting the structure. The question of whether we should say, "There are tables" or "There are not tables" from the point of view of fitting with reality's structure on this assumption is a question of conceptual ethics. This issue, however, is not about "ethics" in the usual sense.

3. A Philosophical Application

I will introduce a philosophical claim that applies the idea of metalinguistic negotiations. Plunkett, Amie Thomasson, and Delia Belleri present the view that some philosophical disputes are metalinguistic negotiations.[9] According to Plunkett, philosophical disputes have features of metalinguistic negotiations.[10] The systematic difference in the applications of the same term and the persistence of disputes with agreements about many facts are such features. For example, Plunkett and Thomasson raise disputes about whether tables exist or only particles exist, as well as disputes about whether or not free will is compatible with determinism. According to Plunkett, if a philosophical dispute is a metalinguistic negotiation and disputants notice it, they can shift it to a dispute by explicitly mentioning the relevant term. In this way, the misleading appearance of the dispute disappears, or a dispute about background issues that is not about linguistic expressions begins.

4. Cappelen and Ando's Objection

Herman Cappelen raises a general objection against the view that some targeted disputes are metalinguistic negotiations.[11] According to the objection, disputes that are claimed to be metalinguistic negotiations are not about linguistic expressions. Here I will state the modified version of the objection by Kaoru Ando.[12]

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[7] Plunkett, "Which Concepts," 843.
[8] Theodore Sider, *Writing the Book of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), vii.
[9] Delia Belleri, "Verbalism and Metalinguistic Negotiation in Ontological Disputes," *Philosophical Studies* 174, no. 9 (2017): 2214-25, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-016-0795-z; Plunkett, "Which Concepts," 852-65; Amie Thomasson, "Metaphysical Disputes and Metalinguistic Negotiation," *Analytic Philosophy* 58, no. 1 (2017): 13-27, https://doi.org/10.1111/phib.12087; Amie Thomasson, "What Can We Do, When We Do Metaphysics?" in *The Cambridge Companion to Philosophical Methodology,* ed. Giuseppina D'Oro and Søren Overgaard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 109-13.
[10] Plunkett, "Which Concepts," 855-9.
[11] Cappelen, *Fixing Language*, 174-175.
[12] Ando, "Semantics," 12. Cappelen's original objection does not invoke conversations. Plunkett and Sundell seem to treat the problem raised by Cappelen as a problem of disputants' self-misunderstanding

Suppose the claim that all disputes that appear to be about whether waterboarding is torture or not are metalinguistic negotiations. Consider the following situation. Both A and B can hear and understand English and Japanese, but only A can speak English and only B can speak Japanese. They have the following dispute:

(4) A: Waterboarding is torture.
　B: いや、水責めは拷問ではない。

In this situation, A's utterance can be a metalinguistic one about "torture" but cannot be about "拷問," and B's utterance can be about "拷問" but cannot be about "torture." Therefore, the dispute is not about linguistic expressions like "torture" or "拷問" and is about whether waterboarding is torture or not.[13]

5. The Explanation of the Mechanism by Which Metalinguistic Negotiations Occur

I will argue that proponents of metalinguistic negotiation views should provide an explanation of the mechanism by which metalinguistic negotiations occur in order to defend their views from the above objection. First, I will present the explanation.

Why are there metalinguistic usages? How can such phenomena occur? How can metalinguistic usages in metalinguistic negotiations be explained? Barker, who claims that "tall" has a metalinguistic usage, tries to offer semantics to explain descriptive metalinguistic usages of gradable predicates like "tall."[14]

Plunkett and Sundell have claimed that normative metalinguistic usages in metalinguistic negotiations can be explained not by semantics but by pragmatics.[15] (However, in their most recent paper, they seem to think there may be a semantic explanation.[16]) Semantics is supposed to be the domain that concerns information regarding the linguistically encoded content of the words we use, and pragmatics is supposed to be the domain which concerns information that is communicated in other ways.[17] Paul Grice or his successors' pragmatics are generally assumed. For example, they deal with irony and metaphor. However, Plunkett, Sundell, and others can hardly be said to give a detailed explanation of normative metalinguistic usages in metalinguistic negotiations.

6. Four Possible Responses

At least four responses to the above objection are possible, and the explanation of the mechanism by which metalinguistic negotiations occur should be given in order to raise (at least some of) these responses.

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and reply to the latter problem. I think this strategy does not apply (at least directly) to Ando's modified version. See David Plunkett and Tim Sundell, "Metalinguistic Negotiation and Speaker Error," *Inquiry* (published electronically July 4, 2019), 2, https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174x.2019.1610055.

[13] The effect of this objection depends on the targeted claim. For example, if the target is a claim that some disputes that appear to be about whether waterboarding is torture or not are metalinguistic negotiations, the objection may not damage the claim.

[14] Barker, "The Dynamics," 3-10.

[15] Plunkett and Sundell, "Disagreement," 15.

[16] Plunkett and Sundell, "Speaker Error," 12.

[17] Plunkett, "Which Concepts," 836.

(i) B's utterance in (4) can be a metalinguistic one about "torture."
B's utterance does not seem to be about "torture" because B does not use the word "torture," but A's utterance may be about "torture" and B's utterance is an answer to it. Considering this, B's utterance may be about "torture." Whether such a response is correct or not is unclear until the mechanism by which metalinguistic negotiations occur is explained.

(ii) The dispute is a metalinguistic negotiation in a way that the objection does not apply to it.
Chris Barker gives semantics of gradable predicates like "tall," and the semantics seem to explain descriptive metalinguistic usages. In my understanding, his semantics is one by which utterances of the English sentence "Feynman is tall" and the Japanese sentence "ファインマンは高身長だ" have the same effect, even in metalinguistic usages.[18] Therefore, according to the semantics, Cappelen and Ando's objection does not apply to descriptive metalinguistic disputes like (2), but whether we can extend such an explanation to other terms or normative metalinguistic disputes is unclear.

(iii) There is the assumption between A and B that "torture" and "拷問" should have the same meaning.
It is uncertain whether this response requires an explanation of the mechanism of metalinguistic negotiations, but there is, at least, indirect relevance. If this response is applied to Cappelen and Ando's objection in general, it should be claimed that a term and a translation of it should have the same meaning, even after changes of meaning in the future, or so it is assumed. Why? The relationship between translation and functional roles of terms, which are mentioned in Section 2, should be clarified. Should translation maintain functional roles of terms? Or does translation make the functional roles of two terms the same? According to Plunkett and Sundell, they do not try to present a theory about functional roles.[19] However, Erich Rast seems to present semantics that explain such functional roles.[20] If we take a position like his, a semantic or pragmatic explanation of metalinguistic negotiations should be consistent with it. Until such an explanation is given, it is unclear whether we can make a coherent explanation of sameness of the functional roles through translation and the mechanism by which metalinguistic negotiations occur.

(iv) A's utterance is about "torture," and B's utterance is about "拷問," but their dispute is about a background issue through such metalinguistic usages.
For example, A may convey that waterboarding is bad, and B may convey that waterboarding is not bad. According to Sundell, even if the literal contents of two utterances do not contradict each other, different kinds of conveyed contents can present

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[18] This is because his "delineations" are functions from meanings rather than from linguistic expressions. See Barker, "The Dynamics," 6.
[19] Plunkett and Sundell, "Speaker Error," 7.
[20] Erich Rast, "Value Disagreement and Two Aspects of Meaning," *Croatian Journal of Philosophy* 17, no. 51 (2017): 408-15, https://hrcak.srce.hr/195070.

a contradiction, and disputes can occur at this level.[21] Metalinguistic negotiations can be thought of as such a dispute. Similarly, in a targeted dispute, in addition to metalinguistic contents, other contents are conveyed. In (4), A conveys that "torture" should be applied to waterboarding and that waterboarding is bad, and B conveys that "拷問" should not be applied to waterboarding and that waterboarding is not bad. The metalinguistic contents of A and B's respective utterances are consistent, but the contents about whether waterboarding is bad are inconsistent. Their dispute can be explained as being about the latter issue. Such an explanation defends the view that there are metalinguistic usages in the dispute, but this seems to be redundant. The idea of metalinguistic negotiation is occasionally invoked to explain the appearance of disagreement in a conversation.[22] Conversely, such an appearance is explained by assuming that, for example, the content that "waterboarding is bad" can be conveyed using the utterance "Waterboarding is torture." Metalinguistic usages have no role in this explanation. One possible response to this worry is that such contents can be conveyed by the utterance only through metalinguistic usages, but whether this response is possible is unclear until that kind of communication mechanism is explained.

7. Conclusion
I have argued that there are at least four possible responses to Cappelen and Ando's objection, and (at least some of) those require proponents of metalinguistic negotiation views to provide an explanation of the mechanism by which metalinguistic negotiations occur. Such an explanation is expected to be given not only from linguistic points of view, but also from philosophical points of view.

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[21] Tim Sundell, "Disagreements About Taste," *Philosophical Studies* 155, no. 2 (2011): 274-9, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-010-9572-6.
[22] Plunkett and Sundell, "Disagreement," 25; Sundell, "Disagreements," 276-9.

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