

## How Use Theories of Meaning Can Accommodate Shared Meanings. A Modal Account of Semantic Deference.

There is a *prima facie* tension between use theories of meaning (UTMs) and the intuition that lay speakers can mean the same things as each other and as the experts when they use natural kind terms (e.g., ‘zinc’) or technical expressions (e.g., ‘credit default swap’); after all, lay speakers use such expressions (let us call them e-words) in ways that deviate from the experts’; anybody who thinks that use determines meaning should conclude that most of the time the meaning of e-words in the idiolect of lay speakers is different from the meaning in the experts’ idiolect.

This tension has not discouraged advocates of UTMs, for example Paul Horwich and Gilbert Harman. They appeal to deference as a reason to attribute the expert’s meaning to an e-word used by a (deferential) lay speaker. However, they do not *explain* how deference warrants the attribution. I offer an account of deference that does so.

First, consider that if I defer to experts, a certain counterfactual is true of me: *ceteris paribus*, if someone whom I recognize as an expert were to object to a word I utter, I would withdraw it or change it.<sup>1</sup> That is to say, in nearby possible situations in which an expert is recognized as such and provides immediate correction, my use comes to be in line with the expert’s. When we *actually* correct ourselves, we void, on the fly, certain elements of our utterance and neutralize the commitments that they would have naturally created. In light of my deference, and the above conditional, it seems reasonable to take my actual, uncorrected, misapplications of e-words as virtually voided; they would be voided if an expert were handy. In general, a lay speaker’s disposition to defer qualifies any one of her applications of an e-word as *voidable*, i.e., as an application that need not be counted as determining the speaker’s commitments.

Next, let us remind ourselves that the idea that use determines meaning is of course that meaning is determined not only by the way a speaker actually uses a word, but also the way she would use it in circumstances that do not, but could, arise. It is also clear that we must not take into account uses in all possible circumstances. A *ceteris paribus* clause is always assumed, that is, we restrict our attention to possible circumstances that do not differ from the actual one in some (hard to articulate) respects. Among these circumstances, if the speaker is deferential, there are some in which misapplications of e-words are voided and other words are used. It seems reasonable to take deference as a reason to *further restrict* the set of circumstances we should take into account: we ought to consider precisely only those circumstances in which the speaker voids the application of a word he uttered (in light of the expert’s judgment) and corrects herself. I am going to call these circumstances ‘deference-restricted’, because the restriction is motivated by deference.

Thus, deference gives us a reason to be selective in collecting evidence on which to base the formulation of a law of use, or the ascription of a disposition, or the attribution of a conceptual role. In these endeavors we are typically selective, we do not consider all that could happen (we would not consider scenarios in which the laws of physics differ). Deference simply provides a reason for *additional* selection. In the remaining scenarios, misapplications are voided and the correct words are used in their stead. Only the use of the correct words is a candidate for semantic evaluation. Meaning supervenes on this use. In other words, meaning is not determined by actual and (*ceteris paribus*-restricted) possible use, but by (*ceteris paribus*- and) deference-restricted use. That use is in line with the experts’, so the meaning is the same as that which the word has in the experts’ mouth.

Notice that we are not forced to say, as one might think, that my account denies the basic insight of UTMs in that it makes meaning supervene on both use and deference. *Deference enters the account only as a constraint on what uses we may admit as the supervenience basis for meaning.*

The speaker’s counterfactual use ensures that her *actual* use of an e-word does have its shared meaning, not (trivially) that it possibly has it. My account supports the non-trivial conditional ‘if she would use *w* in such-and-such a way under such-and-such conditions, then (her use of) *w* means such and such’; the trivial conditional is ‘if she would use *w* in such-and-such a way under such and such conditions, then (her use of) *w* would mean such and such’.

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<sup>1</sup>The counterfactual may need to be refined, and my account can be modified accordingly.