Strictly Speaking*

Renée Jorgensen Bolinger†& Alexander Sandgren‡

Abstract

A type of argument occasionally made in metaethics, epistemology and philosophy of science notes that most ordinary uses of some expression fail to satisfy the strictest interpretation of the expression, and concludes that the ordinary assertions are false. This requires there to be a presumption in favour of a strict interpretation of expressions that admit of interpretations at different levels of strictness. We argue that this presumption is unmotivated, and thus the arguments fail.

1 Loose talk

A wide range of expressions can be given more or less strict interpretations, for example, 'flat' and 'empty'. Sometimes we use them in loose ways: when we say the fridge is empty, we don't mean it is an absolute vacuum. Sometimes we use these expressions intending to defer to the strict usage of relevant experts: when we say that an event is *probable*, we aim to invoke the concept as defined by experts on probability theory, even if we ourselves don't know exactly what that is.[1]

When we borrow an expression from a strict science, we may employ harmless-for-our-purposes simplifications that make our utterances, strictly speaking, false. We often use language this way: when describing my rheumatoid pain I may say that I have 'arthritis in my thigh', and it will be clear enough

---

†Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, Canberra, ACT 0200, Australia. Renee.Bolinger@anu.edu.au

‡The Department of Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies, Umeå University, 90 187, Umeå, Sweden. Alexander.Sandgren@umu.se

[1]We frame our discussion in terms of the interpretations of expressions, rather than terms, because it is sometimes multi-term constructions (e.g. counterfactual expressions) that receive the interpretation, rather than an individual term.

what I mean. But I aim to mean by 'arthritis' what my doctor means, so if she informs me that it refers only to afflictions of the joints, I will adjust my usage. When we aim to use an expression as the experts do, but our everyday purposes aren't demanding, we often get by with uses that don't quite meet the strict standards. Call these cases of *speaking strictly-enough*.

In other cases, our everyday purposes require *not* using the strict sense. Suppose on a hiking trip I advise against drinking water from a stagnant pool, and someone (call them Peter), replies 'well actually, the wind is causing slight disturbances and currents in the water; it isn't *quite* stagnant.' I can simply dismiss Peter's comment; plausibly my utterance invoked a looser standard. Or suppose I mention that two friends arrived at my party at the same time and Peter interjects that according to physics no two events are ever truly simultaneous, so *strictly speaking*, they did *not* arrive at the same time (Lewis, 1989, 136). Again, I can acknowledge that Peter isn't wrong without having to concede that what I said was false. I invoked a looser interpretation of the expression, and can stand by what I actually said. Call this a case of *speaking loosely*.

You get the flavor: we'll be using 'strict' to invoke the standards used by the relevant naturalistically respectable science, while 'loose' invokes our (usually less demanding) everyday standards. Differences of strictness are unlike polysemy; even once we fix on a sense of 'organic', for example, there is a further question about how demanding our standards are.

There's an apparent contrast between *speaking strictly-enough* and *speaking loosely*. When we're speaking strictly-enough, the *correct* interpretation of the utterance — the interpretation which specifies the semantic value of the expression — is the strict one, so what we've said is literally false. But when we're speaking loosely, the fact that what we've said would be literally false *if interpreted in the strict sense* doesn't seem to threaten the truth of what we've actually said; we weren't speaking strictly.

There are three salient explanations of this apparent contrast for a target expression *e*:

- ALWAYS STRICT – The strictest interpretation of *e* is always the correct one. When speaking loosely, we are just unaware (or ignoring the fact) that what we're saying is false.

- PRESUMPTIVELY STRICT – The strictest interpretation of *e* has defeasible priority over looser interpretations.

- NOT SPECIAL – When the strictest interpretation of *e* is correct, it is because

strictness serves our communicative purposes; the strictness itself does not, even defeasibly, give us reason to think it is the correct interpretation.

ALWAYS STRICT takes the strictness of an interpretation as a decisive reason in favour of a strict interpretation; PRESUMPTIVELY STRICT allows that this pressure can sometimes be overridden in favour of a looser interpretation.[2] We argue that one should resist imposing an overarching interpretive principle that favours the strict reading either decisively or just strongly, and instead embrace NOT SPECIAL. The strictest standard is correct only when we are deferring to it or our purposes demand it, and our communicative purposes do not always require deference.

Incidentally, the strictest interpretation isn't always the correct one even in clear-cut cases of deference; we can defer to looser interpretations. When Gus, a botanist, tells his neighbours that the brownies he's brought to their picnic contain nuts, he intends to defer to the common interpretation of 'nut', which includes peanuts.[3] Gus (being an expert) knows that the strictest sense of 'nut' excludes peanuts, but intentionally defers to a looser interpretation in this context. Deference doesn't always imply strictness.

So, we have two kinds of cases and three candidate explanations. We say one should prefer NOT SPECIAL. We will argue for this in §2 and point out why it matters in §3.

2   What we mean

There aren't language-independent facts about what the expressions of a language *must* mean. Linguistic expressions are communicative tools, and their meaning is tied to how we use them: what we generally use them to mean, and what we generally interpret them as meaning. In short,

> USE-GUIDES-MEANING: the meaning of a term is, usually, just what it would have to be for the linguistic practices (communication, coordination, testimony) to succeed as they do in the community.

This is one of the metasemantic principles invoked when theorists say stronger things, like that the meaning of an expression in a language is just what it

---

[2]Note that the strictness of an interpretation need not correspond to its determinacy. A loose interpretation might be fully determinate, e.g. when one stipulates that two events are simultaneous if they're separated by an interval of at most 5 seconds. It is similarly possible for a strict standard to be indeterminate.

[3]Botanically, peanuts are legumes. This example is borrowed from Begby (2014, 11).

must be for the sentences in which it used by competent speakers of a language to mostly come out true. USE-GUIDES-MEANING is a principle about the *semantic meaning* of expressions, not merely about what utterances involving that expression pragmatically convey. It's a very attractive principle, and also a relatively weak one.

Importantly, USE-GUIDES-MEANING doesn't imply that the expressions mean whatever would make most of our utterances *true*. When we borrow expressions from a strict science, much of what we say in everyday contexts is false, because we aim to mean the same thing as the experts, despite having only a hazy grasp of what that is. Our hazy grasp might be wildly inaccurate or inconsistent, leading us to make utterances that are mostly false, because we're mistaken about *what we mean* by the expression. Not knowing what we're talking about doesn't preclude our talking about it (Putnam, 1972; Burge, 1979).

The key to this — what makes us *mistaken* about what we mean, rather than meaning something other than what the experts mean — is semantic deference (Armstrong, 2016; Lassiter, 2008). We intend to use the expression as *they* use it, and this intention bears a couple of hallmarks. First, while our communicative purposes might not *require* that we speak strictly, they aren't in tension with doing so. While we have reason to coordinate our uses with that of the experts, our immediate aims don't require precision, so getting the details right is just not worth the hassle. But our aims wouldn't be undermined by speaking strictly.

Second, we're disposed (when corrected) to bring our use into line. This has both a backward-looking aspect — retracting previous uses that we now recognise are false— and a forward-looking aspect — updating our future uses to better match the strict interpretation. These hallmarks are features of our *usage* that make the expression inherit the strict interpretation, and they're prominent in cases when we're speaking strictly-enough.

But not all cases where the folk's use diverges from those of experts are cases of deference. Sometimes our communicative purposes are best served by *not* using the strict senses used by experts. I can acknowledge that Peter is right that in the strictest sense of 'stagnant', the pond isn't stagnant, without coming under rational pressure to retract my assertion that 'we shouldn't drink this water because it's stagnant.' Nor am I under any pressure to apply 'stagnant' only to absolutely motionless bodies of water in the future. Our communicative purposes, and the warnings against drinking from stagnant pools, require *not* invoking the strict sense. More generally, cases of speaking loosely yield different disagreement and retraction patterns than cases of speaking strictly-

enough: the former don't bear the hallmarks of deference.

Taken together, these features of the cases and the USE-GUIDES-MEANING principle make ALWAYS STRICT unattractive. How does PRESUMPTIVELY STRICT fare? Recall that it ascribes presumptive priority to the strictest reading *because* it's strict. But this gets the order of explanation backwards: in the cases just discussed, when the strict interpretation is correct it is so not because it is strict, but because strictness accords with our communicative purposes.

3   Strictly-speaking false

You may consider it no great loss to sacrifice ALWAYS STRICT; it wasn't very attractive anyway. Quite so. But rejecting it deals a significant blow to what we'll call *strictly-speaking arguments*, that is, arguments that fit the following schema:

STRICTLY-SPEAKING ARGUMENT SCHEMA

(1) On the strictest interpretation, the expression *e* means '. . .'

(2) Most (all) of our ordinary assertions using *e* are false under the strictest interpretation.

(3) So most (all) of our ordinary assertions using *e* are false.

(4) Loose uses of *e* suit our communicative purposes better than the uses consistent with the strictest interpretation.

(5) So, despite (3), we should go on using *e* loosely.

This is obviously enthymematic; (3) only follows from (1) and (2) insofar as the strict interpretation of *e* is *correct*, even in our ordinary, loose conversations. It would follow from ALWAYS STRICT, but given (4), accepting this as the suppressed premise is inconsistent with USE-GUIDES-MEANING. So, given the plausibility of the principle, we might prefer invoking PRESUMPTIVELY STRICT. But here advocates of strictly-speaking arguments incur an explanatory burden: why doesn't (4) defeat the presumption in favour of the strict reading of *e*? When the folk take themselves to mean, and interpret others as meaning, something looser, and successfully coordinate on the basis of those assumptions, our USE-GUIDES-MEANING principle suggests *the term just does mean that looser thing*. What is more, these cases don't have the hallmarks of deference.

Plausibly, the considerations one must raise to discharge this explanatory burden will need to be specific to the expression at issue. Strictly-speaking

arguments arise in a variety of semantic disputes, including moral error theory, counterfactual scepticism, and global epistemic scepticism.[4] The specific justifications available might be different in the various cases, and though we suspect the same explanatory idleness will appear in each context, for the sake of a concrete discussion we'll use Hájek (ms)'s argument that most counterfactuals are false as a representative example of a strictly speaking argument.

Briefly, Hájek argues that, *strictly speaking*, counterfactual constructions of the form 'A would C' are true only if the probability of $(A\& \sim C)$ is 0. But for just about any counterfactual claim, there is a non-zero probability, however strange or unlikely, of $(A\& \sim C)$. This is because (science tells us) the world is genuinely chancy at the most fundamental level. So when I tell my toddler 'were you to drop that glass, it would shatter', I speak falsely. But, he says, I shouldn't worry about that; truth is overblown, and we have more weighty conversational purposes which would be undermined by eschewing loose talk to bring our usage in line with the strictest standard. Doing so would convey – would be interpreted as saying – that the law-like regularities usually expressed by counterfactual claims *don't* hold for the object in question. If I told my toddler merely that 'the glass would very likely shatter', he could justifiably conclude that the glass is unusually shatter-resistant (Hájek, ms, 56).

What Hájek needs in order to discharge the explanatory burden for his strictly-speaking argument is to defend the claim that there is a presumption in favor of strictness that isn't defeated by these practical conversational purposes. This must involve demonstrating that the presumption does explanatory work over and above that done by the sorts of deference facts appealed to in NOT SPECIAL.

The main reason he offers to embrace such a presumption is that it anchors the meanings of *e*: it gives uses stable interpretations, and validates important inference patterns. Allowing the strictness of the interpretation of 'A would C' to shift across contexts risks invalidating important dualities (e.g. $[A \mathbin{\Box\!\!\rightarrow} C] \leftrightarrow \sim [A \mathbin{\Diamond\!\!\rightarrow} \sim C]$), or rendering the meaning of counterfactuals insufficiently stable to facilitate communication, disagreement, etc. The meaning needs to be anchored down somehow, and the strictest standard seems to be a reasonably well-motivated, non-arbitrary candidate.

We agree that the meaning needs to be somewhat anchored, but we needn't

---

[4]For instances of strictly-speaking arguments in moral error theory, see for example Mackie (1977, ch.1); in counterfactual scepticism, see Hájek (ms, § 2 and 4); in global scepticism about knowledge, see Davis (2010), and DeRose (2012) for a rejoinder. Also see Kennedy (2007), Klecha (2018), Lasersohn (1999), and Unger (1971) for more general arguments for strict standards for all 'absolute' terms.

embrace anything stronger than NOT SPECIAL to accomplish this. Deference allows us to anchor the meaning of *e* to a relatively public interpretation — which may or may not be the strictest one. This is how there is a stable interpretation of 'nut', even though it isn't the botanically strict one. Sandgren and Steele (ms) illustrate one way to accomplish this for counterfactuals. They suggest that the usual purpose of counterfactual claims is to indicate objective regularities in the world. We reject counterfactual assertions that fail this test, successfully coordinate with those that pass it, and interpret them as asserting something like a robust connection (quite like a *ceteris paribus* law in the special sciences) holding between the explicit antecedent and consequent in the domain of inquiry invoked. Crucially, the domain invoked need not be fundamental physics: when making claims about geological patterns, say, we aren't concerned with quantum tunnelling effects, since these effects tend to confound the geological regularities. The standards of fundamental physics are in a sense more strict, but they're in an important way inappropriate when we're talking about whether a shield volcano would erupt explosively.

As this illustrates, it is possible to identify adequately stable standards without invoking maximal strictness. Speakers can coordinate on these by deferring to the science. And even if we aren't usually speaking strictly, we can when our purposes require it. So we can preserve the features of counterfactuals that concern Hájek when we're making claims about fundamental physics; they do really hold *in that domain*. But they don't rise up to coerce counterfactuals about other domains. Peter is right that from the perspective of fundamental physics, no spatially separated events happen simultaneously; but that doesn't mean that we can't arrive at a party at the same time.

Our interests in fundamental physics don't supersede our interests in using our language to coordinate, facilitate testimony, and communicate, and these latter interests exert more immediate pressure on interpreting our expressions. Crucially, denying PRESUMPTIVELY STRICT doesn't mean that anything goes, nor that what *e* means is completely up to the speaker. There are still constraints; the language pushes back. It's just that the norms of inquiry that are appropriate to one domain (including standards of precision demanded) aren't automatically appropriate to other domains.

One might still think that strict standards enjoy at least *some* kind of presumptive priority, evidenced by the fact that strict standards are 'sticky': harder to shift away from, in some sense. If strict standards were difficult to shake in this way, *and the difficulty cannot be explained by the usefulness of being strict*, that would be some evidence for PRESUMPTIVELY STRICT. But we contend that when

standards resist loosening it is because the stricter standard is useful. Usefulness for our conversational purposes is the engine of interpretation in these cases, not the strictness *per se*. As evidence, recall that I can acknowledge that Peter speaks truly when he says that 'strictly speaking, water is only stagnant if it has *no current at all*', while felicitously resisting the strict standard. Given that our interest in whether the water is stagnant is driven by whether it is safe to drink, and water is unsafe well before it is *completely* devoid of current, I can cheerfully reply that 'strictly speaking, you're right, but that doesn't matter. This water is stagnant so we shouldn't drink it.' The felicity of this reply suggests that the *usefulness* of a standard, rather than its strictness, is doing the metasemantic work.[5] The facts about usefulness can fully account for the stickiness of stricter standards, without invoking PRESUMPTIVELY STRICT.

Could the felicity of *speaking loosely* be explained with pragmatics? Assuredly. But why should it need to be? All parties to this debate accept that conversational purposes have a role in determining meaning. The onus is on the advocates of PRESUMPTIVELY STRICT to explain why such a presumption is necessary; why appealing to conversational purposes isn't *sufficient* to explain the semantic value of loose uses. And if we're right that *usefulness* is what explains the relevance of the strict standard when we're speaking strictly, then why wouldn't the usefulness of loose standards render the loose standards relevant when we're speaking loosely? Symmetry suggests that what we literally say, when speaking loosely, is true.[6]

4 A parting challenge

Strictly-speaking arguments only run when the strictest interpretation is the correct one; these arguments depend on ALWAYS STRICT or at least PRESUMPTIVELY STRICT. But this presumption in favour of strict interpretations is unmotivated. The cases that support taking the strict interpretation to be correct (speaking

---

[5]Lewis (1979, 353) makes a similar point, writing that '[Unger] can indeed create an unusual context in which hardly anything can acceptably be called 'flat', but he hasn't thereby cast any discredit on the more usual contexts in which lower standards of precision are in force.' For those keeping score at home, what we're advocating here differs from Lewis at two key points: (i) we distinguish strictness from precision (the latter being a matter of the determinacy of a standard, see fn 2), and (ii) we hold that loose talk can be simply *true*, not merely 'true enough'.

[6]For those tempted by the pragmatic treatment of these cases (à la Lasersohn, 1999, 526-27), why shouldn't we say that when speaking loosely, what we literally say is true — the semantic value of the expression is tied to the loose standard — but we might pragmatically convey something false, because hearers might mistakenly invoke the strict standards?

strictly-enough) tend to bear the hallmarks of deference, but many of the cases to which the strictly-speaking arguments are applied (speaking loosely) don't. The main considerations in favour of taking strict interpretations to be correct can be wholly accommodated by the much weaker NOT SPECIAL, which has the additional virtue of being easily compatible with the attractive USE-GUIDES-MEANING metasemantic principle. Our communicative purposes don't always require deference, and even when they do, they don't always invoke the strictest standard. We contend that the strictest standard is correct only when we're deferring to it or our purposes demand it.

If all this is right, then in ordinary cases where our purposes don't require the strictest interpretation, there is no compelling reason to think that the strictest interpretation is correct, and so no reason to think we're speaking falsely. So those who want to wield a strictly-speaking argument must first address three pressing questions:

(i) Why must we take the strict standard to be correct in cases of speaking loosely, despite the striking differences between them and cases of speaking strictly-enough?

(ii) What explains the implied failure of the USE-GUIDES-MEANING principle in these cases?

(iii) What do we gain by incurring these costs: why isn't the ability to sometimes speak strictly sufficient?

If cases of speaking loosely don't involve deference to the strictest standard, and do come under the purview of the USE-GUIDES-MEANING principle, then the strictest interpretation of e isn't the appropriate one for our everyday uses. We're speaking truly, precisely because what we assert isn't what we would have asserted if we were speaking strictly. All of this is compatible with 1, 2, and 4 of the strictly-speaking argument: all it denies is 3.

So we're throwing down the gauntlet to the defenders of strictly-speaking arguments: why should we think that the folk are, despite their intentions, non-deferential attitudes, ability to co-ordinate meanings, and communicative successes, in fact speaking strictly, and, strictly speaking, speaking falsely?[7]

References

Armstrong, J. (2016). Coordination, triangulation, and language use. *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy 59*(1), 80–112.

Begby, E. (2014). Lexical norms, language comprehension, and the epistemology of testimony. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy 44*, 324–342.

Burge, T. (1979). Individualism and the Mental. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy 4*, 73–121.

Davis, W. (2010). Review of DeRose (2009). *Mind 119*, 1152–7.

DeRose, K. (2012). Replies to Nagel, Ludlow, and Fantl and McGrath. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 84*, 711–717.

Hájek, A. (ms). Most Counterfactuals are False. unpublished manuscript.

Kennedy, C. (2007). Vagueness and grammar: the semantics of relative and absolute gradable adjectives. *Linguistics and Philosophy 30*, 1–45.

Klecha, P. (2018). On unidirectionality in precisification. *Linguistics and Philosophy 41*, 87–124.

Lasersohn, P. (1999). Pragmatic Halos. *Language 75*, 522–551.

Lassiter, D. (2008). Semantic externalism, language variation, and sociolinguistic accommodation. *Mind and Language 23*(5), 607–633.

Lewis, D. (1979). Scorekeeping in a language game. *Journal of Philosophical Logic 8*, 339–359.

Lewis, D. (1989). Dispositional theories of value. *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume 63*(1), 113–137.

Mackie, J. L. (1977). *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. Penguin Books.

Putnam, H. (1972). The Meaning of Meaning. *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science 7*, 131–193.

Sandgren, A. and K. Steele (ms). Levelling Counterfactual Scepticism. unpublished manuscript.

Unger, P. (1971). A Defense of Skepticism. *The Philosophical Review 80*(2), 198–219.