

Sociolinguistic variation, slurs, and speech acts

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Abstract

In this paper, I argue that the ‘social meanings’ associated with sociolinguistic variation put pressure on the standard philosophical conception of language, according to which the foremost thing we do with words is exchange information. Drawing on parallels with the explanatory challenge posed by slurs and pejoratives, I argue that the best way to understand social meanings is to think of them in speech act theoretic terms. I develop a distinctive form of pluralism about the performances realized by means of sociolinguistic variants, and I claim that engagement with such performances is an utterly pervasive feature of our linguistic activity.

1 Introduction

It is very common in analytic philosophy – both within the philosophy of language itself and in the many subfields where linguistic questions loom large – to think of language, first and foremost, as a tool that allows agents to exchange information, typically modeled in propositional terms.

There is clearly something importantly correct about this way of thinking. The communication of propositions is obviously a central concern of linguistic agents, and questions about the conditions under which such communication is possible have important ramifications where questions about testimony, sincerity, and democratic participation – to mention just a few philosophically important issues – are concerned.

*An amended version of this manuscript will appear in the *Journal of Philosophy*, where the copyright is held; the *Journal* preprint policy prohibits distribution of the final draft. Although errors, oversights, and infelicities are mine alone, I am grateful to two anonymous referees for their engagement and very helpful suggestions, as well as to illuminating conversations with Martin Abreu-Zavaleta, Elisabeth Camp, Nils Franzén, Nat Hansen, Torfinn Huvenes, Eliot Michaelson, Luise Mirow, Robert Simpson, Pär Sundström, Caroline Torpe Touborg, Bram Vaassen, participants in the University of Pittsburgh *Words Workshop*, the Stockholm University CLLAM seminar, the 2022 Umeå University *Speech and Style* workshop, and a 2022 University of Edinburgh colloquium.

At the same time, however, philosophers' focus on the mechanics of information exchange has sometimes obscured the significance of other things we do with language. Although the idea that certain utterances have an irreducibly performative character has been an established piece of the theoretical landscape since at least [Austin \(1962\)](#), it was only following the work of [Langton \(1993\)](#) and [Hornsby \(1995\)](#) that philosophers began to really appreciate the full breadth of the role such utterances play in our lives. Philosophical engagement with linguistics, it seems to me, has reproduced something like this gap. While work in syntax and semantics that clearly bears on the exchange of propositions has been extremely influential in philosophy, sociolinguistics has received hardly any philosophical attention.¹ Consider, for example, the following pair from [Chambers \(2004\)](#):

- (1) a. Adonis saw himself in the mirror.
- b. Adonis seen hissself in the mirror.

Deploying the set of tools standardly used to explain information exchange, we will have no difficulty identifying senses in which (1a) and (1b) are equivalent. The *differences* between them, however, which involve what sociolinguists call 'social meanings', have so far not been the focus of any sustained discussion in the philosophical literature, despite the fact that their intuitive significance will be "readily recognized by virtually every speaker of the language" ([Chambers, 2004](#), pg. 4).

My aim in this paper will be to develop a speech act theoretic analysis of social meaning, and to show how that analysis constitutes a challenge to the idea that commerce in propositions is the fundamental aim of our linguistic activity. I start the paper in earnest in section two, by sketching what I will call the philosophical STANDARD MODEL of language. In section three, I present examples of intuitively significant variation that the STANDARD MODEL misses. Drawing on parallels with philosophical work on slurs, in section four I consider a number of ways in which the model might be conservatively extended, and I argue against each before offering my preferred alternative in section five. Section six concludes.

2 A familiar picture of language

Consider the following passage from [Lewis \(1980\)](#):

The foremost thing we do with words is to impart information, and this is how we do it. Suppose (1) that you do not know whether *A* or

¹I take the striking and distinctive contribution made by [Keiser \(2023\)](#), who uses data involving differences in pronunciation across different social groups to argue that languages involve a wider range of purposes and methods for achieving them than are standardly countenanced in philosophy, to count as the exception that proves the rule.

B or ... ; and (2) that I do know; and (3) that I want you to know; and (4) that no extraneous reasons much constrain my choice of words; and (5) that we both know that the conditions (1)–(5) obtain. Then I will be truthful and you will be trusting and thereby you will come to share my knowledge. I will find something to say that depends for its truth on whether *A* or *B* or ... and that I take to be true. I will say it and you will hear it. You, trusting me to be willing and able to tell the truth, will then be in a position to infer whether *A* or *B* or (pg. 80)

In this passage, Lewis both characterizes the fundamental explanatory challenge in the philosophy of language and describes the structure of a class of theories that would meet it. The kind of theory he describes has two components, one semantic and one pragmatic. The aim of the semantics is to explain how the truth conditions associated with a particular sentence are determined by the meanings of the sentence's constituent parts and their mode of composition. The aim of the pragmatics is to explain how mutual assumptions about cooperation, given mutual knowledge of a semantic theory, make it possible for speakers and listeners to systematically influence each others' epistemic states by producing linguistic tokens.

I take the claims Lewis makes here — one about what must be explained, the other about how we should explain it — to inhere in so much of the philosophy of language as it stands today that I will call their conjunction the STANDARD MODEL. It does not seem to me to be much of an exaggeration to say that the central research project in the philosophy of language since about the last third of the twentieth century has been the development of the two interlocking explanatory components of the STANDARD MODEL.²

On the semantic side, great progress has been made on the task of constructing a compositionally-plausible theory that will produce intuitively correct truth conditions for arbitrarily many declarative sentences. Davidson (1967), drawing on foundational themes from Frege (1879/1997) and Tarski (1944), described the outlines of a theory that would do the job, and Heim and Kratzer (1998), themselves drawing on Montague (1973) and Partee (1975), built a textbook example that researchers focused on increasingly subtle data have fruitfully expanded in a wide variety of directions.

²Thanks are due to an anonymous referee for pointing out that this characterization overlooks work in the inferentialist tradition that descends from Anscombe and Sellars through Brandom (1994, 2001) and McDowell (1994, 2009), discernible in Kukla and Lance (2009) and in other prominent places. Since I see no obvious way of deploying inferentialist resources to solve the kind of challenge I raise here for the STANDARD MODEL, I leave further discussion for another occasion. I should emphasize, too, that when I call the development of that model the 'central project' in the philosophy of language, I mean that as a socio-historical description and not a normative assessment.

On the pragmatic side, since at least [Stalnaker \(1978\)](#), we have a broadly successful framework that shows how agents can use mutual knowledge about the semantic values of declarative sentences in a context to gain information. The key to this framework is the thought that the epistemic states of the participants in a conversation jointly determine a set of propositions — those that are mutually assumed to be live options for the sake of the conversation. When someone utters a declarative sentence, this so-called ‘common ground’ is updated by intersection with the semantic value of that sentence (or with a proposition determined in a systematic way on the basis of the sentence’s semantic value), and possibilities are ruled out.

I will argue here that the STANDARD MODEL does not explain social meanings as it stands and cannot be conservatively extended to do so. Before beginning that argument though, it will be worth taking a moment to situate my project with regard to other recent work that has revealed important limitations of the model.

For example, renewed interest in forms of expressivism along the lines of [Gibbard \(1992, 2003\)](#) has led to non-propositional semantic treatments for everything from aesthetic predicates to epistemic modals.³ A similarly broad range of data have led philosophers to design conversational frameworks that put as much emphasis on the rules of an exchange as they do on the coordination on items of content, while others have worked out approaches that model conversational dynamics not in terms of the progressive reduction of the set of open possibilities, but in terms of an expansion thereof.⁴

Along lines more similar to those I will pursue here, recent years have also seen a resurgence of interest in the way in which we use words to shape the social landscapes we inhabit. Work in the feminist philosophy of language,⁵ on slurs and pejoratives,⁶ on political speech and manipulation,⁷ and on many other topics besides has drawn attention to new facets of the Austinian idea that we do not merely *say* things, but also *do* things to one another with our words.

While research in this vein typically aims to demonstrate the importance of one or another particular form of linguistic maneuvering, philosophers have sometimes pitched apparently non-informational transactions as a more general challenge to the STANDARD MODEL. [Langton \(2012\)](#), for example, argues that hate speech and

³See e.g., [Gillies \(2001\)](#), [Yalcin \(2007, 2011\)](#), [Franzén \(2020\)](#) and [Ninan \(2022\)](#).

⁴See e.g., [Ludlow \(2014\)](#), [Plunkett and Sundell \(2013\)](#), [Khoo and Knobe \(2018\)](#), [Khoo \(2020\)](#), and [Mankowitz \(2021\)](#), on the one hand, and [Hoek \(2018\)](#) and [Rothschild and Yablo \(2020\)](#) on the other.

⁵See e.g. [Langton \(1993\)](#), [Hornsby \(1995\)](#), [McGowan \(2003\)](#), [Maitra \(2009\)](#), and [Kukla \(2014\)](#).

⁶See e.g., [Potts \(2007\)](#), [Schlenker \(2007\)](#), [Hom \(2008\)](#), [Williamson \(2010\)](#), [Anderson and Lepore \(2013b,a\)](#), [Camp \(2013, 2018a\)](#), [Lepore and Stone \(2018\)](#), [Papa-Wyatt and Wyatt \(2018\)](#), [Nunberg \(2018\)](#), and [Díaz-Legaspe et al. \(2019\)](#).

⁷See e.g., [Langton \(2012\)](#), [Camp \(2018b\)](#), [McGowan \(2018\)](#), [Saul \(2018\)](#), and [Beaver and Stanley \(2019\)](#).

pornography show that in addition to affecting one another's beliefs, language allows us to affect the things others hate and desire, and suggests that the mechanism of accommodation she takes to underlie these possibilities is also at work in "a great deal of informal conversation, and presumably much advertising" (pg. 22). [Beaver and Stanley \(2019\)](#) argue that giving an adequate treatment of morally problematic speech and of political speech will require a substantial rethinking of the "structure, tools, and resources of the theory of meaning" (pg. 533), outline some of those, and sketch a number of possible new forms such a theory could take. [Cappelen and Dever \(2019\)](#) suggest that the STANDARD MODEL will require supplementation with a treatment of the non-cognitive associations they call 'lexical effects', and [Keiser \(2023\)](#) argues that variation in the way people with different social identities speak reveals that the aim of exchanging information cannot be the only aim that shapes our linguistic activity, since variation in fact involves a degraded efficiency of exchange.

Although the approach I will develop here is broadly consonant with this work, I take my argument to be distinctive in several ways. First, while the literature offers what in my view amount to several strong cases for the claim that there is more to language than information exchange, I hope the present paper will show that the 'other things', as it were, are not just common or important, but that they utterly pervade our linguistic lives and therefore deserve a central place in philosophical theorizing. Second, while I take existing work to be agnostic about the prospects for a relatively conservative extension of the STANDARD MODEL, those prospects will be a key focus here, where I will take up and reject each of what I take to be the most plausible contenders. Finally, by structuring my contribution around data from variationist sociolinguistics that philosophers have thus far not properly attended to, I hope to contribute to bringing the two disciplines into dialogue in a mutually-beneficial way. I suspect that even philosophers who disagree with my claims about the STANDARD MODEL will agree that the considerations I adduce here show that the phenomenon of social meaning is one that deserves a place in the philosophical landscape and that going forward, it will have to be incorporated into philosophical theorizing about language in one way or another.

3 Subtleties the standard model misses

According to [Labov \(1972\)](#), one of the foundational texts in variationist sociolinguistics, two expressions are 'variables' when they involve "two different ways of saying the same thing" (*op. cit.*, pg. 272).⁸ Despite figuring prominently in several generations' worth of sociolinguistic research, data involving what some authors

⁸For related prominent characterizations, see [Lavandera \(1978\)](#) and [Dines \(1980\)](#). An anonymous referee points out that a qualification should be added to make clear that the characterization applies to expressions from the same language.

now call ‘variants’ have been largely overlooked in the philosophical literature.⁹ Sociolinguists, however, have described strikingly consistent patterns in the ways in which speakers and listeners deploy and interpret morphosyntactic, phonological, and lexical variants, which at least on their face appear to involve a form of linguistic meaning.

Consider example (1) again:

- (1) a. Adonis saw himself in the mirror.
- b. Adonis seen hisself in the mirror.

Chambers (2004) describes this example as follows:

[These] two sentences convey exactly the same grammatical meaning and everyone who speaks English with even minimal competence recognizes their semantic identity.

[They] do, however, convey very different social meanings as a direct result of their morphological variants. That is, they carry sociolinguistic significance. The first, with its standard forms, is emblematic of middle-class, educated, or relatively formal speech, while the second is emblematic of working-class, uneducated, or highly colloquial (vernacular) speech. These differences will also be readily recognized by virtually every speaker of the language. (pp. 4-5)

I will return later to the question about what to make of Chambers’ slide from saying that variants “convey” different social meanings to saying that variants are “emblematic” of different social groups or ways of speaking. For now, the point I want to make is simply that there is an intuitively significant difference between (1a) and (1b) that nearly any English speaker will detect, but which does not appear to be captured by the STANDARD MODEL, and which has not been discussed in any detail in the philosophical literature.¹⁰

⁹As indicated in note 1, I take Keiser (2023) to be an important exception that supports this generalization. In Nowak (2023), I offer an argument that aims to establish that sociolinguistic variation raises issues about discursive injustice in the sense of Kukla (2014), and Elisabeth Camp and I provide an opinionated survey of possible philosophical approaches to variation in our Camp and Nowak (forthcoming).

¹⁰I will not defend any particular claim here about what the social significance of one or the other variant in a particular context would be. The variant featured in (1b) is one that occurs in a wide variety of English dialects (e.g., vernacular dialects of southwestern England and East Anglia, African-American English, and Appalachian English, and which indexes a variety of different fine-grained properties in addition to those Chambers mentions. While Chambers’ data are invented, he indicates that they derive from Jenny Cheshire’s ethnographic work in Reading, England in the late 1970s, reported in Cheshire (1981, 1997) and drawing on common patterns of British use described in Trudgill (1974) and Hughes and Trudgill (1979), among other places.

Clearly, any time one member of the pair is true, the other will be as well. Both will realize the same updates on conversational contexts, *modulo* irrelevant differences of the form [Stalnaker \(1978\)](#) describes when acknowledging that the common ground of a conversation will reflect basic facts about the concrete situation in which it occurs, like whether there are any goats around. Nevertheless, if you were a language teacher working in a country where English is not widely spoken and you presented (1a) and (1b) for your students as equivalent formulations without any acknowledgement of the kinds of associations Chambers mentions, there is a sense in which you would be setting your students up for a surprise.

To bring another source of variation into play, consider an example from [Campbell-Kibler \(2007\)](#), pg. 36, that demonstrates two ways in which a sentence might be pronounced:

- (2) a. I'm planning on going to grad school.
- b. I'm plannin' on goin' to grad school.

Speakers of an extremely wide range of English dialects alternate, in different social contexts, between pronouncing (ING) as per (2a) and (2b).¹¹ I imagine very few philosophers will be tempted by the thought that there may be a truth conditional difference between one pronunciation and the other, or that the difference is plausibly treated as a difference in terms of the updates each would realize on a Stalnaker context. Nevertheless, there is clearly something intuitively different about them. In the abstract, *-ing* tends to be associated with competence, professionalism, or aloofness, and *-in* with approachability or solidarity.¹² Importantly, however, this does not mean that interpreters will generally come to believe that speakers who pronounce (ING) one way or another are in fact competent or approachable; the particular effects produced by one of these variants are extremely sensitive to a wide range of fine-grained details about the context in which they are produced.¹³

Depending on the details of a particular speech situation, one variant might come across as friendly and approachable, with the other stilted and uptight. In other cases, one variant may be seen as impudent or impolite, while the other would be taken to be appropriately serious and respectful. Knowing which contexts are which — and thus, being able to put the mutually-recognized stable property associations to one's intended social purposes — requires a lot of non-linguistic information, but knowing *that* these variants encode meaningful differences seems pretty clearly to be a part of knowing English.

¹¹See [Fischer \(1958\)](#), [Labov \(1966\)](#), [Trudgill \(1974\)](#), [Wald and Shopen \(1981\)](#), cited in [Campbell-Kibler \(2007\)](#) for a survey.

¹²See [Burnett \(2019\)](#) for discussion.

¹³See [Campbell-Kibler \(2006, 2007, 2008\)](#) for detailed discussions of the ways in which (ING) interacts with other sociolinguistic variables and with listeners' perceptions of a speaker.

To invoke a final mode of variation, consider the following example involving the lexicon, which features a kind of contrast described in [Díaz-Legaspe et al. \(2019\)](#):

- (3) a. They need to go pee-pee.
- b. They need to pee.
- c. They need to piss.
- d. They need to pass water.
- e. They need to urinate.

Once again, (3a)–(3e) seem to be extensionally indiscernible, and each will realize the same update on a conversational common ground. Any fully competent speaker of English, however, will recognize that there are important differences between them, differences that will produce importantly different social effects in different contexts. (3a) is an unremarkable thing to say if you work at a kindergarten, but sounds bizarre if you produce it while serving as a spokesperson for your country’s diplomatic mission at the United Nations. As in the case of our previous examples, you will need more than linguistic knowledge to be able to tell which contexts are appropriate for which lexical variants, or to predict which are likely to produce which reactions in which contexts. At the same time, however, it seems hard to avoid the fact that someone who is not at least generally familiar with the range of possibilities associated with (3a) is in an important sense missing something not just about the world, as it were, but about the word ‘pee-pee’.

Before turning to the question of what we as philosophers should make of the phenomenon of sociolinguistic variation, I want to take a moment to emphasize that the data presented here amount to only the merest scratching of the surface. I chose these examples partially because they produce especially clear felt differences across particularly broad swathes of the English-speaking world, and partially because they are especially well-studied among sociolinguists. The fact of the matter, however, is that one could easily dedicate a book to characterizing the diverse range of forms variation takes over the day in the life of any individual speaker, or a lifetime trying to characterize the forms current in a linguistic community of any size. While I think it makes sense to leave the actual work of providing these characterizations to people who have the right kind of training in linguistics, I do not think that this division of labor impugns the feasibility or the importance of the development of a philosophical sociolinguistics. Given how utterly awash human languages are in apparently meaningful variation, until there is room in the philosophy of language for a story about what we are up to when we pronounce a word one way or another, or put a sentence in one or another truth-conditionally indiscernible syntactic configuration, etc., our theories will be at best substantially incomplete. In what follows, I will describe where I think we

ought and ought not to look for that room.

4 Conservative extensions of the standard model

The examples presented in the previous section are meant to reveal an intuitively important kind of meaning that is not obviously captured by the core resources of the STANDARD MODEL. In this section and the next, I will argue that conservative extensions of the model fare no better; to do justice to the data involving variation, we need to look beyond the exchange of propositions. Let me begin that argument by adverting to the fact that at a high level, the intuitions elicited by sociolinguistic variant pairs recall intuitions that have been widely discussed in the philosophical literature on slurs. Typically, the fundamental challenge those expressions raise is said to be the challenge of explaining why it is that one member of a co-extensive pair (or set) is offensive while the other is not.¹⁴ The data involving variation appear to pose a similar challenge: how should we explain the fact that one member of a pair (or set) of extensional equivalents is typically implicated in the production of different ‘felt effects’ from the other? Moreover, as in the case of slurs, the felt effects of variation are ‘speaker-oriented’; if you say ‘Kit said they ain’t heard nothin’ ‘bout no festschrift’, the implications associated with the variants involved accrue to you and not to Kit. As in the case of slurs, the effects of variation project out of belief attributions, speech reports, the antecedents of conditionals, and so on. And as in the case of slurs, the effects of variation appear to be independent of whether a speaker intended them or not.¹⁵

Given the similarities between the cases, it is natural to take the existing literature on slurs to provide a template for possible forms a treatment of social meanings might take. As I read that literature, most of the theories on offer cluster into two broad categories. On the one hand, we have theories that take the offensiveness of a slur to involve the expression of a problematic content or attitude, and on the other, theories that take the offensiveness to be due to the fact that a speaker who produces a slur realizes a problematic kind of action.

Since our aim here is to evaluate the prospects for developing a conservative extension of the STANDARD MODEL, i.e., an extension on which we say that variation can be accurately captured in terms of information exchange, I will focus my critical discussion on theories of the first sort. Among these, most of the positions that have been staked out in the literature can be usefully distinguished in terms of the

¹⁴See [Dummett \(1973\)](#), [Hornsby \(2001\)](#), [Williamson \(2003\)](#), [Whiting \(2008\)](#), [Anderson and Lepore \(2013b,a\)](#), [Jeshion \(2013\)](#), and [Camp \(2013\)](#), among others. For dissent, see [Hom \(2008\)](#), [Hom and May \(2013, 2018\)](#), [Falbo \(2021\)](#) and others.

¹⁵For discussion of the projection data, see [Cepollaro and Thommen \(2019\)](#) and the references therein. For speaker-orientation, see [Bolinger \(2017\)](#) and the references therein. For ‘offensive autonomy’, see [Hom \(2008\)](#), [Jeshion \(2013\)](#), [Bolinger \(2017\)](#), and the references therein.

answers they provide to the following questions:

- A. What is the nature of the problematic content or attitude associated with the expression in question?
- B. How (where exactly in the architecture of the theory) is that content or attitude encoded?

Consider, for example, the ‘combinatorial externalism’ proposed by Hom (2008). On that theory, slurs are problematic because they semantically encode the conjunction of a negative assessment of a particular group and a prescription for how members of the group ought to be treated. Hom says:

The meanings for epithets can be presented with the following schematized, complex predicate ... :

*ought be subject to $p^*_1 + \dots + p^*_n$ because of being $d^*_1 + \dots + d^*_n$ all because of being NPC**,

where p^*_1, \dots, p^*_n are deontic prescriptions derived from the set of racist practices, d^*_1, \dots, d^*_n are the negative properties derived from the racist ideology, and NPC* is the semantic value of the appropriate non-pejorative correlate of the epithet. For example, the epithet ‘chink’ expresses a complex, socially constructed property like: *ought to be subject to higher college admissions standards, and ought to be subject to exclusion from advancement to managerial positions, and ... , because of being slanty-eyed, and devious, and good-at-laundrying, and ... , all because of being Chinese.* (op. cit., pg. 431)

Having this concrete example on the table makes it easy to see how we might generate a range of alternative positions by varying the answers we give to our A- and B-questions. So, for example, we might endorse Hom’s view about the nature of the properties associated with slurs, but claim that those properties make their appearance not in the lexical semantics, but at the level of the presuppositions associated with the expression, say, or at the level of its conventional or conversational implicatures, or the entailments it licenses.

Alternatively, we might hold any one of these (or other) structural possibilities fixed, while varying our assessment about the nature of the problematic component. So, instead of claiming that slurs encode the idea that a certain treatment is warranted in virtue of the members of a certain group’s instantiating a particular complex social property, we might say that slurs simply encode one or the other of a harmful prescription or a descriptive property with a negative valence, or we might say that they involve the expression of a certain negative attitude, etc.

It is not difficult to imagine how any of these approaches might be adapted to explain the intuitive effects produced by variants like those surveyed in the pre-

vious section. Take the semantic content approach, for example. Suppose we say that:

- (4) $\llbracket \text{he needs to go pee-pee} \rrbracket^{c,g} = 1$ iff $g(i)$'s bladder is full and the audience of c includes a child

A treatment like (4) would certainly offer an explanation of the fact that it sounds bizarre to use the sentence in question in a professional context. After all, we do not expect people to say that they are addressing a child when they manifestly are not. It seems just as clear, however, that this treatment will result in bad predictions. The sentence 'he needs to go pee-pee' does not entail that the speaker is addressing a child, as (4) would have it. Neither is it felicitous to respond by saying 'that's false, there's no child here', as (4) would lead us to expect, or to report on a use by saying, e.g., 'x said that y had a full bladder and that there was a child in the audience'.¹⁶

Of course, we could try to fix these problems by answering our A-question differently; that is, by searching for an alternative truth conditional element that would distinguish 'pee-pee' from 'pee', 'piss', 'urine', and so on. I think the prospects for improving on our admittedly silly proposal, however, are dim, and I see little scope for improving them by varying the answers we offer for the B-question, either.

The heart of the problem (4) reveals is not that we chose the wrong truth conditional contribution for 'pee-pee' or that we went wrong in treating it as an item of content instead of a presupposition (say), it is that there is not *any* specific piece of information or attitude that is reliably encoded by one member of a pair (or set) of variants. While every fully competent speaker will recognize that something importantly different happens when someone employs one variant over another, even if we confine our attention to a particular occasion of use, there is rarely anything so clear as a proposition or attitude that is asserted, presupposed, implicated, endorsed, entailed, or otherwise. Any of the available options will end up making implausible predictions, because each demands a level of precisification that the intuitive data simply do not support.¹⁷

Since there is no space here to argue against every possible completion of the schema suggested by our A- and B-questions, my strategy for supporting this claim

¹⁶Sander (2022) offers essentially this argument in support of a use-theoretic treatment of register differences between co-referring expressions like 'dog' and 'bow-wow' (pg. 13); my use of the idea of child-directedness in this connection comes from Díaz-Legaspe et al. (2019).

¹⁷Camp (2013, 2018a) cites this kind of concern as one of the motivations for her view on which slurs involve the endorsement of a perspective instead of a proposition or an attitude, and I imagine this difficulty is what explains Chambers' alternation between saying social meanings 'convey' something and that they are 'emblematic' of certain social categories (compare Chambers 2004, pp. 4-5, quoted here on page 2).

will be to argue in general terms against three of the most prominent contending types of theoretical architecture: semantic theories, presuppositional theories, and theories based on conventional implicatures.¹⁸

As a first step, let me point out that despite all of the similarities between the case of slurs and the case of variant pairs, there is also a fundamental difference. Where slurs are concerned, our intuitions about the effects wrought by one expression or the other go hand in hand with a degree of uncertainty about their truth conditional equivalence.¹⁹ Witness:

- (5) Kit is white.
- (6) Kit is a honkey.

The reason a semantic approach to the offensiveness data is not dead on arrival is that the various parties to the debate agree that there is intuitive space to wonder whether every case in which (5) could be used to make a true statement will be a case in which (6) could be used to do the same. The fundamental datum concerning the offensiveness of slurs, then, is accompanied by a corollary involving the asymmetrical entailment relations that obtain between sentences involving them and sentences involving their neutral counterparts. For example, while (7) and (8) have a tautological air, (9) does not:

- | | |
|--|------------|
| (7) If Kit is a honkey, then Kit is white. | TAUTOLOGY? |
| (8) Either Kit is not a honkey, or Kit is white. | TAUTOLOGY? |
| (9) If Kit is white, then Kit is a honkey. | FALSE |

If there were no apparent difference in the intuitive truth conditions associated with sentences like (5) and (6), debate among proponents of semantic, presuppositional, and conventional implicature treatments of slurs would make no sense. What distinguishes each theory from the others – and what justifies theory building in this area in the first place – is precisely the way in which the apparent entailment asymmetries are explained, or explained away.

Proponents of semantic theories, regardless of which properties exactly they take slurs to encode, offer a certain kind of straight solution to the apparent asymmetry.

¹⁸The argument I give can be straightforwardly adapted to cover theories involving conversational implicatures and entailments. I set issues raised by expressivist theories to the side. I do not think expressivism will do the trick, as I do not see what non-cognitive attitude e.g., ‘ain’t’ would express. But, if there were a successful expressivist treatment of variation, I would take that both to strengthen my fundamental claim that variation is not about propositional exchange, and to nevertheless fit well with my preferred speech act theoretic analysis; compare [Jeshion \(2013\)](#).

¹⁹This uncertainty is widely reported in the literature; see [Dummett \(1973\)](#), [Saka \(2007\)](#), [Hom \(2008\)](#), [Richard \(2008\)](#), [Camp \(2013, 2018a\)](#), and others.

Qua semantic theorists, they claim that every point of evaluation that makes (6) true makes (5) true, but that there are points that make (6) false while making (5) true. The reason for this asymmetry is that the semantic value of the slur involves a conjunctive property, one of whose conjuncts is the semantic value of the neutral counterpart.

Proponents of presuppositional theories, regardless of which properties exactly they take slurs to encode, offer a different sort of straight solution. They claim that every point of evaluation that makes (6) true makes (5) true, but that there are points that make (5) true while leaving (6) with an undefined truth value. While the semantic values of otherwise-indiscernible sentences involving the slur and its neutral counterpart are the same wherever they are defined, there is a sense in which the asymmetrical relationship between sentences involving them is explained in a similarly conjunctive fashion. The conditions the slur places on points of evaluation include all of the conditions imposed by the neutral counterpart, together with an additional condition involving the problematic content.

Proponents of conventional implicature theories, regardless of which properties exactly they take slurs to encode, offer a skeptical solution. Instead of taking the challenge posed by asymmetrical entailment at face value, they attempt to explain it away. They point out that there are non-slur-involving cases that nearly everyone agrees involve equivalent truth values at all points, but which nevertheless provoke the intuition that entailments do not go both ways. Someone who wants to defend a conventional implicature treatment of slurs can use data like the following to support the claim that intuitions about mutual entailment are not a reliable guide to truth conditional equivalence:

- (10) a. Kit and Char got married and had a baby.
b. Kit and Char had a baby and got married.
- (11) a. He was English, therefore brave.
b. He was English and brave.
- (12) a. He was English but brave.
b. He was English and brave.

Even without getting into the details about which properties might be more or less plausibly associated with which sociolinguistic variants, I think we can appreciate that none of the semantic, presuppositional, or conventional implicature options will work to explain the intuitive variation data.

Take the semantic and presuppositional approaches first. Unlike slurs, our variant pairs do not appear to produce truth conditionally discernible effects. Each member of each of the following pairs (1–3 repeated) manifestly entails the other:

- (13) a. Adonis saw himself in the mirror.
b. Adonis seen hisself in the mirror.
- (14) a. Nobody has heard anything about any festschrift.
b. Ain't nobody heard nothing about no festschrift.
- (15) a. They need to pee.
b. They need to go pee-pee.

As we have seen, there are substantial intuitive differences between the a- and b- versions of (13)–(15). It seems plausible to think that some speakers will take one or the other to be more or less appropriate in a certain context, or to think that certain speakers might be reluctant to produce one or the other. This reluctance, however, is of a different kind than the reluctance someone who accepts a sentence involving a neutral counterpart will feel when confronted with an alternative involving a slur. Someone who accepts that Kit is white might doubt, that is, whether Kit is a honkey; if you overhear someone say ‘Kit is a honkey’ and are asked whether what they heard is true, you might understandably struggle. But if you are standing next to someone who says ‘Adonis seen hisself in the mirror’ and you yourself believe that Adonis had a veridical reflexive visual experience facilitated by a mirror, you cannot consistently doubt the truth of what your neighbor has said, even if you might add a disclaimer like ‘while I wouldn’t myself put things in these terms...’.

Positions that might be tenable in the case of slurs, then, do not even get off the ground where variation is concerned. Of our three candidates, this leaves the conventional implicature view. We can rule that view out by revisiting an argument from Bach (1999) that comes up often in the literature on slurs. Bach points out that (16) and (17) cannot both be accurately reported by (18):

- (16) Shaq is huge and agile.
- (17) Shaq is huge but agile.
- (18) Kit said that Shaq is huge and agile.

Bach calls this the ‘indirect quotation’ test, and claims that it establishes that the difference between ‘and’ and ‘but’ is a difference at the level of what is said. Together with other views of his, Bach takes this to show that the difference between the two lexical items must be a semantic one. While the notion of ‘what is said’ has a long and contested history, we do not have to commit ourselves to thinking that the test is reliable in that connection to see that even where the best candidate examples of conventional implicatures are concerned, paraphrases are closely restricted. So, ‘but’ needs to be reported with ‘but’ instead of ‘and’, you cannot leave

‘therefore’ out, and the order of the conjuncts in a conjunction with apparent temporal implications must be exactly reproduced.

In the case of sociolinguistic variants, however, variants can be exchanged for one another in speech reports with no apparent loss in fidelity:

- (19) I have to urinate.
- a. Char said they had to urinate.
 - b. Char said they had to pee.
 - c. Char said they had to pee-pee.
- (20) No one has heard anything about any *festschrift*.
- a. Char said no one has heard anything about any *festschrift*.
 - b. Char said ain’t nobody heard nothin’ ’bout no *festschrift*.
- (21) Ain’t nobody heard nothin’ ’bout no *festschrift*.
- a. Char said no one has heard anything about any *festschrift*.
 - b. Char said ain’t nobody heard nothin’ ’bout no *festschrift*.

If we set aside constructions in which intonation indicates a metalinguistic focus, as in ‘Char said they had to *urinate*’,²⁰ the question of which variant will be most appropriate in a speech report is a question that tracks the social facts that characterize the context in which the report is generated, not the context of the original speech. I take this to suggest that whatever the differences between variants are, they are not conventional implicatures.

5 A speech act theoretic treatment of variation

Although I have not argued against every possible way in which the STANDARD MODEL might be extended, I think it is clear that the basic approach I have taken will generalize. The fundamental problem with each of the classes of theory we have looked at – and with alternative conservative extensions of the model – is that variants, like slurs, seem to involve a property Potts (2007) called ‘descriptive ineffability’. Everyone will agree upon encountering one that something distinctive has been done, but there appears to be no way to put our finger on exactly what that thing is without simply repeating the expression in question.

This is an issue that in recent years has drawn more and more philosophers working on slurs and pejoratives towards a family of theories that involve an idea Camp (2018a) calls ‘minimalism’. The key claim made by proponents of these theories,

²⁰See Mankowitz (2020) and Mankowitz (2021) for discussion of what she calls ‘expression focus’.

which I will call LEXICOGRAPHIC MINIMALIST theories to distinguish the use in question from others that are current in philosophy, is that explaining the offensiveness of a slur does not require adding an offensive component to the extension of the neutral counterpart, or adding an additional presupposition, or a conventional implicature, or a *sui generis* inference rule, or anything else.²¹ The LEXICOGRAPHIC MINIMALIST holds that all that is required to explain the intuitions slurs produce is the fact that fully competent speakers have, and assume one another to have, some grasp of the metadata associated with the expressions of their language(s).

As Bolinger (2017) puts the key idea:

Speakers competent with a language have knowledge not only of lexical items and grammar, but also a set of co-occurrence expectations that encode the social norms and conventions concerning the use of various terms and ways of speaking. (*op. cit.*, pg. 447)

The primary advantage proponents of LEXICOGRAPHIC MINIMALISM have claimed for the view over what we might think of as the hard-coded alternatives sketched in the previous section is that, as the name implies, it carries very little theoretical baggage. If a contrast in the metadata associated with two extensionally equivalent alternatives is enough to get people to see that a speaker has done something distinctive in selecting one over the other, the LEXICOGRAPHIC MINIMALIST will say, there is no need to build that something into the lexicon, too. So much the better for the minimalist if, as indeed seems to be the case, there is no plausible candidate to build in anyway.

As I see the literature, the various versions of LEXICOGRAPHIC MINIMALISM that have been proposed cluster in two groups. On the one hand, there is a family of views we might think of as spiritual successors to the STANDARD MODEL, which treat linguistic metadata as a resource speakers exploit to encode information that goes beyond that encoded at the level of content, presupposition, implicature, and so on. Philosophers like Camp (2013), Croom (2013), Bolinger (2017), and Nunberg (2018), for example, offer proposals on which our mutual knowledge of the metadata associated with slurs is used to facilitate signaling. As Camp puts things, “slurs are so rhetorically powerful because they **signal allegiance to a perspective**: an integrated, intuitive way of cognizing members of the targeted group” (*op. cit.*, pg. 335, emphasis added).²² In Bolinger’s terms:

²¹See Anderson and Lepore (2013b,a), Bolinger (2017), Camp (2018a), Lepore and Stone (2018), Pullum (2018), Nunberg (2018), and Díaz-Legaspe et al. (2019) for versions of the view and discussion.

²²It is important to note that while Camp (2018a) shares significant pieces of the theory described in Camp (2013), her more recent work places a greater emphasis on the performativity involved when a speaker who produces a slur undertakes a commitment to the appropriateness of a certain perspective targeting the group picked out.

For some content ϕ , when it is common knowledge in the linguistic community that:

- i. α is an expression for ψ associated with ϕ , and
- ii. β is an expression for ψ not associated with ϕ

then in situations where the choice of expression is not forced, and the speaker is aware of (i) and (ii), selecting α in contrast to β **signals that the speaker endorses or shares ϕ** . (*op. cit.*, pg. 447, emphasis added)

On the other hand, there are LEXICOGRAPHIC MINIMALIST views that break more cleanly with the STANDARD MODEL by treating the metadata associated with slurs as performance facilitators. Anderson and Lepore (2013b), for example, say that the key piece of metadata speakers are aware of is the fact that slurs are prohibited; by violating this prohibition, they say, speakers *do* something offensive. Lepore and Stone (2018) place substantial weight on the idea that ‘words have histories’, and claim that by using a slur, a speaker activates the particular history of e.g., racist violence that it is associated with.²³ Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt (2018) say that a speaker who uses a slur unjustly assigns different discourse roles to conversational participants, and Kirk-Giannini (2019) holds that by using a slur, a speaker prescribes that the parties to a conversation take up a particular Camp-style perspective on the target group.

To the best of my knowledge, no one has yet called attention to the idea that LEXICOGRAPHIC MINIMALISM could serve as the foundation for a kind of pluralism about speech acts that would allow us to sidestep the questions that have shaped the literature so far. In my view, however, this possibility is the most exciting promise minimalism offers. Instead of saying ‘slurs are fundamentally used to send signals of a certain sort’ or ‘slurs are fundamentally used to realize performances of a certain sort’, LEXICOGRAPHIC MINIMALISM opens up the possibility for us to endorse a kind of view we might call ILLOCUTIONARY PLURALISM. Rather than identifying slurs with a particular type of illocutionary act, the ILLOCUTIONARY PLURALIST will simply say that they are associated with certain metadata, which speakers and hearers can employ in the production of a wide range of different sorts of speech acts, from sending signals about groups and perspectives, to threatening harms of various sorts, to realizing harms of various sorts, and so on.

On the kind of view I have in mind, we might take a page from Wittgenstein (1953) and see the particular constellation of core semantic properties and the metadata associated with an expression — commonly known (or assumed) facts about its

²³Variations on this theme can be found in Nunberg (2018), who says that using a word with a certain history “materially obtrudes that history into the context” (pg. 62) and Stillman (2021), whose ‘ballistic theory’ involves the claim that “slurs make such potent weapons because they enable their users to inflict noxious associations on members of their target groups” (pg. 6827).

history, particularly prominent uses, its phonetic similarity to other expressions of the language, and so on — in the same way we see the physical properties of a tool. In the case of highly specialized tools, those properties place more constraints on the range of possible uses than they would in the case of a less specialized tool. So, while a decent shovel might be used fairly well as a prybar, a hammer, a trowel, a pull-up bar, and so on, a ddPCR droplet generator is many orders of magnitude better suited for splitting a sample of DNA into uniform partitions than it is for anything else.

I think the analogy fits the case of slurs quite well. The nature of the metadata associated with slurs — their association with violent racist practices, hate, strong proscriptions against use, and so on — make them more like the droplet generator than like the shovel. The nature of those metadata, that is, make it very easy to use a slur to cause offense, to demean, to undermine, to unjustly redistribute conversational power, and so on. While someone who thinks one of these actions is fundamental and the rest derivative will presumably be able to come up with a story about how the derivation goes, ILLOCUTIONARY PLURALISM avoids taking on any commitments here, treating these all as fairly closely related affordances made possible by a common stock of features in the metadata.

Compared to views that take particular expressions or particular features of the metadata associated with an expression to encode a specific type of illocutionary action, ILLOCUTIONARY PLURALISM is better positioned to explain the datum that even highly specialized tools like slurs can be put to various uses in different contexts. In the slurring literature, substantial energy has been devoted, for example, to explaining how an expression that is conventionally associated with a particular offensive role can be reclaimed by members of the target group.²⁴ Less has been said, at least by philosophers, about cases like the following in which a slur is used to build a sense of in-group solidarity among people who are not targeted by the slur:

The sense of complicity that slurs can evoke among the members of the [non-target] group is crucial to socializing them into its communal attitudes. It can also serve a ritual function, when it works to connect the participants in a shared naughtiness. Reporting on her ethnographic research among working whites in an American suburb, [Eliasoph \(1999\)](#) notes that in group contexts, participants, particularly men, often used racist slurs and jokes in the same way they made bathroom jokes and sex jokes, in order to bond around a common defiance of polite norms. ([Nunberg 2018](#), pg. 56)

An ILLOCUTIONARY PLURALIST position about slurs, built on the foundation of LEXICOGRAPHIC MINIMALISM, would allow us to offer a straightforward story about uses like

²⁴See e.g., [Jeshion \(2018\)](#), [Cepollaro and de Sa \(2022\)](#), and others.

these, which very often involve contexts in which a slur does not target any listener. Instead of having to posit any fundamentally novel speech act theoretic mechanisms, meaning drift, or similar, we simply say that people can use the tools the language gives them in a range of different ways that fit their aims.

While I think the approach is promising for slurs, the advantages of ILLOCUTIONARY PLURALISM really stand out when we look at the question of what kind of linguistic maneuverings speakers realize by deploying one or another variant. We saw in section 3 how the intuitions produced by variants vary extremely widely across different contexts. So, an expression that in one context sounds relaxed and convivial might come across as unprofessional and dismissive in another, and a variant that sounds competent and measured in one context might seem standoffish or haughty in another. Instead of trying to find an overarching explanation of all of these diverse effects in terms of a single speech act theoretic operation, ILLOCUTIONARY PLURALISM would allow us the option of mixing and matching, so to speak, drawing on the wide range of theoretical resources linguists and philosophers have brought to bear to explain one particular effect or another.

In the recent philosophical literature on speech acts, most of the discussion has been focused on ethically problematic maneuverings. While that focus has made very clear how much power our words give us to change the social facts on the ground, it makes it easy to lose sight of the fact that much of what we do with our speech is not only not problematic, but ethically significant in positive ways. In addition to bringing out the utter ubiquity of intuitively significant variation, I chose the examples from section 3 because I take them to reveal the breadth of the range of forms our engagement with one another takes in ordinary conversation. While we may occasionally bludgeon one another or grab power, we also select one form of expression over another in order to shield one another or reach out a hand, to draw appropriate boundaries or to invite others in. By speaking in a particular way, we joke and play, comfort and console, make friends and influence one another.

ILLOCUTIONARY PLURALISM would allow us to deploy various pieces of the theoretical infrastructure that has already been developed to give an oven-ready treatment of the fantastic range of illocutionary activities variation makes possible. Consider, for example, the following proposal from [Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt \(2018\)](#):

We ... argue that oppressive slurs achieve oppression via an act of role assignment. The speaker takes the dominant role, while the target is assigned the subordinate role. ... Discourse roles determine the status and rules that govern the dialogue behaviour of participants. Thus, an exercitive assignment of a discourse role is a meta-move that changes the rules governing other dialogue moves.

Discourse roles are not solitary. A role assigned to one participant typ-

ically presupposes complementary roles, to be adopted by other participants. Thus, by entering into a role, a speaker can invite or compel other participants to take on new roles. (*op. cit.*, pp. 2881-2892)

For Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt, discourse roles interact in complicated ways with what they call 'social roles', i.e., background sets of mutual expectations about the ways in which members of different social groups do and ought to interact. When a certain social role is salient to the participants in a conversation, it affects the way in which they interact with one another. Since Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt are primarily interested in the injustices speakers visit upon listeners by deploying slurs, they focus on the ways in which the social roles associated with those expressions allow conversational participants to seize power and thus deprive others of space to maneuver in a conversation. As this passage brings out, however, the basic apparatus they rely on does not presuppose that conversational participants are locked in a zero-sum battle.

Imagine a case in which a famous professor at a prestigious university meets a prospective student for the first time. The two participants' social roles prescribe a conversational dynamic on which the professor tends to lead the discussion and the student to follow. Both parties, however, have ways of changing that dynamic as the conversation proceeds, and Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt's approach offers a way of understanding some of those ways. If the professor is keen to create a relaxed and welcoming space, they might employ variants that sociolinguists have shown to be typically associated with modest levels of education and more familiar relationships as a way not of seizing, but conceding conversational power. If they are keen to establish firm boundaries and hold the student at arm's length, on the other hand, they might deploy variants that reinforce the default script in virtue of broad associations with formality and professionalism. As the conversation evolves, of course, both parties respond dynamically to one another; a rebellious student might refuse to follow the default and insist on dropping all the freshest slang, and by so doing, to appropriate more conversational space than would ordinarily be afforded.

The beauty of taking a pluralistic approach to the kinds of speech acts that the metadata associated with an expression make possible is that it would allow us to tell a story like the one just sketched about the ways in which variants can be used to assign and modify discourse roles, while allowing us to tell other stories about other things we can do with the very same expressions.

Consider, to look at just one more type of action, activities of the sort described by [Labov \(1962\)](#) and [Eckert \(1989\)](#). Each of these authors explores the ways in which speakers use sociolinguistic variation to affiliate or attempt to affiliate themselves with certain social groups, and to construct or attempt to construct common ideological ground with their interlocutors. Labov focused on how a group of speakers

on Martha's Vineyard used a distinctive pronunciation of the diphthong /ay/ both to indicate their subscription to a particular island-focused conservative ideological stance, and to in fact advance the ideology by creating and reinforcing bonds between group members. Eckert showed how similarly distinctive patterns of pronunciation were used by students in a Detroit-area public high school to navigate a complex network of social affiliations by performatively realizing different kinds of personae.

In each of these cases, it would be easy to imagine how the variants in question might be used to assign or reinforce discourse roles in the sense of [Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt \(2018\)](#). In conversation with someone from the mainland, say, an islander might use Labov's diphthong to manifest their independence of thought, thus allocating conversational power in a certain way. Similarly, one of Eckert's teenagers might use 'burnout' slang in conversation with a teacher one one occasion as a form of rebellion, or show deference on another by avoiding it — either choice will have effects in terms of discourse roles. The discourse role story, however, does not seem very well positioned to explain in-group uses of the variants in question, like the way in which the /ay/ diphthong is used to foster a local sense of community by evoking the idea of a shared cultural heritage involving a traditional fishery, or the way a student's status as a burnout is constituted as much by the way they speak as it is the kind of non-linguistic activities they participate in. Instead of trying to explain one of these activities in terms of the other, the ILLOCUTIONARY PLURALIST will say that these are two actions among many that are made available by the metadata associated with a particular variant.

The two operations we have looked at here — assigning discourse roles and performatively affiliating oneself with a group — barely scratch the surface of the full set of illocutionary maneuvers variation makes available to us. I expect that a fully general philosophical sociolinguistics will involve a wide variety of other kinds of socially significant action, from 'aesthetic invitations' of the sort described by [Riggle \(2022\)](#) to exploratory cognition after the fashion of [Shiffrin \(2014\)](#) in which speakers 'try on' various personae, to simply having fun and playing around with the pieces from which those personae are built. There is no space here, or indeed, in any single paper, to sketch all of the possibilities. For now, the key point I want to make is that instead of saying 'social meanings are invitations to take up a perspective', 'social meanings signal a speaker's allegiance to a perspective', or 'social meanings involve the material obtruding of a history into the context' LEXICOGRAPHIC MINIMALISM gives us all the resources we need to be able to endorse ILLOCUTIONARY PLURALISM, i.e., to say 'speakers use mutual familiarity with the metadata associated with expressions to do all of these things and more, sometimes all at once'.

6 Conclusion

I said at the beginning of the paper that I would argue that sociolinguistic variation puts pressure on the idea that the foremost thing we do with words is exchange information. Let me now pull the various threads of the argument together here in summary. Sociolinguistic variation is an intuitively significant phenomenon that linguists have shown to be deeply systematic. Like slurs, the phenomenon is best understood in speech act theoretic terms – while we can transmit information by deploying variants, this is only one activity among many. While speech acts involving slurs occur on the margins of our linguistic practice, however, speech acts involving variation are totally pervasive. Nearly every assertion, question, permission, promise, and so on that we make involves, at the same time, significant maneuvering in variant space.

Of course, as my colleague Pär Sundström has pointed out, every assertion (etc.) involves breathing, too, but no one would say that this shows that breathing is a linguistic activity of comparable significance to the exchange of propositions. The difference, I take it, is that kinds of things we do by maneuvering in variant space are not only things that nearly every competent speaker of a language will recognize as significant in the sense of (potentially) purposive, but as significant in the sense of *valuable to us qua language users*. We care deeply about how we talk, and we care about how the people around us do. These concerns are rooted in the fact that we use the form of our speech to construct our social selves, to affiliate ourselves with the groups we wish to be a part of, to distance ourselves from those we wish to remain distant from, to bond with our friends, and to throw shade at those for whom our feelings are less friendly.

By thinking of social maneuvering in all of these forms as one of the basic aims of linguistic agents, and thus expanding our conception of the sorts of activities that count as linguistic, I expect we will be able to open space to appreciate a range of new and philosophically significant questions involving language.

Consider illocutionary disablement, for example. Even when a speaker counts as fully propositionally expressive in some context, this will not guarantee that their choices in variant space count as performances in the same way another speaker's might. Work on contact between native and non-native speakers of the sort described in [Ayala \(2015\)](#), for example, provides grounds for thinking that important subtleties in a non-native speaker's speech may be missed by a native interpreter. If this picture described here is right, this asymmetry is likely to have substantial consequences where the illocutionary actions at stake are concerned. If those actions are socially important in the ways I have suggested here, existing work on linguistic justice has only scratched the surface; developing a sociolinguistically informed philosophy of language will allow us to push the state of the art

forward.²⁵

The same is true in many other areas of philosophy where questions about language loom large. To take just one more example, consider the literature on free speech.²⁶ Most contemporary philosophical work follows Mill (1859/2003) in assuming a picture of our linguistic activity that looks very similar to the one the STANDARD MODEL is meant to explain. Despite the wide range of defenses of free speech that have been offered, there is broad implicit agreement about the fact that the debate ought to be structured around the question of why it is important that we be able to freely exchange information with one another. As currently formulated, then, theories of free speech miss out on the interest agents have in being able to use the style of their speech to realize socially significant maneuverings of the sort described here. By acknowledging the social significance of style, we can take the first step towards rectifying this lacuna.

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²⁵I explore some of these questions in Nowak (2023).

²⁶Thanks are due to Robert Simpson for discussion here.

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