

Negotiating “Women”: Metalinguistic Negotiations Across Languages

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The metalinguistic approach to conceptual engineering construes disputes between (what I shall call) linguistic reformers and linguistic conservatives as metalinguistic disagreements on how best to use particular expressions. As the present paper argues, this approach has various merits. However, it was recently criticised in Cappelen’s seminal *Fixing Language* (2018). Cappelen raises an important objection against the metalinguistic picture. According to this objection – the Babel objection, as I shall call it – the metalinguistic account cannot accommodate the intuition of disagreement between linguistic conservatives and reformers who are speaking different languages. The objection generalises to metalinguistic approaches to e.g. moral disagreements. This paper discusses the Babel objection and shows how to dispel it.

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1. The metalinguistic account

We all know that our way of talking is not without flaws. Sometimes a word we use would be better not used at all, while sometimes “only” *the way* we use an expression or the *meaning* that is expressed by it is problematic. How we should talk is a contentious issue and the topic of many disputes between (what I shall call) *linguistic reformers* and *linguistic conservatives*. For present purposes, we can understand reformers and conservatives regarding a particular expression *e* as systematically applying *e* to different sets of objects. While linguistic conservatives hold on to how *e* has often been applied in the past (by them and others), reformers apply the expression differently, e.g. to a wider group of objects.¹

Let us consider an example of a dispute between two speakers, Raphael and Connie.

Raphael: “Trans women are women”

¹ While speakers may be linguistic conservatives regarding one term and reformers regarding another term (*et vice versa*), often (and often for doxastic reasons in the background, e.g. political reasons) speakers who are linguistically conservative regarding one term are also linguistically conservative regarding other terms.

Connie: “No, trans women are not women”.

Raphael is a reformer regarding the term “women”. He applies this term more inclusively than Connie, who is a linguistic conservative regarding the term and systematically applies “women” to a more restricted group of people. How should we interpret Raphael and Connie’s dispute?

According to Plunkett and Sundell’s metalinguistic account (see esp. Plunkett and Sundell, 2013; Plunkett, 2015), the interlocutors in this dispute mean different things by the word “women” such that the contents communicated with their statements are not in any conflict.² Raphael and Connie communicate the propositions that trans women are women_{ref} and that trans women are not women_{con} respectively, where WOMEN_{REF} includes and WOMEN_{CON} excludes trans women. In their dispute, the speakers do not mention the term “women”. Still, they also convey metalinguistic propositions about the usage of this term, according to the metalinguistic account. Not all disagreements about words have to be expressed explicitly (see esp. Grice, 1975). Regarding the above dispute, the idea, then, is this: Raphael uttering “trans women are women” communicates the proposition (p_1) that trans women are women_{ref} while also pragmatically conveying that the term “women” should be used in such a way as to include trans women. Connie replying “No, trans women are not women”, on the other hand, uses “women” to express WOMEN_{CON} and thus communicates a proposition that is not in any conflict with p_1 . However, Connie also conveys the metalinguistic proposition that “women” should *not* be used in such a way as to apply to trans women. The speakers thus pragmatically convey conflicting propositions about how best to use “women”.^{3,4}

² As Plunkett and Sundell (2013, pp. 8–16) emphasise, metalinguistic negotiations can concern the *content* as well as the *character* of a term. In the present paper, I prefer to stay neutral on the particular semantics of the term “women”, but see e.g. Saul (2012) and Díaz-León (2016) for discussion of a contextualist account of “women”.

³ According to Plunkett and Sundell’s account, the term “women” expresses different concepts in the mouths of Connie and Raphael. For the purposes of this paper, I will follow this view.

(If you prefer to work from within an externalist framework of meaning, you could still construe the dispute between Connie and Raphael as a metalinguistic negotiation by e.g. assuming that “women” is ambiguous between WOMEN_{REF} and WOMEN_{CON} at the time of the dispute. Sticking to the view that “women” has only one fixed meaning would mean that one of the speaker’s utterances – Connie’s, say – expresses a falsehood on the externalist picture. Still, there might be a chance for externalists to see the dispute as a metalinguistic negotiation. Externalists might try to interpret Connie as *entertaining* WOMEN_{CON} and construe her as (i) merely pragmatically conveying a true proposition about trans women (namely the proposition that trans women are not women_{con}) as well as (ii) pragmatically conveying a false metalinguistic proposition about the usage of “women”. I admit that the relation between metalinguistic negotiations and semantic externalism is in need of further clarification. Also, the pragmatic mechanisms at work in metalinguistic disputes require further elaboration. These tasks lie beyond the scope of the present paper, but see Plunkett and Sundell (2013, §6.1) for a brief discussion of the relation between metalinguistic negotiations and externalism.)

⁴ The metalinguistic account is not limited to proposition-based approaches (cf. Plunkett and Sundell, 2013, p. 9). We can set this aside for the purposes of this paper. For some further relevant discussion on disagreement, meaning and words/terms see also Plunkett and Sundell (2013, §2).

Interpreting disputes like the above as metalinguistic negotiations goes against how many philosophers in conceptual engineering would interpret disputes between linguistic conservatives and reformers (see e.g. Cappelen, 2018; Ball, 2020; Sawyer, 2020). The metalinguistic interpretation has various merits, though, indicating that the approach deserves (at least) substantial discussion. Let me briefly mention four of these merits before moving on.

Interpreting Raphael and Connie metalinguistically means to charitably interpret them as merely using terms differently instead of communicating any a priori, conceptually false assumption (see also Hirsch, 2005, on charity to understanding). According to Plunkett and Sundell’s metalinguistic approach to the above dispute, the disputants apply the word “women” differently and both of them communicate thoughts that are true. Consequently, it is not the case that the two parties employ the same concept of a woman and Connie simply makes an a priori conceptual mistake about whether trans women fall under *that* concept or not. Instead, the speakers are merely employing different concepts. As a result, the metalinguistic account can stick to the idea that “typical speakers of a language have a sufficiently adequate grasp of their linguistic and conceptual resources so that they don’t generally make a priori (conceptually) false assertions” (Hirsch, 2005, p. 72).

Nonetheless, proponents of the metalinguistic picture can identify Connie as making a significant mistake of the right kind. This is a second merit of the account. Intuitively, linguistic conservatives are making a *moral* mistake when refusing to call trans women “women”. It is morally wrong to use “women” trans-exclusively and this kind of mistake is exactly what the metalinguistic account is able to deliver. Interpreting the speakers as pragmatically communicating propositions about how we *should* use “women” provides the possibility to understand them as having a morally significant disagreement about concept choice.⁵

Thirdly, the metalinguistic account can easily accommodate our feeling of *genuine disagreement* between Raphael and Connie.⁶ According to proponents of the metalinguistic account, the speakers’ disagreement is to be localised at the level of pragmatics. While Raphael pragmatically conveys the metalinguistic thought that “women” should be used in such a way

⁵ The metalinguistic account also provides resources to interpret the speakers as disputing how best to use “women” because they disagree on which concept is predominantly expressed by “women”. See section 5 for details on this.

⁶ The term “(dis)agreement” is meant to refer to states and not activities here (see Cappelen and Hawthorne, 2009, pp. 60–61 as well as MacFarlane, 2014, p. 119 regarding this distinction) while disputes are roughly characterised in behavioural terms (see Jenkins, 2014, p. 13). Speakers can thus *have* a disagreement without *being* in disagreement about the topic under discussion (*et vice versa*).

as to apply to trans women, Connie disagrees. She pragmatically communicates the opposite. Hence, even though the speakers communicate compatible propositions about $women_{ref}$ and $women_{con}$, they also clearly pragmatically convey conflicting metalinguistic contents. Their dispute thus reflects genuine disagreement about concept choice. Although they are using “women” differently, Raphael and Connie are not merely talking past each other.

Fourthly, the metalinguistic account has a straightforward story to offer on why Raphael and Connie are talking and disagreeing about the same topic if engaged in a metalinguistic negotiation. The issue of topic continuity, going back to Strawson (1963), has been widely discussed in the literature on conceptual engineering (see Haslanger, 2012, ch. 7; Cappelen, 2018; Prinzing, 2018; Sawyer, 2020; Knoll, 2020; Nado, 2021; Flocke, 2021; et al.), so let me briefly elaborate on this advantage. The question of which topic speakers are concerned with in a dispute is a matter of pragmatics – or so proponents of the metalinguistic picture could argue (see also Jenkins, 2014, pp. 27–28).⁷ To see why this assumption sits well with (at least some of) our intuitions about disputes and their topics, let me briefly illustrate this point by considering the following example:

Bib: “The smartest philosopher of all time requests a chocolate cake for her birthday.”

Bob: “I disagree. If I remember correctly, the smartest philosopher of all time actually wants to eat cherry cake on her birthday.”

Bib and Bob agree that their five-year-old daughter is not the smartest philosopher of all time (at least not yet). They agree that this is Plato, and let’s assume – for the sake of argument – that Bib and Bob are right about this. Still, as their daughter recently started to ask a lot of puzzling philosophical questions, Bib and Bob ironically mean to refer to *her* by using “the smartest philosopher of all time” in the context at hand. What, then, is Bib and Bob’s dispute about? Which *topic* are they concerned with: Plato or their daughter’s wish for cake? The answer seems clear: Bib and Bob are disputing about which kind of cake their daughter wants (although there is also an important sense in which they, or their sentences, are *saying* something about Plato). Coming back to our dispute between Connie and Raphael, we can now see why interlocutors in metalinguistic negotiations can easily be construed as being concerned with the same metalinguistic topic. Seeking to identify the topic of a dispute amounts to finding

⁷ Note that proponents of the metalinguistic account only need to talk about the topics of *disputes* here. For considerations on the topics of *sentences* see e.g. Lewis, 1988, Yablo, 2014, and Plebani and Spolaore, 2021.

out what people *pragmatically convey* with their utterances. Topics of disputes are a matter of pragmatics, not semantics. To be sure, Connie and Raphael plausibly agree that trans women are $women_{ref}$ and not $women_{con}$. According to the metalinguistic approach, however, what Connie and Raphael also mean by uttering “Trans women are not women” and “Trans women are women” respectively, is how they think speakers *should use the term “women”*. Consequently, if we interpret the speakers as being engaged in a metalinguistic negotiation, then we can easily interpret them as genuinely disagreeing about the same topic: the topic of how best to use a particular term.

Adopting the metalinguistic account, then, combines various merits (for more on its upsides, see also section 5). This is not to say that the metalinguistic account answers all relevant questions about disputes and disagreements in connection to conceptual engineering (e.g. questions on the nature of concepts/meanings in general). Moreover, some of its assumptions, especially the ones on topic continuity, have been challenged in the literature (see e.g. Sawyer, 2020; Ball, 2020) and the account might also face certain problems.⁸ Given its merits, though, I think that the metalinguistic approach to disputes between linguistic conservatives and reformers is worth detailed discussion. In what follows, we need not assume that *all* disputes between linguistic conservatives and reformers are metalinguistic negotiations. To get the discussion going, I will only assume that a notable number of them are. I think that disputes and disagreements come in all kinds of shapes and colours and conceptual engineers should generally be open to adopting different interpretations for different disputes – including metalinguistic interpretations.⁹

⁸ Most notably, there is the problem of speaker errors: Raphael and Connie might explicitly refute a metalinguistic interpretation of their dispute and at least on the face of it, it seems unclear whether interpreting their dispute as a metalinguistic negotiation would still be the best option in this case. Plunkett and Sundell (2021) as well as Thomasson (2020) discuss this problem at length. In what follows, I take it that their suggestions are promising enough to (at least) keep the metalinguistic account in the game as a noteworthy contender.

⁹ Depending on context, a dispute between one speaker (*A*) saying that “trans women are women” and another speaker (*B*) replying that “trans women are not women” allows for several interpretations, I think. If, in a particular context, *A* and *B* are using “women” differently but fail to relevantly disagree on what their interlocutor is intending to convey, I would happily construe them as merely talking past each other, for instance (see e.g. Jenkins, 2014 and Vermeulen, 2018 on merely verbal disputes). Moreover, there can also be a context in which *A* and *B* convey conflicting propositions about *women* (cf. a context in which the speakers mean the same by “women”). I am fine with this result, too, and am also open to embracing alternative takes on such disputes. (Some disputes, for instance, might also concern the right analysis of the operative concept yet not the manifest concept; see Haslanger, 2006 and also Saul, 2006 for helpful illustrations of Haslanger’s distinction between manifest and operative concepts.) How to best interpret disputes between reformers and conservatives highly depends on features of the context and the speakers’ communicative intentions. The present paper focuses on contexts in which the speakers express

In what follows, I will discuss a major objection to the metalinguistic account raised by Cappelen (2018). This objection is meant to cast doubt on metalinguistic interpretations in general and appears to spell trouble even for the moderate idea that *many* disputes between linguistic conservatives and reformers are best interpreted as metalinguistic negotiations. As a corollary, Cappelen's objection also threatens metalinguistic interpretations in other areas of philosophy, such as metaethics. As will become clear, Cappelen's objection against the metalinguistic account does not succeed. Discussing the objection in full detail, however, further develops the metalinguistic approach beyond existing discussions of it in the literature.

2. The Babel objection

In his seminal *Fixing Language* (2018), Cappelen rejects the metalinguistic approach to conceptual engineering. He raises the following concern.

For the sake of argument, assume that the dispute between Raphael and Connie considered above *is* a metalinguistic negotiation. Let us say, it reflects disagreement on how best to use the specific English term “women”. According to Cappelen, it is then hard to explain why the disputants do not see their “concerns and arguments [...] [as] *irrelevant* to someone who speaks, say, Icelandic, Chinese, or Russian” (2018, p. 174; emphasis added). Why do Connie and Raphael take “themselves to be agreeing and disagreeing with those talking about the same issue in one of those other languages” (2018, p. 174)? And why are *we* of the impression that there is disagreement between Connie and, say, a German reformer uttering “Trans Frauen sind Frauen”? Intuitively, “there is dis/agreement between speakers of different languages” (2018, p. 174). Yet, according to Cappelen, the metalinguistic account fails to explain why.

Cappelen has a point. We certainly want an account of disputes between linguistic conservatives and reformers that is able to construe e.g. German reformers uttering “Trans Frauen sind Frauen” as being in relevant disagreement with English conservatives (such as Connie) replying “Trans women are not women”. On Cappelen's Austerity Framework, for instance, these speakers disagree about *women* and what they are. His account thus avoids the problem of accommodating disagreement across languages – and so do all other accounts which do not construe reformers and conservatives as “merely” negotiating the usage of a particular word. On the metalinguistic account, however, the German and English speakers are concerned with

different concepts by “women” and pragmatically convey conflicting metalinguistic propositions about how best to use this term.

different words: “Frauen” and “women” respectively. While the English conservative uses “women” to express WOMEN_{CON} and pragmatically conveys the proposition that the *English* term “women” should not be used such as to include trans women, the German reformer uttering “Trans Frauen sind Frauen” uses “Frauen” to express WOMEN_{REF} and pragmatically conveys the proposition that the *German* term “Frauen” should be used such as to include trans women. On the metalinguistic account, the speakers are thus “talking about how to define different words” (2018, p. 174), which is why this account is unable to explain the intuition of disagreement across languages, according to Cappelen. I shall call this worry the *Babel objection*.

3. Generalising the Babel objection

The Babel objection not only matters with respect to metalinguistic approaches to disputes between linguistic conservatives and reformers. That is, Cappelen’s objection not only matters for conceptual engineering. It also generalises to metalinguistic accounts in other areas of philosophy, such as metaethics.

Let us start by focusing on the objection’s general relevance for interpreting disputes between linguistic conservatives and reformers. For the sake of the argument, assume that Cappelen’s objection succeeds. Proponents of the metalinguistic account would then have to ask with regard to *any* dispute between a conservative *C* and a reformer *R*: would *C* and/or *R* relevantly disagree with somebody (*S*) talking back at them in a different language? If yes, then interpreting *C* and *R*’s dispute as a metalinguistic negotiation would have to be avoided. For, interpreting their dispute as a metalinguistic negotiation means to interpret *C* and *R* as negotiating the usage of a particular word of their language (e.g. English). In what way, then, would a possible speaker *S* relevantly disagree with *C* and *R* if *S* only spoke about a term of *S*’s language (e.g. Spanish)? Apparently, Cappelen’s objection affects disputes in conceptual engineering in general. Whenever it seems justified to think that a conservative *C* and/or a reformer *R* would disagree with a possible speaker’s *S* reply in a different language, a metalinguistic interpretation of *C* and *R*’s dispute could not be right, even if *C* and *R* are speaking the same language.

What is more, the Babel objection not only generalises to intra-linguistic disputes between linguistic reformers and conservatives. It also affects metalinguistic accounts defended in other areas of philosophy. As some have argued in metaethics, for instance, the metalinguistic

account proves to be a useful interpretative approach to moral disagreements between speakers of different communities. Let me give two examples for this line of argument:

- i. Plunkett and Sundell (2013, pp. 1–3) discuss Hare’s (1991) case of a missionary and an Indigenous person who apply the word “good” to different objects in the course of their dispute. If we assume that these speakers attach different semantic meanings to “good”, then, according to Hare (1991, pp. 148–149), we would not be able to accommodate our impression of relevant disagreement between them. Plunkett and Sundell disagree. As they point out, even if the speakers used “good” with different meanings, they could be engaged in a metalinguistic negotiation on how best to use this term. Consequently, the intuitive datum of genuine disagreement between the Indigenous person and the missionary does not warrant the semantic conclusion that “good” is used with the same meaning during their dispute.
- ii. As Sodoma (2021) points out, moral relativism faces the challenge of accommodating epistemically significant disagreement between speakers of different communities. She argues that interpreting such “moral inter-group disagreements” as metalinguistic negotiations on how best to use e.g. “morally wrong” (i.e. according to which set of moral standards) could do the trick. On her metalinguistic picture, moral disagreements between speakers of different communities could be construed as being epistemically significant if we understand them as metalinguistic negotiations. The metalinguistic approach thus enables moral relativists to reinforce their account, according to Sodoma.

The details of these metalinguistic interpretations of moral disputes will not matter for the purposes of this paper. It suffices to note that, much like the metalinguistic approach to conceptual engineering, Plunkett and Sundell’s answer to Hare as well as Sodoma’s relativist account depend on a successful response to the Babel objection. In fact, the specific cases under discussion in their papers provide particularly strong reasons for why the Babel objection should better be unsound. After all, speakers involved in real “moral inter-group disagreements” (Sodoma, 2021) – such as the missionary and the Indigenous inhabitant of some “distant island” (Plunkett and Sundell, 2013, p. 1), for instance – *are* usually speaking different languages. If authors construe such speakers as genuinely disagreeing about how best to use moral vocabulary, then there seems to be a particular need to explain how exactly metalinguistic negotiations work across languages.

4. Dispelling the Babel objection

As we have seen, accommodating disagreement between speakers of different languages constitutes a general challenge to the metalinguistic account. This challenge has so far not been taken on by proponents of the metalinguistic picture. *Pace* Cappelen, however, the Babel objection can be successfully answered. This section will show how. The next section will then discuss a different metalinguistic response to the Babel objection.

Let us start with a general observation. It is possible that disputants genuinely disagree about one and the same topic even when they do not address that topic in their dispute. Speakers can be in a state of disagreement without explicitly expressing this disagreement in their linguistic exchange. So, German reformers and English conservatives could well be concerned with different words in their statements but still disagree over the truth of what each of them is communicating. To be sure, on the metalinguistic account, these speakers are talking about slightly different metalinguistic topics: one of them is talking about how best to use the particular English word “women” while the other is concerned with the proper usage of the German “Frauen”. But it is an important first step to note that this divergence in topics does not imply any lack of disagreement between them. To briefly illustrate this point, consider the following dispute:

Claire: “Snow is great! It makes the world look wonderful.”

Francis: “I disagree. I used to think the same but now I know that snow isn’t a great substance at all.”

Assume that in the context of their dispute, Claire means to convey that *snow* is great while Francis means to convey that *cocaine* is not great. Hence, Claire and Francis are talking about different topics on the account outlined: snow and cocaine. It is still a possibility, however, that Claire thinks that cocaine is a great drug while Francis disagrees with Claire’s assessment of snow. Francis might hate snow. Just because speakers are talking about different topics, they need not fail to disagree on these topics. They can still be in a state of disagreement on what each of them communicates (see also Chalmers, 2011, p. 526 on this).

Coming back to Cappelen’s Babel objection, the question, then, is this: are there any reasons to assume that English conservatives and German reformers do have conflicting attitudes in virtue of which they are in a state of disagreement? And if yes, is this disagreement somehow reflected

in their dispute, even though the propositions which the speakers pragmatically convey in their dispute do not conflict? Answering these questions in the affirmative, I take it, are the two desiderata that the metalinguistic approach will have to meet to refute the Babel objection. To see how the metalinguistic account can be brought to satisfy these desiderata, let us start with an example.

Bruno and Kim, let us assume, are botanists. They know that from a botanical point of view, strawberries are not *berries* while bananas are. Now, imagine a situation in which Kim is eating strawberries. “Yum...”, she says to Bruno, “strawberries are definitely my favourite berries.” Subsequently, the two of them engage in the following dispute:

Bruno: “Strawberries are not *berries*, Kim.”

Kim: “Oh, come on, Bruno. *Bananas* are not berries!”

Let us assume that Bruno and Kim pragmatically convey metalinguistic propositions on how best to use the term “berries”. Bruno communicates that the term “berries” should not be used in such a way that it applies to *strawberries* (p_3) while Kim pragmatically conveys that “berries” should not be used in such a way that the term applies to *bananas* (p_4). Thus, the metalinguistic propositions conveyed by the speakers do not conflict. They are consistent and concern slightly different topics. Still, we typically take Kim’s “Bananas are not berries” to be a relevant reply to Bruno’s utterance, and we intuitively presume that their linguistic exchange reflects relevant disagreement, although p_4 does not directly contradict p_3 . How can we accommodate this intuition?

I think that there is a simple explanation available. The intuition of relevant disagreement arises because there is good reason to suspect that although the metalinguistic propositions p_3 and p_4 are consistent, the speakers still *disagree* about whether p_3 and p_4 are true because of a more fundamental metalinguistic disagreement between them in the background of their dispute. Interpreting the dispute, we presume that Bruno has some subjective reasons to communicate p_3 , and most of us will quickly conjecture that a crucial reason for Bruno to convey p_3 would be the belief that the usage of “berries” should follow plant taxonomy. That metalinguistic belief in the background easily explains why Bruno advocates against using “berries” for strawberries. From a botanical point of view, strawberries are not berries. Hearing Kim’s reply, on the other hand, we charitably assume that her answer is supposed to signal some relevant disagreement with Bruno, and we note that it would do so if Kim disagreed with Bruno on

whether the usage of “berries” should follow plant taxonomy. A disagreement in the background on whether it is best to follow plant taxonomy would easily explain why Kim engages in the dispute with Bruno by advocating against using “berries” for bananas and why her reply also signals relevant disagreement on whether it is best to use “berries” for strawberries. The metalinguistic disagreement in the background relevantly connects the two topics that Bruno and Kim are addressing. It is *because* the speakers disagree on whether it is best to follow plant taxonomy that they engage in this dispute and disagree on the truth of p_3 and p_4 .

Coming back to the Babel objection, proponents of the metalinguistic account can base their reply to Cappelen’s worry on an analogous explanation. Consider the following dispute:

G(erman) L(inguistic) R(eformer): “Trans Frauen sind Frauen.”

E(nglish) L(inguistic) C(onservative): “No! Trans women are not women.”

On a metalinguistic reading of this dispute, *GLR* employs the wider concept of womanhood $WOMEN_{REF}$ and pragmatically communicates that the term “Frauen” should be applied in such a way as to include trans women (p_5). Speaker *ELC*, in contrast, employs the narrower concept of womanhood $WOMEN_{CON}$ while pragmatically conveying that this usage of “women” is appropriate (p_6). So, in contrast to Connie and Raphael’s same-language dispute about the usage of “women”, not even the metalinguistic propositions conveyed by *GLR* and *ELC* (p_5 and p_6) are in any direct conflict. Strictly speaking, the disputants are concerned with different words and slightly different topics. In this respect, then, *ELC* and *GLR*’s inter-language dispute is importantly *disanalogous* to the same-language dispute between Connie and Raphael. Connie and Raphael convey inconsistent metalinguistic propositions about the usage of “women” while the metalinguistic propositions communicated by *GLR* and *ELC* are consistent, according to the metalinguistic account. Does that mean that the metalinguistic account cannot explain why, intuitively, *GLR* and *ELC* disagree with what their interlocutor conveys (respectively)? I do not think so. The metalinguistic account *can* interpret *GLR* and *ELC* as being in a state of genuine disagreement on p_5 and p_6 that is reflected in their linguistic exchange.

In close analogy to Kim and Bruno’s case, the intuition of disagreement arises because we assume that there is a more fundamental metalinguistic disagreement between *GLR* and *ELC* in the background of their dispute in virtue of which the speakers engage in their dispute. Quite generally, different metalinguistic disagreements in the background are possible (see also the

next section). However, in light of *GLR*'s utterance, I take it that we will typically interpret *GLR* as holding the more general metalinguistic belief that people's self-identification should guide the usage of gender vocabulary and that any language should therefore appropriately respect how trans women self-identify. This belief in the background easily explains why *GLR* advocates for using "Frauen" for trans women. What is more, it also explains why *GLR* disagrees with the conservatives' usages of "women" in English-speaking countries, and with *ELC*'s trans-exclusive usage of this term in particular. That is, the metalinguistic belief in the background accounts for *GLR*'s disagreement with *ELC* on what *ELC* pragmatically conveys about the usage of "women" (p_6).

Hearing *ELC*'s reply, on the other hand, we charitably assume that her answer is supposed to signal some relevant disagreement with *GLR*, and we quickly get that it would do so if *ELC* disagreed with *GLR* on whether languages in general should reflect gender self-identification. This metalinguistic disagreement in the background would easily explain why *ELC*'s reply signals relevant disagreement with *GLR* on whether it is best to use the German "Frauen" for trans women and why she thinks that the term "women" should not be used for trans women. To put it more generally, we assume that the fact that *ELC* sees good reasons to pair "women" with $\text{WOMEN}_{\text{CON}}$ is reflected in her advocating for this very word-concept pair. And we intuitively conjecture that her subjective reasons to pair "women" with $\text{WOMEN}_{\text{CON}}$ also support "Frauen"- $\text{WOMEN}_{\text{CON}}$.

In a nutshell, then, the idea of a metalinguistic answer to Cappelen's Babel objection is this. The speakers disagree on the truth of p_5 and p_6 because they disagree on whether languages should appropriately respect how trans women self-identify. More generally speaking, in most salient contexts, we intuitively assume that *GLR* and *ELC* hold some relevant and more fundamental conflicting metalinguistic beliefs in the background of their dispute. This disagreement in the background grounds the speakers' metalinguistic disagreement on p_5 and p_6 and it explains why the speakers engage in their dispute. It is true that on the metalinguistic account, *ELC* and *GLR* pragmatically communicate consistent metalinguistic propositions (as do Bruno and Kim). As they are speaking different languages, they *are* speaking about slightly different metalinguistic topics. Yet, even on the metalinguistic account, our intuition of genuine disagreement can be explained. When encountering a dispute such as *GLR* and *ELC*'s, we typically interpret the speakers as disagreeing on a more fundamental metalinguistic question that grounds the speakers' disagreement regarding p_5 and p_6 . Encountering the dispute, most of

us will naturally assume that *GLR* wants *any* language to be trans-inclusive while *ELC* does not. This explains why we intuitively assume that their linguistic exchange signals relevant disagreement.

To be sure, this explanation of disagreement is not quite as straightforward as the explanation of disagreement in same-language cases like Connie and Raphael's. After all, the explanation of inter-language disputes holds on to the assumption that the metalinguistic propositions pragmatically conveyed by the speakers in such cases are consistent. Still, it is important to note that proponents of the metalinguistic account *can* accommodate relevant disagreement even in inter-language cases, and that they can do so by drawing on assumptions that also explain our feeling of disagreement in many same-language cases like Kim and Bruno's. So, even though *ELC* and *GLR* negotiate the meaning of two different words, they are engaged in a dispute that is clearly not a merely verbal dispute on the metalinguistic picture.

What is more, the present response sufficiently generalises. Assume that another speaker *SLR* joins the discussion who speaks a third language and advocates pairing $\text{WOMEN}_{\text{REF}}$ with a third term t that is a translation of "women"/"Frauen" into *SLR*'s language. (For instance, *SLR* might say: "Las mujeres trans son mujeres.") On the picture outlined, then, *SLR* is likely to relevantly disagree with *ELC* but to agree with *GLR* even if we interpret all speakers involved as conveying consistent metalinguistic propositions. That is because it seems very likely that *SLR* has some subjective reasons to advocate the word-concept pair $t\text{-WOMEN}_{\text{REF}}$ which generalise to pairing "Frauen" as well as "women" with $\text{WOMEN}_{\text{REF}}$, and which are not shared by linguistic conservatives such as *ELC*. (Probably, *SLR*, too, thinks that people's self-identification should guide the usage of gender vocabulary of *any* language, which gives her a reason to reject p_6 .) Thus, intuitively, *SLR* appears as signalling relevant disagreement with *ELC*'s position on "women"- $\text{WOMEN}_{\text{CON}}$ but as being on *GLR*'s side regarding "Frauen"- $\text{WOMEN}_{\text{REF}}$.

Coming back to possible examples in metaethics, the present answer to the Babel objection also covers disputes between speakers of different moral communities. Take two speakers engaged in a moral dispute about animal ethics. One (*EI*) utters "Eating animals is wrong" while the other speaker (*SI*) replies in Spanish: "No! Comer animales no está mal". On Sodoma's (2021) relativist proposal, both statements express a truth, and *EI* and *SI* are engaged in a metalinguistic negotiation. *EI* advocates using "wrong" with reference to one set of moral standards #1 while *SI* pragmatically conveys that "mal" should be used with reference to another set of moral standards #2. How, then, are the speakers disagreeing if they are talking

about different words and thus different topics? Again, the answer can be developed in analogy to my reply above. What Sodoma and colleagues need to identify is a relevant metalinguistic disagreement between the disputants in the background of their dispute which explains why the speakers disagree on the specific metalinguistic proposition that their interlocutor is pragmatically communicating. Generally speaking, the two speakers have some respective reasons for using “mal” and “wrong” according to different sets of moral standards, and these reasons clash. Thus, *EI*’s reasons in the background for using “wrong” with reference to #1 are reasons to use “mal” with reference to #1, too. And the reasons that *SI* has in the background for using “mal” with reference to the other set of moral standards #2 are also reasons to use “wrong” with reference to #2. This, then, accommodates our impression of relevant disagreement between *SI* and *EI*.

5. Translations: A different approach?

In *Fixing Language* (2018), Cappelen briefly discusses a different metalinguistic solution to the Babel objection than the one presented in the last section. He suggests that “Plunkett and Sundell could liberate their view from th[e] focus on specific lexical items if it appealed to translations” (2018, p. 175). Regarding the dispute between *GLR* and *ELC*

G(erman) L(inguistic) R(eformer): “Trans Frauen sind Frauen.”

E(nglish) L(inguistic) C(onservative): “No! Trans women are not women.”

this possible variant of the metalinguistic account would claim that what “the speakers disagree over are *all* the lexical items that are *translations*” (2018, p. 175; my emphasis) of the expressions under discussion (i.e. “Frauen” and “women”).

If the speakers make a claim about all those words, then we would guarantee disagreement between speakers of different languages and the [Babel] objection [...] would be circumvented. (Cappelen, 2018, p. 175)

I interpret this idea of how to modify the metalinguistic account in light of the Babel objection as follows. According to Cappelen’s suggestion, *GLR* employs the wider concept of womanhood $WOMEN_{REF}$ and pragmatically communicates that the term “Frauen” *as well as all the lexical items that are translations of “Frauen”* (including “women”) should be applied in such a way as to include trans women. Speaker *ELC*, in contrast, employs the narrower concept of womanhood $WOMEN_{CON}$ while pragmatically conveying that this trans-exclusive usage of

“women” as well as a trans-exclusive usage of all the lexical items that are translations of “women” (including “Frauen”) is appropriate. Hence, the speakers pragmatically convey conflicting propositions about how to best use terms of different languages. Let us call this possible variant of the metalinguistic account the (*metalinguistic*) *translation account*. At least at first glance, this account circumvents the Babel objection. It seems to deliver a straightforward explanation of our intuition of disagreement between *ELC* and *GLR*.

According to Cappelen, however, the metalinguistic translation account runs into a problem, which he briefly describes as follows:

[I]t won't work to appeal to the idea of translation. We have to choose which meaning to translate from – if we pick two different meanings, then they won't be picking out the same set of expressions. If we pick the same one, we will bias the debate in favor of one speaker. (2018, p. 175)

This section discusses the translation account and Cappelen's objection to it. In my opinion, the discussion adds some welcome complexity to the metalinguistic picture. It provides the opportunity to further illustrate the last section's answer to the Babel objection (an answer that relevantly differs from the translation solution suggested by Cappelen), and it points to various important but as yet underexplored features of metalinguistic negotiations (such as the role of context).

5.1 Cappelen's objection to the metalinguistic translation account

On the metalinguistic translation account discussed by Cappelen, *GLR* and *ELC* use “Frauen” and “women” to express different concepts, $WOMEN_{REF}$ and $WOMEN_{CON}$. (That assumption is in line with what Plunkett and Sundell's (2013) account suggests.) Moreover, *GLR* and *ELC* pragmatically convey conflicting propositions about how best to use “Frauen” and “women” as well as all those other terms that are *translations* of “Frauen” and “women” (respectively). Despite its initial appeal, though, we should not adopt the translation approach to dissolve the Babel objection, according to Cappelen. To further illustrate his concern, it is helpful to briefly discuss another inter-language case first (see also Plunkett and Sundell, 2013, p. 27):

Britney (pointing to French fries): “These are chips.”

Gerhard: “Nein, das sind keine Chips.”

Let us assume that Britney (who is British) uses the English term “chips” to express $CHIPS_{FRIES}$. Moreover, suppose for the sake of argument that what Britney pragmatically communicates with her utterance is the metalinguistic proposition that “chips” *as well as all translations of “chips”* should be used in such a way that they apply to fries. Gerhard, on the other hand, is German. He uses the term “chips” to express $CHIPS_{CRISPS}$. Furthermore, say, by uttering “Nein, das sind keine Chips” Gerhard pragmatically conveys a metalinguistic proposition about which usages of “chips” *as well as all translations of “chips”* into different languages are appropriate.

In my opinion, this example helps to illustrate Cappelen’s point on why proponents of a metalinguistic view should not bring translations into the picture to answer the Babel objection. As Cappelen points out, “[w]e have to choose which meaning to translate from” (2018, p. 175), i.e. regarding the Britney-Gerhard case, we have to decide on whether to choose $CHIPS_{FRIES}$ or $CHIPS_{CRISPS}$ as the meaning to translate from. If we picked $CHIPS_{FRIES}$ *and* $CHIPS_{CRISPS}$ as the meanings to translate from, then we would pick out two different sets of expressions. On the other hand, if we picked e.g. only $CHIPS_{FRIES}$ as the meaning to translate from, then Britney would communicate the metalinguistic thought that “chips” as well as all translations of “chips” *meaning* $CHIPS_{FRIES}$ (i.e. “Pommes”, “frites”, “French fries”, “patatas fritas”, etc.) should be used in such a way that they apply to fries. Gerhard, on the other hand, would convey that all translations of “chips” *meaning* $CHIPS_{FRIES}$ should *not* be applied to fries. In the scenario detailed, we would consequently bias the debate in favour of Britney, just as Cappelen cautions against, provided that terms such as “frites”, “Pommes”, “French fries” etc. *should* in fact be used for fries. So, if we only picked $CHIPS_{FRIES}$ as the meaning to translate from, then Gerhard would convey a metalinguistic proposition that seems to be false. (The same would hold, *mutatis mutandis*, for Britney and $CHIPS_{CRISPS}$.)

Now, this line of reasoning might not seem too troubling when looking at Britney and Gerhard’s dispute, which might come across as being merely verbal anyway. However, an analogous worry also affects *GLR* and *ELC*’s dispute, i.e. a dispute which clearly elicits the impression of relevant disagreement between the speakers. Which meaning expressed by *GLR* and *ELC* – $WOMEN_{REF}$ or $WOMEN_{CON}$ – should we pick to translate from when interpreting *GLR* and *ELC* as conveying metalinguistic propositions not only about the specific terms that they are using (“Frauen” and “women”) but also about all those words that are *translations* of these terms, as proponents of the metalinguistic translation account would suggest? Let us assume for a

moment that $WOMEN_{REF}$ and $WOMEN_{CON}$ do translate differently into different languages.^{10,11} Thus, suppose that there is a language L in which speakers predominantly express $WOMEN_{REF}$ with one term (e_1) and predominantly express $WOMEN_{CON}$ with another term (e_2). In this case, we would, as before, pick out two different sets of expressions (one containing e_1 and one containing e_2) if we picked both meanings ($WOMEN_{REF}$ and $WOMEN_{CON}$) to translate from in the case of GLR and ELC 's dispute. Then, however, GLR would convey a proposition about how best to use the set of expressions containing e_1 in the dispute while ELC would communicate a metalinguistic thought on how best to use the set of expressions containing e_2 . Hence, the metalinguistic propositions conveyed by the speakers would concern different sets of expressions. What is more, assuming that GLR would agree that e_2 should *not* be used in such a way that e_2 applies to trans women, GLR would fail to disagree with ELC on how best to use e_2 (analogously for ELC and e_1). On the other hand, if we picked only one of the two meanings to translate from – $WOMEN_{REF}$ or $WOMEN_{CON}$ – then we would bias the debate in favour of one speaker. Picking $WOMEN_{REF}$, for example, we would bias the debate in favour of GLR , provided that all translations of “Frauen” typically used to express $WOMEN_{REF}$ (such as e_1) should in fact be used in such a way that they apply to trans women. For in this case, ELC 's metalinguistic proposition that we should *not* use all translations of “women” (including e_1) in such a way that they apply to trans women would be wrong.

Consequently, the metalinguistic translation account runs into a dilemma, just as Cappelen predicts. The account is not able to accommodate the impression of disagreement in all inter-language disputes. Bringing translations into the picture is therefore of no help for proponents of a metalinguistic view to provide a general answer to the Babel objection.

5.2 What can we learn from Cappelen's objection?

Section 5.1 elaborated Cappelen's objection to the metalinguistic translation account. In the remainder of this section, (1) I will draw attention to an important caveat regarding Cappelen's objection. Moreover, (2) I will revisit the solution to the Babel objection presented in section 4 and detail the role of context in metalinguistic negotiations.

¹⁰ This might not appear too plausible in the case of “women” but it is certainly possible. And it could be plausible for other examples.

¹¹ Cappelen leaves it unspecified under which conditions an expression x can legitimately be called a *translation* of another expression y of a language L_1 into a different language L_2 . For the sake of simplicity, I will assume that x is a translation of y into L_2 iff speakers of L_2 predominantly use x to express the same concept as speakers of L_1 predominantly express with y .

(1)

According to Cappelen, adopting the metalinguistic translation account amounts to biasing an inter-language dispute (such as *GLR* and *ELC*'s) in favour of one speaker if we only pick one of the relevant meanings (e.g. $\text{WOMEN}_{\text{REF}}$) to translate from. Regarding a good many cases, I think that Cappelen is exactly right on this. His objection to the metalinguistic translation account is therefore successful. The metalinguistic translation account cannot provide a general strategy to answer the Babel objection. However, it is worth noting that even if “women”- $\text{WOMEN}_{\text{REF}}$ translates as e_1 into L (because e_1 in L is predominantly used to express $\text{WOMEN}_{\text{REF}}$), the best way for speakers of L to use e_1 might *not* be to express $\text{WOMEN}_{\text{REF}}$. After all, it is not always best to use a term in accordance with its predominant usage. In particular, it might not always be best for speakers of L to use e_1 in such a way that e_1 applies to trans women. But if the best way to use e_1 is *not* to express $\text{WOMEN}_{\text{REF}}$, then we would also *not* automatically bias *GLR* and *ELC*'s dispute in favour of *GLR* by picking $\text{WOMEN}_{\text{REF}}$ as the meaning to translate from. For, even if e_1 is predominantly used to express $\text{WOMEN}_{\text{REF}}$ in L , *ELC* would then be right in arguing that e_1 should not be used in such a way that it applies to trans women by speakers of L . Moreover, *GLR* and *ELC* could actually be in agreement on how best to use e_1 .¹²

On a more general note, it is important to bear in mind that speakers in metalinguistic negotiations can advocate a particular usage of an expression – and rightly so – even if they know that this usage deviates from how the expression is predominantly used. To be sure, speakers can also be in genuine disagreement on how best to use a particular expression e because they disagree on how e is predominantly used. Interlocutors might think that all expressions of a language should best be used in accordance with how the majority of speakers of this language uses them, for instance. However, interlocutors can certainly also disagree on how best to use e for different reasons. In fact, interlocutors in metalinguistic negotiations can advocate a certain usage of e even when they *know* that their preferred usage of e would vastly deviate from how e is used in a linguistic community. Speaker *ELC*, for instance, might know that almost all speakers of English nowadays use “women” to express $\text{WOMEN}_{\text{REF}}$ but still advocate pairing “women” with $\text{WOMEN}_{\text{CON}}$. As Burgess and Plunkett (2013, p. 1094) clarify in their introduction to conceptual ethics, the “should” or “best” in “how we *should* use a term”

¹² Note, though, that in the scenario detailed, we would still describe *ELC* as intending to communicate how best to use translations of $\text{WOMEN}_{\text{REF}}$ such as e_1 , which might misrepresent *ELC*'s communicative intentions. In this sense, then, we might still “bias” the dispute against *ELC* by picking $\text{WOMEN}_{\text{REF}}$ as the meaning to translate from. (I am grateful to a reviewer for pressing me on this point.)

or “how best to use a term” is to be understood broadly, concerning all kinds of “normative and evaluative theorizing” (see also Thomasson, 2017, p. 12). Speakers in metalinguistic negotiations might thus disagree on how best to use a particular term because they disagree on which of the concepts under discussion would be more joint-carving, morally superior, ... or superior all things considered. I think that it is important to keep this manifoldness of speakers’ intentions and attitudes in mind when interpreting metalinguistic negotiations.

(2)

Does Cappelen’s worry affect the last section’s answer to the Babel objection? I do not think so. According to the answer presented in the last section, *ELC* and *GLR* (respectively) convey metalinguistic propositions about “women” and “Frauen” only. Thus, the last section’s answer to the Babel objection does *not* construe the speakers as conveying metalinguistic propositions about “women” and “Frauen” *as well as all the lexical items that are translations of these terms*. In fact, the last section’s solution does not appeal to the idea of translation at all. In this sense, my solution is not only less demanding but also unaffected by Cappelen’s worry about the metalinguistic translation account.

Let me emphasise one further detail about metalinguistic negotiations that is often disregarded in the literature (e.g. by Cappelen, 2018, p. 174). So far, we have often talked as if *ELC* and *GLR*’s metalinguistic negotiation would simply concern how best to use two different concatenations of letters: W-O-M-E-N and F-R-A-U-E-N. But as Plunkett and Sundell emphasise, metalinguistic negotiations concern the question of “how best to use a word *relative to a context*” (2013, p. 3; italics added). Plunkett and Sundell see functional roles as part of that context. According to them, in a particular context (“setting”), “certain words (largely independent of which specific concept they express) fill specific and important functional roles in our practices” (2013, p. 20). The idea of *functions* or *functional roles* of concepts and/or terms is highly debated in the literature on conceptual engineering. (For instance, the accounts of Prinzing, 2018, Thomasson, 2020 and Nado, 2021 appeal to functions while Cappelen, 2018, ch. 16 and Riggs, 2021 take a more critical stand on the functional approach to conceptual engineering.) Luckily, we do not need to stick our necks out on this issue here. Proponents of the metalinguistic account need not commit to functions as being part of the contexts relative to which speakers in metalinguistic negotiations advocate the usage of certain terms. Independently of whether proponents of the metalinguistic account commit to functions, they can interpret *ELC* and *GLR*’s dispute as follows: *GLR* advocates how best to use “Frauen”

within the German-speaking linguistic community – i.e. a community in which “Frauen” is typically used in a particular way and in which it has certain connotations, colourings, figurative usages, lexical effects, (functional roles?) etc. All of these semantic and non-semantic features are features of the context relative to which *GLR* advocates how best to use “Frauen” in his dispute with *ELC*. *ELC*, on the other hand, advocates against using “women” for trans women within the *English*-speaking linguistic community in which, again, “women” is typically used in a particular way and in which it has all kinds of further features, which are part of the context relative to which *ELC* advocates how best to use “women” in his dispute with *GLR*.

Hence, *ELC* and *GLR* negotiate how one should use two different words relative to two different contexts. However, as we have detailed *ELC* and *GLR*’s case so far, these two contexts, while being different, are also notably similar regarding “women” and “Frauen”. That is to say that “women” and “Frauen” have very similar – if not the same – semantic and non-semantic features within the English and the German linguistic community respectively, features which should be seen as part of the contexts relative to which *ELC* and *GLR* negotiate how best to use those terms. This similarity assumption underlies our strong feeling of relevant disagreement between *ELC* and *GLR*. If two or more speakers discuss how to use two or more expressions e_1, e_2, \dots relative to two or more different contexts c_1, c_2, \dots , then it is likely that the speakers’ dispute really reflects disagreement on how best to use e_1, e_2, \dots relative to c_1, c_2, \dots only if e_1, e_2, \dots have relevantly similar features in c_1, c_2, \dots

Just hypothetically assume that, unlike “Frauen” in German, the term “women” in English had severely negative lexical effects and connotations. That is, assume that the contexts relative to which *ELC* and *GLR* discuss how to best use “women” and “Frauen” respectively are not relevantly similar regarding these two terms. In this case, there might actually be *no* disagreement between *ELC* and *GLR* on which concept of womanhood best to pair with the English “women”. Just assume that in general, say, *GLR* thinks that gender vocabulary should be used in accordance with how persons self-identify. However, *GLR* is uncertain whether calling trans women “women” would really be the best choice in a scenario in which “women” is extremely negatively coloured. In the situation as described, we might expect *GLR* to refuse a trans-inclusive usage of “women” within the English-speaking linguistic community.¹³ Note,

¹³ The reasoning might seem none too realistic regarding “Frauen” and “women” (although “girly”, for instance, is negatively coloured). For an example that might be more true to life, consider the context relative to which speakers discuss the usage of the English “race” and the context relative to which speakers discuss the usage of the German “Rasse”. These contexts do seem notably different regarding these two terms such that speakers advocating to speak of different “races” in the English-speaking community, for example, might be opposed to

however, that whether *ELC* and *GLR* would really disagree on how best to use “women” eventually depends on how exactly we detail the case and on *GLR*’s doxastic attitudes in particular. Sometimes, for instance, speakers also want to see negatively coloured terms reappropriated or decide to deliberately use terms disruptively (see Sterken, 2020). In general, adding sufficient details to a case under discussion may dissolve the impression of disagreement. Varying details about cross-linguistic disputes call for varying interpretations. The metalinguistic account is flexible enough to accommodate that. It can react to specific details of each case and evaluate individual cases individually.

Let me briefly recap what we have learned in this section. This section discussed (what I called) the metalinguistic translation account, which Cappelen (2018) briefly presents as a possible variant of the metalinguistic account. At least at first glance, the metalinguistic translation account might seem to circumvent the Babel objection. Yet, the translation account does fall prey to Cappelen’s objection (section 5.1). As a result, proponents of the metalinguistic picture should not adopt the metalinguistic translation account to answer the Babel objection.

In section 5.2, I raised a caveat about Cappelen’s objection to the translation account. As I have argued, we do not automatically bias a dispute in favour of one speaker if we only pick one meaning to translate from. As we would do so in a good number of cases, however, adopting the metalinguistic translation account still does not provide a general solution to the Babel objection. In addition, I underlined the difference between the metalinguistic translation account and the less demanding metalinguistic response to the Babel objection that I presented in section 4. (My answer does not rely on construing *ELC* and *GLR* as conveying metalinguistic propositions about how best to use “women”, “Frauen” as well as *all translations* of these terms.) Moreover, the section elaborated on the role of context in metalinguistic negotiations. I argued that varying features of the context(s) relative to which two disputants discuss how to best use (a) particular word(s) can call for varying interpretations of their dispute. As I illustrated, the metalinguistic account leaves room for evaluating disputes across languages on a case-to-case basis. The account is flexible enough to accommodate varying details of varying disputes.

speaking of different “Rassen” in Germany (given that the German “Rasse(n)” is usually strongly associated with Nazism).

6. Conclusion

The present paper defended the metalinguistic approach to conceptual engineering against one of its major critics. According to Cappelen (2018), the approach cannot accommodate disagreement between speakers of different languages (the Babel objection). As shown in the paper, the Babel objection also affects metalinguistic interpretations in other areas of philosophy, such as metaethics. However, the objection misses its target. As a result, the metalinguistic account still stands as a noteworthy contender for explaining disagreements in conceptual engineering and elsewhere.

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