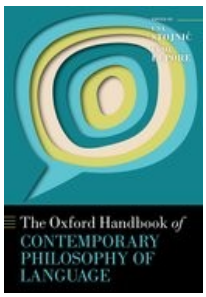

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CHAPTER

27 Linguistic Variation, Agency, and Style

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Abstract

People speak in different ways within and across contexts; and utterances that are equivalent in their essential content and force can differ in their social significance in virtue of differing phonologically, morphologically, syntactically, and lexically. These dimensions of linguistic variation have not received sustained philosophical attention. We argue that *meaningful form* contributes significantly to the speech acts that agents perform with their utterances. Speakers communicate social information by navigating fine-grained differences in how they speak, and hearers systematically pick up on and use this information. Moreover, these fine-grained differences performatively alter the conversational context. We review three options for handling these aspects of speech within the philosophy of language—exclusionism, informationalism, and performativism—and sketch prospects and challenges for a theory of sociolinguistic variation going forward.

Keywords: informationalism, linguistic style, manner implicature, meaningful form, natural meaning, performativism, rational communication, register, sociolinguistics, speech-act theory

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1. Introduction

Contemporary philosophy of language has been largely structured around two explanatory projects. One aims to explain how, simply by producing certain sounds or shapes, I can tell you that snow is white, that arithmetic is incomplete, or that there is milk in the refrigerator. The other aims to explain how, by producing such signs, I can place you under arrest, threaten your family, or commit myself to hosting a dinner party.

The first project descends from Frege (1879/1997) 's attempt to specify the meanings of complex mathematical and logical sentences by analyzing their basic constituents and mode of combination. While the tools Frege developed have been adapted, expanded, and applied to an ever-widening range of phenomena involving both formal and natural languages, philosophers working in his wake have largely retained a basic assumption: that the fundamental aim of our linguistic activity is to exchange information.

To take a pithy example, witness Lewis (1980: 80):

> 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 *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. ...

If we both know how the world has to be in order for a sentence to be true and we trust that each will aim to say only true things, then just by uttering a sentence, I can inform ↳ you about the world. Philosophers' explanations of how such exchanges succeed typically involve a formal analysis of how the meanings of individual words combine to determine the meanings of sentence types, together with a formal analysis of how those sentence types and general principles of rationality and cooperation, plus substantive assumptions about the context of utterance, determine the meanings of token utterances. Different implementations of the project distribute the task of explaining the truth-conditions of particular token utterances differently among syntax, semantics, and pragmatics; but all share a focus on the compositional determination of truth-conditions in communication.[1]

p. 677

The second project, most prominently associated with Austin (1962), focuses on utterances as a form of action: what Austin called *performatives*. To contrast performatives with informational utterances (which Austin called 'constatives'), consider

(1) You're out!

as uttered by two different speakers at a baseball game. A teammate who utters (1) provides you with a report about the state of the game at a certain time. But an umpire pronouncing the same words does not (merely) tell you how things stand: by their very utterance, they make it the case that you are out. Rather than focusing on truth-conditions, work in the Austinian tradition has aimed to explain the conditions under which utterances are *felicitous* by analyzing the social practices within which those utterances occur, especially as they involve relations within institutionalized economies of authority. Contemporary work in this tradition often explores questions of power and propriety, including especially consent and coercion (see, e.g. Langton 1993; Hornsby 1995; McGowan 2003; Maitra 2009; Tirrell 2011; Kukla 2014; Anderson 2018; Caponetto and Cepollaro 2023).

Practitioners from both camps have generally acknowledged that the two projects overlap. Thus, on the one hand, Frege (1879/1997) already encodes the insight that assertion centrally involves *doing* something with a content, analogous to judging it true, an insight that Stalnaker (1978) develops into a theory of conversational dynamics. And on the other hand, Austin (1962) concludes his introduction of performative utterances by arguing that constatives are themselves a species of performative. Nonetheless, in practice the two projects have tended to diverge in their overall goals, target phenomena, and methodologies.

Our aim in this chapter is to call attention to a species of linguistic significance that has been largely overlooked by practitioners in both traditions, which we call *meaningful form*. By this, we mean aspects of an

utterance's implementation that are equivalent to a class of alternative implementations in terms of their 'essential' representational and/or performative effect but which are differentiated from one another in virtue of correlating with distinct features of a speaker's psychological and/or social identity, either within or across conversational contexts.

We think meaningful form is interesting and important in its own right. We also think that taking it
p. 678 seriously reveals that the informational and performative explanatory ↳ projects are more tightly interwoven, and more limited in their implementation to date, than philosophers have generally recognized. We begin in section 2 by surveying a range of data that showcase our target phenomena. In section 3, we consider where such phenomena might fit relative to a broadly neo-Fregean theory of utterance meaning in terms of the compositional analysis of sentences' conventional truth-conditions. In section 4, we explore how meaningful form might fit within a broadly Lewisian model that analyzes conversational dynamics in terms of rational information exchange. In section 5, we articulate aspects of meaningful form that motivate a broadly Austinian performative analysis of utterances as actions. While our primary aim throughout is to showcase a variety of questions and opportunities for exploring meaningful form, we also offer provisional reasons to think that an adequate treatment will involve elements of both information exchange and performativity. Section 6 concludes with a programmatic discussion of the upshot. We take our discussion to suggest that the standard conceptions of linguistic meaning and linguistic competence may be too narrow and that debates about topics including linguistic justice, free speech, and the value of linguistic diversity may be ignoring a crucial component of what ordinary speakers do by uttering words.

2. Phenomena of Meaningful Form

2.1 Variations in Contrasting Implementations

Our goal in this section is to draw attention to meaningful form, understood as aspects of linguistic implementation that realize the same syntactic and semantic 'essential effect' as a class of alternate implementations while being correlated with distinct psychological and/or social features or effects. In such cases, merely formal differences in how a common content is implemented make a meaningful difference to the utterance's overall effect. So characterized, meaningful form encompasses a motley crew of properties, both in terms of the linguistic vehicles involved and in terms of their psychological and social correlates.

First, on the side of the implementing vehicle, a variety of otherwise equivalent features of a sentence's form can be recruited to carry meaning, including—at least—pronunciation, syntactic structure, and lexical expression. Providing a comprehensive taxonomy is a task for another occasion; here, we simply offer some examples to illustrate.

To start, consider the following minimal pair from Chambers (2004: 4):

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

(2a) and (2b) differ in their morphological realizations of tense and the reflexive pronoun. We know of no
p. 679 mainstream philosophical theory that has treated such differences ↳ as significant; on all standard approaches, they encode the same proposition, trigger the same presuppositions, entail the same consequences, and realize the same updates on a conversational common ground. Nonetheless, we agree with Chambers (2004: 5) that virtually any speaker of English will recognize that "the first [example] is emblematic of middle-class, educated, or relatively formal speech, while the second is emblematic of

working-class, uneducated, or highly colloquial (vernacular) speech." Further, ordinary language users employ these sorts of associations whenever they produce and interpret speech. The outcome of a job interview, or an attempt to integrate oneself into a new team, or to secure a second date often depends in part on the impressions generated by deploying one over another such morphological options.

Syntactic alternatives produce similarly distinct social effects. Consider negative concord, a feature of a wide variety of English dialects in the United States and the United Kingdom, as in:

(3) a. Nobody has heard anything about any festschrift.
b. Ain't nobody heard nothing about no festschrift.

The two instantiations in (3) make equivalent claims about the evoked writing project. But they differ in social significance: normatively standard English marks negation with a negative polarity item ('no/anything'), while many vernacular dialects follow languages like French and Russian in preserving negative concord ('no/nothing').[2] Likewise for dangling prepositions: thus, the first but not the second alternatives in minimal pairs like

(4) a. You should come {with/with us}.
b. The cat wants {in/to come in}.

are associated with casual speech across a range of socio-economic classes in the upper Midwest of the United States (Benson 2009).

Turning from syntax to the lexicon, (nearly) extensionally equivalent expressions often vary in psychological and/or social significance. Thus, 'mutt' and 'mongrel' both refer to mixed-breed dogs but differ in the attitudes they suggest it is appropriate to have toward them (cf. Frege 1892/1952). 'Sweat' and 'perspire' and 'urine', 'pee', 'pee pee', and 'piss' are extensionally equivalent but differ in affect and imagery as well as conversational register, formality, and expected audience. In the United States, 'soda' and 'pop' are understood to be extensional equivalents by nearly all speakers but are associated with different regions (see: https://popvssoda.com). And in the United Kingdom, alternates like 'sofa'/'settee' and 'napkin'/'serviette' pick out the same sets of objects but carry different class associations: perhaps perversely, 'settee' and 'serviette' sound déclassé, as though one were trying too hard.[3]

In addition to morphology, syntax, and lexicon, variations in pronunciation can also be significant. As George and Ira Gershwin's 1937 'Let's call the whole thing off' playfully illustrates, speakers and listeners don't just track, but have strong opinions about the difference between pronouncing 'either' as *ee-ther* or
p. 680 *eye-ther*, or 'tomato' as *tom-ay-to* ↳ or *tom-ah-to*. In the contemporary United States, analogous variant pairs include 'La Croix', pronounced as *luh croy* or *la cwah*; 'aunt', pronounced to rhyme with 'ant' or with 'savant'; and 'route', to rhyme with 'root' or 'spout'. And in some regions or social circumstances, it would be aberrant and pretentious to pronounce 'creek' as *creek* rather than *crick*, 'water' as *wah-ter* rather than *wooder*, or 'ask' as *ask* rather than *axe*.

2.2 Variations in Contrasting Significance

So far, our survey has focused on variation in which aspects of a sentence's implementational form are recruited as meaningful. We now turn to two other ways in which cases of meaningful form can vary. First, they vary in the *degree of control* speakers have over their implementation. Most of the examples above involve alternates that are available for actualization by most speakers of the relevant language: thus, although a given speaker may find it easier or more natural to pronounce 'water' as *wooder* or to employ negative concord, most speakers could implement the alternate variant with a bit of effort. By contrast, in other cases, speakers have much less immediate control. For example, it is an open question to what extent a speaker's physiology affects speech production in ways that are interpreted as gendered; and many studies have investigated perceptions of features of accent and dialect that speakers have little scope to change without long-term habituation.[4]

Second, cases of meaningful form vary in the kinds of features with which the variants are *correlated*. Some contrasts obtain between groups of speakers, categorized by region, class, race, age, or gender. Others obtain across the contexts in which a given speaker produces the variant, as when a teacher uses one profile of syntactic structures, vocabulary, and intonational contours when speaking to children and another to colleagues or district administrators. Further, sometimes the groups in a group contrast are coarse-grained, as in differences between British, Australian, and American English; while other groups are highly localized, as when students in a particular school or classroom develop a distinctive locution. Sometimes, variants are correlated with stable characteristics, like demographic or character traits, while other times, they are correlated with more transient states, like mood. Finally, some contrasts primarily concern psychological traits, like friendliness, while others concern social traits, like class, and still others concern the conversational context, like formality.

Cases of meaningful form plausibly differ in other theoretically important ways as well; here we have merely highlighted dimensions of difference that are especially relevant to our subsequent discussion.

2.3 Three Waves of Complexity in Variation

We take up the philosophical relevance and status of these sorts of differences in how speakers implement
p. 681 the same 'essential effects' in subsequent sections. In the remainder ↳ of this section, we briefly canvass how sociolinguists in the variationist tradition have understood the different ways that what we're calling 'meaningful form' are produced and deployed, with a particular eye toward highlighting the wide range of types of variation in play.

The variationist tradition developed around the study of what William Labov (1972b) called 'variables' but which, given the philosophical currency of using 'variable' in a more mathematical sense and following Burnett (2017, 2019), we call 'variants'. Labov (1972b: 272) describes variants as "different ways of saying the same thing." Translated into familiar philosophical terms, we take this to mean that the expressions or constructions have as their characteristic function contributing the same semantic value or combinatorial operation or realizing the same primary update to the conversational common ground. Thus, variants *v1, v2, vn* … count as variants in virtue of belonging to a class *V* defined in terms of an equivalent syntactic or semantic effect *S*, whose elements contrast in being associated with distinct psychological and/or social features *f1, f2, fn* …

In the early days of sociolinguistic research, dubbed the 'first wave' by Eckert (2012), variation was taken to reflect a speaker's membership in broad, stable social categories like class, race, and gender. Eckert takes Labov (1966) and Trudgill (1974) to have demonstrated that in the United States and the United Kingdom, a wider range of variants were used by speakers from lower-class and working-class backgrounds than by speakers from middle-class backgrounds; similar results held in Panama (Cedergren 1973) and Iran

(Modaressi 1978) and have since been documented in languages around the world. Hypothesizing that a speaker's class determines the degree of naturalness with which they produce standardized forms, Labov compared speech in casual conversation, in interviews, and during a formal reading task and found a substantially greater difference in the frequency with which non-standard variants were produced in increasingly formal contexts as one moves down the class hierarchy. That is, increasingly formal contexts led to a large change in the frequency of non-standard variants among lower-class speakers; a less great, but still prominent, change among working-class speakers; and still less change among middle-class speakers. Labov took these results to show that the primary mechanism by which a speaker's agency affected the form of their linguistic output was *self-monitoring*: in experimental settings that invited greater self-consciousness, lower- and working-class speakers produced more standard forms, although their speech never fully approximated middle-class speech.

'Second-wave' theorizing involved the recognition that "linguistic variables do not index categories, but characteristics" (Eckert 2012: 93). That is, rather than being restricted to broadly stable, coarse-grained demographic categories like race and class, variants were taken to correlate with more fine-grained aspects of personality and perspective. This shift allowed researchers both to interpret variations in speech as reflecting a broader range of social identities and also to see speakers as *choosing* to employ vernacular over standard forms in order to endorse traits associated with particular social identities, such as anti-authority
p. 682 culture among working-class adolescents ↳ in Reading, England (Cheshire 1982) or local agrarian tradition in Spanish Cantabria (Holmquist 1985).

In contemporary, 'third-wave' variationism, theorists have developed a still more nuanced model of why people produce different variants in different contexts, even for variants associated with coarsely individuated personality or demographic traits. Consider again negative concord, as in (4a) and (4b). Interpreters generally associate negative concord "with class, and toughness perhaps, but also quite specifically with lack of education" (Eckert 2012: 122). However, this does not mean that people who produce the non-standard forms are themselves generally seen as lower-class, tough, or uneducated. While those properties are associated with the variant in a stable way in the abstract, third-wave research has demonstrated that particular uses of the variant can produce a wide variety of interpretations by listeners, depending on the context of use. To take a particularly dramatic example, when Hilary Putnam (1975) writes

(5) Cut the pie any way you like, 'meanings' just ain't in the head,

no one supposes that the self-monitoring that would ordinarily mask his true working-class colors has lapsed. Rather, given Putnam's position as an esteemed Harvard professor and the fact that (5) occurs in a scholarly text, he is manifestly exploiting *ain't*'s working-class associations for rhetorical effect: to emphatically express the obvious truth of externalism (compare Nunberg 2018: 267).

A similarly complex dynamic obtains with variants that are less strongly, or not at all, associated with a group category. Consider variation in pronunciation of the English morpheme (-ING), which nearly all speakers of English produce in both of the following forms:

(6) a. I was thinking about doing some grilling later.
b. I was thinkin' about doin' some grillin' later.

Sociolinguists have shown that the '-ing' realization is associated with intelligence and competence, and the '-in' realization with approachability and affability (see Campbell-Kibler 2006, 2007, 2008, and references therein). However, deploying one or the other variant does not uniformly, or even usually, produce the impression that one is intelligent and competent or approachable and affable. For one thing, the effects depend on detailed, concrete facts about the context of utterance: at an ayahuasca retreat, pronouncing (-ING) as '-ing' may mark you as an uptight square, while '-in' may have little or no effect.

For another, the effects wrought by a particular variant can be amplified, attenuated, or shifted by co-instantiation with other variants. As Campbell-Kibler (2008) demonstrates, '-in' increases the perceived strength of a US Southern accent and of the social associations indexed by that accent ("lack of education, rural origin, 'redneck' "), while '-ing' decreases them. Conversely, '-ing' increases the perceived strength of an accent that participants described as 'gay' ("lowered masculinity, the city, and the term 'metrosexual' ") while '-in' decreases them.

p. 683 These same interpretive resources are available not only to broad segments of a population but also more locally. Thus, one of the earliest variationist studies, reported in Labov (1962, 1963), involved the use by long-time, year-round residents of Martha's Vineyard of a distinctive pronunciation of the diphthong /ay/ to manifest a traditionalist, island-first ideological stance, in marked contrast to the way in which summer visitors to the island spoke and presumably thought.

At the hyperlocal level, Eckert (2000) documented correlations among the phonological patterns and social roles of students at what she calls 'Belten High School' in Detroit in the 1990s. Students labeled themselves as 'jocks' or 'burns': roughly, 'jocks' participated in canonical school activities, including athletics and school government; while 'burns' rejected such activities in favor of unsupervised, unstructured social activities often involving drugs and fighting. 'Burns' were more likely to shift their pronunciation of certain vowels: in particular, to pronounce the (uh) in words like 'fun' so that it sounds like 'fawn'; and the diphthong /ay/ in words like 'file' so that it sounds like 'foil'. Female burns were most likely to shift their pronunciation; and stronger affiliation with the burnout crowd was correlated with more extreme phonological shift. Moreover, individuals shifted pronunciations differentially for specific conversational contexts: for instance, employing an extreme shift when dramatizing affiliation with typical 'burn' behavior like pulling an 'all-noiter' (see McConnell-Ginet and Eckert 1995).

By detaching the fine-grained, local significance of particular uses of variants from the demographic associations they evoke in the abstract, third-wave sociolinguists highlighted the role that meaningful form plays in '*bricolage*': a process of splicing together linguistic resources from a range of levels of generality, evoking properties drawn from a massively multidimensional space that might not otherwise fit easily together. While the interactions among those properties and their effects is extremely complex, well beyond the scope of what speakers can typically articulate, they produce something that ordinary folk clearly do recognize and that plays a substantial role in explaining their interpersonal reactions. We think the resulting patterns of speech can be aptly characterized as a *linguistic style*, which we understand as a complex, open-ended disposition to navigate the space of sociolinguistic variation in a particular way.

Moreover, we take these ordinary linguistic styles to form the material basis for more overtly aesthetic modes of speech in both ordinary discourse and in literature. Putnam's use of 'ain't' in (5) constitutes one example. For a more sustained illustration, consider the markedly disparate literary styles, and their implications for the narratological and authorial personae they evoke, on display in the following pair of opening lines, from Henry James's *What Maisie Knew* (1897/2009) and J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (1951), respectively:

(7) The litigation seemed interminable and had in fact been complicated; but by the decision on the appeal the judgement of the divorce-court was confirmed as to the assignment of the child. The father, who, though bespattered from head to foot, had made good his case, was, in pursuance of this triumph, appointed to keep her: it was not so much that the mother's character had been more absolutely damaged as that the brilliancy of a lady's complexion (and this lady's, in court, was immensely remarked) might be more regarded as showing the spots.

p. 684 (8) If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth.

Among other features, James exploits multiply embedded relative clauses, complex anaphoric dependencies, high-register lexical expressions, and contextually detached descriptions. And he does this in order to construct a narrator who is, among other things, reserved, reflective, British, and aristocratic. By contrast, Salinger employs direct address, linear syntactic constructions, contextually embedded reference, slang, and taboo expressions in order to construct a narrator who is, among other things, brash, youthful, American, and (ostensibly) unpretentious. The authors deploy literary style to establish their very different narrators in ways that are masterfully efficient and intuitive. But they do so by harnessing correlations between linguistic form and psychological and social traits that are established in everyday discourse and by amplifying the sorts of stylistic choices that ordinary speakers make in such discourse.

Offering a metaphysical analysis of linguistic style, much less an explanation of how particular linguistic styles result from conforming to and departing from a multiplicity of established expectations about phonetic, morphological, lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic aspects of language, is a task for another occasion. Here, we merely want to emphasize the complex, nuanced, context-sensitive, intuitive, open-ended nature of linguistic style and the rich range of uses to which it is put in both ordinary and artistically designed speech.

3. Is It Meaning?

3.1 The Traditional Project

In section 2, we surveyed data involving variations in language use. We claimed first, that ordinary speakers recognize these variations as alternative implementations within a common class, where the variants are themselves, in turn, correlated with different psychological and/or sociocultural traits. Second, we claimed that ordinary speakers' production of and reactions to speech are often influenced by recognition of these correlations in ways that depend on the particular context of utterance. We now turn to the philosophical relevance of these data. In this section, we ask whether, and where, to incorporate meaningful form into a larger theory of meaning.

The default position for many will be that sociolinguistic meaning is simply irrelevant to philosophy of language. This view has a distinguished pedigree. The Fregean project was explicitly founded on the assumption that analysis must focus on a highly restricted subset within the full panoply of speech: one that is tractably systematic and stable and also tightly connected to foundational philosophical topics like
p. 685 resolution of ↳ disagreement through proof, transmission of knowledge through testimony, and ontological investigation through conceptual analysis. In its traditional form, philosophy of language focuses on the compositional determination of the truth-conditions of sentential types; pragmatic explanations are leveraged to winnow out irrelevant variations in meaning across occasions of use. Thus, insofar as the instances of meaningful form in section 2 are defined as "different ways of saying the same thing," they are exactly the sorts of vicissitudes the traditional project aims to ignore.

The choice to focus attention on the compositional determination of truth-conditional content may be methodologically wise. Every theory must engage in idealization and abstraction; given how various, nuanced, and socially embedded the phenomena of sociolinguistic variation are, it might seem that any attempt to include them within a theory of meaning will explode it into an unruly 'theory of everything'. Moreover, it might seem that the phenomena are not distinctively linguistic, and so should be assimilated to a general theory of social behavior instead.[5]

However, proponents of truth-conditional compositional analysis must also acknowledge that choices about how to idealize and abstract involve substantive commitments, reflecting a substantive theoretical

perspective. Any perspective presupposes a taxonomy, which purports to reflect homeostatic clusters of lower-level features in the world (Boyd 1999), along with an aligned set of explanatory goals and priorities (Carnap 1950). The truth-conditional compositional semanticist's perspective employs a taxonomy parsing sounds and shapes into words and sentences by abstracting away from some lower-level variations in pronunciation, lexicon, and syntax with the aim of identifying stable contents that perform certain epistemic and metaphysical functional roles. To do so, it ignores other features and functional roles, especially involving social coordination. This perspective may be perfectly internally coherent. But even if it is, we still need to ask whether its operative categories and priorities are ones we reflectively endorse.[6]

Moreover, in order to justify a dismissive stance toward meaningful form, a traditional theorist would also need to establish that it is sufficiently disconnected from the compositional determination of truth-conditions to be safely ignored. We'll explore this question in more depth in section 3.3; here, we simply note that this assumption is one that analytic philosophy has struggled to establish from its inauguration. Frege spends the bulk of 'Sense and reference' defending his principle of compositionality against counterexamples in which substitution of co-referring expressions appears to alter truth-conditions—some of which, like the substitution of 'nag' for 'steed', clearly involve meaningful form. Frege acknowledges that many sentences arouse "subsidiary thoughts" which "are associated with our words in accordance with psychological laws." But he insists, sometimes poignantly, that if we attend carefully to our intuitions, we will find that these merely "color" the "main thought," without affecting its truth-conditions (1892/1952: 227). In particular, he suggests that mismatches between the main thought and any associated ideas are "as if a song with a sad subject were sung in a lively fashion" (1892/1952: 226) rather than constituting outright contradictions.

Like Frege, Grice carves out a privileged category of what is 'strictly speaking' true, acknowledging that
p. 686 utterances are often associated with additional thoughts that might ↳ make one "less comfortable" with a speaker's statement (1961: 127) while insisting that the discomfort is "insufficient to falsify" it (1989: 361). Where Frege's catch-all category of 'coloring' includes feelings and images, Grice restricts his analysis to propositional contents. And within the class of "associated thoughts" that fall outside 'what is said' "in the favored sense" (1989: 45), Grice distinguishes between conventional and conversational implicatures.

Contemporary theorists tend to be more concerned with explaining how speakers communicate than with placing science on a secure foundation. But they continue to rely on delicate, sometimes esoteric intuitions about what is 'strictly speaking said' in pursuit of identifying a stable compositional core. To this end, they standardly differentiate at-issue content, which is compositionally determined, discourse-focal, and truth-conditional, from peripheral meaning, which can be generated by both conventional and conversational mechanisms and can make both truth-conditional and expressive contributions (Potts 2005). Parsing the landscape in this way enables us to interrogate more precisely the claim that meaningful form is theoretically irrelevant to philosophy of language. As we'll see, for each of these categories of meaning, the assumption of irrelevance is a plausible null hypothesis that turns out on inspection to be at least somewhat controversial.

3.2 Natural vs Non-natural Meaning

It may seem obvious that variations in meaningful form do not affect an utterance's truth conditions. While the supposed equivalence (Grice 1975: 44) between the bracketed alternations in

(9) He is an Englishman; {and/but/therefore} he is brave

is admittedly recherché, it takes little or no reflective work to access the 'favored sense' in which (6a) and (6b) (repeated) are "different ways of saying the same thing":

(6) a. I was thinking about doing some grilling later.
b. I was thinkin' about doin' some grillin' later.

Indeed, our working definition of meaningful form encodes the assumption that the alternation displayed in (6) is meaningful *because* the variants are marked as alternative implementations within a class *V* defined by semantic or syntactic equivalence.

At the same time, though, such variants are arguably *meaningful* insofar as they differ in the overall information they carry about the world. For instance, the alternates in (6) differ in the personality traits attributed to the speaker. Thus, a defender of the claim that sociolinguistic variation is irrelevant needs more than a sweeping invocation of equivalence in the total set of possible worlds compatible with the utterance. It is precisely their recognition of this fact about wider informational difference that drives Frege and Grice to gesture toward their more refined notions of "what is said."

p. 687 We will evaluate the prospects for treating meaningful form specifically as peripheral meaning shortly, in section 3.3. Here, we consider a still general but slightly more nuanced version of the argument from irrelevance: that the species of information that differentiates (6a) from (6b) falls outside the scope of analysis because the theorist's target is *communication*, understood in Grice (1957) 's terms as hearers' recognition of what speakers are trying to accomplish by getting them to reason about their reasons for producing the utterance they did. By contrast, the traditional semanticist maintains, the information carried by sociolinguistic variation is a case of *natural meaning*: an 'index' or 'trace' (Peirce 1903; Dretske 1981; Millikan 2004) of the speaker's personal and social history, on a par with their having a squeaky voice, a red shirt, or blue hair. An utterance's natural meaning may well arouse "associated thoughts" or feelings in a hearer; and these effects may be anticipated and even intended by the speaker. But, the traditionalist maintains, none of this has anything distinctively to do with communication, let alone with language.[7]

We will argue in section 4.3 that there is something importantly right about the idea of meaningful form as a kind of natural meaning that indexes worldly features. However, we will also suggest in section 5.2 that the scope of purely natural cases of meaningful form is significantly more limited than one might think. Thus, for example, while the association of vocal pitch and timbre with perceived gender appears canonically 'natural' to many, recent work suggests that speakers actively leverage sociolinguistic variables to present gendered social identities (see note 4 above). For now, we simply note that even if the operative forms and correlations are indeed entirely 'natural' meaning, on a par with a tree's rings indexing its age, it does not follow that they are communicatively irrelevant. After all, speakers can exploit natural meaning in the service of non-natural meaning, as when Herod means that Salome must now have sex with him by displaying Saint John the Baptist's head to her (Grice 1957: 382).

There are clearly some cases in which a speaker tokens a variant without speaker-meaning it. For instance, they may be ignorant of the variant's relation to its contrast class: perhaps they are embedded within an isolated community that doesn't implement any alternate variants; or they lack the ability to recognize either those variants or their worldly correlates. Or they may recognize the variant in both its contrast and its correlation but be helpless to modulate their speech. However, as we noted in section 2.2, most cases of sociolinguistic variation aren't passively generated in this way.

It is also true that speakers are often not explicitly and precisely aware of the alternate variants, the defining class relative to which they 'say the same thing', or their differentiating worldly correlates. But this is true of much referential meaning and most grammatical meaning (Putnam 1975; Burge 1979; Rattan 2002). Further, as with referential and grammatical meaning, speakers are generally sensitive to those contrasts and correlates. First, as hearers, they respond to different variant-types in ways that reflect stable, systematic associations with their correlates, as modulated by particular contexts of tokening. Establishing such systematic sensitivity is a large part of sociolinguists' empirical task, on a par with establishing stable,

systematic syntactic and lexical effects. Second, even if a certain speaker defaults to a single variant-type
p. 688 across contexts (say, ↳ pronouncing 'aunt' to rhyme with 'ant'), there is typically a robust sense in which they *could* implement an alternate variant, for instance if asked to imitate a previous utterance or impersonate someone of a certain type. More importantly, as we saw in section 2.3, speakers often produce different variants depending on their context-specific aims.

In this sense, most cases of meaningful form involve action as opposed to mere behavior.[8] Thus, rather than positing a sharp cleavage between natural and communicative meaning, we advocate a continuum. At the 'natural' end reside pure indexes: features of speech that are passively implemented by speakers whenever they speak. At the 'agentive' end reside full performances: features of speech events in which speakers intentionally construct bespoke personae by selecting idiolect-relative variants to fit context-specific aims. In between lie cases in which a speaker "lets show"—that is, allows their speech to reveal—psychological and/or sociocultural features that they could suppress or modify with effort (Bonard 2022).

3.3 Composition and Convention

Suppose we grant that meaningful form at least sometimes falls within the scope of communicative meaning. Where should we locate it? We conclude this section by presenting some provisional evidence that meaningful form can affect both at-issue and peripheral truth-conditional content, and both conventionally and conversationally communicated peripheral contents. Again, our aim here is not to settle these questions, only to argue that the phenomena are complex and interesting enough that they should not be dismissed out of hand.

Returning to the alternation in (6), we suggested in section 3.2 that the two variants might partition the overall space of worldly possibilities differently in virtue of attributing different personality traits to the speaker, even if they 'strictly speaking' say the same thing. But one might press the argument further to claim that this overall difference modulates the property expressed by the embedded verb phrase (cf. Acton 2020, cited in Eckert 2019: 757). For instance, one might hold that some events that clearly fall within the extension of 'doing some grilling'—say, a Japanese chef searing precisely symmetrical rectangles of wagyu beef on a superheated lava rock—should be excluded from the extension of "doin' some grillin'". Much as a speaker who orders a hamburger might complain that they didn't get what they ordered if the waiter delivers a burger encased in Lucite (Searle 1978: 216), so too might we imagine a hearer of (6b) objecting that their agreed-upon plans were not fulfilled by the chef-seared cooking activity ("You call this 'grillin'?! This ain't no grillin'!"). If we were to model truth-conditions in supervaluationist terms, as has been proposed to handle vagueness (Fine 1975), and/or to weigh admissible possible worlds in terms of accessibility, one might claim that the overall supertruth-conditions of utterances of (6a) and (6b) largely overlap but do not completely coincide.

Further, the difference between the admissibility or accessibility of overall truth-conditions in (6a) and (6b)
p. 689 can be traced to a particular constituent: the presence or ↳ absence of final 'g'. In some cases, it can even be argued that the use of a variant affects overall truth-conditions by interacting compositionally with other sentential features (Eckert 2012: 454). In this vein, Jaszczolt (2018) argues for systematic interactions among referential expressions, sociolinguistic information, and illocutionary force in *de se* expression. Thus, suppose Peter, who is the dean, utters one or the other of the alternations in

(10) a. You will get a pay raise. You have my word for it.
b. You will get a pay raise. You have the dean's word for it.

(10b) foregrounds Peter's authority in two distinct ways: by referring to himself in a detached, third-person manner and by explicitly mentioning his institutional role. Each contributes to making his utterance more

authoritative. And in turn, the choice to self-refer in these ways, as opposed to with 'my', strengthens the illocutionary force of the first sentence as a promise rather than a prediction (Jaszczolt and Witek 2018: 201).[9]

Suppose we grant that meaningful form at least sometimes affects the content and/or force of a speaker's primary illocutionary act in ways that can be traced to discrete, interacting features of the utterance. How should we respond? Cases like (6) and (10) can be taken to add new grist to a familiar mill of skepticism about the viability of isolating truth-conditional compositional semantics from broader pragmatic effects. This skepticism has standardly been fueled by cases of lexical underdetermination and polysemy (Searle 1978; Travis 2001). Some theorists have responded to those cases by abandoning the project of truth-conditional semantics entirely (Chomsky 2000; Pietroski 2018) or by retreating to a minimalist semantics for "what is strictly speaking said" (Borg 2004). However, others have expanded the scope of analysis to truth-conditional pragmatics (Carston 2002; Recanati 2010). Examples of meaningful form affecting primary illocutionary content might then motivate a still more ambitious expansion of compositional semantics, one that fully integrates truth-conditions and force with social information and effects (Jaszczolt 2018; Beaver and Stanley 2023).

The more likely response by traditional semanticists will be to insist that the intuitions of truth-conditional, compositional differences invoked for (6) and (10) rely on loose interpretations that must be bracketed off for serious semantic theorizing. We think there is something importantly right about this response. Speakers who instantiate the alternate variants in (6) do "say the same thing," in ways that make a conversational difference which our theory needs to respect. A speaker who utters (6b) while intending to sear wagyu beef does not lie, and can respond to an objecting hearer by insisting that they did fulfill their articulated plan. Nor is there any straightforward contradiction in continuing (6b) with

(11) I was thinkin' about doin' some grillin' later—in fact, I'm planning to sear these luscious rectangles of wagyu beef on lava and serve them with shaved kombu and microgreens.

p. 690 We take the admissibility of such responses and continuations, even when they are incongruous, pedantic, or misleading, to be theoretically significant because they reveal a skeleton of conventional semantic meaning that is occluded in more fully charitable, cooperative communication (Camp 2006a, 2016, 2018, 2022).

At the same time, we need to acknowledge that these theoretical conclusions are controversial. Moreover, even if granted, they would at most show that meaningful form does not affect conventional compositional at-issue semantic content. This still leaves open the possibility that meaningful form is a species of peripheral meaning, whether conventional or conversational. And here too, we think that these possibilities should not be summarily dismissed.

First, as our discussion in section 3.2 shows, even if some cases of meaningful form are 'natural' in the sense of simply carrying information, many are plausibly conventional. That is, relative to a given community of practice, the existence of variant ways of 'saying the same thing' and their correlations with different worldly features are established assumptions. Those variants and correlates also typically depend at least partly on contingent historical precedents, and lack any independent functional utility. Further, speakers reliably recognize and exploit these arbitrary, commonly assumed correlations in the service of information exchange and social coordination in ways that systematically affect subsequent conversation. Prima facie, then, they count as conventional communication on a Lewisian analysis (Lewis 1969).

It is true, and important, that the operative communities of practice may be quite local and that the correlations may arise and evolve dynamically. But this is also true of lexical meaning. While hyperlocalists like Davidson (1986) take these facts about lexical meaning to undermine any appeal to semantic

conventions, others take it to motivate a more dynamic analysis of convention (Armstrong 2016, 2022; Richard 2019). The same conclusion can be drawn for local, transient correlations in meaningful form. More generally, as with the contrast between natural and agentive meaning, we suggest that conventionalization is a matter of degree and that correlations between variants and worldly features can be more or less deeply entrenched and/or broadly established.

Second, the discussion in section 3.2 about exploiting natural meaning shows that sociolinguistic meaning can serve as a vehicle for conversational implicature regardless of how the correlation between variant and worldly feature is established. This is most obvious in cases of what Nunberg (2018: 266) calls "ventriloquistic implicature": when a speaker exploits a variant to invoke a persona they clearly do not actually instantiate, as in Putnam's utterance of (5). But even in cases where a speaker unreflectively implements a variant to project their instantiation of its standard worldly correlate, they still arguably satisfy the requisite conditions for Gricean communication, so long as they have sufficient awareness and control to potentially implement an alternative variant. For instance, when Obama pronounces (-ING) as '-in' at a White House picnic, he arguably does so with the (possibly tacit) intention that the hearer recognize (possibly tacitly) that he is friendly, and further, that their recognition of this intention should be at least
p. 691 part of their reason for thinking he is, indeed, friendly. In this way, even ↳ straightforward tokenings of meaningful form may be treated as Manner implicatures (Grice 1975: 58; Nunberg 2018; Burnett 2019).

Nearly all of our arguments in this section have taken the form of proofs of existence: that there exist at least some cases of sociolinguistic variation that might plausibly be treated as non-natural or agentive meaning, where this might in turn be taken to affect at-issue truth-conditional content, or else conventional or conversational implicature. The primary lesson we hope readers draw is just that there is considerably more empirical and theoretical to work to be done. Another lesson is that the boundaries between our canonical categories of meaning are more blurred than we might have thought; and that different cases of meaningful form may fit most comfortably within different categories. Thus, there may be no obvious, theory-neutral way to parse the phenomenon of meaningful form as a whole.

4. Meaningful Form as Information

4.1 Dynamic Informationalism

In section 3, we asked whether, and if so where, to locate meaningful form within an overall theory of meaning. In focusing on where to locate meaningful form, we remained as neutral as possible about what *kind* of meaning it involves, simply assuming that a variant *v* is defined by membership in an equivalence class *V* plus its correlation with a differentiating psychological and/or social feature *f*. Defining variants in terms of such correlations might suggest modeling meaningful form as simply providing information about correlated worldly features.

Thus, in section 1, we quoted Lewis (1980) assuming that imparting information is "the foremost thing we do with words" and proposing that we accomplish this by exploiting mutual trust in this informational project plus mutual knowledge that "what I say" "depends for its truth" on certain conditions obtaining in the world plus knowledge of conventions for pairing sentences and truth-conditions. We could now add meaningful form to the list of resources we exploit to do this. Stalnaker (1978, 2014) can be read as pressing the core idea of communication as a joint project of inquiry plus mutual knowledge of language–world dependencies a step further, by assimilating knowledge of linguistic meaning more integrally within the scope of interlocutors' world knowledge. In particular, Stalnaker allows that the truth-conditions of what I *assert* can depend upon the context of utterance, not just in the weak sense of saturating the values of indexical expressions but in the strong sense that I expect you to use rational cooperativity plus world

knowledge to fix the meanings of my words.[10] And if this is right, then it's plausible that variations in meaningful form can affect core at-issue content. More generally, it should not be surprising that conversational dynamics can be affected by an extremely wide range of aspects of an utterance, given that they can be influenced by the manifest meanings of events that are not even utterances, as when a goat
p. 692 walks into the room and ↳ this fact immediately enters the common ground (Stalnaker 1978: 86).[11] On a dynamic informationalist model, a speaker's tokening of a particular variant *v* can contribute information of many kinds. Most obviously, it may add the information that the speaker instantiates *v*'s correlative feature *f* to the conversational common ground. Even if the speaker's production of *v* is entirely passive, the information that *f* obtains can still enter the common ground. But if the speaker produces *v* actively and with the intention that their hearer recognize that they are so doing, and the hearer recognizes this, then this too can enter the common ground. And of course, these updates may interact with other operative assumptions to produce further or different updates, including the information that the speaker is merely pretending to instantiate *f*.

Moreover, speakers can use informational updates to achieve other species of coordination. For instance, by updating the common ground with the information that I want to know the time, I may motivate you to tell me the time. And by updating with the conditional information that I will punch you if you don't give me your lunch money, I may motivate you to hand it over. Capitalizing on these sorts of motivational possibilities thus opens up an appealing promise of theoretical parsimony by reducing performative aspects of communication to rationally anticipated consequences of information transmission.[12]

4.2 Non-propositional Contents

In section 4.1, we argued that a theorist who analyzes communication entirely in terms of informational updates can be highly ecumenical about the background assumptions and downstream effects that they include in their analysis, and thereby smoothly assimilate meaningful form within their model. What aspects of meaningful form might they *not* be equipped to explain? In section 5, we'll identify three performative characteristics that we take to pose substantive challenges. In the remainder of this section, we sketch three prima facie challenges that we think an informationalist can ultimately accommodate.

An initial concern centers around specifying the information contributed by a given variant *v*. Exactly which possible worlds are eliminated by the presence or absence of final 'g' in (6)? Even ignoring variations in what information is contributed across contexts of utterance, it can seem inappropriately determinate to describe the feature contributed by a particular utterance in terms of a property *f* like competence or affability, as sociolinguists often do (e.g. Burnett 2019). The information and effects of meaningful form are often considerably more amorphous than this.

While it is true, and important, that sociolinguistic meaning is often indeterminate, we take such indeterminacy to be endemic to communication in general, including much lexical meaning (Camp 2006b). Indeed, given the complexity and variability of conversational contexts, indeterminacy may well be a functional feature, rather than a regrettable bug, because it supports interpretive tolerance. Moreover, a dynamic model is arguably better equipped to handle indeterminacy than traditional static models are. First, it can allow the operative partitionings of the overall space of possibilities to vary in their fine-
p. 693 grainedness, depending on both conversational and theoretical purposes ↳ (Stalnaker 2014). And second, it can allow for updates that alter the relative accessibility of possibilities, rather than treating them as either absolutely in or out of the expressed content.

The second, deeper objection is that what meaningful form contributes to the conversation is something different in *kind* from propositional information. While we are ultimately sympathetic to this worry, it is

important to distinguish various ways for a contribution to be non-propositional, some of which can be handled in straightforwardly informational terms.

In particular, in section 2.3 we saw that some variants are correlated with *ideologies*: for instance, with the traditionalist, island-first attitude of long-time Martha's Vineyard residents. As a first pass, one might model an ideology as a large, amorphous set of explicit and implicit beliefs (Shelby 2014), and one might treat ideological updates in terms of an indeterminate 'cloud of propositions' (von Fintel and Gillies 2008). However, many theorists have argued that more is required to explain what makes ideologies so potent. At a minimum, they also involve a mutually self-reinforcing set of social practices and material conditions (Haslanger 2017), which are implemented psychologically through scripts, schemas, and perspectives. And one might think that scripts, schemas, and perspectives are not themselves reducible to even an amorphous set of beliefs, because they are open-ended, intuitive, holistic dispositions to handle information by parsing, selecting, connecting, and responding to whatever information one encounters (Camp 2019).

The informationalist can easily grant that a speaker's use of a variant *v* updates the common ground with the proposition that the speaker holds a certain ideology *I*. They can also grant that the speaker's tokening of *v* updates the common ground with the fact that *I* entails a cloud of propositions *C*, which may also themselves be added. Likewise, the informationalist can allow that the speaker's tokening of *v* adds the proposition that *I* is associated with a set of social practices and material conditions *M* and an open-ended cognitive profile *P*.

Even so, one might still feel that, in many cases, the tokening of *v* does more than contribute information about the speaker's ideology and that ideology's worldly implications. Indeed, in many cases, it is already common knowledge that the ideology exists and that the speaker endorses it. Rather, it is plausible that what tokening *v* does is to *activate* the ideology within the conversation. More specifically, perspectives, whether ideological or not, are essentially *intuitive* modes of interpretation: they involve actual cognitive implementation in ways that are partly—but only partly—under voluntary control. The fact of such merely partial cognitive control is crucial for explaining a notable feature of perspectivally loaded speech including slurs, metaphorical insults, and insinuations: that it entrains even resistant hearers to intuitively notice, expect, explain, and evaluate the world, at least temporarily, in its terms (Camp 2013, 2017c, 2018).

The power of perspectives over even resistant hearers demonstrates that rational acceptance or belief are neither necessary nor sufficient for intuitive activation. Thus, the primary problem posed by perspectival updates for the informationalist is not one of indeterminacy. Rather, it is that there is an important
p. 694 functional difference between a ↳ speaker merely contributing the information that they accept an ideology or other perspective and that perspective's actually governing the conversational dynamics. More generally, there is often a significant functional difference between a speaker's saying or implicating *that* they are friendly, female, young, or traditionalist and their adding that same information by actually tokening a variant that correlates with that feature. Talk of information alone doesn't yet capture this difference.

4.3 Non-representational Dynamics

The informationalist can begin to address this gap by appealing to the dynamics of conversational updates, and specifically to the *way* in which a context is updated rather than just to what that update is. Thus, presuppositions have long been recognized to produce accommodation by default (Lewis 1979), in a way that enables speakers to sneak risky contents into the common ground (Langton 2012). Formally, this has been modeled as an informational update that is directly imposed, where this contrasts with at-issue contents, which are proposed (Potts 2005; AnderBois et al. 2010; Murray 2014).

The distinctive dynamics of imposed updates explains part of the intuition that tokening a variant *does* something more than simply add information to the common ground. However, there remains a deeper way in which the effect of meaningful form differs from standard informational updates. In the case of presuppositions, appositives, evidentials, and other forms of peripheral meaning, propositions that are imposed on the common ground can still be removed from it by being challenged (von Fintel 2002), denied (Clapp 2017), or retracted (Caponetto 2020). By contrast, typical cases of meaningful form involve a more direct connection to the information contributed, which prevents them from being removed in this way. This is because a speaker who tokens a variant *v* does not typically contribute the information that they instantiate the correlative feature *f* to the common ground by way of producing a representation whose acceptance depends on their interlocutors' trust in their cooperativeness and epistemic authority. Rather, hearkening back to our discussion of natural meaning in section 3.2, the speaker's tokening of *v* itself *indexes*, *shows*, or *expresses f*.[13]

In this respect, social meaning is indeed often closer to natural meaning than to either lexical meaning or implicature, as Khoo (2017: 59) suggests. But we also saw in section 3.2 that meaningful form in general cannot simply be reduced to pure natural meaning. This is not just because the connection between variant and feature is often culturally mediated or arbitrary; more importantly, as we saw in section 2.3, speakers are often guided in their tokening of variants by their context-specific beliefs and intentions in a way that makes them communicative agents and not just passive informational conduits.

To the extent that meaningful form is not fully voluntary, it becomes a *costly signal* (Zollman et al. 2013): tokening it reveals facts about a speaker that are hard to fake. At the same time, insofar as speakers do have partial control over which variants they use, they can exploitatively token one variant rather than another: either openly, in the service of 'ventriloquistic implicature', or else manipulatively, in order to get their
p. 695 hearer to ↳ believe propositions they know to be false. Even when speakers use meaningful form to mislead, however, they do so not by misrepresenting the world (including themselves) but by *posing*: directly presenting themselves as someone other than who they are. And this presentation is itself a doing that cannot then be retracted or undone in the same way that a false assertion, presupposition, or implicature can. Rather, it can at most be overwritten.

This is not the end of the story for the dynamic informationalist. In particular, they might try to accommodate these intuitions about meaningful form as a form of indexing, showing, or expressing by appealing to direct updates in virtue of manifest events, akin to a goat walking into the room, which likewise cannot be retracted (Egan and Sundell, ms.). However, we think that these intuitions about meaningful form as involving a species of presentation that is more direct than representation are compelling enough to warrant exploring an analysis that centers on speech as a form of action rather than information.

5. Meaningful Form as Performance

5.1 Expressing and Enacting

In section 4, we explored the prospects for analyzing meaningful form in informational terms. In effect, the informationalist is committed to treating the difference between minimal pairs like (6a) and (6b) as differences in the overall informational profile of utterances containing those variants. While this enables them to smoothly handle informational differences that fall outside of standard compositional processes, it also thereby makes it more challenging for them to explain the intuition that variants within an equivalence class *V* are "different ways of saying the same thing." By contrast, a performative analysis can straightforwardly appropriate the intuition that the variants are truth-conditionally equivalent, while holding that they differ in what they *do*: in their use-conditions (Kaplan 1999; Potts 2007; McCready 2010; Díaz-Legaspe et al. 2019). Moreover, a performative analysis can straightforwardly grant that both the truth-conditional equivalence and the use-conditional difference between variants in an equivalence class *V* are often conventional.

These general performativist commitments might be captured with various more specific models. Broadly, a performative analysis will hold that a speaker's tokening of a variant *v* is (prima facie) felicitous if and only if the speaker instantiates the correlative feature *f*. By tokening *v*, the speaker (prima facie) expresses that they instantiate *f*, where expressing is understood as indexing or showing, as in section 4.3. In cases where *f* is not already instantiated, the speaker attempts, via their utterance, to make it the case that *f* is instantiated. And in cases where it is mutually evident that the speaker does not instantiate *f*, the speaker attempts to exploit the appearance of expressing *f* to achieve some higher-order effect.

p. 696 The idea that speakers' tokenings of variants constitutes an expressive performance runs deep through the sociolinguistics literature. As we saw in section 2.3, sociolinguists moved from treating variants as demographic indices which could be repressed with effort, toward a picture on which speakers produce complex, context-specific constellations of variants in a process of 'bricolage' that, at its limit, includes the most nuanced complexities of literary style.

To bring out how complex this process can be, consider Eckert (2002: 1) 's analysis of the following utterance by Trudy, a sixth-grade girl in Northern California:

> (12) I went up to her and I'm all "Whassup?!" and she's all "Whassup?!" And then I'm all like—she's all "What'd I do?" I'm all—I'm all—"Bitch I heard you were talking shit!"

Eckert identifies at least four variants in (12): falsetto rise-fall on "Whassup," fronting of /U/ in "Whassup," a highly reduced form of "I'm all" [ʔmO:], and a raised /I/ in "Bitch." Adding to this phonological richness, we might also mention the use of quasi-quotational 'like' and 'all', and of the taboo words 'bitch' and 'shit'. Eckert points out that "the fronting of /uh/ is part of the Northern California Vowel Shift" and that raised /I/ is correlated with gang status in Northern California Chicano English. She then offers the following description of what Trudy and her friend Lillian manage to do by using these variants:

> In these highlighted performances, they are simultaneously crafting selves and providing signposts for their peers. And in doing so they are making sense both of and for their social and linguistic environment. Their performances lay down the relation between linguistic styles—and the features that make up those styles—and personae, or styles of being. The individual variables that we variationists study one by one take on life only in the context of such styles and of the performances that give meaning to the styles.

> The entire performance combines a childish style with a tough adolescent style, as Trudy goes back and forth between speech like that quoted above, and 'kid talk' which doesn't include any of the extreme features of her fighting style and includes delighted laughter … Trudy is moving towards adolescence—indeed, she's consciously leading her cohort in the transition and this lead is a salient aspect of her identity.
>
> (Eckert 2002: 2–3)

To get clearer on how performance might go beyond the provision of information, we want to flag three dimensions of performativity at work here: *reflexivity*, *excercitivity*, and *enregistrement*.

5.2 Reflexive Performance

First, Eckert suggests that by speaking in the way she does, and in particular by tokening a raised /I/, Trudy
p. 697 signals that she is tough or bold. Trudy has, of course, already done ↳ something tough or bold by participating in a fight. But we can imagine a new student at the same school, Marissa, with no established social identity, recounting the same event in a measured, canonically classroom-appropriate voice and lexicon. Alternately, we can also imagine another new student, Janelle, recounting a story about events that don't themselves involve any actions that are inherently tough or bold but using the same kinds of variants as in (12). We think Marissa would be representing or telling a story about being bold, while Janelle would be expressing or enacting boldness. (We can imagine a listener reporting later, "Wow, Janelle is so bold—did you hear how she talked to Prof. Eckert?!")

We might put this by saying that at least some of the social features associated with meaningful form are *reflexive*. One can, at least sometimes, be tough by talking tough. Similarly, one can show kindness simply by speaking with a warm tone or prosody. (We can imagine a listener reporting later, "Wow, Prof. Eckert is so kind—did you hear how she responded to Trudy's story about the fight?") More generally, one can be respectful, flippant, rude, belittling, meek, or many other things simply by speaking in a certain way, independently of the content of one's speech.

Moreover, insofar as coming to be a certain sort of person is bound up with behaving in the relevant ways often enough or in important enough circumstances, speaking in a certain way may not just constitute a certain sort of action; it may also thereby constitute you as a certain sort of person. As Judith Butler puts it, our social selves are "identit[ies] instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" (1988: 519).

On Butler's analysis of gender identity, the relevant species of 'act' is "both intentional and performative," where " 'performative' itself carries the double-meaning of 'dramatic' and 'non-referential' " (1988: 528). We interpret this to mean that a socially meaningful performance (such as tokening a variant correlated with gender or gang status) is *dramatic* insofar as it is a stylized instantiation; and that it is *non-referential* insofar as it does not denote or index an independently existing feature or entity (though it may seduce us into thinking it does). For Butler, this dramatic, non-referential status also undermines an analysis of such stylized acts as expressive, in the sense of indexing an independent, inner feature *f*. In that case, performance would fully construct identity: as Butler (1988, 519) says, one's identity is "tenuously" and "continuously" "constituted in time" through iterated performance. We take no stand on the ontology of gender or other social identities here. Whether or not meaningful form is also expressive in this metaphysical sense, performative reflexivity offers a basis for treating sociolinguists' claims about 'persona construction' quite literally: as performing speech acts that reflexively implement constitutive features of a persona.

5.3 Excercitives

Second, by means of reflexively instantiating psychologically and socially significant features, speakers shape the social relations in which they are embedded. For example, by instantiating raised /I/, Trudy associates herself with Chicana gang membership, where both this correlated feature *f* and the act of
p. 698 instantiating the variant *v* given its ↳ correlation with *f* mark her as bold. And in turn, Trudy thereby positions herself in a certain way relative to the other students in her class: as a leader in the kid-to-adolescent transition.

Among the social relations altered by reflexive instantiation are *discourse roles*: the statuses that interlocutors occupy within a conversation (Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt 2018). Tokenings of meaningful form are thus excercitives in McGowan's (2003) sense: utterances that function to modulate the dynamics of conversation, and the broader reality, going forward (cf. also Kukla and Lance 2009). Among other things, and other things being equal, Trudy's instantiation of the particular constellation of variants she deploys will affect whether and how her interlocutors grant her the right to set the question under discussion, and whether they treat her as having epistemic and hermeneutic authority on certain topics. It will also likely affect the accessibility relations that are operative in the discourse, by altering how the overall space of possibilities is partitioned and ordered. By contrast, reflexive instantiations of other types of social features —say, kindness, rudeness, or meekness, as implemented via their own distinctive profiles of variants—will modulate the discourse structure and social and discourse roles in systematically different ways. Implementing different profiles of variants will also constitute the conversation itself as more or less formal, polite, epistemically serious, and so on. All of this will affect what interlocutors both do and should take away from the conversation. However, it accomplishes all of this in ways that are importantly difficult to capture in standard testimonial reports using indirect quotation.

These effects on social and discourse roles also shape social relationships more broadly, by *affiliating* speakers with certain groups and practices and distancing them from others. For instance, we saw in section 2.3 that Eckert's 'jocks' and 'burns' tended to employ distinct phonological profiles, which were correlated with different patterns of non-linguistic activities: with playing sports and participating in student government versus with smoking, drinking, and fighting. These phonological profiles were also correlated with different ideologies: accepting corporate society versus embracing adult working-class risks and rewards. At least for 'jocks' and 'burns', mere vocalization does not fully constitute identity: one must also be disposed to actually engage in enough of the correlative profile of activities and attitudes. But instantiating the operative sociolinguistic profile is one strand within that larger performance.

5.4 Enregistrement

Third, the use of meaningful form produces a performative element of *enregistrement* (Agha 2003, 2008). In general, once it becomes common knowledge that an individual *A* has used or uses variant *v*, this itself affects the social assumptions and practices associated with *v* itself. In the simplest case, tokening a variant reinforces its previously established associations. More often, it modulates those associations at least slightly. As Eckert (2002: 3) puts it, by tokening raised /I/, Trudy provides a "signpost for her peers," which
p. 699 other students must then orient around. Thus, where her own utterance ↳ successfully marks Trudy as a bold and somewhat dangerous leader relative to the other sixth graders, subsequent tokenings by her classmates might position them as her followers or as try-hard impersonators. Moreover, such shifts can be negatively reactive rather than affiliative: for instance, if high schoolers hear Trudy using raised /I/, they may be more likely to drop it as passé. This kind of negative reactivity appears to be at work in the process whereby the French slang verlan lexeme *meuf* (formed by inversion from *femme*), which once had a transgressive shade that has been bleached away by widespread adoption, has been reformed into *feumeu*.[14]

5.5 Information and Performance

We think these three dimensions of meaningful form—reflexivity, excercitivity, and enregistrement—go a significant way toward motivating a performative analysis of meaningful form. We also suspect there are other dimensions of performance worth exploring. By itself, such an analysis need not be incompatible with an informationalist analysis along the lines sketched in section 4; indeed, the two models are likely to be complementary. Rather, the foundational question is whether we need both or can make do with just one—presumably, given the standard theoretical landscape, with informationalism.

As we saw in section 4.1, a deflationary dynamic informationalist can acknowledge that speakers *do* things by tokening variants, so long as these are analyzed as downstream consequences of informational signaling. So, for example, they can hold that by tokening raised /I/, Trudy imparts the putative information that she is bold. Updating with this information causes her hearers to treat her as being bold, which in turn helps to constitute her as a leader by causing her interlocutors to behave and to update the common ground in ways that reflect this assumption.

We obviously cannot adjudicate the general foundational debate here. But we are inclined to think that providing a fully deflationary informationalist account of performativity will be challenging. In Harris (2020) 's terms, a speaker's 'essential aim' in using a linguistic variant is to produce certain social effects in the world, not to update a conversational context. As such, we take it that an analysis of meaningful form that includes performativity will better reveal the causal joints and sockets (Dennett 1991) that structure the space of counterfactual communicative contingencies: the equivalence and contrast classes of possible utterances that would produce basically the same or dramatically different effects.

An informationalist can, of course, couch their explanations of informational update in terms of psychological and/or social features like being bold or friendly, Chicana or Midwestern, or anti-authoritarian or traditionalist. However, we think this still fails to do justice to the sense in which meaningful form functions as a tool for social action. To explain this function, many sociolinguists, like Eckert above, have appealed to Erving Goffman's work on face and persona construction. Goffman takes a central activity of our lives to be maintaining a stable social identity. He models everyday interactions as a
p. 700 species of dramatic performance in which we claim *face*, or social value, by taking ↳ a certain *line*: by performing "a pattern of verbal and non-verbal acts" that "express [one's] view of the situation and through this [one's] evaluation of the participants, especially [oneself]" (Goffman 1967: 5). Such performances are often largely automatic, embodied, and emotionally inflected. As such, they are typically robust signals of participants' actual views of their situations. But they are not fixed reflexes. Goffman compares taking a line to playing a card game: our social identities are simultaneously the hand of cards or set of traits we have been dealt and the strategy or style with which we play them in real time (Goffman 1967: 32). Typically, even 'given' traits like vocal timbre can be 'played' in multiple ways, including strategic ones. Moreover, traits that appear as given, including those associated with apparently natural categories like race and gender, may be not just socially constructed but also capable of individual modulation, albeit with effort and through habituation over time.[15]

As we have indicated at several points, we take one theoretical payoff of a serious consideration of meaningful form to be highlighting this kind of complex, nuanced interplay between the naturally given, the socially constructed, and the agentively performed, both within language and in life more generally.

6. Conclusion

We began this chapter by presenting a range of data under the rubric of 'meaningful form': aspects of an utterance's implementation that are otherwise equivalent but that become meaningful in virtue of correlating with different features of a speaker's identity. While existing philosophical work has largely ignored meaningful form, we think it is time for philosophers to take the phenomenon seriously. We sketched three broad strategies for responding to this challenge: exclusionism, informationalism, and performativism.

As our discussion of performativism suggests, we suspect that a satisfying account of meaningful form requires a richer model of the kind of agency that is at stake when speakers engage one another in conversation. We think making sense of what people are up to when they produce and encounter meaningful form requires seeing them not just as rational beings endowed with complex hierarchical representational capacities but as agents motivated by a wide range of social, practical, epistemic, emotional, and aesthetic aims.

We expect that reimagining linguistic agency in this way will lead to more vital and productive models of what languages themselves are and what competence in a language amounts to.[16] It cannot be an accident that every known human language involves deep reservoirs of variation or that normal language users acquire knowledge of sociolinguistic meaning alongside syntax and semantics. We expect that a theory of language that addresses these features from the outset, in both their interaction with and separation from 'core' compositional machinery, will be considerably better equipped to provide a satisfying treatment of socially functional linguistic elements, such as honorifics, interjections, and discourse markers.

p. 701 We also think a reorientation along these lines opens up a host of significant normative questions. In section 4.3, we argued that meaningful form often contributes information to the common ground in a way that cannot be retracted or undone but only overwritten. This uncovers new opportunities for misleading, and with it new complexities in understanding lying, manipulation, and authenticity. In section 5.3, we argued that meaningful form plays an exercitive function by reinforcing and modulating discourse and social roles. We focused on meaningful form as a tool for enacting agency. But by the same token, we think that attention to meaningful form needs to play a role in constructing more fine-grained causal and normative explanations of how speakers limit and undermine others' agency (Langton 2012; Kukla 2014) and in disclosing new options for counterspeech (Langton 2018; Caponetto and Cepollaro 2023).

At a societal level, we can interrogate situations in which background social conditions produce epistemic and discursive injustice in virtue of meaningful form, as Rickford and King (2016) argue occurred in George Zimmerman's trial for murdering Trayvon Martin.[17] Further, if political structures contribute to members of majority groups being less able to recognize the range of performances realized by minoritized speakers than minoritized speakers are at seeing what majority speakers are up to (Nowak 2022), then we might wonder whether governments ought to play a role in rectifying the asymmetry, perhaps by regulating representation in the media, public education, and/or parliamentary proceedings.[18]

An expanded conception of linguistic agency may also thereby recast our understanding of the nature and value of freedom of expression. Philosophical theories of free speech are typically couched in straightforwardly epistemic terms. Thus, classic Millianism (1859) argues that we need to be free to speak and listen in order to maximize access to true propositions and to subject our beliefs to rational scrutiny. More recent work sometimes appeals to democratic legitimacy: citizens who can't openly exchange information can't make informed political choices or hold government to account (Meiklejohn 1948; Cohen 1997; Heinze 2016). However, we can imagine free-speech regimes that meet these criteria while tightly circumscribing the range of acceptable implementations of meaningful form.[19] Our discussions in sections 4 and 5 suggest that such regimes would still impose unjust epistemic and practical costs. More

fundamentally, they appear to unjustly constrain the actualization of agency through self-construction and social affiliation.

A richer conception of the scope and implications of linguistic agency also raises new questions about the scope and status of public communication in the form of advertising and propaganda. It is well established that formulations that 'say the same thing' can differ stylistically in ways that systematically affect behavior (see Tversky and Kahneman 1981; Levin et al. 1998; Thaler and Sunstein 2008; Gkatzia et al. 2016). Adding meaningful form to the toolkit by which such effects are produced provides richer resources for diagnosing and intervening on them, for good and for ill (see Stanley 2015; Beaver and Stanley 2023). It also raises pressing normative questions about the tokenings of sentences by artificial systems like ChatGPT,
p. 702 which can mimic the ↳ complex constellations of meaningful form manifested by demographic groups and individual agents.

Finally, attention to sociolinguistic discussions of meaningful form within everyday discourse offers a rich, nuanced body of resources for investigating the construction of literary style. Authors construct styles that express highly particular "textures of being" (Murdoch 1956) in ways that augment the construction of personal style in everyday life (Robinson 1985; Riggle 2015) in interaction with rich assumptions about genre and literary history. More systematic attention to linguistic style within everyday speech promises to deliver significantly more nuanced analyses of how literary works exploit and enrich those resources in aesthetically ambitious ways.[20]

These are topics for another occasion. We will rest content if we have demonstrated that meaningful form through sociolinguistic variation warrants concerted philosophical attention.

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Notes

1. See Partee (2011) for a historical look at formal semantics and Harris (2017) for discussion of the history of the philosophy of language and linguistics in relation to analytic philosophy more generally.

2. For discussion of the basic syntactic facts of negation in English, see Labov (1972a), Childs et al. (2015), and the references therein. For discussion of the social significance of negative concord in English, see Cheshire (1981, 1997), Eckert (2001), Moore (2004), and the references therein. For discussion of variability in negative concord in French, with attention to its sociolinguistic implications, see Ashby (1976), Armstrong and Smith (2002), and Burnett et al. (2015).

3. Nancy Mitford (1956) famously labeled the distinction as "U versus 'Non-U'," where 'U' designates terms with the kind of plain ease of speech achieved only by the truly posh.

4. For a survey of phonetic differences between male and female speech, see Simpson (2009); for discussion of some of the

ways in which speakers leverage sociolinguistic variables to present a gendered social identity, see McConnell-Ginet and
p. 703 Eckert (1995), Hancock et al. ↳ (2014, 2015), and Zimman (2017), and references therein. For discussion of the significance of vocal gender dysphoria, see Nuyen et al. (2023). Thanks to Quill Kukla for discussion. For a survey of work on accent, see Moyer (2013); for discussion of some striking differences in the way people react to native and non-native accents, see Lindemann (2002, 2011), Lev-Ari and Keysar (2010), Ayala (2015), and references therein.

5. For a recent take along these lines, see Cappelen and Dever (2019).

6. See Keiser (2023) for discussion of challenges posed by 'non-ideal' language to the idealizations in orthodox truth-conditional philosophy of language.

7. For recent applications of this strategy, see Lepore and Stone (2014) and Stojnić and Lepore (2022).

8. For discussion of the scope of action as opposed to mere behavior, see, e.g. Davidson (1971, 1973), Bratman (1987), and Álvarez (2013).

9. For a more complex example of putatively compositional interaction, Beltrama and Casasanto (2017) argue that the attitudinal use of the intensifier 'totally' produces a specific, context-sensitive 'flavor' of social meaning, which in turn modifies the content that is being intensified.

10. Cf. (Stalnaker 1978: 92) on 'diagonalization', though he takes the phenomenon to be more general.

11. There are, of course, important differences between Lewis's and Stalnaker's views of context and its relation to content, and among the dynamic models constructed in their wake. Kamp (1981) and Heim (1982) inaugurated dynamic semantics as a formal analysis of Stalnakerian conversational update. See Karen Lewis (2014) for defense of a traditional semantic analysis that incorporates many key dynamicist insights. See Egan and Sundell (ms.) for a generalization of 'goat update' to all conversational dynamics.

12. Thus, Lewis (1970) analyzes interrogatives and imperatives as disguised statements about desires and intentions, while Davidson (1979) analyzes sentences with non-declarative moods as making statements about their communicative force. More recently, see, e.g. Kaufmann (2012) for a propositionalist analysis of imperatives, Mandelkern (2019) for an informationalist analysis of epistemic modals, and Schiller (2021) for a broadly informationalist analysis of threats. See Starr (2014) for criticism of reductive analyses of grammatical mood, along with Camp (2017a, 2017b). See Roberts (2018) for more general discussion of recent work connecting speech-act force and grammatical mood.

13. The sociolinguistic notion of indexing traces back to Peirce (1903). Wittgenstein (1922) draws an analogous distinction between showing and saying. See Green (2007) for a recent theory of expression as the outer showing or manifestation of an inner state. This notion of showing is often invoked in metaethical expressivism; see, e.g. Camp (2017a) for discussion.

14. Verlan is a youth slang that often inverts syllabic order. For a survey of its formation processes and social significance, see Sloutsky and Black (2008). Méla (1988: 57) proposes negative affiliation as a mechanism driving 're-verlanisation': the recursive process whereby a standard lexeme that has already undergone a verlan transformation undergoes a second mutation; thanks to Quentin Griffon for this point. On enregistrement and negative affiliation more generally, compare Beaver and Stanley (2023). Beaver and Stanley propose a general theory of meaning couched in terms of 'resonance' (itself in effect a species of natural meaning), plus social practices of 'attunement' to resonances, as a tool for forming and maintaining social identities. Their theory is designed to locate the phenomena of social significance and social
p. 704 positioning at the heart of the foundation ↳ of meaning. While we celebrate attention to social significance and performance, we also think, as we indicated in section 3.3, that a fully integrationist model neglects key theoretical and normative distinctions among different species of meaning.

15. Again, the perception and performance of gender for transgender people offers an especially fascinating and practically significant case study: see, e.g. Hancock et al. (2014, 2015); Zimman (2017).

16. See Hymes (1966) for a promising notion of 'communicative competence' and Keiser (2023) for discussion of some of the forms a more inclusive conception of language might take.

17. See Fricker (2007) and Medina (2014) for discussion of epistemic injustice, including testimonial injustice. Dotson (2011: 250) argues that failures on the part "of an audience to communicatively reciprocate, either intentionally or unintentionally, in linguistic exchanges owing to pernicious ignorance" can constitute a form of epistemic violence. See

Jalloh (2022) and Nowak (2022, 2023) for discussion of some of the ways in which meaningful form might contribute to such injustice and violence.

18. Empirical evidence suggesting that even relatively brief exposure to different accents can significantly influence comprehension might point the way toward candidate sensitization strategies (see, e.g. Bradlow and Bent 2008; Baese-Berk et al. 2013).

19. Thanks to Robert Simpson for discussion here.

20. See, e.g. Jameson (2013) for discussion of different uses and avoidances of first- and third-person pronouns for narrative purposes and its historical consequences for literary realism.

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