

There Can be  
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Patrick Skeels

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# There Can be No Dispute

Patrick Skeels

University of Kentucky

Arguments from disagreement try to show that a given fragment of language has stable semantic content across contexts and in the mouths of different speakers.

- (1) a. Adam: The keys might be in the drawer.  
b. Bernard: No, that's wrong. They're not in there.
- (2) a. Adam: Apples are tasty.  
b. Bernard: No, apples are not tasty.

Bernard disagrees with Adam in (1) and (2), therefore the content of their respective assertions should conflict, i.e., be logically inconsistent.

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Contextualists about epistemic modals, taste predicates, etc.  
say the meaning of the fragment of language in question is  
sensitive to  $c$ .

Contextualists about epistemic modals, taste predicates, etc. say the meaning of the fragment of language in question is sensitive to  $c$ .

BUT relativizing denotation to a context fails to capture cross-contextual inferences and compatibilities (consequence and consistency).

$\llbracket \varphi \rrbracket_c$  and  $\llbracket \neg \varphi \rrbracket_{c'}$  can be consistent, since  $\llbracket \varphi \rrbracket_c \neq \llbracket \varphi \rrbracket_{c'}$ .

So  $\llbracket \text{Apples are tasty} \rrbracket_{Adam}$  and  $\llbracket \text{Apples are not tasty} \rrbracket_{Bernard}$  can be consistent.

Since they are not treated as inconsistent/incompatible, the contextualist cannot predict/explain the disagreements.

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Given that disagreements concern conflict in content, we want disagreements to be explained in terms of the rational incompatibility of those contents (semantically).

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Given that disagreements concern conflict in content, we want disagreements to be explained in terms of the rational incompatibility of those contents (semantically).

Stable content views keep the content stable across contexts, and can thus capture the conflict in content and predict/explain disagreement concerning the fragment of language in question.

Ex: Dynamic semantics, relativism, expressivism,

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**Signpost:** Arguments from disagreement motivate stable content views and challenge contextualist views.

Contextualists have two strategies:

- 1 Debunking strategies- deny that (1), (2), and similar cases are genuine disagreements (*bad*).
- 2 Metalinguistic Strategies- explain the disagreement metalinguistically (*good*).

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- 1 Debunking strategies- deny that (1), (2), and similar cases are genuine disagreements (*bad*).
- 2 Metalinguistic Strategies- explain the disagreement metalinguistically (*good*).

Plunkett and Sundell (P&S) endorse and defend 2.

- (3) **Disagreement Requires Conflict in Content (DRCC):** “If two subjects  $A$  and  $B$  disagree with each other, then there are some objects  $p$  and  $q$  (propositions, plans, etc.) such that  $A$  accepts  $p$  and  $B$  accepts  $q$ , and  $p$  is such that the demands placed on a subject in virtue of accepting it are rationally incompatible with the demands placed on a subject in virtue of accepting  $q$ .”

Arguments from disagreement assume DRCC: P&S go to great lengths to meet them on their own terms.

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P&S distinguish between a *disagreement* and a *dispute*.

- Disagreements: conflicts in our attitudes.
- Disputes: conflicts in speech/communication.

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P&S distinguish between a *disagreement* and a *dispute*.

- Disagreements: conflicts in our attitudes.
- Disputes: conflicts in speech/communication.

Disputes (linguistic exchanges) express disagreements (conflicts in attitudes).

- (4) **Canonical Dispute:** “A dispute consisting in Speaker *A*'s utterance of *e* and Speaker *B*'s utterance of *f* is canonical just in case there are two objects *p* and *q* (propositions, plans, etc.) such that Speaker *A*'s utterance of *e* literally expresses *p* and Speaker *B*'s utterance of *f* literally expresses *q*, and *q* is fundamentally in conflict with *p* in the manner appropriate to objects of that type.” (e.g. Propositions *p* and *q* are inconsistent.)

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Canonical disputes are when speakers “mean the same thing”  
with their words.

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Canonical disputes are when speakers “mean the same thing” with their words.

However, Plunkett and Sundell think that this doesn't always happen.

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P&S: entire disputes about word usage can happen without mentioning the word: *metalinguistic negotiations*.

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P&S: entire disputes about word usage can happen without mentioning the word: *metalinguistic negotiations*.

Two necessary conditions:

- (7) **Metalinguistic Use Condition:** A dispute is a metalinguistic negotiation only if it employs a metalinguistic usage.
- (8) **Best Use Condition:** A dispute is a metalinguistic negotiation only if it concerns a distinct normative question about how to best use a linguistic expression in context.

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They think that disputes like (1) and (2) may actually be metalinguistic negotiations.

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They think that disputes like (1) and (2) may actually be metalinguistic negotiations.

**Signpost:** P&S think that disputes that have been assumed to be canonical may not be.

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Arguments from Disagreement: Ps about disagreement to Cs about semantics.

P&S claim that arguments from disagreement have this form:

**P1)** All genuine disagreements require stable semantic content of what is asserted.

**P2)** Cases like (1) and (2) express genuine disagreements.

---

**C)** Cases like (1) and (2) require stable semantic content of what is asserted.

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P&S claim that arguments from disagreement have this form:

**P1)** All genuine disagreements require stable semantic content of what is asserted.

**P2)** Cases like (1) and (2) express genuine disagreements.

---

**C)** Cases like (1) and (2) require stable semantic content of what is asserted.

P&S accept P2, but argue that P1 tacitly assumes that the disputes in (1) and (2) must be canonical.

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If metalinguistic negotiations are a legitimate phenomenon, then P1 is false, because such disputes need not be canonical, and the argument from disagreement is unsound.

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If metalinguistic negotiations are a legitimate phenomenon, then P1 is false, because such disputes need not be canonical, and the argument from disagreement is unsound.

Contextualism can still explain the intuition of disagreement.

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If metalinguistic negotiations are a legitimate phenomenon, then P1 is false, because such disputes need not be canonical, and the argument from disagreement is unsound.

Contextualism can still explain the intuition of disagreement.

Call this objection: *The Possibility of Metalinguistic Negotiation*

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If metalinguistic negotiations are a legitimate phenomenon, then P1 is false, because such disputes need not be canonical, and the argument from disagreement is unsound.

Contextualism can still explain the intuition of disagreement.

Call this objection: *The Possibility of Metalinguistic Negotiation*

**Signpost:** If metalinguistic negotiations are legitimate, then P1 of arguments from disagreement is false, the argument is unsound, and the motivation for common content semantics is undercut.

Two options:

- 1 Reject the legitimacy of Metalinguistic negotiations (*bad*).
- 2 Produce a version of the argument from disagreement that is indifferent to metalinguistic negotiations.

1. is difficult. Plunkett and Sundell remain agnostic about the precise mechanism of metalinguistic negotiations, i.e., is it semantic or pragmatic?

2. will require a disagreement that is not expressed via a metalinguistic negotiation.

Two options:

- 1 Reject the legitimacy of Metalinguistic negotiations (*bad*).
- 2 Produce a version of the argument from disagreement that is indifferent to metalinguistic negotiations.

1. is difficult. Plunkett and Sundell remain agnostic about the precise mechanism of metalinguistic negotiations, i.e., is it semantic or pragmatic?

2. will require a disagreement that is not expressed via a metalinguistic negotiation.

**Problem:** the whole gimmick is that *any* exchange could secretly be a metalinguistic negotiation.

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**Solution (naive):** We need a disagreement without a dispute.

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**Solution (naive):** We need a disagreement without a dispute.

These come on the cheap: any time two individuals believe rationally incompatible contents, they disagree.

*However* Plunkett and Sundell say disagreements concern *only* our attitudes and do not concern the semantic endeavor of assigning meanings to words.

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**Solution (older, wiser):** We need a *linguistically expressed* disagreement without a dispute.

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- (9) a. Adam: Carolyn believes that apples are tasty.  
b. Bernard: David believes that apples are not tasty.
- (10) Adam: Carolyn believes that apples are tasty, but  
David believes that they aren't.

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Consider (9). Two observations:

- 1 (9) is a linguistic exchange that expresses a disagreement between Carolyn and David.
- 2 There is no dispute between Carolyn and David.

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Can't explain disagreements without dispute metalinguistically.

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Can't explain disagreements without dispute metalinguistically.

A dispute is a necessary condition for a metalinguistic negotiation.

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Can't explain disagreements without dispute metalinguistically.

A dispute is a necessary condition for a metalinguistic negotiation.

Disagreement without dispute thus rules out the possibility of metalinguistic negotiation.

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Can't explain disagreements without dispute metalinguistically.

A dispute is a necessary condition for a metalinguistic negotiation.

Disagreement without dispute thus rules out the possibility of metalinguistic negotiation.

Novel idea: Run arguments from disagreement based on cases of disagreement without dispute and avoid the challenge.

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**Signpost:** Cases of disagreement without dispute rule out the possibility of metalinguistic negotiation.

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P&S are unconvinced.

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P&S are unconvinced.

Other (older) objection: *Sundell's Dilemma*

Sundell: arguments from disagreement rest on an assumption.

- (11) **Substantive Disagreement (SD):** Substantive Disagreement: If in a discourse, Speaker A and Speaker B really disagree with one another, then there is some proposition  $p$  such that some utterance by Speaker A expresses  $p$  and some utterance by Speaker B expresses  $q$ , where  $q$  entails not- $p$ .

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Sundell claims that this is question-begging: arguments from disagreement draw conclusions about inconsistency from premises about disagreement.

They work so long as we assume disagreements require inconsistency.

Sundell claims that we'll need to provide a version of SD that is not question begging to be convincing.

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Sundell claims that this is question-begging: arguments from disagreement draw conclusions about inconsistency from premises about disagreement.

They work so long as we assume disagreements require inconsistency.

Sundell claims that we'll need to provide a version of SD that is not question begging to be convincing.

Two options.

- (12) **Substantive Disagreement\*** (SD\*): If in a discourse, Speaker A and Speaker B take themselves to be in conflict, then there is some proposition  $p$  such that some utterance by Speaker A expresses  $p$  and some utterance by Speaker B expresses  $q$ , where  $q$  entails not- $p$ .

Not circular, appeals to felt conflict.

Won't work: Overpredicts inconsistency.

- (13) a. Adam: I like David.  
b. Bernard: I don't like David.

- (14) **Substantive Disagreement\*\*** (SD\*\*): If in a discourse, linguistic denial is a felicitous move for Speaker B in response to an utterance by Speaker A, then there is some proposition  $p$  such that Speaker A's utterance expresses  $p$  and Speaker B's utterance expresses  $q$ , where  $q$  entails not- $p$ .

Not circular, appeals to denial licensing.

Won't work: Overpredicts inconsistency.

- (15) a. Adam: I drank two beers.  
b. Bernard: No, you drank all the beers.

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Sundell's Dilemma: SD is either question begging or untenable.

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Sundell's Dilemma: SD is either question begging or untenable.

**Signpost:** Sundell's Dilemma the assumption of canonicity, without appealing to metalinguistic negotiations. Ruling those out cannot be enough.

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This has been a frozen conflict for several years now.

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Observation: very tough to argue whether/how that disagreement should inform out semantic theorizing.

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This has been a frozen conflict for several years now.

Observation: very tough to argue whether/how that disagreement should inform out semantic theorizing.

New Plan (wrinkled, wizened): Argument from disagreement without disagreement.

Affirmations: just like denials, except they express acceptance rather than rejection.

- (16) a. Adam: It's raining.  
b. Bernard: That's right/I agree/I accept that/Sure/That's true.
- (17) a. Adam: It's raining.  
b. Bernard: That's right/I agree/I accept that/Sure/That's true, it is raining.

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They can be licensed and they can fail to be licensed.

- (18)
- a. Adam: Apples are tasty.
  - b. Bernard: No they aren't.
  - c. Adam: # That's true.

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Affirmations can be licensed in the same environments denial is.

- (19)
- a. Adam: I drank two beers.
  - b. Bernard: No, you drank all the beers.
  - c. Bernard: I accept that, but you drank all of the beers.

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They can also be licensed when speakers/listeners have the intuition of conflict.

- (20) a. Adam: I like David.  
b. Bernard: That's true, but I don't like David.

*Doomed Coordination Attempts (DCAs)* are always infelicitous.

- (21) a. Adam: The keys might be in the drawer.  
b. Bernard: # That's right/ I agree/I accept that, but they aren't in the drawer.
- (22) a. Adam: Apples are tasty.  
b. Bernard: # That's right, I agree/I accept that, but apples aren't tasty.

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For any case that motivates an argument form disagreement (like (1) or (2)), we can generate a DCA like (21) or (22).

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For any case that motivates an argument form disagreement (like (1) or (2)), we can generate a DCA like (21) or (22).

The infelicity of DCA's projects under embedding.

For any case that motivates an argument form disagreement (like (1) or (2)), we can generate a DCA like (21) or (22).

The infelicity of DCA's projects under embedding.

- (29) a. Adam: The keys might be in the drawer.  
b. Bernard: # Carolyn thinks that that is correct but that they aren't in the drawer.
- (30) a. Adam: Apples are tasty.  
b. Bernard: # Bernard: Suppose both that that's true and apples aren't tasty.
- (31) # Adam thinks that apples are tasty, and Bernard agrees, but he doesn't think they're tasty.

## There Can be No Dispute

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What we have: systematic infelicity that projects under embedding.

Predicting and explaining this infelicity is a job for semantics!

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Stable content semantics have no difficulty in predicting and explaining the infelicity of DCA's.

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Stable content semantics have no difficulty in predicting and explaining the infelicity of DCA's.

The content is stable, so it's incompatible, jsut like in the cases of disagreement.

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Contextualism struggles, much like it did for the cases of disagreement.

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Contextualism struggles, much like it did for the cases of disagreement.

So  $\llbracket \text{Apples are tasty} \rrbracket_{Adam}$  and  $\llbracket \text{Apples are not tasty} \rrbracket_{Bernard}$  can be consistent, so Bernard can accept Adam's assertion, while making his own.

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**Signpost:** DCA's are:

- Systematically infelicitous.
- 1:1 for instances of disagreement to DCA.
- Easily predicted by stable content views.
- Not easily predictable by contextualism.

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## Here's an Argument from Disagreement without disagreement

Here's an Argument from Disagreement without disagreement

**P1)** Stable Content semantics can predict and explain the infelicity of DCAs like (21) and (22).

**P2)** Contextualist semantics cannot predict and explain the infelicity of DCAs.

**P3)** We should prefer semantics which predict and explain the infelicity of DCAs.

---

**C)** We should prefer stable content semantics.

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Looks a lot like the argument from disagreement, but there are several advantages:

1) Contextualism cannot appeal to metalinguistic negotiations to explain the infelicity (avoids possibility of metalinguistic negotiation).

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Looks a lot like the argument from disagreement, but there are several advantages:

- 1) Contextualism cannot appeal to metalinguistic negotiations to explain the infelicity (avoids possibility of metalinguistic negotiation).
- 2) The contextualist semantics itself must predict this infelicity.

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Looks a lot like the argument from disagreement, but there are several advantages:

- 1) Contextualism cannot appeal to metalinguistic negotiations to explain the infelicity (avoids possibility of metalinguistic negotiation).
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- 3) Uphill battle for contextualism to offer debunking arguments.

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Looks a lot like the argument from disagreement, but there are several advantages:

- 1) Contextualism cannot appeal to metalinguistic negotiations to explain the infelicity (avoids possibility of metalinguistic negotiation).
- 2) The contextualist semantics itself must predict this infelicity.
- 3) Uphill battle for contextualism to offer debunking arguments.
- 4) Contextualist explanations for DCA's and Disagreements will be, at best, disjunctive.

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## 5) Avoids Sundell's dilemma

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5) Avoids Sundell's dilemma

6) Does not require that we reject the legitimacy of metalinguistic negotiations.

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5) Avoids Sundell's dilemma

6) Does not require that we reject the legitimacy of metalinguistic negotiations.

7) No disagreement: I don't have to reject a single claim P&S make.

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1) I've made the argument for disagreement without disagreement, BUT I suspect DCAs will can be incorporated into a full account of disagreement.

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1) I've made the argument for disagreement without disagreement, BUT I suspect DCAs will can be incorporated into a full account of disagreement.

Maybe able to develop an account of disagreement and SD that avoids Sundell's Dilemma.

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1) I've made the argument for disagreement without disagreement, BUT I suspect DCAs will can be incorporated into a full account of disagreement.

Maybe able to develop an account of disagreement and SD that avoids Sundell's Dilemma.

2) There is not, to my knowledge any empirical work on the infelicity of DCAs. Might be some low-hanging fruit there.

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Thanks!

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