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ON MEANING WITHOUT USE*

Here is a compelling hypothesis about the nature of linguistic communication: language use is conventional. Of course, there are caveats—not *every* fact about language use is conventional; features of our physiology and historical events, e.g., also play some determining role in the way we use language. But the idea is that there are deep and important facts about language use—for instance, the fact that a linguistic population speaks a language whose expressions mean one thing rather than another—that are conventional in nature. Let’s call this the *Conventionalist Hypothesis*.

A number of considerations contribute to the appeal of the Conventionalist Hypothesis. Among them is its ability to explain a particularly salient feature of linguistic intentionality: the dependence of linguistic meaning on the behavior of language users as opposed to “natural” connections between expressions and the world.

“[N]o one is able to persuade me that the correctness of names is determined by anything besides convention... No name belongs to a particular thing by nature, but only because of the rules and usages of those who establish the usage and call it by that name,”—Hermogenes in Plato’s *Cratylus*¹

“A name is a spoken sound significant by convention... I say “by convention” because no name is a name naturally but only when it has become a symbol.”—Aristotle *De Interpretatione* (16a.20–28)²

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¹ Plato, “Cratylus,” in John Cooper, ed., C. D. C. Reeve, trans., *Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), at 384c-d.

² Both quoted in Michael Rescorla, “Convention,” in Edward N. Zalta, ed., *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Stanford: The Metaphysics Research Lab, 2007).

Plato may not have supported the Conventionalist Hypothesis, however; Socrates argues against Hermogenes’ position in the *Cratylus*. Thanks to Zoltan Szabó for pointing this out.

The arbitrary nature of the connection between expressions and meanings is widely seen as one of the paradigmatic features of human languages, and it standard for introductory texts in linguistics to begin with a discussion of this phenomenon.³ One attractive feature of the Conventionalist Hypothesis is that it offers a compelling explanation for this striking property of natural language.

Another is its participation in a broader, independently motivated theoretical program (commonly associated with philosophers including Paul Grice, David Lewis, Stephen Schiffer, and Robert Stalnaker)⁴ aimed at providing a picture of language and linguistic communication according to which their intentional and normative features arise from more familiar facts about mental states and social behavior. I'll call this the *Reductive Project*. A crucial step in filling out this picture is to provide what I will call a *use-based metasemantics*—a grounding story, in terms of actions and mental states, for the fact that a particular language belongs to a particular linguistic community. The Conventionalist Hypothesis provides a blueprint for such a story, and thus a potential cornerstone for the broader project.

Given its *prima facie* plausibility and theoretical appeal, it would be nice to develop a viable metasemantic theory to support the Conventionalist Hypothesis. Over the last few decades, however, various worries have appeared not only to dampen the prospects for such a theory, but to cast doubt on the viability of any type of use-based metasemantic theory—thus threatening the entire Reductive Project. This paper addresses one such worry—the problem of meaning without use—arguing that it poses no threat to the Reductive Project in general, nor to the conventionalist

³ The claim that language displays this feature is sometimes called “the Arbitrariness Principle”, as Saussure includes it among his principles of Structural Linguistics in Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de Linguistique Générale* (Paris and Lausanne: Payot, 1916) in Charles Bally, Albert Sechehaye, and Albert Riedlinger eds., Roy Harris, trans., *Course in General Linguistics* (New York: Open Court, 1998).

⁴ See H. P. Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), David Lewis, *Convention: A Philosophical Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), Stephen R. Schiffer, *Meaning* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1972), Robert Stalnaker, *Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, (2014).

metasemantic project in particular; if our best hypothesis about the nature of language is to be rejected, it should not be on the basis of this concern.

In broad strokes, the problem of meaning without use boils down to the contention that the intentional features of natural language expressions outstrip the intentional features of the actions and mental states that constitute language use—actions and mental states which characterize language users’ ability to utter and interpret expressions of their language. As a result, language users’ actions and mental states can only determine the *used* fragment of a language of any given linguistic community—that containing expressions which can be uttered and interpreted by members of that community. But because natural languages also contain an *unused* fragment—comprising expressions so long or complex that language users are unable to utter or interpret them—there are populations such that use-based metasemantic theories cannot distinguish between their language *L* and a language *L** which is just like *L* except for what it assigns to its unused fragment. So any use-based metasemantic theory delivers the wrong predictions, and is thus false.

Below I present the argument in more detail, using the conventionalist metasemantic framework as a case study; I demonstrate why it applies to conventionalist theories broadly rather than any one in particular (e.g., David Lewis’ theory, on which discussions of the problem often focus)⁵ and show that it further generalizes to any type of use-based metasemantics. After

⁵ This theory is presented in Lewis, *Convention, op. cit.*, and David Lewis, “Languages and Language,” in Keith Gunderson, ed., *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1975) pp. 3-35. For discussion of the problem of meaning without use as it applies to Lewis as well as to conventionalist accounts more generally, see Martin Davies, “Foundational Issues in the Philosophy of Language,” in Michael Devitt and Richard Hanley, eds., *The Blackwell Guide to Philosophy of Language* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2006), pp. 19–40, John Hawthorne, “A Note on ‘Languages and Language,’” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* LXVIII, 1 (1990):116 – 118, John Hawthorne, “Meaning and Evidence: A Reply to Lewis,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* LXXI, 2 (1993):206–211, Brian Loar, “Two Theories of Meaning,” in Gareth Evans and John McDowell, eds., *Truth and Meaning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 138–161, Brian Loar, *Mind and Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), David Lewis, “Meaning Without Use: Reply to

unpacking the problem, I'll argue that metasemantic conventionalism has a solution to this challenge: The claim that populations use languages containing unused expressions is only supported given the assumption that there is a unique grammar for a public language. But on no viable conception of a grammar for a public language do we get the result that this fragment is not determined by convention. Thus, either public languages do not contain unused fragments, or they are determined by convention. Since metasemantic conventionalism is one species of use-based metasemantics, it follows that if the possibility of meaning without use poses no threat to conventionalism, it poses no challenge *in principle* to the use-based metasemantic project. Moreover, as I develop the solution for conventionalism, analogous strategies for alternative kinds of use-based theories will emerge, suggesting that the same general tools are available to a variety of approaches.

I. Overgeneration

Let me begin by saying a bit more about how I'll be understanding the conventionalist metasemantic project: I'll call a *Conventionalist Metasemantics* any theory which appeals (only) to convention in answering: *in virtue of what does a population speak the language it does?*

Conventionalist Metasemantics:

For any language L and population P , L is a language of P in virtue of the fact that P participates in a convention of use in L .⁶

Hawthorne," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* LXX 1 (1992):106–110, Stephen Schiffer, "Actual-Language Relations," *Philosophical Perspectives*, XI (1993):231–258, and Brian Weatherson, "The Role of Naturalness in Lewis's Theory of Meaning," *Journal for the History of Analytical Philosophy*, I, 10 (2013): 0–19.

⁶ See Lewis, *Convention*, *op. cit.*, Lewis, "Languages and Language," *op. cit.*, Schiffer, *Meaning*, *op. cit.*, Loar, *Mind and Meaning*, *op. cit.*, and Wayne A. Davis, *Meaning, Expression, and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

My concern is to defend *pure* metasemantic conventionalism—the claim that conventions *fully* determine whether a population speaks a language—and draw heavily Lewis' early work as an example of such a view. Crucially, my aim is not to defend the details of Lewis' account in particular, but rather to establish that the problem of meaning without use poses no problem *in principle* for purely conventionalist accounts. Thus, I abstract away from the details

It is important to note that thus understood Conventionalist Metasemantics is concerned with explaining facts about *shared, public* languages. There is an ongoing debate about whether it would be more theoretically fruitful to focus on facts pertaining to *individual idiolects*. Space does not permit a defense of public language inquiry here; instead I will take for granted the importance and legitimacy of this project, and argue that the problem of meaning without use poses no threat to Conventionalist Metasemantics understood as a metasemantics for *public language*.⁷ The general thrust of the argument, however, does not depend on this assumption, nor is the solution I suggest uniquely available to Conventionalist Metasemantics; as I present this solution I will show how it can be extended to conceptions of language as private idiolects and to alternative use-based theories.

of Lewis' account whenever possible. Moreover, none of the arguments rest on issues relating to Lewis exegesis; my goal is to defend a certain broad type of metasemantic theory, of which of Lewis is commonly taken to be a paradigmatic case (regardless of whether he is rightly taken to be so). Nonetheless, I take myself to be following the orthodox interpretation of Lewis, and make note of controversial interpretive issues. Following Weatherson, "The Role of Naturalness in Lewis's Theory of Meaning," *op. cit.* and Wolfgang Schwarz, "Against Magnetism," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, XCII, 1 (2014):17–36, I take Lewis to defend a two-step approach to mental and linguistic meaning: the first step uses charity and decision theoretic norms to fix mental content, while the second step uses mental content (via conventions of use) to fix linguistic meaning. This paper is concerned only with the second step and takes Lewis to initially defend a purely conventionalist approach. He appears to suggest further constraints post-1980 to handle various indeterminacy problems (including meaning without use), as noted in section 4.

⁷ For arguments against public languages, see Noam Chomsky, *Knowledge of Language* (New York: Praeger, 1986), Donald Davidson, A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs. In Ernest Lepore, ed., *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp. 433–446, James McGilvray, *Chomsky: Language, Mind, and Politics* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1999), Ray Jackendoff, *Foundations of Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), and Daniela Isac, & Charles Reiss, *I-Language: An Introduction to Linguistics as Cognitive Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). In defense of public languages, see Alex Barber, "Idiolectal Error," *Mind and Language*, XVI, 3 (2001): 263–83, Ruth Garrett Millikan, "In Defense of Public Language," in Louise M. Antony & Norbert Hornstein, eds., *Chomsky and His Critics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), Robert J. Stainton, "In Defense of Public Languages," *Linguistics and Philosophy*, XXXIV, 5 (2011): 479–488, Josh Armstrong, "Coordination, Triangulation, and Language Use," *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*, LIX, 1 (2016):80–112, and Elisabeth Camp, "Conventions' Revenge: Davidson, Derangement, and Dormativity," *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* LIX 1 (2016):113–138.

For now I assume that, minimally, a language is a function from expressions to meanings, representable as a set of expression/meaning pairs.⁸ I leave it open what types of expressions may belong in this set (though Lewis' own account includes a restriction to sentences, such a restriction is not mandated by conventionalist accounts generally).⁹ §3 considers ways in which more restrictive conceptions (specifically, those including a grammar) affect the dialectic. I assume a simplified version of David Lewis' theory of convention throughout, but the arguments generalize to any theory of convention that conforms to the Reductive Project: we'll say that a *convention* is, among other things, a regularity in action within a population that is sustained by expectations of conformity.¹⁰ Exactly what conditions should fall under the umbrella of *other things* is a contested issue that will not be relevant to the discussion, so we can set it aside.¹¹

⁸ For my purposes here, I will abstract away from context-sensitivity. Though this phenomenon raises interesting issues for conventionalist metasemantics (and use-based metasemantics more broadly), such issues are orthogonal to the problem of meaning without use, and thus fall outside the scope of this paper. A standard move is to accommodate context-sensitivity by taking languages to be functions from expression/context pairs to meanings. (Cf. Kaplan, David, "Demonstratives: An Essay on the Semantics, Logic, Metaphysics and Epistemology of Demonstratives and other Indexicals," in Joseph Almog, John Perry & Howard Wettstein, eds., *Themes From Kaplan* (Oxford University Press, 1989b) pp. 481-563, Lewis, *Convention, op. cit.*, pp. 163-64, Lewis, "Languages and Language," *op. cit.*, p.13, and Robert C. Stalnaker, "Pragmatics," *Synthese*, xxii, 1-2 (1970): 272—289. There are alternative ways of dealing with indexicality; one might treat it as a special case of context-sensitivity in which the codomain of the function can be partitioned into two (or more) sets of meanings, or—following Lewis, *Convention, op. cit.* and Lewis, "Languages and Language," *op. cit.*, as a function that maps an expression/context pair to a set of meanings. David Lewis, "Index, Context, and Content," in Stig Kanger & Sven Öhman, eds., *Philosophy and Grammar* (Dordrecht, the Netherlands: Reidel, 1980) pp. 79-100 adds indices to deal with "shiftiness".

⁹ See Davis, *Meaning, Expression, and Thought, op. cit.* and Jessica Keiser, "Language without Information Exchange," *Mind and Language* (forthcoming) for examples of conventionalist theories that accommodate sub-sentential constituents. Lewis' restriction to sentences leaves him open to charges of referential indeterminacy. Because this is a problem for Lewis in particular rather than conventionalist theories generally—and because referential indeterminacy is orthogonal to the problem of meaning without use—I set this issue aside.

¹⁰ See Lewis, *Convention, op. cit.*, and Lewis, "Languages and Language Use," *op. cit.*

¹¹ Lewis also includes the following conditions: (1) the regularity *R* is a solution to a recurring coordination problem faced by members of the population *P*, (2) the expectation of conformity to *R* provides members of *P* with reason to themselves conform, (3) there is a general preference among *P* of general conformity to *R* on condition that most members conform, (4) there alternative regularities that would have solved the same coordination problem, and (5) these conditions are common knowledge among *P*. See Lewis, *Convention, op. cit.*, and Lewis, "Languages and Language Use," *op. cit.* for details (my presentation relies more heavily on the later account). Though the spirit of Lewis' account of convention is standardly taken to be correct, some of these conditions are controversial. For discussion, see Tyler Burge, "On knowledge and convention," *Philosophical Review* LXXXIV 2 (1975):249–255, Brian Skyrms, *Evolution of the Social Contract* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), Andrei Marmor, "On Convention," *Synthese* CVII, 3 (1996): 349 – 371, Andrei Marmor, *Social Conventions: From Language to Law*

Given this conception of convention, the conformity of Conventionalist Metasemantics to the Reductive Project can be made more perspicuous: it claims that a population P speaks a language L just in case they exhibit a regularity of use in L that is sustained by expectations of conformity, where both *use* and *expectations* are understood in terms of actions/mental states. Metasemantic theories conforming to the Reductive Project are sometimes called *use-based metasemantics*, as such theories typically cash out *use* in terms of actions/mental states. Thus, Conventionalist Metasemantics is one particular form that a use-based metasemantics might take.

The argument from meaning without use poses the following dilemma for use-based metasemantic theories: if the actions and mental states used to ground the theory are specified in liberal enough way, the account will overgenerate. If it includes restrictions sufficient to avoid overgeneration, it is bound to undergenerate. In the remainder of this section I spell out the overgeneration horn of the dilemma. The following section considers potential solutions, showing how they appear to lead to an undergeneration worry.

The easiest way to understand the overgeneration horn of the dilemma is to consider the predictions of a rudimentary use-based-metasemantics. It is uncontroversial that we speak the languages we do at least partly in virtue of facts about how we use them. But what is it to use a language? As a rough first pass, we might say that to use a language is to utter its expressions in a certain way. When we think of language use, after all, we first and foremost think of *utterances*—language users making sounds, marks, signs, etc. to convey some sort of message. Though precisely *which way* the expressions must be uttered is ultimately of great theoretical significance,

(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), Ruth Garrett Millikan, “Language Conventions Made Simple,” *Journal of Philosophy*, xcv, 4 (1998): 161-180, Margaret Gilbert, *On Social Facts* (Abington: Routledge, 1989), and Margaret Gilbert, “Social Convention Revisited,” *Topoi* xxvii, 5-16 (2008):5-16.

it is irrelevant to getting the overgeneration worry off the ground. So we can think of a naïve use-based theory as follows, leaving it open what conditions go in for w :

Naïve Use-Based Metasemantics:

For any language L and population P , L is a language of P in virtue of the fact that members of P utter the expressions of L in a certain way w .

But there is an immediate problem: we speak languages containing more expressions than we have, or ever will, utter. Consider the following expression:

“I know someone who knows someone who knows someone who knows someone who knows a very, very, very, very, very stable genius.”¹²

English is a big language, containing potentially infinitely many expressions which no one has had—indeed, ever will have—the occasion to utter. Think of how many expressions can be created by iterating occurrences of “who knows someone” and “very” in the example above. A great many of these are such that they have never been and never will be uttered. Nonetheless they are apparently bona fide expressions of English; they have meaning, in spite of not being used.

Let’s unpack the problem a bit more: In spelling out more precisely what it takes to use a language L , the Naïve Theory can either (1) place non-trivial constraints on the entire language or (2) place non-trivial constraints on a fragment.¹³ An example of option (1) would be to say that P uses L in virtue of uttering *all* of its expressions in way w . In order to determine whether L is a language of P , we’d need to check whether *each* of its expressions met a certain condition: being uttered by members of P in way w . This option undergenerates; it fails to predict that English is our language, since we do not utter all of its expressions. An example of option (2)—a strategy

¹² Thanks to Zoltan Szabó for this example.

¹³ Of course, there are other ways that the account would need to be made precise. For instance, it would need to answer the question *how many members of P*. This is an interesting question which comes up in Lewis, “Languages and Language,” *op. cit.*, but since it will not affect the discussion here, we can set it aside.

used by Lewis—is to put a *conditional* requirement on utterances: *P* uses *L* just in case they utter any expression of *L* in way *w*, *if* they utter it at all.¹⁴ This only places non-trivial constraints on a *fragment* of a language; in order to determine whether *L* is the language of *P*, we'd need only check whether the expressions belonging to a fragment of *L*—those uttered by *P*—met a certain condition: having been uttered by *P* in way *w*. Expressions belonging to the remaining fragment trivially meet the conditions on use in virtue of not having been uttered at all. But this approach overgenerates, predicting that we speak every language agreeing with English with respect to the uttered fragment, regardless of what it assigns to the remainder.

The upshot is that while facts about utterances seem to play some role in determining which language we speak, they cannot be doing all the work; they can give necessary, but not sufficient conditions. Provided that a theory correctly specifies which particular way *w* we must utter the expressions of a language, it will deliver a set of languages for a population *P* which includes its true language(s) *L* as well as every language *L** which assigns the same values as *L* to expressions in its used fragment.¹⁵ In other words, this theory cannot account for meaning without use—it cannot tell us in virtue of what fact *P* speaks a language containing unused expressions that carry one meaning rather than another. We need another condition to single out *L* by placing constraints on the unused fragment.

¹⁴ This is not the only way to put nontrivial constraints on only a fragment of a language. You might, for instance, say that a population uses a language just in case they utter a subset of its expressions in a certain way. This is a looser requirement than that given by the conditional, placing non-trivial conditions on a fragment of a fragment; we'd only need to check that the fragment of *L* containing expressions which have been uttered contains *at least one* expression that has been uttered in way *w*.

¹⁵ I do not presuppose that each linguistic population uses a unique language, but I will sometimes adopt this way of speaking for ease of exposition. The issue is not that we expect the correct metasemantic theory to deliver a *unique* language—rather that it *not* deliver the *wrong* language(s) or *fail* to deliver the *right* one(s).

If a theory is to conform to the Reductive Project, it must flesh out this condition in terms of actions or mental states of some kind. In the following section we'll look at Conventionalist Metasemantics's strategy (due to David Lewis (1969)) for patching up the overgeneration worry through an appeal to expectations, and see that it presents a new *underdetermination* problem—the second horn of the dilemma. We'll see that the problem is not generated by features of expectations in particular, but rather by features of actions and mental states in general, thus generalizing to any solution that conforms to the Reductive Project.

II. Undergeneration

The achievement of sharing a public language involves not only uttering its expressions in a certain way (the role of the speaker) but also knowing how to interpret the utterances of others (the role of the audience). David Lewis thought that the ability to interpret utterances in a public language was best understood in terms of expectations. By focusing exclusively on the speaker's role, the Naïve Theory fails to provide sufficiently tight conditions on language use. Expectations can fill in the rest of story by addressing the role of the interpreter, thereby tightening up these conditions.¹⁶ Here is a comparison:

Naïve Use-Based Metasemantics:

For any language L and population P , L is a language of P in virtue of the fact that members of P utter the expressions of L in a certain way w .

Conventionalist Metasemantics:

For any language L and population P , L is a language of P in virtue of the fact that members of P participate in a convention of use in L .

¹⁶ Of course, Conventionalist Metasemantics brings considerably more benefits to a Naïve Theory (for instance, an explanation for why patterns of use are self-perpetuating), but relevant to the discussion at hand is the resources it provides in solving the meaning without use problem.

i.e., they exhibit a regularity of uttering the expressions of L in a certain way w that is sustained by expectations of conformity.¹⁷

Both accounts include uttering the expressions of L in a certain way as a necessary condition for L being a language of a population P . But Conventionalist Metasemantics require *conventionalized* use, which adds another necessary condition: members of P must have the right kinds of expectations about the utterances of others.¹⁸ The hope is that utterances will get us part of the way there, and expectations can do the rest of the work: a specification of how a population P must utter the expressions of their language L will uniquely determine its used fragment, while its unused fragment will be determined by constraints on expectations about utterances.

However, a similar problem emerges, which is not specific to any particular instantiation of Conventionalist Metasemantics in that it is independent any particular specification of w . Rather, it comes down to the idea that our expectations about utterances are apparently limited in

¹⁷ In order to deal with context-sensitivity, this way w will need to appeal to the properties of expressions *in a context*. Again, I will abstract away from such complexities, but see Lewis, “Languages and Language,” *op. cit.*, p.13-14.

¹⁸ Lewis’ own incorporation of expectations of the account is more complex in that he introduces them at two levels: at the level of use, and at the level of convention. First, *use in a language L* involves not only certain kinds of utterances, but also certain kinds of expectations. For Lewis, to use L is to be both truthful in L (to try not to utter expressions of L unless they are true in L) and trusting in L , which is to *expect* that others will be truthful in L . (See Lewis, “Languages and Language,” *op. cit.*, p.7 and David K. Lewis, “Meaning without use: Reply to Hawthorne,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* LXX, 1 (1992):106 – 110., p. 106.) He also introduces expectations at the level of convention: A convention of use in L , for Lewis, is a regularity of truthfulness and trust in L that is sustained by expectations of conformity (as well as meeting additional conditions—see ft. 9). This introduces higher-order expectations: when a population P participates in a convention of use in L , its members not only have expectations about how others will utter expressions of L (in virtue of the *trust* part of use in L), but also have expectations about others’ expectations (in virtue of this use being conventional among P). (Higher order expectations also follow from Lewis’ common knowledge constraint.)

In contrast, the account I present here only incorporates expectations at the level of convention. I prefer this strategy because it provides the requisite theoretical tools while simplifying the dialectic, however one could follow Lewis in introducing expectations again at the level of use. The upshot is that on the account I present here, the listener role is not itself conventionalized, as it is on Lewis’ account—rather, it is captured by the fact that the speaker’s role is conventionalized. But there are different ways to go here.

a way that linguistic meaning is not; natural languages contain more meaningful expressions than we can have suitably robust expectations towards.

The structure of the problem is similar to that encountered earlier. In making the conditions on expectations precise, Conventionalist Metasemantics can either (1) place non-trivial constraints on an entire language L or (2) place non-trivial constraints on a fragment. Let's start with an example of option (2), again from Lewis: members of P must expect that for all expressions of L , they will be uttered in a certain way w ,¹⁹ *if* they are uttered at all. Again, this only puts non-trivial constraints on a *fragment* of L . In order to determine whether they were satisfied, we'd need only check to see whether expressions belonging to a fragment of L —those which members of P expect to be uttered—met a certain condition: that each of its expressions are such that members of P expect them to be uttered *in way* w . The constraint is trivially satisfied with respect to remaining fragment, just in virtue of containing expressions which are not expected to be uttered at all.

This approach tightens up the Naïve Theory, but not enough. As Schiffer (in conversation with Lewis) points out,²⁰ it delivers a set of languages for a population P which includes its true language L as well as every language L^* assigning the same values as L to the fragment containing expressions that are *either uttered or expected to be uttered*—regardless of what it assigns to the remainder. For instance, it assigns to our linguistic community not only English, but a language just like English except containing additional garbage expressions like “12@#:FHp98+” to which

¹⁹ For Lewis, this is truthfully. See Lewis, *Convention*, *op. cit.*, and Lewis, “Languages and Language Use,” *op. cit.*

²⁰ See Lewis, “Meaning Without Use: Reply to Hawthorne,” *op. cit.* See also Stephen Schiffer, “Intention and Convention in the Theory of Meaning,” in Bob Hale, Crispin Wright and Alexander Miller, eds., *A Companion to the Philosophy of Language*, 2nd Edition, (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), pp. 49-72.

it assigns random meanings, given that we neither utter such expressions nor expect them to be uttered.

Lewis attempts to resolve the problem by proposing a version of option (1): Members of *P* expect others to conform to the regularity of uttering expressions of *L* in way *w* just in case they assign a greater probability to their being uttered in way *w* than in some other way, for every expression of *L*. This places non-trivial constraints on the entire language rather than just a fragment, thus blocking overgeneration. But the problem, according to John Hawthorne, is that though this move rules out garbage sentences, it does so at the cost of *undergenerating*; there are sentences of English so incredibly long or complex, he claims, that our subjective probability that they will be uttered is exactly zero.²¹ Lewis denied this, arguing that these subjective probabilities “are not zero; just very, very small”. Nevertheless, he conceded a different sense in which we lack the relevant expectations about a certain class of English expressions: we fail to assign a greater probability to their being uttered *in way w* than *in some other way*. According to Lewis, some expressions are just so long or complex or strange that we would not have any idea about how to interpret an utterance of one of them:

you’d think the speaker was trying to win a bet or set a record, or feigning madness or raving for real, or doing it to annoy, or filibustering, or making an experiment to test the limits of what is humanly possible to say and mean. You wouldn’t think he was trying to be truthful in *L*. Still less would you think he was trying effectively, armed with skill enough to overcome the complexities of the sentence.²²

²¹ Hawthorne, “A Note on ‘Languages and Language,’” *op. cit.*

²² Lewis, “Meaning Without Use: Reply to Hawthorne,” *op. cit.* p. 108.

Supplementing the Naïve account with expectations, then, fails to solve the dilemma. We are again presented with two options for precisifying the account, one leading to overgeneration and the other leading to undergeneration.

Though the problem of meaning without use has been posed as an issue for conventionalist theories *generally*, arguments tend to focus on Lewis' particular theory without explaining why they should be expected to generalize. The discussion between Hawthorne and Lewis, and Schiffer (in conversation with Lewis) indicates that the problem arises from features of the particular *way* w —involving truthfulness and trust—specified by Lewis' account. But given that Conventionalist Metasemantic theories may adopt different conditions for w , there is no reason to expect it to generalize to alternative accounts. Nonetheless, there is a way of articulating the concern which shows that it not applies not only to Lewis' theory—indeed not only to every instantiation of Conventionalist Metasemantics—but to any use-based theory.

Here is what I suspect to be the underlying worry: as noted above, use-based theories conform to the Reductive Project by grounding metasemantic facts in facts about actions and mental states. Let's pool the types of actions and mental states that a use-based theory T uses to ground the fact that a population uses a language L , and call this *use relative to T* . So relative to the Naïve Theory, use amounts to utterances of a certain kind, and relative to Conventionalist Metasemantics, use amounts to utterances and expectations of a certain kind. Let's say that a fragment of a language is *used* by a population relative to T just in case it *non-trivially* meets the conditions placed on use by T within that population. (Note that on this technical sense of "use", the used fragment may include what we might more naturally call "usable" expressions given that they are only *potentially*—but not actually—uttered. This is because this definition of use folds in not only actions such as utterances, but mental states such as expectations; thus, if language users

have the relevant mental states involving the expressions in that fragment, it will count as *used* in this technical sense, even if those expressions are not in fact uttered. I will continue with this terminology throughout). We'll say that a fragment of a language is *unused* by a population relative to T just in case it *fails* to non-trivially meet the conditions placed on use by T within that population. The problem seems to be that for any use-based Theory T , there are populations—specifically, natural language speaking populations—who speak languages containing fragments which are unused by them relative to T . Whatever conditions on use are given by T , they can either be trivially satisfied by the unused fragment or they cannot; if they can, T will overgenerate, predicting that P speaks its true language L in addition to every language L^* which is identical to L except for (at least some part of) its unused fragment. If these conditions *cannot* be trivially satisfied by the unused fragment, then the account will undergenerate, predicting that P does not use L .

Hence, the problem of meaning without use:

- (1) There are populations whose languages contain an unused fragment.²³
- (2) For any such population, Conventionalist Metasemantic Theories fail to distinguish between the language L of that population and every language L^* which is just like L except for what it assigns to (at least some part of) its unused fragment; they either predict that the population speaks both L and L^* (overgeneration), or neither (undergeneration).
- (3) Therefore, the Conventionalist Hypothesis is false.

Because we can replace “Conventionalist Metasemantics” with “use-based metasemantics”, the argument threatens the entire Reductive Project, casting doubt on its prospects for developing a viable metasemantics. In the following section I argue for the following solution: *either* there are

²³ Since we are now understanding usability as a theory-relative property, this claim will strictly-speaking hold *relative to any Conventionalist Metasemantics*.

not populations who speak languages with unused fragments—in which case the first premise of the argument is false—*or* the fact that they speak such languages is determined by convention, in which case the second is false. Thus, I establish that the problem of meaning without use is no threat to the Reductive Project in general, nor to the Conventionalist Hypothesis in particular.

III. The Solution

The general idea behind the argument—in particular, its first premise—is that whatever non-trivial conditions on use that the use-based metasemantic theorist can up with, you can always find some expressions for which these conditions are not met relative to some population and their language. That is, there seems to be a mismatch between our actions and mental states and the intentional features of natural language expressions; the former are limited in a way that the latter are not. Given this mismatch, as long as the use-based metasemantic theorist gives conditions tight enough to rule out imposter languages, she will inevitably make them *too* tight; you will always be able to find a fragment of the target language failing to meet them because there are no limits on, e.g. the length and complexity of natural language expressions, though there are limits on our ability to utter and interpret them. But why should we accept this claim? In the literature on meaning without use, it is taken as a data point by theorists on both sides of the debate, without explicit justification. Below I survey several potential motivations, showing that either they are unsupported or they undermine the second premise. Either way, the argument fails. Throughout the discussion I will continue to use Conventionalist Metasemantics as a case study; however, if it can be shown that Conventionalist Metasemantics—which is a form of use-based metasemantics—can diffuse the problem of meaning without use, it will establish that this challenge poses no threat, in principle, to the use-based metasemantic project generally.

Why think that public languages contain unused expressions? The principal phenomenon that a metasemantics for public language seeks to explain is how groups of agents are able to communicate systematically using sounds, marks, signs, etc.²⁴ Shared access to an intentional system would account for this data: groups of agents can communicate efficiently by exploiting their mutual understanding of such a system. A metasemantic theory aims to provide a grounding story about how groups of agents converge on an intentional system, thus explaining the phenomenon of systematic communication. The type of explanation it seeks is metaphysical rather than causal, so it ought to be modally robust; it should provide necessary and sufficient conditions for public language use, rather than a contingent explanation of *actual* public language use. If positing unused expressions could contribute to such an explanation, then that would be one reason for accepting the first premise of the argument from meaning without use. However, *by hypothesis*, such expressions play no actual nor possible role in communication. Consider an example given by Hawthorne:

Let us suppose that you and I speak two different languages, A and B. A and B assign the same meanings to sentences of a length that at least one of us could possibly utter, but different meanings to sentences that are too long for either of us to utter. Would the fact that we spoke two different languages impede communication between us? Clearly not. Discourse between us would proceed very smoothly.²⁵

²⁴ Cf. John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge University Press, 1969), chapter 1, Lewis, "Languages and Language Use," *op. cit.*, Stephen Schiffer, *The Things We Mean* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 105, Stephen Neale, "Silent Reference," in Gary Ostertag, ed., *Meanings and Other Things: Essays in Honor of Stephen Schiffer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 229-344, at p. 252. The theoretical task of metasemantics is often understood as providing a metaphysical explanation of semantic facts, where the data constraining semantic facts also include facts about judgments of truth conditions and inferential patterns (see Robert Stalnaker, "Reference and Necessity," in Bob Hale and Crispin Wright, eds., *A Companion to Philosophy of Language* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1997), David Kaplan, "Afterthoughts," in Joseph Almog, John Perry, and Howard Wettstein, eds., *Themes From Kaplan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) pp. 565-614, Alexis Burgess & Brett Sherman, "A Plea for the Metaphysics of Meaning," in Alexis Burgess & Brett Sherman, eds., *Metasemantics: New Essays on the Foundations of Meaning* (Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 113-138, Seth Yalcin, "Semantics and Metasemantics in the Context of Generative Grammar," in Alexis Burgess and Brett Sherman, eds., *Metasemantics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 17-54, at p. 20). However, because I am for the moment restricting my attention to metasemantics for *public languages*, the latter data are relevant only insofar as they are *shared*, and contribute to facts about *communication*.

²⁵ Hawthorne, "A Note on 'Languages and Language'," *op. cit.*, p 118.

Though Hawthorne presents this alleged counterexample as the final blow for conventionalism, it points directly to its vindication.²⁶ The Conventionalist Metasemantic theorist should deny that you and I speak different languages, claiming instead that our shared language is the intersection of A and B. Rather than begging the question, this move is motivated by the feature of the situation noted by Hawthorne—that any actual and potential discourse between us would run smoothly. Insofar as a metasemantic theory aims to explain our ease of communication, one which predicts the intersection of A and B to be our shared language does the best job. Adding a story about expressions *for which it is stipulated that one could not possibly communicate using them* would introduce complexity without explanatory value, at least with respect to the explanatory task at hand (other explanatory tasks will be considered in due course). In general, no language *L* containing an unused fragment will ever be eligible for providing the best explanation for ease of communication between two or more agents; there will always be some language (e.g. the jointly used fragment of *L*) which is a better fit.

It is important to note here, for those suspicious of public languages, that the complaint of explanatory redundancy extends to conceptions of languages as idiolects. Suppose that we are not so much interested in explaining the fact that you and I can communicate efficiently, but rather in explaining how we—as individuals—are able to produce and interpret expressions. We still have no theoretical justification for ascribing to individuals idiolects containing expressions for which it is stipulated that they could not possibly use; again, this would introduce complexity without explanatory value. Shifting our focus to the capacity of individuals—rather than groups—to use a

²⁶ Hawthorne is not opposed to metasemantic conventionalism *per se*, but rather suggests that conventions *alone* cannot ground language use.

language, we still get the result that no language L containing an unused fragment will ever be eligible for providing the best explanation for an individual's capacity to use a language; there will always be some language (e.g. the usable fragment of L) which is a better fit. This argument will be spelled out in greater detail below—but it is important to flag that whether we are interested in idiolects or public languages, Hawthorne's example provides no pressure to accept premise 1.

But perhaps there are other considerations supporting the thought that we speak languages with unused expressions. I suspect that the primary motivation is rooted in perceived pressures from grammar. The idea is something like this: each public language has a unique grammar—a set of compositional rules that determine a one/one function from the meanings of complex expressions to the meanings and structure of their parts. This grammar, combined with any conventionally determined used fragment, will generate infinitely many more expressions than those belonging to that fragment. The uniqueness condition is important here: for the argument to work, each public language L must have a unique grammar which generates an unused fragment F —or at the very least, a unique set of grammars, each of which generates that same fragment.²⁷ If there are alternative grammars for L which fail to generate F , then there will be no principled reason for claiming that F belongs to L (more on this below).²⁸ Whether or not this argument is compelling will depend on what conception of grammar is at issue. I will consider several, arguing that on none of them does the argument from meaning without use go through. Though I will continue to focus the discussion on Conventionalist Metasemantics and public languages, along

²⁷ To simplify the discussion I'll set aside the second option, the though the arguments below apply *mutatis mutandis* to sets.

²⁸ Thus, I'm in agreement with Lewis when he says that, "Unfortunately, I know of no promising way to make sense of the claim that a grammar Γ is used by population P whereas another grammar Γ' , which generates the same language as Γ is not." Lewis, "Languages and Language Use," *op. cit.*, p. 20.

the way I will show how the same arguments extend to conceptions of languages as private idiolects and alternative types of use-based metasemantic theories.

What would determine a unique grammar for a language? Here are two broad possibilities: (1) each language has a unique grammar that is determined by patterns in its used fragment;²⁹ (2) each language has a unique grammar that is determined by compositional rules which are psychologically realized in the users of that language. Let's start with the first possibility. The idea is to take a look at the meaning/expression pairs in the used fragment of any language *L*; the grammar is the simplest (or otherwise theoretically virtuous) set of rules that delivers a one/one function from the meanings of these expressions to the meanings and structure of their parts. As Lewis pointed out, while this conception of grammar (which he appears to have adopted) supports the first premise of the argument from meaning without use, it undermines the second. On this conception, "use determines some meanings, those meanings determine the rules, and the rules determine the rest of the meanings. Thus use determines meaning, in part directly and in part indirectly, for the entire language."³⁰ If the grammar of a language is determined by extrapolation from patterns in the used fragment, unused expressions pose no problem for the Conventionalist Metasemantic Theorist; given that she can find the right recipe for how conventions determine the used fragment, those same conventions will also indirectly determine the rest. Note that this solution is not restricted to the Conventionalist Metasemantic theorist, nor to a conception of language as public and shared. For any type of use-based theory, given that it has the resources to determine the used fragment of a language (whether private or shared), then if the grammar for

²⁹ One (potentially unwelcome) implication of this picture is that only *used* languages have grammars. Given the commitment that all languages have a unique grammar, one would need to deny that there are unused (i.e., merely possible) languages.

³⁰ Lewis, "Meaning Without Use: Reply to Hawthorne," *op. cit.*, p. 109.

that language is determined by patterns in this used fragment, the unused expressions generated by that grammar will be indirectly determined by use.

Now let's consider the second conception of grammar, as a set of rules which are psychologically realized in the users of a language. Again, there are two possibilities: either these rules are conventional or they are not. Suppose first that they are conventional—i.e., members of a linguistic community participate in a convention of using complex expressions in a way that determines a bijection to the structure and meaning of their parts. Wayne Davis holds such a view, claiming that the meanings of words and other sub-sentential expressions are determined by conventions of speaker meaning.³¹ Conventions also determine construction rules, which impose grammatical structures onto strings of words and map them to idea structures. Thus, conventionally determined word meanings and construction rules jointly determine the meanings of sentences, which may extend beyond the used fragment. So, just as in the case of extrapolation, convention determines meaning, in part directly, and in part indirectly, for the whole language.³² This conception of grammar, again, undermines the second premise of the argument.

There are well-known objections to both conceptions of grammar considered above—and by extension, the solutions to the problem of meaning without use that they offer the Conventionalist Metasemantic theorist.³³ While space does not permit a discussion of these issues here, the aim of the present paper is not to defend any particular conception of grammar but rather

³¹ See Davis, *Meaning, Expression, and Thought*, *op. cit.*

³² An anonymous referee wonders if this collapses into Lewis' approach. It does not: for Lewis, the use conventions concern utterances and expectations of utterance of sentences. For Davis they concern utterances and expectations about utterances of *words* while the construction conventions concern utterances and expectations about utterances conforming to *certain structures and patterns*.

³³ See J. Robert G. Williams, "Eligibility and Inscrutability," *Philosophical Review*, CXVI, 3 (2007): 361-399, Weatherson, "The Role of Naturalness in Lewis's Theory of Meaning," *op. cit.*, and Zoltán Gendler Szabó, "Structure and Conventions," *Philosophical Studies*, CXXXVII, 3 (2008): 399 - 408.

to show that on none of them is Conventionalist Metasemantics threatened by the argument from meaning without use. In the remainder of the paper I focus on the last conception of grammar: a *nonconventional* set of rules which are psychologically realized in the users of a language. I devote the bulk of my attention to this conception because (i) it appears to be the dominant position, and (ii) there has been (as far as I am aware) no successful attempt to dispel the argument from meaning without use under this conception—facts which may explain why the argument is still commonly taken to pose a serious threat to Conventionalist Metasemantics, and use-based theories broadly speaking. Nonetheless, I show that even on this conception of grammar, the problem has no bite.

Let's suppose, then, that the grammar for a language is psychologically realized in the users of that language, but that it is not conventional. Rather, it has been internalized by individual speakers of the language in some non-conventional way—such as, e.g., through an innate language faculty.³⁴ That language users have internalized such a grammar is widely thought to best explain their ability to produce and interpret seemingly infinitely many expressions which have never before been uttered.³⁵ This conception of grammar does not support the argument from meaning without use for several reasons.³⁶ The first is that such a view about the productive capacities of language users undermines premise one. Recall that relative to Conventionalist Metasemantics, *use* is understood not only in terms of utterances but also expectations—the ability to interpret the utterances of others. Thus understood, the productive capacity of language users *just is* their ability to use a language; the number of expressions that language users have the ability to produce and

³⁴ This influential view of grammar is due to Noam Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1965). See Loar, “Two Theories of Meaning,” *op. cit.*, Stephen Schiffer, “Two Perspectives on Knowledge of Language,” *Philosophical Issues*, XVI, 1 (2006): 275-87. and Davies, “Foundational Issues in the Philosophy of Language,” *op. cit.* for applications of this approach to the meaning without use problem.

³⁵ This argument can be traced back at least to Frege (1884). A similar argument from the learnability of language is given by Davidson (1965).

³⁶ Thanks to an anonymous referee for pushing me to spell this out more.

interpret exactly coincides with the used fragment of their language. (It is important to note that because our understanding of *use* includes mental states as well as actions, the used fragment represents what Chomsky calls speakers' *competence*— “the speaker-hearer’s knowledge of his language”—rather than *performance*— “the actual use of language in concrete situations”.³⁷) If those productive capacities are infinite (as Chomsky argues), so is the used fragment of their language. If they are finite,³⁸ then the grammar which best explains them will not generate an unused fragment. Either way, the first premise is undermined. Granted, in the latter case there may be theoretical reasons for *idealizing* by positing a grammar which generates infinitely many expressions: First, we simply do not know the limitations of the productive capacity of language users, and so we do not know where the used fragment begins and where it ends. Second, a set of rules which delivered a finite fragment would be gerrymandered; for instance, in addition to the compositional rules that give us a general recipe for building up complex expressions from smaller ones, we’d need to include some rule that tells us to cap them at length n , where n is the length of the longest expression in the used fragment. A more elegant grammar would include those same *general* rules while *excluding* the capping rule, thereby generating an unused fragment. But notice that now we have moved to a conception of grammar that collapses back into the extrapolation view discussed above—and as we have seen, this conception undermines premise two because the unused fragment is determined indirectly by convention. Note, again, that this argument is not specific to Conventionalist Metasemantics or a conception of language as public and shared; given that a use-based metasemantic theory has the resources to predict the used fragment of a language

³⁷ Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

³⁸ See Paul Ziff, “The Number of English Sentences”, *Foundations of Language*, XI, 4 (1974): 519–532 and Geoffrey K. Pullum and Barbara C. Scholz, “Recursion and the Infinitude Claim”, in Harry van der Hulst, ed., *Recursion in Human Language* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2010) pp. 113–137 for arguments that natural languages are finite.

(where the used fragment is understood as the fragment for which users have the capacity to utter and interpret), the same arguments above will apply *mutatis mutandis* to her account. Moreover, the same arguments can be adapted to individual, private languages—insofar as we posit a grammar to explain the productive capacities of an individual, the best-fitting grammar for her private language will not generate unused expressions without extrapolation.

Insofar as we are interested in a metasemantics for *public languages*, however, there is a second reason why this conception fails to support the argument from meaning without use: Grammar so conceived should not be considered part of a *public* language, given that it plays no necessary role in an explanation of systematic communication. Such an explanation requires that members of the group share an understanding of an intentional system which they are able to exploit in order to communicate effectively. As Hawthorne's example shows, such a system need only involve expression/meaning pairs that extend up to—and only up to—the point where they have the capacity to exploit it. Granted, in addition to an explanation of *communication*, we may also want an explanation of *productivity*: the related, but importantly distinct question of how finite creatures are able to exploit such complex intentional systems. Here, the best explanation plausibly appeals to an internal representation of a compositional grammar for that system. But such an explanation is contingent; since any minimally complex language *L* (construed as a set of expression/meaning pairs) will underdetermine a grammar,³⁹ it is possible for different grammars to explain the very same capacity—the ability to produce and interpret utterances of expressions of *L* according to their assigned meanings—in different speakers⁴⁰. Indeed, for creatures with greater cognitive resources than we happen to have, rote memorization could be responsible for

³⁹ See Lewis, "Meaning Without Use: Reply to Hawthorne," *op. cit.*, Loar, *Mind and Meaning*, *op. cit.*

⁴⁰ Scott Soames, "Linguistics and Psychology," *Linguistics and Philosophy*, VII, 2 (1984): 155 – 179 makes the same point in arguing that the extrapolation conception is the one that is relevant to linguistic theory.

this capacity, with grammar falling out of the picture altogether.⁴¹ Chomsky—the leading proponent of this conception of grammar—is clear that he is offering a contingent, empirical hypothesis about a species-wide trait, a trait that cross-cuts possible users of any particular language. Lewis declined to incorporate this conception of grammar into his metasemantic analysis for this reason, claiming that:

I am ready enough to believe in internally represented grammars. But I am much less certain that there are internally represented grammars than I am that languages are used by populations; and I think it makes sense to say that languages may be used by populations even if there were no internally represented grammars. I can tentatively agree that L is used by P if and only if everyone in P possesses an internal representation of a grammar for L, if that is offered as a scientific hypothesis, but I cannot accept it as any sort of analysis of “L is used by P”, since the analysandum clearly could be true although the analysans was false.⁴²

The point is that there is explanatory work neither for a grammar nor an unused fragment in metasemantic theory which seeks necessary and sufficient conditions for public language use. This is certainly not to claim that there is no explanatory work for a grammar *whatsoever*. There is a distinct question of how are language users able to exploit such a complex intentional system, whose answer plausibly involves an internalized set of compositional rules. But this explanation is both causal and contingent—it is not a necessary condition for communication in a public language, and thus should not be considered *part* of that language within metasemantic theorizing. The upshot is that—as others have pointed out—we ought to model languages at different levels of granularity relative to different theoretical aims, adopting a pluralistic methodology which is prevalent in other special sciences.⁴³ Domains of inquiry aiming to describe the psychological

⁴¹ Cf. Schiffer, “Intention and Convention in the Theory of Meaning,” *op. cit.*

⁴² Lewis, “Languages and Language Use,” *op. cit.*, p.22. I am making a slightly different point than Lewis here. His denial that internalized grammars were part of public languages was based on issues of conceivability, while mine is based on issues concerning explanation.

⁴³ Cf. Gabe Dupre, “Idealisation in semantics: truth-conditional semantics for radical contextualists,” *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* (forthcoming).

mechanisms undergirding linguistic competence will plausibly need to model languages at a level of granularity which includes a grammar.⁴⁴ Thus, I certainly do not claim that grammar plays no role in linguistic theory broadly construed, but rather that *for the purposes of public language metasemantics*, we can—and should—make do with a coarser-grained model of language which does not include a grammar; we *can* because grammar is theoretically inert with respect to providing necessary and sufficient conditions for systematic communication among groups of agents, and we *should* because there is no principled reason for privileging any one grammar in particular.

IV. Conclusion

Returning now to the problem of meaning without use, let me sum up—and in doing so, clarify my departure from Lewis, on whose ideas I’ve leaned heavily throughout. I’ve argued that the first premise of the argument from meaning without use is motivated only by the assumption that there is a unique grammar for a public language which generates an unused fragment for that language. I’ve shown, however, that on no viable conception of a grammar does the argument go through: on the conception of grammar as extrapolated from the used fragment, the second premise—which claims that conventions of use underdetermine the meanings of unused expressions—is false. The second premise is also false on the conception of grammar as a conventional set of compositional rules. On the conception of grammar as a non-conventional psychologically internalized set of grammatical rules, the first premise is false—moreover, insofar

⁴⁴ The role of syntactic theory is not to give necessary and sufficient conditions for communication, but rather to model the grammatical rules psychologically internalized by language users. As Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, *op. cit.*, p.3 notes, this enterprise “involves a great deal of idealization. Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech-community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance”. Thus, even within the domain of syntactic theory, we should expect models of varying degrees of granularity according to the level of abstraction demanded by specific theoretical pursuits.

as we are concerned with *public languages*, grammars should not be considered part of shared languages because they play no necessary role in an explanation of systematic communication among groups of agents. Lewis, in contrast, seemed to simply take it as a data point that languages contain infinitely many expressions, and eventually became convinced that this forced him to accept the first premise of the argument. He posits grammar to get *out* of the problem of meaning without use—though I am suggesting that he would not have faced the problem to begin with if he had not tacitly accepted that public languages have a grammar.⁴⁵ Because he accepts the first premise, his solution is dependent upon coming up with a viable conception of grammar that undermines premise two.⁴⁶ I am arguing, instead, that on no viable conception of grammar does the argument from meaning without use go through—either the first premise will be false, or the second will be false. While there are, of course, other potential concerns which cannot be addressed within this space, the argument from meaning without use poses no threat to conventionalist metasemantics nor to the Reductive Project.⁴⁷ If our best hypothesis about the nature of language use is to be rejected, it should not be on this score.

⁴⁵ Perhaps he needed to appeal to grammar to get out of other indeterminacy worries concerning reference (see Williams, “Eligibility and Inscrutability,” *op. cit.*, but see Weatherson, “The Role of Naturalness in Lewis's Theory of Meaning,” *op. cit.* and Schwarz, “Against Magnetism,” *op. cit.*, for arguments that he was not terribly concerned about that issue.

⁴⁶ See Williams, “Eligibility and Inscrutability,” *ibid.* for an argument that this conception of grammar gives the wrong predictions with respect to referential expressions.

⁴⁷ One such concern might be referential indeterminacy. See Willard van Orman Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1960), Hilary Putnam, “Models and Reality,” *Journal of Symbolic Logic*, XLV, 3 (1980): 464-482, McGee (2005), Weatherson, “The Role of Naturalness in Lewis's Theory of Meaning,” *op. cit.*, Weatherson, “The Role of Naturalness in Lewis's Theory of Meaning,” *op. cit.*, and Schwarz, “Against Magnetism,” *op. cit.* for discussion. I address worries about referential indeterminacy for the conventionalist project in Keiser, “Language without Information Exchange,” *op. cit.*

