

Disagreement Lost

Think of disputes as linguistic interactions (as opposed to, say, conflicts in people's attitudes).¹ If we think of disputes in this way, it is enough for two people to have a dispute over the truth of a given utterance that one of them makes that utterance and the other says 'that's not true', 'that's false', 'you're wrong', or something along those lines. Typically, when two people have a dispute over the truth of an assertoric utterance, that is a symptom of a conflict between their beliefs about the facts they take the disputed utterance to be about. For example, suppose that Anna and John are both competent users of English, that Anna sincerely utters 'grass is green', and that John sincerely replies 'no, it isn't' or 'that's not true'. It seems natural to think that Anna and John's dispute betrays a conflict between Anna and John's beliefs about the color of grass: by uttering 'grass is green', Anna expressed her belief that grass is green; by uttering 'that's not true', John expressed his belief that grass is not green. In this sense, Anna and John's dispute is *not merely verbal*.

The notion of a non-merely-verbal dispute has played important roles in philosophy and linguistics. For example, authors like Lasersohn (2005), MacFarlane (2007, 2014), Stephenson (2007) have attacked certain forms of contextualism about predicates about personal taste by appealing to the notion of a non-merely-verbal dispute or disagreement. According to them, if certain forms of contextualism about predicates of personal taste are true, then if two people have a dispute over the truth of 'apples are tasty', their dispute is no more substantive than a dispute between someone who utters 'my name is Sandy' and someone who utters 'my name is not Sandy'. Cappelen and Lepore (2005) have also argued against contextualism by appealing to the notion of a genuine or non-merely-verbal disagreement. According to them, if contextualism is true, "it would be a miracle if speakers in different contexts were ever able to agree, disagree, or more generally, share contents" (p. 124). And since, according to them, cross-contextual disagreements are very common, we should reject contextualism. Call general arguments of this form "arguments from lost disagreement".

This paper shows that arguments from lost disagreement affect contextualists and anti-contextualists alike. In particular, I argue that, given the view of non-merely-verbal disputes presupposed in arguments from lost disagreement, non-merely-verbal disputes are extremely rare regardless of the truth of contextualism. The argument is this:

- (P1) **Disagreement in Content:** A dispute between A and B over the truth of U is not merely verbal if and only if there is a proposition A and B both believe to be U's truth-conditional content.²
- (P2) **Variance:** Nearly every utterance is such that there is no proposition that more than one language user believes to be that utterance's truth-conditional content; therefore,
- (C) **Lost Disagreement:** Nearly every utterance is such that any dispute over its truth is merely verbal.

Lost Disagreement follows straightforwardly from the premises. Disagreement in Content attempts to capture the kind of conflict that characterizes non-merely-verbal disputes. Roughly, according to Disagreement in Content, a dispute over the truth of a given utterance is not merely verbal just in case there is a proposition the parties to the dispute take that utterance to express, which one of the parties

¹ Cf. Cappelen and Hawthorne's (2009) distinction between disagreement as an activity and disagreement as a state.

² Hirsch (1993, p.181) endorses a similar characterization of non-merely-verbal disputes in terms of believed equivalences between sentences rather than in terms of beliefs about an utterance's truth-conditions. Sidelle (2007, p.89) takes a similar characterization to be the standard picture of non-verbal disputes.

accepts and the other rejects. Variance, on the other hand, is a thesis about ordinary speaker's beliefs about the truth-conditional contents of ordinary utterances. Assuming that the proposition literally expressed by an assertoric utterance is just that utterance's truth-conditional content, Variance roughly states that, for nearly every utterance, there is no proposition that more than one language user takes that utterance to literally express.

The main point in favor of *variance* is as follows. For nearly every assertoric utterance, there are enormously many—often, uncountably many—different propositions any language user could easily have believed to be that utterance's truth-conditional content. Given the vast number of equally eligible truth-condition candidates each of those utterance has, and absent further explanation, it would be extremely unlikely for any two language users to have the exact same truth-conditions.

For example, suppose *F* is a predicate whose application depends on an object's properties along one or more continuous dimensions—e.g. height, weight, degree of similarity to a paradigmatic member of a certain class, etc.—and *j* is a proper name. For any language user, there will be a huge number of extremely similar and equally natural (or otherwise eligible) properties—each corresponding to a slightly different cutoff point along one or more of the dimensions on which the application of *F* depends—such that that language user could easily have believed that that utterance has the truth-conditional content that *j* (the object denoted by *j*) has that property. If, for example, a language user believes that *F* expresses the property corresponding to the cutoff point *x* along one of the dimensions relevant to the application of *F*, she could just as easily have believed that *F* expresses the property corresponding to the slightly different cutoff point *x'*, that it expresses the property corresponding to the slightly different cutoff point *x''*, etc. Now, take an arbitrary utterance *U* of '⌈*j* is *F*⌋'. Given the huge number of properties any language user could easily have taken *F* to express, it would be extremely unlikely for there to be a property such that more than one language user believes that *U* has the truth-conditional content that *j* has that property. Accordingly, it would be extremely unlikely for a dispute over the truth of *U* to count as non-merely-verbal by the lights of Disagreement in Content.

I examine various potential replacements for Disagreement in Content, and argue that they don't fully solve the problem. Chief among those alternatives is:

Factual Conflicts: If *A* utters *U*, and *B* disputes the truth of *U*, *A* and *B*'s dispute over the truth of *U* is not merely verbal if and only if, where *P* is the proposition *A* believes to be *U*'s truth-conditional content, and *Q* is the proposition *B* believes to be *U*'s truth-conditional content, *P* and $\neg Q$ cannot both be true.

As I argue, even if we substitute Disagreement in Content with Factual Conflicts, non-merely-verbal disputes will still be relatively rare. If Factual Conflicts is true, in order for a dispute over the truth of *U* not to be merely verbal, the proposition the utterer associates with *U* must entail the proposition the other disputant associates with *U*. Yet this situation is still rather unlikely to obtain.³

Towards the end of the paper I outline an account of disagreement that puts contextualists in a position to account for the existence of genuine cross-contextual disagreements.

³ Let *P* be the proposition the utterer associates with *U*, and *Q* be the proposition the person that denies the truth of *U* associates with *U*. If there are *n*-many propositions any language user could easily have taken to be *U*'s truth-conditional content, and those propositions are strictly ordered, the chance that *P* entails *Q* (assuming that all those propositions are equally likely to be picked) is $\frac{1+2+\dots+n}{n^2}$ where $1+2+\dots+n$ is the number of choices of *P* and *Q* such that the former entails the latter, and n^2 is the number of possible combinations of Anna and John's choices. As the value of *n* increases, the chance that Anna's standard is greater than or equal to John's decreases, approaching $\frac{1}{2}$. Thus, given Factual Conflicts and a sufficiently high number of truth-conditional content candidates for *U* ordered by logical strength, it will be relatively likely for Anna and John's dispute to be merely verbal—consider, for instance, that when *n*=10, the chance that *P* entails *Q* is 0.55.