Temporal Externalism and the Normativity of Linguistic Practice

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Abstract

Temporal externalists expand Putnam's and Burge's semantic externalisms to argue that later uses of words transform the semantic significance (extension or meaning) of earlier uses. Conflicting intuitions about temporal externalism often turn on different conceptions of linguistic practice, which have mostly not been thematically explicated. I defend a version of temporal externalism that replaces the familiar regularist and normative-regulist conceptions of linguistic practice or use. This alternative identifies practices neither by regularities of use, nor by determinate norms governing their constituent performances, but by the ways those performances bear upon and are accountable to one another. Performances are intelligible as part of a larger pattern of practice, but different performances extend that pattern in partially conflicting ways. The essentially anaphoric concepts of "issues" and "stakes" allow us to talk about how alternative extensions of past performance conflict or otherwise mis-align (what is "at issue" in those performances), and what differences it would make to extend the practice in one way rather than another (what is "at stake"). The result is to recognize both the interdependence of linguistic performances, and the open texture of concepts, by situating them within broader patterns of discursive interaction with changing circumstances.

Keywords

temporal externalism - semantic externalism - linguistic practice - normativity - meaning - concepts - words - discursive practice

My first encounter with the literature on temporal externalism\(^1\) resembled the situation of Molière's M. Jourdain, who was astonished to discover that he had been speaking prose all of his life. I saw that I had long been a temporal externalist. Since I arrived at this position by a somewhat different philosophical route than the canonical history of the topic, however, it is useful to explore how the standard arguments, intuitions, and examples from the debates over temporal externalism appear from this different orientation.

Temporal externalism emerged within the philosophy of language, in a line of descent from Putnam, Kripke, and Burge on "external" physical and social determinants of the meaning and extension of linguistic expressions and utterances.\(^2\) "Temporal externalism" refers to a family of views according to which the meaning and/or extension of an utterance on one occasion is partly dependent upon past and future uses of the same words. The earliest presentations of now-canonical examples mostly treated temporal externalism as an untenable consequence that should be circumvented by other adjustments in accounts of meaning.\(^3\) Subsequent proponents of temporal externalism recognize that the notion has often seemed highly counter-intuitive, and many of their arguments on its behalf have accepted the burden of intuition-shifting; critics claim that the burden has not been met. In the face of such clashing intuitions, another perspective on the issue may be useful.

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3 Wilson, "Predicate Meets Property"; Donnellan, "Kripke and Putnam on Natural Kind Terms".
I arrived at my own understanding of the temporality of meaning through work in the philosophy of science, in which I have sought to shift attention from scientific knowledge toward scientific practice. This work has been informed by critical attention to other discussions of “practices,” within the philosophy of the social sciences, interdisciplinary science studies, and the “social practice” tradition in the philosophy of language. This orientation provides an interesting perspective on the discussion of temporal externalism, since “linguistic practice” has often been a pivotal but under-analyzed concept in much of that literature.

Several examples of appeals to linguistic practice within the temporal externalism debates indicate my point. Stoneham, for example, attributes the impasse of intuitions about temporal externalism to alternative conceptions of linguistic practice: “[Brown’s] argument here exploits a particular conception of linguistic practice which can, and has been, denied. If Brown is right about linguistic practices, then her argument is very powerful.”

The notion of a linguistic practice plays a different and even more central role for George Wilson and Jackman. Both argue that the very idea of language as a practice, rather than a specific, independently defensible concept of linguistic practice, provides the grounding for temporal externalism. Consider George Wilson’s conclusion:

> It is not the case that our actual practice presupposes a conceptually prior version of [the assumption of sameness of extensions over time] and lies in danger of being revealed as groundless unless some independent justification for the assumption can be found. It is our practice itself that constitutes the foundation for the principle, and that practice constitutes, as it were, a kind of division of linguistic labor over time.

Jackman similarly concludes that “such ‘temporally sensitive’ ascriptions are the result of the fact that, when using a language, we understand ourselves as taking part in a shared, temporally extended practice.”

Tanesini argues that an adequate conception and defense of temporal externalism depends upon adopting the latter, normative conception of linguistic practice.

What work is supposed to be done by the notion of linguistic practice or practices in these discussions, and can the concept carry the load? The underlying notion, surely, is that the meaning and extension of linguistic terms is determined by their actual use. Appeals to linguistic practice(s) are gestures toward spelling out what the relevant sense of ‘use’ ought to be. Yet we cannot presume without argument that there is a coherent notion of practice available to satisfy this demand. Stephen Turner has provocatively argued that a wide range of appeals to the notion of a “practice” in social theory and science studies have been pseudo-explanatory. His broader reflection on the fate of “the social theory of practices” ought to be at least mildly disturbing, in light of the multiple uses of the concept I have just highlighted within the temporal externalism literature:

The idea of ‘practice’ and its cognates has this odd kind of promissory utility. They promise that they can be turned into something more precise. But the value of the concepts is destroyed when they are pushed in the direction of meeting their promise.... The project itself is never

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6 Wilson, “Satisfaction Through the Ages,” 96.

7 Jackman, “We Live Forwards But Understand Backwards”, 173.

8 Jackman, “We Live Forwards But Understand Backwards”, 160–64.


10 Tanesini, “Temporal Externalism”. 
challenged, but it never succeeds either, at least in the way it would succeed if the structure of the beast were gradually being revealed. Instead we get, so to speak, different kinds of scans of the beast, each of which cannot be improved beyond a certain level of fuzziness.\footnote{11}

Turner, Paul Roth, and others are also suspicious of the conceptions of normative governance that are often linked to the very idea of a practice.\footnote{12} I have elsewhere provided general overviews of what is to be learned from this extensive literature on “practices” and their normativity and will not try to reproduce that here.\footnote{13} Instead, I will take a critical look at some points of intersection between the appeals to linguistic practice within the literature on temporal externalism, and the broader literature on “practices” and norms that Turner assessed so pessimistically.

The concept of a linguistic practice has often aligned closely with the concept of a linguistic community.\footnote{14} This alignment is a central feature of Mark Wilson’s original thought experiment, in which the practice of using the word ‘ave’ to refer to flying things that may or may not include airplanes stipulatively belonged to an entire geographically isolated and otherwise relevantly homogeneous community.\footnote{15} Whether these people constitute a community because they use language in similar ways, or whether their uses of words belong together because they are performed by members of the same spatially and temporally contiguous community, was left ambiguous. This ambiguity is not innocuous. It then becomes possible to construct scenarios in which maintaining sameness of extensions over time requires one either to introduce artificial, synchronically indiscernible divisions between linguistic communities whose word uses later diverged, or else to assimilate divergent uses of words within a single linguistic practice. If temporal externalism requires that we preserve sameness of extension over time by reading subsequent splits between linguistic communities back into the language and social life of their common ancestors (some of whom may have linguistic descendants in both communities), so much the worse for temporal externalism.\footnote{16}

We should therefore look more closely at the connection between the notion of a “practice” and that of a “community.” The latter notion often connotes something in common among its members. In the case of linguistic communities, the obvious commonality would be that their members speak the same language. But of course, sameness or difference of language across time is precisely what is at issue in the discussions of temporal externalism. Are we using the same word, ‘gold,’ that John Locke used, or merely the same word-form with a different extension? Do we speak the same language as earlier users of the same word-forms, or should we understand the language (and the extensions of its terms) to have changed over time?

One approach to these issues would be to identify a practice as some regularity of performance that is criterial for determining what constitutes the relevant community. I presume this is what Tanesini refers to as “the whole pattern of use” of an expression.\footnote{17} This way of talking about practices more generally has attracted a wide range of theorists, from Pierre Bourdieu to Philip Kitcher.\footnote{18}

Here, however, we encounter one of the important lessons to be learned from the social theory of practices. If a practice is identified by some underlying regularity of performance or presupposition among members of a community, then there are no practices. Partly this is because practices must accommodate errors in performance. A further difficulty is that training, and the identification and correction of errors, are insufficient to establish anything like a
regularity that could be criterial for participation in the practice. Moreover, such a conception of practices is too rigid. There can be disagreements, or simply unrecognized divergences, among practitioners or their performances, without thereby undercutting the identity of the practice. That is especially clear in the case of explicit disagreement, since to disagree about how some practice ought to be performed requires recognition that the disagreement is internal to the practice. Such disagreement or divergence in its constituent performances can also be diachronic, since a practice can change without necessarily dissolving its identity.

These considerations point toward an alternative conception of a practice, as identified by its governing norms rather than by its performative regularities (I shall refer to this as a "regulist" conception of practices, in contrasted to the regularist conception introduced in the previous paragraph). Tanesini makes this distinction central to her taxonomy of temporal externalisms, and defends a regulist conception of linguistic practices, as governed by socially instituted norms whose authority is retroactive. I am quite sympathetic to thinking about practices in terms of normativity rather than constitutive regularities, but we need to ask more carefully what it is for a norm to be socially instituted, and how its institution comes to be binding upon subsequent or prior performances of the practice. Tanesini avoids confronting this issue by arguing hypothetically: she concludes that if a norm has been instituted, then its authority applies retroactively, while recognizing that not all claims about meaning successfully institute norms. Yet there is a significant tension here between the conception of definite norms being instituted with retroactive authority, and her recognition that concepts are and should be open textured.

What are we to say, for example, about cases of retroactive institution of norms that are then subsequently revised on the basis of further novel experience? The standard examples in the temporal externalism literature are only carried through a single iteration of novel applications, but the history of science is replete with concepts like ‘acid’ or ‘gene’ that have undergone multiple further articulations to accommodate further empirical discoveries and theoretical reconceptualizations. Are we to say in such cases that a norm was successfully instituted, and applied retroactively, but subsequently revised or repealed? If so, it is hard to know what to make of the retroactive authority of a later-retroactively-repealed norm. Do we say instead that the retroactive force of the subsequent legislative act shows that any subsequently revised semantic norm had not been successfully instituted in the first place? Recognition of the open texture of our own concepts would then commit us to some degree of skepticism concerning the legislative authority of our own meaning claims, since they always remain open to retroactive repeal in light of novel experience. Neither response is attractive.

There is a general problem here. Recognizing that concept use always remains open-textured is in conflict with the demand that a practice be identifiable by some definitely specifiable norm that governs it. Is there any way to understand linguistic practices as normatively constituted, while also maintaining their open texture? Yes. The key is to recognize two different ways to conceive of a practice as normatively constituted. Most philosophers writing about normativity have tacitly assumed that if a practice is normative, it must involve accountability to some more or less definite norm that somehow governs various performances subject to it. Tanesini seems to follow this tendency, by identifying what I am calling a "regulist" conception of practices as a normative conception. In the case of semantic norms, it then becomes an interesting problem to understand how such norms are actually instituted, and what constitutes their normative authority and force. When Wilson's Druids include airplanes within the extension of 'ave', presumably the normative force of this inclusion comes from the fact that this is how members of this community now speak, and that one ought to use the word 'ave' in this way in order to participate in this linguistic practice. But this very consideration is the principal

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19 The criterial or otherwise normative role of the pattern is crucial to this argument. D. Dennett, "Real Patterns", _Journal of Philosophy_ 89 (1991), 27–51, has forcefully reminded us that real patterns in the world need not be anywhere close to exceptionless; patterns can stand out clearly despite background noise. In that case, however, one needs some other way to identify the relevant domain, and the elements of which possible patterns are composed. Moreover, it is one thing to agree that there is a pattern in some set of performances, and another matter altogether to identify which pattern that is, and how the same pattern would be correctly continued. For more extensive discussion of the general issue of discerning elements of patterns as independent of the patterns they compose, see J. Haugeland, _Having Thought_ (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), ch. 11. For more extensive discussion of words as the "elements" of which patterns of linguistic practice is composed, see below, and also G. Ebbs, _Truth and Words_ (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), and D. Kaplan, "Words", _Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, 64_ (Supplementary) (1990), 93–119.

20 M. Wilson, _Wandering Significance: An Essay on Conceptual Behavior_ (Oxford: Oxford University Press), provides many illuminating examples of scientific concepts whose detailed application to further instances requires patchwork revision or extension of its original uses and formulations, including concepts such as force in classical mechanics that are widely regarded as systematically unified, due to insufficient attention to the details of their application and use.
source of intuitions contrary to temporal externalism. For if the only reason to include airplanes within the extension of ‘ave’ is to accommodate what Druid-speakers actually do, it becomes hard to see why that decision has normative authority over past practice. After all, there is an obvious sense in which that is not what Druid-speakers did before any of them first encountered airplanes. In the context of conceptions of linguistic practice, the arguments for and against temporal externalism would then turn on whether we should regard the history of ‘ave’-use in Wilson’s thought experiment as involving two distinct linguistic practices, or one continuous one. On that point, intuitions differ.

Here it becomes useful to consider an alternative way of understanding a practice as normatively constituted, which at various places I call a “normative” conception of practices, in opposition to both regularist and regulist conceptions. Instead of identifying a practice by the accountability of all of its performances to a specifiable norm (which may not yet have been definitely settled or fully specified), we can identify the practice by the mutual normative accountability of its performances to one another. For example, the historical continuity of the Druid language provides the setting for understanding its performances as mutually accountable to one another. Whatever else Druid-speakers are doing when they utter ‘ave’, they understand one another as uttering a word that has been used before, and can be used again, in ways that are intelligible in relation to one another.

I talk about such mutual intelligibility among performances of a practice in terms of what is “at issue” and “at stake” in that practice. Practitioners’ performances are accountable for various issues that arise in the ongoing development of the practice, e.g., how one ought to accommodate encounters with novel entities like airplanes in sustaining subsequent iterations of the same practice. They are accountable to what is at stake in the ongoing evolution of the practice. This latter point is more easily understood in relation to the

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23 Gold is an especially interesting case, because of the long history of conceptual adjudication of this term’s applicability. Our current appeal to atomic number as indicating the number of protons in the nucleus of an atom is part of a longer history, which first identifies gold as a material whose identity (and difference from cheaper imitations) matters due to its combined monetary and decorative roles, and has an extensive subsequent history of procedural and conceptual relations marking out the extension of the concept. Archimedes’s canonical recognition of gold’s density as an identifying mark (alongside dissolution only in aqua regia, which helped to generate the example for temporal externalism of whether platinum is “white gold”) has at least one intermediate successor in the appeal to atomic weight, which only later was supplanted by atomic number. ‘Gold’ has a scientific and cultural/economic history at least as complex as ‘acid’ or ‘gene’, I venture to suggest.

24 Note that the identification of these terms as a nomenclature for metals is not an independent characterization of the issue, but a further spelling-out of what is at stake in the issue of whether to use one term or two. Under the different counterfactual history in which platinum was referred to as one of two kinds of ‘gold’ used in jewelry, we might then say that the choice reflects what is at stake in the nomenclature for decorative-craft materials.
proposed by Brandom.\textsuperscript{25} Logical vocabulary has an expressive role of allowing us to make explicit, as a claim that we can reason about and assess, the propriety of something we do. Thus, the logical conditional allows us to say, and reason about, what we do when we make an inference. Propositional attitude terms and their associated prepositions allow us to make explicit the differences between commitments we undertake and commitments we attribute to others: “S believes of a that p.” Foucault’s use of the term ‘power’ also plays this expressive-logical role, enabling us to talk about how actions reconfigure the field of possible actions of others.\textsuperscript{26} In a similar way, the terms “at issue” and “at stake” express the intentional and normative directedness of performances of a practice toward “something” (an issue of divergence or conflict among performances, and what is at stake in settling that issue in one way or another) that potentially outruns any particular expression of what it is.\textsuperscript{27}

These two expressions are essentially anaphoric concepts. Just as pronouns always refer to a prior token use of an antecedent singular term, these two terms always refer to antecedent patterns of performance and their directedness toward some indefinitely open future pattern of activity. We can say what we think is at issue and at stake in, for example, conflicting intentions about how to apply a familiar term in novel circumstances, while allowing that alternative, inconsistent formulations are also attempts to formulate the same issue or stakes (i.e., referring to the same antecedent directedness). Such alternative formulations are accountable to the ongoing use of the term, and what

\textsuperscript{25} Brandon discusses the expressive role of logical vocabulary throughout Making It Explicit (Harvard University Press, 1994), and argues that semantic concepts, and ascriptions of propositional attitudes belong to a broader sense of logical vocabulary as enabling us to say what we otherwise could only do, but not talk about.

\textsuperscript{26} For a more extended discussion of Foucault’s concept of power as having the kind of expressive role that Brandon attributes to logical vocabulary in the broad sense, see J. Rouse, “Power/Knowledge,” in G. Gutting, ed., Cambridge Companion to Foucault, Second Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 166–199).

\textsuperscript{27} This talk of an expressive role for meaning-claims is an alternative way to fulfill Tanesini’s claim that they are normative rather than descriptive. Tanesini suggests that such claims purport to be legislative, and presumably are legislative when successful. I am arguing that meaning-claims do not institute or legislate norms for use, but instead serve as defeasible expressions of what is already at issue and at stake in the use of the terms characterized in those claims. Ebbs’ (Truth and Words) distinction between a performative understanding of words and a descriptive-explanatory understanding marks a difference in stance or location that is closely related to my distinction between an expressive and a legislative understanding of meaning-claims. In both cases, we are trying to understand linguistic practice and its normativity from within.

is at issue and at stake in the larger pattern of practices in which that use is embedded. Choices may be and usually are made unreflectively whether or not to apply a familiar term in novel circumstances. Yet such choices are never arbitrary, never just “making things up as we go” in Ebbs’ succinct formulation, if the continuation of a linguistic practice is to constitute a meaningful use of words. Meaning, on this view, arises from the accountability of those choices to how it matters to the ongoing practice (and other practices with which it is entangled) to have made them in one way rather than another, which is another way to talk about what is at stake in those choices.

Part of my underlying claim is that a parallel mistake is involved both in efforts to cash out what is at issue and at stake in various practices either in terms of non-normative facts about what people do in various settings or their de facto dispositions or preferences, or by appeal to determinate norms or “normative facts” that are somehow, mysteriously, in place as authoritative. Both views assume that either one must take normative claims in a realist way as referring to determinate norms, or else normativity must be somehow reducible to regularities. By understanding the ways in which performances of a practice are constitutively related to one another anaphorically as aiming to contribute to a common pattern whose configuration is not fully determinate (because futurally open-ended, as continuations and corrections of past performance), one can avoid both of these problematic alternatives. Thus in Wilson’s classic example, when one recognizes a circumscribed practice like the use of the word ‘ave’ as embedded within a broader nexus of Druid life, one does not thereby reduce normative issues and stakes to actual dispositions and preferences, nor does one posit a norm that somehow specifies the term’s meaning or extension throughout that entire period. One instead recognizes that the ongoing adjudication of the issue of how to use the term turns not only on assessments of prior use, but also projections of their continuation in future patterns, whose continuation in one way rather than another makes a difference to other performances and practices. What is at issue in this practice is thus intertwined with a wider range of interconnected issues and stakes, in ways that we can talk about, reason about, and assess, without ever having an already-determine norm in play. Social practices, including linguistic practices, are temporally extended patterns of performance whose instances are interdependent not only with other present and past performances, but with the open-ended continuation of the same pattern amidst changing circumstances (including changes in ongoing performance).

How does this constitutively-temporal conception of the normativity of linguistic practice help us respond to the original clash of philosophical intuitions over temporal externalism? The issue, we have seen, is whether the
uses of terms like ‘ave’ or ‘gold’ across their applications to novel circumstances constitute a single, continuing practice, or two distinct practices, according to whether the terms have the same or different extensions (or meanings) before and after the initial encounter with novel circumstances. My response is, I believe, closely in accord with that of Ebbs, although I like to think that it gives independent and perhaps more encompassing reasons for his claim that we should give priority to our practical judgments of sameness of extension in a regularist sense of ‘use’.

Consider what it is to use a word (setting aside for the moment the additional, crucial complications arising from the role of words as constituents of sentences or judgments). I utter a sound, make a mark, or form some other discernible, repeatable gestalt. I have not yet said a word, however, unless my utterance is understandable as an instance of an extant linguistic practice. In that respect, word-use has a holistic dependence upon past and future uses of the same word. To use a word is to utter an expression that has been used before and can be used again. The dependence of any one use of the word upon others is holistic, in the sense that there is no originating point in the chain of uses of one and the same word where its meaning-content is already present and available for inheritance by subsequent users. Only when the use of the word is reasonably well established in an ongoing practice is its normative status of having been an utterance of a meaningful word retroactively conferred upon it by its continuity with subsequent use. This continuity is not, and cannot be, a de facto regularity in those uses. That is so in part because any such regularity would be open to gerrymandering of a sort implicitly recognized in the standard examples that motivate temporal externalism. Which regularity was instantiated by past uses of a term is open to bifurcation through subsequent application of the word in novel circumstances. More fundamentally, a mere regularity of use is insufficient, because the defeasible presumption that one is using the same word, with the same extension as in past uses, is constitutive of its normative status as word-use in the first place. If one's use of the word-form is not to be understood in its continuity with past and future uses of the same word, it is not clear in what sense we could claim to be using a word. Sustaining the normative status of word-forms as words, with an extension to which their use is accountable, is what is at stake in the default presumption of the same-ness of extensions over time.

A thoroughly normative temporal externalism about meaning thus falls out as a straightforward consequence of what I in turn take to be fairly straightforward assumptions about the normativity of linguistic practice. The status of an utterance or inscription as a meaningful word is established and sustained by its previous and subsequent use as a word with the same presumed extension or other semantic roles. It might be objected, however, that this argument only establishes temporal externalism for a distinctively limited set of circumstances, while undermining temporal externalism as a more general thesis. When a new word is first introduced (or an old word is applied in new circumstances, as in Wilson’s ‘ave’ example), the argument might go, its extension in the initial instances of such use is indeed retroactively determined by its subsequent uptake within ongoing linguistic practice (for example, it could not yet have been clear at the outset whether the initial application of ‘ave’ to airplanes was a mistake or a successful innovation; that was determined by the subsequent uptake). Once such use has been stabilized, however, on this objection to temporal externalism, the word’s meaning and extension are determined by its present pattern of use, such that any divergence from that pattern marks the introduction of a new word, with a new extension. Has the
original clash of intuitions about temporal externalism then simply returned in a new guise?

No. Here is where I think the advantages of a normative over a regulist conception of linguistic practice become evident. To what do I commit myself when I use a word that already has a place within an extant linguistic practice? The regulist concludes that I commit myself to some specifiably circumscribed meaning and extension that already governs the use of the word within that practice, even if it has not yet been recognized as such.32 A normative conception suggests instead that I commit myself to whatever meaning and extension other uses of the same word invoked (the commitment, that is, is to continuity with other uses rather than to some specific explication of that continuity). The open texture of concepts is thereby built directly into our understanding of linguistic practice.

The open texture of linguistic practice is important for at least three reasons. First, it accommodates the wide variety of ordinary uses of terms, which include figurative and playful uses as well as mistakes and innovations. These uses inherit their significance from past uses, while also partly transforming the significance of those uses. Moreover, it need not be fully clear in all cases where the border between literal and figurative or serious and playful uses lies, or better, that there is such a clear border. Second, it gets matters right concerning semantic skepticism. A regulist conception of the normativity of meaning seems to leave open the possibility that the presumption that some definitely specifiable norms govern the diverse uses of the same words might be false.33 To be sure, there are cases in which that presumption is false, as Ebbs notes in the case of ‘robin’ in British and American English. Those cases can only be identified, however, against the background of massive continuity in other cases.34 The presumption of sameness of extension over time, that is, is not generally defeasible, but is instead a constitutive presumption of linguistic practice.

Third, but perhaps most important, the centrality of open texture allows for a more adequate understanding of the normative authority and force of linguistic practices. Tanesini’s rhetorical resort to hypothetical discussion of the legislative institution of semantic norms is instructive on this score. If we think of meaning-claims as legislative, it is hard to understand how such legislative claiming could ever be authoritative. If subsequent practitioners were to violate the instituted norms, after all, it is unclear why that should be regarded as an error or violation of established norms, rather than a correction or an innovation. A normative conception of linguistic practice answers that question in terms of the constitutive temporal extendedness of linguistic practice. A meaning-claim gains its normative authority now from the difference it would make to subsequent practice to respect and enforce the norms it expresses. Of course, different speakers propose to use and understand words in different ways (often simply by so using them). What makes some correct and some incorrect is their retroactively applicable significance for subsequent discursive practice. In this respect, we can say of the normativity of meaning-claims (and, mutatis mutandis, of the various uses of words that imply such claims) what Robert Brandom said about the normativity of truth claims:

Sorting out who should be counted as correct... is a messy retail business of assessing the comparative authority of competing evidential and inferential claims... There is no bird's-eye view above the fray of

32 I say “specifiably circumscribed” rather than “definite” extension to accommodate the version of regulist temporal externalism advocated by Jackman, “We Live Forward But Understand Backward,” discussed further below.
33 In this respect, recall Tanesini’s careful hypothetical formulation that “if a norm has been instituted, then its authority is retroactive” (“Temporal Externalism,” 12–13) She thereby accommodates the fact that not all meaning-claims institute norms, but also may thereby too readily accommodate the possibility that none do.
34 G. Ebbs, “Learning from Others” Nous 36 (2002), 545–549, argues that Davidson’s Principle of Charity is seriously mistaken, in encouraging interpreters to ascribe differences in idiolect to other speakers in order to maximize truth, at the cost of abandoning too readily the practice of taking speakers’ words at face value (i.e., attributing to them the same conditions-of-satisfaction that the interpreter attributes to her own uses of the same word). If Ebbs is right, however, there is an analogue to the Principle of Charity in his own account: we are only able to attribute occasional divergent uses of what at face value seem to be the same word, as we do with standard British and American uses of ‘robin’, against the background of a presumed massive continuity in “practical judgments of satisfaction” across participants in the same linguistic practice. Moreover, I argue in a different context (Rouse, How Scientific Practices Matter, ch. 5–6) that it is a mistake to regard Davidsonian radical interpretation as an interpretation of the idiolect of a speaker, in a distinct idiolect employed as a metalanguage. We should instead understand radical interpretation as an explication from within of the discursive practice that encompasses both the interpreted and the interpreter’s linguistic performances and actions. Even if Ebbs is right to object to promiscuous attribution of differences of idiolect in order to maximize truth (and I think he is right about that), the Principle of Charity does still apply within the interpretation of these encompassing discursive practices. Ebbs’s argument against Davidson is thus not against interpretive charity, but against positing individual idiolects as the locus wherein charity is applied.
competing claims from which those that deserve to prevail can be identified. [Moreover,] the status any [proposed] governing principles as probative is always at issue in the same way.\textsuperscript{35}

The answer to the question of which ones should prevail always lies ahead of us (with retroactive authority) in what becomes of the practice as a result, and what difference that makes in turn to subsequent practice. What is thereby instituted is not a determinate semantic norm, but a field of expressive possibilities and their significance.

Jackman has attempted to build the open texture of concepts into a conception of linguistic practice in a different way, however.\textsuperscript{36} It is instructive to consider briefly both how Jackman’s account differs from mine (and from Ebbs’s) and what is at stake in that difference. Jackman proposes what amounts to a hybrid of regulist and regularist conceptions of linguistic practice. He is first and foremost a regulist temporal externalist, for whom future uses of terms have something like retroactive legislative authority. That retroactive authority is confined, however, within the scope of the accessible equilibria in ongoing patterns of use of a term, where an equilibrium is accessible “if it both preserves a sufficient number of entrenched beliefs and applications, and has no competitor that preserves significantly more”.\textsuperscript{37} The hope, presumably, is to use regularities in past uses of a term to provide a principled basis for distinguishing those cases in which a new concept is introduced with a different articulation of linguistic practices. To give some salient examples, do our current uses of ‘electron’ or ‘gene’ preserve “a sufficient number of entrenched beliefs and applications” from J. J. Thomson’s or Wilhelm Johannsen’s original invocations of these terms to count as part of the same linguistic practice? No doubt with sufficient subtlety in defining what counts as an entrenched belief or application, such examples can be accommodated, but at a cost. What matters to the continuity of the relevant linguistic practices is not the extent of constancy of belief and application in the practice over time. What matters instead are the interrelations among the various uses of a term over time, and the constitutive sense that something has been continuously at stake in the development of the practice in which they occur. The stakes remain constant despite shifting formulations and recognitions of what they are and how they are best expressed. In many cases, no doubt, fidelity to what is at stake in a linguistic practice will maintain considerable continuity in belief and application over time. Yet when an ongoing history of talk and interaction reveals sufficiently novel and unanticipated circumstances sufficiently often, a genuinely continuous linguistic practice is likely to escape the boundaries set by those equilibria accessible from some of its earlier moments. Scientific practices are among the cases especially likely to burst the bounds of past equilibria of belief and application, even while maintaining continuity through their development over time as an ongoing practice.\textsuperscript{38} The world keeps confronting us with unexpected possibilities, which we must accommodate within scientific practice. We usually do so without giving up what has previously been accomplished, although sometimes that requires significant reinterpretation of what we meant all along.

One source of resistance to temporal externalism may dissolve with this recognition that the retroactive determination of semantic content reflects the accommodation of the world’s variety and recalcitrance within ongoing and continuous linguistic practices. We may bridle at the thought that subsequent choices by other speakers in response to new circumstances partially determine what I mean now. It is not their choices that are authoritative over my linguistic performances, however, but the stakes I share with them in linguistic articulation and communication. Subsequent developments and discoveries in linguistic and other practices may place those stakes in a new and previously unforeseeable light, but later responses to such developments are subject to comparable normative constraint. On the other hand, temporal externalism does not thereby reduce to the more familiar material and social externalisms. It emphasizes the continuity of discursive practice over time as a normative concern to which its performers and performances are accountable, and recognizes the ineliminable role of historical contingency in shaping the issues and stakes to which discursive practice is accountable. The circumstances to which linguistic practices are accountable are not the world from a God’s-eye position “outside” it, but a contingent and evolving history of


\textsuperscript{36} Jackman, “We Live Forwards But Understand Backwards”.

\textsuperscript{37} Jackman, “We Live Forwards But Understand Backwards”, 160.

\textsuperscript{38} As I noted before, Wilson, *Wandering Significance*, is a treasure trove of illustrations of the ubiquity of such shifting conceptual content in the sciences.
discursive interaction that articulates both the circumstances to which it belongs and the stakes it engages.

I note by way of a brief conclusion that part of the reason for understanding linguistic practices as normative in the sense I have presented here, and more specifically for understanding scientific practices as normative, is to arrive at a suitably naturalistic conception of such practices. My temporal externalism about normativity generally, and not merely about semantic norms, shares a broad commitment to naturalism with the origins of temporal externalism in the semantic externalism of Putnam and Burge. My view nevertheless requires some significant revisions to most familiar conceptions of what it is to understand some domain naturalistically. The conception of linguistic practice I am proposing situates discursive articulation in the midst of ongoing causal interaction with speakers' surroundings, including the linguistic and other performances of other speakers as a central and integral part of those surroundings, and does not require appeal to anything other than those complex patterns of mutual causal and normative entanglement. In recent work, I show how to understand that entanglement in evolutionary biological terms as a form of behavioral niche construction. Why such a conception of linguistic and scientific practice is genuinely naturalistic, by accommodating what has been at issue and at stake in a long history of debates over naturalism, is nevertheless a story that must be reserved for another occasion.39

39 My initial attempt to sketch the outlines of such a story about the contested commitment to understand science and philosophy naturalistically was developed in Rouse, How Scientific Practices Matter. The constructive naturalistic program that interprets linguistic use and understanding, and conceptual normativity more generally, as an evolutionary biological phenomenon of ongoing behavioral niche construction is further developed in J. Rouse, Articulating the World: Conceptual Understanding and the Scientific Image (forthcoming).