The Inquiry-Centered Notion of Words

There is a longstanding project in philosophy that aims to figure out guidelines for fruitful rational inquiries. Words constitute (imperfect) tools[1] for keeping our investigations on target. Putnam and Burge's work highlights a key fact about our ordinary and scientific conversations: two speakers who have significantly different beliefs about, for instance, elm trees or arthritis may nevertheless use the *same* words, 'elm' and 'arthritis', respectively, to express their beliefs about elms and arthritis.[2] I aim to elucidate a notion of word that allows us to make sense of this fact. I call it "the inquiry-centered notion of words". I am optimistic that once we focus on *one* coherent notion of *word* our intuitions with regard to word-identity run deep. So deep, in fact, that we will come to realize that inquiry-centered words do not change their semantic content.

Putnam stresses how in an ongoing inquiry about *k* stuff, we can talk about *k*s using 'k' and do so productively even in the absence of agreement and knowledge of the correct definition for 'k'.[3] Linguists[4] and even philosophers[5] do not (typically) individuate words in ways that help us explain how words by themselves can play that role in inquiry.[6] If we agree with deflationists, all there is to the meaning of *my own* (current) words is captured by biconditionals of this sort: "snow is white" is true, if and only if, *snow is white.* An additional step of interpretation is needed for me to be licensed to make such assertions about other people's utterances.[7] Ebbs argues compellingly that *this* additional step will conflict with Putnam and Burge's insight that we can disagree

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[1] Irmak (2018).
[2] Putnam (1973), (1975), and Burge (1979). See also Evans (1973) and Kripke (1980).
[3] Putnam (1975).
[4] Bromberger (2011).
[5] Irmak (2018).
[6] We also need to make reference to their semantic content. See Frege (1892).
[7] Davidson (1967).

about the meaning of 'elm' and still talk about elms.[8] Kaplan's notion of words renders the separate step of interpretation unnecessary, since (usually) we are all engaged in the same word-repetition practice. It thus serves me well for clarifying the inquiry-centered notion of words.

Reflecting on the variability of games, Kaplan judges as follows: "the use of the same name shows that innovators *intended* the changes they introduced to be *variations* on the same game".[9] It is the *commitment* to a common inquiry that creates the publicly shared word 'k', which in turn enables (but doesn't always ensure) successful communication about k. Kaplan treats words as (socially constructed)[10] continuants made up of stages.[11] The answer as to what binds together these stages into one word continuum comes from *within the practice itself*. Take two utterances u_1 and u_2: u_1 and u_2 constitute utterances of the same word w, if and only if, u_1 is an *intentional* repetition of u_2 (or vice versa).

For my purposes, the strongest objection against his account is that Kaplan offers *inadequate* criteria for word-repetition.[12] I will respond to this charge by *fleshing out* these criteria. Kaplan assumes that it is (usually) *transparent* to the speaker whether she is continuing a given word practice.[13] My own experience as a non-native English speaker has me doubt this. For years, I *passed muster* with fellow English speakers with my use 'thigh' that I translated as 'Wade' (which means calf, in German). I intended to

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[8] Ebbs (2002) and (2009) ch.4.
[9] Kaplan (2011), p. 572.
[10] Irmak (2018).
[11] Kaplan (1990).
[12] Cappelen (1999), Alward (2005), Hawthorne and Lepore (2011), Bromberger (2011), Sainsbury (2015) and Irmak (2018).
[13] See also Ebbs (2002) and (2009).

repeat their word 'thigh' but failed.[14] Upon being informed by a trusted source about my mistake, I retired the idiosyncratic word 'thigh$_I$' and adopted a new (new to my mental lexicon) word 'thigh$_P$'. My commitment to successful communication *obliged me* to make certain changes in my mental lexicon. The challenge is to take seriously the possibility that the speaker is confused about her own words and may remain so, without thereby altogether undermining the inquiry-centered account of words.

Some speakers will grant that their use of 'bitch' is an insult, but not a *misogynist* insult. It just means *female asshole* and adds descriptive content to the insult but doesn't attribute a general inferiority to women. No! This Humpty Dumpty move will not dissolve all the blame. Of course, it is possible that the speaker was ignorant of what 'bitch' actually means, but that ignorance violates her *linguistic obligations*. I build my criteria for word repetition on such linguistic obligations.

A speaker, Peter, who is unaware of the existence of two different robin species, communicates with British English speakers about European Robins and with American English speakers about American Robins using (in her own estimate) one and the same word 'robin'.[15] Peter mistakenly *merged* two distinct word-repetition continua into one.[16] I am puzzled by Kaplan's conclusion that "nothing whatsoever is being said"[17] in word-merging situations. In our scientific investigations, experts often are in Peter's situation. Whenever they *disambiguate* a word 'w', they make the case that there is one confused word-practice 'w' that should be split into two: 'w_1' and 'w_2'– if we want to engage in

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[14] See also Evans (1973).
[15] Ebbs (2009), ch. 4.
[16] McCulloch (1991), p. 77.
[17] Kaplan (1990), p. 109.

productive inquiries about *w*. How many notions of *liberty* are there?[18] How many notions of word are there?

    I want to offer an analysis where we should consider the idiosyncratic use of 'robin' to be *pegged* against 'robin$_{AE}$' and 'robin$_{BE}$'. When Peter finds out about the two species, he should alter his mental lexicon and retire 'robin$_I$' by replacing it with 'robin$_{AE}$' and 'robin$_{BE}$'. I will propose that Kripke's Paderewski puzzle[19] is the inverse of this merging case. A public name is split into two idiosyncratic ones. 'Paderewski$_1$' and 'Paderewski$_2$' do not behave like 'David$_1$' (denoting David Hume) and 'David$_2$' (denoting David Kaplan). If I find out that David Hume was born in the eighteenth century, I do *not* have to alter my mental lexicon.

    My aim in this paper is to build criteria for word repetition on linguistic obligations and explain why (inquiry-centered) words don't change their meaning. I require that the speaker *from an informed perspective* determine whether her word is *the same word* as the one being repeated on the public continuum (e.g. by consulting a dictionary). There may be other notions of word, equally valuable, but they don't answer the questions I am interested in here.

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[18] Berlin (1958).
[19] Kripke (1979).

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