

Evaluative and Metalinguistic Dispute*

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Abstract

Recently, the hypothesis that purely evaluative disputes are metalinguistic negotiations has gained traction. I resist a strong version of that hypothesis, and defend that some of those disputes are not metalinguistic negotiations. To defend that claim, I argue that metalinguistic negotiations have three linguistic properties that some purely evaluative disputes lack. First, in a metalinguistic negotiation it is felicitous to embed the dispute-initial statement under the subjective attitude verb *consider*. Second, in a metalinguistic negotiation a speaker can reply to that initial statement using a *metalinguistic comparative*. Thirdly, metalinguistic negotiations address metalinguistic *questions under discussion*. Some purely evaluative disputes lack these properties, which suggests that they are not metalinguistic negotiations.

Keywords: evaluative adjectives; metalinguistic negotiation; semantic variantism

1 Introduction

Consider the following exchange:

- (1) Amir: Filing taxes is fun. I should have been an accountant.
Berta: No, filing taxes is not fun. It's terribly boring!

In (1), Amir and Berta have a *purely evaluative dispute* about filing taxes. It is evaluative because it involves the evaluative adjective *fun*;¹ it is purely evaluative because both speakers assume knowledge of filing taxes; and it is a dispute because Berta's explicit denial is felicitous.

Recently, the following hypothesis has gained traction.²

(E≈M). *Purely evaluative disputes are metalinguistic negotiations.*

A metalinguistic negotiation is a *normative metalinguistic dispute*. Metalinguistic disputes are disputes about language use. They can be descriptive and normative. A descriptive metalinguistic dispute concerns how language is *in fact* used; a normative metalinguistic dispute, or metalinguistic negotiation, concerns how language *ought* to be used.

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¹Evaluative adjectives are those that semantically encode a reference to what is good or bad. This includes predicates of personal taste, aesthetic and moral adjectives.

²Barker 2013; Plunkett and Sundell 2013, 2019; Sundell 2011, 2016, 2017; Umbach 2016.

Metalinguistic negotiations are best characterised by example. Consider this exchange (Ludlow 2008):

- (2) (Context: Secretariat, the famous racehorse, has been included in the list of the 50 greatest athletes of the XXth century)
Amir: Secretariat was an athlete. People say that he is the best racehorse of all time.
Berta: No, he was not an athlete—he was a horse!

The dispute in (2) is not about who Secretariat was: speakers may agree that Secretariat was a famous racehorse. Rather, it concerns whether horses count as athletes. This is a metalinguistic negotiation, because speakers are negotiating how the word *athlete* ought to be used.³

Suppose, by contrast, that someone asks who Usain Bolt is:

- (3) (Context: someone asks who Usain Bolt is)
Amir: Usain Bolt is an athlete. People say he's the best sprinter of all time.
Berta: No, he is not an athlete—he is a politician.

This dispute seems to be straightforwardly factual: it concerns whether Usain Bolt is an athlete or something else altogether.

Proponents of (E≈M) argue that exchanges like (1) are like (2), that is, disputes where speakers negotiate the meaning of a word. In this paper, I argue that, while some evaluative disputes are metalinguistic negotiations, others are not. To defend that, I argue that metalinguistic negotiations have three properties that some evaluative disputes lack: first, the dispute-initial sentence of a metalinguistic negotiation can be felicitously embedded under *consider*; secondly, one can reply to such initial statement using a *metalinguistic comparative*; thirdly, metalinguistic negotiations address metalinguistic *questions under discussion*.

Before moving on, a clarification about evaluative disputes. I assume that a dispute is a dialogue consisting minimally of two statements, one of which licenses explicit denial (*no, I disagree*, etc.). In this characterization, exchanges like (1)-(3) count as disputes regardless of how the conversation evolves.

I characterised *purely* evaluative disputes as those in which speakers share all relevant factual information. Considered in this way, (1) is a purely evaluative dispute only if Amir and Berta share all factual information about filing taxes (in this case, that requires having filed taxes). Many evaluative disputes are like this: people discussing whether something is fun, tasty or beautiful often assume common factual knowledge of whatever is under evaluation.

By focusing on the purely evaluative I set aside two salient types of evaluative disputes: first, evaluative disputes in which people do not share factual knowledge of the object of evaluation but share relevant standards. Suppose that Amir and Berta share a love for admin duties; but whereas Amir has filed taxes, Berta hasn't. In this context, for Amir to utter (1) is a way to provide Berta with descriptive information about filing taxes—information to the effect that

³The dispute in (2) could also be interpreted as descriptive, concerning how the word *athlete* is in fact used in a specific context. However, descriptive metalinguistic disputes are often prompted by invoking particular linguistic practices. See §2.2.3 for the distinction between descriptive and normative metalinguistic dispute.

it meets their common standard of *fun*.⁴ Secondly, I set aside situations in which speakers are discussing a specific standard *other than their own*. Suppose that Amir and Berta are discussing what things Scottish people find fun. In that situation, to discuss whether filing taxes is fun would be a way of discussing whether Scottish people find filing taxes fun.⁵

2 The metalinguistic thesis

The thesis that evaluative disputes are metalinguistic negotiations plays an important role in blocking a prominent form of argument used repeatedly across philosophy of language. I begin this section by reviewing that argument and how it is blocked by (E \approx M).

2.1 Variantism and the metalinguistic wedge

Consider exchange (1) again. Whatever theory of the meaning of *fun* we adopt, there are two intuitions that it has to honour. The first is that neither Amir nor Berta seem at fault in their opinion nor in expressing it in the way they do. The second is that they disagree.

Variantist proposals about the meaning of evaluatives are thought to correctly account for the former intuition at the expense of the latter. VARIANTISM about a class of expressions or fragment of language *F* is the thesis that *F*-expressions mean different things at different contexts of use.⁶ Variantism about *fun* implies that *fun* has a different meaning for Amir and for Berta (note the SMALL CAPS and subscripts).

- (4) Amir: Filing taxes is FUN_a.
Berta: No, filing taxes is not FUN_b.

This theory is attractive insofar as it accommodates the intuition that, if Amir likes filing taxes, he is not at fault in saying so; and the same goes for Berta.

However, this view has trouble *vis-à-vis* the intuition that (1) expresses a disagreement. For according to variantism, Amir and Berta do not mean the same thing by *fun*. Consequently, the propositions that their utterances express are also different, and compatible. But one is inclined to say that Amir and Berta disagree about the proposition expressed by their sentences, namely, the proposition *that filing taxes is fun*: Amir thinks that it is true; Berta thinks that it is false.

⁴Such “descriptive” evaluative disputes can be difficult to distinguish from the purely evaluative. Moreover, those are two extremes; in between there is a large class of *mixed* disputes, where evaluatives advance descriptive and evaluative information simultaneously. See Hare 1952, p.116 and ff. for a classic characterization of descriptive uses of evaluatives, and Umbach 2016 for further discussion of Hare.

⁵In these cases, sometimes the standard is explicitly mentioned and sometimes it is not. In the former case, sentences have the form *such-and-such is fun according to x / around here / in x’s opinion*. Such uses of evaluatives often count as *descriptive* metalinguistic disputes. The latter, where no standard is explicitly mentioned even though the context makes one salient, are called *exocentric* (Laserson 2005; Stephenson 2007) or *inverted commas* uses of evaluatives (Hare 1952, 111 and ff).

⁶The most standard form of variantism is CONTEXTUALISM, modelled after Kaplan’s (1989) distinction between CHARACTER and CONTENT. Contextualists about *F*-expressions hold that, even though *F*-expressions have a constant *character*, they can have different *contents* at different contexts of use. In this respect, *F*-expressions would behave like indexicals. Another variantist account would be an ambiguity theory according to which *F*-expressions are ambiguous between different Kaplanian characters.

This intuition can be captured *via* the following bridge principle (call it *disagreement implies incompatibility, D>I*):⁷

(D>I). *If two speakers x and y express disagreement with each other, then there are propositions p and q such that x 's utterance expresses the proposition p and y 's utterance expresses the proposition q and p entails not- q .*

(D>I) implies that Amir and Berta's sentences express incompatible propositions, something false on the variantist proposal. Therefore, variantism about *fun* cannot account for the intuition that (1) is a disagreement.

That is, in a nutshell, the argument of DISAGREEMENT LOST against variantism.⁸ More broadly, the argument relies on the idea that the *dialectical connections* (agreement, disagreement, same-saying, etc.) between evaluatives used at different contexts strongly suggest that their meaning is cross-contextually stable, contrary to variantism.

It is at this point where the notion of a metalinguistic dispute might be thought to come to the rescue. Metalinguistic disputes, as we saw, are such that speakers mean different things by their words. In (2) it is intuitive to think that each speaker means something different by *athlete*: for Amir, the denotation of *athlete* includes non-human animals; for Berta it does not. According to variantism, we can represent their dialogue as follows:

- (5) Amir: Secretariat was an ATHLETE_a.
 Berta: No, he was not an ATHLETE_b.

Here, the fact that each speaker means something different by *athlete* is not at odds with the fact that (2) expresses a disagreement. So disputes like (2) provide evidence against (D>I).

But what about the intuition of disagreement—what are Amir and Berta disagreeing about? A possible answer is that they disagree about the right concept of *athlete*: Amir advocates for ATHLETE_a; Berta for ATHLETE_b. Crucially though, they can disagree without engaging in an explicit dispute about the meaning of *athlete*: each of them advocates for their preferred meaning by discussing an instance—Secretariat—that discriminates between the two. In this view, their disagreement concerns, not the propositions *semantically expressed* by their assertions, but the propositions about the correct meaning of *athlete* that they *pragmatically convey* (marked with \rightsquigarrow):⁹

- (6) Amir: Secretariat was an ATHLETE_a \rightsquigarrow *athlete* means ATHLETE_a
 Berta: No, he was not an ATHLETE_b \rightsquigarrow *athlete* means ATHLETE_b

Given this, why not say about (1) the same thing that we just said about (2)? If disputes like (1) are like (2), then we should think twice before concluding that variantists cannot accommodate the intuition of disagreement, since disputes like (2) do not require the relevant terms to have the same meaning. The possibility that a dispute is metalinguistic, then, drives a wedge between a dispute and the conclusion that speakers express incompatible propositions: in a metalinguistic

⁷This is a principle about what it is to *express* a disagreement, not what it is to *stand* in disagreement. The former implies the latter, but not the other way around.

⁸The argument is not exhausted here, as there are multiple ways of spelling out variantism. See Lasersohn 2005.

⁹A further question is what type of pragmatic mechanism is invoked. I remain neutral about this.

dispute, speakers can disagree and yet express compatible propositions. Let's now explore further the notion of metalinguistic dispute.

2.2 Varieties of metalinguistic dispute

2.2.1 Metalinguistic vs. non-metalinguistic usage

Following Plunkett and Sundell (2019), I start by characterising METALINGUISTIC USAGE. Often, speakers use (not mention) a term to make a claim about language use itself. Consider this much-quoted scenario from Barker 2002:

Normally, (7) will be used in order to add to the common ground new information concerning Feynman's height:

(7) Feynman is tall.

But (7) has another mode of use. Imagine that we are at a party. Perhaps Feynman stands before us a short distance away, drinking punch and thinking about dancing; in any case, the exact degree to which Feynman is tall is common knowledge. You ask me what counts as tall in my country. "Well," I say, "around here, ..." and I continue by uttering (7). (Barker 2002, pp. 1–2)

Standardly, speakers presuppose a threshold of height for *tall*, and use sentences like (7) to inform about people's heights. But in this scenario, (7) does not inform about Feynman's height, which is common ground. Rather, (7) informs about the accepted threshold of *tall*, which is a piece of linguistic knowledge. (7) is thus a metalinguistic usage of *tall*.

2.2.2 Metalinguistic vs. non-metalinguistic dispute

If a sentence like (7) were disputed, it would lead to a METALINGUISTIC DISPUTE (Barker 2013):

(8) (Context: What counts as tall around here?)

Amir: Feynman is tall.

Berta: No, Feynman is not tall.

In this case, the dispute would concern the accepted threshold for *tall* rather than Feynman's height.

It is useful to contrast examples of metalinguistic disputes to clear non-metalinguistic counterparts. Suppose that two speakers are discussing how Eisman looks. Amir believes that Eisman is 175 cm tall, while Berta believes that she is 145 cm tall. A similar exchange to (8) could take place between them, but in this situation, their exchange presupposes a certain threshold for *tall* (say, ~170 cm), and the issue is Eisman's height:

(9) (Context: What does Eisman look like?)

Amir: Eisman is tall.

Berta: No, Eisman is not tall.

2.2.3 Descriptive vs. normative metalinguistic dispute

The contrast between a metalinguistic and non-metalinguistic dispute about *tall* parallels the disputes about *athlete* that we saw at the outset, (2) and (3). However, there is an important difference between (8) and (2): the former concerns what *tall* actually means (in a country); the latter concerns what *athlete* ought to mean.

This motivates a distinction between two types of metalinguistic disputes: disputes that concern the way in which language is *in fact* used, and disputes that concern the way in which language *ought* to be used. The former are *descriptive* metalinguistic disputes. Descriptive disputes are often prompted by invoking specific linguistic practices (*what counts as tall around here?*). The latter are *normative* metalinguistic disputes, also called METALINGUISTIC NEGOTIATIONS. (2) is one such case. In (2), speakers are not disputing how *athlete* is in fact used; rather, each of them appears to have a different concept of *athlete*, and their utterances express a metalinguistic dispute about what *athlete* should mean.¹⁰

2.3 The weak & strong metalinguistic thesis

Metalinguistic disputes offer evidence against (D>I). But there is a further step from rejecting a general form of argument to rejecting it when it is applied to a specific set of linguistic expressions. After all, if evaluatives did not figure in metalinguistic disputes, then a version of (D>I) restricted to evaluatives could be upheld. This is where the basic metalinguistic thesis enters the picture.¹¹

(E≈M). *Purely evaluative disputes are metalinguistic negotiations.*

Whether endorsing (E≈M) carries a commitment to treating (1) as a metalinguistic negotiation depends on the *strength* and *scope* of (E≈M). The *strength* of (E≈M) concerns its quantificational force. So formulated, (E≈M) is generic. But we can sharpen (E≈M) into the following weaker and stronger theses:

(Weak E≈M). *Some purely evaluative disputes are metalinguistic negotiations.*

(Strong E≈M). *All purely evaluative disputes are metalinguistic negotiations.*

(Weak E≈M) blocks the argument of disagreement lost for evaluatives, at least if that argument relies on an unrestricted version of (D>I): if some purely evaluative disputes are metalinguistic negotiations, and metalinguistic negotiations are disagreements where speakers do not express incompatible propositions, then (D>I) is false. However, (D>I) could be restricted to non-metalinguistic disputes, and then the argument of disagreement lost would go through for such uses. In addition, since (Weak E≈M) only holds that some purely evaluative disputes are metalinguistic, it is compatible with (1) not being a metalinguistic dispute.

¹⁰A further distinction can be made among metalinguistic disputes between those about the Kaplanian character of a term and those about its Kaplanian content. The former concern what concept a term expresses (or ought to express). (2) illustrates this. The latter concern the (correct) resolution of a context-sensitive term, given a stable character. (8) is an example. See Plunkett and Sundell 2019, pp. 6–7. This distinction will not matter for our purposes.

¹¹(E≈M) implies that purely evaluative disputes are not *descriptive* metalinguistic disputes. But that should not be surprising, since purely evaluative disputes do not include situations in which speakers discuss a specific standard. Descriptive metalinguistic disputes are beyond the scope of (E≈M).

If (Strong $E \approx M$) is true, then (1) is a metalinguistic negotiation. And more importantly, purely evaluative disputes cannot be used to motivate any view that relies on a principle like (D>I), such as invariantism or relativism (about evaluatives, that is), regardless of how (D>I) might be restricted. Finally, if (Strong $E \approx M$) holds, our two intuitions about (1) can be accommodated within variantism coupled with a notion of purely evaluative dispute as metalinguistic negotiation: variantism captures the intuition that speakers in (1) are not at fault in their divergent opinions; the intuition of disagreement is captured by the thesis that those disputes are metalinguistic negotiations.

Plunkett and Sundell (2013) subscribed to (Weak $E \approx M$) and remained neutral about (Strong $E \approx M$), as their objective was to block the argument of disagreement lost. But Sundell has explicitly defended (Strong $E \approx M$) for some evaluatives, such as predicates of personal taste (henceforth PPTs) and aesthetic adjectives (cf. Sundell 2016, 2017). Barker (2013) and Umbach (2016) can be seen as subscribing to a version of this thesis too;¹² and Marques 2017, Rast 2017 or Finlay 2017 are among its critics. In what follows, I argue against (Strong $E \approx M$).

Besides its strength, the *scope* of ($E \approx M$) concerns what evaluatives it applies to. In the literature surrounding ($E \approx M$), it is customary to focus on a handful of paradigmatic evaluatives, in particular PPTs and aesthetic adjectives. Usually, it is assumed that observations about such paradigmatic evaluatives will extend to other adjectives belonging to the same class. For example, arguments in favor of (Strong $E \approx M$) might be illustrated with e.g., *tasty*, but are usually taken to extend to other PPTs, such as *delicious* or *disgusting*. In the coming sections, I adopt a similar approach. I discuss *fun*, *delicious*, *disgusting* and *beautiful*, as these are some of the paradigmatic examples discussed in the literature to argue for (Strong $E \approx M$). Thus, I intend to debunk (Strong $E \approx M$) as applied specifically to disputes involving those adjectives. However, I tentatively assume that what I say here about these adjectives is true of other, similar evaluatives, such as *entertaining*, *yummy* or *nasty*. But importantly, this is an assumption that can be defeated. A defender of (Strong $E \approx M$) might, for example, retort that (Strong $E \approx M$) holds of some more restricted range of examples, different from the ones discussed here. But it is up to them to restrict the scope of (Strong $E \approx M$) and argue for it.¹³

3 Not all evaluative disputes are metalinguistic

How can we determine whether any dispute is a metalinguistic negotiation? The examples seen so far are (i) paradigmatic and (ii) stir *our* intuitions—the intuitions of philosophers and

¹²For these authors, every dispute involving evaluatives falls between the two axes illustrated with *tall* in (8)/(9): it is either a dispute about facts or language (or both). This makes evaluative dispute similar to disputes involving other adjectives. Sundell: ‘the very same theories that account for words like *tall* or *expensive* can account for our use of words like *tasty*, *bold*, and *beautiful*’ (2016, p. 3); ‘even a simple form of contextualism—once augmented with the notion of metalinguistic negotiation—provides the resources to explain the full range of perceived faultlessness and disagreement in aesthetic debate’ (2017, p. 103). Barker: ‘On the dynamic picture here... the context set simultaneously tracks uncertainty and indeterminacy *about the world*... and also uncertainty and indeterminacy *about the discourse*’ (2013, p. 243, my emphasis). Umbach: ‘There are two reasons for a proposition to be evaluative. Either it is used in a metalinguistic way affecting the denotational borderline of the predicate or it is used in a descriptive way exploiting commonly agreed on criteria for satisfaction of the predicate’ (2016, p. 130). Recall that in our characterization of purely evaluative dispute we set aside disputes where all relevant perspectival information (taste, values, standards) is shared, but relevant factual information is not. For these authors, such disputes would be factual; *purely* evaluative disputes would be metalinguistic.

¹³I thank an Associate Editor of this journal for suggesting this clarification.

linguists working on this topic. However, if we want to use a more useful notion, we'd better think of a more detached criterion than looking at paradigmatic cases. After all, when we move from paradigmatic to peripheral cases, such as evaluative disputes, intuitions are bound to be less crisp.

I propose to search for independently attestable properties of metalinguistic negotiations. By establishing a set of such properties, we will have stabler, more empirical grounds upon which to base any claim that a dispute is metalinguistic. Suppose that we determine a set M of such properties. We can then substitute *being a metalinguistic negotiation* for *satisfying M* in the various metalinguistic theses. That way, we obtain empirically testable theses to work with. Instead of (Strong $E \approx M$), we would have the following:

(Strong $E \approx M^*$). *All purely evaluative disputes are M .*

But what is M ? In the following subsections, a set of three linguistic markers are put forward. I submit that this is what M stands for, and conclude that (Strong $E \approx M^*$) is false. These linguistic markers rely on the idea that metalinguistic negotiations license certain conversational moves. I show that each of those markers tells apart paradigmatic cases of metalinguistic negotiations from their non-metalinguistic counterparts; then, I show that they also tell apart certain evaluative disputes from others.

3.1 Dispute-initial metalinguistic statement

Dispute-initial metalinguistic sentences can be embedded felicitously under *consider*. *Consider* is a SUBJECTIVE ATTITUDE VERB (Sæbø 2009). Subjective attitude verbs, which include *find* and *feel*, are doxastic operators characterised by a more restricted distribution than *believe* or *think*, as they impose certain constraints on their complement clauses.

Kennedy and Willer (2016, 2019) focus on *consider*. They propose that *consider*-embeddings carry an inference that the predicate in their scope is open to stipulation or negotiation. We can say that the inference is that the application of the predicate is *controversial*. When that inference fails, the embedding is infelicitous. Some predicates lack controversial applications, and those are infelicitous under *consider* (marked with #). Compare in this respect *vegetarian* and *prime*:

- (10) a. I consider Lee (to be) vegetarian.
- b. # I consider 26 (to be) prime.

For other predicates, the felicity of a *consider*-embedding depends on the context:

- (11) a. I consider Frank Zappa (to be) a jazz musician.
- b. # I consider Ella Fitzgerald (to be) a jazz musician.

Since whether Frank Zappa was a jazz musician is controversial, (11a) is felicitous in most contexts. But there is no similar controversy about Ella Fitzgerald. Thus, (11b) is infelicitous in most contexts. Nonetheless, this inference can be accommodated—the audience of (11b) may accept that the status of Ella Fitzgerald as jazz musician is controversial. For predicates like *jazz musician*, the controversial character of any given application is contextual.

I propose the felicity of *consider*-embedding as a linguistic marker of metalinguistic usage. This is illustrated by observing that such embeddings distinguish paradigmatic cases of metalinguistic disputes from their non-metalinguistic counterparts. Recall the two disputes involving *athlete*. A dispute-initial *consider*-embedding is only felicitous in the metalinguistic case.¹⁴

- (2) Amir: I consider Secretariat (to be) an athlete. People say that he is the best race-horse of all time.
Berta: No, he was not an athlete—he was a horse!
- (3) Amir: # I consider Usain Bolt (to be) an athlete. People say he’s the best sprinter of all time.
Berta: No, he is not an athlete—he is a politician.

Intuitively, the reason why a *consider*-embedding is infelicitous in (3) case is that the controversial inference is not satisfied in that context, as Usain Bolt’s status as athlete is hardly controversial.

A similar contrast arises with a PPT like *fun*: depending on the context, there are situations in which a dispute-initial *consider*-embedding is felicitous and situations in which it is not.

Recall (1). Could Amir have embedded his sentence under *consider*? It depends on the context. Suppose that speakers are thinking of fun things that most people hate. In such context, it would be natural for Amir to embed his sentence under *consider* (although there is an even stronger preference to embed under *find*):

- (12) (Context: what are fun things that most people hate?)
Amir: I consider filing taxes (to be) fun. I should have been an accountant.
Berta: That is indeed super weird. I can’t think of anything less fun.

Filing taxes is such a universally despised activity that it is difficult to think of a context in which calling it *fun* would not be controversial. But suppose that Amir and Berta walk out of Amir’s favourite comedy show, where he goes every week. He loves the show and, as far as he can tell, the audience loves it too. They meet their friend Carla at the door, and Carla asks them about the show. In that context, and assuming that Amir doesn’t yet know that Berta didn’t like the show, it would be odd for Amir to use *consider*.

- (13) (Context: what’s the show like?)
Amir: # I consider it (to be) fun. Everyone loves it!
Berta: No, it’s not fun. It’s terribly boring!

We can explain this contrast by noting that the controversy inference triggered by *consider* is satisfied in (12), but not in (13). Of course, whether the *consider*-embedding is felicitous depends crucially on the (contextual) assumption that, from Amir’s perspective, the show’s funness is not controversial. After Berta disagrees with Amir, the issue *becomes* controversial, and further *consider*-embeddings might be licensed. But at the initial stage, in which Amir assumes that there is no debate to be had, embedding under *consider* is not felicitous. This suggests that Amir did not make a metalinguistic use of *fun* in (13).

¹⁴Hansen (2019, 7 and ff) similarly observes that metalinguistic usage is essentially *adversarial*, in that it is expected to not be uniformly accepted by the audience.

Before moving on, let us consider two objections. First, one might think that the infelicity of *consider*-embeddings has nothing to do with metalinguistic usage, but with the fact that *consider*, like other attitude verbs, is a hedging device. In situations where speakers are not expected to hedge, one would predict *consider*-embedding to be infelicitous. Such might be the case of (13). Against this however, note that, in (13), hedging with *think* is acceptable. Moreover, variations of *consider*-embedding that do not mention the speaker are equally odd (by contrast, all these embeddings would be fine in (12)):

- (14) (Context: what's the show like?)
- a. I think it's fun.
 - b. # My friends consider it (to be) fun.
 - c. # It should be considered (to be) fun.

A second objection is that speakers in a metalinguistic negotiation may not be willing to embed their claim under *consider*. For example, if Berta is really invested in the Secretariat issue, she may refuse to use *consider*. But we are not tapping into the choices of speakers. What we are pondering is not whether Berta would in fact *consider*-embed, but rather whether it would be felicitous for her to do so, given how the dispute is set up.

3.2 Metalinguistic reply

Just as there are (in)felicitous ways of initiating a metalinguistic dispute, there are (in)felicitous ways of replying to it. In a metalinguistic negotiation, a dissenting speaker can use a METALINGUISTIC COMPARATIVE. Metalinguistic comparatives are constructions that compare the aptness of expressions. Here are some examples (Morzycki 2011):

- (15)
- a. George is more dumb than crazy.
 - b. Clarence is more a syntactician than a semanticist.
 - c. Your problems are more financial than legal.
 - d. I am more machine now than man.

(15a) does not mean that George possesses a higher degree of dumbness than craziness, but that it is more apt to call him *dumb* than *crazy*.

Metalinguistic comparatives have morphological, syntactic and semantic features that distinguish them from run-of-the-mill comparatives (Giannakidou and Yoon 2011; Morzycki 2011; Rudolph and Kocurek 2020). Morphologically, they allow forming the comparative with *more* instead of *-er* (* marks ungrammaticality):

- (16)
- a. George is more dumb than crazy.
 - b. * George is more dumb than Dick.

Syntactically, the comparative morpheme *more* can appear after the main adjective:

- (17)
- a. Clarence is a syntactician more than a semanticist.
 - b. * Clarence is tall more than Bill.

And semantically, they do not require the *relata* to be gradable (15c); and not even adjectives (15d).

In German, metalinguistic comparatives can be explicitly marked with the comparative particle *eher* (Umbach and Solt 2020, 16 and ff.). Suppose that we are talking about a shirt that is somewhere between blue and green, and this is common ground. Then, (18a) is fine, whereas (18b) is hard to make sense of.

- (18) a. *Das Hemd ist eher blau als grün.*
The shirt is more blue than green.
b. *Das Hemd ist eher blau als orange.*
The shirt is more blue than orange.

Umbach & Solt spell out this contrast as follows:¹⁵ Metalinguistic comparatives carry an inference that, holding fixed the facts of the matter, there exist available interpretations of the relevant predicates according to which the object under discussion may be thought to fall under one or the other. (18a) implies that there are compatible interpretations of *blue* and *green* according to which the shirt could be classified as either. The choice is a matter of linguistic preference.

By contrast, if a metalinguistic comparative is formed with adjectives for which that inference fails, the construction can only be interpreted ironically or humorously, *as though* the inference were satisfied. Such is the case with (18b). The facts about the shirt cannot be such that the choice between calling it *blue* or *orange* is a matter of linguistic preference. Thus, the only way to interpret (18b) is as irony or a joke. The speaker in (18b) is comparing the aptness of two terms for which, in fact, there cannot be competing interpretations, and thus could never be literally compared (in the same way as *blue* and *green*). For example, the speaker in (18b) could be mocking someone else's statement that the shirt is orange, by speaking *as though* that person's interpretation of *orange* made it comparable to *blue*.¹⁶

I want to propose the possibility of replying to a statement using a metalinguistic comparative in a literal, non-ironic/humorous sense as another linguistic marker of metalinguistic negotiation. In a metalinguistic negotiation, it is natural to express disagreement by proposing an alternative expression, and to do that with a metalinguistic comparative used literally. In non-metalinguistic disputes, a metalinguistic comparative can only be interpreted ironically or humorously.

To see this, let's look at another paradigmatic case of metalinguistic negotiation. Consider two speakers disagreeing about the status of waterboarding, knowing perfectly well what waterboarding consists in (Plunkett and Sundell 2013, p. 19). Endorsing respectively the UN and the US definitions of torture, they could have the dialog in (19).¹⁷ Alternatively, Berta could reply to Amir using a metalinguistic comparative, or with German *eher*—both used literally:

¹⁵German *eher* differs from English metalinguistic comparatives in subtle ways (see Umbach and Solt 2020, 23 and ff.). The differences do not matter for our purposes.

¹⁶'Suppose, you ordered a beautiful orange shirt from Amazon.com and when you open the package you find that they sent a blue one. The sentence in [(18b)] would then mean that it is more adequate to call the shirt blue than to call it orange, which can only be understood as an ironic comment on the concept of color at Amazon' (Umbach and Solt 2020, p. 18).

¹⁷Waterboarding involves immense suffering, but does not cause permanent damage. According to the UN's definition of torture as 'any act inflicting severe suffering, physical or mental, in order to obtain information or to punish,' waterboarding is torture. But according to the US Justice Department definition of torture as 'any act inflicting pain rising to the level of death, organ failure, or the permanent impairment of a significant body

(19) (Context: UN hearing)

Amir: Waterboarding is torture.

Berta: Waterboarding is more interrogation technique than torture. \approx literal

Waterboarding ist eher Verhörtechnik als Folter.

Suppose instead that Amir and Berta are discussing Roman law. Amir, consulting a hand-book, makes the observation below; Berta corrects him by pointing to a different passage. The dialogue in (20) would not be a metalinguistic negotiation about *torture*, but rather a non-metalinguistic dispute about Roman law:

(20) (Context: Roman law)

Amir: The penalty for desertion in Roman law was torture.

Berta: The penalty was more death than torture. \approx ironic/mocking

Die Strafe ist eher der Tod als Folter.

In this case, for Berta to reply with a metalinguistic comparative could only be interpreted ironically, mocking Amir's view.

A similar contrast arises with evaluatives: sometimes, an evaluative dispute can be replied to *via* a literal use of a metalinguistic comparative. But sometimes, if a speaker chooses a metalinguistic comparative, it can only be interpreted ironically, suggesting that they are not using the terms metalinguistically.

Suppose that Amir and Berta are having a well-garnished sushi meal. Amir loves it, but Berta doesn't find it particularly great:

(21) Amir: The sushi is delicious! Don't you think?

Berta: The sushi is more beautiful than delicious. \approx literal

Das Sushi ist eher schön als deliziös.

In this case, Berta's metalinguistic comparative is literal, since there are interpretations of the relevant facts compatible with *delicious* and *beautiful*.

Suppose instead that Berta found the sushi utterly disgusting. They could have the following dialogue:

(22) Amir: The sushi is delicious! Don't you think?

Berta: The sushi is more disgusting than delicious. \approx ironic/mocking

Das Sushi ist eher eklig als deliziös.

In this case, Berta's answer can only be interpreted ironically, as there can be no competing interpretations of the facts compatible with the sushi being *delicious* and *disgusting*. This suggests that the dispute in (22) is not metalinguistic.

Before moving on, it bears pointing out two things about this test. First, in a situation like (22), Carla might resist Berta's use of *disgusting* to describe the sushi by saying *No, the sushi is more*

function,' waterboarding is not torture.

repulsive than delicious. Carla would be using a metalinguistic comparative ironically to initiate a metalinguistic dispute. However, this is not problematic. The fact that Carla is initiating a metalinguistic dispute with Berta is compatible with the dispute between Amir and Berta not being metalinguistic. It would be a different dispute. Moreover, it could be argued that Carla is *echoing* Berta's utterance, and that this licenses Carla's ironic metalinguistic comparative. Echoic use is a general feature of metalinguistic usage (Carston 1996). To see that echoing plays a role, note that it would be difficult to interpret Carla's utterance as metalinguistic without it being preceded by Berta's.¹⁸

Secondly, we should insist on the scope of this test. As we said, it applies to disputes involving more than one expression. The claim is that, if such disputes were metalinguistic, one would expect them to be about the aptness of expressions. The fact that a metalinguistic comparative—whose purpose *is* to compare the aptness of expressions—cannot be interpreted literally, suggests that that's not what these disputes are about. If a dispute involves a single term, this test cannot determine whether it is metalinguistic. But this is fine, for two reasons: first, as long as there are purely evaluative disputes for which the test works, this is evidence against (Strong $E \approx M^*$). And disputes like (22), where speakers use evaluatives with diametrically opposed meanings, are ubiquitous. Secondly, even for disputes containing only one evaluative, we can assess whether introducing a second expression embedded in a metalinguistic comparative would be interpreted literally or ironically. *Per* this test, such disputes would only count as metalinguistic in the former case.

3.3 Metalinguistic continuation

Metalinguistic negotiations are disputes that concern how language should be used. In virtue of this, one would expect that they primarily address a *question under discussion* (Roberts 1996) concerning language or concepts. For example, in Barker 2002 metalinguistic usage is prompted by asking *what counts as tall around here?* Call that a METALINGUISTIC QUESTION UNDER DISCUSSION. However, if a metalinguistic dispute arose in this situation, it would be classified as descriptive, since speakers are discussing how language is *actually* used in a particular context. A normative metalinguistic dispute—a metalinguistic negotiation—about *tall* could be prompted by a normative version of that question, e.g., *what should count as tall around here?* Based on this, let's propose the following template for the QUD of a metalinguistic negotiation:

(Metalinguistic negotiation QUD). *What should count as F?*

By contrast, the QUD that corresponds to non-metalinguistic uses of *tall* is a QUD that asks about an individual and not a predicate. We can formulate it as follows:

(Non-metalinguistic QUD). *What is x like?*

As a third linguistic marker of metalinguistic negotiation, we can compare which of those two QUDs is most clearly addressed by a given dispute. Consider Barker's case and its non-metalinguistic counterpart, (8) and (9). As noted, the intuition that one is a metalinguistic dispute and the other isn't is driven by the explicit questions that initiate each dialogue (*what counts as tall in your country? / what does Eisman look like?*). To show that each of these dialogues addresses primarily one of those questions and not the other, we can look at the

¹⁸I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this.

felicity of possible continuations.¹⁹ In (8), it would be pragmatically odd for Amir to reply to Berta by citing other properties of Feynman. By contrast, it would be fine for him to say that someone else is tall. In (9), these judgments are reversed.

- (23) (Context: What counts as tall around here?)
 Amir: Feynman is tall.
 Berta: No, Feynman is not tall.
 Amir: ✓ Well, whatever. Friedman is tall.
 Amir: ?? Well, whatever. She wears glasses.
- (24) (Context: What does Eisman look like?)
 Amir: Eisman is tall.
 Berta: No, Eisman is not tall.
 Amir: ?? Well, whatever. Friedman is tall.
 Amir: ✓ Well, whatever. She wears glasses.

If we turn to evaluative disputes, a parallel contrast can be attested. For any dispute involving *beautiful*, let us distinguish the following two QUDs:

- (25) a. What should count as *beautiful*? metalinguistic QUD
 b. What is *x* like? non-metalinguistic QUD

Suppose that Amir and Berta are reading a list of the ten most beautiful Swedish films. To Amir's surprise, *The Seventh Seal* and *Summer with Monika* are left out. This dialogue ensues:²⁰

- (26) Amir: *The Seventh Seal* is a beautiful film!
 Berta: No, it's not. It's adolescent, fashionable pessimism.
 Amir: ✓ Well, whatever. *Summer with Monika* is a beautiful film!
 Amir: ?? Well, whatever. It's about a Medieval knight.

One salient reason for this contrast is that the focus of this conversation is what should count as a beautiful film, rather than *The Seventh Seal* itself. This is, therefore, a metalinguistic dispute about *beautiful (film)*.

Suppose now that Carla tells Amir and Berta that she's getting into Bergman. She's watched *Summer with Monika*, which she liked, and now she asks them about *The Seventh Seal*:

- (27) Amir: *The Seventh Seal* is a beautiful film!
 Berta: No, it's not. It's adolescent, fashionable pessimism.
 Amir: ?? Well, whatever. *Summer with Monika* is a beautiful film!
 Amir: ✓ Well, whatever. It's about a Medieval knight.

Here the focus is on *The Seventh Seal*, and so it seems clear that the metalinguistic QUD (25a) is comparatively less pertinent than the non-metalinguistic (25b), as witnessed by the fact that

¹⁹Thanks to Diego Feinmann for this suggestion.

²⁰Partially taken from Sundell 2017, p. 98; Amir's retort is my addition.

citing other beautiful films is pragmatically odd. This suggests that the dispute in (27) is not metalinguistic.

To sum up: we have looked at three linguistic properties that are clearly instantiated by paradigmatic examples of metalinguistic negotiations but *not* by their non-metalinguistic counterparts; and they are instantiated by some purely evaluative disputes and not by others. Assuming that these properties are what the M in (Strong $E \approx M^*$) stands for, (Strong $E \approx M^*$) is false. And if assuming that metalinguistic negotiations necessarily have these properties, then evaluative disputes that lack those properties are not metalinguistic negotiations; that is, (Strong $E \approx M$) is false.

4 Objections

There are two salient objections to the argument put forward here. The first is that none of the markers in §3 are *necessary* properties of metalinguistic negotiations. Hence, they are not a reliable guide to the metalinguistic character of a dispute.

There are two ways of substantiating this objection. The first—and most reasonable—is to produce clear cases of metalinguistic negotiations that have none of the properties put forward in §3. I don't think this holds promise. Even though I have not shown that the properties in §3 apply to each paradigmatic example used in the literature, I am confident that they do—but I leave the verification to the reader. Until and when clear cases of metalinguistic negotiations lacking these markers are offered, it is safe to assume that these markers single out metalinguistic negotiations. Moreover, even if I were wrong and the properties discussed here were not necessary properties of metalinguistic disputes, the project of exploring what those properties are is worthwhile—and that is so independently of whether evaluative disputes are metalinguistic negotiations.

Alternatively, the objector could reject that metalinguistic negotiations have any observable properties *at all*. This would be methodologically and empirically misguided. Methodologically, for reasons given in §3: there is little point in employing a presumably linguistic distinction if that distinction is drawn relying exclusively on intuitions, with no independent properties to be attested. And it would be empirically wrong, because there *are* differences between the paradigmatic examples of metalinguistic disputes and their non-metalinguistic counterparts, however difficult it may be to single them out.

The second objection is that, contrary to what I claim, proponents of the view that evaluative disputes can be subsumed under a variantist semantics coupled with a notion of evaluative dispute as metalinguistic negotiation are not committed to (Strong $E \approx M$). Their claim is that evaluatives behave just like any other expression, and therefore, one should expect that evaluative disputes are sometimes metalinguistic and sometimes not, just like other context-sensitive expressions, (e.g., *tall*). The fact that some evaluative disputes have none of the putative properties of metalinguistic negotiations is predicted by their view.

In reply to this, recall the basic idea behind the distinction between metalinguistic and non-metalinguistic usage. In Barker's 2002 characterization, metalinguistic usage occurs when speakers presuppose all relevant factual knowledge and discuss a relevant piece of linguistic knowledge (i.e. (8)). Non-metalinguistic usage is characterised by presupposing all linguistic

knowledge and discussing a piece of factual knowledge (illustrated by (9)).²¹ If evaluatives worked in the same way, then one would expect all uses of evaluatives to fall within those two axes: at one extreme all factual knowledge is presupposed and only the linguistic facts are under discussion; at the other linguistic knowledge is presupposed and only factual knowledge is discussed. I hope to have shown that evaluatives escape this model. What we have been calling purely evaluative disputes throughout this work are indeed situations where all factual knowledge is presupposed. But I have argued that there is no guarantee that what is being discussed in those disputes are only linguistic facts.

Sometimes linguistic facts are under discussion, sometimes they are not; the linguistic markers in §3 are the proposed criteria for distinguishing them. Evaluative disputes where initial *consider*-embedding is felicitous, where a reply using a metalinguistic comparative can be interpreted literally and where the most relevant QUD is metalinguistic are such that the linguistic facts are under discussion. Evaluative disputes lacking those properties are such that linguistic facts are not under discussion. If some evaluative disputes are such that *neither* facts *nor* language are under discussion, then evaluatives do not fall between the two axes mentioned above, and *a fortiori* do not behave like other context-sensitive expressions.

5 Conclusion

In this paper, I have done two things: I have proposed a set of linguistic criteria to distinguish metalinguistic from non-metalinguistic disputes, and I have argued against the thesis that all purely evaluative disputes are metalinguistic negotiations. As Plunkett & Sundell put it (2013, p. 32, their emphasis), ‘[i]f a metalinguistic analysis is proposed for some type of dispute, then it posits that that dispute is *like the chili case* or *like the Secretariat case*’. I have defended that some purely evaluative disputes—e.g., (13), (22) and (27)—differ in crucial ways from those cases. Thus, although some evaluative disputes are metalinguistic negotiations, not all of them are. I conclude that we should distinguish two types of purely evaluative disputes, and whereas one of them can be modelled as metalinguistic negotiations, the other cannot. How to characterise the latter type of dispute is the topic of much other—and hopefully still further—work.

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²¹Those are the two extremes. Most often, speakers will presuppose little to no knowledge at all, and using *tall* is a way of ruling out certain combinations of heights and thresholds, thereby augmenting both linguistic and factual knowledge simultaneously. See Kocurek et al. 2020 for recent work in this regard.

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