

Reconsidering Carnap vs Quine on Individuating Languages

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Abstract

Recent analytic metaphysics has seen a resurgence in deflationary approaches following in the footsteps of Rudolf Carnap. However, these views face unanswered questions: W. V. O. Quine is still widely held to have successfully rebutted Carnap's deflationism in the 1950s by rejecting the analytic/synthetic distinction on which it was based. Both Quineans and Carnapians should accept a deflationary reading of the Quine-Carnap debate, since it turns on the ontological question of how to individuate languages. On this reading, whichever theory provides the best practical resources for individuating and discussing languages-as-entities should be accepted, by the lights of either theorist. I argue that Quine's ontology of languages is problematic by his own reasoning, and that Carnap's has better pragmatic utility, so should be preferred. I then sketch a way for the neo-Carnapian to extract analyticity from natural languages.

Keywords

Carnap; deflationism; language; pragmatism; Quine

1 Introduction

The Quine-Carnap debate is a foundation stone of present-day analytic metaphysics. Quine's (apparently successful) rebuttal of Carnap's metaphysical deflationism looms large; present-day analytic metaphysics uses broadly Quinean methods to propose and evaluate

metaphysical theories for their truth. Along with these methods goes a Quinean suspicion of the analytic/synthetic distinction, which was central to the debate and Quine's rebuttal.

Against this rejuvenation of metaphysics, neo-Carnapians hold that Carnap's deflationary method, suitably adapted to the modern day, is sufficient to take the bite out of apparently substantive metaphysical disputes. The relation of the neo-Carnapian movement to a concept of analyticity is somewhat hazy. For instance, Amie Thomasson [2015: ch. 1] (following Price [2009b]) at some points looks for an acceptable alternative,¹ and at others looks to embrace the original notion (e.g. Thomasson [2020], which explains modal vocabulary as expressing analytic rules of use). Likewise, Eli Hirsch's intensional deflationism (the core of Hirsch's deflationism, which yields his famous theory of quantifier variance—see Hirsch [2016]) appears to rely heavily on a concept of analyticity to cast metaphysicians as speaking different languages with, ultimately, quantifiers that follow different analytic rules. Hirsch, however, does not explicitly call this out, or attempt to justify why he is able to make use of a concept of analyticity in the wake of Quine's critique.

Indeed, neo-Carnapians do not generally argue for their ability to make use of the analytic/synthetic distinction. However, the question whether they can help themselves to analyticity in this way seems pressing, as Quine is widely taken to have argued successfully against the theoretical respectability of the distinction.

A promising way to lodge an argument defending appeals to the analytic/synthetic distinction is by deflating the Quine-Carnap debate itself. Paul Grice and Peter Strawson [1956] published an early paper adopting such a stance, which I will discuss further below. Part of the appeal of such a stance is that such disputes are to be settled by weighing the pragmatic viability of each position against the other. Both Carnap and Quine were pragmatists, so this promises an approach that ought to be acceptable to either camp. Indeed, Carnap himself seems to have favoured something like this view on the dispute (cf Stein [1997]), and Alexander George [2000] also contemplates a similar deflationary move, citing Quine [1994: 99–102] as generally in favour of such a deflation, although not, of course, of Carnap's view itself.

If the dispute is apt for deflation in this way, we ought to be able to show how it is really a metaphysical dispute, and therefore not a substantive one by the lights of the respective authors. And indeed the stakes in the Quine-Carnap debate are metaphysical.

¹ Although Jonathan Schaffer [2009] notes that Thomasson's metaphysical deflationism requires the application conditions for an expression to yield analytic truths.

Specifically, they hinge on our preferred ontology of languages: In “Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology” (Carnap [1950]), Carnap offers individuation conditions for languages that tie their identity closely to analytic truths, while Quine, where he does explicitly adopt a specific ontology of languages, opts for one framed in broadly behaviourist terms, that eschews reference to analyticity (Quine [1976]).

Note that there is a distinction, somewhat obscured in the discussion following the historical Quine-Carnap debate, between a concept of analyticity as it applies to natural language sentences, and as it applies to “regimented” (Quine) or “rationally reconstructed” (Carnap) sentences—sentences in languages specifically constructed to be suitable to doing science, and determining the ontology of a scientific theory. The issue is somewhat complicated by the fact that neo-Carnapians seem disinclined to draw this distinction. At least some of this seems to be intentional, if not explicitly argued. The original dispute between Carnap and Quine themselves appears to have been focused mainly on regimented languages, since both take some sort of regimentation to be necessary for discerning ontological commitments. By contrast, neo-Carnapian thinkers largely focus specifically on the possibility of doing ontological work in ordinary language (e.g. Hirsch [2011], Price [2011: ch. 12], Thomasson [2015, 2020]). This creates the question of where to look to try and discern an analytic/synthetic distinction—in constructed languages, where purported analytic rules can be stipulated clearly, or in natural languages, where we most easily see the utility of concepts within the analyticity-family demonstrated (*per* Grice & Strawson [1956])?

My own critique will mainly focus on destabilising Quine’s account of the individuation of regimented languages. It will attempt to show that Quine’s own criteria for differentiating regimented languages are not up to the task, and do not yield useful results. I will devote section 7 to discussing the possibility of extending the discussion to natural languages, and offer a sketch for how the neo-Carnapian could construe ontology as done in natural language that supports this application, and that appears consonant with how prominent neo-Carnapians do in fact proceed.²

Construing Quine and Carnap as offering competing views on how to individuate (regimented) languages allows us to formulate an argument defending the Carnapian view on the basis of its pragmatic utility that ought to be acceptable to both camps. Hence we have a course by which we can justify the Carnapian reliance on an analytic/synthetic

² My sincere thanks to an anonymous reviewer at *Disputatio* for pushing me for greater clarity on this distinction.

distinction, thus setting the stage to support a neo-Carnapian application of a concept of analyticity to natural language. As far as I can tell, this angle on the Quine-Carnap debate has never been covered in the literature; while a great deal has obviously been written on Carnap and Quine on language, there is next to nothing written about Carnap and Quine on, specifically, the *individuation* of languages. The topic therefore also offers the opportunity for a new view on an old, and somewhat intractable, discussion.

This is what I will attempt to do below. In section 2 I briefly recount the relevant portions of the Quine-Carnap debate. In section 3 I demonstrate the link to the individuation of (regimented) languages, and outline Carnap's view on such. Section 4 presents Quine's competing account of language individuation. In section 5 I offer my critique of Quine's account, and in section 6 I argue that, interpreting the debate as a dispute over the ontology of languages, the Carnapian offers the more coherent and more pragmatically viable position. Section 7 then examines the prospects for neo-Carnapians to make use of the arguments presented for a viable concept analyticity by applying them to natural language.

2 The Quine-Carnap debate

The Quine-Carnap debate is usually understood to have proceeded as follows: Carnap proposed a deflationary view couched, at least tacitly, in terms of the analytic/synthetic distinction. The origin for this Carnapian view is the seminal paper "Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology" (Carnap [1950], hereafter 'ESO'), in which Carnap draws the distinction between questions that are internal to a linguistic framework, and are therefore meaningful, according to that framework's rules, and questions that are external to any such framework, and that are therefore meaningless pseudo-questions (*ibid.*: 25). Within a year, Quine had published two papers attacking this version of Carnap's deflationary position: "On Carnap's Views on Ontology" (Quine [1951a]) and "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" (Quine [1951b]). The former paper examines and rejects the grounds for Carnap's drawing the internal/external distinction, finding that there is no principled way to do so, while the latter does much the same for the analytic/synthetic distinction, and has since become an extremely influential paper within analytic philosophy generally, as well as a core part of the Quinean manifesto.

Carnap relies on the analytic/synthetic distinction to underpin his internal/external distinction—that is, the distinction between questions asked "internally" to a linguistic framework, and those intended to be asked "externally" to any framework. Internal questions are easily answerable by using the rules of the framework, while external ones are

not coordinated with any such rules, and so are meaningless. The former include many ordinary questions such as ‘What is the number between three and five?’ and ‘Did King Arthur really exist?’, while the latter include more metaphysically-minded questions, such as ‘Are there any physical objects?’.

It is important to note that the internal/external distinction and the analytic/synthetic distinction are not identical, although they are intimately related; for Carnap, the point at which a question goes from being internal to being external is the point at which the questioner cannot charitably be interpreted as accepting the analytic rules of the current linguistic framework, without supposing them to be making serious systematic errors. For instance, a person otherwise competent with regards to the framework of mathematics asking ‘Do numbers exist?’, who intended the question as an internal (*i.e.*: a mathematical) one would display such a basic error regarding the rules of that framework that it would be uncharitable (or perhaps implausible) to interpret them as trying to use those rules. Instead, the best we can do is interpret the question as, in some way, proposing a new framework with different analytic rules.

Matti Eklund [2009] further distinguishes between “factual-external” and “pragmatic-external” questions. Factual-external questions attempt to pose questions with genuine content externally to linguistic frameworks, and are therefore strictly nonsensical for Carnap, while pragmatic-external questions are a sort of speech-act proposing a new framework (*ibid.*: 131–2). Pragmatic-external questions accomplish something worthwhile, although they strictly cannot be made sense of in the framework under discussion, while factual-external questions are misconceived, and rely on anti-deflationist assumptions about the nature of the discussion.

For Carnap, there is no real disagreement between someone operating in the old framework and someone operating in the new, because they mean different things by their terms. Hence there is no question of a substantive metaphysical dispute between speakers. For instance, we might imagine someone operating within a physical object framework that bears a commitment to everyday physical objects such as tables. Such a speaker would take the sentence S_1 : ‘There exist some tables’ to mean something very different to the organicist, who believes that the only things that really exist are physical simples and living beings. The organicist takes S_1 to be equivalent in meaning to the sentence S_2 : ‘Some tables are either physical simples or living beings’. Obviously S_2 is false, so the organicist is going to take S_1 to be false also, thus differing from the everyday speaker, using their own rules for applying the term ‘Table’ (Hirsch [2016: 106]). The difference here is not a substantial metaphysical one, but one of language, since both parties agree on what is true of the world, disagreeing

only about which version of the linguistic framework of physical objects we ought to be using. The analytic rules of a linguistic framework are bound up with its identity, and thus with this deflationary way of interpreting metaphysical disputes. The threat presented by Quine to the analytic/synthetic distinction is thus a threat to the notion of frameworks generally, and therefore to a Carnapian deflationism.

3 Individuating languages

As is now well documented, Quine and Carnap each struggled to get to grips with the other's view on the analytic/synthetic distinction, despite their personal and professional closeness (*cf* Creath [1991] and [2007], Richardson [2003], Price [2009a], Decock [2017]). I propose that a good way to get a handle on the conflict between the two authors is in terms of the differentiation of languages as entities. Although, again, Carnap was amenable to a sort of confirmational holism much as Quine was, there are implicit differences in his view of language individuation. Carnap himself sums up this angle on the dispute in passing in ESO:

Quine does not acknowledge the [internal/external] distinction which I emphasize above, because according to his general conception there are no sharp boundary lines between logical and factual truth, between questions of meaning and questions of fact, between the acceptance of a language structure and the acceptance of an assertion formulated in the language. [ESO: 32, fn 2]

Roughly speaking, Carnap's view of language has it that a change of linguistic rules entails a change of language—language identity supervenes on language rules. This is consonant with his distinguishing sharply between the analytic sentences that, as above, express rules that distinguish the language from other languages, and the synthetic sentences that express particular ways the world is or could be by using those analytic rules. Analytic rules, for Carnap, are of the essence of a language; they form the individuation conditions (and

thereby part of the persistence conditions) embedded within the sortal term ‘Language’.³ This, in turn, is why Carnap views the requirement for a definition for analyticity that generalises across all languages (as opposed to a definition of “Analytic in L_0 ”) as “manifestly unreasonable” (Carnap [1990: 430]): which sentences count as analytic will vary hugely between languages, with potentially no overlap out of which such a criterion might be engineered.

To illustrate the point of difference, take the case of revising a purported analytic sentence S , in a language L . For Quine, this is simply what happens: we previously took S to be true solely in virtue of its logical form and the rules of L . Now, because of some recalcitrant datum, it has become expedient to revise some component that went into S ’s being taken to be true. There are no limits on what gets revised, only that the end result be the most pragmatic version of the language available. At the end of the process, we’ll still be talking about the same sentence S , in the same language L . S ’s truth-conditions—and perhaps also its truth-value—will be different, but its identity and the identity of the language L are retained. Of course, Quine takes this to show that S never really was an analyticity (of the eternal, un-revisable sort), and indeed that no sentence is, since any sentence could play the role of S , and be revised as a result of scientific observation. As Quine puts it: “The lore of our fathers is a fabric of sentences [...]. It is a pale gray lore, black with fact and white with convention”, but we should not expect to find “any quite black threads in it, or any white ones” (Quine [1976: 132]). So be it; the important point for discerning the point of difference with Carnap is the robustness of the language L , as

³ The concept of linguistic frameworks is highly influential in modern neo-Carnapian discussions. It appears most natural to construe Carnap as intending the linguistic frameworks of ESO to be constructed languages (paralleling Quine’s “regimented” languages), as pointed out by Broughton [2021]. Broughton critiques Eklund [2013] for appearing to take linguistic frameworks to be natural languages; however, as Eklund [2023: 97] points out, it is possible to read Carnap as allowing that talk of linguistic frameworks can include natural languages, despite the latter not being constructed. Note that in the quote above, Carnap refers to “language structure(s)” and “language(s)”, and appears to be identifying linguistic frameworks with these, from context, although it is not obvious whether he intends the discussion to be limited implicitly to constructed languages, or to include natural language. I will discuss this point further in section 7.

an entity, which persists through the revision.⁴

Carnap, then, paints the picture differently to Quine: we currently speak a language L_1 in which S is true analytically, that is, true solely in virtue of the rules of L_1 . At some point matters call for a potential revision, and we have before us a proposed language, L_2 , in which S is no longer analytically true—that is, either S is false, or S is true such that its truth isn't guaranteed by the rules of L_2 , but needs investigating empirically. L_2 is a different language from L_1 precisely because it has different rules; it would have to, in order for S to go from being analytically true to not. As above, we have before us a pragmatic decision, but here it involves choosing between two languages, namely, deciding whether we ought to adopt L_1 or L_2 . Likewise (although Carnap is not specific about this), it seems only reasonable that we should properly speak of different sentences, S_1 and S_2 , whose truth conditions reflect the rules of use of their respective languages.

This makes clear how Carnap can account for linguistic change, including changing supposedly analytic rules, yet allow that these rules really are still analytic: for the Carnapian, to revise an analytic rule is simply to adopt a new language. Analyticities still represent eternal truths in the strictly qualified sense that, stated in the old language with the old rules in force, they will always be true. However, this is not the sense in which Quine finds analytic unrevisability to be problematic. Paul O'Grady [1999], for instance, makes the point that Carnap accepts the same holism, derived from Duhem and Poincaré, as Quine; Carnap's frameworks are designed to provide a deflationary dissolution of metaphysical

⁴ Another angle on Quine's critique, as noted by Peter Hylton [2021: 458], is to view him instead as objecting to Carnap's drawing a pragmatic/evidential distinction. Hence we get formulations such as the following: "Carnap has maintained that [the issue whether classes are entities] is a question not of matters of fact but of choosing a convenient language form, a convenient conceptual scheme or framework for science. With this I agree, but only on the *proviso* that the same be conceded for scientific hypotheses generally" (Quine [1951b: 43]). Hylton notes that, contrary to how it is often taken, this rejection of a pragmatic/evidential distinction constitutes not a rejection of the concepts 'Analytic' and 'Synthetic', but rather an epistemic view (Quine's epistemological holism) that opposes Carnap's Principle of Tolerance regarding languages (cf Carnap [1937: 51–2]). Being an epistemological position, this view is not itself actually at odds with the analytic/synthetic distinction (Hylton [2021: 458–9]), or, therefore, Carnap's ontology of languages as articulated here. This is because any evidence internal to a framework that might speak to its rejection—Quine's "recalcitrant data"—are, for the Carnapian, eligible to factor into the pragmatic decision to reject the framework in favour of another, since we favour, on pragmatic grounds, frameworks where we don't have to explain away lots of problematic data. Hence any theoretical posit can play either a pragmatic or evidential role, *per* Quine's *proviso* above, but this does not preclude our distinguishing those that are essential to a language from those that are not.

problem cases, not to furnish absolute analytic truths (*ibid.*: 1206). O’Grady thus holds that, in his rebuttal of Carnap, Quine is in fact shadow-boxing a reductive verificationist theory of meaning that Carnap himself had previously abandoned.

The Carnapian can thus go through all the same motions of rejecting a purported analyticity on pragmatic grounds that the Quinean can. The Carnapian just understands the process as one of adoption of a new framework of rules rather than keeping the same language and incorporating new data. What we have before us is a choice between two empirically equivalent ways of modelling language revision that offer different ontologies of languages. The course now for either the Quinean or the Carnapian should be to see which is more pragmatically viable.

For Carnap, as is made clear by ESO [32: fn 2], a language is a body of rules. Change the rules, and you have a different language; play by the rules, and you get easily obtainable, internal answers to ontological questions. Quine’s move, then, is to claim that no such identity conditions for languages can be discerned—there is no way of coherently describing the concept of analyticity so as to outline a particular category of sentences that are essential features of the language, as against those that aren’t. The immediate problem for Quine is that languages as individually discernible entities play a role in interpreting the truth conditions of sentences. As we will see, Quine’s attempt to patch this hole in his programme faces some serious problems.

4 Quine’s theory of language individuation

Throughout most of his work, Quine does not explicitly address the problem of how to distinguish one language from another. Hence while there is, of course, an enormous literature concerning Quine on language, there is next to nothing concerning Quine on *languages*, construed as entities, and their individuation. Nevertheless, Quine does, in one or two places, remark on the importance of the problem of language individuation. For instance, in a discussion of intensional concepts:

What I find more disturbing [...] is the need of dragging in the language concept at all. What is a language? What degree of fixity is supposed? When do we have one language and not two? [Quine 1976: 196]

The context for the worry here is that sentences apparently need to be indexed to a language in order to be interpreted, so that we can do away with talk of propositions. Quine [1969]

addresses the problem as regards eternal sentences, which are transformations of individual sentence utterance events that index such events with a time. For instance, the sentence

J: 'John is a bachelor'.

uttered at T_1 , might be true, but might come to be false at T_2 if John gets married in the interim. By contrast, the transformed, eternal (and tenseless) version of the utterance

E: 'At T_1 , the sentence <John is a bachelor> is true'.

is invariant in its truth across time. This means that we can reconstrue someone pronouncing (J) at T_1 as an eternal sentence utterance event—the event of a certain speaker's uttering an eternal sentence (here (E))—which can be assigned an invariant truth value.

The problem, as noted, is that the sentence's truth conditions will still vary depending on the language in which we take it to be appropriately interpreted. For example, the truth conditions of (E) will vary depending on whether we take it that 'Bachelor' is a term appropriately applied to an unmarried man, or to a certain variety of orange, something that depends on how it is used in our language. Quine notes, thus, that we have to package eternal sentences with "a tacit subscript on the word "true," or "eternal," specifying the language". (*ibid.*: 142) This puts Quine in a quandary: in so vehemently rebutting the use of such notions as analytic or semantic rules, he denies himself access to those same resources for performing the task of sharply individuating languages such that we can provide a value for this important "tacit subscript", and thus give invariant truth values to eternal sentences.

The shift from eternal sentences to eternal sentence utterance events is a subtle move by Quine, and plays into his solution. The language parameter is still present, so languages still need to be individuated, but the parameter is now attached to the individual utterance event, not the eternal sentence itself. Thus, Quine dodges the problem of having to individuate languages semantically as eternal frameworks of rules or meanings, and can instead attempt to cash them out in behaviouristic terms centred on the particular speaker at the time of the utterance event.

This he does by outlining a view on which the essential language parameter is given by the "total present speech dispositions" held by the speaker at the time of the utterance event (*ibid.*: 144). These are the dispositions held by the speaker, at the point when the utterance is made, to respond to other linguistic and non-linguistic stimuli with specific verbal acts

of their own. Building in reference to such dispositions, Quine feels, will be sufficient to distinguish the linguistic usage patterns the speaker holds, and intends their utterance to adhere to, without appeal to anything so spurious as a semantic rule. For example, the disposition to use ‘Bachelor’ in respect of unmarried men and not in respect of fruit makes it clear how we are to interpret the word in its occurrence in the utterance of (E). We might loosely say that the language parameter is determined by speakers’ dispositions to *undertake to follow* certain linguistic rules, and not by the rules themselves, saving Quine from reliance on there actually being analytic linguistic rules.⁵

Quine’s attempt to succeed where (as he sees it) Carnap failed by providing criteria for distinguishing between languages is ingenious and subtle. However, I will argue in the following section that it falls to considerations that Quine specifically should find particularly cutting.

5 Problems with Quine’s theory

Quine’s behaviourist solution to individuating languages suffers from a problem regarding instability, ultimately leading to a dilemma for the Quinean: either accept that languages and eternal sentences are radically unstable, or build into the account the same sort of arbitrariness of which Quine accuses Carnap.

First, and most crudely, there is a difficulty with language sharing: if we take any two speakers, we will doubtless find that the total set of each of their speech dispositions will differ in a myriad of ways. We can see this by considering seemingly inconsequential dispositional differences, in far-fetched circumstances. For instance, my disposition to pronounce of a live unicorn, were I ever to see one, ‘There is a horned horse’, as opposed to your disposition to utter ‘There is a horse with a horn’, creates a dispositional difference

⁵ Dispositions, being a modal notion, are of course on the list of features Quine considers to be metaphysically suspect. He shows awareness of the tension in the passage cited above: “Dispositions. Out of the frying pan into the fire again?” ([1969: 144]). To soothe the tension, Quine gives a very brief account that attempts to ground speech dispositions in terms of the physiological features of the speaker, which are not directly observable, but are nonetheless present (*ibid.*). One is doubtful that this sketch will suffice to ground Quine’s account of language individuation without also overextending to cover examples of which Quine remains sceptical. Nevertheless, despite its running contrary to his other work, I want to grant Quine the use of speech dispositions here, so as to direct my main critique at the most developed version of his view on language-individuation. As will be seen in the arguments presented below, access to dispositions, even so construed, will not help but will rather complicate his position.

between us that, taking the letter of Quine's account strictly and flat-footedly, would mean that we actually speak different languages *at present*. This in turn means that we can never feasibly utter the same eternal sentences, since, people having uncountably many speech-dispositions to corral (there being uncountably many circumstances that would elicit speech responses), we could never feasibly get them all to line up.

Quine signals in certain places that he is willing to accept that each language-user speaks a personal idiolect, with homing in on another's patterns of usage being an exercise in translation (Quine [1969: 46–9]).⁶ However, the instability goes deeper still. It appears possible to change one's own dispositions: immediately after waking up, I am disposed to be crabby, and respond poorly to intrusions; after having some coffee, I'm instead disposed to be more polite in my phrasing. Again, on a pedantic reading of the theory, this constitutes a change in language, such that eternal sentences I previously uttered earlier this morning are irretrievable to me now, and cannot be repeated.⁷

Note that if we want to go in for a less pedantic reading of the theory, we run into a familiar problem. The issue up to now has been that the identity of eternal sentences appears to be contingent on things that seem irrelevant to the matter of determining which eternal sentence is which, such as trivial differences in dispositions to respond in far-fetched circumstances. The solution would be to earmark certain dispositions as relevant to the

⁶ Although note that this is not quite so straightforward: Quine in this passage talks about radical translation occurring between speakers of the same language, which seems to speak for the idiolect view, but uses this to push against the “myth of the museum”, or the idea that each speaker has a determinate idiolect composed of mentally held propositional contents and linguistic labels. This is an example of the Quinean tension that is emerging here; Quine wants to hold at once that sentences have their content determined (by dispositions) for a particular speaker, and simultaneously that their content is indeterminate.

⁷ We might try to get around this by indexing dispositions to a time. So rather than having, at T_1 , a disposition to utter sentence A, which changes at T_2 to a disposition to utter B, we could think of one as having a disposition to utter A at T_1 , and a disposition to utter B at T_2 , with these existing side by side, and our language therefore being invariant. First, I do not think this was what Quine had in mind; the language parameter as given incorporates a time parameter not as part of the dispositions themselves, but as distinguishing between different sets of dispositions at different times. It seems plausible that Quine wanted language change through dispositional change to be possible under the theory, even if not in so unstable a way as it turned out. Further, it seems intuitively strange to build “future” dispositions—dispositions that, so to speak, I do not yet have—into the identity conditions for the sentences I am presently uttering. If this were the case, then an individual would have only one language throughout their entire life, which is just as strange, and seems to make the sortal ‘Language’ about as useless, as if they adopted a new one with each new utterance, as on the opposite reading. My thanks to Rob Trueman for raising this objection.

identity of a language, and thereby a set of eternal sentences, with other dispositions being irrelevant. However, this is simply to raise again the old problem Quine alleged of Carnap's application of a concept of analyticity, only in a new vocabulary of dispositions. There appears to be no easily available criterion for when a disposition determines the identity of a language (or sentence) and when it is irrelevant to such, in just the same way that there is no easily available criterion for distinguishing which linguistic rules ought to count as analytic, and therefore as determining the identity of a linguistic framework. Taking this horn of the dilemma, then, the Quinean approach is no better off than the Carnapian one; what appeared to be progress was in fact kicking the can down the road to another vocabulary.

At this point it appears open to the committed Quinean to bite the bullet, and opt for the first horn of the dilemma, *i.e.*: take it that every language-user speaks in their own (admittedly unstable) idiolect. This does not appear, initially, to be too far from Quine's idea of the indeterminacy of translation. If the Quinean is already on board with there being no fact of the matter about how to correctly translate between languages(/idiolects), then the translation challenge posed by the radical instability of Quine's behaviourist languages doesn't seem to pose any new problems. Translation is to be judged practically, by success in communication, not by seeking a perfect mapping of dispositions (*e.g.* Quine [1992: 43]).

The problem is that the instability created by Quine's behaviourist criterion of language identity isn't actually the same phenomenon as his indeterminacy of translation. The phenomenon of indeterminacy of translation, as Quine has it, is that there is no fact of the matter about whether a translation of a sentence from one language to another is correct or not, because this is underdetermined by speaker behaviour (Quine [1960: §12], Quine [1969: ch. 2]). By contrast, the behaviourist interpretation of eternal sentences offered in Quine [1969] establishes that, on the flat-footed reading, there is a fact of the matter, because there is a correct translation available—it's just never feasible to obtain it. To see this, recall that the value assigned to the language variable is just the total present speech-dispositions of the speaker, about which there is, on the flat-footed reading, a determinate fact of the matter. On this view, the success of our interpretive efforts is determined by how well we can model these dispositions. It is not indeterminate whether these efforts ever succeed; it is a determinate fact that, on the flat-footed reading, they will always fail.

This further demonstrates the tension that Quine expresses in his [1969], namely, between the need to provide a set of facts that make a speaker's utterance interpretable and provide eternal sentences with truth-values, and the resistance to reengineering the concept of a determinate semantic meaning. In fact, it seems that Quine tends towards

the second horn of the dilemma—the less pedantic view. Hence in his [1960] we get the following:

For naturalism, the question whether two expressions are alike or unlike in meaning has no determinate answer, known or unknown, except insofar as the answer is settled by people's speech-dispositions, known or unknown. If by these standards there are indeterminate cases, so much the worse for the terminology of meaning and likeness of meaning. [Quine 1960: 29]

Following this is a brief discussion of the case of two equally defensible but opposed English translations of a foreign expression, both of which accord entirely with the speech-dispositions of all speakers concerned (*ibid.*). This is an impossibility on the flat-footed reading, since the only way for the translations to *be* opposed is for there to be some dispositional difference between speakers.

The second horn retrieves Quinean indeterminacy, but grounds it in the ambiguity over which dispositions are relevant to determining the value of the language parameter. And it may be possible for the Quinean to work with this, treating different dispositions as relevant to language-individuation depending on context, much as Quine treats the notion of translation as practical and context-sensitive. However, taking this tack sacrifices the invariance of the language parameter for eternal sentences, since which language the sentence should be interpreted as belonging to varies with context of interpretation. Hence it also sacrifices the notion of eternal sentences as having invariant truth values, which, recall, was the point of introducing the language parameter in the first place.

As I noted when introducing it, the first horn of the dilemma appears implausibly pedantic. The reason for taking it seriously was that it is not open to the Quinean to draw the distinction that the second horn requires, between language-essential and language-inessential dispositions, as a fact independent of interpretive contexts. In fact, the dilemma is not at all easy for the Quinean to shrug off, since it brings out a tension between different parts of Quine's views on language—a tension of which Quine himself seems to have been partly aware.

6 Pragmatic utility

The problems faced by Quine's theory of language individuation are significant because they play into the pragmatic decision to be made between adopting his framework (to use

the term loosely) for individuating languages, or Carnap's. To restate the interpretation from section 3, Quine and Carnap are putting forward competing criteria for individuating languages—indeed, different language-ontologies, understood in a suitably deflationary way. Since both theorists are pragmatists, whichever option does the best job should, by the lights of either theorist, be the one we accept.

This calls for a re-framing of the debate not as an attack on the coherence of the concept of analyticity, but rather as a contest between two competing metalanguages for discussing different linguistic practices. In this context, to note the failure of Quine's dispositional replacement for a concept of analyticity is to note that Quine's proposed language-ontology fares no better than does Carnap's when put to the same trials—the two are on a par as regards such an evaluation. There is therefore no clear answer, at least at this stage, regarding which metalanguage is the most viable option, pragmatically speaking. Note, though, that understood thus as a proposal to secure linguistic utility, a Quinean argument that we would be pragmatically better off if we simply excised talk of analytic rules (and differentiation of languages thereby) from our metalanguage would, without a viable alternative to put in place, be an extremely hard sell.

How might the dispute play out on this pragmatic footing? Below I will sketch out an argument that, examined in this new light, Carnap has the better of it. The focus here will be on what adopting a Carnapian deflationary framework, complete with a concept of analyticity, can get us, and why even the committed Quinean should want to reap these benefits.

In the wake of "Two Dogmas", Paul Grice and Peter Strawson published a paper arguing the benefits of a concept of analyticity. The concept, the authors argue, is demonstrably usable in a systematic way. Grice and Strawson posit that the consistency with which philosophers apply the concepts 'Analytic' and 'Synthetic' not just to canonical examples, but to entirely novel cases, is evidence in favour of their being meaningful:

For, in general, if a pair of contrasting expressions are habitually and generally used in application to the same cases, *where these cases do not form a closed list*, this is a sufficient condition for saying that there are *kinds* of cases to which the expressions apply; and nothing more is needed for them to mark a distinction. [Grice & Strawson 1956: 143] (emphasis in original)

The idea here is that the distinction between analytic and synthetic sentences is consistently applicable by language-users not just to a closed canon of sentences, such as might be

learned by rote, but to completely novel sentences that the language-users have never before considered.⁸

We can infer two things from this observation. First, analyticity is not conceptually bankrupt. The arguments in “Two Dogmas” suggest that application of the concept of analyticity ought to be arbitrary, such that agreement between speakers on what is analytic could only be reached by learning an arbitrarily selected, closed canon of sentences, since there is no reductive explanation available of what a sentence’s being analytic actually amounts to. This carries with it the assumption that lacking such an explanation impugns the concept’s utility. But what the Grice-Strawson argument appears to show is that this assumption is flawed; a concept can be applied in a consistent, principled way even in the absence of a reductive specification of its extension (*ibid.*: 148). Recall that, per the above, the Quinean argument has to be understood as an attack on the pragmatic value of the concept, that is, as claiming that because the concept lacks a reductive definition, a language would be pragmatically better off for its being removed. In light of the Grice-Strawson argument, this looks like a difficult position to hold.

The second inference we can draw points to the availability and utility of a vocabulary with analyticity at its base—the so-called “analyticity family”. According to Grice and Strawson, the reach of analyticity extends far. Indeed, as argued above, it is the basis not only of concepts that Quine deemed suspicious, such as synonymy and meaning, but also concepts to which the Quinean wants to help themselves, such as that of a distinct language as an individual entity. With ‘Language’ fall other sortal concepts, such as ‘Word’, ‘Sentence’ and ‘Expression’, all of which plausibly require individuation of languages in order to be usable themselves (one wouldn’t speak of having the same sentence in two different languages except in a weak, phonetic sense, a pressure to which Quine himself is sensitive, hence his attempt to provide some criteria for a more robust sense of ‘Language’). Thus the Carnapian who is at home with a concept of analyticity with which to individuate languages

⁸ Further, the authors note that these concepts are not just applicable in formal philosophical contexts, but that they see at least implicit use outside philosophy, by Quine’s own lights. This is because the ordinary notion of synonymy as sameness of meaning, according to Quine’s arguments in “Two Dogmas”, is based on a conceptually prior notion of analyticity. Ordinary language-users who are untrained in the philosophical version of the concepts thus appear to display an implicit understanding of them in their ability to apply the derived concept of synonymy, and other concepts in the “analyticity family”, such as self-contradiction, when analysing language, with a high level of consistency to a non-closed list of cases (*ibid.*: 145–7). I will discuss this further in section 7.

can boast a broader vocabulary for dealing with linguistics than can the thoroughgoing Quinean who rejects analyticity.

The Grice-Strawson argument tells us that we don't need to be able to give a definition of a concept of analyticity for it to be useful. Nevertheless, we can help to flesh out the meaning of a concept of analyticity by providing a sketch of its functional role within metalinguistic discourse. With the link between analyticity and the identity of languages made clear, we can offer such a sketch: A sentence *S* is analytic-in-*L* iff the rejection of the truth of *S* by a language-user *U* means that *U* speaks a language other than *L*.⁹ This explanation is on the order of what Michael Williams calls an EMU, or Explanation of Meaning in terms of Use (Williams [2013]). Williams uses EMUs to offer a non-representationalist characterisation of theoretical concepts in terms of their practical function. The purpose of the EMU is to provide a pragmatist explanation of a concept in cases where it is impossible to provide an informative explanation by way of unpacking the properties to which the concept refers. Typical applications are to provide explanations of the functional role of concepts such as 'True', 'Good' and so on, where these resist encapsulation in a wholly general, informative set of criteria. The Quine-Carnap debate seems to show that 'Analytic' fits this bill.

The relevant upshot of the above sketch lies in the functional role it assigns the sortal term 'Language' in linguistic practice. If I take you to be speaking a different language to me, then I am not bound by the same obligations that my own language would place on me were you to utter homophonous sentences in my language. Likewise, I don't take you to be bound by the obligations my sentences might place on you; we each recognize that, until we agree on a shared language (or a translation scheme), there can be no disagreement between us.

The functional role of the sortal 'Language' is thus to sort speaker obligations and permissions in this particular way. O' Grady [1999] argues that this is the role Carnap saw for his conception of analyticity. It is this role that is at work in ordinary cases of linguistic wrangling, where what appears to be at issue is how to engineer a linguistic concept (see e.g.: Plunkett [2015] and Belleri [2020]; see also Decock [2017: §4] on Carnap's sympathy for contemporary "linguistic engineering" programmes). The way we assess when this speaking at cross-purposes happens will necessarily involve some interpretation from speakers. It

⁹ This will of course need interpretation to account for a person's being able to speak two or more languages, etc.; one does not "reject" the rules of English in order to speak French, except perhaps in a very specific sense, nor does one "reject" the rules of the language of physical objects to switch to talking about mathematical ones. This would have to be settled in details of the notions of acceptance and rejection as *quasi*-speech acts.

is possible that another person might explicitly deny a sentence that is analytic in one's own language, but more often one has to make a judgement about when it is charitable to interpret the other person as speaking another language with different background rules, rather than making systematic errors in one's own language (cf Hirsch [2011: ch. 6]). Quine himself mentions something like this procedure when discussing translating sentences into one's home language. Note, however, that where the analyticity family allows the Carnapian access to such concepts (e.g.: the sortal concept 'Language') to aid in interpretation, the behaviourist account of languages that Quine offers is unable to retrieve this functionality due to the problems (chiefly interpersonal instability) noted in section 5.

7 Regimented vs natural languages

As noted in section 1, the focus of the debate between Quine and Carnap themselves was on constructed languages designed to be used for natural science, and to have ontological commitments read off them clearly and unambiguously. However, the modern day dispute between Quine's and Carnap's respective intellectual descendents is less clear-cut. In particular, modern day neo-Carnapians appear to focus almost entirely on natural language. For example, the project of Amie Thomasson's influential *Ontology Made Easy* [2015] is explicitly to restore the capability of making ontological claims to ordinary language-users (that is, speakers of natural languages). A necessary step in Thomasson's process is discerning quantificational structure in everyday sentences of natural language (*ibid.*: ch. 2–3). Likewise, Eli Hirsch [2011] frames his deflationism in terms of differences in quantificational structure, such that ordinary speakers who appear to disagree with each other on ontological points are actually speaking past each other, as described in section 1 above.

To my knowledge, there exists almost no discussion in the neo-Carnapian literature regarding the propriety of using apparently regimented formulations to cash out the logical structure (and thereby ontological commitments) of natural-language sentences, which, as noted, neo-Carnapians do routinely. The closest thing to an exception is Matti Eklund's recent paper discussing, *inter alia*, the possibility of a "permissive" or "indifferent" reading of Carnap on linguistic frameworks that allow that fragments of natural languages can count as frameworks in Carnap's sense (Eklund [2023: 97]). In a footnote, Eklund notes that Carnap himself blurs the line on whether analyticity can be discerned in natural language, in some places apparently saying it cannot, and in others saying merely that analyticity in natural language has no "exact definition" (*ibid.*: fn 10, 103–4], quoting Carnap [1990:

427])). If the issue is merely one of the strictness of a definition of analyticity, Eklund argues, this leaves some wiggle room for a concept of analyticity in natural language.¹⁰

Eklund's point gives us some reason to think neo-Carnapians doing ontology in natural language are more in line with Carnap's own thinking than appearances suggest. Further, the arguments put forward above for the pragmatic utility of a concept of analyticity appear to extend readily to natural language. In particular, the Grice-Strawson argument seems to apply equally well to natural languages and constructed languages, since ordinary speakers appear able to apply concepts in the analyticity-family consistently to those languages (the authors themselves do not distinguish between natural and constructed languages in putting forward this argument). Likewise, approaches such as that of Hirsch seem to demonstrate the utility of a sortal term 'Language' tied to a concept of analyticity, as discussed in section 6 above. All of this gives us reason to want to extend the analysis to natural language.

However, this does not yet tackle Quinean concerns about doing ontology in natural language. We can begin to address these concerns by considering Quine's reasons for rejecting the applicability of natural language to this task. For Quine, natural-language sentences have to be translated into a regimented language, with a clear quantificational structure, in which we can do ontology.

Quine holds that there is no fact of the matter regarding the equivalence of natural-language sentences and their regimented paraphrases (Quine [1970: 395]). Thus although we can discern ontological commitments in the regimented language, sentences in the regimented language cannot be said to cash out the commitments of their natural-language counterparts. This is, first, because synonymy of sentences, just as of smaller expressions, cannot adequately be made sense of (Quine [1960: 145]), and second, because the indeterminacy of translation from one language to another prevents determinate equivalence between any natural-language sentences and their counterparts in the regimented language. On the latter, Quine says the following:

But I should mention that synonymy and therefore meaning are even worse off than analyticity when we transcend a single language. For if the two expressions to be equated

¹⁰ The discussion in question is a response to Broughton [2021], who attributes to Eklund the view that Carnap's linguistic frameworks are exclusively fragments of natural languages. Eklund [2023: 97–101] replies by noting that his own arguments do not rely on this assumption, but that Carnap's examples are largely framed as natural-language disputes and so are liable to create an impression that linguistic frameworks *can be* natural languages, or fragments thereof.

belong to different languages, their biconditional or equation is far from analytic; it is incoherent, belonging to no language. [Quine 1991: 271]

The gulf imposed by Quine between a natural-language sentence *S* and its regimented paraphrase *S'* thus stems, on both counts, from his rejection of the concept of analyticity; there can be no question of *S'* expressing the same meaning as *S*, and thus cashing out ontological commitments implicit in *S*, because this would presuppose notions of synonymy and analytic rules that Quine himself has rejected.

Once again, if we put the concept of analyticity back on the table as a pragmatic competitor, the picture looks different. As Quine states, if *S* and *S'* are sentences in different languages, there is no question of an analytic rule connecting their respective usage rules. Conversely, if there were an analytic link between the two sentences, this would imply that they shared a language.

Thus, since the neo-Carnapian wants to speak of the ontological commitments of natural language, they have to hold that *S'* expresses a quantificational structure that was already present (in some sense) in *S*. The neo-Carnapian can do this if they take *S'* to be a sentence in *the same* language, *L*, as *S*, and if they take it that there is an analytic rule of *L* guaranteeing the synonymy of *S* and *S'*. The quantificational tools of first-order logic are thus to be construed by the neo-Carnapian as *extensions* of our natural language, useful for clarifying ambiguities, rather than as structures of a distinct formal language to which we migrate when we do ontology.

Note that the neo-Carnapian cannot do everything here at the level of sentences, that is, pointing to equivalences between natural-language sentences and sentences in first-order logic—at some point they have to ascend to the level of semantic meanings. This is because the phenomenon of lexical ambiguity means that many natural-language sentences are ambiguous regarding their proper clarification into first-order logic sentences. Some notion of the semantic meaning expressed by sentences is required to model this ambiguity, *i.e.*: as a one-many relationship between sentences and semantic meanings they could be taken to express. There is a ready made neo-Carnapian solution here in the form of inferentialism, which has been adopted by several such authors at various points (*cf* Brandom [1994], Price [2023], Thomasson [2020: ch. 3]).¹¹ For the inferentialist, the semantic meaning of a sentence *S* consists in the inferential moves that one who asserts *S* is committed and

¹¹ See also Peregrin [2020] regarding Carnap's own inferentialist turn.

entitled to. A speaker asserting *S* undertakes a commitment to act on sentences following analytically from *S*, with such commitments being tracked by the linguistic community (what Brandom [1994: 182] calls “deontic scorekeeping”). For a sentence, *S*, to be ambiguous between regimentations *S'* and *S''* consists in its being unclear which set of commitments—those entailed by *S'* or by *S''*—would be being undertaken by a speaker uttering *S*.

Inferentialism here serves the key function of grounding the distinction between different semantic meanings. This in turn allows the neo-Carnapian to model regimentation as an intra-language process of (using Brandom’s expression) making explicit the different sets of inferential commitments that could be carried by ambiguous sentences, thus avoiding concerns about the indeterminacy of translation between natural language and a regimented language.

The sketch I have provided above is intended to show how the neo-Carnapian might support their ability to do deflationary ontological work in natural language, against Quinean concerns. In doing so, I aimed to cash out positions held implicitly in the neo-Carnapian literature. The neo-Carnapian approach is significantly different from both Quine’s and Carnap’s, in the ways noted; however, the same arguments regarding the pragmatic utility of a concept of analyticity, compared to the costs of dispensing with such a concept, are just as relevant for the neo-Carnapian approach to natural language as to Carnap’s linguistic frameworks.

8 Conclusion

It is important to remember that what the Carnapian and the Quinean both want out of this discussion, amongst other things, is a framework for deflating metaphysical disputes. Since both disputants are metaphysical deflationists, both should be looking for a pragmatic solution to the debate, which is to say the course that offers the most promise for analysing language and (although we should be careful not to reason too circularly) continuing the project of deflating metaphysical disputes. Again, the upshot of treating vocabulary in the analyticity-family as respectable is to allow for just such a framework. I have argued that the Carnapian, with criteria for individuating languages and a vocabulary of semantic concepts, each undergirded by the analytic/synthetic distinction, is in a better position to do this than the Quinean. Quine’s own attempt to substantiate the individuation conditions for languages on which the dispute really hinges is unstable, for structurally similar reasons to those alleged by Quine of Carnap’s. If the Carnapian is in no better theoretical shape than the Quinean by the lights of “Two Dogmas”, then they can at least claim a metalinguistic

vocabulary that is more practically useful, and more self-consistent. This gives us at least one reason to prefer the Carnapian framework to the Quinean one.

I have argued that neo-Carnapians likewise have a clear path to doing deflationary ontology with a respectable concept of analyticity in tow, for all that they diverge from (the orthodox reading of) Carnap by doing this in ordinary language. Although I have only been able to gesture to it here, a neo-Carnapian concept of natural-language analyticity grounded by inferentialism can potentially yield the equivalence between ordinary, everyday sentences and their regimented counterparts that appears to be required by neo-Carnapian thinking.¹²

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