

**Temporal Externalism, Use and Meaning**  
**Henry Jackman**  
**York University**

**Abstract**

Our ascriptions of content to utterances in the past attribute to them a level of determinacy that extends beyond what could supervene upon the usage up to the time of those utterances. If one accepts the truth of such ascriptions, one can either (1) argue that *future* use must be added to the supervenience base that determines meaning, or (2) argue that such cases show that meaning does not supervene upon use at all.

The following will argue against authors such as Lance, Hawthorn and Ebbs that first of these options is the more promising of the two. However, maintaining the supervenience thesis ultimately requires that the doctrine that use determines meaning be understood as 'normative' in two important ways. The first (more familiar) way is that the function from use to meaning must be of a sort that allows us to maintain a robust distinction between correct usage and actual usage. This first type of normativity is accepted by defenders of many more temporally restricted versions of the supervenience thesis, but the second sort of normativity is unique to theories that extend the supervenience base into the future. In particular, if meaning is partially a function of future use, we can understand other commitments we are often taken to have about meaning, particularly the commitment to meaning being 'determinate', as practical commitments that *structure* our linguistic practices rather than theoretical commitment that merely *describe* such practices.

The claim that meaning supervenes upon use has become something of a philosophical commonplace, and a typical expression of this "supervenience thesis" is the following:

**U:** The use of a word determines its extension.

However, just how **U** should be interpreted is often unclear. Its status as a commonplace stems at least partially from the fact that "the use of a word" and "determine" can be interpreted in many different ways, and **U** has often been reinterpreted rather than rejected when its supporters were confronted with phenomena that did not sit well with **U** as it had been previously understood.

For instance, **U** was, for much of the last century understood in what I will call a "presentist" or "currentist" fashion according to which the interpretation of an utterance was taken to supervene upon the use of the words at the time of utterance itself. On such a reading, **U** should be more explicitly cashed out as:

**CU:** The *current* use of a word determines its (current) extension.

CU itself can be understood in various ways. For instance CU can be understood in an *internalist* way in which the only usage relevant to meaning is that describable in terms of stimuli and responses that could be shared by doppelgangers of ours who lived in an environment different from ours in various unperceived ways. On the other hand, use can be understood in a non-internalist way according to which the use of a word includes the actual environment in which it occurs, so that if I apply "water" to H<sub>2</sub>O, and my twin applies it to XYZ, we are using the term differently, even if neither of us could tell H<sub>2</sub>O and XYZ apart.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, the use in CU can be understood in *individualist* way according to which the only use relevant to what a speaker means is their own, or a non-individualist way in which the relevant use is that of their *entire community*.<sup>2</sup> Further, current use can be taken to encompass only how the speaker *actually* uses the word, or to also include how he or she is *disposed* to use it at that time of utterance. The dispositionalist, non-internalistic and non-individualist interpretation readings will hereafter presumed to hold for the versions of U discussed.<sup>3</sup>

CU came to grief when the thought experiments of Kripke and Putnam showed that two people or communities whose current use of a word were exactly the same could very well be taken to mean different things by that word.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, U was reinterpreted as:

**PCU:** The *past* and current use of a word determines its (current) extension.

Kripke and Putnam were also understood as illustrating the importance of one's *environment*, but that could, as mentioned above, be captured within a non-internalist interpretation of CU. The important point for the purposes of this paper (which was more obvious with proper names than with natural kind terms) was that reference didn't (at least immediately) switch when our

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<sup>1</sup> I'll simply assume that the details of this case are familiar from Putnam 1975.

<sup>2</sup> For the best-known defense of the non-individualist position, see Burge 1979.

<sup>3</sup> Largely because these interpretations are motivated by accepting ascriptions the rejection of which would almost certainly come with a willingness to reject the sorts of ascriptions upon which this essay is focused.

environment did, so reference was *historical* in the sense that it was the environment in which the term was *originally* used that determines what it meant.<sup>5</sup>

However, it has recently been argued by a number of philosophers that even **PCU** is not entirely in keeping with our ascriptional practices, and that our everyday ascriptions of content treat the content of our thoughts and utterances as sensitive to contingent linguistic developments that take place *after* the utterances in question.<sup>6</sup>

To take one of many examples recently discussed, consider the case of "gold". Prior to developments in modern chemistry, the standard tests for being gold (malleability, dissolvability in *aqua regia*, etc.) were satisfied by platinum as well, and all samples of platinum were classified as "gold". Further, when tests were developed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century that could distinguish gold from platinum, platinum made up a tiny proportion of the purported samples of "gold", and so platinum was considered a substance that was mistaken for gold rather than a variety of it. Large amounts of platinum were subsequently discovered in South Africa, but by this time the distinction between gold and platinum was already in place. However, if the platinum deposits in South Africa had been discovered *before* the development of modern chemistry, there would have been enough platinum in the 'gold' supply for both platinum and our gold to be considered different *types* of 'gold'.<sup>7</sup> We take 17<sup>th</sup> century speakers to be talking about *gold* with the word "gold", even though, if history had developed a little differently after their utterance, our counterparts would have interpreted them as making claims that were true of *gold or platinum*.

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<sup>4</sup> Kripke 1972, Putnam 1975.

<sup>5</sup> Leaving room, of course, for possible changes of meaning over time (see Evans 1973).

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance Lance & Hawthorne 1990, 1997, Jackman 1996, 1999, 2005, Ebbs 1997, 2000, G. Wilson, 2000, Lance 2000, Stoneham 2003, Collins 2006, Tasenini (forthcoming), as well as possibly Koethe 1982, and Rouse 1987. The existence of such temporally loaded content ascriptions is also noted, but not endorsed, in M. Wilson, 1982, Donnellan 1983 and Sorensen 1997.

One needn't endorse such ascriptions, but those views that endorse these aspects of our ascriptional practice will be referred to here as varieties of "Temporal Externalism" (or "TE"). Temporal Externalists seem faced with two choices with respect to **U**. The first of these is to reinterpret **U** so that it fits our practice, leaving one with something like:

**PCFU:** The past, current and *future* use of a word determines its (current) extension.<sup>8</sup>

The second is to claim that the problem is not with the interpretation of **U** but with **U** itself, and thus that we should give up on the supervenience thesis altogether.<sup>9</sup>

The following will defend a version of **PCFU** and the associated assumption that meaning supervenes upon use. Typically a defense of **PCFU** would argue for its superiority over some version of **PCU**,<sup>10</sup> but this paper will defend **PCFU** against those who might think that temporal externalism should lead to the denial of **U**. In particular, it will focus on three philosophers who seem skeptical of the supervenience thesis while endorsing the kinds of ascriptions used to motivate **PCFU**: Mark Lance, Johan Hawthorn and Gary Ebbs. The supervenience thesis will, I believe, hold up against the reservations that they may have about it, though preserving it will require adopting a non-standard (though to my mind independently plausible) interpretation of the "determination" relation involved in **U**.

## Lance and Hawthorn

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<sup>7</sup> For a more extended discussion of this case, see Donnellan 1983, Ebbs 2000, Wilson 2000, Jackman 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Versions of PCFU are defended in Jackman 1996, 1999, Stoneham 2003, and Wilson 2000.

<sup>9</sup> As we shall see, versions of this second position are defended in Ebbs 2000 and possibly Lance & Hawthorn 1997. That there would be such differences about what temporal externalism shows us about meaning should not be surprising. Many philosophers who could all be considered 'semantic externalists' in the 70's in virtue of sharing Putnam's and Kripke's intuitions about the cases they described had radically different 'robust' accounts of what such cases should be take to show us about meaning. For instance, some philosophers took the cases to show that reference was at bottom a causal and scientifically reducible relation (Devitte 1980, Field 1972), while others took it to show no such thing (McDowell 1978, Evans 1982.). Indeed, after an initial reading of Ebbs 2000, I thought that I had found someone with views close to my own, but on a closer reading and later conversation I discovered that, far from sharing my views, he considered mine to be of precisely the sort of view that he took himself to be arguing *against*.

Whether or not Lance and Hawthorn (hereafter "L&H") endorses **PCFU** is unclear. Ebbs, for instance, has taken them to be committed to **PCFU**.<sup>11</sup> By contrast, Tanesini takes them to be critics of it.<sup>12</sup> I'm not convinced that L&H's views really are incompatible with the supervenience thesis, though there is reason to think that L&H take them to be. Still, understanding why **PCFU** is compatible with L&H's views should help explain what I think the supervenience thesis does, and doesn't, commit us to.

One reason to think that L&H might reject **PCFU** is their claim that translation is "indexical", so that "two different translations may correctly translate some term in two ways that are incompatible".<sup>13</sup> This might seem to suggest that any version of **U** must be false since the two incompatible meaning assignments could be true of the same community, and thus there could be differences of meaning with no corresponding difference of use to underwrite them.

However, this conclusion only follows from the 'indexicality' or translation if you thought that translation was a descriptive project engaged in from an objective and detached perspective.<sup>14</sup> Fortunately for **PCFU**, this is precisely the model of translation that L&H are criticizing. For L&H, translation is a normative enterprise where the object is to "create a single large linguistic community,"<sup>15</sup> so while two incompatible manuals *could* be correct, only one of them could *actually* be correct. (Just as each of two competing players could win particular a game of chess, without it being the case that *both* could.) That is to say, if one translator successfully integrated with the target community and brings it into line with his proposed translation manual, another translator would no longer be able to correctly translate the

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<sup>10</sup> Which is what I do in Jackman 1996, 1999, 2005.

<sup>11</sup> In his comments on an earlier version of Jackman 2004, he puts Lance and Hawthorn in the "futurist" camp.

<sup>12</sup> Tanesini 2005, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> Lance and Hawthorn 1990, p. 28.

<sup>14</sup> The view of translation traditionally attributed to Quine.

<sup>15</sup> Lance and Hawthorn 1990, p. 28.

community according to their alternate manual.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, L&H explicitly deny that both translators could actually be right.<sup>17</sup>

To put their spin on the example discussed above, we can imagine two groups of aliens who might have visited Earth in 1600, one of whom would translate "gold" as referring to *gold* and another who would translate it as picking out *gold or platinum*. Each group could have, had they arrived first, used their translations to interact with us in a way that would have led our own linguistic practice to develop in a way that would justify their translation. Consequently, while both could not do this together (since the rival translations would prevent each other from creating a larger linguistic community with our language), any one group would be able to create a larger linguistic community that would make their translation correct, even though these translations are incompatible with each other. This is enough to rule out **PCU**, but, as it stands, is still compatible with **PCFU**.

A community's meaning is a function of all of its usage, and the normative aspect of translation comes from the fact that past usage doesn't settle how future use should go. This allows translators to legitimately affect future usage, and thus contribute to what determines the meanings that they are attributing to their target. If one understands translation not as a description of an independent practice, but as an attempt to unify two practices, then there is no reason to view the sort of 'indexicality' L&H describe as being incompatible with **PCFU**, so if one is looking in L&H's work for a reason to deny the supervenience thesis, one needs to look elsewhere.

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<sup>16</sup> Lance and Hawthorn 1990, pp. 43-44.

<sup>17</sup> Lance and Hawthorn 1990, p. 44.

However, L&H's claim that translation is indexical is not the only reason to think that they must reject the supervenience thesis, and perhaps the clearest case where L&H seem to deny PCFU is in their book, *The Grammar of Meaning*, where they describe a view that sounds remarkably like PCFU:

It has been argued by Putnam, Rouse, and others that the totality of past facts about linguistic usage do not determine meaning or, hence, the correctness of future linguistic actions. Rather, it is claimed, the meaning of various bits of language at the present time depends upon future usage of these terms. (Lance & Hawthorn 1997, p. 196)

L&H go on almost immediately to criticize the view described above.

[T]his attempt to divorce normativity from descriptive facts is not radical enough. The natural reading of this view is that meaning claims are some sort of high-level, functional description of structures of usage as they exist in a community across time, including future times. Thus, if a meaning claim entails a normative claim about how language ought to be used, this normative assertion must, again, be seen as an attributive implicational claim to the effect that total historical societal usage – functionally characterized, in terms perhaps of the undertaken normative commitments of the practitioners – implies an endorsement of this propriety. If this were correct, then to say, for example, that one ought not to allow computers to play chess would be to say that the forbidding of chess-playing computers follows from the total structure of endorsements of the chess world through time. Thus, if one were to claim that the chess world is going to allow chess computers and always will until the game disappears, *it would be manifestly and directly contradictory* to go on to make the normative claim that this should not be. This is an absurd conclusion. Indeed, one might maintain that it is a bad idea to allow chess computers precisely because of the fact that when people continue to develop them it will signal the end of chess as an interesting game. Even if the normative rejection of computer chess is *wrong*, it is surely misguided to suppose that it is *logically inconsistent* with the view that people will go on to ruin chess in this way. (Lance & Hawthorn 1997, pp. 196-7)<sup>18</sup>

However, while it may be the case that the consequences L&H consider follow from a "natural reading" of PCFU, the natural reading isn't obligatory. Claiming that meaning depends on future usage isn't incompatible with saying that that future usage could incorporate mistakes, since the

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<sup>18</sup> See also the following remark from Lance:

It is extremely natural to take ... that which determines the rule to which one's behavior is answerable, [to be] present and future practices of one's linguistic community, what future communities would actually hold one to were they to evaluate one's present performances. This reading, however, is neither palatable, nor essential. The fundamental allegiance of a genuine linguistic agent – one who is both subject to and author of normative authority – is to the tradition and social practice, not to the positions of individuals within the practice, not even the unanimous positions of all the participants. The structural possibility of a distinction between what is accepted by the community and what is actually licensed by the practice is secured by the insistence that actual patterns of acceptance be only *prima facie* justified. (Lance, 2000, pp. 126-127)

Much of what I will say about L&H below applies to this remark as well.

idea that future usage helps determine meaning does not imply that there is some point in the future where usage can be *equated* with meaning.<sup>19</sup>

While L&H are right that future use is only *prima facie* justified, I take this to be true of the conception of use relevant to *any* plausible version of U. For instance, most defenses of CU don't take it to commit one to saying that every aspect of current usage has to be correct. Indeed, most versions of CU try to explain how, even if current use determines meaning, at least some aspects of current use can be understood as mistaken. Some of these attempts could be understood as 'reductive' in the sense that meaning ascriptions just describe some naturalistically specifiable subset of actual use,<sup>20</sup> but (as I've argued elsewhere)<sup>21</sup> there is no reason to think that even CU need commit one to this sort of reductionism about meaning. In particular, one can take meaning to be a function of use but understand this function to be a *normative* one. For instance, one could take the semantic values of our terms to be those that 'maximize' the truth of the commitments embodied in our use. If meaning is produced by this sort of function, then any aspect of our use, no matter how stable it is, can turn out to be mistaken if the meaning assignment that best maximizes the truth of the whole would treat it as mistaken.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, even if one thinks that how our terms *are* used determines how they *should be* used, one can agree with L&H that meaning ascriptions are about how speakers *should* use their terms rather than descriptions of how they *do* use their terms.

For instance if we discovered the relevant chemical test for gold and defined it as we do now, we would have meant *gold* by gold, even if we, in fact, never subjected any samples of platinum to this test so that platinum samples remained in the set of things we actually applied "gold" to.

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<sup>19</sup> This will come up again in the discussion of Ebbs.

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance Dretske (1981, 1986), Fodor (1987, 1990).

<sup>21</sup> See, for instance, Jackman 2003b.

<sup>22</sup> See Jackman 2003a, 2003b. This is, of course, a variant of the Principle of Charity. (See Davidson 1984.)



It could be that it becomes settled that we mean *gold* by gold even if we *never* discover that samples of platinum are not gold. Developments in our usage can settle that a certain item will fall within the extension or anti-extension of one of our terms without our ever becoming aware of this.<sup>23</sup>

Just as a defender of Charity who endorses **CU** (or **PCU**) has the resources to say that much (past and) contemporary usage is mistaken, the **PCFU**-friendly philosopher need not require that there ever be a time in the future when actual use can be *equated* with correct use. **PCFU** may expand the range of *inputs* into the function from use to meaning, but the function itself stays normative. L&H seem to characterize the defender of **PCFU** as endorsing the claim that meaning statements are merely *descriptions* of regularities in use, and it is this non-normative understanding of what the "determination" relation is in **U** that would ultimately make any version of it seem unacceptable.<sup>24</sup> However, if the determination is taken to be normative one,

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<sup>23</sup> At this point one should note that, one should not confuse **PCFU** with

(**FU**) The *future* use of a word determines its (current) extension.

Critics of Temporal Externalism often write as if it were committed to some version of (FU), and this is possibly explained by the fact that TE is often motivated by examples where, in the future, the imagined usage is entirely correct and so could seem like it was, on its own, enough to determine meaning. That is, the futures involve cases where the extension of "Grant's Zebra" (Wilson 1982, Jackman 1996, 1999), "Witch" (L&H 1990, 1997), or "Gold" (Wilson 2000, Jackman 2005) could be determined by someone who just looked at the future usage and nothing else. In much the same way, social externalism is typically motivated by considering cases where the social use can be understood as free from error (see Burge 1979) even though this is in no way an essential part of the view (see Burge 1986). Unlike, our use of, say, proper names like "Thales" where how the term was used in the past seems essential to what it means now, our current use of "gold" might, on its own, seem like it's enough to, as a matter of fact, figure out what we mean(t). That is, we often describe pasts where speakers are ontologically confused (or whose usage otherwise underdetermines what they mean) followed by futures where what is called "x" actually is *x*. This isn't, however, a necessary feature of such examples, and defenders of PCFU are committed neither to the view that there will be some future time where actual use can be equated with correct use (what is perceived to be an equilibrium may not actually be one), or with the thesis that future use *must* be read back in to the past (that usage couldn't develop in a way that amounts to a change of meaning. For a discussion of this, see Jackman 1999, 2005.

<sup>24</sup> Lance & Hawthorn 1997, p. 56.

then **PCFU** seems immune to the objections L&H bring against the purely descriptive version above.<sup>25</sup>

So at the end of the day, it's still not clear whether L&H are committed to rejecting **PCFU**. It is clear that they reject **PCFU** on its most "natural" reading, but, as I've argued, that doesn't commit one to rejecting **U**.

### **Ebbs**

A more straightforward argument from temporal externalism to the denial of **U** can be found in Gary Ebbs' "The Very Idea of Sameness of Extension Across Time",<sup>26</sup> which takes the legitimacy of the TE-ascriptions to be in conflict with the following "metaphysical principle":

The use of a word determines its extension.<sup>27</sup>

That is to say, he takes it to be in conflict with **U**. Ebbs characterizes the relevant sense of "use" in the following way.

[T]he "use" of a word may be understood to include the linguistic dispositions and mental states at time *t* of speakers who utter sentences in which *w* occurs, the physical constitution of things to which those speakers are causally related to at *t*, the non-semantic relations speakers bear to each other at *t*, the non-semantic relations they bear at *t* to speakers who used *w* before *t*, and the physical constitution of the things to which these earlier speakers were causally related. (Ebbs 200, p. 245-6)

As it stands, this amounts to a rejection of **U** only as interpreted as **PCU**, but Ebbs makes it clear that moving to **PCFU** by adding future usage will not improve things.

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<sup>25</sup> This is, admittedly, an understanding of the determination involved in the supervenience thesis that does not come natural to many. For instance, Tanesini distinguishes the supervenience thesis "semantic facts supervene upon non-semantic facts" (Tanesini 2005, p.5), from reductionism, "the thesis that meaning can reductively be explained in terms of us" (Tanesini 2005, pp.6-7), and it is important to keep the two positions separate. The pertinent question is this: does accepting **U**, that is, the idea that use 'determines' meaning, commit one to reductionism or just the supervenience thesis? I'm inclined to think that it only commits one to only supervenience, while Tanesini seems to take it to commit one to some sort of reductionism (and she is far from alone in this).

This difference may be why Tanesini sees me as "wavering" between the two varieties of temporal externalism she discusses (one which endorses **PCFU**, and one which rejects **U** (Tanesini 2005, p. 6)). Since I both reject reductionism and accept the determination thesis, while Tanesini takes the determination thesis to entail reductionism.

<sup>26</sup> Ebbs 2000.

[T]o accept [PCFU] is to accept that the extension of a word  $w$  at time  $t$  can be determined by the use of  $w$  some time *after*  $t$ . ... I agree with Donnellan [1983] that this view of language is "outrageously bizarre". (Ebbs 2000, p.258)

Ebbs agrees with Donnellan that **PCFU** is outrageously bizarre, but unlike Donnellan, he agrees that two groups of people, whose physical environment, internal states and usage up to time  $t$  are just the same could still mean something different by their terms at  $t$  even if the only difference between them were accidental occurrences that took place after that time.<sup>28</sup> Donnellan rejects TE along with PCFU, and since most of the 'bizarreness' of **PCFU** comes from TE, Ebbs needs some more principled reason for giving up on **PCFU**.

One initial reason Ebbs has for rejecting **PCFU** is that he takes it to "collapse the distinction between belief and truth".

[T]here is a ... problem with futurism [**PCFU**]: it presupposes that our uses of a word at some future time can settle its denotation at that future time. Just as our present uses of our words were once only future uses of our words, so future uses of our words will be someday be present uses of our words. Futurism therefore implies that when certain future uses become present, a version of presentism becomes true. For reasons I will explain, however, no version of presentism, including futurism, is acceptable.

The deepest problem with presentism is that it collapses the logical distinction between belief and truth. Contrary to what presentism requires, our agreements about how to use our words, no matter how firmly entrenched, do not guarantee that the beliefs we express by using those words are true. We may at some point become convinced that 'bald' is true of Edward-at- $t$ , and we may even be unable to *make sense* of the claim that Edward was not bald at  $t$ , but such facts about our use of 'bald' do not somehow "make it the case that" Edward was bald at  $t$ . The reason is that we might very well revise our view about whether Edward was bald at  $t$ , without either changing or taking ourselves to have changed the denotation of 'bald'. (Ebbs 2003, pp. 7-8)

As should be clear from the discussion of L&H above, I don't take this criticism to be fair. In particular, just as **CU** (Ebbs' "presentism") doesn't entail that how we currently use a term must be correct, **PCFU** (Ebbs' "futurism") doesn't entail that there will be some future time when how

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<sup>27</sup> Ebbs 2000, p. 245.

<sup>28</sup> Ebbs motivates TE with *twin* rather than *counterfactual* cases. That is, he argues that people *just like us* could mean something different than we do if their future were different, not that *we* might mean something different were our future so. However, I think it is plausible to take him to be committed to the counterfactual claim that if *we* had discovered platinum in South Africa before we developed chemistry, then *we* would have meant something different. Otherwise, he it seems as if he would have to say that, had we discovered the platinum first, we would have been mistaken in thinking that it was gold, in which case, its not clear why we shouldn't just say the same thing about our counterparts.

we agree to use our words will have to result in beliefs that are all true.<sup>29</sup> Once again, provided that you understand the relation between use and meaning as a normative one, the tension posited here disappears.

Consequently, I take Ebbs's most serious reservation about **PCFU** to be the following worry:

[T]her is an ever-present possibility of branching: for any given pattern of applications of a term, different characterizations of the extension of the term are possible, and may lead to different applications of the term. I have argued that in such cases there is no independent criterion for determining which characterization of the extension of the term is correct. I conclude that the use of a term never determines its extension, and hence no version of [U] is correct. (Ebbs 2000, p. 260.)

If the sort of branching characteristic of, say, the "gold" case, is always possible, then it might seem as if future use could *never* settle what we mean by our terms, since no matter how much use was added, some underdetermination would always remain. Given the everpresent possibility of branching, usage never seems to produce completely determinate meanings.

Of course, the fact that branching is always possible would only undermine **U** if we thought that the meanings of our terms were 'determinate', that is to say, if we took the meaning of a term to be so precise that it would commit us to a particular branch's being the right one even if the branching itself never occurred. Fortunately for Ebbs, there is a long tradition in thinking about meaning that argues for precisely this assumption. Frege, for instance, suggested that the meanings of our terms had to be completely determinate, and the view has recently been brought back to prominence by Timothy Williamson.<sup>30</sup> Ebbs may not be sympathetic to Williamson's commitment to **U**,<sup>31</sup> but he does seem to endorse Williamson's arguments for conceptual determinacy,<sup>32</sup> and from this determinacy he builds an argument against **U**.

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<sup>29</sup> Or, alternatively, one could identify presentism and futurism with the non-normative construals of **CU** and **PCFU**, in which case the claim would be that just as **CU** doesn't entail presentism, and **PCFU** doesn't entail futurism.

<sup>30</sup> Williamson 1992, 1994.

<sup>31</sup> Williamson 1994, 1996 argues that our usage (indeed, our usage even as understood as **PCU**) is enough to produce completely determinate meanings.

<sup>32</sup> Ebbs 2001.

Ebbs thus argues that for any version of U, including **PCFU**, the following form an inconsistent triad.

**Determinacy:** Meanings are completely determinate.

**Branching:** At any point in time, usage is compatible with multiple meaning assignments.

**U:** Use determines meaning.

In suggesting that **U** the member of the triad that must go, Ebbs can be grouped with contemporary 'soft'-epistemicists about vagueness like Horwich and Sorensen, in that all three justify their holding on to **Determinacy** by denying **U**.<sup>33</sup> By contrast, one could deny **Branching** (as do 'hard'-epistemicists such as Williamson),<sup>34</sup> or simply deny **Determinacy** (as do most non-epistemicists about vagueness).<sup>35</sup>

Rather than taking sides as to which of the three principles must be given up, I'd like to suggest that **PCFU** makes it possible to understand **Determinacy** in a way that allows one to hold on to all three.<sup>36</sup> In particular, most of our claims about the world can be viewed as embodying 'theoretical' commitments about the way that the world is; what we commit ourselves to is taken to be independent of our taking on that commitment. When I claim that there are two liters of milk in my fridge right now, the situation that I'm making a claim about is independent of the claim that I make. I can, of course, take on such theoretical commitments about the future

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<sup>33</sup> See Sorensen (2001) and Horwich (1997, 2000). (The view is also attributed to Field in Schiffer 1999, p. 490.) The main difference between Ebbs and these writers is that Ebbs explicitly argues that the failure of determination is a feature of any future state of our practice, not just its current one (and so it applies to **PCFU** just as much as **PCU**).

<sup>34</sup> On such a view, branches would only be apparent, and our current and past usage would always settle in advance which possible branch is actually the one that accords with what we currently mean.

<sup>35</sup> See, for instance Fine 1975, Keef 2000. The denial of **Determinacy** can also be found in Wittgenstein 1953, and Lakoff & Johnson 1999.

<sup>36</sup> Van McGee and Brian McLaughlin (1995, 1998) also try to hold on to all three, but do so by splitting our intuitive conception of truth. They see our idea of truth being governed by (1) a "Disquotational Principle" (that entails **Determinacy**) and a "Correspondence Principle", (the first half of which is something like **U**). They recognize the tension between these two, so they argue that our pre-theoretical conception of truth should be split into a notion of "definite truth" which is governed by the correspondence principle, and "truth" which simply follows the disquotational principle. This allows them to keep all three, but only at the expense of denying that the meanings for which **Determinacy** holds are the same as those for which **U** is true. The following attempt to reconcile the

as well. I may predict that it will snow tomorrow, or that the price of gas will go up over the summer and still take my claimings to make no difference to what I'm making these claims about. However, with some claims about the future, my commitment is not so much theoretical as practical. When I tell my wife that I'll be home for dinner at 8:00, I take on a commitment to *make it the case* that I'll be there. One might make a more theoretical prediction about this as well, but facts that undermine the theoretical commitment need not absolve me of the practical one.<sup>37</sup> Statements that are exclusively about the past or present can't embody such practical commitments, since the facts that the claims are about have been settled, and so there is no way for us to affect them by the time that the claim is made.

Now it should be clear that, without a commitment to **PCFU**, **Determinacy** would have to be viewed as a purely theoretical commitment on our part. If future usage cannot contribute to what we currently mean, then the claim that our terms have determinate extensions would be a claim about something that has already been settled, and thus out of our practical control. Of course, one could endorse **PCFU** and still view our commitment to **Determinacy** as purely theoretical, in which case endorsing both **Determinacy** and **U** amounts to a *prediction* (rather than something closer to a *promise*) that our usage will eventually produce completely determinate meanings. The truth of **Branching** would entail that this prediction is false, so merely endorsing **PCFU** will not make **U** compatible with **Determinacy** and **Branching**.

However, while endorsing **PCFU** isn't *sufficient* to change our commitment to **Determinacy** from a theoretical to a practical one, it is *necessary* for the change, and once **Determinacy** is viewed in this more practical fashion, its compatibility with both **U** and **Branching** becomes

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three will not involve trying to bifurcate our pretheoretical conception of truth or meaning in anything like this fashion. (McGee and McLaughlin's views are discussed in considerably more detail in Jackman 2006.)

<sup>37</sup> Treating such practical commitments as merely theoretical amounts to a type of 'bad faith' of the sort discussed in Moran 2001.

clearer. For instance, one might think that our legal practice embodies a commitment to something like **Determinacy**. For every case considered, a particular law either does, or doesn't apply to it, and if it applies, it should determine a definite outcome. However, this commitment is implausibly if viewed as a theoretical one. There seems little reason to think that our legal practice has thus far, or will in any future time, produce a set of norms that are so extensive that they would settle an answer for *every possible* case. Viewed from a theoretical or 'external' perspective, then, determinacy of law is an insupportable commitment. However, for those *inside* the legal practice, the commitment can be adopted as a practical one. For every case that comes up, there *must* be a decision, and this requires that past acts be evaluable in terms of current clarifications of the norms involved. From outside the practice one can consider a case and see that nothing inside the practice settles it, but from inside the practice, when the case is considered, the practice evolves to settle it.

In much the same way, if someone looks at our linguistic practice from an external perspective, **Determinacy** will seem implausible. If concept use really is open textured, then for any pre-branching point, meaning will be unsettled, so no matter how far into the future you go, you won't reach a point where usage has produced completely determinate meanings. If the practice's extension into the future is *finite*, then, there will come a point where the incompatibility of **Branching**, **U** and **Determinacy** will come to a head. By contrast, if the commitment to **Determinacy** is seen as practical, then its combination with **Branching** only commits us to settling the branches that come to our attention, and reading those settlements back on to past claims. A commitment to **PCFU** allows for just this. From the external perspective, we may recognize that our practice may never produce completely determinate

contents, but from the more internal perspective, the future is *open* to us, and we can understand ourselves as free to make our contents determinate as long as the branches come.<sup>38</sup>

It was already pointed out in the discussion of L&H that **PCFU** must be understood as suggesting a 'normative' relation between meaning and use in that a gap between how our terms *are* and *should be* used must be maintained. However, the issues Ebbs brings up point to another important sense in which the relation between use and meaning must be normative. The first sort of normativity requires that our meaningful utterances be the sorts of things between which logical relations hold, and the Frege/Williamson arguments stress that such logical relations can only be properly understood as holding between expressions with *determinate* content. It thus follows that, (1) if use is to produce *meaning* it needs to be governed by norms like **Determinacy**, and (2) the truth of **Branching** entails that **Determinacy** could never be an accurate *description* of our practice. Consequently, use could only be governed by **Determinacy**

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<sup>38</sup> One could argue that there are practices that are constituted by our taking on such practical commitments. When one thinks about chess, there is a sense in which it is *necessarily true* that bishops move along diagonal lines, and a sense in which they *clearly need not*. (This is not Vendler's (1967) point where it is a contingent fact that chess has the rules it does, but rather that it is a contingent fact that the physical objects called "bishops" are moved in accordance with the rules of chess which govern them.) When one is playing within the game, one is committed to seeing to it that the bishops only move diagonally, and from this 'internal' perspective, the fact that they move this way is necessarily true. Nevertheless, the game of chess can be viewed from a more 'external' perspective in which one can recognize that the piece that one is characterizing as a "bishop" may not, in fact, always be moved in the way that the rules require.

In much the same way, there is a sense in which it is *necessarily true* that **Determinacy** holds of our words, and a sense in which it *clearly does not*. When one is engaged in the practice of making assertions, one is committed to seeing to it that one's claims have determinate meaning, and from this 'internal' perspective, **Determinacy** is necessarily true. Nevertheless, our linguistic practice can be viewed from a more 'external' perspective in which one can recognize that the noises that one is characterizing as words, assertions, etc, need not have the sort of determinate content that speakers commit themselves to.

In both cases, what is characteristic of the 'internal' perspective is that those adopting it must be in some sense be *engaged in* the practice in question, and through this engagement have some degree of *control* over its outcome. It is this control that allows one to see the norms as necessary, they are norms that one can enforce oneself, and so the necessity involved is robust but practical rather than the theoretical but as-if 'necessity' that would be available from the external perspective.

However, this sort of control, and thus the internal perspective from which **Determinacy** can be seen as necessary would only be possible if we could affect the determinacy of our utterances, and this requires that the corrections we make affect the content of what we said in the past. Otherwise, the only attitude to take towards our past utterances would be an 'external' one for which **Determinacy** clearly does not hold.



if **Determinacy** were a 'constitutive/regulative' norm, and this requires that the use so governed be extended into the future.

The idea that the meanings of our terms are determinate is something that can seem apparent from *inside* our linguistic practices, and **PCFU** allows our usage to be viewed in this same 'internal' way. By contrast, less open-ended versions of **U** encourage us to see usage in a more detached and theoretical way, and while such usage doesn't produce determinate meanings, it is far from clear that, viewed from this more detached perspective, we would understand ourselves as speaking a determinately meaningful language.

Without **PCFU**, **Determinacy** and **Branching** lead to skepticism about whether we are using our terms correctly, since we would have no reason to believe that we picked the right branch whenever we hit a branching point.<sup>39</sup> If meaning weren't a function of (future) use, not only couldn't **Determinacy** be a practical norm, but facts about meaning would also be independent of any of our choices, which is precisely what leads to skepticism about the correctness of our choices in the branching cases.<sup>40</sup>

Consequently, while Ebbs takes **Branching** and **Determinacy** to undermine all versions of **U**, including **PCFU**, our commitment to **Branching** and **Determinacy** is, in fact, grounds for our being committed to **PCFU**.<sup>41</sup> Rather than forcing us to give up **U**, **Branching** makes it clear that we are faced with either skepticism, the denial of **Determinacy**, or the need to treat

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<sup>39</sup> Such skepticism is worse if one endorses TE, since one might otherwise claim that meaning just changes whenever we take the 'wrong' branch. Indeed, one might argue that this sort of view would undermine TE itself, since if we can go wrong at such branches, there is no compelling reason to think that we have got it right when we ascribe meanings to the past.

<sup>40</sup> Of course, **PCFU** doesn't guarantee that we will always make the right choice, because even if branching is true, there will be cases where apparent branches already do have an 'settled' answer which our other commitments tie us to. For a more extended discussion of this, see Jackman 1999.

<sup>41</sup> See Jackman 2004, 2006. For another argument motivating TE in terms of something like (1) see Tanesini (forthcoming).

**Determinacy** as normative, and treating **Determinacy** as normative requires that we endorse a version of **U**, particularly **PCFU**.

## **Conclusion**

It seems, then, that adopting **TE** should encourage one to adopt **PCFU** rather than reject the idea that meaning supervenes on use. Indeed, while many arguments against the supervenience thesis draw from the intuition that meaning is 'normative', I've argued above that endorsing the supervenience thesis (indeed, the temporally extended version of it embodied in **PCFU**) is, in fact, the only way in which we can ultimately make sense of important aspects of such normativity.<sup>42</sup>

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