

# Understanding the Debate on the Metaphysics of Words

## Abstract

What are words? How should words be individuated? Such questions set the agenda for the metaphysics of words. Unfortunately, misunderstandings are piling up in this field. Although the discussion between Kaplan, Cappelen, Hawthorne, Lepore and others has given rise to interesting insights into many aspects of words, I contend that the debate is highly compromised by a lack of clarity about the *questions* in the first place. The purpose of this paper is to partially clarify the debate on the metaphysics of words by examining the very nature of the questions to be addressed. I shall differentiate three inquiries about words and shall provide explanations of why misunderstandings can and do arise. I claim that, in so doing, we may put the debate back on solid footing in order to rethink the real nature of words.

## Keywords

Metaphysics, Semantics, Word identity, Misunderstandings, Questions.

## 1 “A hard beginning makes a good ending”

Shortly after the seminal work of Frege (1892), philosophers began to feel the need to discuss and further clarify semantic notions like *sense*, *reference* and *truth*. Curiously, the notion of *word*, on the contrary, remained basically unquestioned for decades:

Philosophers take a great deal of interest in the study of meaning, reference, truth and other semantic properties, but remarkably little attention has been paid to the entities that have semantic properties. (Cappelen 1999, p. 92)

Consequently:

[T]he paucity of critical work has left the conceptual terrain relatively underdeveloped and in need of some sorting out. (Alward 2005, p. 172)

In particular, *metaphysical* reflections on words are deemed to be insufficient, and hence the subject matter is still in need of closer scrutiny. At present, although we are far from having detailed metaphysical investigations about the nature of words, something interesting is happening in this direction.<sup>1</sup> A stimulating debate started from Kaplan’s ground-breaking paper “Words” (Kaplan 1990), in which new philosophical reflections about words are put forward.<sup>2</sup> A series of successive comments and criticisms to this paper has given rise to thoughtful answers about the nature of words: McCulloch (1991), Cappelen (1999), Szabó (1999), Wetzel (2002), Alward (2005), Hawthorne and Lepore (2011), Kaplan (2011), Bromberger (2011), Irmak (2018).

After Kaplan (1990), we refer to such a debate with the phrase *metaphysics of words*. It is a rather new issue, and as usual for many new issues, it is chaotic and nebulous — as I shall try to show. Particularly, I contend that the debate is highly compromised by a lack of clarity about the questions in the first place. Consequently, the discussion ends up frequently at cross purposes. In this paper, I shall set aside the answers and go back to the questions. My aim is to make the metaphysics of words a genuine metaphysics disentangled from other inquiries which — as we shall see — often tend to confuse the proper metaphysical debate on words. The goal of the paper is to partially clarify the contemporary discussion on words and shed light on the questions to be dealt with.

What do we want to know about words? Kaplan defines the subject matter thus: it is in order “to rethink not just the semantics of names, but their very *syntax*, the *metaphysics* of words: How should words be individuated? What is the nature of a word?” (Kaplan 1990, p. 94; my italics). Two terms stand out: *syntax* and *metaphysics*. What are we talking about? Kaplan suggests that the research is to “capture the elements of form that are independent of semantics”

---

<sup>1</sup>Truth to tell, words have stimulated many reflections of different nature since ancient philosophy, and “they have been under intense study since at least the fourth century BC (Pāṇini)” (Bromberger 2011, p. 499). Nonetheless, as is commonly held, in what we call *analytic philosophy of language* the attention paid to words and their metaphysics is marginal (see also Hawthorne and Lepore 2011), and philosophers tend to take for granted what in fact is far from being granted.

<sup>2</sup>In fact, Kaplan’s ideas are not entirely new; as Cappelen (1999, p. 101, footnote 2) pointed out “Millikan’s view is similar [to that of Kaplan]”. But for the present purposes this is not relevant.

(Kaplan 1990, p. 94). But why does he mention *syntax* and *metaphysics*? Kaplan (1990, 2011) claims that between  $a = a$  and  $a = b$  — with  $a$  and  $b$  rigid designators — there is a relevant logical-syntactical difference, and accordingly they should not be regarded as expressing the same proposition, irrespective of the semantic value of  $a$  and  $b$ . Such a logical-syntactical difference rests on the difference between  $a$  and  $b$  *qua* linguistic objects: “this issue takes us directly to matters of word individuation” (Kaplan 1990, p. 95).

This is the sense — highly idiosyncratic — in which the phrase *syntax of words* is to be understood: if  $a = a$  and  $a = b$  differ in syntax, then this depends on the difference between  $a$  and  $b$ . Since they do *not* differ in semantics (according to direct reference theorists like Kaplan), the way in which they differ is in their syntax, due to the fact that they affect the logical-syntactical form of the sentences in which they appear. Since such a syntactical research on words implies a reflection on word individuation, it calls for a metaphysical speculation on identity: “a non-duplication principle is required; that is, a property, K, needs to be identified such that no two words can be alike in respect K” (Alward 2005, pp. 172-173). Hence, the metaphysics of words. Essentially, the fundamental questions in need of answers are the followings:

- (1) a. What are words?
- b. How should words be individuated?<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, (1*a-b*) have been misunderstood by some participants of the debate. I maintain that (1*a-b*) have at least three different readings which represent three different inquiries; and every inquiry needs to be kept firmly separate from the others in order to avoid confusion and misunderstandings. The debate often proceeds at cross purposes due to the confusion of these three different inquiries. Therefore, I shall distinguish: the *semantic* inquiry, the *metaphysical* inquiry and the *scientific* inquiry. Apparently, some philosophers interested in the debate sometimes tend to conflate two or more inquiries. And the discussion, frequently, does not really accomplish anything but misunderstandings.

Roughly: 1) the semantic inquiry is supposed to investigate the meaning of the term ‘word’; 2) the metaphysical inquiry is supposed to include words as objects within a general partition of reality; 3) the scientific inquiry is supposed to elucidate the characteristics of words as linguistic items in the context of a language. (The latter is simply *morphology*.)

---

<sup>3</sup>See Wetzel (2002) for related and more specific questions concerning the metaphysics of words.

## 2 Three ways of understanding the questions

Consider the questions (1*a-b*):

- (1)
  - a.* What are words?
  - b.* How should words be individuated?

“Units of language”, one could answer to (1*a*). After all, it is not hard to imagine situations in which such a reply turns out to be adequate for the questioner. Nevertheless, it is not always as helpful and informative a definition as one might hope for. The questioner might be harder to please. (S)he might want to know a more specific definition able to isolate all and only words — something the answer “units of language” does not, since also letters and phrases might be thought of as *units* of language. Namely — we can intuitively say — (s)he might want to know the *meaning* of the word ‘word’, and question (1*a*) is a possible means for asking about such meaning.<sup>4</sup> Let us thus isolate the semantic reading of question (1*a*): *what does the word ‘word’ mean?* The answer, arguably, calls for a semantic inquiry. In this respect:

- i.* *What are  $\varphi$ s?* is equivalent to *What does the word ‘ $\varphi$ ’ mean?*

Notoriously, it is not easy to spell out the way in which words mean. Several theories of lexical meaning are around, and each theory provides different answers about what the meaning of a word is (see Murphy 2010 and Geeraerts 2010). For the sake of argument, let us consider componential approaches to lexical meaning which define the meaning of a word on the basis of necessary and sufficient conditions. ‘Word’ might be defined as ‘a fistful of letters comprised between blank spaces to which is associated a meaning’, call this condition C.

Ideally, following condition C one is now able to recognise all and only words. (I know, matters are much more complex than this. However, let us remain for a moment in such an easy world, with the promise that things will be complicated in what follows.) Namely, one is able to individuate the extension of the term ‘word’, the set of words. One is able to individuate words *qua* words on the basis of condition C which is considered to be the meaning of ‘word’. So, question (1*b*) might be regarded as having the following semantic reading: *how should words qua extension of the term ‘word’ be individuated?* (I also call it *semantic reading* because it relies on meaning for individuating the extension.) In our case, they

---

<sup>4</sup>It is not a platitude that the meaning of a word is given in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions needed for determining the extension of the word. However, it seems to me that if necessary and sufficient conditions could be attached to words for building their extensions, they would be meanings.

are individuated by a set of conditions that every competent speaker attaches to the term ‘word’.

In this respect:

- ii. How should  $\varphi$ s be individuated?* is equivalent to *How should  $\varphi$ s qua extension of the term ‘ $\varphi$ ’ be individuated?*

In other terms: what are the mechanisms according to which the word ‘ $\varphi$ ’ acquires extension? Traditionally, even in this case, the answer calls for a (meta)semantic inquiry.

Yet, questions (1a-b) might be regarded as having different readings, as I said. Another questioner might be interested in knowing what words are in their ultimate nature. Namely, what words are *qua* things within a more general number of things which constitutes reality. What is the real nature of the entities we call ‘words’? Question (1a) is thus reformulated: *what is the ultimate nature of words?* In this respect:

- iii. What are  $\varphi$ s?* is equivalent to *What is the ultimate nature of  $\varphi$ s?*

Traditionally, this is something metaphysics does. As you may have noticed, quotation marks disappeared in *iii*; semantics is ruled out. What we are interested in now are objects, not word meaning. Importantly, in order to conduct such research, no commitment to meanings is required. This is true in two ways: 1) the metaphysical analysis of  $\varphi$ s, which investigates the ultimate nature of  $\varphi$ s, does not *necessarily* yield the meaning of ‘ $\varphi$ ’, and 2) the meaning of ‘ $\varphi$ ’ does not *directly* describe the ultimate metaphysical nature of  $\varphi$ s — otherwise, a competent speaker would have access to the ultimate nature of the things (s)he knows the meaning of. But let us see what this means in a little more detail.

Imagine we agree with Descartes in admitting two substances, and imagine we still agree with him in the way he describes the world metaphysically. Saying that words are either physical objects or abstract objects would be more or less a satisfying answer to the metaphysical reading of question (1a). Still, no meaning of the word ‘word’ is achieved. On the other hand, if we consider condition C as the meaning of ‘word’, no interesting metaphysical account of words emerges from that. The fact that words are either physical objects or abstract objects is not something condition C is supposed to tell us — or at least it is not something it tells us directly. This does not mean that semantics and metaphysics *must* be independent, this just means that they *might* be independent. Accordingly, we ought to take such a possibility into account and consider the two inquiries disentangled from each other as a matter of principle.

Apart from subsuming objects under more general categories, the metaphysical inquiry is also expected to clarify identity. What does it mean for an object to be the same as itself? This has to do with individuation, but in a different way from the semantic individuation discussed above: from a metaphysical point of view, words are to be individuated *qua* worldly objects within reality, and not *qua* words. This means that an object is to be considered identical with itself according to a certain principle of identification. What is it that makes *this* word the same I wrote yesterday?

Henceforth, the term ‘individuation’ shall be used in connection with the *semantic* individuation, namely with the individuation of the extension of ‘ $\varphi$ ’; and the term ‘identification’ shall be used in connection with the metaphysical individuation, namely the principle according to which  $\varphi$  is identical to itself.<sup>5</sup> For instance, we can formulate claims of the form:

Identification: *Words  $O_1$  and  $O_2$  are identical if and only if  $R$  holds between  $O_1$  and  $O_2$ .*

From a metaphysical point of view, question (1*b*) is thus reformulated:

*iv. How should  $\varphi$ s be individuated?* is equivalent to *How should  $\varphi$ s be identified qua objects?*

In other words, what is it that makes an object the same object over time and in different situations? What are the more general principles of identity of a given object? Arguably, these arguments are not about language; they are rather about various non-linguistic aspects of the world: no genuine semantic conclusion about the term ‘word’ follows from these metaphysical investigations.

The last reading of question (1*a*) that I want to single out is related to a scientific standpoint which, roughly, analyses the object from a particular point of view seeking 1) to elucidate all the relevant characteristics of the object in connection with objects of the same category and 2) to find a place for such an object in a rigorous classification of the objects of the same category. Among the activities of science there is systematic categorisation of entities or concepts, also known as *taxonomy*; namely an arrangement of “methodological analyses [...] at the same time descriptive, critical and advisory” (Andersen and Hepburn, 2016). Importantly, beside classifying, taxonomy is also expected to elucidate the principles that underlie such hierarchical classification of entities of interest to an enterprise. The scientific inquiry about words, which is called *morphology*,

---

<sup>5</sup>This is what Hawthorne and Lepore (2011, p. 476) call First-level Identity Criterion: “the objects for which the criterion of identity is stated are the same as those between which the criterial relation obtains”.

is thus supposed to take words into account *qua* units of a language, which is a general category for numerous objects such as phonemes, morphemes and the like; and shall describe all that relevant characteristics words display *qua* units of a language — like being normally made of morphemes, being constituents of sentences and so on and so forth. Therefore, we expect a specification about how words are different from other things falling under the same broader category of a *unit of language*.

These scientific considerations are different from both the semantic inquiry and the metaphysical inquiry. Scientific considerations do not aspire to give meanings, say, necessary and sufficient conditions speakers attach to words in order to communicate. Neither do they aspire to elucidate the ultimate nature of the objects they deal with. Morphology, for instance, is also concerned with non-necessary features of words and does not treat words *qua* objects in general; words are treated *qua* units of a language instead, namely *qua* objects of a certain kind which share common features with other similar objects like letters, morphemes, and phrases.

In this respect, (1a) might be reformulated thus:

- v. *What are  $\varphi$ s?* is equivalent to *What is the particular nature of  $\varphi$ s in the context of objects of the same kind?*

In spite of the generality of my analysis, one thing seems clear: questions (1a-b) about words are not as straightforward as they seem. Different standpoints can be isolated, as I have shown, and different inquiries can be pursued. In order for the debate on words to get back on track, the differentiation of the three inquiries could be helpful. Before showing how the debate on the metaphysics of words is compromised by the confusion of some of these different standpoints, let me expand the discussion about words and the three inquiries.

### 3 Words under scrutiny

In this section, I shall give a sketch of the ways in which the three inquiries could be conducted about words. Then, in Section 4, I shall show how the participants of the debate on the metaphysics of words are led astray by the confusion between the inquiries.

#### 3.1 The Semantic Inquiry

What does the word ‘word’ mean? Such a question presupposes a theory of lexical meaning in which it is clarified what it is for a word to have meaning in the first place. The answer about the meaning of ‘word’ might change depending on the

theory under analysis. As I pointed out earlier, there are a number of lexical meaning theories and therefore a number of possible ways in which the meaning of ‘word’ is defined. Some linguists, however, consider such definitions incorrect and not fruitful:

[S]ince there is no way of defining the term ‘word’ in such a way as to make the definition tally with the naïve uses of it, contemporary structuralists are prone to employ it most sparingly and to refuse to set up any universally valid linguistic unit between the moneme (often called ‘morpheme’) and the sentence. (Martinet 1962, p. 90)

Others, on the other hand, maintain that ‘word’ has a definable meaning, and they believe that pursuing it is essential to linguistic analysis (see Ullmann 1951 and Bloomfield 1984). Bloomfield, for instance, defines the word as “minimum free form”. This means that the set S of words is the set of minimum linguistic forms that can appear in isolations as an autonomous utterance.

Another common definition is the following: *‘Word’ means: a fistful of letters comprised between blank spaces to which is a meaning is associated. It does not allow intrusions of other linguistic material* (see the CGEL). Thus, according to this definition, the set S<sub>1</sub> of words would be different from the set S: the word ‘the’, for instance, cannot be used to perform an utterance (although it can be mentioned to perform an utterance), but by contrast it is formed by letters comprised between blank spaces, it has a meaning and it does not allow intrusions of other linguistic material. Or: *‘Word’ means: a rank of sounds that cluster themselves around an accent to which is associated a meaning.* Or: *‘Word’ means: a representation of a unique and complete concept with a non-compositional meaning.* And so on and so forth. All these definitions fit a theory of lexical meaning where meanings are given in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. It is hard to find the right formulation (see Lieber 2009), but this is still a possible way to develop the semantic inquiry.

By contrast, one could instead stress the polysemy of the term ‘word’ and come up with a prototypical definition of ‘word’ (Ramat 1990). The prototype is an ideal object with particular characteristics. And a prototypical definition defines the prototype of a class of objects in order to individuate the members of the class that are closer to or more distant from the prototype. In a class with a prototype there is not a yes/no answer for the membership of an object, there is a gradual scale of membership instead. That is to say that something is a more adequate member of something else because of its greater likeness to the prototype. Such a definition fits a theory of lexical meaning which rejects a necessary and sufficient condition exploiting the notion of *family resemblance*.



Differently, it could be said that the meaning of the term ‘word’ changes depending of the context of use, and nothing like a steady meaning is attached to the term ‘word’ in isolation. Something like this fits a contextualistic view of lexical meaning (see Jaszscolt 2016): roughly, the term ‘word’ only has a potential truth-conditional content which is specified in different ways in context.

These, among others, are all possible ways to conduct the semantic inquiry. More broadly, the semantic inquiry investigates the relationship between ‘word’ and the world. Speakers’ common-sense knowledge about meanings is something semantics might take into consideration — although not necessarily. Words *qua* extension of the term ‘word’ are thus individuated, according to the various definitions, through the meaning of the term ‘word’. But, again, this has nothing to do with the way in which words are identified *qua* objects. (More on this in section 4.) The latter is something the metaphysical inquiry is about.

### 3.2 The Metaphysical Inquiry

Metaphysics, in the analytic tradition, deals with the ultimate nature of reality (see Berto and Plebani 2015). Typically, metaphysical questions about words are the following: what kind of objects are words? What is the nature of the relationship between a word and its potentially infinite occurrences such as utterances and inscriptions?

According to Alward (2005, p. 173):

A complete account of the nature of words must answer three separate questions. First, a non-duplication principle is required; that is, a property, *K*, needs to be identified such that no two words can be alike in respect of *K*. Second, an account of word-name co-reference needs to be provided. And third, an account of the transworld identity conditions of words is required.

Clearly, no semantic inquiry could hope to elucidate these issues. It is not the meaning of the term ‘word’ that is supposed to give us all this information. Yet, we might wonder if meaning is essential to word identity, and semantic essentialists like MacIver (1937) favour a positive answer. But, importantly, word identity, among other metaphysical issues, is *not* spelled out by semantics.

The best known metaphysical theory of word is the Type-Token Model (TTM). It comes from Peirce (1933) and, among others, was supported by Quine (1987). According to the classical version of the TTM, words are types, namely abstract objects encoding a given phonographic pattern which needs to be instantiated by an occurrence, a token, in order for it to be an occurrence of that type. In order for an occurrence  $o_n$  to count as an occurrence of the word *O*, it has to resemble

the type **O**. Two utterances or inscriptions are occurrences of the same word if and only if they are tokens of the same type. The resemblance, arguably, concerns the orthographic shape and/or the phonetic aspect of the type.<sup>6</sup> Updated and improved versions of TTMs can be found in Cappelen (1999), Szabó (1999) and Wetzel (2002).

On the other hand, Kaplan chooses to abandon such a model and proposes an alternative: the Stage-Continuant Model (see Kaplan (1990, 2011) for the rationale behind such a choice). In Kaplan’s view “utterances and inscriptions are *stages* of words, which are the *continuants* made up of these interpersonal stages along with some more mysterious *intrapersonal* stages” (Kaplan 1990, p. 98; italics in the original). However, without any further clarification, this might seem only a terminological alternative. But it is not. According to the Stage-Continuant Model words are cultural artifacts living in the concrete world as naturalistic objects. Words are in this respect continuants made up, in some sense, of the concrete stages. Continuants do not have a fixed form which has to be resembled by the occurrences. In order for an occurrence  $o_n$  to count as an occurrence of the word **O**, it has to be produced intentionally by a person with the intention of continuing the transmission of the word **O** (s)he mastered — no abstract object encoding a certain shape is needed here.

In other terms, a person must be in a certain mental state in which that very word displays. In doing so, (s)he does not need to imitate any spelling or sound: the occurrence counts as an occurrence of that word if the proper mental state obtains. (Cappelen (1999) calls these theories *intentional theories* of words.) After being introduced, a new word typically passes on to other people through stages. Stages like utterances and inscriptions undergo a massive transformation through time and space. Yet, the transmission to people by people ensures communication even if words might dramatically change: the continuity of the word among people is ensured by the stages.

This is roughly Kaplan’s view. See, for instance, Wetzel (2002), Alward (2005) and Irmak (2018) for other metaphysical theories of words.

---

<sup>6</sup>According to McCulloch (1991, p. 74) there might be other ways of characterising the resemblance between a token and the type: “When people speak of type-type and token-token identity theories in the philosophy of mind, for example, they do not mean to imply that token beliefs of the same type look like, or sound like, each other. Use of the type/token vocabulary here merely implies that the tokens are bound together by *some* relevant resemblance or similarity”.

### 3.3 The Scientific Inquiry

As should be clear by now, I agree with Bromberger (2011, p. 498-499) in saying that the question “‘What are words?’ is woefully underspecified”. And I agree in saying that “Kaplan reads it one way; Hawthorne and Lepore read it in a radically different way”. (This is exactly what I shall try to show below in Section 4.) However, I disagree with Bromberger when he says that “[n]either reading turned out to be very fruitful”. At least, I disagree with this insofar as this means that neither reading turned out to be very fruitful *period*. More on this later.

He proposes his own reading and judges the others as non-promising. (We shall see why in what follows.) What are words? Bromberger (2011, p. 499) answers thus:

Each word, in every language, is constituted of hierarchies of segments and belongs to lexicons made up of other words, or is derived or compounded from such other words. Words are distinguished by their syntactic, phonological, and semantic features [...]. Words are the domain of morphological conditions on affixation, clitization, and compounding. They are the domain (depending on the language) of stress or tone assignment. They are the theme of phonological and morphological process of assimilation, vowel shift, metathesis, reduplication, and phonotactic constraints.

Arguably, for his purposes, he acknowledges a scientific reading of the question; namely, he seeks to describe words as linguistic items included in the context of a language. He proposes classifications and lists non-necessary conditions of words; he elucidates morphological properties words display in connection with other words; he describes words from a linguistic point of view; and this is all information a morphology textbook is supposed to spell out.

Kaplan’s and Hawthorne and Lepore’s readings are non-promising as far as such a scientific inquiry is concerned. But this does not mean that they are non-promising for other readings either. The separation of the three inquiries helps us to give the right importance to Kaplan’s reading and that of Hawthorne and Lepore. Bromberger’s answer, on the other hand, might be adequate to address the scientific inquiry instead; by contrast, it is not adequate for addressing the other two inquiries, which, as we have seen, are different from each other and worth pursuing.

As Cappelen (1999, p. 100) points out, what Bromberger is trying to assess “is largely an empirical question pursued by, among others, phonologists and computer scientists who construct programs that take spoken language as input and have written language as output (and vice versa). It’s a complex and difficult enterprise, the details of which are of no philosophical significance.”

Arguably, the metaphysical status of words and the meaning of the term ‘word’ are not issues which find their *full* explanation within morphological considerations of the kind presented by Bromberger. Or at least, they do not find such an explanation in Bromberger’s analysis. But I have shown that all three readings are possible for three different concerns, and three different standpoints are to be isolated to shed light on the debate.

## 4 A Series of Misunderstandings

### I

Unfortunately, misunderstandings have lurked since the beginning of the contemporary debate. Kaplan (1990) first paves the way by contrasting the Orthographic Conception and the Common Currency Conception. Kaplan (1990, p. 94) formulates the questions thus: “How should words be individuated? What is the nature of a word?”. According to the Orthographic Conception “expressions of the language consist of strings of atoms called ‘letters’, certain strings form words” (Kaplan 1990, p. 98). Kaplan maintains that such a stance is wrong, and that it has to be replaced by the Common Currency Conception, according to which words are *not* conceived as strings of letters. Nevertheless, the two stances are not bound to be inconsistent with each other if we bear in mind the differentiation of the inquiries. The Orthographic Conception might be a good candidate for the semantic inquiry, and, on the contrary, the Common Currency Conception might be a good candidate for the metaphysical inquiry.

Truth to tell, Kaplan never argues that the Orthographic Conception could *not* be the right answer for the semantic inquiry, he simply compares the Orthographic Conception with the Common Currency Conception considering both as answers to the metaphysical inquiry.<sup>7</sup> The conclusion is that, as an answer to the metaphysical inquiry, the Common Currency Conception is superior to the Orthographic Conception. Nonetheless, he makes the comparison without any clarification regarding the difference between the semantic inquiry and the metaphysical inquiry. I believe this might be detrimental for a clear investigation of words. One might conclude that once you have rejected the Orthographic Conception as a metaphysical answer, you have dispelled the Orthographic Conception definitively. But this would be a mistake, as we saw. A clarification about the two inquiries might be helpful to avoid such misunderstandings.

In other terms, the extension of the term ‘word’ is individuated on the basis of the meaning of the term ‘word’, and such a meaning can be given by the

---

<sup>7</sup>I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this point.

Orthographic Conception (and, as we saw above, this has been typically done by linguists); on the other hand, words *qua* objects are identified on the basis of a metaphysical principle (see Alward 2005), which might be spelled out by the Common Currency Conception (see Kaplan 1990). Just to be clear, Kaplan is not chargeable with confusion between the two inquiries, yet putting both the Orthographic Conception and the Common Currency Conception on the same plane without any clarification about the different inquiries might in turn create misunderstandings and lead us astray.

## II

Cappelen (1999, p. 92) contends that Kaplan “argues that [the classical Type-Token Model] both fails to capture our ordinary (pre-theoretical) concept of a word and is detrimental to work in philosophy”. He is right about the second conjunct,<sup>8</sup> but he is wrong about the first. In Kaplan (1990) there is *not* such an explicit statement. (Perhaps Cappelen thought Kaplan would agree with this, but I maintain Kaplan would be right not to do so.)

If what I said is true, no metaphysical inquiry is supposed to capture *our ordinary* concept of word and spell out the way we use it. This is something the semantic inquiry might be expected to do; this is something that deals with *meanings*. What Kaplan (1990, p. 98) explicitly says is that the “token/type model is the wrong model for the occurrence/word distinction (i.e. the utterance/word distinction or the inscription/word distinction)”. This has nothing to do with the way speakers use the concept attached to ‘word’. The Type-Token Model is wrong as a model for comprehending the nature of words *qua* objects, namely for identifying them in the sense discussed above.

Kaplan does not state, as Cappelen (1999, p. 94) wrongly believes, that “the common currency conception captures our ‘pre-theoretic notion’ of a word better than what the traditional type-token model does”. Kaplan argues that the model he proposes fits better the way in which we usually identify words *qua* objects, and not the way in which we individuate words *qua* words, namely the way in which we build the extension of the term ‘word’. It is the latter that has to do with the concept of ‘word’, not the former.

Moreover, Cappelen maintains that if Kaplan is right, then every physical event which is produced during the relevant intentional state S counts as an occurrence of the word  $\varphi$  related to S. According to Cappelen, this forces us to consider a given scribble as an occurrence of  $\varphi$  if S obtains. (“The strange result could be due to an entirely non-intentional mechanical malfunctioning at the ‘output end’ of my

---

<sup>8</sup> “[F]or serious semantics, I think that it is my common currency conception that would be important” (Kaplan 1990, p. 111).

action”, as Cappelen (1999, p. 94) says.) The conclusion is that this is “evidence that Kaplan doesn’t correctly describe how we *individuate* words” (Cappelen 1999, p. 94; my italics). From my point of view, the fact that a scribble might sometimes count as an occurrence of a word in Kaplan’s account does not imply that Kaplan does not correctly describe how we *individuate* words. And this is so because the individuation Cappelen has in mind, I believe, is a *semantic* individuation, whereas Kaplan is dealing with the *metaphysical* individuation, viz. *identification*.

What Cappelen rightly points out is that we would not use the term ‘word’ to refer to the scribble; however, this semantic consideration, on Kaplan’s view, does not imply that the scribble should not count as an occurrence of a word. Cappelen is simply suggesting that Kaplan’s theory does not describe how we individuate words *qua* words; namely, the way in which we use the term ‘word’ in order to individuate its extension. However, not every occurrence of a word must be included in the extension of the term ‘word’. Consider the case of sign language. For a user of such a language, occurrences of words are also gestures, which are *not* words: gestures are stages of continuants, but gestures do not fall under the extension of the term ‘word’. Kaplan’s analysis does not aim at explaining how we individuate the extension of the term ‘word’. And Cappelen is wrong in criticizing Kaplan on this point. The scribble produced in the relevant intentional state S may well be a stage of  $\varphi$  related to S without necessarily belonging to the extension of the term ‘word’. A confusion between the semantic inquiry and the metaphysical inquiry led Cappelen astray.

Kaplan’s model, on the contrary, is intended to capture the nature of words *qua* objects. Arguably, not only words fall under Kaplan’s model. For instance, also symbols and drawings might be included in the same metaphysical explanation. And symbols and drawings are not included in the extension of ‘word’.<sup>9</sup>

### III

Alward’s paper is explicitly about “the ontological status of words” (Alward 2005, p. 172); in particular, he explores the relation between two entities: word-types and utterances/inscriptions. However, Alward (2005, p. 173) maintains that a metaphysical theory of words “can be evaluated in terms of our ordinary conception of a word”. He wonders: “Does the account in question conform to our *ordinary use of the notion?*” (my italics). It is obvious that we have ordinary *conceptions* of what things *are*, and this is something metaphysics might take into account;

---

<sup>9</sup>The following consideration seems to be in line with what I said: “Even if one were to conclude that names are so unlike other words as not to be regarded as a part of any particular language, this should not count against applying the earlier principles of individuation to names” (Kaplan 1990, p. 110).

but our *ordinary uses of the notion* of ‘word’ are not supposed to be captured by metaphysics, but by semantic inquiry instead: when we use a notion of a word we perform a semantic action.

Even if, in fact, Alward (2005) does take into consideration our ordinary (or intuitive) conception of the object word, he does not explicitly mention the distinction between our ordinary conception of the object word and our ordinary use of the notion ‘word’; moreover, he seems to blur such a distinction using interchangeably the phrases “ordinary use of the notion” and “ordinary conception of a word”. I believe this might pave the way to substantial confusion between the desideratum of a semantic account of ‘word’ and the desideratum of a metaphysical account of words *qua* objects. It is the semantic account that possibly has to be conformed to “our ordinary use of the notion [of ‘word’]” (Alward 2005, p. 173); but any metaphysical account of words ought to be concerned with considerations about our ordinary (or intuitive) conception of the object word instead. Our ordinary use of the term ‘word’ - which is a different thing - need not be involved in our metaphysical explanation of the object word.

Our common-sense metaphysics is not included in our common-sense knowledge about the meanings of words. The common-sense knowledge about the meaning of ‘cat’ does not contain the information that cats have certain metaphysical properties we would typically ascribe to them, like the property of being physical entities, spatio-temporally located, and so on and so forth. Therefore, metaphysical theories of word are to be evaluated in terms of our ordinary knowledge of what words are *qua* objects in the world, and not in terms of our ordinary use of the notion attached to ‘word’. They are two different knowledges based on different intuitions, as I argued above.

#### IV

Hawthorne and Lepore (2011, p. 475) “voiced multiple reservations about Kaplan’s account”. However, according to Kaplan, although “their paper has the tone of disagreement, [...] when [he] thinks about what they are saying, [he] feel[s] that for the most part it is quite supportive” (Kaplan 2011, p. 507). (Clearly, this is a further sign of confusion about what is what.) Again, Hawthorne and Lepore’s analysis, although it is said to be a “metaphysical investigation of word identity” (Hawthorne and Lepore 2011, p. 448), centres on “certain uses of the English word ‘word’ [and] they interpret the question as calling for a Quinean ‘semantic ascent’ on that word and those uses” (Bromberger 2011, p. 490). Consider the following quotations from their paper:

We do not deny that there may be *certain* contexts in which we use ‘word’ to speak about entities that are individuated by shape or form.

[...] The form- or shape-theoretic conception *may* capture some uses of ‘word’ [...]. But there *are* clearly uses for which nothing like that conception is adequate. (Hawthorne and Lepore 2011, p. 451)

It seems that Hawthorne and Lepore’s analysis is driven by our uses of ‘word’. And they assess Kaplan’s theory taking into consideration such uses:

[O]ne might hold that the extension of ‘word’ in ordinary use is never, or is hardly ever, a set that includes common currency names. On this conception, common currency names are irrelevant to ordinary ‘word’ talk. (Hawthorne and Lepore 2011, p. 466)

But Kaplan’s theory is not to be evaluated in terms of our uses of the term ‘word’, for it is free from any commitment to our ordinary ‘word’ talk. Therefore, when Hawthorne and Lepore conclude that “it is hard to construe him [i.e., Kaplan] as merely positing a class of entities — common currency names — that is theoretically important for linguistics, philosophy of language, and cognitive science, but of which ordinary folk have no conception” (Hawthorne and Lepore 2011, p. 466), they fail to recognise that Kaplan’s theory of word does not involve semantic considerations of ‘word’.

Thus, they seem to privilege a semantic reading of question (1*a*). Moreover, as Bromberger points out, since “[t]hey assume [...] that the English word ‘word’ [...] is used to refer and has an extension [...] the question for them becomes ‘What is peculiar to the member of that extension?’ ‘How are these members individuated?’” (Bromberger 2011, p. 491). It turns out that Hawthorne and Lepore also privilege a semantic reading of question (1*b*) as spelled out above. They seem to scrutinise the way in which words are individuated, not identified — according to the terminology adopted here. The first, as I said, is a semantic endeavour, the second is a metaphysical endeavour.

Kaplan, on his side, is not interested in this kind of reading. He centres on a metaphysical inquiry which is not achieved through semantic investigations of the kind discussed above. Since Hawthorne and Lepore read the questions in another way, they cannot oppose their answers to that of Kaplan — as they claim to do (see Hawthorne and Lepore 2011).

## V

Bromberger (2011) focuses on question (1*a*) and, as I have already said, he agrees with the fact that question (1*a*) is underspecified. He maintains that “Kaplan on one side, and Hawthorne and Lepore on the other, approach the question and its requirements with very different concerns in mind and end up often at cross



purposes, leaving some essential aspects of words unattended” (Bromberger 2011, p. 487). (This is exactly what I have tried to show above providing some arguments.) However, Bromberger (2011, p. 487) adds that the way in which Kaplan and Hawthorne and Lepore take on the issue “hardly pins down the question ‘What are words?’; nor does it pin down what is at stake in their debate”.

He seems to diminish the importance of the metaphysical reading of question (1*a*) to understand words. But he aims at understanding words under the particular light of the morphologist, and this does not mean that the metaphysical reading *is not* important and fruitful to understand words in another light. His objection to Kaplan is the following:

Any worthwhile conception [of word] would take aboard that words function as constituents of phrases and sentences. It would acknowledge that they play their defining roles merged with other terms, and thus, that — whatever their intrinsic perceptual and referential features — it is of the essence of words that they can appear in juxtapositions through which they receive and assign thematic roles, and stand in various functional relationships. (Bromberger 2011, p. 490)

Again, these are desiderata a scientific inquiry on words should meet. Kaplan’s model functions as a metaphysical analysis which, as we saw, is in principle disentangled from both semantics and morphology. Although Bromberger spotted some misunderstandings within the debate, he is guilty, from my point of view, of conceiving his scientific reading as the only and the right reading. But the scientific inquiry tells us nothing about what words are in the genuine metaphysical sense and tells us nothing about the semantic properties of the term ‘word’ in any interesting sense of semantics.

Moreover, Bromberger also seems to diminish the importance of the semantic reading of question (1*a*). He argues that dwelling on the way speakers use the term ‘word’ “is blind to too many essential features of words” (Bromberger 2011, p. 491). Again, the features Bromberger is interested in are not something a semantic theory about the term ‘word’ is supposed to provide. These are features we find in morphology textbooks, which are not supposed to elucidate either metaphysics or semantics in the strict sense. It is as though we looked for the meaning of the term ‘human’ and for metaphysical information about humans inside medicine textbooks. We simply do not.

## 5 Conclusion

I want to conclude with a few general remarks. The upshot of my analysis is that in order to produce a genuine metaphysics of words, semantic investigations on

the term ‘word’ and morphological considerations on words in general should be regarded — *as a matter of principle* — as bearing no direct information about the metaphysical status of words. Hence, criticisms of metaphysical theories of words ought to be weighed carefully, and the differentiation of the three inquiries is better taken into account. The debate is mired in a web of confusions which mainly comes from the mixture of different ways of looking at words.

The Orthographic Conception and the Common Currency Conception may both be tenable for different inquiries: the former for the semantic inquiry and the latter for the metaphysical inquiry, for instance. Morphological considerations like Bromberger’s can coexist with Kaplan’s Common Currency Conception and with Ramat’s definition of ‘word’. They are not inconsistent with each other. They only are different answers for different inquiries.

I shall not try here to provide final answers for each inquiry. This was not my purpose. By contrast, if my arguments are sound, I believe I have provided at least two positive results: a way to take account of subtle misunderstandings within the contemporary debate on the metaphysics of words; and a framework for studying words which isolates metaphysics from semantics and morphology. I claim this is the right path to follow for the debate to get back on track.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Massimiliano Vignolo, Carlo Penco and Stefano Predelli for their helpful suggestions. I am also grateful to the anonymous referees whose pertinent and constructive comments resulted in significant improvements to the paper.

## References

- [1] Alward, P. (2005). Between the Lines of Age: Reflections on the Metaphysics of Words. In: “Pacific Philosophical Quarterly”, 86: 72-187.
- [2] Andersen, H. and Hepburn, B. (2016). Scientific Method. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.).
- [3] Berto, F. and Plebani, M. (2015). *Ontology and Metaontology: A Contemporary Guide*. London & New York: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- [4] Bloomfield, L. ([1933] 1984). *Language*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- [5] Bromberger, S. (2011). What are words? Comments on Kaplan (1990), on Hawthorne and Lepore, and on the issue. In: “The Journal of Philosophy”, 108 (9): 486–503.
- [6] Cappelen, H. (1999). Intentions in Words. In: “Noûs”, 33 (1): 92–102.
- [7] Frege, G. (1892). On sense and reference. In: Geach, P. and Black, M. (1966). *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, notations edition.
- [8] Geeraerts, D. (2010). *Theories of Lexical Semantics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [9] Hawthorne, J. and Lepore, E. (2011). On words. In: “The Journal of Philosophy”, 108 (9): 447–485.
- [10] Huddleston, R., and Pullum, G. K. (2002). *The Cambridge Grammar of English. Language (CGEL)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [11] Irmak, N. (2018). An Ontology of words. In: “Erkenntnis”. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10670-018-0001-0>
- [12] Jaszczolt, K. M. (2016). *Meaning in Linguistic Interaction: Semantics, Metasemantics, and Philosophy of Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [13] Kaplan, D. (1990). Words. In: “Proceedings of the Aristotelian society”, supplementary volumes, 64: 93–119.
- [14] Kaplan, D. (2011). Words on words. In: “The Journal of Philosophy”, 108 (9): 504–529.
- [15] Lieber, R. (2009). *Introducing Morphology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [16] MacIver, A. M. (1937). Token, type and meaning. In: “Analysis”, 4 (4): 58–64.
- [17] Martinet, A. (1962). *A Functional View of Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [18] McCulloch, G. (1991). Making Sense of Words. In: “Analysis”, 73–79.
- [19] Millikan, R. G. (1984). *Language, Thought, and Other Biological Categories*. Cambridge, MIT Press.

- [20] Murphy, M. L. (2010). *Lexical Meaning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [21] Peirce, C. S. (1933). Prolegomena to an Apology for Pragmatism. In: C. Hartshorne and P. Weiss (eds). *Collected Papers of C. S. Peirce*. Harvard: Harvard University Press, vol. IV, pp. 411–63.
- [22] Quine, W. V. O. (1987). Type versus Token, in his *Quiddities: an Intermittently Philosophical Dictionary*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- [23] Ramat, P. (1990). Definizione di ‘parola’ e sua tipologia. In: Beretta, M., Molinelli, P. and Valentini, A. (eds). *Parallela 4. Morfologia*. Tübingen: Narr.
- [24] Szabó, Z. G. (1999). Expressions and their representation. In: “The Philosophical Quarterly”, 49 (195): 145–163.
- [25] Ullmann, S. (1951). *Words and Their Use*. London: Frederick Muller.
- [26] Wetzell, A. (2002). On types and words. In: “Journal of philosophical research”, 27: 239–265.