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AGAINST THE QUOTATIONAL THEORY OF MEANING ASCRPTIONS¹

SUMMARY: According to the quotational theory of meaning ascriptions, sentences like “‘Bruder (in German) means brother’” are abbreviated synonymy claims, such as “‘Bruder (in German) means the same as ‘brother’””. After discussing a problem with Harman’s (1999) version of the quotational theory, I present an amended version defended by Field (2001; 2017). Then, I address Field’s responses to two arguments against the theory that revolve around translation and the understanding of foreign expressions. Afterwards, I formulate two original arguments against both Harman’s and Field’s versions of the theory. One of them targets the hyperintensionality of quotations and the other raises a problem pertaining to variant spellings of words.

KEYWORDS: meaning ascriptions, use/mention distinction, pure quotation, translation, hyperintensionality, variant spellings.

1. Introduction: The Problem of Special Occurrence

We use language to talk about individuals, events, times, and states of affairs. But we can also use it to talk about letters, words, sentences, and utterances. When language is used this way, a linguistic device is needed that turns language on itself. Pure quotation (henceforth, simply quotation) is one such device.

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By enclosing an expression in quotation marks, we refer to (or, more colloquially, we mention) that expression. Thanks to this device, then, we can say that a certain expression has such and such properties, among which is having a certain meaning. In ordinary communication, we ascribe meanings with such sentences as the following: “‘Brother’ means male sibling”, “‘Procrastinate’ means to put things off”, and “‘Bruder’ (in German) means brother”.^{2, 3} In each one of these meaning ascriptions, a quotation referring to a linguistic expression⁴ is the subject of “means”, which is followed by an expression of our own language. The latter expression plays the role of a “linguistic exemplar” (Field, 2017, p. 8) serving the purpose of providing an example able to display the meaning of the expression referred to by the quotation on the left-hand side.

Meaning ascriptions are worth discussing for three main reasons. First of all, they seem to challenge some widespread assumptions about the traditional use/mention distinction, which will be the topic of this paper. Secondly, they involve non-extensional linguistic environments, as they do not allow substitution of coextensional expressions after “means”.⁵ These non-extensional environments do not necessarily involve “that”-clauses. Thirdly, meaning ascriptions are sentences that speakers use for a variety of purposes in ordinary linguistic exchanges: explaining the meaning of an expression, providing a definition, disambiguating among different meanings of a single expression, etc. However,

² My quotation conventions are these. Double quotation marks are used to quote expressions; single quotation marks are used to quote expressions that occur inside a quotation. So, while “my” is a possessive, “‘my’” is not—it is the quotation of a possessive. Notice that in accordance with standard usage, I use double quotation marks also to report another’s writing or speech; the context will always make it clear how I am using double quotation marks.

³ There are other kinds of sentences that we use to ascribe meanings: “The meaning of ‘Bruder’ (in German) is brother” and “Male sibling is what ‘brother’ means”. My discussion applies to them in the same way in which it applies to sentences like “‘Bruder’ (in German) means brother”.

⁴ Although nothing in my discussion hinges on this, my preferred view is that quotations occurring in meaning ascriptions refer to morphologically and graphically marked realization types of word types. For example, the quotations “‘Bruder’” and “‘Brüder’” refer to two different realization types of the same word type BRUDER, i.e., the singular and the plural realization type, respectively. This is my preferred view because meaning ascriptions are sensitive to morphological variations: if I want to specify the meaning of “Bruder” in German, I should say that it means brother, not brothers, for the latter is the meaning of “Brüder”. Nevertheless, since quotations can be used to refer to tokens, nominalistically-minded philosophers may well read meaning ascriptions as involving quotations referring to word tokens (either simple tokens or realization tokens).

⁵ As Kripke (1982, pp. 9–10, fn. 8) underlines, “means” may be used as synonymous with “refers to”. For instance, in legal contracts, “means” is often used to specify what the technical terms stand for (e.g., “‘Programme’ means a programme of study for which you have received an offer”). In these cases, we have straightforward extensional environments. However, in this paper I am not concerned with this reading of the sentences at stake.

as suggested above, the topic of this paper involves the use/mention distinction. What is puzzling about meaning ascriptions is the semantic status of the expressions figuring as linguistic exemplars: as Sellars (1956, p. 24; 1963; 1974), Black (1962, Chap. 2), Alston (1963a; 1963b), Garver (1965), and Christensen (1967) noticed in passing some time ago, the mode of occurrence of these expressions is very special, for they appear to be neither regularly mentioned nor regularly used.

By way of example, consider “‘Bruder’ (in German) means brother”. If “brother” were mentioned, and the containing ascription were taken at face-value, then the ascription would be true if and only if what “Bruder” means is the linguistic expression “brother”—assuming, as is usually done, that quotations (unambiguously) refer to linguistic expressions, signs, or any other quotable item.⁶ Given that the meaning of “Bruder” is not a linguistic expression, the sentence would incorrectly turn out to be false.

One might then be tempted to understand linguistic exemplars as being regularly used expressions, which contribute the semantic values they customarily have in sentences other than meaning ascriptions. But this cannot be correct, for (again, if the ascriptions are taken at face-value) we would get wrong results. To illustrate, consider “‘Procrastinate’ means to put things off”. If the complex expression on the right-hand side were used, in uttering the sentence we would be saying that the word “procrastinate” intends to delay certain things. In some special and perhaps bizarre contexts, we may want to say something like this; but normally, the intended interpretation of the aforementioned sentence is not this one. Hence, the view that the complement of “means” is regularly used is unable to account for the intended reading of the ascription.

To put it in a nutshell, the way linguistic exemplars occur on the right-hand side of meaning ascriptions is *sui generis*, at least *prima facie*: if these sentences are taken at face-value, such exemplars are neither regularly used nor regularly mentioned expressions. The question as to the mode of occurrence of these expressions is what I call the Problem of Special Occurrence.

⁶ This is a widespread assumption among theories of the semantics of quotation. It is so widespread that it would be difficult to list all the people who endorse it; however, see Pagin & Westerståhl 2010 for a detailed discussion of the standard view of quotations and its motivations. Yet, it should be mentioned that some theorists reject this assumption and, accordingly, maintain that quotations are multiply ambiguous or context-sensitive. The views they endorse appear to be quite hospitable to the idea that quotations, in some linguistic environments, can refer to the meanings of the quoted expressions. In the final section of the paper, I shall argue that one way of solving the problem I am describing may be to embrace one such view of quotation; however, in this paper I shall not discuss this kind of solution.

Another important assumption in my arguments will be that pure quotations are semantically inert: the content of the quoted linguistic material is segregated from the content of the containing sentence. As far as I know, this assumption is accepted in the debate, and it is usually treated as an essential feature of pure quotations, as opposed to, e.g., mixed quotations and scare quotations.

According to Abbott (2003, p. 21), their awkward mode of occurrence is evidenced also by the fact that people often choose a different punctuation device when they wish to write them. For instance, Washington (1992, Ex. 12), Perry (2001, p. 59), Whiting (2013, p. 6), Glüer & Wikforss (2015) use italics, Field (2001; 2017) employs corner quotes, Kaplan (1969) introduces special meaning marks, and Garver (1965) proposes a dedicated notation (attributed ultimately to Black, 1962, Chap. 2).⁷ However, Abbott also observes that there is “an intuitively obvious way to express the idea” conveyed by, e.g., “‘Bruder’ means brother”: we may well say “‘Bruder’ means the same as ‘brother’”. This suggests a seemingly sensible way to dismiss the Problem of Special Occurrence: ascriptions should not be taken at face-value, but rather as shorthand for synonymy claims between the expressions figuring in subject and complement positions.⁸ On this account, linguistic exemplars are nothing but regularly mentioned expressions. Yet, Abbott says that “usually we do not want to be so wordy” (Abbott, 2003, p. 21). However, I maintain that the point is more substantial than this: the quotational theory of meaning ascriptions is wrong and therefore it does not really provide a solution to the Problem of Special Occurrence. In the remainder of the paper, I shall present two versions of the theory, and then discuss some arguments against them.

2. Quotational Solutions

A clear exemplification of the quotational theory is suggested by Harman: “[‘means’] abbreviates a relational predicate S together with a pair of quotation marks surrounding what follows [...] where S is such that for every expression $\ulcorner e \urcorner$, $\ulcorner e S e \urcorner$ is true” (Harman, 1999, p. 265).⁹ He then suggests that S may be interpreted as “is synonymous with”, “means the same as”, or the like. More recently, Neale (2018) has observed that meaning ascriptions are “completely metalinguistic”, that is, they involve reference to two linguistic expressions. In short, (1) is to be analysed as (2):

- (1) “Bruder” (in German) means brother.
- (2) “Bruder” (in German) means the same as “brother” (in English).

⁷ Following the suggestion of an anonymous reviewer, I have decided not to use italics or any sort of punctuation mechanism (according to the reviewer, the use of italics or special punctuation after “means” is extremely rare in actual lay language).

⁸ To my knowledge, the first appearance of this view is due to Johnson (1921, p. 90), mentioned by Moore in the lectures he gave at Cambridge in 1933–1934 (Moore, 1966). As far as I know, Moore is the first one to attack the quotational view. In §4 I discuss an argument inspired by one of Moore’s remarks on the topic.

⁹ I have added here Quine’s quasi-quotation marks. I use them to mention variables ranging over expressions.

Even though in the subsequent discussion I make use of the informal rendering of the quotational analysis, here is a formal representation of (2):

- (3) $\forall x (x \text{ is a meaning} \rightarrow (\text{“Bruder” has } x \text{ in German} \leftrightarrow \text{“brother” has } x \text{ in English}))^{10}$

This representation literally quantifies over meanings. For argument’s sake, I assume that it is possible to provide an equally good representation that does not quantify over such entities, but rather unpacks the notion of “meaning the same as” in a certain way. For example, according to Field (2001), the relation between two synonymous words is that of having equivalent meaning characteristics, which include “the inferences that govern certain kinds of sentences containing the words and [...] the worldly conditions that typically lead to the assent to other kinds of sentences involving the words” (Field 2001, p. 159). On a more Quinean view, we may avoid mentioning equivalence relations, and just say that two words mean the same exactly if their meaning characteristics make it appropriate to translate one into the other (or to use them interchangeably, if they belong to the same language).¹¹

The issues to which the foregoing paragraph alludes are worthy of further independent scrutiny. Yet, their topic is not the problem at stake here. Rather, the topic I want to discuss is whether or not the quotational view provides a correct solution to the Problem of Special Occurrence. If it does, (1) is nothing but a shortened version of (2) (or (3)), and hence the proposition expressed by (1) is nothing more and nothing less than the proposition expressed by (2) (or (3))—regardless of how the notion of “meaning the same as” (or some equivalent notion) is to be spelled out in detail.

¹⁰ This formal representation is a simplified version of Field’s analysis in Field (2017). I mention his actual version later on in this section, after introducing an amendment in the quotational theory.

¹¹ Let us set aside worries about intra-linguistic synonymy too. Mates (1950, pp. 215ff) argued that no two expressions of a single language are synonymous. Sceptics *à la* Mates have two options. On the one hand, they may embrace an error theory of meaning ascriptions, according to which all such sentences are false or lack a truth-value—perhaps with the exception of homophonic ascriptions, like “‘Brother’ means brother”. On the other hand, they can focus on inter-linguistic synonymy (see (2)) and the related ascriptions ascribing meanings to foreign expressions (see (1)). Those who also have doubts concerning inter-linguistic synonymy can either hold an error theory or focus on more artificial examples involving English words and expressions of an argot, i.e., a language in which words in a given natural language are altered according to certain rules, like Pig-Latin. One of its rules is that for English words that begin with consonant sounds, all letters before the initial vowel are placed at the end of the word sequence, and then the suffix “ay” is added. No change in meaning occurs: “pig” becomes “igpay” in Pig-Latin, and by stipulation “pig” is synonymous with “igpay”. Thus, people who are doubtful about inter-linguistic synonymy can focus on ascriptions such as “‘Igpay’ (in Pig-Latin) means pig”.

For argument's sake, I shall also grant that the supporter of the quotational theory can provide a plausible story for the unvocalised linguistic material in (1), i.e., for the occurrence of “the same as” at some semantically relevant level of syntactic complexity. However, that story may well not be easy to come by. For one thing, the postulated relationship is surely not one of syntactic ellipsis, for (1) need not be uttered after a previous occurrence of “the same as”, from which the alleged hidden occurrence in (1) would then be recovered.

Let us leave these difficulties aside and turn our attention to Harman's quotational theory. As it stands, the theory needs a refinement, because clearly (1) and (2) are not truth-conditionally identical. For instance, (1) is false and (2) is true with respect to a world in which (a) the use of “brother” and “sister” by the counterparts of actual English speakers is swapped, and (b) the use of “Bruder” and “Schwester” (i.e., the actual German translation of “sister”) by the counterparts of actual German speakers is swapped. With respect to such a world, “Bruder” and “brother” are synonymous, but they mean something completely different to what they actually do, and hence “Bruder” does not mean brother (indeed, we actual speakers would say that it means sister). In order to solve this problem, one may rigidify the right-hand side of (2). In this spirit, Field (2001, pp. 158ff; 2017, pp. 6ff) suggests that (1) should be analysed as (4), of which (5) is a more formal version:

- (4) “Bruder” (in German) means what “brother” actually means (in English).¹²
- (5) $\forall x (x \text{ is a meaning} \rightarrow (\text{“Bruder” has } x \text{ in German} \leftrightarrow \text{actually (“brother” has } x \text{ in English)}))$

Despite the fact that reference to actuality in Field's analysis solves the problem raised for Harman's theory (and granting that Field can provide a story about the unvocalised linguistic material in (1)), there are independent arguments against both versions. Given that these arguments do not hinge on the presence or absence of the actuality operator, in my discussion I shall focus on the simpler version of the theory, i.e., Harman's. Two of the four arguments I present have been allegedly rejected by Field (2001; 2017). I shall start with them, showing that Field's replies can be challenged (§§3–4). Later, I provide two arguments that neither Field nor Harman has discussed (§§5–6).

¹² Note that Field (2001) focuses on the individual speaker with their own idiolect. For example, he claims that to say that a word means brother “is just to say that it has meaning-characteristics that are [...] equivalent to the actual meaning characteristics of my term [‘brother’]” (Field, 2001, p. 59). However, in Field (2017), the focus of the discussion is mainly on public languages.

3. Translation

A well-known objection against sententialist theories of belief ascriptions is Church's (1950) translation argument. A parallel argument can be formulated against the quotational theory of meaning ascriptions.¹³ If this theory is correct, (1) is analysed as (2), here reported:

- (1) "Bruder" (in German) means brother.
- (2) "Bruder" (in German) means the same as "brother" (in English).

If (1) is analysed as (2), they express the same proposition. The Italian translations of (1) and (2) are (6) and (7), respectively:

- (6) "Bruder" (in tedesco) significa fratello.
- (7) "Bruder" (in tedesco) significa lo stesso di "brother" (in inglese).

According to the quotational theory, (6) and (7) are thus translations of two sentences that express the same proposition. Then, also (6) and (7) express the same proposition. But this is patently false.¹⁴

Field objects that the argument relies on standards of translation that require reference-preservation of the parts, but "these are not the proper standards of translation in this case" (Field, 2017, p. 8). Thus, (7) does not translate (2); rather, its correct translation is (8):

- (8) "Bruder" (in tedesco) significa lo stesso di "fratello" (in italiano).

Field (2001, p. 161; 2017, p. 7–8) urges that when we translate (2) we are not interested in literal translation, but rather in quasi-translation, which involves the translation of the quoted expression on the right-hand side. Similarly, he holds that the quotation marks surrounding the latter expression "don't behave quite like ordinary quotation marks" (Field, 2001, p. 161). Field does not define

¹³ The target of the original argument was Carnap's analysis of belief ascriptions. Church ultimately attributes the argument to Langford (1937, p. 61). This type of argument has been used by a number of authors (for different purposes), like Lewy (1947, p. 26), Strawson (1949, p. 84) and Kneale & Kneale (1962, pp. 50–51).

¹⁴ As for Church's original argument, Putnam (1953), Davidson (1963), and Richard (1997) observe that Carnap's analysis of belief ascriptions is not intended to capture their meaning, but only something logically equivalent, thus making Church's objection inapplicable. This problem is irrelevant here: the quotational view of meaning ascriptions is meant to be a solution to the Problem of Special Occurrence, and thus must provide semantically equivalent sentences (§2). However, the problem of hyperintensionality (§5) raises an objection against the view that the theory provides sentences that are even just logically equivalent to meaning ascriptions.

the notion of quasi-translation,¹⁵ nor does he elaborate on the special quotation marks he mentions, except for saying that “we want [their quoted material] to be quasi-translated rather than ‘literally translated’” (Field, 2001, p. 161). Field’s remarks are reminiscent of a reply put forth by a number of philosophers to Church’s original argument. For example, Geach (1957, p. 91–92), Dummett (1973), Burge (1978, p. 141–145), and Kripke (1979, p. 139, fn. 5) hold that what counts as correct, actual translation often includes translation of quoted expressions, in order to convey the point of the source sentence. On this view, what is crucial to meaning ascriptions and synonymy claims is not part of their semantics, but it is better seen as involved “in a convention presupposed in [their] use and understanding” (Burge, 1978, p. 146). The convention in connection with (1) and (2) directs one to interpret the sentences in the specified manner; this yields the result that (8), and not (7), translates (2).

Let me reply as follows. It is completely inessential to the argument whether or not (8) is an actually acceptable translation of (2). The argument is concerned exclusively with the semantics of (1) and (2), and not with any pragmatic “conventions presupposed in their use”. Sometimes we may be interested, as Field says, in quasi-translation, but it is surely possible to be interested in literal translation as well. Literal translation requires at least preservation of character (in the sense of Kaplan, 1989), so that an expression e_1 of a language L_1 literally translates an expression e_2 of a language L_2 only if e_1 and e_2 have the same character.¹⁶ Any notion of translation that does not meet this condition is not literal. Assuming that “brother” and “fratello” have the same character, the latter is a literal translation of the former. On the other hand, the quotation “brother” and the quotation “fratello” do not have the same character; therefore, the latter is not a literal translation of the former. If we assume that translation is compositional (at least in the case at stake), we can conclude that (8) is not a literal translation of (2). Moreover, given that literal translation requires at least character-preservation (and *a fortiori* reference-preservation, given a context), (7) is the correct literal translation of (2). And literal translation, as opposed to non-literal

¹⁵ Nevertheless, he offers a nice non-linguistic analogy that should help us see the point: “[s]uppose that a witness before the Warren Commission described the impact of the decisive bullet by pointing at the place on his own head “where the bullet hit”, i.e. analogous to the place on Kennedy’s head where it hit. And suppose that in some future investigation someone is asked to give a literal account of the Warren Commission testimony; she will do so by pointing to a spot on her own head” (Field, 2017, p. 8).

¹⁶ I am giving only a necessary condition for literal translation because there are clear cases of literal translation requiring more than character-preservation. Consider proper names: usually people think that the Italian literal translation of “Hesperus” is “Espero”, and not “Fosforo”, though the character of “Fosforo” is the same as that of “Hesperus” (maybe here another condition involves the history of the name, or something along these lines).

or quasi-translation, is the kind of translation we should use for the purpose of drawing semantic conclusions.¹⁷

In addition, echoing Salmon's (2001) remarks on Church's translation argument, I suggest that translation is here invoked merely as a device to facilitate our seeing the semantic difference between certain sentences. The argument aims at showing that (6) and (7) differ semantically, as they have different literal meanings. That is, they differ in character and therefore, given a context, they express different contents or propositions. Notice that the two sentences have different characters no matter whether or not the quotational theory is correct. Now, literal meaning should be opposed to whatever kind of information that may be inferred from it together with knowledge of English—in particular, knowledge of what “brother” means. By showing the semantic difference between (6) and (7), the argument establishes that (1) and (2) are semantically different too, even if the proposition expressed by the former may be easily inferred from the proposition expressed by the latter.

There is a desperate move that the supporter of the quotational theory may make: denying the intuitive claim that (1) is translated into Italian by (6). Since in (1) reference is made to the word “brother”, any literal translation of (1) must include an expression referring to that word. Hence, despite our intuitions, (9) counts as the literal translation of (1):

(9) “Bruder” (in tedesco) significa brother.

For argument's sake, I grant that (9) is a grammatical sentence.¹⁸ Yet, a more controversial result is obtained by reformulating the argument focusing on ascriptions of meaning to declarative sentences. Consider, for instance, (10):

¹⁷ My distinction between literal and non-literal translations exemplifies one way of substantiating Salmon's (1986, p. 58–59, 84–85; 2001, p. 586) distinction between—on the one hand—translations that aim at preserving the semantically encoded information of a piece of linguistic material, and—on the other hand—translations that aim at preserving its pragmatically imparted information. According to Salmon, only the latter may depart from mere semantic constraints. Now, (8), contrary to (7), is a pragmatically, though not a semantically, correct translation of (2). If there is a semantically adequate translation of a sentence, we should be concerned with that kind of translation when assessing semantic aspects of the sentence, as is the case here. (Quine, 1960, pp. 26–79, 211–216; Tarski, 1983; Davidson, 1967; 1968; 1973; and Kaplan, 2004, §3 have employed this kind of translation in drawing some of their semantic conclusions). I stress the “if” because there are sentences whose translations cannot preserve all their semantic aspects: “The sentence hereby uttered is in English” cannot be translated into German by preserving both its character and the content it expresses in a context. Anyway, (1) does not include self-referential elements that may trigger impossibility results.

¹⁸ Although I originally suspected that there may be some controversy as regards the grammaticality of (9), an anonymous reviewer suggests that the grammaticality of this sentence is totally unobjectionable, as so-called noun switches are extremely frequent in code-switching between all sorts of pairs of languages.

(10) “Hunde bellen” (in German) means that dogs bark.

Field observes that “the presence of ‘that’ is enough to indicate the special role that the sentence ‘dogs bark’ plays, [namely] its role as a content-indicator” (Field, 2017, p. 3). According to him, there is no relevant difference between meaning ascriptions for sentential and sub-sentential expressions, except for the fact that in the latter case “we have no analog of ‘that’” (Field, 2017, p. 3). If Field is right,¹⁹ the quotational theory applies straightforwardly to meaning ascriptions for sentential expressions (as he explicitly says). Thus, (10) is analysed as (11):

(11) “Hunde bellen” (in German) means the same as “Dogs bark” (in English).

Now, the alternative version of the translation argument would rely on the idea that the Italian translations of (10) and (11) are (12) and (13), respectively:

(12) “Hunde bellen” (in tedesco) significa che i cani abbaiano.

(13) “Hunde bellen” (in tedesco) significa lo stesso di “Dogs bark” (in inglese).

If (1) is not literally translated by (6) (as the desperate objection holds), then (10) is not literally translated by (12). Rather, its literal translation is (14):

(14) *“Hunde bellen” (in tedesco) significa che dogs bark.

But (14) appear to be ungrammatical. As the advocate of the objection and I are both assuming, a literal translation is character-preserving and hence reference-preserving. If the reference of a sentence is its truth-value, as is commonly thought, (14) is not the literal translation of (10). Indeed, given that ungrammatical sentences do not express propositions, (14) does not express a proposition; *a fortiori* it lacks a truth-value, and hence is not true, contrary to (10). Obviously, if one thinks that the reference of a sentence is not a truth-value, it will suffice to say that (14) lacks a character altogether (because of its ungrammaticality), and therefore it is not a literal translation of (10).²⁰

¹⁹ Field may be right as regards ascriptions of meaning to non-indexical sentences. Things are more complicated with indexicals. If I were to attribute a meaning to the Italian sentence “Spero di mangiare presto” I could do two things. I may say that it means “I hope to eat soon”, or that the sentence, as uttered by me, means that I hope to eat soon. In the first case, I would be attributing a character to the sentence, whereas in the second case, a content (i.e., the proposition expressed on that occasion).

²⁰ The example in my reply to the desperate objection involves a language switch between a complementizer and a content clause. An anonymous reviewer observes that this phenomenon has been discussed (and variably assessed) in Spanish-English code-switching. Unfortunately, I was unable to find literature on Italian-English code-switching. However, in Spanish-English code-switching, there is some controversy as to

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Field attributes the second argument he rejects to Schiffer (1987, pp. 33–35; 2003, p. 47; 2008, p. 289). Schiffer’s original argument did not concern meaning ascriptions; rather, it was meant to provide an objection against Davidson’s (1968) paratactic account of indirect reports. However, I think that the idea at the heart of Schiffer’s argument (as applied to meaning ascriptions) is ultimately to be found in a remark advanced by Moore (1966). He observes that if in saying that “Bruder” means brother all you are saying were that “Bruder” means the same as “brother”, “you would not be telling anyone what the meaning of [‘Bruder’] is [...]. If this were all, it is an assertion you might make, even if you hadn’t the least idea what [‘brother’] meant” (Moore, 1966, p. 57). Thus, in saying that “Bruder” means brother, you are not just saying that “Bruder” and “brother” are synonymous expressions.²¹ The thought here is that the quotational theory incorrectly implies that one can understand what an ascription says without knowing the meaning of the expression that works as a linguistic exemplar. Or, to put it more accurately, the quotational theory makes wrong predictions when applied to occurrences of meaning ascriptions that are embedded in knowledge or belief ascriptions.

To see this point clearly, we may arrange Moore’s remarks in the form of an argument. If the quotational theory is correct, then (1) is shorthand for (2), here reported:

- (1) “Bruder” (in German) means brother.
- (2) “Bruder” (in German) means the same as “brother” (in English).

Then, if Pablo knows that (2), he knows that (1). But if Pablo is a monolingual speaker of Spanish, he does not understand the word “brother”. Thus, the quotational theory predicts that Pablo knows that (1) without knowing what “Bruder” means in German. But saying that Pablo knows that (1) seems to imply exactly that Pablo does know what “Bruder” means.

Field (2001, pp. 160ff) discusses a different version of the argument. Suppose that Anna and Marco are monolingual speakers of Italian. Anna believes that “Bruder” (in German) means what “fratello” means (in Italian), while Marco believes that (2). The quotational theory apparently implies that it will be Marco, rather than Anna, who believes that (1).

whether a switch between a complementizer and a content clause is allowed (see González-Vilbazo, 2005; Hoot, 2011; Ebert & Hoot, 2018; Sande Piñeiro, 2018). Be that as it may, I should not take for granted that (14) is surely ungrammatical. Hence, the desperate move that the supporter of the quotational theory makes may not be so desperate.

²¹ As mentioned in footnote 8, Moore makes this remark in his discussion of Johnson’s quotational view. The original example draws on an intra-linguistic meaning ascription. I have adapted it to make it consistent with the other examples. However, the difference between inter- and intra-linguistic ascriptions is here irrelevant.

Field replies by applying the notion of quasi-translation to belief and knowledge ascriptions. Roughly, the idea is that, for every rational agent S and English sentence $\ulcorner P \urcorner$, $\ulcorner S$ believes/knows that $P \urcorner$ is true in English if and only if S stands in some appropriate relation with a quasi-translation of $\ulcorner P \urcorner$ in a language S understands (Field, 2001, p. 162; 2017, p. 7–8).²² So, if Anna believes that (1), she is in a relation of, say, acceptance with an appropriate quasi-translation of (1) or of an equivalent sentence, like (2).²³ An Italian quasi-translation of (2) is (8), here reported:

(8) “Bruder” (in tedesco) significa lo stesso di “fratello” (in italiano).

Thus, the theory correctly predicts that it is Anna, and not Marco, who believes that (1). Similarly, Pablo knows what “Bruder” means in German because he assents to a Spanish quasi-translation of (2).

However, the only rationale for preferring the notion of quasi-translation over that of literal translation is that it helps Field to handle apparent problems in his theory. Moreover, the notion of quasi-translation appears to be so coarse-grained that it may be used for too many different purposes, which casts doubts on the very notion itself. For instance, it may be used to argue that co-referring proper names are truth-preservingly substitutable in the complement clauses of belief ascriptions. One may say that, e.g., “Espero brilla nel cielo” (i.e., the Italian literal translation of “Hesperus shines in the sky”) is a quasi-translation of “Phosphorus shines in the sky”; then, if Anna assents to “Espero brilla nel cielo”, she believes that Phosphorus shines in the sky, even if she assents to neither “Espero = Fosforo” nor “Hesperus = Phosphorus”. The conclusion may be correct, but certainly not in virtue of the arbitrary choice of treating “Espero brilla nel cielo” as a quasi-translation of “Phosphorus shines in the sky”.

Field may reply that the example of Anna and Marco involves the quasi-translation of a quoted expression, while the Hesperus/Phosphorus case involves the quasi-translation of a regularly used expression. He may then stress that we are allowed to, and should, prefer quasi-translation only for cases involving quoted expressions. Notice, though, that the example of Anna and Marco does involve the quasi-translation of a regularly used expression, namely “English”,

²² Variables like $\ulcorner P \urcorner$ are assumed to range over declarative sentences that lack indexicals, ambiguities and pronominal devices. Field sketches the view not in terms of quasi-translation but in terms of “quasi-meaning”, so that to believe that P is to be in a certain relation with a sentence that quasi-means the same as $\ulcorner P \urcorner$. However, the notion of quasi-meaning is defined in terms of that of quasi-translation: “We don’t care much about ‘literal meaning’, if that is what is preserved in ‘literal translation’ [...] what we care about, rather, is what is preserved in quasi-translation” which we may call “quasi-meaning, though I think it is what most would simply call meaning” (Field, 2001, p. 161).

²³ For the sake of precision, note that since Field’s actual analysis of (1) is (4) (or (5)), to believe that (1) is (for him) to assent to an appropriate quasi-translation of (4) (or (5)). Nothing in my discussion hinges on this.

which is quasi-translated into Italian as “italiano” (see (2) and (8)). At this point, Field cannot object that references to English and Italian may be omitted. A word means something in a given language, and since it may mean one thing in a language and a different thing (or nothing) in another one, the analysis must make clear which language is at stake, in order to get the right truth-conditions. The same applies to any translation or quasi-translation of them.²⁴

Let us take stock. The two arguments discussed so far concern translation and the understanding of foreign expressions. There are further arguments against the quotational theory that are independent of such issues, arguments that neither Harman nor Field addresses. In the next sections, I present two of them. The first one targets the hyperintensionality of quotations; the second one concerns how the quotational theory deals with ascriptions involving variant spellings of a word. Again, since they apply to Harman’s version of the theory as well as to Field’s, I shall focus on the former, given its greater simplicity.

5. Hyperintensionality

Pure quotations are standardly thought to be the clearest examples of hyperintensional positions that we have in natural languages.²⁵ I argue that this raises a problem for the quotational theory.

First of all, a bit of terminology. For every English sentence $\ulcorner P \urcorner$, a position in $\ulcorner P \urcorner$ is hyperintensional if and only if synonymous (and hence necessarily co-extensive) English expressions are not replaceable in that position without changing the truth-value of $\ulcorner P \urcorner$. Although “lawyer” is synonymous with “attorney”, the former cannot be truth-preservingly replaced by the latter in the sentence “The word ‘lawyer’ has six letters”.

Now, the quotational theory implies that the expressions figuring on the right-hand side of meaning ascriptions are not truth-preservingly replaceable by synonymous expressions. But this implication is incorrect. Consider (15) and its quotational analysis:

(15) “Archäologie” (in German) means archaeology.

(16) “Archäologie” (in German) means the same as ‘archaeology’ (in English).

Call (C₁) the claim that “archaeology” and “archeology” are synonymous expressions in English, and assume it is true (according to *Collins English Diction-*

²⁴ Notice, however, that in using (1) we may (and usually do) omit the complement “(in German)” in ordinary language exchanges; but, again, if we want the truth-conditions to be given correctly, we should make it explicit.

²⁵ See Cappelen & Lepore (2007, p. 4). Predelli (2013, p. 174–177) is the only exception I am aware of: truth-preserving substitutivity of synonymous (and hence necessarily co-extensive) expressions within pure quotation marks is a corollary of his defence of truth-preserving substitutivity of all strings within pure quotation marks.

ary, “archeology” is a variant spelling of “archaeology”, in both British and American English). Then, “archaeology” in (16) cannot be truth-preservingly replaced by “archeology”, since the former expression occurs in a hyperintensional position. Hence, (17) cannot be validly inferred from (16) and (C₁):

(17) “Archäologie” (in German) means the same as “archeology” (in English).

Nevertheless, “means” does not trigger a hyperintensional position. If (15) and (C₁) are true, then (18) is true as well:

(18) “Archäologie” (in German) means archeology.

Similarly, if “Bruder” (in German) means brother, and “brother” and “male sibling” are synonymous expressions, “Bruder” (in German) means male sibling. However, we should not jump too quickly to the conclusion that meaning ascriptions are intensional in the position following “means”, where a position is intensional in $\ulcorner P \urcorner$ if and only if only necessarily co-extensive expressions are replaceable in that position without changing the truth-value of $\ulcorner P \urcorner$. Even though “to be German” and “to be German and to be English or not English” are necessarily co-extensive expressions, the former cannot be truth-preservingly replaced by the latter in the sentence “‘Essere tedesco’ (in Italian) means to be German”. Meaning ascriptions allow for the truth-preserving substitution only of synonymous expressions, where the relevant notion of synonymy is more fine-grained than that of necessarily co-extensionality; spelling out in detail what this notion exactly amounts to is a tough job, about which much has been said. However, this is an issue for another discussion; for our purposes, we just need to acknowledge that “means” does not trigger a hyperintensional position and, most importantly, that at least some substitutions are allowed in the complement position.²⁶ By contrast, no substitutions at all are allowed in pure quotations.

Let us go back to the argument. If the quotational theory is correct, (a) (15) and (16) stand in the analysis relation, and (b) (17) cannot be validly inferred from (16) and (C₁). Since (18) and (17) stand in the analysis relation too, (18) cannot be validly inferred from (15) and (C₁). But, as argued above, (18) can be

²⁶ Some recent developments in truthmaker semantics for exact entailment may be useful here. Fine and Jago (2019) offer a system in which $\ulcorner P \urcorner$ and $\ulcorner Q \urcorner$ are semantically equivalent when, roughly, they share all their truthmakers in all truthmaker models. This is one of the few systems that draws semantic distinctions between, say, $\ulcorner P \urcorner$, on the one hand, and $\ulcorner P \wedge (Q \vee \neg Q) \urcorner$ and $\ulcorner P \vee (Q \wedge \neg Q) \urcorner$ on the other (which are all classically, intuitionistically, and relevantly equivalent)—*ditto* for predicates. This kind of view may allow us to account for the intuitively obvious semantic difference between the ascriptions “‘Essere tedesco’ (in Italian) means to be German” and “‘Essere tedesco’ (in Italian) means to be German and to be English or not English”. In turn, this could help us provide a criterion for substitutivity (in the complement position) in terms of exact truthmaking.

validly inferred from (15) and (C₁): therefore, the quotational theory incorrectly invalidates the inference from (15) and (C₁) to (18).

One might reply that this objection implies the absurd conclusion that the quotation in subject position is not a pure quotation. Let us pretend, for the sake of the argument, that also in German there are two words for archaeology, namely, “Archäologie” and “Arkäologie”.²⁷ Call (C₂) the claim that “Arkäologie” is a German expression that is not only necessarily co-extensive with “Archäologie”, but also synonymous with it (whatever synonymy might be), and assume it is true. If we replace “Archäologie” with “Arkäologie” in (15), we obtain the following true meaning ascription:

(19) “Arkäologie” (in German) means archaeology.

In general, synonymous expressions appear to be truth-preservingly replaceable in the quotation figuring in subject position. This validates the inference from (15) and (C₂) to (19). Consequently, (15) is not hyperintensional in the position occupied by the quotation “Archäologie”; hence, the latter is not a pure quotation, as pure quotations are hyperintensional positions.

This line of reasoning is wrong. To illustrate why, suppose that (15) allows the truth-preserving substitution of synonymous expressions in the position occupied by the quotation “Archäologie”, and thus that the quoted expression in subject position can be truth-preservingly replaced by “Arkäologie”. As a consequence, any sentence resulting from the conjunction of (15) with another sentence allows the truth-preserving replacement of the quoted expression in subject position with “Arkäologie”. Thus, the inference from (20) and (C₂) to (21) is valid:

(20) “Archäologie” has eleven letters and means archaeology (in German).

(21) “Arkäologie” has eleven letters and means archaeology (in German).

But (21) is false, contrary to (20). Hence, the inference is not valid. Therefore, we have no reason to think that my argument against the quotational theory can be applied to the subject position.

Recall that in his discussion of the translation argument (§3), Field maintains that quotation marks occurring on the right-hand side of meaning ascriptions “don’t behave quite like ordinary quotation marks [since] we want [their quoted material] to be quasi-translated rather than ‘literally translated’” (Field, 2001, p. 161). Perhaps Field would use a similar strategy to deal with the problem of

²⁷ I am just pretending that “Arkäologie” is an actual German word. Of course, the fact that German does not actually have two words for archaeology is irrelevant, as we may find realistic examples in other languages. I have decided not to change the example in order to be consistent with the remainder of the section and the paper, in which I extensively make use of that example.

hyperintensionality. For instance, he may argue that the quotations at stake are so special that meaning ascriptions are not hyperintensional in such positions. However, I think that introducing a special semantic category just to save the quotational theory from apparent problems puts the supporter of the theory in a bad dialectical position.

Apart from this, appealing to a special semantic category will not help us solve the Problem of Special Occurrence: the puzzle consists exactly in understanding what semantic contribution is made by an expression occurring after “means”. Saying that it is a quotation that does not behave as a regular quotation clearly is not an answer to the puzzle; rather, it is a way of restating the puzzle once we have assumed that there is something quotational in the way the relevant expression occurs.

6. Variant Spellings

As already mentioned, “archeology” is a variant spelling of “archaeology”, in both British and American English. Suppose that Tim and Sam are speakers of the former. Tim has always come across “archaeology”, and never “archeology”, while Sam the opposite. Suppose that Tim and Sam read in a German monolingual dictionary that the definition of “Archäologie” is such-and-such. Then, they use a bilingual dictionary to translate the definition as follows: “the study of human activity through the recovery and analysis of material culture”. Tim and Sam understand this definition the same way. Now consider the following sentences:

- (22) a. There is a word in German that means archaeology.
 b. There is a word in German that means archeology.

On the basis of the procedure Tim has followed (i.e., using a monolingual and a bilingual dictionary) and his knowledge of English, he accepts (22a). Hence, on the basis of that procedure and his linguistic knowledge, Tim has learnt something about German. The same line of reasoning applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to Sam and (22b).

The procedure Tim has followed is identical to the one Sam has followed. Thus, it seems that the thing about German that Tim has learnt is identical to the thing about German that Sam has learnt. What distinguishes Tim from Sam is how they would express that thing: Tim would express it with (22a), while Sam would express it with (22b). Thus, (22a) and (22b) intuitively express the same proposition. But the quotational theory conflicts with this conclusion: the analysis of the former makes reference to “archaeology” while the analysis of the latter makes reference to “archeology”.²⁸

²⁸ If we reformulate the example focusing on the idiolects spoken by Tim and Sam, we may raise a problem pertaining again to translation. While the lexicon of Tim’s idio-

Why, however, should one not insist that (22a) and (22b) are semantically different? First of all, if these two sentences expressed different propositions, perhaps we should hold something analogous as regards, say, an utterance of (22a) made by someone with rhotacism and an utterance of the same sentence made by someone without rhotacism. After all, one might maintain that if a small spelling variation of a word affects the semantics of the containing sentence, then there is no reason for us not to say that the pronunciation affects it as well; but the conclusion that it does would be patently absurd.²⁹

An advocate of the quotational theory may reply as follows. Two different ways of pronouncing “archaeology” do not count as utterances of two different words; on the contrary, “archaeology” and “archeology” are two different words. Therefore, (22a) and (22b) express different propositions because they make reference to two different words. Here there may be room to argue that this reply relies on a controversial assumption concerning word individuation, namely, that words are not individuated (among other things) by their phonetic properties, or that words are not so individuated in the case at issue. Be that as it may, I do not wish to push in this direction. Instead, I want to challenge one of the implications of the view that (22a) and (22b) do not express the same proposition. To do this, I need to introduce an assumption concerning the relation between propositions and beliefs:

(PB) For every atomic English sentence $\ulcorner P \urcorner$ and $\ulcorner Q \urcorner$, if the proposition that P is not the proposition that Q , then it is possible for a rational agent to believe that P (in a context c) without believing that Q (in c).

If (PB) is true, then the view (implied by the quotational theory) that (22a) and (22b) express different propositions implies that it is possible for a rational agent to believe that (22a) (in a context c) without believing that (22b) (in c). For instance, since Tim does not know that “archaeology” is a variant spelling of “archeology”, he may believe that (22a) without believing that (22b).

This does not seem correct to me. Imagine the following situation. After Tim finds out the meaning of “Archäologie” via the translation of the definition he found in the monolingual dictionary, we ask him: “So, what does ‘Archäologie’ mean?”. He replies by uttering certain sounds: ‘arçæolo’gi in “dʒɜ:mən mi:nz ɑ:ki’blədʒi”. How could we write in English what he is saying? We have two options:

lect contains “archaeology”, but not “archeology”, the lexicon of Sam’s idiolect contains “archeology”, but not “archaeology”. If the quotational theory is correct, (22b) is not a sentence of Sam’s idiolect that literally translates (22a), i.e., a sentence of Tim’s idiolect. This result is strongly counterintuitive.

²⁹ Or it would be patently absurd in the case at stake. In other cases, the pronunciation may affect the proposition expressed, e.g., when the sentence contains an indexical that refers to the way the utterer utters that very sentence or some part of it (“In order to sound like a posh nobleman, you need to speak like so”).

- (23) a. “Archäologie” (in German) means archaeology.
 b. “Archäologie” (in German) means archeology.

Even if we do not know whether he is aware of one or both spellings, we understand what he is saying, and we note no ambiguity. But if the same sounds corresponded to sentences expressing different propositions, we would notice some degree of ambiguity.³⁰ Since Tim’s utterance is not ambiguous, and we assume that he is speaking sincerely and in English, we would ascribe to him the belief that (23a) and the belief that (23b), as they are one and the same belief³¹—*ditto* for the belief that (22a) and the belief that (22b).

One may notice that despite the wide acceptance of (PB) (i.e., the principle I have invoked in my example), the latter is not universally endorsed. For instance, Richard maintains that “believes” expresses a “triadic relation among a person, a proposition, and a sentential meaning, the latter entity a different sort of thing than a proposition” (Richard, 1983, p. 425), a sort of “Kaplansque character” (1983, p. 429). On this view, to believe that *P* is to be in a relation with the proposition that *P*, under a certain sentential meaning (see also Richard, 1990). One may draw on this view to argue that (22a) and (22b) differ in sentential meaning, and thus, even if the proposition that (22a) and the proposition that (22b) are not the same, it is possible to believe that (22a) without believing that (22b). However, if the supporter of the quotational theory maintains that (PB) is false, my argument may be seen as showing that they are committed to a minoritarian view of the relation between propositions and beliefs, as the majority of philosophers accept (PB).

Moreover, we may rephrase one of my observations in the form of an independent objection that does not make use of (PB). If (23a) and (23b) express different propositions, an utterance of “arçεolo’gi” in “dʒɜ:mən mi:nz ɑ:ki’nlədʒi” should be ambiguous; but such an utterance is not ambiguous—at least, for most

³⁰ The supporter of the quotational theory may insist that what the example shows is that we should ask Tim to disambiguate. This is in sharp contrast with our intuitions about the difference between the case at stake and one in which Tim utters certain sounds that correspond both to “I’m writing a paper on intentionality” and “I’m writing a paper on intensionality”. We would regard his utterance as ambiguous.

³¹ I am assuming some form or another of disquotational principle, according to which from Tim’s assent to the uttered string of sounds we can jump to conclusions about his beliefs. The point can be restated by means of a different and unobjectionable disquotational principle conditionally linking assertion to utterance of a (string of sounds that counts as a) sentence. Regardless of whether one’s sincere assent to a (string of sounds that counts as a) sentence does or does not imply that one believes the proposition expressed, it certainly does imply that one asserts that proposition. So, we could say that in the described scenario, Tim asserted that (23a) or, analogously, that he asserted that (23b).

ordinary speakers, supporters of the quotational theory being exceptions. Hence, (23a) and (23b) are semantically equivalent—*ditto* for (22a) and (22b).³²

7. Conclusion

If taken at face-value, sentences of the form $\ulcorner e \text{ (in } L) \text{ means } x \urcorner$ raise a puzzle about the way $\ulcorner x \urcorner$ occurs in them (at least on one reading), as this expression appears to be neither regularly used nor regularly mentioned. This is the Problem of Special Occurrence. Quotational approaches attempt to show that there is no problem at all; rather, the illusion of such a problem is generated by failing to see that the predicate “means” (as it occurs in meaning ascriptions) is shorthand for “means the same as” or some other predicate that expresses a relation between linguistic expressions. Once we see “means” in the right way, we have an unproblematic answer to the alleged puzzle: $\ulcorner x \urcorner$ occurs in $\ulcorner e \text{ (in } L) \text{ means } x \urcorner$ exactly how $\ulcorner e \urcorner$ does. In this paper, I have considered two versions of the quotational theory and I have discussed some arguments against them. In particular, I have replied to Field’s responses to two arguments that revolve around translation and the understanding of foreign expressions. Then, I have provided two original arguments involving hyperintensionality and variant spellings. If these arguments are correct, this theory is wrong, and thus the Problem of Special Occurrence persists.

One might notice that the phenomenon shown by this problem is somehow opposite to the phenomenon known as mixed quotation, of which the following sentence contains a paradigmatic example: “Quine said that ‘quotation has a certain anomalous feature’”. Intuitively, what this sentence says is true if and only if Quine said (expressed the proposition) that quotation has an anomalous feature, and did so by uttering the words “has a certain anomalous fea-

³² With respect to my discussion in this section, an anonymous reviewer notices that it is crucial to make a distinction between two different issues. One is whether the words “archeology” and “archaeology” quote each other; the other one is whether one knows that they quote each other. The former is a problem of semantics of quotation, whereas the latter is an epistemic issue. According to the reviewer, here the relevant issue is the epistemic one, and it requires more formal and conceptual work on modality (as applied to quotation) to be implemented in the discussion.

However, I am not completely sure that the issue here is epistemic, although I acknowledge that my example involving Tim and Sam may give the impression that it is. In my view, the relevant point is that two meaning ascriptions that differ only in that one involves “archeology”, while the other one “archaeology” (in their complement position) do not differ semantically. However, if the reader thinks that the issue here is only epistemic, then they might construe the argument as one that shows that the quotational theory has unwelcome consequences as regards (what we might call) the epistemology of meaning, the issue of what one knows when one knows the meaning of a word. Intuitively, Tim and Sam know the very same thing about a certain German word; but this fact is denied by the quotational theory.

ture".³³ Hence, here we have some words that are simultaneously used and mentioned. Then, one may be wondering why there is no Problem of Special Occurrence for mixed quotation.

The answer is pretty straightforward: there is no such problem because we have, on the one side, theories of the semantics of regularly used expressions, and, on the other side, semantic accounts of quotation. A theory of mixed quotation, then, is an attempt to put the two things together, so to speak. By contrast, there are no theories that are possibly combined with one another to explain how expressions can meaningfully occur in sentences without being used nor mentioned. In other words: while we know how expressions occur in mixed quotations, we have only a negative description of how they occur when they figure as linguistic exemplars in meaning ascriptions.

Let me conclude by stressing that, as suggested in footnote 5, one way of dismissing the Problem of Special Occurrence is to reject standard accounts of quotation, according to which quotations always refer to linguistic expressions, signs, and the like. In light of my discussion of the quotational theory, one may conclude that we should embrace an account that makes quotations ambiguous or somehow context-sensitive.³⁴ On one such account, quotations can refer to a variety of things, including linguistic expressions, sounds, typographic forms, and—one may urge—also meanings. Therefore, one might advocate this kind of account and then take meaning ascriptions at face-value by arguing that the complement position is occupied by a quotation referring to a meaning (presumably, the meaning that the quoted expression actually has). Given that we were led to the quotational theory because of a problem concerning the mode of occurrence of the complement expression, one may say that my arguments against that theory suggest that other views of quotations need to be endorsed. Be that as it may, theories assuming that quotations can refer to a variety of things are worthy of independent scrutiny. Moreover, if we want to use such theories to address the Problem of Special Occurrence, we shall need a detailed account of how the right interpretation of the quotation in complement position is to be obtained (that is, the interpretation in which the quotation refers to a meaning, as opposed to an expression). These are topics for another discussion.

³³ Mixed quotation had not been much discussed prior to Davidson (1979), but it has recently taken centre stage in discussions of quotation. See De Brabanter (2010) for a survey of the issue from a linguist's point of view. Maier's (2017) article presents some of the most important formal semantic theories. For recent philosophical theories, see Cappelen & Lepore (1997), Recanati (2001), Gómez-Torrente (2005), and McCullagh (2017).

³⁴ See, for instance, Davidson (1979), Clark and Gerrig (1990), Saka (1998; 2006), García-Carpintero (2004; 2017; 2018), Gómez-Torrente (2017), Johnson (2018). Although all these theories agree that quotations can refer to a variety of things, they differ in various respects.

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