

Actualist Meaning Objectivism

Maria E. Reicher*

RWTH Aachen University

ABSTRACT. In this paper, I defend a strong version of actual intentionalism. First, I argue against meaning subjectivism, conventionalism and contextualism. Second, I discuss what I take to be the most important rival to actual intentionalism, namely hypothetical intentionalism. I argue that, although hypothetical intentionalism might be acceptable as a definition of the concept of utterance meaning, it does not provide an acceptable answer to the question of what *determines* an utterance's meaning. Third, I deal with the most serious objection against actual intentionalism, namely the failure objection. I argue that the failure objection can be overcome within a framework of full-blown actual intentionalism if one distinguishes between categorial and semantic intentions. Moreover, I show how this version of actual intentionalism accounts for the possibility of innovative metaphors and other implicatures. Finally, I demonstrate that actual intentionalism – thus construed – makes it possible to distinguish between communicative failures and the intentional breaking of conventions.

I. Introduction

The central concern of this paper is an ontological question: Do works of art have such a thing as an objective meaning with determinate boundaries, and if so, what is it that determines these boundaries? I wish to defend a view known as *actual intentionalism*, the view that, first, works of art do have objective meaning, and, second, ultimately the meaning of a work is determined by communicative intentions of the actual author. I understand the concept of communicative intentions along the lines of a Gricean analysis, which roughly states that the author intends to elicit

* Email: maria.reicher-marek@rwth-aachen.de

particular mental states and/or episodes in virtue of her utterance. I focus here on *literary* works of art, though much of what will be said is applicable to other kinds of works as well.

I shall defend actual intentionalism by ruling out its main rivals, and by providing a solution to what I take to be the most serious problem for actual intentionalism. The main rivals of actual intentionalism are meaning subjectivism, conventionalism, contextualism, and hypothetical intentionalism. I will start with meaning subjectivism, because meaning subjectivism contradicts actual intentionalism as well as conventionalism, contextualism, and hypothetical intentionalism. Thus, actual intentionalism as well as conventionalism, contextualism and hypothetical intentionalism share common ground, namely meaning objectivism. The debate between these positions just concerns the question of what *constitutes* a work's objective meaning, whereas meaning subjectivism *denies that there is* such a thing as objective meaning.

In what follows, I distinguish literary *works* from *texts*. A text, as I use the term here, is a sequence of words and/or sentences (more exactly a *type* of such a sequence). Words and sentences have *conventional meaning*. Conventional meaning, as I understand it, is the sort of meaning a reader is able to grasp solely in virtue of having mastered the language in question, i.e., in virtue of her lexicographical and grammatical knowledge.

A literary work contains a text as a constitutive part, but is usually not exhausted by the text. It is plain that in most (if not in all) cases, a work's meaning is not exhausted by the conventional meaning of the utterances it consists of. Metaphors, irony, and other implicatures transcend conventional meaning, which typically does not exceed the level of sentences. A work's meaning, however, is generated (in most, if not in all cases) to a considerable extent beyond the sentence level. Lexicographical and grammatical knowledge therefore is inadequate for fully understanding those levels of meaning that are generated through the interrelations of the sentences within a text.

2. Meaning Subjectivism

According to what I call meaning subjectivism, a work does not have objective meaning, i.e. any meaning that is independent from an interpret-

ing subject. Rather, a work *gains* its meaning only through the interpretive processes of particular readers at particular occasions. Here, “interpretive processes” are to be understood in a very wide sense, which not only includes conscious and explicit interpretive efforts, but all cognitive processes that could be subsumed under the label of “understanding” or “making sense of” the work in question.¹

Consequently, according to meaning subjectivism, the uninterpreted work is a meaningless something. Under appropriate circumstances (i.e. when a reader tries to make sense of it), however, it may elicit meanings. Different readers (or even the same reader on different occasions) are likely to arrive at distinct meanings. One and the same work may therefore elicit a countless number of distinct meanings, none of which, however, can claim a particular status as *the proper meaning* of the work. Accordingly, statements about a work’s meaning are not true or false in any usual sense. A true or objectively right interpretation does not exist.

Meaning subjectivism, thus construed, is not, in itself, an inconsistent view. It is, however, in conflict with well-entrenched conceptions and practices. It stands at odds with standard conceptions of works, texts, meanings, and authors, as well as with the actual practice of interpretation, literary criticism, translation, and copyright law.

Here is what I take to be the standard conceptions:

1. Works and texts are not just sequences of meaningless patterns, but also (and perhaps primarily) sequences of ideas and thoughts, which are the meanings of the patterns in question. Thus, meanings are not simply attached to works and texts under appropriate circumstances. Meanings are rather *constitutive parts* of works and texts.
2. Works and texts are *created*. The creators of works and texts are the *authors*.
3. The creation of works and texts essentially involves intentional activities. Consider, for instance, an author who creates a text by putting words on screen: Putting words on screen in the relevant sense is more than playing a mere causal role in a process at the end

¹ See, e.g., Fish 1980, Shusterman 1992.

of which something that looks like words and sentences appears on a screen. Putting words on screen involves the *intention* to put words on screen. Something (for example, a computer program or a hailstorm) may *cause* something that looks exactly like words on a screen, without *having put* words on the screen. This is because computer programs and hailstorms do not have the required intentions.

The intention to produce words and sentences consists in the intention to produce (tokens of) patterns that have a conventional meaning within a language. The intention to utter *particular* words and sentences consists in the intention to produce (tokens of) patterns that have a *particular* conventional meaning within a language.

Meaning subjectivism is inconsistent with either of these conceptions of works, texts, and authorship. It is also inconsistent with widespread practices of interpretation, literary criticism, translation, and copyright law.

Meaning subjectivism is thus a highly revisionary view. Of course, the standard conceptions might be on the wrong track, but the burden of argument is on the side of the revisionist. Why should we jettison well-entrenched conceptions of the central concepts of literary theory, when these conceptions are not only conceptually consistent, but also consistent with deeply rooted and almost universal practices of our intercourse with literature?

In what follows, I discuss what I take to be the most important arguments in favor of meaning subjectivism.²

1. Proponents of meaning subjectivism sometimes claim that it is simply not true that the search for objective meaning is a standard practice in the interpretation of literary texts. Rather, it is argued, when readers interpret literature, they are interested in what a text *could* mean or perhaps what it means *to them*.

Reply: This is an empirical hypothesis that can be falsified by investigating the actual practices of literary criticism. To put it very carefully: I grant that the search for subjective and possible meanings is *sometimes* the

² For the following, see my "Objective Interpretation and the Metaphysics of Meaning" (Reicher 2010).

aim of interpretation in literature; but the search for objective meaning is *at least as widespread*.

2. Proponents of meaning subjectivism argue that meaning objectivism ignores the fact that reading can be a creative process in its own right.

Reply: Reading can indeed be a creative process, but that does not imply that objective meaning does not exist. One may grant a creative role to the reader without abolishing the author.

In many cases, the reader's creativity, her subjective meaning attributions, serve the overall goal of discovering what the text really means. In other cases, the reader is creative in the sense that she uses her imagination to fill in the gaps left by the author.

3. Meaning subjectivists argue that meaning objectivism cannot account for the fact that there is often (if not always) more than one correct interpretation of a work.

Reply: Of course, there may be more than one correct interpretation of a work. Various correct interpretations of the same work may bring to light distinct parts or aspects of the work's meaning. Meaning objectivism does not rule out this possibility. Meaning objectivism only contends that there may be correct *as well as* incorrect interpretations.

4. One of the most popular objections to meaning objectivism is that it ignores the fact that it is often difficult (if not impossible) to know for certain what the objective meaning of a given text is.

Reply: While it may be difficult to explore the nature of a certain piece of reality, this, of course, does not entail the non-existence of this piece of reality. Meaning objectivism does not imply that infallible knowledge can be obtained about objective meanings.

To sum up: There are no cogent arguments against meaning objectivism. Therefore, there is no reason to give up the standard conceptions of works, texts, and authorship and to reject standard practices as nonsensical in favor of meaning subjectivism.

3. Conventionalism and Contextualism

Conventionalism is the view that the respective meaning of a work or text depends solely on linguistic conventions. In other words, according to conventionalism, a work's meaning is identical to the conventional meanings of the words and word-sequences that constitute the work. According to conventionalism, interpretative questions have to be settled by taking recourse to lexicography and grammar only.

Conventionalism, at least in its pure form, is an untenable view for at least two reasons. First, it leaves open how it is determined *what conventions* are in play and, moreover, *whether any conventions* are in play in the first place. Consider, for instance, one of Monroe Beardsley's famous examples: the verse "He raised his plastic arm." According to one linguistic convention, "plastic" is synonymous with "made of a synthetic material", according to another it is synonymous with "shapely". Conventionalism alone does not answer the question of whether the first or the second of these two conventions is at play on a given occasion or indeed neither.

Moreover, intuitively, it seems possible that there are tokens of patterns that look like tokens of the sentence "He raised his plastic arm" and yet have no conventional meaning at all. A pattern of this sort might be realized, for instance, by sheer coincidence, on the sandy ground of the deep sea or on some uninhabited planet that will never be discovered by any conscious being. It is at least debatable whether the given patterns in such cases have *any* conventional meaning at all. If they do not, the question arises as to the circumstances under which tokens of patterns *would* have conventional meaning. Conventionalism by itself does not provide an answer to this question.

Second, as stated above, the meaning of a literary work usually comprises much more than the conventional meaning of its text. Conventionalism can hardly do justice to metaphorical meaning, irony and other implicatures (including those that serve to disambiguate utterances like "My car ran out of gas"). To claim that these elements do not belong to a work's meaning would deprive literary works of some of their most distinctive features – those features, namely, which are critical for our appreciation of the works.

Consider, for instance, the debate about the meaning of the last line of

Goethe's famous poem "Wanderer's Nightsong": "Just wait, soon you will rest, too." Linguistic conventions do not determine to whom the "you" in this line refers. (Is it the author or a fictitious speaker? Is it some other particular addressee or simply any listener?) They do not explain whether this line is to be understood as a promise or consolation or, conversely, a threatening prediction. Finally, and above all, they do not determine whether the "rest" is to be understood as the tired wanderer's nightly sleep, death or both.

According to contextualism, the meaning of an utterance is determined by the context of the utterance. Usually, contextualism and conventionalism go hand in hand. One might argue that it is the *context of the utterance* – instead of the author's intentions – that determines, first, whether a particular pattern has conventional meaning in the first place, and, second, *which* linguistic conventions are at play. Furthermore, it could be argued that those aspects of meaning that are not determined by linguistic conventions are determined by the context. In other words, according to contextualism, the context fills in the gaps left by conventionalism.³

In my view, however, this account puts the cart before the horse. In fact, the context of utterance plays an *epistemological* role, since it gives us clues to the author's intentions. Thus, it often helps us *to discover* the meaning of an utterance – but it does not *determine* the utterance's meaning.

To illustrate this point, it may help to imagine the lettering "PERA" on a display window. "Pera" is the Italian word for "pear", but it is also the name of a district in the town of Istanbul, the transliteration of an ancient Greek word meaning "wallet" or "leathern sack, in which travellers and shepherds carried their provisions", the name of a village in Cyprus and the name of a botanic species. We now might suppose that the window in question is the window of a restaurant in a German town, the dishes on the restaurant's menu are mainly Turkish, and the restaurant's walls are decorated with photographs from a large city located at the shore of a large body of water. These contextual facts might be taken as evidence for the hypothesis that the letters on the window denote the district in Is-

³ For conventionalist arguments see Nathan 1992 (though Nathan in the final resort opts for hypothetical intentionalism).

tambul, not the fruit, the leather sack, the Cypriote village or the botanic species. Thus, one might say that the context helps to disambiguate the writing. But it does so because it provides us with evidence of the restaurant owner's intentions.

4. Hypothetical Intentionalism

Hypothetical intentionalists distinguish between *utterer's meaning* and *utterance meaning*, identifying a work's meaning with the latter. William Tolhurst, one of the leading advocates of hypothetical intentionalism, explicates utterance meaning as follows:

[U]tterance meaning is best understood as the intention which a member of the intended audience would be most justified in attributing to the author based on the knowledge and attitudes which he possesses in virtue of being a member of the intended audience. Thus utterance meaning is to be construed as that hypothesis of utterer's meaning which is most justified on the basis of those beliefs and attitudes which one possesses qua intended hearer or intended reader. (Tolhurst 1979, 11)

Different versions of hypothetical intentionalism are distinguished by their understanding of the relevant audience. In Tolhurst's version, the relevant audience is determined by the actual author's intentions. Tolhurst's hypothetical intentionalism thus still incorporates a significant element of actual intentionalism. For Tolhurst, the meaning of an utterance is just the meaning that a member of the intended audience would be most justified to believe to be the meaning intended by the author.

In contrast to Tolhurst, Jerrold Levinson, another prominent advocate of hypothetical intentionalism, does not leave it to the author to determine the relevant audience. Rather, he construes the relevant audience – independently of the author's intentions – as an *ideal audience*. Utterance meaning is thus defined as the meaning that a member of the ideal audience would be most justified believing to be the author's actually intended meaning.

It should be noted that the explications of the notion of the relevant audience given so far do not determine which beliefs and attitudes a member of this audience is supposed to have. Both the conception of the relevant audience as the *actually intended audience* and that of the relevant audience as an *ideal audience* are compatible with a wide range of requirements. In principle, the constraints on the relevant audience in both versions might range from merely having mastered English and having basic knowledge about the world to having a thorough acquaintance with other works of the author and the author's contemporaries, or familiarity with philosophical, sociological, and political currents that might have influenced the author, or a theoretical background and scientific knowledge of all sorts, and, indeed, even knowledge that the actual author could not possess.

Advocates of hypothetical intentionalism tend to be vague about what constraints are in place. The required background knowledge falls somewhere between a mere mastering of the work's language and virtual omniscience. It is clear, however, that the resources of the intended and/or ideal audience must be publicly accessible. That is, whatever beliefs and attitudes may be required by a member of the relevant audience, it cannot be required that she has direct acquaintance with the author's actual intentions.

It seems reasonable to assume that hypothetical intentionalism coincides with actual intentionalism in many – if not in most – cases. For if the author has done a reasonably good job and if a member of the intended audience develops an interpretive hypothesis on the basis of all the relevant resources that are available to her, the hypothesis should be true.

However, hypothetical and actual intentionalism fall apart when the author does not succeed in communicating her actual intentions to the relevant audience. According to actual intentionalism, the work in these unfortunate cases means what the author intended it to mean (no matter of how the audience understands it), whereas, according to hypothetical intentionalism, the work in fact means what the intended and/or ideal readers believe it to mean (no matter what the author intended).

At first glance, hypothetical intentionalism is intuitively attractive because it combines two features: On the one hand, it seems to retain a close connection to the author's actual intentions (which fits well with our stan-

dard conception of works, texts, and authorship, and with standard practices of interpretation and literary criticism). On the other hand, in those cases where communication between author and audience fails because of a mistake by the author, hypothetical intentionalism seems to yield intuitively correct results, whereas actual intentionalism seems to yield intuitively incorrect results.

It seems absurd to claim that a text means whatever its author intended it to mean – no matter what she may have actually put to screen. Suppose an author intends to write a text in standard English and formulates the following sentence: “In the backyard, a pear tree was blooming.” Her communicative intention, however, was to express that a *plum* tree was blooming in the backyard. Suppose, furthermore, that the author does not indicate anywhere in the text that she actually meant “plum tree” instead of “pear tree”. In this case, actual intentionalism seems to be bound to argue – quite dubiously – that “pear tree” means “plum tree”. By contrast, according to hypothetical intentionalism, “pear tree” in this instance means “pear tree”. Thus, what the author actually said is that there was a blooming pear tree in the backyard – even though she intended to say something else. Intuitively, the hypothetical intentionalist interpretation of this case looks correct.

Nevertheless, I want to argue in the remainder of this paper that actual intentionalism is superior to hypothetical intentionalism. First, I will raise an objection to hypothetical intentionalism. I will then defend actual intentionalism against what I take to be the most serious objection to it, namely that it is unable to plausibly explain those cases where a text does not mean what the author intended it to mean.

Reconstruction and Critique of Hypothetical Intentionalism

In what follows I will argue that hypothetical intentionalism does not provide a feasible answer to the question of what determines utterance meaning. I will show this by reconstructing hypothetical intentionalism on the basis of its formulation by William Tolhurst. I propose, to begin with, the following reconstruction of hypothetical intentionalism:

(HI) An utterance *u* means *m* if, and only if: If there is a reader *r* who is a member of the relevant audience, then *r* is justified in believing that the author of *u* intended *u* to mean *m*.

Two explanatory remarks: First, for the sake of brevity, I will speak of “the relevant audience” instead of “the intended and/or ideal audience”. I wish to leave it open here whether the relevant audience is determined by actual authorial intentions or by some standards that are independent from the author. Second, I understand the locution “is justified to believe *p*” in the sense of “is more justified to believe *p* than to believe non-*p*”.

(HI) looks plausible from the outset. Although a lot surely hinges on how the relevant audience is construed exactly, I do not wish to question the truth of (HI) here. At least for the sake of argument, I grant that, if an utterance *u* means *m*, then, if there is a reader with the appropriate beliefs and attitudes, she is justified in believing that the author of *u* intended *u* to mean *m*. I also grant that, if a reader with the appropriate beliefs and attitudes is justified in believing that the author of *u* intended *u* to mean *m*, then *u* indeed means *m*.

(HI) may therefore go through as a materially adequate explication of the concept of utterance meaning (that is, it picks out the right extension). Whether (HI) is also an *illuminating* explication, is a different question which I do not wish to enter here. It should be remembered, however, that the point of departure for this paper was not how the concept of utterance meaning is to be *defined*, but the question of what *determines* an utterance’s meaning (assuming that there is such a thing as a determinate meaning of an utterance). Hypothetical intentionalism does not provide a convincing answer to this question, however.

Determination, as I understand it, is a metaphysical *grounding relation*. To say that the meaning of an utterance is determined by actual authorial intentions is to say that an utterance *u* means *m* *because* the author actually intended such-and-such. An utterance has its meaning *in virtue of* the author’s actual intentions. In other words, according to actual intentionalism, the author’s actual intentions are the metaphysical ground of an utterance’s meaning.

According to hypothetical intentionalism, however, the metaphysical ground of an utterance’s meaning is supposed to be hypothetical inten-

tions. In other words, according to hypothetical intentionalism, an utterance *u* means *m*, because of the conditional fact that, if there is a reader *r* who is a member of the relevant audience, then *r* is justified in believing that the author of *u* intended *u* to mean *m*.

Yet it seems plain that this conditional fact cannot be the metaphysical ground of the (unconditional) fact that an utterance *u* means *m*. It is not the case that *u* means *m* because a reader with particular beliefs and attitudes (if there is such a person) is justified in believing that the author of *u* intended *u* to mean *m*. Rather, it seems to be the other way around: Because *u* means *m*, a reader with appropriate beliefs and attitudes would be justified in believing that the author of *u* intended *u* to mean *m*.

Consider the following analogy: It is not the case that a chemical substance *s* has the composition XYZ because an ideal scientist would be justified in believing that *s* has the composition XYZ. It is, in fact, the other way around: Because *s* has the composition XYZ, an ideal scientist would be justified in believing that *s* has the composition XYZ.

To sum up: Even if one grants that hypothetical intentionalism provides a materially adequate definition of the concept of utterance meaning, it does not provide a plausible answer to the question of what determines an utterance's meaning.

5. A Plea for Actual Intentionalism

In contrast to meaning subjectivism, actual intentionalism fits very well with the standard conceptions of works, texts, meanings, and authors, as well as with the actual practice of interpretation, literary criticism, translation, and copyright law. In contrast to conventionalism, it does justice to metaphorical meaning, irony and other implicatures. In contrast to contextualism, it does justice to the difference between matters of ontology and matters of epistemology. In contrast to hypothetical intentionalism, it provides a plausible answer to the question of what determines an utterance's meaning.

So why is actual intentionalism not universally accepted? There are a number of reasons, some of which – as has been shown at length elsewhere – are based on misunderstandings that can be overcome quite easily. Rather than simply rehearsing the discussion of these “easy objections”

here, I will focus on what I take to be the most serious objection against actual intentionalism: the “failure objection”.

The Failure Objection

The most serious objection against actual intentionalism is that actual intentionalism does not have an adequate explanation for communicative failures. More precisely, actual intentionalism seems to blur the distinction between what an author *intended to say* and what she actually *said* (i.e. what her utterance actually *means*).⁴ I call this the *failure objection*. While the pear and plum tree case mentioned above is a useful illustration, it is possible to think of a more extreme example. Imagine a person who, in a state of extreme delusion, intends to write a sequence of grammatical English sentences with a particular meaning, but in fact only writes down a sequence of arbitrary letters and punctuation marks (and realizes her failure only the day after, when the effect of the drug has worn off or the psychotic attack has subsided). Proponents of actual intentionalism seem to be bound to say that the sequence of arbitrary letters and punctuations marks is a (meaningful) text, because the temporally deluded person intended to communicate something with it. This seems to be just wrong.

As I see it, the failure objection is the most serious challenge to actual intentionalism. As I have already indicated, in many (if not most) cases, what an author intended to say and what she actually said will coincide due to her proficiency and effort. Nevertheless, the author may not succeed, i.e., she may not be able to say what she intended to say. If actual intentionalism cannot account for this fact, it should be abandoned.

A solution seems to present itself in which this problem is overcome through some sort of watering down of actual intentionalism. One might say, for instance, that the author’s power to confer a particular meaning *m* to a pattern by intending the pattern to mean *m* is restricted by linguistic conventions. According to this proposal, the author’s intentions become effective only if they are compatible with the linguistic conventions that are in force.⁵ At first glance, this move looks appealing. It also seems to

⁴ See Levinson 1992, 236; Dickie & Wilson 1995.

⁵ For versions of moderate actual intentionalism see, for instance, Carroll 2000 and Stecker 2006.

provide a solution to the above objection: Since they are bound by linguistic conventions, authors do not have unrestricted power to give any meaning *m* to a given pattern just by intending to express *m* by means of this pattern. Therefore, it may happen that an author does not say what she intended to say.

However, such watered-down versions of actual intentionalism generate problems of their own: The view that an author's power to confer meaning is restricted by conventions entails that metaphorical speech is hardly possible, since fresh and inventive metaphors owe their existence precisely to a breaking up of existing conventions.⁶

Moreover, and more radically, there is what I call the "Bichsel problem", named after the Swiss author Peter Bichsel. Bichsel is the author of a story entitled "A Table Is a Table", in which a man decides to re-name the things in his environment:

He called the bed picture.
 He called the table carpet.
 He called the chair alarm clock.
 He called the newspaper bed.
 He called the mirror chair.
 He called the alarm clock photograph album.
 He called the wardrobe newspaper.
 He called the carpet wardrobe.
 He called the picture table.
 And he called the photograph album mirror.

So:

In the morning the old man would lie in picture for a long time, at nine the photograph album rang, the man got up and stood on the wardrobe, so his feet wouldn't feel cold, then he took his clothes out of the newspaper, dressed, looked into the chair on the wall, then sat down on the alarm clock at the carpet and turned the pages of the mirror until he found his mother's table. (Bichsel 1971, 18)

Just what is Bichsel saying when he produces the utterance "the old man would lie in picture for a long time, at nine the photograph album rang ..."?

⁶ Nathan argues that one could construe the conventions more generously, such that they leave room for ironic and metaphorical speech. However, this entails the danger of over-stretching the notion of conventions. (See Nathan 1992.)

It seems clear that Bichsel is saying that the old man would lie in *bed* for a long time and that his *alarm clock* rang, and so on. But according to the conventions of English, “picture” means picture and not bed, and “photograph album” means photograph album and not alarm clock, and so on. Thus, a proponent of the watered-down version of actual intentionalism would appear obliged to maintain that Bichsel is saying that the old man’s *photograph album* rang.

To sum up the problem: It seems that actual intentionalism is not able to account for the fact that there might be a difference between what an author intended to say and what she actually said when the author unintentionally violates linguistic conventions. The obvious solution to this problem seems to be to postulate that the author’s power to confer meaning to her utterances by means of her intentions is restricted by linguistic intentions. However, this watered-down actual intentionalism faces the problem that it cannot account for the fact that authors are able to break with linguistic intentions intentionally, for instance by creating fresh metaphors, or, more radically, by creating a whole secret language, as in Bichsel’s case.

A Solution to the Failure Objection

The solution I am going to propose rests on a distinction of two sorts of intentions, both of which are involved in the overall communicative intention to bring about a particular mental state or episode in virtue of a particular utterance. I call these two sorts of intentions *compliance intentions* and *semantic intentions*, respectively.

On the most basic level, authors (usually) intend in the first place that the pattern token they produce be a *text*, i.e. a sequence of words and sentences. This entails the intention that the pattern token will comply (to a certain extent at least) with orthographical, grammatical, and semantic rules. Such rules, however, are always bound to a particular language. Accordingly, authors (usually) intend to make use of a particular language L. Therefore, authors usually intend (to a certain extent at least) to follow the rules of L, including the semantic rules. This is the compliance intention.

A semantic intention, by contrast, is the intention to bring about a particular mental episode (say, an image of a blooming plum tree in a backyard) by means of an utterance.

I propose the following version of actual intentionalism:

- (AI) An utterance *u* means *m* if, and only if: The author of *u* intended *u* to mean *m* (semantic intention) and *u* complies with the semantic rules the author intended to follow (compliance intention).

The solution to the failure problem now runs as follows: If the author utters “There was a pear tree” and means that there was a plum tree, her utterance does not mean that there was a plum tree, because the utterance does not comply with the semantic rules the author intended to follow (given that the author intended to follow the rules of standard English). Similarly, in the delusion case, the sequence of arbitrary letters and punctuation marks does not mean what the author intended it to mean, because the author intended to comply with the rules of standard English and she failed to do so.

However, in contrast to the watered-down actual intentionalism discussed above, this solution does justice to the fact that authors can deliberately break up the semantic rules of a given language. In the case of fresh metaphors, as well as in the case of the man in Bichsel’s story, authors/speakers deliberately abandon existing semantic conventions and substitute them with their own semantic rules.

Thus, the account that I propose here allows for a distinction between mistakes and failures, on the one hand, and conscious breaks with existing conventions, on the other. Accordingly, if the author consciously decides to alter the semantic rules of English such that “pear” means “plum”, then the sentence “A pear tree was blooming” actually means “A plum tree was blooming” (though to understand the sentence correctly, it is necessary to realize that it is no longer an English sentence). Similarly, an apparently arbitrary sequence of letters and punctuation marks may indeed be a text if the author has made use of a secret code – even if the author herself is the only person who knows that code. These results look intuitively plausible to me.

Authors are free to break up conventions at any level. In extreme forms of *sound poetry* and *shape poetry*, they consciously refuse to produce sequences of words and sentences. This has been the most radical break with linguistic and literary conventions. In less extreme cases, authors

consciously break orthographical and/or grammatical and/or semantic conventions, while sticking to the overall intention to produce a text. Authors may also consciously break with certain genre conventions while sticking to the overall intention to produce a work that belongs to a particular genre.

Authors may accept existing conventions without any revisions, partly follow and slightly modify them, or reject them completely. This is what makes fresh metaphors and other inventive implicatures possible. An author's power to confer a particular meaning to a particular pattern is not restricted by any conventions – apart from those that the author herself intends to follow.

A Possible Objection

At the outset, I claimed that it is the purpose of this paper to defend actual intentionalism. But is the view I have proposed really intentionalism in the first place? Is it not rather a form of conventionalism?

My answer to this is the following: Obviously, there is an element of conventionalism involved. Thus, if conventionalism is just the view that conventions play a role in determining the meanings of utterances, one might indeed classify my view as a form of conventionalism. On the other hand, I have characterized actual intentionalism as the view that the meaning of an utterance is ultimately determined by the communicative intentions of the actual author. As I see it, my view is still in accordance with this characterization, since I believe that communicative intentions involve not only semantic intentions but also compliance intentions. At any rate, the author's actual intentions still wear the trousers.⁷

⁷ This is a substantially revised version of the paper I presented at the ESA conference in Prague in June 2013. A still older version has been discussed at the Philosophy Department at the RWTH Aachen University. I am indebted to numerous people for helpful comments, especially to Daniel Dohrn, Ludger Jansen, Nicola Mößner, and Thomas Petraschka (see Petraschka 2013), but also to several members of the audience of my presentation in Prague.

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