

“Niche Construction and the Politics of Language”

Joseph Rouse

ABSTRACT

Two recent practice-based conceptions of linguistic communication challenge the dominant “content-delivery” models. Beaver and Stanley’s *The Politics of Language* (2023) and Rouse’s *Social Practices as Biological Niche Construction* (2023) have different aims. Beaver and Stanley develop an account of linguistic meaning as affective and politically engaged. Rouse starts from evolutionary accounts of human ways of life to situate language within a more general, naturalistic account of social practices as forms of biological niche construction. Despite their different orientations, the two books can work together as a more compelling challenge to standard accounts of linguistic meaning and communication.

Keywords: language, communication, practices, semantic content, slur words, power

1 Introduction

The dominant accounts of language and linguistic communication in the anglophone philosophical tradition draw on what David Beaver and Jason Stanley (2023, 27-30) describe as a “content-delivery model.” This model is developed somewhat differently in representationalist and inferentialist accounts of semantic content. Both approaches complicate that model by recognizing that semantic content is always contextually framed and implemented in actual speech. Each nevertheless retains a core conception of semantic content as a property of propositions or occasioned sentences and their sub-sentential constituents, and of

conceptual understanding as cognitive grasp of that content.

Two systematic developments of practice-based accounts of language have recently challenged this widely shared model of language and communication. Beaver and Stanley's *The Politics of Language* starts from the analysis of slurs and hate speech to develop a more encompassing treatment of pervasive affective and political dimensions of language use. My ecological-developmental account of discursive practices is developed in two books. *Articulating the World* (2015) draws on scientific and philosophical analyses of the evolution of language to develop a radically naturalistic account of human conceptual capacities, including the capacities exercised in scientific practices. *Social Practices as Biological Niche Construction* (2023) then expands this analysis into a conception of social practices more generally, including languages, as evolved forms of biological niche construction that reconfigure people's developmental environments.

Both my account and Beaver and Stanley's emphasize the public, situated, and interactive character of language and other expressive practices in human ways of life. Speaking and listening/hearing are things people do in the world. Those actions are both enabled and shaped by the prior and ongoing discursive articulation of social worlds or biological environments which speakers and listeners inhabit with one another. Each account thereby integrates the causal

involvements of utterances with their normative significance as meaningful. Both accounts also emphasize that language use does not stand alone but is caught up amid the many other practices people engage in. As a result, both projects fundamentally relocate the philosophical analysis of linguistic meaning as belonging to embodied social life. Linguistic meaning is not something that speakers grasp and deploy cognitively. It is instead a complex pattern of material entanglements in the world. Individual speakers take up and contribute to that pattern perceptually, practically, and affectively, while nevertheless having only a limited, perspectival grip on the phenomenon as a whole.

The two projects differ in their primary aims and starting points. Beaver and Stanley highlight the pervasive political significance of linguistic communication, and their analysis begins with slurs and dog whistles. My two books develop a revisionist naturalism that shows how to understand language, social life, and our diverse forms of normative accountability as biological phenomena. We also develop our proposals by reconstructing different approaches to understanding semantic content. Beaver and Stanley situate their account against the background of compositional formal semantics from Frege to Montague. My approach proposes instead to turn the inferentialism of Brandom (1994) and Sellars (2007) “inside out”. We each nevertheless preserve some key aspects of these two

standard analyses of semantic content within our more encompassing accounts of linguistic practices.

These two projects are mutually complementary. Together, they provide a more compelling and far-reaching challenge to familiar conceptions of language than either does separately. Considering the two accounts together brings out how substantially they revise standard approaches to the philosophy of mind and language. Both projects are too complex and far-reaching to admit of easy summary. I will only sketch some central components of each approach that illustrate how they can complement and extend one another's analyses. The paper's first two parts introduce those features of each account respectively. The final part highlights how they work together toward a more substantial philosophical re-orientation.

2 Beaver and Stanley on the Politics of Language

Beaver and Stanley argue that the political significance of language pervades communication, from developing group cohesion, ideological reinforcement, and effective persuasion to the use of slurs and other expressions reinforcing oppressive stereotypes or promoting genocide. They emphasize that speech can be directly harmful and argue for a more nuanced approach to political regulation of speech that promotes political equality rather than unrestricted liberty. My concern,

however, is their underlying model of linguistic practice rather than the important political project it serves. My presentation of this model is focused on three sets of interconnected concepts that display their expansive conception of linguistic meaning.

I begin with Beaver and Stanley's linked conceptions of resonance, attunement, and harmony. Resonance is their analogue to semantic content in standard approaches, with attunements in turn paralleling cognitive attitudes such as belief. Resonance and attunement have a much greater range than utterances, however. As they note, "anything can have resonances of any sort. A bowl of soup can carry resonances of comfort, and a boot can have resonances of socks and feet, of a quaint little cobbler's shop, and simultaneously of oppression and authoritarianism; Orwell's 'boot stomping on a human face—forever' both adapted and modified the resonances of boots— forever" (26).

"Resonance" initially emphasizes associative connections between things, and hence is tied to those for whom those connections hold, or as they put it, to those *attuned* to those resonances. Resonance is a scalar notion determined by frequencies of co-occurrence. As their own over-simplification, Beaver and Stanley "define what it means for an action of a given type to have associative resonances with a feature of context in terms of the propensity of the feature to co-occur with a

token of the action”(43). They similarly characterize individuals’ attunements to something as the extent to which their “state and behavior predictably evolve in accordance with its presence in the agent’s context” (70). Attunements thus also differ in degree according to those predictive correlations. As predictive associations, attunements are also independent of whether people are conscious of their attunements and even of whether they can represent them explicitly. We can be attuned to features or relations for which we have no words or awareness.

Beaver and Stanley are most concerned with how people are individually or collectively attuned to social practices, however. Attunement to practices involves how people’s states and behaviors predictably evolve in accord with the presence of the practice in the agent’s context. The presence of a practice can be understood either as the proximity of the practice as a type, or the occasioning of a token performance instantiating the practice. Beaver and Stanley take practices in turn to cluster together around *communities* of people who share collective cognitive and perceptual attunements to those practices. Beaver and Stanley take their account of practices from others, notably Bourdieu (1972), Jaeggi (2018), and Haslanger (2018), and I will say more about their understanding of practices in the concluding section. Overall, however, the shift from content and cognition to resonances and attunements concerns how what people say and do clumps into patterns of

co-occurrence among settings, performances, and communities of participants.

That clumping arises from people's affective, habitual, and normative responses to those patterns in their social worlds.

The third concept in this group, harmony, concerns how these clumpings are sustained and changed. Where resonance is an expansive replacement for semantic content and attunement expands cognitive attitudes, harmony similarly expands on the traditional role assigned to logical consistency. Beaver and Stanley draw on psychological studies of cognitive dissonance and non-deliberative uptake to propose a hybrid model of attunement change, in which “how our cognitive attunements change inherently involve noncognitive attunements. ... Attunement change is based on a more holistic property of systems of attunements, so that ... the emotive and dispositional tail has the potential to wag the epistemic dog” (136). The underlying point is that people live and act from a background of conceptualizations and attunements into which new situations, encounters, and tasks must be assimilated more or less harmoniously. That ongoing process of adjustment includes both deliberative and non-deliberative responses.

Much human behavior and adjustment of attunements aims to diminish dissonance, enabling smoother response to circumstances and confirmatory reinforcement of those attunements. Dissonance can be reduced by rejecting or

eliminating attunements that conflict with one's dominant orientation, but also by fragmentation that temporarily suppresses or deactivates some attunements and brings others forward. Such fragmentation can be oriented by context, shorter- or longer- term attunements, and individual or collective attunements. As Beaver and Stanley put it, "fragmentation derives from the fact that attunements do not each exist in a vacuum, but rather are associated or dissociated with each other in the sense that activation of one attunement tends to lead to activation or deactivation of others to varying degrees" (139). Beaver and Stanley emphasize the multi-dimensional complexity of how attunements can be harmonized or dissonant. Harmony or dissonance can occur within sets of individual attunements or of those largely shared with groups with whom people identify; with their narrative organization into intelligible and explanatory patterns; amid the contextual priming of some resonances and attunements to them; through the mutual reinforcement of collective behaviors and attunements in groups; and through relations among shorter- and longer-term processes of harmonization.

Presupposition and accommodation are paired as a second important group of concepts in Beaver and Stanley's account. Communicative performances always involve presuppositions. Classic examples of presuppositions include the referents of words used; the embedding of expressions within negations, conditionals,

quotations, questions, or imperatives; and the many ways word choice frames and enables people's response to what is expressed. Communicative presuppositions are important because they encourage audiences' accommodation to what is presupposed as a prominent form of harmonization. Often one more readily accommodates what is presupposed than what is overtly communicated, which makes presupposition and accommodation especially important for understanding persuasion and formation of ideologies.

Beaver and Stanley expand the significance of presupposition and accommodation by moving beyond standard accounts of the logic of presupposition. Earlier philosophical discussions attended to propositional presuppositions about the world or what was previously said, which smooth communication on particular occasions. Beaver and Stanley first emphasize a much wider range of presupposed resonances to which listeners may be attuned. They also attend to how acts may presuppose whole practices of various kinds, from the language spoken to the more specific contexts in which communication takes place. Above all, as they note,

Once we move to considering presupposed norms and practices, and once we allow that accommodation involves not only modification of beliefs, but also modification of behaviors and dispositions, and once we also consider

the motivations for accommodation in terms of joint behavior at the level of groups of arbitrary size, accommodation becomes something more remarkable. It becomes an engine of societal change. (245)

Collective accommodation is not always convergent. Sometimes people differentiate their dispositions and behaviors from one group to enhance harmonization with others. Beaver and Stanley also treat presupposition and accommodation as scalar rather than categorical concepts, which allows for more fine-grained and differentiated analysis of accommodation in groups and over time. Small accommodations undertaken repeatedly over time can lead to major reorientations of practices and collective attunements, as “when executives describe people solely in terms of their work efficiency and their interlocutors increasingly treat those too old or infirm to work with disdain [with a time course] measured not in dozens of milliseconds but in dozens of PowerPoint presentations” (260).

Beaver and Stanley’s expansive account of linguistic communication undermines familiar idealizations in philosophical thinking about language, most notably those of neutrality and transparency. These challenges to idealizations in philosophy of language are my third and final expository focus. To idealize neutrality is to understand language and communication as ideally freed from

differences in perspective and social location. Such idealizations could serve both theoretical purposes, by giving analytical centrality to a neutral core of perspective-free discourse, and practical goals, as when discursive neutrality is taken as a democratic ideal. Beaver and Stanley reject both idealizations of neutrality. They argue that perspectival differences are ubiquitous, stemming not only from indexicality, but also from the narratives, stereotypes, evaluative orientations, prejudices, identities, and other collective attunements within which communication is situated. Above all, communication always takes place within a nexus of practices and contributes to those practices. Beaver and Stanley conclude that, “On our model, there is no sense to be made, as long as one is using words in a living language, of the possibility of reasoning free of a set of background practices,” a point further enhanced by “the ubiquity of non-assertive speech acts in ordinary discourse as well as political discourse” (320). They instead focus on jokes, chants, threats, greetings, slurs, prayers, and the many other ways in which people engage one another discursively.

Beaver and Stanley nevertheless insist that to recognize the pervasive role of perspective, ideology, and collective attunement is not to deny the possibility or importance of truth. People can be attuned to physical features of the world as well as to practices and social classifications, and to the world as it is rather than how it

is taken to be. In this respect, discourse parallels perception, which can be attuned to the same things despite variation in perceptual capacities and orientations. They conclude that recognition of the possibility of getting things right and the broader adaptive role of language in evolution is nevertheless consistent with recognizing the ineliminability of social perspective and with developing a theory of meaning for which truth is not central.

Beaver and Stanley also challenge the idealization of transparent communicative intentions, which they dub “straight talk.” Theorists from Paul Grice to David Lewis make shared intentions central to understanding communication. Those theorists presume that communication is ideally cooperative, in the strong game-theoretic sense in which agents act in ways that enhance the probability that they and others will each reach their goals. In contrast to this idealization, Beaver and Stanley highlight the ubiquity of “hustle,” utterances and exchanges in which speakers do not communicate transparently. Hustle can be intended or incidental, conscious or not, and may vary in whether it is harmful or congenial to those involved. Straight talk is not an incoherent ideal, unlike perspectival neutrality, but Beaver and Stanley argue that it is a misplaced idealization for the theory of meaning. They conclude that,

Since mortal agents are incapable of having full access to the context and

assumptions against which what they say or hear has meaning, everything that has been said or will be said by human beings will involve some degree of opacity for both speaker and audience. The inevitability of incidental hustle means that we literally cannot have a full appreciation of what any sentence means. (344)

3 Language as Biological Niche Construction

My two books develop philosophical implications of recent multi-disciplinary work on language evolution. These analyses emphasize that human bodies and ways of life co-evolved with language and other expressive practices as forms of material and behavioral niche construction. Niche construction is the process by which organisms' life processes and behavior transform one another's developmental and selective environments. Niche construction affects evolution in two ways: it changes the selection pressures on a lineage, and it changes the developmental patterns that produce the variation on which selection operates. Natural selection and niche construction thus work together in non-linear patterns of constitutive interdependence among organisms and their environments. People reconfigure the environments that shape one another's biological development.

On this conception, languages did not evolve as capacities of human brains

or bodies which were then deployed communicatively in language use. Human brains and bodily capacities co-evolved with languages through a process of iterated, niche constructive transformation. Languages are pervasive features of people's developmental environments, and people normally develop and only develop normally in discursive environments. Children gradually pick up on these aspects of their surroundings, and people's neural-developmental capacities evolved under selection pressure for language learning. Languages in turn evolved both to adapt to those developmental capacities and also to how those communicative interactions were integrated into people's overall ways of life. Like Beaver and Stanley, I emphasize the perceptual, expressive and affective aspects of people's co-evolution with discursive environments, within which the more familiar philosophical focus on syntactically structured semantic content must be situated.

This account of language fits into a more encompassing account of hominin evolution, which emphasizes the emergence of more extensive and far-reaching patterns of cooperative interdependence. The initial emergence of cooperative social foraging in fission-fusion groups later evolved into an extensively practice-differentiated way of life. People do not just work together cooperatively with others in practices undertaken together. Those practices also increasingly

depend on the contributions of other practices, many of which their participants do not themselves engage in or even understand. The relevant sense of ‘cooperation’ is then more complex than the broadly game-theoretic notion that Beaver and Stanley emphasize. In their narrower sense, “to cooperate, agents must choose to perform actions that enhance the probability that both they and others will reach their goals” (333). That conception of cooperation presupposes that the goals of those actions are specifiable independently from the cooperative activity itself. Cooperation in a stronger sense involves goal-directed practices whose goals are internal to the practice itself. The relevant sense of goal-directedness traces back to Aristotle, for whom organisms are *energeia*, goal-directed processes whose goal is the continuation of that very process. A practice-differentiated way of life must enable those diverse practices with their own goal-directed patterns to pursue the goals embedded in the continuation of the practice while supporting and being sufficiently supported by the other practices around them.

Classical conceptions of practices, including those on which Beaver and Stanley rely, identify practices by performative regularities, governing norms, or shared presuppositions, including their own notion of collective attunements. The practices people take up often lack such common elements, however, and undermine them if and when they do seem to occur. Practices typically involve

participants who play different roles, with different understandings of the practice they share and the goals that it serves, and different motivations and concerns guiding their own participation. Moreover, those practices are also interdependent with other practices with their own contested goals and their participants must accommodate their own involvement in other practices with goals of their own. Not all practices are mutually supportive but instead sometimes conflict with or challenge the continuation of other practices.

What does identify a practice over time is a temporally extended pattern of closely coupled interdependence among its constituent performances and circumstances. I talk about “close coupling” in a sense that can be modeled by groups of coupled differential equations. What each participant does depends not only on prior performances, but also on the anticipated continuation of the practice in ways suitably aligned with or supportive of their own performances. What various participants do is thus a function of what other participants do and vice versa, in patterns that undergo ongoing mutual adjustment. Practices are temporally extended patterns of sufficiently *aligned* performances and circumstances. Participants must be able to recognize and continue the pattern of past performances, which nevertheless do not determine *how* they ought to go on subsequently. Practices are thus sustained and transformed over time by a

constitutive tension. Differences in participants' interests, understanding, commitment, and other involvements lead them to continue the practice in divergent ways. Participants nevertheless need to sustain supportive alignment among their performances amid changing circumstances, and this need leads to continuing adjustments to what they do to sustain continuity. Of course, those adjustments are often misaligned in turn, such that practices are only sustained amid ongoing conflict, confusion, misunderstanding, and disruption. Thus, where Beaver and Stanley talk about harmony or dissonance among attunements, I talk about alignment or misalignment among practices and performances, including communicative performances.

Discursive practices play crucial roles within other practices, partly by enabling coordination and sharing information. They also allow participants in a practice to express what they take as goals of the practice (its constitutive goods, virtues, excellences, etc.), and to indicate what is at issue and at stake in misalignments among participants' performances and with their circumstances. This talk about a practice nevertheless belongs to the practice and can be misaligned in turn. Not only can people disagree about what they are up to together and why it matters. These differences have no privileged direction of fit. Sometimes people adjust what they do to fit what they or others say they are doing;

sometimes they change what they say to accommodate what they do.

Brandom's inferentialist semantics offers an important advantage for conjoining my niche constructive account with Beaver and Stanley's emphasis on language as political. Brandom does not treat semantic content as a property of linguistic expressions or their uses. His account instead emphasizes that communication is a temporally extended process of tracking and adjudicating perspectival differences among people's material-inferential commitments and entitlements. People differ over which inferential commitments a linguistic expression invokes, but they understand one another by tracking those differences from their own conceptual perspective. My account of language as niche construction then takes a further step by turning Brandom's inferential semantics inside out. Brandom starts with intra-linguistic inferences and only later attaches perception and action as language entries and exits. I start with people's practical-perceptual and affective involvement in a practice-differentiated way of life, including the discursive practices integral to everything we do. The result is that linguistic meaning on my account already encompasses the wider range of resonances and attunements that Beaver and Stanley invoke and communication involves similar processes of harmonization and collective differentiation among speakers.

My account takes this broader conception of meaning one step further, however. Language use is indeed embedded in the concretely attuned grasp of words and their resonances within the practices we undertake. Those practices are also interdependent with a wide range of other practices in which those same expressions have different uses and resonances. People's communicative interactions with one another often cross those boundaries, and must do so to coordinate and respond to the interdependence among different practices. People's understanding of language includes and responds to the recognition that words have different significance across contexts. The ability to use language not only perspectivally tracks one another's perspectival differences, but also responds to the relations among the practices in which people are concretely engaged and the many other practices with which they are interdependent. The result is a more complex conception of the dynamics of a practice-differentiated way of life and of the discursive articulation of those practices and their mutual responsiveness.

4 Integrating these Practice-based Alternatives to Semantic Content Models

We can now consider how these two practice-based alternatives to a content-centered conception of language and communication complement and extend one another. I begin with two complementary relations between these accounts as wholes. First, my account of language as niche construction broadens

the rationale for Beaver and Stanley's model. They challenge an overly idealized conception of language use as the sharing of aperspectival representational contents in straight talk, because it obscures many significant linguistic phenomena. I show why those idealizations are also an anti-naturalist, philosophical imposition on languages, which conflicts with the scientific intelligibility of their biological development and evolution.

Beaver and Stanley's richly detailed account of the politically charged dynamics of language as a site of ideological formation, oppressive harm, and political action fills a gap in my account. My book recognizes that a practice-differentiated way of life is also power-differentiated, amid political conflict among shifting factions and coalitions. Practices are not only mutually enabling and interdependent, but also sometimes oppositional to and even eliminative of other practices, and their mutual alignment can enable sustained domination and oppression. My account nevertheless gives much less attention to the role of language in constituting and sustaining power and domination, an omission that Beaver and Stanley constructively remediate.

Each book also contributes to the other more specifically. Beaver and Stanley rely on problematic conceptions of social practices, as previously mentioned. Although the concept of a social practice and of speech practices as

social practices is central to their work, they largely rely on others, notably Bourdieu (1972), Jaeggi (2018), and Haslanger (2018), to explicate the concept. The explication does not do justice to their analysis, however, in several respects. They rightly understand practices without reliance on agents' intentions. Nevertheless, neither they nor the practice theories they cite actually develop an alternative characterization of "acting in accord with a practice" (74). This omission is important, because an adequate conception of the dynamics of practices must accommodate mistakes, innovations, internal contestation, and constitutive relations to other practices. Moreover, despite rejecting the content metaphor for understanding linguistic practices, Beaver and Stanley implicitly rely on the content of social norms to characterize practices, whether or not that content can be made explicit as rules.¹

My book's conception of practices and their constituent performances is

¹ Beaver and Stanley do make important accommodations that are not explicitly part of how they characterize practices. Their scalar notion of attunement to a practice allows for but does not explicate these internal differentiations. They also recognize that practices encompass different performances by people with different roles, and that practices are nested, which blocks characterizing them in isolation. They also recognize that attunement to practices encompasses the material settings of those practices, which makes the material setting more integral to the practice and its normative significance than traditional accounts of social practices allow.

more congruent with the details of Beaver and Stanley's account, in at least two respects. First, practices are temporally extended patterns that cannot be specified at a point in time. Performances of a practice are instead identifiable only jointly in relation to a history of past performance and an anticipatory orientation toward subsequent performances by oneself and others in relevant circumstances.² What then characterizes how performances belong to a practice and answer to its constitutive normative concerns is how those performances and their successors defeasibly depend on one another over time. Temporally extended sequences matter, because belonging to a practice is specifiable in part by reference to how subsequent performances respond to earlier misalignments. Practices are dynamic patterns of mutual adjustment to partially divergent performance rather than being definable by common features of the performances themselves.

A similar point applies to how practices involve normative accountability. Practices do constitutively invoke normative concerns and incorporate criticisms and sanctions of performances taken to conflict with them. The difficulty is that those concerns lack a determinate content, because what the "norms" are and how they apply to cases is always at issue within continuation of the practice. What is at

² This anaphoric account of normativity can be understood as a generalization of temporal externalist conceptions of meaning as normative (Rouse 2014).

stake in resolving those issues over time is what the practice becomes. I thus develop an explicitly anaphoric conception of normativity as involving temporally extended issues and stakes within and among performances of a practice. Situated performances of a practice are not accountable to already-determinate norms, but are instead accountable *to one another* for what is at issue and at stake in continuation of the practice and its place within a larger nexus.

Beaver and Stanley in turn importantly contribute to my inversion of Brandom's inferentialist semantics. Brandom relies on the notion of material inferences as non-logical inferences that constitute conceptual contents. Examples include the inference from Pittsburgh as west of Philadelphia to Philadelphia as east of Pittsburgh, and from rain to wet streets. Brandom's semi-pragmatist notion of conceptual content nevertheless isolates these material inferential relations from embeddedness in perceptual and practical involvement in the world, including visceral and affective grasp of words and circumstances. These chosen examples noticeably abstract from affective or political significance. Even when such significance is salient, as in slurs, Brandom's account does not go far enough. He rightly indicates that what is objectionable are slur words themselves, and not just assertions containing them. Brandom's objection only reflects a rational fastidiousness, however. We should not use slur words because they embed

inferential relations we do not endorse. My inversion of Brandom embeds word choices in their fuller practical, perceptual, and viscerally affective significance. Language is integral to our discursively articulated environments, and understanding a language is not just a cognitive matter of making or endorsing inferences. The language available to us and how we and others deploy it helps configure a situation as a field of practical possibilities for action, self-understanding, affective response, and personal development. My account nevertheless lacks succinct expression for expanding “material inferences” into how we inhabit a discursively articulated world. Beaver and Stanley’s conception of practical, perceptual, and affective attunement to resonances concisely expresses what material inferential relations become when no longer idealized and abstracted as relations among words and sentences in isolation.

My account then enables two further developments of Beaver and Stanley’s constitutive metaphor of attunement to resonances. The first point responds to their recognition that they are replacing one metaphor— the “content” delivered in verbal “containers”— with another: “The resonance metaphor suggests that rather than being a ‘thing’ inside or carried by another ‘thing’, meaning is a process ... that sustains an informational connection. Don’t think of meaning as an object being transferred, but a state being shared” (31, 30). The content metaphor

nevertheless includes a sense of how that content is “grasped,” as a mental representation usable in subsequent expressions and inferences. My account allows a comparable unpacking of the metaphor of attunement to resonances. Human bodies always have a practical, perceptual, and affective “posture,” understood as how we set ourselves to explore and respond to the world. Our developed and partially habitual posture makes some surrounding features perceptually salient and occludes others, and orients us toward some possible actions and passions while making others less readily available or fluent. Postures are not self-contained, however, but always grounded in, directed toward, and enabled and constrained by the biological environments that we both inhabit and reconfigure by our activities. What we can do, see, and feel is dynamically shaped by how our bodily postures are both affected by and responsive to a meaningfully configured environment. A salient feature of those environments is the postures of others, including their perceptual, practical and affective orientations.

Slurs are instructive here also. Beaver and Stanley rightly emphasize the visceral effects of even mentioning slurs, citing recipients who describe it as “like a knife stabbing you” or that it “hits in the gut, catches the eye, knots the stomach, jerks the knee, grabs the arm” (386).³ They nevertheless still understate the role of

³ Beaver and Stanley cite Ice Cube and Patricia Williams in these two quotations.

slurs, which extends beyond their explicit use or mention. People's responsiveness to one another in various situations is partially configured by the ready and recognized *availability* and significance of specific slurs, their visceral resonances with the salience of people's racialized, gendered, sexually oriented or other contextually "disparagable" bodily postures, and the consequential differences in their environments for those directly or obliquely targeted by familiar slurs and those escaping their orbit. In that context, the "state shared" by the resonances of salient slurs is not the *same* state, but more or less reciprocally oriented relations among people differently situated in that discursive context.

Taking over my conception of practices also more substantially develops the resonance metaphor. Beaver and Stanley explicate resonance and attunement in terms of probabilities of co-occurrence. The resonances of a performance of a practice are features of its context for which the occurrence of that performance boosts the probability of their occurrence (43). Collective attunements to a practice are then a predictable accord between people's behavior and the presence of the practice or its instances and their resonances. This formulation constructively renders resonance and attunement scalar rather than categorical. There is an underlying problem, however, because as Beaver and Stanley recognize, their "correlational notion of associative resonance is *noncausal*" and they need "to

distinguish the things that a communicative act is correlated with from those it causes” (217). Their efforts to make this distinction are too limited, however, in only trying to distinguish the direction of causal relations embedded in probabilistic resonances. Philosophers of science have painstakingly shown that one cannot explicate causal relations even as changes in conditional probabilities, which presupposes conditionalizing on other possible *causes* (Cartwright 2003). Rather, one needs to situate those probabilities within more structured causal models that distinguish different kinds of causal relations: standing conditions, triggers, hasteners, defeasors, and so forth, often in nested relations of causal interdependence. Thus, in place of Beaver and Stanley’s account of resonances as probabilistic co-occurrence of actions and features of their context, we need more detailed, temporally extended models of the *causal coupling* among different components of practices. That modeling should include participants’ ongoing adjustments of their participation in a practice in response to conflicts and failures of alignment among prior performances or with other practices with which they are involved.

This shift from a correlational to a causally interactive conception of resonances and attunements allows for a final, crucial emendation of Beaver and Stanley’s conception of language politics. Beaver and Stanley’s book is not a

dispassionate analysis of political implications of language use, but instead aims toward a social justice project of regulating speech to enhance political equality. All well and good. They frame that critical project, however, by relying on a conception of power drawn from longstanding debates in social and political theory over the multiple “faces” of power. *Social Practices as Biological Niche Construction* develops an alternative conception of power in response to widely recognized problems in these and other conceptions of power in social theory (Hayward 2000, Wartenberg 1990, Menge 2018). Beaver and Stanley rightly note the need to conjoin “the *instrumental power* of words as the ability ... to exercise power over others” with “the power that words give groups of people to coordinate and effect joint action” (2023, 115, original emphasis), which are often kept distinct in social theories of power. They nevertheless still hold onto a conception of power as an ability or capacity that agents, groups, or institutions possess and exercise to exert power over others (115). Recognizing both that power arises partly from the biological neediness and vulnerability of human bodies and that power relations depend on maintaining the coordinated and situated alignment of multiple agencies undermines treating power as a capacity that can be possessed and exercised. I cannot here summarize my reconception of ‘power’ as an expressive concept whose role is to indicate how people’s situated causal capacities

and performances reconfigure the normative significance of how others' actions are circumstantially enabled or constrained. I will instead conclude with the bald claim that incorporating this reconception of 'power' within Beaver and Stanley's and my conjoined challenge to a content-delivery model of linguistic communication is more conducive to understanding how to advance their political project.

REFERENCES

- Beaver, David, and Jason Stanley. 2023. *Niche Construction and the Politics of Language*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1972. *The Logic of Practice*. Translated by Richard Nice. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Brandom, Robert. 1994. *Making It Explicit*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cartwright, Nancy. 2003. "From Causation to Explanation and Back." In *The Future for Philosophy*, edited by Brian Leiter, 230-45. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Haslanger, Sally. 2018. "What Is a Social Practice?" *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 82: 231-47.
- Hayward, Clarissa. 2000. *De-Facing Power*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Press.

Jaeggi, Rahel. 2018. *Critique of Forms of Life*. Translated by Ciaran Cronin.

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Menge, Torsten. 2018. "The Role of Power in Social Explanation." *European Journal of Social Theory* 21:22-38.

Rouse, Joseph. 2014. "Temporal Externalism and the Normativity of Linguistic Practice." *Journal for the Philosophy of History* 8:20-38.

Rouse, Joseph. 2015. *Articulating the World*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Rouse, Joseph. 2023. *Social Practices as Biological Niche Construction*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Sellars, Wilfrid. 2007. *In the Space of Reasons*, edited by Robert Brandom and Kevin Scharpp. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Wartenberg, Thomas. 1990. *The Forms of Power*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Author Biography: Joseph Rouse is the Hedding Professor of Moral Science in the Department of Philosophy and the College of Science and Technology Studies at Wesleyan University. His most recent books are *Social Practices as Biological*

Niche Construction (Chicago 2023) and *Articulating the World* (Chicago 2015).

His primary research interests are in the philosophy of scientific practice, philosophical naturalism, theories of social practice, philosophy of biology, and the history of 20th C. philosophy.