

9 Scare Quotes and the Nonliteral Use of the Inverted Commas

I. Subsentential Quotation and Scare Quotation

When I first introduced subsentential (mixed) quotation in chapter 3, among the examples were so-called ‘scare’ (or ‘queer,’ ‘shudder,’ or ‘sneer’) quotations,¹ such as

- (1) Nicola said that Alice is a “philosopher” (C&L 1997, 436)
- (2) Palin tweeted that “peaceful Muslims” should “refudiate” the mosque being built at Ground Zero. (Maier 2014)

But I deferred their discussion to this chapter in order to lay out my general theory before turning to this special phenomenon. Until recently, scare quotes have received relatively little attention in the philosophical and linguistics literature.² However, as a result of interest in subsentential/mixed quotations such as

- (3) Life is “what happens while you are making other plans” (John Lennon, “Beautiful Boy,” from the album *Starting Over*, cited in Predelli 2003)
- (4) Life is “the farce which everybody has to perform” (Arthur Rimbaud, *Une Saison en Enfer*, “*Mauvais Sang*,” cited in Predelli 2003),

philosophers and linguists began to subsume strings like (1) and (2) under the same rubric. Like subsentential/mixed quotations, they exhibit the same patterns of syntactic and semantic interaction with their larger matrices; and neither occupies the argument position of a name or referring term as do mention-expressions.³ This is *prima facie* evidence that scare quotations have representational, or use, content. At the same time, the scare-quoting phrases make some kind of metalinguistic reference, if not to themselves, then to some feature related to themselves. But in contrast to non-scare

subsential quotations, scare quotations occur much more frequently in nonreportative contexts, for example:

- (5) In offset printing ‘proofs’ of illustrations come from the darkroom, not the proof press. (*CMS*, 172)
- (6) He is presenting his dissertation at the ‘paper’ session. (where he should have said ‘poster’ session) (Recanati 2011, 250)
- (7) Y. Skouratov, general prosecutor, was suspended by B. Yeltsin in March. His successor, Y. Tchaika, was ‘promoted’ minister of justice in August. (Recanati 2011, 248, 273)
- (8) National greed has disguised itself in mandates to govern ‘inferior’ races. (Predelli 2003, 3, citing the *MacMillan Handbook of English*)
- (9) The ‘debate’ resulted in three cracked heads and two broken noses. (Predelli 2003, 3, citing *CMS*)
- (10) This remarkable piece of ‘art’ consists of a large canvas covered with mud and old bus transfers. (Predelli, 2003, 3, citing *Handbook of Current English*)
- (11) Look, it’s Jack’s philosophical idol ‘Quine’ who is coming to argue and refute us!
- (12) My nine-year-old son thinks that his father teaches ‘mid-evil’ philosophy. (Rafi Stern, 1997)
- (13) A: The freedom fighters succeeded in liberating the village.
B: Those ‘freedom fighters’ butchered two-thirds of the inhabitants of the village they ‘liberated.’ (Brandom 1994)

Even though they lack an explicit subject and verb of Q-saying, these sentences seem to be quotational attributions with an understood but elliptical subject and verb. As I argued in chapter 8, it is odd, if not impossible, to cancel their metalinguistic reference, as in:

- (6a) *He is presenting his dissertation at the ‘paper’ session but no one ever called it that.
- (9a) *The ‘debate’ resulted in three cracked heads and two broken noses, but no one ever described it in those terms.

Furthermore, as I argued in the general case of inverted commas in non-reportative contexts, the very presence of the inverted commas is evidence that an elliptical subject and verb of Q-saying are at least understood. One

can make this understanding explicit by adding to the surface sentence a parenthetical ‘X said’ or ‘so-called’ (where X stands for a generic public) with no noticeable change of meaning.⁴

- (5) In offset printing [what people commonly call or say are/so-called] ‘proofs’ of illustrations come from the darkroom, not the proof press.
- (6) He is presenting his dissertation at [what he calls or says is] the [so-called] ‘paper’ session.
- (10) This remarkable piece of [what a salient individual said is/so-called] ‘art’ consists of a large canvas covered with mud and old bus transfers.

For these reasons, I assume that scare quotations, no different from other subsentential quotations, have bare-bones representational content, exemplificational content, and in general are true just in case there is a quoted phrase that was uttered by an (implicit) subject in their context that is an instantiation of the property or representation exemplified by the quoting phrase in its context. However, for scare quotations, the gap between the representational and exemplificational contents is much greater than it is for quotations in general.

To begin with, the bare-bones representational content of subsentential and scare-quoting phrases are determined differently. The representational content of standard subsentential (and, for that matter, sentential) quotations, what they say, is determined by the meaning with which the quoting phrase would be used in an indirect discourse report of the quoted utterance. In general, this will be the very same disquoted quoting phrase or its homophonic translation unless it contains indexicals that must be converted (following Frege’s directive) to accommodate differences between the quoted and (indirect) quoting contexts. Those sorts of adjustments will carry over to scare quotations that contain indexicals. But scare-quoting phrases pose another problem due precisely to the feature that most obviously distinguishes them from other quoting phrases: there is something *wrong* about them. They are either linguistically incorrect—and therefore evidence of the quoted subject’s linguistic or lexical incompetence—or expressions with meanings unknown to the speaker or without a meaning, or misuses of technical or professional terminology, or inappropriate expressions in the context of utterance—not because of *what* they say (although that may independently be the case) but because their language is not appropriate to express their intended content in the quoting context,

for example, ‘inferior’ in (8). As this range of errors and improprieties indicates, ‘scare quotation’ is something of an umbrella term that subsumes a wide range of phrases that could be wrong for many different reasons. ‘Refudiate’ in (2) is a mongrel of ‘refute’ and ‘repudiate’; ‘mid-evil’ in (12) is the (humorous) result of a child’s mishearing or misunderstanding of ‘medieval.’ ‘Proofs’ for inked offset plates or cylinders and ‘paper sessions’ for ‘poster sessions’ show incompetence in technical or professional terminology, ‘Peaceful Muslims’ and “‘inferior’ races” display biased language in ethnic and racial talk. ‘Quine’ in (11) appropriates the name not just for someone other than Quine but also for someone who, in the eyes of the speaker, is anything but Quine in intellect and philosophical stature. Similar remarks apply to ‘debate’ in (9) and ‘art’ in (10): these are not just false of the intended extension but wildly false.

What is common to all these wrong uses is that there is a mismatch between the intended or presumptive bare-bones content and the (explicit or contextually presupposed) scare-quoted subject’s choice of phrase or word to express it. One might suppose, then, that the function of the scare quotes is to say that the choice of words is an error, improper, incorrect, inappropriate, or deviant. This is the view of Cappelen and Lepore, who argue, while defending their view that quotation marks are semantically ineliminable, that in examples like (1) the marks indicate that the speaker does not know the meaning of the quoting words, that the (presupposed) subject misspoke, that the words are gibberish or “not words in his language”; any of these features “may explain why [the speaker] mixed quoted” (C&L 2007, 56). Hence, (1) is true only with quotation marks and false without them. But if the function of the scare quote-marks is simply to flag that the words are wrong, how do the marks themselves make a sentence meaningful or true when, without them, it would be meaningless or false? If (1) is gibberish without the inverted commas, how does their mere addition make it meaningful or true?

The moral I draw is that the function of the inverted commas in scare-quotation is *not* to express the fact that the subject misuses or improperly uses words (although they do)—*that* the word used *is* wrong. Nor can the presumptive representational content of the scare quoting phrase be its literal meaning because what is wrong is precisely the mismatch between the intended content and the phrase used—and in some cases, the scare-quoting phrase has no literal meaning. To verbally articulate the representational content of the scare-quoting phrase, the default is to substitute

linguistically correct, appropriate, known language that expresses it. But identifying that intended or presumed content requires extralinguistic knowledge and reasoning—for lack of a better term, context—which makes it easier for some cases than for others. Apparent linguistic mistakes like ‘refudiate’ in (2) go over straightforwardly to correct predicates like ‘repudiate’ or ‘refute,’ ‘paper session’ to ‘poster session,’ and ‘mid-evil’ to ‘medieval.’ But apart from all the philosophical worries that attend the very idea of individuating (the same) content, other wrong word-choices are much more difficult to articulate in ‘correct’ language. ‘Debate’ in (9) might express ‘exchange-turned-into-brawl,’ ‘art’ in (10) be expressed by ‘junk pretending to be art,’ and ‘Quine’ into ‘self-deluded person who imagines himself (or whom some other contextually salient individual wildly imagines) to be Quine-like in intellect and stature.’ But, like many such attempts to provide synonyms or paraphrases, none of these attempts to articulate the properties expressed by the scare-quoting phrases is bound to satisfy everyone.

One example that has attracted much attention is (1), which illustrates the difficulties of spelling out the representational content of scare-quoting expressions, especially in the absence of a rich description of the quoted and quoting contexts. The example was first introduced by C&L (1997, 437) as a “not *un*common” case of the use of unknown words, “words not part of our [the speaker’s] vocabulary,” words “unintelligible to the reporter himself” (437). Quoting speakers put ‘philtosopher’ in q-marks either to indicate that they are “uncertain” of its meaning, or to indicate (positively?) that Nicola’s vocabulary is larger than theirs—which is why they do not understand him—or because they are “convinced that Nicola is linguistically incompetent” (437) and they want to make that clear to everyone without saying, or committing themselves to, exactly what is incompetent. In a note (437, 12) C&L add that their explanation is “closely related to the use of mixed quotation to distance oneself from objectionable vocabulary”—a point to which we will return. In their later 2007 book they describe ‘philtosopher’ as gibberish, not simply a word whose meaning is unknown to the speaker, and argue that the sentence (1) without inverted commas around ‘philtosopher’ “doesn’t capture [its] content” (56) without saying what that content is. Nor do they give any context for (1). Although they originally gave (1) as a case of mixed quotation, in their *Minimal Theory* of 2007, the word ‘philtosopher’ is simply mentioned, and indeed it has no interpretation, at least no semantic interpretation.

The example subsequently generated a cottage industry around it. For example, Recanati (2011, 250) asserts (without explanation) that Nicola is a five-year-old boy; that “philtosopher’ is a nonword and meaningless in standard English (and adds that “it’s hard to say exactly what the sense of ‘philtosopher’ in [Nicola’s] idiolect is”; 2011, 250, n. 23); and that the example requires a (monster-like) shift for its interpretation from the speaker’s English-language parameter in the actual context to Nicola’s (foreign) idiolect or language-parameter in *his* context of utterance.

Neither C&L’s nor Recanati’s analyses hit the mark. To begin with, ‘philtosopher’ is not gibberish or meaningless. The suffix ‘er’ applied to nouns refers to people either occupationally connected to or who produce what the noun signifies, namely, ‘philtosophy.’ Hence, we may not know exactly what ‘philtosophy’ means or what Nicola means by ‘philtosophy,’ but we know that it is something people can do as an occupation and something produced. Second, ‘philtosophy’ obviously sounds so close to ‘philosophy’ to make us wonder (or maybe presume) whether it is a mistaken pronunciation, especially if the quoted subject is a five-year-old. (Compare (12): my nine-year-old son’s ‘mid-evil’ for ‘medieval.’) Second, because ‘philtosopher’ is not a word of English that can express representational content, there *is* something wrong, inappropriate, improper, or deviant about what Nicola said *in English*—and we want to preserve that fact about its status in the speaker’s quoting language, namely, English. On Recanati’s account involving language shift to Nicola’s idiolect, there turns out to be nothing deviant, odd, or inappropriate about what he said because he was speaking a different language, his own, in which the word is perfectly kosher. Showing that Nicola spoke ‘correctly’ in *another* language does not explain the ‘incorrect’ use of the word in *our*, the *quoting*, language.

Nonetheless, although Recanati does not tell us how he discovered that Nicola is a five-year-old boy, I am inclined to agree that the most plausible interpretation of (1) is that it reports a child’s mistaken or deviant utterance *in English*. Like Predelli’s (2005, 154, 158) examples of ‘sublimable [rather than ‘subliminal’] ads’ and ‘nucular [rather than ‘nuclear’] weapons,’ so ‘philtosopher’ is a five-year-old’s word for philosopher. However, the point of the scare quote marks is neither to trigger a language shift, nor to signal *that* the quoted subject’s use of the word is wrong, nor to mention a shape ‘philtosopher’ whose meaning we do not know. Instead, I will now argue, it is to register the speaker’s disavowal of Nicola’s use of ‘philtosopher’ *as*

his, the speaker's, own word in his quoting language English to express the representational content Nicola intends to express. That disavowal is what makes (1) a case of scare quoting.

II. The Representational Content of Scare Quotations

Before turning to my positive proposal, one more word about the representational content of scare quotations. As we have seen, scare quotations are a mixed bag. For one set of scare-quoting phrases, we can identify default predicates that correctly articulate their presumptive content in *our* language (e.g., (2), (5), (6), and (12)); the content of the scare-quoting phrase will then be the content of that predicate. So, the property corresponding to the scare-quoting phrase as its representational content will not be determined by the literal meaning (or character) of the scare quoting phrase, but by the meaning (or character) of the default predicate. To characterize that property, we have two possible routes. One is to treat the q-marks as monsters that shift the context to the alternative quoted context of the quoted subject in which their idiolect expresses that very property with that word. However, whatever one's view of indexical monsters, such a shift leads us (as I said earlier) to lose precisely what is wrong about the scare-quoting word—the mismatch between the word-choice and representational content—hence, the reason why the quoter disavows the quoted subject's phrase. The second route is the one I pursued earlier in chapter 5 for indexicals that occur in subsentential quotations. We substitute for the scare quoting phrase in the indirect discourse report (that expresses the representational content in the quoting context) the default predicate (when we can identify one) that tracks the quoted subject's intended representational content. But this route has its cost, too (as we saw in chapter 8): the loss of compositionality.

A second class of scare quotations employs quoting phrases whose representational content corresponds to no identifiable predicate interpreted literally in the speaker's language, either because we do not understand the phrase or because of the many difficulties that attend the identification of words to express a given content.⁵ In these cases, I suggest that we take the content, say, a property, to be a contextually selected complement or contrary to the content literally expressed by the scare-quoting term—even if we lack words for that complement or contrary. By 'context' here, I primarily mean mutually recognized intentions and beliefs, that is,

shared presuppositions. Among these presuppositions, we can distinguish two sets. Some will be about the whole set of contrary and complementary properties to the literally expressed content of the scare-quoting phrase that are possible candidates for its representational content. Others will serve to constrain *which* among those complementary or contrary properties is selected and, foremost among the latter, will be presuppositions about the property or content that can be expected to elicit the speaker's strongest disavowal of the scare quoting phrase because it is literally inappropriate or linguistically wrong to express that selected content.⁶ So, to determine *what* the intended scare quoted representational content is one must know *that* the quoting phrase is scare quoting! This is not much to take home, but it is crucial that the scare-quoting phrase have some content (even if we must Ramsey-like existentially quantify over it) because it is the mismatch between (the literal meaning of) the scare-quoting *phrase* and that presumptive representational content that underlies scare quoting. Thus C&L's initial characterization of 'philosopher' as unintelligible or meaningless—if that means that it expresses *no* content—will not serve this purpose. On the other hand, the selected property must be unsuitable and inapt as possible to be the representational content of the scare-quoting phrase.

III. The Role of Inverted Commas and Other Q-Marks in Scare Quoting

If the function of inverted commas in scare quoting is to signal neither *that* the phrase is wrong nor *what* is wrong with it, what is their role? The representational and exemplificational work in scare quotation are both accomplished by the scare-quoting phrase itself. To see what else the commas might do, recall their function in proper quotation. As we saw in chapter 8, the inverted commas are part of the verb of Q-saying, which expresses the attribution of a quoted token to a subject. But as we also saw, earlier in chapter 1, this linguistic device for attribution is the product of a long history that ran along a number of trajectories. On one, signs (like the diple and S-shaped flourish) that were originally marginal annotations that gave directions to readers to attend to passages and to guide their spoken recitation, intonation, and pauses eventually became punctuation marks. A device for use in oral practice became a piece of the written language system. But this is not simply a matter of encoding a particular use within the perimeters of a graphic sign. The transformation into an inscription

increases speakers' expressive power—because once a use becomes a sign, it becomes possible to use the sign itself for different purposes than its original one. So, as the extra- or metatextual *notae* became pieces of linguistic punctuation in the shape of the inverted commas—once their use in the practice of quotation or citation was, as it were, 'lexicalized'—it became possible for speakers to *use* those signs, the inverted commas, in more and different ways than they were originally meant. The inverted commas that were originally, or literally, intended to express attribution, became a means to nonliterally express scare quotation.

For a helpful analogy to this transformation in the role of the inverted commas from quoting to scare quoting, consider the metaphorical use or interpretation of a word. In metaphor, a word that was originally used to express one meaning, which then became lexicalized as its literal meaning, is used to express something else nonliterally or figuratively. But its nonliteral or figurative use is not independent of its literal use (or meaning once it is lexicalized)—as if we simply recycled or rebaptized the sign to express some other independent meaning. Rather, it is nonliteral or figurative because it presupposes and exploits (knowledge of) the literal meaning. Recall the old adage that the metaphorical depends on the literal. The truth in that motto is that the metaphorical interpretation of an expression \emptyset does not (generally) include the literal meaning of \emptyset (although sometimes they overlap), but the literal meaning of \emptyset is active in determining the metaphorical content. In particular, the metaphorical interpretation of \emptyset depends on and is drawn from various kinds of presuppositions we hold about literal \emptyset s. For example, Romeo's utterance of 'Juliet is the sun' metaphorically says (among many other things) that his life revolves around her or that he cannot live without her nourishment. The properties of 'revolving around X' or 'necessary for one's sustenance' are properties literally true of or stereotypically associated with or presupposed to be exemplified by what is literally the sun. In this sense, the metaphorical depends on the literal: without understanding its literal meaning (and its associated commonly presupposed features), one cannot know the metaphorical interpretation of the predicate—even though that literal meaning is not part of the metaphorical interpretation. This is also the sense in which the literal is 'active' in the metaphorical even when it is not part of the metaphorical interpretation.⁷

A second trajectory in the history of quotation and the inverted commas is also relevant to the genesis of scare quotation. Recall again that the

function of the original quotation sign, the *diple* or S-shaped flourish, was to draw attention to noteworthy passages, originally scriptural verses and later statements of authoritative or canonical pagan authors like Homer and Plato and then *sententiae* or wisdom statements. In so quoting or citing, the quoter—the copyist or reader—did not themselves assert the quoted statement, but by citing it for its authoritative and authorizing wisdom—what everyone ought to acknowledge and believe—they conventionally implicated their endorsement of *and* assent to the correctness and perspicuity of the quoting words to express their wisdom or authoritative content. Over time, as we saw in chapter 1, and especially beginning toward the end of the eighteenth century, the practice of quotation changed with changing conceptions of common and private property. The authorizing and authoritative character of quotation declined, and the practice of quoting became more egalitarian and democratic. As a result, what was quoted was not necessarily wisdom or universal truths. Thus the earlier implication of endorsement of or assent to the truth of the quoted passage was no longer drawn. The same holds nowadays. The quoter/speaker is a neutral third party with no commitment of their own to the *truth* (or wisdom) of the quoted sentence; they exclusively use the quoting phrase to attribute the quoted phrase to the subject. However, to succeed at the attribution through their own use of the *quoting* phrase, they must tacitly endorse or affirm that their quoting words faithfully and appropriately express the content of the attribution; their own use implies that the words express in their quoting context the attributed quoted content. Indeed the quoter implies that, like their own quoting words, the quoted subject meant by their words what the quoting words mean for them. All this is part of the contemporary literal meaning of quotation.

I want to propose that the relation between the inverted commas in quotation and in scare quotation is analogous to the relation between the literal and metaphorical (or more generally, nonliteral) uses of words. As if they were themselves words, the inverted commas literally mean one thing when they are used to quote and nonliterally or figuratively mean something else when they occur in the practice of scare quoting. When used in quotation, the inverted commas as part of the verb of Q-saying (in its contemporary or post-eighteenth-century sense) serve to attribute the quoted phrase to a particular individual subject as their “private property.” This is their literal meaning. When used in scare quotation, the inverted

commas as part of the verb of scare Q-saying still serve to attribute the quoted phrase to the (implicit or explicit) quoted subject but they make that attribution exclusively to the quoted subject—and, more specifically, they exclusively attribute to that subject *how* its content is represented, through the exemplified representation. The quoter restricts the mode of attribution, the quoted words, solely to its quoted subject, disavowing any implied endorsement or authorization on the quoter's own part. The quoter says with the inverted commas that *only* the quoted subject, and not they, endorses or avows the appropriateness or correctness of the quoted *language* as a way to express the attributed content. The inverted commas, which in quotation proper were a fence around the quoted subject's private property to demarcate exactly what belongs to them, now serve in scare quotation as a barrier, blocking off the quoting words to prevent anyone from imputing them to the quoting speaker. The quoter disowns, not only their own responsibility for the appropriateness or correctness of their quoting words, but also any implied endorsement of the quoted subject's choice of their quoted words to express their intended representational content. Thus, rather than express a judgment about the *words*, the scare-marks express the speaker's *attitude* toward the quoted subject's choice of language. This attitude can range along a continuum of more specific attitudes: from nonendorsement and disassociation to disapproval and opposition, to contempt, hostility, disauthorization, condemnation, or mockery. But they are all species of a genus of disavowal: the quoting speaker *S* intends that their fellow contextual participants, including the quoted subject *T*, recognize that *S* intends that the phrase by which *S* attributes a given content *C* to an utterance by *T* be a phrase attributed only to *T* to express *C* and not to *S* herself.

This attitude or stance of disavowal is the nonliteral meaning carried by the inverted commas (as part of the scare quotational verb of saying). If the literal meaning of the commas implies the quoter's endorsement of the words as an appropriate or correct expression of the attributed content, their nonliteral meaning is disavowal (by the speaker) of the propriety of the quoted words and indeed of their own quoting words used in making the attribution.

This interpretation of scare quotes as disavowal is not original to me. C&L (2005a) describe the function of scare quotes "to indicate that speakers *distance* themselves, for whatever reason, from certain aspects of linguistic behavior" (56, my emphasis). Recanati (2011, 240) describes it as "disassociation." And Brandom (1994) long ago gave a similar analysis using the

very term ‘disavowal’ although it carries a much more specific valence in his inferentialist semantics. All these notions are close to what I call disavowal or disowning the quoted subject’s words. But my point is that it is not simply this attitude (however labeled) that is expressed by the scare quote marks but that it is an attitude that is conceptually dependent on the literal meaning of the marks in the same way that a figurative meaning is dependent on the literal. The same “dependence” and “active-ness” that holds between the metaphorical and the literal holds for the relation between the literal quoting and nonliteral scare quoting uses of inverted commas and q-marks. If quotation is attribution with implied endorsement of the propriety of the words, scare quotation is attribution with implied disendorsement or disavowal.

In the literature scare quoting has also been associated with irony and sarcasm, although it has sometimes been taken to express weaker attitudes like skepticism and doubt.⁸ This is true, but the irony and sarcasm expressed by the scare quotes cannot have the representational *content* of the quoting/quoted words as its object; it must be directed specifically to the mismatch between the words and intended content. So, if Jack suggested “Let’s go for a picnic tomorrow” and the next day turns out to be stormy, then if I quote him by saying, “Well, Jack said: “Tomorrow will be a beautiful day for a picnic,”” I am being sarcastic and ironic but I am not scare quoting. Nonetheless, what is right about the irony or sarcasm view is that what scare quotation expresses, in addition to attribution of a representational content to the quoted subject, is not more propositional content (like the contrary of the quoting expression), but an attitude: disavowal or disownership, something like an illocutionary act or manner of delivery, which, as we saw earlier, is a feature sometimes exemplified by the quoting expression.⁹ And this ‘meaning’ is dependent on the literal meaning of the marks, which is to attribute to someone what they said in their own words, thereby implying my endorsement of the propriety of those words to express that content. Scare quoting, like other figurative uses of language, preserves—and is constrained by—the literal meaning of its vehicle at the same time that it refigures that meaning.

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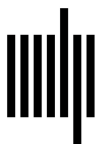
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