Notes on Disagreement*

*It is Monday morning and the phone is ringing. Ede is calling from Frankfurt. For a moment I am in panic that he wants to sell me some obscure paper to be reviewed until yesterday. But no. Ede actually wants to know something about context sensitive grammars. He makes my day. A question about content! Who in this world is still calling people on Monday morning to ask some question about ... linguistics? If only I could get more phone calls like this.

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1 There is absolute poverty, relative poverty, poverty as defined by national committees, the World Bank, the United Nations, and so on.
words had different meanings—if only as a child, when we had to learn our very first language. However, the formal theory does not seem to have progressed far enough to deal with this fact. There are still some who wish to maintain the belief that mutual understanding requires the use of a common language. Some of that is driven by a curious fear—expressed recently among others in Glanzberg (2007) and Cappelen & Lepore (2005)—that we could simply not communicate without a homogeneous language. However, it is one thing to lack an explanation for a phenomenon and quite another to deny its existence. The evidence against a shared language is overwhelming, although the idiolects seem to share a common core (if at least in the form of a set of common words and constructions). Thus language, it appears, is both a private and a public entity. This tension creates an interesting role for communication. We will argue, among other things, that successful communication in the sense of fully shared meanings exists only in rare situations. Mostly, we simply (optimistically) assume it to be given. This means that successful communication in this sense rarely ever happens. But since we rarely find out about any discrepancies the failure will mostly not be diagnosed. And this leaves us with the impression that communication works perfectly. When occasionally we realise that we misunderstand each other, we do not break down. Quite to the contrary. We humans can actually fruitfully deal with this situation. Failed communication not only exists but also opens interesting avenues to improve our mutual understanding.

A final point concerns compositionality. A standard argument in favour of compositionality is that we can understand the meaning of a sentence that we have never seen before. It is feared that the individualisation of language makes it impossible to make this argument. We do not think so. For it is not necessary to assume that the result of someone else’s meaning composition is the same as yours. Diagnostically, however, if you assume the sentence to mean anything you please and someone else can do the same, then who is to judge that the result of meaning composition has any value? The answer to that question is simple: compositionality simply is a property of an individual language. Communication does not figure in the definition of compositionality. It is not needed. You may even have a different meaning composition algorithm for the same language, let alone for different languages (based on the same syntax).

The paper is structured as follows. In Section 2 we argue that the homogeneity assumption is actually ill-founded. We should in fact expect endless variation. This opens the door for less-than-optimal communication. Section 3 discusses an example on how misunderstandings can be diagnosed and managed in dialogue. The following sections work out some of the theory behind