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There are no uninstantiated words

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ABSTRACT

Kaplan ([1990]. "Words." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 64: 93–119; [2011]. "Words on Words." *The Journal of Philosophy* 108 (9): 504–529) argues that there are no unspoken words. Hawthorne and Lepore ([2011]. "On Words." *The Journal of Philosophy* 108 (9): 447–485) put forward examples that purport to show that there can be such words. Here, I argue that Kaplan is correct, if we grant him a minor variation. While Hawthorne and Lepore might be right that there can be *unspoken* words, I will argue that they fail to show that there can be *uninstantiated* words.

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Kaplan (1990, 2011) argues that there are no unspoken words. In this claim, Kaplan has been largely isolated. The dominant view seems to be that there can be unspoken words (see, for example, Wetzel 2009, 38; Katz 2000). In particular, Hawthorne and Lepore (2011; hereafter H&L) have put forward highly influential arguments that purport to show that there can be unspoken words. H&L do this, in part, to argue against Kaplan's stage-continuant ontology. I also want to reject Kaplan's ontology, but for different reasons that are not relevant to this paper. In this paper, contra the prevailing view in the literature which seems to agree with H&L on unspoken words, I will argue that Kaplan is correct at least on this point, if we grant him a minor variation. While H&L might be right that there can be *unspoken* words, I will argue that they fail to show that there can be *uninstantiated* words. This conclusion is good news at least for the spirit of Kaplan's claim that 'the world is not brimming with unspoken words' (1990, 117).

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H&L's arguments against unspoken words make use of the productive nature of morphology.[1] Consider the morpheme 'un-'. In English, this is a bound morpheme, meaning that it can only appear as part of a larger construction, such as 'unhappy' (as opposed to free morphemes which need not be part of such constructions and can be tokened alone). Such bound morphemes can be conjoined to various words. This is what is happening in the word 'unhappy', where the bound morpheme 'un-' is prefixed to the word 'happy'.

H&L ask us to imagine a situation where some particular combination of the morpheme 'un-' and an adjective happens to never have been articulated. H&L suggest that this situation 'would hardly preclude this combination from being a word of the language. It may even be that in this scenario many people thought about using the word "unhappy" but decided against it, or intended to use it but never got around to it' (2011, 9). Thus, there must be unarticulated words as 'unhappy' is a word of English whether articulated or not, simply due to the existence of the morpheme 'un-' and the word 'happy'.

Indeed, they suggest this issue multiplies. As morphology is 'productive', we can imagine cases where the same prefix is added repeatedly. Just as 'anti-missile' exists due to the existence of 'anti-' and 'missile', so does the word 'anti–anti-missile', and so on. H&L, therefore, argue that not only are there unspoken words, but there are lots of them.

There are two responses that I want to make to these sorts of cases. The first concerns the distinction between a word being 'unspoken' and 'uninstantiated'. H&L's examples certainly seem to suggest a situation in which there are *unspoken* words. For example, no one has ever spoken an instance of the prefix 'anti-' repeated twenty times followed by the word 'missile'. But this might not mean that the word is *uninstantiated*, where instantiation of word need not require a person speaking the word. The word might be written, or, perhaps more likely, thought. If we allow that words can be articulated internally, then this would secure the existence of some articulations of many of H&L's morphology cases that purported to show the existence of *un*articulated words.

This response has limited success though. As H&L themselves pre-emptively point out, it is not clear that this could cover all cases. What about a combination of the prefix 'anti-' a million times, or a billion times, followed by the word 'missile'? Such cases may be unthinkable, at least in practice if

[1]What follows is admittedly a highly simplified description of the relevant morphological aspects of language, but it is sufficient for the purposes of this paper.

not in principle, and for the reasons they have given, this would still seemingly be a case of a word that exists and yet is uninstantiated.

H&L also point out that this sort of response might not save Kaplan's ontology due to Kaplan's commitment to the view that when a word stops being articulated it goes out of existence (2011, fn. 29). This seems correct as an argument against Kaplan, but it strikes me as being a good case for rejecting Kaplan's additional claim that words cannot have an intermittent existence, rather than being an argument for positing uninstantiated words. But let us leave that response there, and move onto the second, in my view stronger, response to H&L's morpheme cases.

H&L's argument rests on the idea that we can make true claims about uninstantiated words, like those mentioned above, and about words like 'unhappy' had it been the case that it had never been articulated. The intuition is that we could know what 'unhappy' means in a world in where only the prefix 'un-' and the word 'happy' have been articulated. We know what the prefix 'un-' does to an adjective that follows it, therefore even in that world in which 'unhappy' has not been articulated, we know some property of 'unhappy', and hence the word must still exist in that world.

It is worth first noting that while it is intuitive that we would know what 'unhappy' means in such a world, other real-world examples threaten that intuition. For example, consider the word 'horrible'. The word (roughly put) describes something or event as unpleasant or bad. It is an adjective that has its etymological roots in Latin. In English, Latin-derived adjectives can have the suffix '-fic' attached to them in order to express the production or causation of the thing specified by the initial element. This 'horrific' means to produce or cause something horrible.

The word 'terrible' is also an adjective that derives from Latin, and also (roughly put) describes something as unpleasant or bad. It too can have the suffix '-fic' attached to it. However, while 'terrific' can mean to cause something terrible, it also (perhaps even more commonly) is used to describe something good or great.

This example suggests that it is far from clear that we could a priori predict the properties of unspoken words. Armed only with the knowledge of the '-fic' suffix, we would fail to predict the difference between 'horrific' and 'terrific'. This casts doubt on the above claims about 'un-' and 'happy'. Can we be sure that the rules of use governing 'un-' do not vary depending on what element it is combined with? There is something of a Wittgensteinean rule-following spirit to this. While we *think* we know how these suffixes and prefixes work, there are real-world examples

that show the rules are not without exception, and hence H&L's claim that we can reliably predict the meaning of uninstantiated words, weakening the intuition that such uninstantiated words exist.

Moving on, even if we grant H&L their claim that we can predict the meaning of uninstantiated words, there remains a serious problem for their argument due to the distinction between *possible* words and *actual* words.

We can take it as given that there are some actual words. All of the words in this paper for instance are actual token words, and they are presumably tokens of some actual types.[2] Possible words, in contrast, do not have tokens – at least not in our world. This does not mean, though, that we cannot say something about such possible words. Just as we can imagine possible tables that do not exist, and make claims about the properties that they *would* have were they to exist, we can do the same about words. Indeed, I think that this is precisely what is happening in H&L's morpheme cases. They are cases in which we are making claims about what properties possible words *would* have were they to exist. They are claims about *possible* words, not *actual* words, and hence not about actual uninstantiated words.

To see this, consider an analogy with the periodic table of elements. When Mendeleev developed the first periodic table, he famously left many gaps within it. These gaps were for elements that he predicted might exist, but had not yet been discovered. Mendeleev was able to predict the properties of those elements through knowing the properties of other elements that had been discovered. But, now imagine a situation where Mendeleev's table predicted that there was some element, but it turns out that it did not exist. In such a case, would we think that the element still exists, albeit uninstantiated? If we follow H&L's reasoning, we would have to answer yes as, in virtue of the way in which Mendeleev constructed the table, we know some property of the uninstantiated element. However, this strikes me as an unwanted conclusion. We can certainly make predictions about the properties of possible elements (and indeed, Mendeleev made very good predictions), but we have no grounds to claim that those elements exist simply on the basis that we can make claims about what properties they *would* have were they to exist.

[2]Assuming we believe in the existence of word-types. Elsewhere I have argued against the existence of word-types (Miller 2021a), or at least that we should rethink what word-types are (Miller 2021b). However, in this paper I will grant that word-types exist, and hope to show that even those who accept word-types into their ontology should not accept uninstantiated word-types (or, at least not on the basis on morphological considerations such as these).

A similar story can be told in the case of words. H&L are right in their claim that even in a world in which 'unhappy' has not been instantiated, we might know what it *would* mean were it to be instantiated. Assuming that in that world, the rules of the prefix 'un-', and the meaning of 'happy' are known, we might be able to make predictions about what 'unhappy' might mean were it to be instantiated. But this does not mean that the word 'unhappy' exists. In that world, unlike the actual world, 'unhappy' is a merely possible word. It could exist, and that it is a possible word is sufficient to mean that we might be able to make predictions about the properties that it would have if it did exist. But there is no reason to posit the *existence* of the uninstantiated word.

The same goes for all morpheme cases. Let us assume that combination of the prefix 'anti-' repeated a billion billion times, and the word 'missile' has never been articulated in the actual world. This is a reasonable assumption on the grounds that to write or speak such a word would take a longer time than is humanly possible, and our finite working memory would mean that such a word also cannot be thought. Can we make predictions, though, about what this word would mean if it were instantiated? Yes, and those predictions are likely to be reliable precisely because morphology is productive, and the rules of use for the prefix 'anti-' are well established.

But this only secures the claim that we *would* know what it means if the word *were* to exist. To move from this claim to one about the existence of the uninstantiated word would beg the question against those that wish to deny that the world contains uninstantiated words. The morpheme cases alone do not secure the existence of uninstantiated words as we can just as easily explain our seeming knowledge of properties of uninstantiated words through taking them to be merely possible.

Some that accept the existence of uninstantiated words may argue that the possible existence of such words is enough to secure their existence by arguing that if words are abstract types, then, like all abstract entities, words exist necessarily. That some of these types have instances in the actual world and some only in possible worlds would therefore not impact the existence of the word qua type.

This response, though, would require antecedently accepting some form of Platonism, and would again beg the question against those that reject Platonic views, such as Kaplan (and myself). I think there are other additional reasons to reject Platonism, but whatever we think about those issues, we cannot use Platonism to argue for the existence

of abstract word-types, and then use the existence of those abstract word-types to argue for Platonism.[3]

To summarise, I have argued that H&L's morpheme cases are insufficient to show that uninstantiated words exist. This is, firstly, due to doubts that can be raised about our ability to reliably predict the properties of instantiated words. But, secondly, even if we do grant that we can predict those properties, this only secures us the knowledge of what some possible words *would* be like *were* they to exist, not to their actual existence. This is not an argument for Kaplan's ontology which faces other significant objections,[4] but it does support one (slightly adjusted) claim made by Kaplan: the world is not brimming with uninstantiated words.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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[3]Though see Irmak (2019) for an alternative view wherein words are abstract, created types. Irmak's view may be compatible with the conclusions in this paper given his rejection of the eternal nature of abstract words.

[4]Including, for example, a response H&L centred around the introduction of words into a language via description, which H&L provide against a possible solution to their argument that there are uninstantiated words (2011, 9–10). While this is part of the wider discussion around uninstantiated words in H&L's paper, I have not considered it here as the possible solution H&L suggests relies on aspects of Kaplan's wider stage-continuant ontology of words which I do not wish to defend. My response to H&L's core argument concerning uninstantiated words does not rely on any other aspect of Kaplan's wider ontology of words.