3.1.3: Semantic Disagreements

When two people disagree, the source of their disagreement might be that they are using the same term in two different senses. If they could clear up the ambiguity, their so-called semantic disagreement might end. Here is an example:

1st speaker: Since you’re from Brazil and speak Portuguese, you are not an American.

2nd speaker: We South Americans are as American as you North Americans, and I say you are an ignorant Yankee who will someday choke on your own conceit.

The first speaker is probably a U.S. citizen who believes that only U.S. citizens are "Americans." The second speaker uses "American" more broadly to refer to anybody from North, Central, or South America. Their disagreement is a semantic disagreement. More informally this is called a verbal disagreement, and the speakers are said to be "talking past each other." Semantic disagreements are disagreements about meanings, but substantial disagreements are disagreements about how the world is or about what should be done. Ambiguity is one cause of semantic disagreements, and clarifying the meanings of terms will often resolve that kind of disagreement. Substantial disagreements, such as whether U.S. citizens are more conceited than Brazilians, are much harder to resolve.