

Peer Review

Review of: "What's in a Name? On the Problem of Meaning-Change"

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1. Independent researcher

Dear Professor Meixner, your article is an eloquent introduction to the problem of meaning change. The first section of the article introduces the idea of a word having meaning by conventions that align the word's intension with an extension that can be factually represented. The second section then introduces the ways in which the alignment between intension and extension conventionally assigned to a word can change. First, the new and old meanings can be proper subsets of one another; second, they can come to intersect to some extent; and third, they can become disjoint. I reserve anything but praise for the analytical precision of these expositions because the tight scope of the paper still manages to give way to far-reaching conclusions about sociopolitical debates on the meanings of general names. Furthermore, I will also refrain from giving any suggestions in terms of formulation, as the paper bears the traces of an experienced writer.

Instead, I will try to provide some conceptual pushback regarding the proposals found in sections four and five. I think that addressing the three points that I raise in a convincing way will turn this four-star paper into a five-star one.

1. What is meaning change to conceptual engineering?

The first point concerns the article's silence regarding the elephant in the room: *conceptual engineering*. Still, this might be intentional, as already in the second section, you write: “(Note that meanings *in themselves* – being concepts, certain abstract entities – cannot change [...])” (p. 3). Conceptual engineering, on the contrary, specifically holds that it is *concepts* that change and can be changed. Following philosophers like Herman Capellen^[1] and Sally Haslanger, scholars have argued that there can be moral, semantic, and epistemic conceptual *amelioration*,^[2] which others call *adaptation*.^[3] Other forms of conceptual engineering are the instruments of conceptual *elimination*,

[4] and conceptual *introduction* or 'lexical expansion'.^[5] In short, all kinds of tweaks to intension and extension have been discussed and studied.

To support the claim that this is relevant for your article, let me sketch the connection with your three variants of meaning change. First, note the parallel between lexical expansion – the introduction of a new word (a neologism) for a new concept – with your meaning-change variant C – the new meaning becomes disjoint from the old meaning. Amelioration/adaptation, in turn, overlaps with variants A (there is a proper subset relation between the meanings) and B (the new meanings intersect, but aren't subsets) by changing concepts' intensions and extensions, for some reason or the other. So, including a contrasting dialogue with this body of work that so clearly parallels your approach to meaning change (but (apparently) deeply differs from it) will undoubtedly enrich this article. One way in which this can be done is to mention the paradigm of conceptual engineering and to name your reasons for setting up an alternative paradigm or preferring the terminology of 'meaning change'.

2. What are concepts, really?

The second point has to do with the construal of concepts as "abstract entities". While I will not, in my disagreement, *force* any other conception upon your work, I think devoting a paragraph of attention to the question "What are concepts, really?" will significantly strengthen the push of the article towards your view of meaning-change, as it strongly depends, in argumentation, on the role of phrases like "conditionally objectively true concept" (p. 6). Your abstract entities view namely differs from other possible views of concepts. For example, concepts are construed by some as *mental representations*. Yet others (as is more to my liking) construe what a concept is along the lines of an 'ability' one can possess, an enabler for thought and action. As Matthieu Queloz writes, concepts can be regarded as...

thinking techniques: as the norm-governed patterns according to which we move from perception to thought, from thought to thought, and from thought to action. In acquiring concepts, we learn to interpret and evaluate the world around us by forming bundles of dispositions to partition the world in certain ways and draw certain inferences about it, both in our minds and through our actions (p. 23).^[6]

When one lets go of the assumption that concepts are abstract entities, the idea of them 'changing' or being 'engineered' *can* be entertained fruitfully. Given the availability of alternatives, implementing their consideration or rejection into the article's flow will better ground your assumption that

concepts are abstract entities, which is a vulnerable aspect of your approach to meaning-change. Possibly, your view of meaning-change might be agnostic with respect to the nature of the concept (which it currently doesn't seem to be).

3. *The language-game of changing meaning*

Finally, I perceive a problematic train of thought in the content of 'Precept III' that you propose for rationally guiding meaning change. While the norms for meaning-change introduced up to the point of Precept III's introduction seem to me to be sensible, namely:

- (O) the semantic system shouldn't be made worse than it is;
- (I) often meaning-*distinction* is to be preferred over meaning-*change*; and
- (II) often meaning-*reform* is to be preferred over meaning-*revolution*,

the third precept for meaning-change lays down an arbitrary division line. This arbitrary division line is the descriptive/normative distinction. Precepts O, I, and II succeed in appealing to the higher utility of the resulting semantic system if adhered to, but Precept III introduces the respective inclusion or exclusion of moral considerations into the justification of meaning-change “if it is appropriate to include them” (p. 10). But appropriate to whom? To you, it might seem evident; to others, not so much. Although your track record as a philosopher hints at familiarity with the Wittgensteinian ideas I wish to put into connection with your Precept III to highlight its problematic nature and remedy it, I am still convinced of the fruitfulness of doing so. What I want to propose to you is that Precept III tries to lay down a rule of the designed language-game of changing meanings that is *arbitrary*, rather than that it fulfills the role of *hinge* along which the other aspects of the language-game are supposed to turn.^[7] The same thing can sometimes play the role of description and, at other times, the role of a norm.

Simply put, the enclosure Precept III subscribes to is too tight: can we hold, apart from in clearly *fossilized* uses of words, such as in the domain of mathematics that you repeatedly draw on (par. 655-657),^[7] that meanings are free from moral considerations? I think the cases of fossilized uses of words are *exceptions* rather than *exemplars* of the exclusion of moral considerations. I see an illustration of the problem in your application of the precept to the meaning-change of ‘woman’. Allow me to explain. Already in the second section, the recent meaning-change of type B of woman to something that intersects with the old meaning (i.e., some elements in the extension of woman are no

longer successfully named by it, whereas some items which previously were not elements of the extension now are) is classified as a change “*for the worse*”. As you explain later on (p. 12), this change is ‘for the worse’ because the general name “grown-up and XX-chromosomal complete human-being” that is the old meaning of woman has two components: a descriptive (“grown-up and XX-chromosomal”) and a normative component (“complete human-being”). Your argument depends on the idea that changing the descriptive component for moral reasons violates Precept III, i.e., it violates the “*purely biologically descriptive*” function of this component of the meaning (p. 14). However, as we go on, meaning what we do with the words we use, the *functions* that concepts have can change as well, in accordance with our underlying needs.^[6] So, who's to say that the functions of our concepts stay the same, e.g., that woman's old component ‘XX-chromosomal’ remains “*purely biologically descriptive*”? As the language-game of ascribing gender to humans has evolved, the rules of the game changed along with it. And possibly precisely because of the restrictiveness of the ‘XX-chromosomal’ for some social groups, moral considerations – that may up to that point *had not* been relevant to the meaning – became relevant. Even though we can still describe these individuals as having cells with XX-chromosomes, the placing in the concept of woman is a moral matter. What is also relevant to your argument is that this change in the moral valence of the function can be totally conventional as well, even if some, like yourself, find themselves to be outsiders to this convention. In conclusion, Precept III could be dropped, or the ‘appropriateness criterion’ should be revised so as to not boil down to any personal or esthetic preferences.

Conclusion

Disregarding these conceptual digressions and whatever you might take away from them, your conclusion in section five that “meaning-change [...] need not wait for justification” (p. 14) is elegant and spot-on. However, it doesn't follow that because it is *possible* that “*something else*” decides how conflicts between semantic systems are resolved, that “truth and rationality” cannot guide this “something else”, or are held for certain by some community. I ask you to chew on the question of whether it can be that “truth and rationality” are not disqualified, but work in a dynamic interplay with “something else” and the historical and psychobiological accidentalities of the human form of life.

To summarize, this paper's quality is undeniable. The only way I envisioned for improvement was via conceptual fortification on three points. Qua the general virtues of academic writing, I have nothing to

remark. If you somehow see to address the three points I raised, I imagine the quality and depth of the article's clear argumentation will be improved. Thank you for writing this paper, as it has proven to be welcome food for thought.

References

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6. ^{a, b}Matthieu Queloz. (2021). The Practical Origins of Ideas. doi:10.1093/oso/9780198868705.001.0001.
7. ^{a, b}Ludwig Wittgenstein. (1969). *On Certainty*. Blackwell.

Declarations

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.