

## Peer Review

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

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## Review of What's in a name? On the problem of meaning change

Expressions like *woman* or *tall* are true of sets of individuals. The precise membership of these sets is not generally relevant for semantic analysis: we can, and typically do, simply assume that they denote whatever they are true of, for a determinate speaker, or speaker community (which are definitely not the same thing). One might note, or just assume, that the extension of such predicates may not be absolutely clear for any one speaker (cf. *beech* and *elm*), and that the same predicate may be used as having different extensions within a community while remaining the same predicate; but this does not get in the way of semantic facts like, for instance, that *many women are tall* means that the intersection between the set of women (whatever it is) and that of tall individuals (however one may characterize the cut-off point between being tall and not being tall), consists of a number of individuals vaguely described as 'many'.

Various factors contribute to this sort of vagueness, and elucidating them is, of course, an interesting and useful pursuit. This paper, however, takes another and more original direction: it articulates a philosophically informed critique of noun meaning change over time. It does not just categorize different parameters along which a noun's denotation can change in time, but it also offers an argument for the view that such changes may be 'better' or 'worse': specifically, changes compatible with the existing network of semantic contrasts (by subsuming the previous meaning, and/or by relating the new one to it) are better on functional and epistemic grounds, and changes that do not involve unwarranted appeals to morality are preferable on moral grounds.

This well-reasoned reflection will stimulate further reflection on topical issues, as many political and social conflicts are framed in terms of what certain terms are claimed to mean, and who can authoritatively establish their applicability: what are the criteria for 'being' a woman/man, what is

‘democracy’ or ‘the free world’, but also what is ‘war’ and ‘genocide’. By itself, this is a good reason to engage with the views articulated in this paper. Aside from this positive but generic assessment of the paper as a valuable contribution, does it also develop a compelling argument?

My personal reaction is more nuanced in this respect. It seems to me that the author’s intention was not so much that of convincing readers that nouns ‘should’ change in a certain way rather than another, as that of stimulating readers to subject meaning changes (sometimes imposed by manipulative means) to a full-fledged philosophical critique. Changing the meaning of terms that are very important in one culture’s worldview is not an inevitable but harmless fact of life, but is something that can and should be debated rationally. In this respect, the paper makes a strong argument, which is particularly valuable because it purposefully skirts polemics and emotionally-tinged moral judgment.

In other respects, the argument here developed may still be stimulating, but it suffers from a form of schematism which makes it well-argued in abstract terms, but inadequate when applied to the actual phenomena in question. The main points of critical discussion can be stated as follows.

- The paper sets out to analyze changes in the meaning of nouns; but then the argument hinges on items like *primary thinker*, *chunk of gold*, and *complete human being*, which are not nouns. The difference is important: nouns (including compound nouns like *pickpockets* or *has-been*) differ from such expressions because they do not make explicit certain aspects of their meaning. What the author uses in some key passages are more akin to definitions, which express concepts by means of descriptions in a more or less compositional way. Meaning shifts in nouns are important precisely because they can alter a noun’s content without making this explicit, and often making available two quite distinct conceptualizations. *Human beings are animals* and *human beings are not animals* are both true, because *animal* is vague enough to encompass the senses ‘member of the animal kingdom’ and ‘non-human member of the animal kingdom’. This type of vagueness is common, as a consequence of the fact that many nouns have an extended and a narrower sense (*horse* as ‘horse’ or as ‘male horse’, *glove* as encompassing mittens or not). Other aspects of vagueness derive from the simultaneous legitimacy of a ‘scientific’, definition-based interpretation and a common-usage one, both equally real and legitimate: for example, few people would object to a plate of vegetables that includes mushrooms and tomatoes, although a strict ‘scientific’ perspective categorizes mushrooms as neither plants nor animals, and tomatoes as fruit). Finally, the precise meaning of ideologically connotated

(but no less legitimate) terms like *crime*, *god*, *tolerance*, or *ideology* strongly depends on one's background assumptions, and varies accordingly.

- Behind this lies a deeper problem: the paper seems to accept a definitional approach to the conceptual content of nouns, but this is only one way of circumscribing the semantic range of a concept, and arguably the least satisfactory one (cf. the overview by Margolis and Laurence 1999, dated but still very informative and useful). In addition, noun meanings do not necessarily correlate with that kind of knowledge one may wish to call 'concepts': *day* has quite different meanings as '24-hour period' and as the opposite of 'night', just as *law* does in its legal and in its non-legal ('systematic rule-like implication') sense; yet this seems to be a matter of polysemy, not homonymy, given the strong and obvious connection between the two. A certain ambiguity pervades the paper's argument, which focuses on changes in the conceptual content of nouns under the apparent assumption that a noun strictly identifies one such content.

- Although the conceptual content is what really matters, the argument is built on what nouns are true of; that is, on their extension (and derivatively, their intension). It is not a quibble to note that the two are not the same. A significant component of conceptual content is connotative, as it does not impinge on which objects satisfy the description but on the way the content relates to an underlying base of values, assumptions, and background knowledge. A notion of a 'complete' human being might rest on properties like having fully developed free will and on legal status; but in a different worldview, it could have relied essentially on the ability and the entitlement to carry arms, or on belonging to a group defined ethnically, culturally, or confessionally. The Greek *anthropos* and the Latin *homo*, both contrasting with the terms more narrowly meaning 'man as adult male', cannot strictly speaking be equated with a modern view of 'human being' (as in *les droits de l'homme*, or *die Würde des Menschen ist unantastbar*), because their ideological context was quite different, and the content (not limited to the extension) of a word is essentially determined also by its paradigmatic relations with other words, concepts, and background assumptions. Likewise, the contrast expressed today by the words *war* and *peace* has a conceptual content and conceptual associations quite different from those of a culture where small-scale raids were a normal part of life, and people lived in permanent semi-warfare (*war* historically goes back to the same Germanic term *\*werra* which surfaces in today's German (*ver*)-*wirren*). A famous passage in Seneca's *Epistulae morales* (book 5, letter 47) states 'they are slaves - in fact, they are men [*homines*, not *viri*]': their belonging to the category of human beings is stated to be compatible with a legal framework which made them

‘deficient’ human beings, but the statement of their humanity is informative: Seneca did not just reproduce a state of affairs, he made a point. Shifts in the conceptual content / meaning / extension of a term, in sum, are important, but they can’t be mapped precisely, because (i) nouns, as distinct from definitions, are *systematically* polysemous and the boundaries of their extension cannot be fixed in principle, and (ii) conceptual content, as distinct from extension, depends essentially on association and context. A distributional-semantic approach that mapped the shifting linguistic context of a term over time would usefully provide a sound empirical basis for this sort of study.

- The philosophical argument developed in this paper understandably schematizes the process that leads to a term being ‘reassigned’ a different content. But there are some respects in which this is an oversimplification. People don’t just ‘decide’ that A now means X instead of Y; these are sociocultural, indeed political dynamics which have a bearing on the way words are used. Often enough, it is a matter of power: a power group claims to have a proprietary use of certain sensitive terms and imposes its own interpretation on a wider community under pain of being socially (or legally) sanctioned. Using *fish* to loosely include cetaceans has no ideological or practical consequences; using *woman* one way or another decides, for example, on the assignment of Olympic medals, on military conscription, or on the destination of a prison inmate. Power is involved when the desired use is imposed by means of sanctions (legal, penal, or social). But there’s an essential twist: when the content of a term is set up, and possibly changed, as a deliberate power tool, it typically relies on the *previous* content to achieve its consequences. Consider the author’s example of *woman* re-defined as what he conveniently dubs ‘fem-emotional’. By itself, this change in the content and extension of *woman* needs not have any practical effects; these arise when the re-denomination makes possible new social (not emotional) behaviour, as newly-defined women are claimed to play the same social role as old-defined women. It’s this tacit reliance on the *older* concept that makes it possible to modify behaviour and social norms. Just setting up a new category (say, ‘fem-emotional’) labelled in the same way as an older category (say, *woman*) would have no practical effect until the full set of conceptual entailments, expectations, and assumptions of the older category are applied to the new one. In this way, a prison inmate who is a woman *qua* ‘fem-emotional’ may be detained among women *qua* biological females. Likewise, labelling *change* any new more stringent conditions unilaterally imposed by management has no practical effect until slogans like *embrace change* associate the new conditions with the positive content of the original term *change*, with its connotations of open-mindedness, progress, and change for the better.

It can be seen how easily what starts off as a programmatically 'dry' philosophical critique of noun meaning change slides into an ideologically-charged discussion. To my mind, the main merit of this paper lies in giving a philosophical handle on issues that involve subjective moral and ideological 'judgment', but are all too often disguised under a pretence of linguistic objectivity.

## **Reference**

Margolis, Eric and Stephen Laurence. 1999. Concepts and Cognitive Science. In E. Margolis and S. Laurence (eds), *Concepts: Core Readings*. Cambridge: MIT Press. pp. 3-81.

## **Declarations**

**Potential competing interests:** No potential competing interests to declare.