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Philosophica II

Words and Language

Book of Abstracts

Invited speakers:

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PHILOSOPHICA II

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BOOK OF ABSTRACTS

Institute of Philosophy
Maria Curie-Skłodowska University
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Our Languages, Other Languages, and Language

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Much philosophy of language is really the philosophy of how particular linguistic expressions and linguistic practices work. Nothing wrong with that! But a different kind of project focuses on the space of possible languages. What kinds of expressions can there be? What sorts of speech acts can there be? This latter project is philosophy of language as such. I here engage in this latter project, focusing on the possibility of semantically alien languages. I describe and develop this idea, present motivations, and discuss challenges.

Ordinary Words

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Contemporary metaphysical work on words started out as a tribute to commonplaces. The task was to articulate a metaphysics capable of accounting for ordinary judgments about wordhood and word sameness, and conformity to folk judgment remains to this day a factor in assessing the conceptual virtues of rival ontologies. A system that counts or individuates words in a manner we find intuitively alienating is judged, ceteris paribus, inferior to one that avoids doing so, and deviations from common metalinguistic wisdom are routinely perceived as requiring appropriate mitigation. For some time the enterprise developed largely in isolation from the language sciences. More recently, philosophers have begun to import into the discussion technical constructs borrowed from linguistic theory, and have proceeded to undertake metaphysical work on words on the assumption that the "words" at issue coincide with one of these theoretically legislated posits: grammatical words, roots, lexemes, and lemmas, to name a few. Disciplining the sortal by deference to the ontologies developed by descriptive grammars is a productive reflex, but the substitution risks shifting the debate to a different subject matter. I will try to reassess the situation and draw a conciliatory moral. We should distinguish two endeavors: one aimed at the foundational regimentation of the constructs supplied by descriptive grammars; the other aimed at the description of the ordinary category that underlies the expression of the commonplaces.

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Plenary Speaker Talks

Normativity, Necessity, and (Im)Possibility (and Words)

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Language is clearly normative – there is an important sense in which we ought to use words and other linguistic entities in certain ways. This normative element unpins various common everyday phenomena, from ensuring language's communicative function, to explaining intuitions about linguistic mistakes (of all sorts) to accounting for language acquisition. The aim of this talk is to begin to account for the normativity of language, within a bundle-nominalist metaphysics of linguistic entities. Along the way, I will also comment on various (semi-)related notions, including necessity and (im)possibility (and maybe language evolution, depending on timing).

No Doubt

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Philosophy has long been concerned with various doxastic and epistemic states, such as belief and knowledge, and numerous philosophers have examined what it is for a subject to believe or know something. Surprisingly, however, little work has focused on analyzing doubt, even though doubting is no less philosophically significant than believing or knowing. This talk does two things: it provides a novel account of doubt and investigates how doubt relates to certainty and knowledge. Along the way, I develop a new account of certainty and offer novel arguments showing that knowledge requires neither certainty nor the absence of doubt.

Inferentialism, Essentially Contested Concepts and the Case for Conceptual Teams

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The paper argues that the classical inferentialist outlook on the standards that rational agents are bound to when they draw inferences and apply concepts does not account for the distinction between rational and irrational disagreement. The lack of this distinction is traced back to the inferentialist's omission of essentially contested concepts, concepts that generate insoluble disputes among rational beings, and the role these play in our discursive practices. To make inferentialism more sensitive to disagreements that resist resolution by reasons alone then, the notions of local entitlement and conceptual teams are introduced.

Although the inferentialist takes the process of establishing meaning to be fundamentally tied up with difference of outlook, the classical inferentialist theory is nevertheless incompatible with essentially contested concepts. A tension arises with respect to how entitlements to commitments to material inferences that contain such concepts are transferred between participants in the game that is language. In particular, incorporating inferences containing essentially contested concepts into the classical inferentialist framework creates difficulties in understanding how the transmission of entitlements is meant to operate, since spaces of reasons occupied by essentially contested concepts can generate inconsistent courses for action for language users that are impartial with respect to attributing specific meanings to essentially contested concepts. The paper identifies four distinct strategies one could take to resolve the tension and ultimately rejects the principle that taking another player to be entitled to a commitment, and identifying this commitment as rational, generate a licensing to undertake this commitment oneself.

Thus, my proposed solution to this tension narrows the scope of entitlements by distinguishing between local and global entitlement. While global entitlement is understood to play a similar role to how entitlements are understood in the classical inferentialist model, local entitlement differs in that being locally entitled to reassert what another player has legitimately committed themselves to is only granted if one belongs to the same relevant conceptual team. Additionally, belonging to a conceptual team is taken to be endorsing a specific material inference containing an essentially contested concept. Throughout the paper these notions are developed, and I argue that while these concepts invite further development, they offer the most promising route to maintain core inferentialist commitments, while nevertheless accounting for insoluble disagreements between rational beings.

Indeterminacy Ascends

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Natural language is characterized by a high degree of indeterminacy: its expressions are vague, general, imprecise, ambiguous, elliptical, and open-texture. This familiar observation has a less familiar consequence. Indeterminacy need not remain confined to the object language; it can ascend to the metalinguistic level and affect the theoretical concepts by means of which we describe expressions, contents, and linguistic acts.

Consider, for example, the concept of denotation, understood as a relation between a predicate and its extension. Let $L_{\circ}$ be an object language containing the predicate $tall_{\circ}$. A homophonic semantic clause may then be written as:

$$a \in [[tall_{\circ}]] \text{ iff } tall_{\circ}(a).$$

($tall_{\circ}$ is the object-language predicate reused at the metatheoretical level in order to specify its own extension).

Suppose now that a is a borderline case for $tall_{\circ}$. Then:

$$\text{it is indeterminate whether } tall_{\circ}(a).$$

Hence:

$$\text{it is indeterminate whether } a \in [[tall_{\circ}]].$$

The indeterminacy has been projected from the object-language predicate into the metatheoretical claim about its denotation. Denotation is a general relation between expressions and extensions. If, for some expression e, it is indeterminate which objects belong to its extension, then it is indeterminate what extension *e* denotes. But then the denotation relation itself has indeterminate instances: it is not always determinate whether a given expression stands in the denotation relation to a given extension. In that sense, indeterminacy ascends from the object-language predicate to the metatheoretical relation of denotation itself. In other words: the vagueness of "tall" makes "denotation" vague as well.

This is the basic pattern of *meta-indeterminacy* (as I shall call the phenomenon). When a semantic theory specifies denotation by reusing, translating, or disquoting an indeterminate object-language expression, the resulting metalinguistic assignment inherits that indeterminacy. It becomes indeterminate not merely whether a is tall, but whether a belongs to the denotation of $tall_{\circ}$. Thus the theoretical concept of denotation is affected by the very indeterminacy it was meant to represent.

Analogous arguments can be given for a range of central syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic notions: *grammaticality*, *reference*, *truth*, *satisfaction*, *acceptability* (*of a sentence in a context*) etc. These examples point to a systematic phenomenon: indeterminacy is projectable within the hierarchy of languages. In the final parts of the paper, I shall discuss potential philosophical implications of meta-indeterminacy: its relevance for the methodology of semantics, conversational content-sharing and ontology of semantic properties.

Semantic Paradoxes Through the Lens of Graph Theory

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Semantic paradoxes concern the very concept of truth and the relationship between language and reality, showing that a language capable of speaking about its own propositions can generate contradictions. Since Russell, the pathology of the Liar sentence has traditionally been diagnosed as a matter of circularity, or self-reference. Yablo's (1993) infinite, non-self-referential sequence of sentences challenged this diagnosis by exhibiting genuine paradoxicality without any circularity in its structure – raising the question of what, precisely, a structural theory of paradox should look like once the naive slogan "paradox = cycle" fails.

This talk surveys the graph-theoretic or "geometric" research program built in response to that challenge. This approach to logical paradoxes consists of a set of formal methods that analyze paradoxical phenomena by examining structural patterns of references between statements using the mathematical theory of directed graphs (*digraphs*). I present the formal framework of reference graphs (*rfgs*) and characterize dangerous/precarious digraphs (Rabern et al., 2013) which reveal a structural difference between a paradox and a hypodox – the Truth-Teller and the Liar have the same reference graph, but different semantic behavior. I then trace Beringer and Schindler's (2017) full treatment for arithmetic with a primitive truth predicate *T* and semantic dependence defined in term of relevancy to the evaluation of a sentence (following Leitgeb, 2005) extend this picture to the infinite case. On this basis, they construct *rfgs* and propose their conjecture that the Liar graph and the Yablo graph are the only two irreducible sources of paradoxicality.

Finally, I discuss Hsiung's (2025) reply to this still-open conjecture, showing that self-reference and circularity-dependence turn out to be genuinely distinct notions, diverging in both directions, and every dangerous acyclic digraph is shown to contain infinitely many "social sentences." I conclude with a suggestion that this contribution captures the very idea behind the conjecture.

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Word Coincidence

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Ordinary objects coincide. I coincide partly with my left leg and wholly with the fusion of my atoms. Words are a particularly curious class of objects. The aim of this paper is to examine word coincidence, i.e. the view that words are objects that can coincide with other objects (just like ordinary objects do). The first aim of the paper is to argue that there are good reasons to think that words coincide. Firstly, examples of word fission (Hawthorne & Lepore 2011, p. 483-484; Liebesman & Magidor (MS)) should convince us that words coincide just like in other cases of fission known from the literature (e.g. on person fission). Secondly, words are tolerant but not hypertolerant: they can change their meaning and 'shape', but only up to a point. The recent solutions to puzzles of tolerance generated by tolerant but non-hypertolerant objects (Dorr, Hawthorne, Yli-Vakkuri 2021; Yablo forthcoming) rely on the existence of multiple coinciding objects. If the analogous puzzles are to be solved in the same way for the case of words, we should accept word coincidence. The second aim of the paper is to explore the models of word coincidence and argue for a particular model of word-coincidence based on semantic plasticity and derived from Yablo's (forthcoming) view of ordinary object coincidence. Lastly, the paper aims to explore the consequences of accepting word coincidence for the ontology of words.

Are Bald-Faced Lies Performative Declarations?

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This paper develops an account of bald-faced lies as performative declarations. This is done by examining how bald-faced lies serve as counterexamples to the traditional propositional account of lying. To do so, this paper introduces the traditional propositional account of lying and then presents bald-faced lies as a counterexample to the intention to deceive condition of this account of lying. Then three types of response to this kind of counterexample are spelled out: lies are not deceptive, bald-faced lies are deceptive and bald-faced lies are not lies. Reasons concerning the prima facie wrongness of lying and the nature of deception are given to favour the last kind of response to the other two. Subsequently, Keiser's view of bald faced lies as not lies is explained, with the functional role she purports bald-faced lies to have being brought into key focus. Keiser's view of bald-faced lies is that they are moves in a language game with merely locutionary content. Their function is to alter the outcome of language games in spite of evidence, without making a move in a conversation. Keiser's view is challenged by the fact that this merely locutionary characterisation of bald-faced lies is ill equipped to explain the functional role she purports they play. I argue that in order to function successfully as moves in a language game, bald- faced lies must possess illocutionary content as performative declarations. An analysis of these kinds of illocutionary acts is given and shown to fulfil the functional role Keiser gives. With this, I expand on Keiser's view to develop an account of bald-faced lies as performative declarations. On this account, bald-faced lies are able to alter the outcome of language games as they have power as declarations. The kind of power they possess is reflected on with a key distinction introduced between harder and softer forms of power. Comparisons are then drawn with Melkonian-Altshuler's 2024 account of political bald-faced lies. Three possible challenges to this view are examined and shown to not undermine the account: bald-faced lies do not alter reality in the right way in order to qualify as declarations, this further illocutionary move is unnecessary and this new account is too restrictive. Subsequently, this paper concludes that bald-faced lies are not lies as understood by the traditional propositional view of lying but instead are performative declarations.

Coordination Without Language: Why Lewisian Inductive Inference Fails to Explain the Emergence of a Unique Language

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The Sender-Receiver game formalized by Lewis (1969) models signaling systems as a convention: an arbitrary solution to a coordination problem. Language, on Lewis' account, is thus a shared signaling system within a population. Its emergence is explained by the capacity of agents for inductive inference, that is, the ability to adjust future behaviour by drawing conclusions from past outcomes. Argiento et al. (2009) apply the Roth-Erev learning algorithm to the game to model minimally rational agents that gradually adapt their behavior on the basis of past experience. They prove that the resulting stochastic process converges almost surely to one of the two optimal signaling systems. I extend their result by applying the Roth-Erev algorithm to a role-reversal variant of the original game, in which roles are not fixed but randomly reassigned at each interaction: the purpose of this extension is to model more realistically ordinary linguistic practice, in which the same individual both produces and interprets signals. I prove that the resulting stochastic process converges almost surely to one out of four equilibria. Two correspond to unified signaling systems, in which a single convention emerges. The remaining two are mismatched signaling systems, in which the two agents stabilize on opposite conventions depending on which role they occupy. These mismatched equilibria arise from the role-specific structure of reinforcement learning: since agents independently update the behavioural dispositions associated with each role, what is learned in one communicative role does not transfer to the reverse. If we take the role-reversal game to be a more realistic model of communicative interactions, the emergence of mismatched equilibria reveals a limitation of the Lewisian thesis: inductive inference can explain how signaling conventions stabilize within a role, but does not by itself guarantee the emergence of a shared, unique language across a population. What is missing, I argue, is a mechanism by which agents recognize communication as a joint action-–what Gilbert (1990) calls we-intentionality, the capacity to constitute themselves as plural subjects of a shared goal. Only in this way can agents recognize communicative roles as mutually exchangeable. This interpretation is supported by the empirical work of Tomasello (2010), who identifies the skills and motivation for shared intentionality as distinctive foundations of human communication, as opposed to non-human primates. Shared intentionality allows each participant to hold both roles simultaneously within a single representational format. This bird's-eye view is precisely what makes the roles interchangeable.

In Some Respect

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It is common to talk about what is the case in some respect or pro tanto. An outfit may be elegant in some respect even if an excessively conspicuous logo makes it inelegant overall. Or, even if it is not wrong overall for a starving person to steal food, doing so is still wrong in some respect.

Remarkably little attention has been given to what it means to be P in some respect. Yet such talk is pervasive, especially in ethics and aesthetics. My aims are the following. Firstly, to argue that this is a general metaphysical problem that has slipped under the radar. Secondly, to show that some natural solutions are inadequate. Thirdly, to propose a tentative road forward.

The problem has clear analogues in central debates about the metaphysics of modality and time. In general, things can be P in some respect without being P overall. Similarly, what is possibly P need not be actually P and what was or will be P need not be P now. Our metaphysics should account for what is the case in some respect, just as it should accommodate the merely possible, the past and the future.

Yet doing so is a difficult task. Two natural solutions provide at best partial answers. The first is that to be P in some respect, as opposed to overall, is to be P in virtue of a part. It is natural to say that a photo is red in some respect because it contains a red spot. However, this view cannot account for many cases. An artwork can be balanced overall without having balanced parts.

A second suggestion is that an object is P in respect of Q just in case if the object were not Q, it would be P to a lesser extent. Again, this analysis is not fully adequate. An artwork's merits and defects can depend on the same properties so that they stand or fall together. For example, the same features that make an object dynamic may make it garish. If so, then it may be that the object would be aesthetically better if it were not dynamic.

I conclude with my suggestion: that to be P in respect of Q is for Q to contribute positively to the degree to which the object is P.

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Referring without referents?

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Hanks says that the content of 'Mercury' is **Mercury**: roughly, the act *referring to Mercury*. Hanks' theory is ambitious: he says that it can be extended to solve the problem of empty names (Hanks 2015, chap. 6). I will make a *semantic* and a *metasemantic* argument against the ambitious, extended act-type theory.

Semantic argument

The semantic content of the empty name 'Vulcan', **Vulcan**, is an act-type of referring, but not an act of referring to anything. One might object that all acts of referring are acts of referring to something. However, someone might reject that premise, and offer some theory of what an act of referring that is not an act of referring to something could be. One option, given Hanks' background theory of acts, is that **Vulcan** is a super-type of acts such as *referring to Neptune*. This reply has a cost: it must be accepted that there are acts that are super-types of some other acts that can be performed without performing at least one of the sub-types. An alternative option is to say that **Vulcan** is an act of referring to something, an 'object of thought' in, e.g., Crane's sense (Crane 2013). This reply reduces the ontological plausibility that was supposed to motivate the theory.

Metasemantic argument

Any theory must say why a name has its content. The act-type theory has three ways to do that. The content of 'Neptune' is **Neptune** because:

1. Neptune is the referent of 'Neptune'.
2. People who use 'Neptune' are referring to Neptune.
3. People who use sentences in which 'Neptune' occurs express propositions that are true or false partly depending on Neptune's properties.

None of 1–3 can be true of 'Vulcan'. 'Vulcan' has no referent, there is nothing that people who use it refer to, and there is nothing that is involved in the truth conditions of the proposition (if any) expressed by sentences in which it occurs. One reply is that 2 is viable if there is an object of thought that users of 'Vulcan' can refer to. As well as the cost of accepting objects of thought, this reply commits the act-type theory to 2. This generates problems:

1. At least according to Kripke's formulation of speaker's reference, someone speaker refers to something with 'Vulcan' only if they believe that it is the referent of 'Vulcan' (Kripke 1977). So, this defence of the extended act-type theory applies only to people who have (according to that theory) false beliefs.
2. Even if the belief requirement is removed, this theory collapses the distinction between speaker's reference and semantic reference.

Deceiving through Worldbuilding – Propaganda in Fiction

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How can fiction, understood as works of literature, film, etc., can be used to further propaganda or to deceive the audience? Hardly anyone doubts that works of fiction can be used to convey a worldview or an ideology, often implicitly. However, much like in the case of paradox of fiction, there is a tension between the fact that fictional statements do concern actual world and that they can influence the beliefs of the audience. Moreover, despite the fact that evaluative statements present in fiction are not readily interpretable as relating to the actual world, works of fiction can influence the worldview of the audience.

In this talk, Currie's concept of fiction author – a theoretical entity constructed by the audience and used in interpreting the statements in the work of fiction – is used to explain how it is possible to make sense of fictional deception, with the focus on propaganda.

The issue of deception in fiction has been primarily analysed in the context of the possibility of lying and/or deceiving, taking a sentence as a unit of deception. In contrast, the claim is that it is possible to deceive through worldbuilding, by construing a fictional author with a set of assumptions which are not readily interpretable as fictional. This makes deception though fiction possible even if one is unable to identify a singular deceptive sentence.

Using this framework, an analysis of deceitful worldbuilding in fiction is put forward. This informs an understanding of one crucial example of ideology-spreading fiction – propaganda. Propaganda is often understood as a deliberate attempt to convince a group of people of a proposition without rational argument. Treating is as such, an explanation how it can be realised through the works of fiction is provided.

Misogynistic meaning change: patterns of linguistic derogation of women

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In this talk I focus on the patterns of meaning change processes of expressions denoting women, specifically, when an originally neutral expression gains derogatory connotations. I provide an overview of what early feminist work on gendered language contributed to the study of androcentrism in language and linguistic derogation of women (Lakoff, 1975; Schulz, 1975; Spender, 1980; Moulton, 1981; Cameron, 1985). I analyse examples of the meaning change of several gender-specific terms which started as neutral or positive and underwent gradual pejoration, showing that these changes reveal sexist perspectives encoded and enforced by linguistic practices. I identify three types of examples: word-pairs where the meaning of the feminine term is derogatory and its masculine counterpart is not; terms that were originally gender-neutral but turned gender-specific and derogatory; words that were terms of endearment applicable to women and gained derogatory meanings.

Lakoff (1975) provides examples of masculine and feminine word-pairs where there is a clear asymmetry between supposedly analogous meanings, like in „master" and „mistress", „bachelor" and „spinster". Moreover, many words denoting women at some point were euphemisms for „prostitute" --- among the examples are occupational terms like „maid", kinship terms like „niece" or „cousin", and even words like „queen" and „princess". Their masculine counterparts, however, were spared the pejoration. The second type of examples are words that originally were gender-neutral. Words like „whore" (which originally meant „a lover of either sex") or „harlot" (which originally meant „a fellow of either sex" and was more often used to refer to men than to women), however, became derogatory terms for women. The third type of examples relates to the semantic change in terms of endearment for women. Schulz (1975) shows the pattern of gradual pejoration using the meaning history of the word „tart", meaning a small pastry. It was first applied to young women as a term of endearment, eliciting connotations of sweetness. Later it was applied to women who were sexually desirable, then it became a derogatory term applied to „promiscuous women" or prostitutes.

I will argue that these examples of meaning change show us two things. First, men are regarded as superior to women --- even when the word-pairs are originally equally neutral, the feminine ones gain derogatory connotations while the masculine ones don't. Second, women are primarily seen as sexual objects --- even when a word is neutral it often gains sexual connotations. Both these points connect with androcentrism in language in that we treat men as the norm, the paradigmatic person, and women as outliers, defined by their gender, their desirability, and their potential as sexual objects for men.

The Vague Designates of Proper Names

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This paper develops an objection to Kripke's account of proper names as rigid designators by introducing what I call the "problem of the vague designate." According to Kripke, a proper name designates the same individual across all possible worlds in which that individual exists. However, the metaphysical basis of such cross-world identity remains insufficiently explained within the Kripkean framework. While Kripke rejects descriptivist criteria of identification, his account nevertheless presupposes that we can determinately track one and the same individual throughout modal space. I argue that this presupposition becomes unstable once we consider sorites-style sequences of minimally varying possible worlds.

To illustrate the problem, consider an actual individual --- for example, Aristotle --- and imagine a series of worlds W_0, W_1, W_2 ... W_n, where each successive world differs only minimally from the preceding one: a microscopic biological variation, a slight temporal displacement in birth, a marginal alteration in environmental history, and so forth. Between adjacent worlds, there appears to be no principled basis for denying transworld identity. Yet after sufficiently many iterations, we eventually reach cases in which the application of the name "Aristotle" appears deeply indeterminate. The Kripkean therefore faces a dilemma. Either cross-world identity itself admits of borderline cases, or there exists a sharp metaphysical cutoff determining identity despite the absence of any articulated criterion capable of grounding it.

The central claim of the paper is not that rigid designation is false, nor that classical descriptivism should be revived. Rather, the argument targets what may be called the unjustified determinacy of Kripkean rigidity. Kripke's semantics assumes that, for every possible world, there is always a determinate fact of the matter as to whether the name "Aristotle" refers to a given individual in that world. However, the theory does not adequately explain what grounds this determinacy once descriptive criteria of identification are rejected. As a result, rigidity appears to depend upon an implicit and insufficiently theorized conception of transworld identity.

I further argue that the causal-historical theory of reference cannot by itself resolve this difficulty. Causal chains may explain how reference is fixed within the actual world, but they do not by themselves explain how a particular individual is to be identified across merely possible worlds. Consequently, rigid designation seems to rely on antecedently assumed criteria of modal identity and similarity even while officially rejecting descriptivist accounts of reference.

Slurs: Words or Articulations?

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Stojnic and Lepore (2021; 2025) have recently argued that, when it comes to explaining the toxicity of slurs, it isn't really the words themselves that matter. Instead it is the canonical articulations of slurs---mere patterns of sound or shape---that trigger toxic effects; and so, explanations of slurs'toxicity must be articulation-based rather than word-based. S&L argue for this conclusion on the basis of the "inheritance phenomenon" (2025: 86-87), which involves slurs' canonical articulations triggering the toxic effects typically associated with slurring words even when those words are not strictly present. This points towards a radical conclusion: since mere articulations have no linguistic meaning, yet are sufficient to trigger the toxic effect characteristic of slurs, it follows that there can be no adequate meaning-based explanation of the toxicity of slurs.

The above discussion sets the stakes, but the focus of this paper is on the question of what really triggers slurs' toxic effects, i.e., whether it is the words themselves or their canonical articulations. It's a hard question to answer, since words are typically realized via their canonical articulations and since no slurs in English are perfectly homophonous with any non-slurring word. In the first

part of the paper, I examine the cases that S&L use to tease apart slurring words and their canonical articulations. They give us two kinds of cases: one where we get the articulation, but not the word (as in the inheritance phenomenon) and another where we get the word but not its canonical articulation (as in the case of a mispronounced slur).

Next, I argue that we do better to look at corpus data from Warriner et al. (2013) and discussed in Mandelbaum et al. (2024), alongside further experimental results from Mandelbaum et al. (2024). Looking at the English language in general, it turns out that slur-rhymes (or words that come close to sharing an articulation with slurs) tend to have a more negative "feel" than non-slur-rhymes. However---and quite surprisingly---this fact turns out to be explained by high prevalence of velar

plosives in slurs and slur-rhymes, not the resemblance of slur-rhymes to slurs per se. On the whole, then, these data support the conclusion that slurs' canonical articulations don't generally inherit the toxicity of the words they are often used to realize---and therefore that word-based accounts of slurs can be safely pursued, even in light of S&L's arguments to the contrary.

Words and Abstracta in Object Theory

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The metaphysics of words is a complex field, with ongoing discussions concerning individuation, types and tokens, along with variations of distinct accounts, including platonistic, continuant, bundle, and originalist approaches, among others (see, e.g., Kaplan, 1990; Wetzel, 2009; Gasparri, 2016; Irmak, 2019; Miller, 2021). Where much of the discussion has centered on familiar expressions, relatively little has been said about merely possible words, or words that have not been instantiated, or that could never be instantiated (cf. Hughes, 2023). The aim of this talk is to introduce one way of approaching the subject through a Meinongian interpretation of Edward Zalta's Abstract Object Theory (1983; Bueno & Zalta, 2017).

Following a basic reconstruction of the approach, a simple way of talking about words is introduced, together with stronger and weaker variations. This amounts to treating words as abstract objects that encode various properties, and which may or may not have mirror objects that not only encode but exemplify these properties, along with the property of existence. Given a largely unrestricted domain of abstract objects, we can find any number of abstracta to serve as uninstantiated words, alongside a finite set of actual words. The simple nature of this picture allows for the modelling of mere possibility, as well as for modelling various different positions in the literature, allowing them to be articulated or mimicked within the framework, including Wetzel's (2009) Platonistic position or Kaplan's (1990, 2011) continuant position.

Following this reconstruction, some of the internal issues with the supporting object-theoretic approach are discussed – including how we select the relevant properties, how we conceptualize change over time, as well as implications for how we distinguish possibility and impossibility. This is ultimately intended as a workshopping discussion, exploring the viability of object theory as a means of developing a Meinongian approach to the broader discussion on words.

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Can Natural Properties Constrain Reference?

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David Lewis's reference magnetism holds that the objective naturalness of candidate meanings functions as a metasemantic constraint on reference: use underdetermines the correct interpretation, but more natural properties are more eligible as referents and thereby win by default. Naturalness grounds eligibility, eligibility constrains referents, and the two together jointly determine the correct interpretation. The thesis has been invoked to answer Putnam's model-theoretic argument, Quine's inscrutability of reference, and Kripke's rule-following paradox. This paper argues that naturalness cannot play the metasemantic role Lewis assigns to it.

The argument proceeds in three stages. I begin by reconstructing Lewis's account of reference-fixing and situating reference magnetism within the broader debate on referential indeterminacy. I then turn to Lewis's proposed solution to Kripkenstein's rule-following paradox. Lewis argues that naturalness is a genuine metaphysical constraint rather than a merely epistemic heuristic, and so is not immediately vulnerable to Kripke's objections to similar proposals. I accept this point but argue, following Merino-Rajme (2015), that Lewis's solution nonetheless fails: even if naturalness fixes reference metaphysically, it cannot explain how a speaker is guided in future applications of a term. Lewis's account can at best be an answer to a different kind of sceptical challenge, as it implicitly accepts the Kripkensteinian conclusion about private language.

The central contribution of the paper concerns a different and more general class of counterexamples. I argue that the phenomenon of semantic narrowing, in which a word's meaning becomes more specific over time, sometimes shifting from a more to a less natural referent, is systematically incompatible with reference magnetism. Taking 'meat' (from any solid food to edible animal flesh) as the main example, I show that such referential shifts occur without any corresponding change in the underlying naturalness ranking, and without any feature of speakers' behaviour that could, by Lewis's own lights, defeat the presumption in favour of the more natural interpretation. This generates a dilemma: either negative dispositions of use suffice to shift reference, in which case the appeal to naturalness is idle, or they do not, in which case reference magnetism predicts the wrong referent after semantic narrowing.

I conclude by considering two weakened readings of Lewis's proposal: reference magnetism as an account of referential ease and as an interpretation heuristic. I argue that both fail for related reasons. Naturalness cannot therefore serve as a full-blown metasemantic constraint, a measure of cognitive accessibility, or a useful guide for the field linguist.

Individuating Proper Names

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Kaplan (1990) famously challenged the traditional type/token model of words (see e.g., Devitt 1981, Recanati 1993), in particular in connection with proper names. Instead, he put forward his common currency conception, according to which proper names understood as singular referring expressions are individuated by reference-fixing acts and chains of transmission. Such common currency names are contrasted with generic names which as such are multiply applicable and non-referential. Although Kaplan takes himself to be proposing a theory of "metaphysics of words" (1990: 95), his method of individuating proper names lacks a metaphysical explanation of what it is that enables reference-fixing events to play such individuating roles.

In my presentation, I will propose an alternative, metaphysical model of individuation of proper names, which, although it bears similarities to Kaplan's ideas, provides the much-needed metaphysical explanation of proper name individuation. I will argue that proper names are identity-dependent upon their referents and explore the viability of two plausible ways of construing this dependence relation by making use of distinct notions of ontological dependence proposed by Fine (1995) and Lowe (1998) respectively. I will suggest that Lowe's notion is more apt for capturing the link between the name and its referent, as it enables us to explicitly appeal to the crucial role that a function of naming plays in an act of reference fixing. I will show how this model enables us to account for the transmission of the same name by means of continuous exploitation of the dependence of the name upon its referent.

Having presented the model, I will answer a charge of indistinguishability of different names of the same entity. According to this objection, even though the dependence-based mechanism can plausibly explain away the alleged one-to-many relation that holds between names and referents, it collapses the many-to-one relation (an entity can be a bearer of many different names), into a one-to-one relation where all proper names of a given entity are equivalent. I will propose that we can account for the many-to-one relation between names and referents by adhering to Lowe's notion of essential identity-dependence and distinguishing between a general notion of a naming function and its particular instances as applied during reference-fixing events.

I will conclude by discussing some advantages that such a distinctively metaphysical explanation of proper name individuation carries both for metaphysics and for semantics (pace Mahant's 2022 criticism of the common currency model).

The Semantics of Event Schemas

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Recently, there has been a surge of interest in how reference is fixed in episodic mental representations, that is ones arguably representing events. This includes i.a. recent work on episodic memory (Openshaw, Michaelian, & Perrin 2025), as well as imagination (Langland-Hassan 2024). In this talk, I provide a proof of concept for an account of reference-fixing in one subtype of imaginings that has so far not received much attention, namely episodic future thinking, standardly defined as the 'capacity to imagine or simulate experiences that might occur in one's personal future' (Schacter, Benoit, Szpunar 2017).

The question is pressing not only because, contrary to some suggestions (Debus 2014), such mental states should not be seen as (at least always) lacking singular reference   after all, I can episodically picture my tomorrow's conference talk as going badly, only to be later proven wrong by my surprisingly good performance, something possible only if the original future thought was about that particular talk---but also because none of the three standard approaches to reference can straightforwardly account for the phenomenon.

Causalism fails for the simple reason that an event that remains in the future cannot exert causal influence on present mental states. Descriptivism fails as well, depending on the version: either because getting one thing wrong about the future event would lead to reference failure, or because, when construed in terms of closest or best satisfaction of representational content, it becomes ad hoc, difficult to formulate precisely, and liable to generate predictions that conflict with intuitive verdicts. Finally, intentionalism fails, among other things, because it would allow, contrary to intuition, a representation closely resembling, say, a tennis match to refer to my tomorrow's conference talk, provided the subject so intended.

In the positive part of the paper, I propose therefore a hybrid framework that avoids the shortcomings identified for these 'pure' approaches. I also tentatively outline how my account can be realized via specific mental structures, such as event schemas (Ghosh & Gilboa 2014), and demonstrate how this proposal aligns with broader empirical evidence regarding the formation of episodic representations.

What's your type? Skeleton categories as structural ontologies

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Type theory structures the combinatorial behavior of meaning-bearing expressions and thus provide a formal ontology for natural language semantics. However, any account of types faces a prior epistemological question: what makes two expressions the same type? This paper proposes a category theoretic answer with both foundational and empirical significance.

The two most influential traditions adopt very different assumptions about typehood (cf. Sutton 2024). Simple type theories (STTs), originating in Church's typed lambda-calculus and developed in Montague grammar, assume a small inventory of basic types (e,t,s). Rich(er) typed theories (RTTs), inspired by Martin-Löf's intuitionistic type theory, allow fine-grained typing in which propositions themselves are types. STTs achieve compositional simplicity but rely on an implicit identity-based criterion: expressions sharing a syntactic position are assigned the same type. This becomes problematic when expressions with clearly distinct structures occupy the same environment, as with the complements of forget.

(1) She forgot ...
  a. the taste of oysters/her glasses
  b. to bring her laptop charger
  c. that 2+2=4
  d. whether it would be sunny in New York
  e. why Casey didn't call her back

However, type-shifting, the standard response in STTs, leaves open the question of how initial types are determined and, accordingly, what motivates the direction of the shift.

The proposal developed here replaces the identity-based criterion with a structural one grounded in category theory (cf. Mac Lane 1998, Riehl 2016). Rather than assigning expressions single types, we examine their distribution across combinatorial roles. Each expression is associated with the set of types under which it can compose with other expressions. Two expressions are treated as isomorphic and thus as belonging to the same type iff they share the same such distribution. The resulting equivalence classes form the objects of a skeletal category of types, with morphisms corresponding to meaning predicates, thus respecting compositionality.

This approach offers three advantages. Formally, it provides a principled middle ground between the rigidity of STTs and the proliferation of RTTs. Epistemologically, it grounds typehood in patterns of combinatorial interaction rather than in stipulation. Empirically, it explains when type-shifting is warranted and in which direction: shifts are motivated precisely where distributions partially overlap, making the account directly relevant to the analysis of natural language data.

Whether or not types also carry non-formal ontological weight, a question this framework deliberately leaves open, the equivalence classes defined here bear a structural resemblance to the kinds of semantic objects Moltmann (2024) carves out on independent grounds, a convergence that invites further investigation.

Words, Concepts, and the Paradox of Analysis

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Some influential solutions to the paradox of analysis share a common structural feature: they recast a puzzle about the identity of concepts as a puzzle about the synonymy of expressions. This paper argues that such solutions effectively transform the paradox into a version of Mates' puzzle, and that this transformation changes the subject rather than resolving the original problem. I propose an alternative solution - grounded in laws of concepts - that preserves the conceptual character of the paradox while explaining how analysis can be necessarily true and genuinely informative.

The paradox of analysis asks how a statement such as 'a vixen is a female fox' can be informative, given that, if correct, it expresses a necessary identity between concepts - and should therefore be no more informative than 'a vixen is a vixen'. Several prominent solutions locate the source of informativeness in the semantic properties of expressions rather than in the nature of concepts (e.g., Church 1946; Carnap 1947), thereby addressing a puzzle about substitutivity and synonymy - Mates' puzzle - rather than the paradox of analysis itself. The two puzzles differ in modal profile: the identity asserted in a correct analysis is necessary, whereas facts about the meanings of expressions are contingent. An account that explains informativeness by appeal to contingent semantic facts does not address the same problem.

I argue that the paradox requires a solution that operates at the level of concepts without reducing to claims about expressions. Drawing on a generalization of the Best System Account of laws of nature (Lewis 1973), I propose that just as 'water is H_2O' expresses a law of nature, 'a vixen is a female fox' expresses a law of concepts - an axiom of the best systematization of the conceptual domain. On this account, informativeness is explained not by a difference in the meanings of expressions, but by the role the analysis plays within a theoretical structure that balances simplicity, strength, and explanatory power. Both 'a vixen is a female fox' and 'a vixen is a vixen' are necessarily true, but only the former has the status of a law. The distinction between laws and non-laws thus does the explanatory work that differences in sense or intension were meant to do - without collapsing the paradox of analysis into Mates' puzzle.

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Modality, Semantic Rules, and the World

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There's a growing interest in deflationary and neopragmatic approaches in several branches of philosophy. An important view that stems from such approaches and justifies their assumptions is modal normativism, which explains modal discourse as expressing semantic rules rather than tracking modal facts (Thomasson, 2020). Despite its virtues, modal normativism is often criticized for allegedly inviting anti-realist consequences and for failing to explain how modal knowledge, and thus metaphysical theories, are constrained by the world (Dohrn, 2025; Mallozzi, 2023).

In the talk I argue that these worries arise from a mismatch of explanatory expectations and a misunderstanding of the kind of epistemological explanation that modal normativism offers. My aim is to show that modal normativism is not in danger of anti-realism by presenting how it can meet the core expectations of its critics. I argue that while modal normativism primarily provides a functional and justificatory account of modal discourse, critics implicitly demand a causal explanation of how semantic rules are acquired, since the constraining role of the world can be formulated within modal normativism precisely in causal terms.

In response to these worries I show that the causal account of semantic rule acquisition that satisfies these needs is present in modal normativism, although not explicitly discussed. I then discuss this process by drawing on theories of norm acquisition combining the insights concerning the nature of semantic norms given by Sellars (1954) and Brandom (1994), and the non-representational framework on cognition provided by the ecological psychology (Chemero 2009; Rietveld, Kiverstein 2014). I argue that these frameworks provide a well-justified causal explanation of how we acquire semantic rules, according to which such rules emerge from our knowledge about affordances that might be understood as a precondition to brandomian pre-normative, world-involving abilities to reliably and differentially follow patterns of interaction within the world. As I show, this identifies the causal constraining role of the external world as arising from the space of available interactions an agent takes part in. I argue that making this story explicit rules out the anti-realist worry by restricting possibilities in two ways: first, via socially stabilized linguistic actions, and second, by anchoring norms and accepted modal claims in the agent's available interactions within an environment.

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Words and Dynamic Concepts: An Austinian Metasemantic Perspective

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This paper has two main aims. First, I develop an Austin-inspired model of dynamic concepts that combines two perspectives: Meaning Eliminativism (ME) and Dynamic Conventionalism (DC). Second, I draw on Austin's fourfold model of assertion to explain how dynamic concepts are used, stabilised, and modified in discourse.

The talk is organised into two parts. In the first, I outline a metasemantic framework that integrates ME and DC and introduces the notion of dynamic concepts. According to ME --- often understood as a radical form of contextualism (Recanati 2004, 2005; Jaszczolt 2016) --- words do not possess abstract, stable meanings; rather, they are associated with histories of use that feed into context-sensitive processes of meaning construction. From the perspective of DC, linguistic conventions can be modelled as lineages of precedents (Millikan 2005), that is, chains of past uses that function as projectable guides for future lexical applications. Importantly, such precedents both constrain and underdetermine new uses; as a result, each act of following a convention involves what Sbisà (2023) calls interactional negotiation. I argue that this dynamic perspective reconciles eliminativism about meaning with the view that language use is a convention-governed practice. On this account, concepts expressed by words can be represented as evolving sets of projectable semantic standards that guide and constrain their future applications.

In the second part, I develop Austin's (1953/1979; cf. Fiengo 2017, 2020; Fiengo and McClure 2002; Sbisà 2024) model, which distinguishes four types of assertion --- Calling, Describing, Exemplifying, and Classing --- realisable in utterances of the form I is T, where I identifies a particular and T names a type. I account for the differences among these assertoric acts by specifying the procedures governing their performance. To this end, I treat them as situated speech acts in Jacob Mey's (2001) sense, that is, as acts afforded by particular conversational contexts. I suggest that, in enacting a given procedure, speakers navigate a range of options afforded by the discourse situation. As a result, these four types of assertion are subject to distinct criteria of evaluation and are performed by invoking different procedures---understood as configurations of felicity conditions in Austin's (1975) sense. I use the resulting model to characterize the roles these assertoric acts play in stabilising, negotiating, and transforming dynamic concepts.

Gay Silence

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Gay silence is a communicative strategy aimed at concealing one's non-heterosexual identity and avoiding being outed. Rather than straightforwardly confirming or denying the assumptions at play, the speaker manages the conversational exchange so that the topic of sexual orientation becomes sidelined. In doing so, gay silence exploits ordinary conversational expectations, while subtly subverting them in order to protect one's privacy and minimize social, professional, or physical risks.

Consider the following example from an interview with Jodie Foster:

Interviewer: Do you have a steady boyfriend?

JF: No. No, I don't have time. ...

Interviewer: What kind of fella would you like, really? ...

JF: Huh... I don't know. I suppose I would like somebody who understood my business.

The interviewer wrongly presupposes that Foster is interested in having a boyfriend, thereby establishing heterosexuality as the unchallenged background norm of the conversation. Foster does not correct the interviewer; instead, she responds as if she were considering a male partner in the future.

We propose that gay silence exploits a previously undiscussed type of accommodation (cf. Lewis 1979) that we label substitutive accommodation: the speaker neither accepts the original presupposition nor openly blocks it nor remains silent, but instead guides the exchange toward a weaker, substitute content. More formally:

Substitutive accommodation occurs when, rather than adding the speaker's full presupposed content p to the common ground, the hearer introduces a weaker proposition p*---an entailment of p that is conversationally relevant but does not entail p---through a lexical substitution in their response, thereby preventing p from becoming officially established in the common ground while maintaining the surface appearance of cooperation.

In the example above, the interviewer presupposes that Foster is interested in a male partner (p). Foster responds by replacing the gendered terms "boyfriend" and "fella" with a gender-neutral term "somebody" (p*). Other neutral substitutes, such as "partner" or "spouse," would serve a similar purpose.

The use of substitutive accommodation has several consequences. First, it renders the resulting communication only superficially cooperative. By answering the interviewer's questions, Foster aims only to appear cooperative: she deliberately conceals her sexual orientation by steering the conversation away from terms like "boyfriend" and "fella," thereby maintaining a public image consistent with heteronormative expectations. Gay silence can thus be seen as a form of strategic speech rather than a cooperative exchange of information (cf. Keiser 2023; Berstler 2025; D'Ambrosio 2025). Crucially, this form of strategic speech is defensive in nature, and its primary function is to conceal one's non-heterosexual identity while tacitly maintaining consistency with heteronormative expectations.

Second, substitutive accommodation creates a defective context, i.e., one in which the participants' presuppositions diverge (Peet 2021). In our example, Foster deliberately leaves the interviewer and the audience with a false belief about what is on the official record (cf. Camp 2018), i.e., that Foster is considering a male partner. To achieve this, Foster steers the conversation so that the interviewer and the audience interpret her responses as addressing a question about a potential male partner. Not only does Foster have to navigate the conversation carefully, but she must do so in a smooth and natural way (cf. Berstler 2025). A delay longer than usual in answering may betray information that one wants to hide, or be read as a sign of insincerity.

Expressive-Relativism about Expressives and Assessment-Sensitivity

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Expressives are words that help us express our inner states and attitudes, such as anger, fear, pain, delight, surprise and so on. They range from interjections like "oops" and "ouch" to more loaded terms like "damn" or "fuck", and to pejoratives like "jerk" or "asshole". While some expressives have been thought to have descriptive content, generally they have been found puzzling for traditional, truth-conditional semantic approaches, in that they also pack an "expressive punch": using an expressive seems to be more potent, and able to produce harm in their targets, than any of its descriptive paraphrases. Additionally, expressives can be used in attributive position ("That fuckhead Jeremy forgot the turkey.") or in predicative position ("Jeremy is a fuckhead.")

In this paper, I engage with Berškytė's (2021) recent proposal to tackle predicative uses by postulating -- following a tradition starting with Kaplan (ms), and continuing with Potts (2007), McCready (2010), Predelli (2013), Gutzmann (2015), etc. -- two levels of content: a descriptive one, cashed out in terms of truth-conditions, and an expressive one, cashed out in terms of use-conditions. Motivated by disagreement and retraction data concerning expressives and in contrast to previous views, Berškytė takes the descriptive content of expressives to be assessment-sensitive (MacFarlane (2014)), thus solving the challenges such phenomena pose for rival views.

I think Berškytė's approach is on the right track, but insufficient insofar as it doesn't explain a further puzzle: namely, that people don't only take those with whom they disagree concerning expressives as being descriptively wrong, but also as having the wrong attitude towards their targets. However, a slight modification of the view that takes not only the descriptive content of expressives to be assessment-sensitive, but the expressive content as well, is better suited in this respect. The bulk of the paper is dedicated to two ways of spelling out the view proposed: by relying on a reinterpretation of the traditional notion of use-conditions (as not being tied to the speaker's attitudes, but to the assessor's) and by forging a novel notion dubbed "assessment-conditions", on a par with, but different from, the more traditional one. I then provide some support for this view by presenting a precursor (Orlando & Caso's (2024) view about some aesthetic thick terms) and by showing how it can also be applied to slurs. The resulting picture is of a highly economical theory with a wide range of applications, witnessing both the fruitfulness of the assessment-sensitivity framework and its relevance for socially-relevant expressions.

Revisionist reports report commitments

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This paper is about revisionist attitude reports (“RRs”; Recanati, 2012; Blumberg & Holguín, 2018; Blumberg & Lederman, 2021; Tancredi & Sharvit, 2022; Benbaji-Elhadad, 2023, Mayr&Schmitt, 2024; Deal 2025), like the following one:

Vegan: Ann thinks that every vegan has to supplement B12. Bob says to his vegan friend Carol, whom Ann has never met or heard of in any way: “Ann thinks you have to supplement B12.”

The report is striking because Bob attributes to Ann a belief about a person she is unaware of. Its felicity goes against the intuitive idea that true belief reports should accurately describe the content of the ascribee’s belief state. In this paper, we report the results of two online survey experiments on revisionist reports which suggest the phenomenon is more systematic than some recent theorists have suggested.

In study 1, we show that participants accept a wide range of revisionist reports, based on various inference patterns (universal instantiation, disjunctive syllogism, modus ponens, exportation). This puts pressure on theorists who want to deny that revisionist reports are felicitous (e.g., Recanati 2012).

Study 2 shows that RRs obey a general asymmetry constraint; they are felicitous when, as above, the ascribee believes a major premise which is updated with the contribution of a minor premise, but infelicitous when the information contributed by each respective agent is reversed, like in the following report:

Reverse-Vegan: Ann thinks that Carol is a vegan, but doesn’t know anything about vegans. Bob believes that every vegan has to supplement B12, so he says to Carol: “Ann thinks you have to supplement B12.”

Leading theories of RRs, such as those from Blumberg & Lederman (2021), Tancredi & Sharvit (2022) Benbaji-Elhadad (2023), and Mayr & Schmitt (2024), fail to account for the asymmetry we found. Their models suggest that revision involves merging the information held by various agents into a single corpus from which to conduct inference, treating all information in the resulting corpus on a par.

We sketch an alternative theory that breaks the symmetry. On our account, revisionist reports express reportee’s unacknowledged commitments (Brandom, 1994), rather than what they “would believe if they were a part of our conversation, and knew what we know” (Blumberg & Lederman, 2021, p. 760).

Words as an insight into the conceptual sphere: Comments on the relationship between puns and linguistic worldview

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This paper explores the relationship between wordplay and the linguistic worldview theory developed by Jerzy Bartmiński (2009, 2012), arguing that puns may constitute a valuable source of insight into human conceptualization and culturally embedded cognition. While puns, understood "as two strings of thought [...] tangled into one acoustic knot" (Koestler, 1964) are often treated as marginal or purely humorous phenomena, this study proposes that they reveal latent conceptualizations encoded in language and expose the motivated coexistence of multiple conceptualizations within a single lexical form. In other words, they can provide "access to the conceptual sphere, to the realm of ideas and images important in a given culture" (Bartmiński, 2009). Drawing on examples based on the verge of homonymy/polysemy — such as the English word right, which simultaneously denotes spatial orientation ("not left") and evaluative correctness ("proper" or "true") — the paper demonstrates how puns can be useful in reconstructing the worldview.

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