Criticizing Language
Dangers, Deficiencies, and Conceptual Engineering

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ABSTRACT   In this paper, I consider a number of philosophical critiques of language and describe how their criticisms compare. In particular, I discuss how the current trend in the philosophy of language known as conceptual engineering fits into this tradition and to what extent it can be considered a critique of language per se, rather than a method of addressing dissatisfactions with certain individual terms. I suggest that philosophical criticisms of language can be divided into allegations of two types of shortcoming: dangers and deficiencies. In the category of dangers, I consider some well-known examples from the history of philosophy, and suggest that they partly rely on an unexpressed form of Linguistic Determinism. I then move on to the deficiencies highlighted in the critiques offered by Wittgenstein in the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, and Mauthner in his Contributions to a Critique of Language. These form a pair of apparently opposite ways of considering the flaws in language, but I shall argue that they have much in common. I then describe the conceptual engineering movement and its mission to provide "improved" meanings of certain terms. I show that implicit in the assumptions behind conceptual engineering are criticisms of language of both varieties—current meanings are seen as dangerous as they represent a threat to social justice, and the system of allocation of meaning is seen as flawed and in need of external intervention.

KEYWORDS   Conceptual Engineering; Critique of Language; Wittgenstein, Ludwig; Mauthner, Fritz; Linguistic Determinism

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> The way that can be spoken of
> Is not the constant way;
> The way that can be named
> Is not the constant name.
> Lao Tzu

1. Introduction

As a bad workman blames his tools, so philosophers—the workers in language *par excellence*—are apt to turn upon the medium of their own craft and consider it a poor thing: insufficient, imprecise, and in need of repair. Wittgenstein famously stated in the Tractatus (henceforth TLP) that "All philosophy is a 'critique of language'" (4.0031), and though a critique is not yet a criticism, there is an ongoing theme within philosophy that if only language could be made to behave itself properly, if only it were not quite as it is, advances might be made in our reason and understanding. Wittgenstein describes this as "our feeling that once we have a sign-language in which everything is all right, we already have a correct logical point of view" (TLP 4.1213). The irony from which the writings of no sage can be extracted, no matter what depth of wisdom lies behind them, however, is that the only form of expression available by which those ideas may be transferred to the unenlightened is that very language which they hold to be inadequate. Lao Tzu was clear that the Tao could not be spoken of, but what was he to do but speak of it?

This applies with even greater urgency to academic philosophers who are not at liberty to talk in riddles and paradoxes (although we may have doubts about Wittgenstein on this point!) in the hope that some ray of comprehension reaches into the minds of their readers. In a discipline where every point must be made with the utmost precision, a lack of faith in language to accomplish that task is a serious drawback. Wittgenstein's acknowledgement at the end of the Tractatus that those who have followed him will understand that the words of the work itself are largely without a proper grounding, and are but a ladder to the next level of comprehension, is an honest, but ultimately damaging admission: if the words of the Tractatus do not make Wittgenstein's point, what was the good in writing them? If they do, then the language that it is written in seems not to be so deficient after all.

In this essay, I shall consider several "critiques of language," including Wittgenstein's and Mauthner's, to which he refers in passing, and then discuss how dissatisfaction with language is the driving force behind the modern trend of "conceptual engineering," the cornerstone text of which is entitled "Fixing Language." Cappelen's naming of his book in this way

is perhaps the most explicit sign of the general philosophical dissatisfaction with a language which appears to be broken; and while he is sceptical himself as to their likely success, the title also implies that it is the task of philosophers to make the necessary repairs.

I shall argue that these criticisms can be divided into two varieties of supposed flaw: dangers and deficiencies. In section 2 below, I give examples of the former, where elements of language are held to draw the unwary into errors, and, in section 3, I discuss critiques which are based on the nature of the system of language itself and its inadequacy to do that which we ask of it. In section 4, I discuss conceptual engineering and claim that its assumptions contain inherent criticisms of language of both types, thus placing it within the long tradition of philosophical language critique. This is not, however, a contribution to the history of conceptual engineering or a description of how it developed from earlier theorising: the aim is to place the trend in context, not to describe its genesis.

I conclude with the suggestion that attempts to correct language are ultimately misplaced and misdirected. I shall assert that while language users are often drawn into error by the surface structure and hidden eccentricities of language, it is the users who are to blame, not the words. Much as a tidy house will soon fall to messy confusion merely through the process of being lived in, so too would an ameliorated language quickly slip into disorder and conceptual disarray once left in the hands, or rather the mouths, of its speakers. In short, I shall suggest that a companion volume to Cappelen's work might be offered with the title "Fixing Linguists" and that such a project would likely meet with an equal chance of success.

2. The dangers of language

This is not a work in the history of philosophy and I shall not attempt to find the earliest occasions on which philosophers questioned the efficacy of their means of expression or raised doubts about the ability of words to express the truth and not lead us into error. I suspect that criticism of language is as old as language itself and a dissatisfaction with its present state has presumably been one of the main drivers of its development from the first words to the heavy tomes of today's dictionaries. Rather, I mention here three examples of the ways in which language has been looked upon with a certain degree of suspicion, highlighting the dangers towards which it may be thought to lead us. These dangers are of false reasoning, false understanding, and false valuing.

The first of these is found within the tradition of work on the "fallacies of language." This can be taken to begin in earnest with Aristotle's

division of Sophisms into those related to language and those others, in the Sophistical Refutations. Of the 13 threats to correct reasoning which he identifies, 6 are found to be rooted in language, coming from its structure, its semantics, and its expressions. This is not to say that language is to blame for sophistry, more that the nature of language is such that sophistry can easily be achieved through its manipulation. Language is to be watched and examined lest it lead us astray. Writers on fallacies ever since have included certain "fallacies of language," most often concerned with vagueness and ambiguity, though not usually with such prominence (see Hinton 2021, ch. 8) and in recent times the linguistic nature of many fallacies not previously placed in this category has been brought to light.[1]

Undoubtedly, the fallacy of language which is of most relevance in a discussion working its way towards a consideration of conceptual engineering is that known as Persuasive Definition. This was originally defined by Stevenson as changing the "descriptive meaning" of a term without changing its "emotive meaning" (1944, 210). That is to say, that such definitions change what is denoted by a word without changing the attitudes or behaviour directed towards what is so denoted. For example, when legal systems began to recognise that non-consensual intercourse within a marriage could be called "rape," the range of what was denoted by that term was broadened, but the consequences of committing rape were unchanged. In argumentation, persuasive definitions are often linked to fallacies of equivocation where the same term is used with two different meanings within one argument, whether by design or through confusion (Hinton 2021, 2024).

Change to the extension of the term "rape" is a good example too to illustrate the difference between the two attitudes towards definition which Schiappa (2003) draws as an important prelude to his deeper discussion: definitions can describe how a word is used or how it ought to be used. Dictionaries seek to do the former, conceptual engineers, as we shall see, the latter. Changing definitions of "rape" have not sought to better describe how the word is used, but to delineate how those advocating them believe it should be used. Schiappa is very much on the side of the activists here: "definitional disputes should be treated less as philosophical or scientific questions of "is" and more as sociopolitical and pragmatic questions of "ought" [with] greater emphasis on the ethical and normative ramifications of the act of defining" (2003, 3). This attention to the consequences of acts

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1. See, for example, (Tindale 2007; Visser et al. 2018; Schumann et al. 2021) on the Straw Man fallacy.

of definition obviously introduces questions of value—what are positive ramifications and what negative?—and, potentially, leads to the danger of one interlocutor imposing values surreptitiously on another. There is also a danger of interlocutors misunderstanding the nature of the definition being offered: they may take it to be a description of facts of use, when it is not intended as such, or a description of essence—the supposed "true" nature of some concept—when it is not that either.

This view of definitions is clearly in opposition to the essentialist position which asserts that there is a true nature to a particular phenomenon or concept and that the best definition is the one which most closely describes it. As Schiappa puts it: "most questions of the form "what is X?" are asking not "How do we use the word X?" but instead are asking what X *is* in reality" (2003, 6; original emphasis). This he links to the Platonic position on the true essence of things. One does not have to take a position on Plato's forms to see that there is scope for confusion here when the two questions "what is X?" and "what does X mean?" are taken to be the same, not to mention the possibility of "what should X be?" and "what should X mean?." This is an issue we return to later in section 4.

A different concern, representing a particularly serious form of a fallacy of expression, can be found in the work of George Berkeley. He considered the doctrine of abstract ideas to be at the root of all manner of misconceptions, and blamed language for the belief in their existence. Having confidently concluded that they are an impossibility, he states further: "we have traced them to the source from whence they flow, which appears to be language." He does acknowledge that "words are of excellent use" but notes that "it must be owned that most parts of knowledge have been strangely perplexed and darkened by the abuse of words, and general ways of speech in which they are delivered" (Berkeley 1988, 49). Put simply, "had there been no such thing as speech or universal signs, there never had been any thought of abstraction" (Berkeley 1988, 47), and much confusion would have been avoided. The merits of Berkeley's arguments need not concern us here: our interest lies in the fact that language is portrayed as a danger for its users, drawing them into errors in their thinking and obstructing the pursuit of knowledge, all the while there being no other medium for its distribution.

A similar point is made by Mauthner: "Most people have the weakness to believe that, since a word is present, it must be a word for something, and that, since a word is present, something real must correspond to it" (1901–2, Vol. 1, 159), and less radically by Arne Naess: "the existence of some concept term in no way guarantees that something falls under that concept" (1966, 67). Mauthner uses the term "word fetish" and I have referred to this

phenomenon elsewhere as the "fetishisation of language" and labelled errors of reasoning stemming from it as "Concept fallacies" (Hinton 2021, Ch.11). There is a difference, however, between errors of reasoning, with which Aristotle was concerned, and the errors of understanding which Berkeley is discussing: believing that one thing follows from another because language implies a connection is not the same as believing that certain entities exist because language refers to them. Both Berkeley and Naess[2] seem to be saying that familiarity with linguistic items can have an impact on how we see reality: there is a tendency, they feel, amongst speakers to assume that words do have reference and do reflect the world around us. Thus, how language portrays the world is how we believe it to be.

Another problem stemming from language and leading to philosophical error and confusion is also one which takes us closer to the type of critique offered by conceptual engineers. It comes from the Utilitarian philosophy of Jeremy Bentham. He notes how philosophers have obscured the connection between pleasure and the good by referring to the latter as "the honourable, the glorious, the reputable, the becoming … in short, any thing but pleasure" (Bentham 1962, 42). In this way, they have excluded goods which are considered "the gross; that is, such as are organical [but] cherished and magnified the refined" (Bentham 1962, 42). The criticism of language here, then, is that it is open to manipulation, through euphemism and suggestive connotation, and, although Bentham does not elaborate on this, there is a suggestion that this has an effect on the thinking of the populace similar to that later described as linguistic determinism (Whorf 1956, Wolff and Holmes 2011). By excluding physical pleasures from conceptions of the good life, philosophers have, according to Bentham, allied themselves with the religious in promoting an asceticism that leads to misery; whilst, of course, providing those of "elevated" tastes with ample opportunity to condemn their fellow men for their carnality. There is a very real consequence to this abuse of language in the lives of the population and the moral rules by which they are expected to be conducted. For women, in particular, physical pleasure has often been equated with sinfulness, and even for men, the directions such pleasure can take have been strictly limited. There is little doubt that a great many homosexual people have been forced into lives of miserable abstinence in even secular societies because what for them brought pleasure did not coincide with the "honourable," the "reputable" or the "becoming" of the age.

Bentham's complaint is closely related to the question of authority in defining and redefining words or concepts: who has the power to do so and

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2. For Mauthner's views see section 3.2.

on what basis? There is, as C.S. Peirce pointed out, an "Ethics of Terminology" (1958), what Oliver refers to in his discussion of that work as "a right and a wrong way of naming things" (1963, 238). Peirce is keen to stress the importance of continuity of use for the preservation of knowledge and understanding in the sciences, but it is of equal importance in any linguistic community. Whether there can be good social reasons to disrupt this continuity by deliberating imposing new meanings on common words is a difficult question, considered briefly in section 4.

These three examples suffice to show three philosophical worries about how language can lead us into error: by affecting our reasoning, our understanding, and our values—in short, our thinking. The following section discusses rather different criticisms of language—its deficiencies and limitations as a system for the expression of meaning.

3. DEFICIENCIES OF THE SYSTEM

As the opening citation from Lao Tzu shows, the idea that language is, as a system, simply unable to express certain important ideas is not one which suddenly appeared at the beginning of the twentieth century. There are, however, two influential critiques of language which arrived at that time and mirror one another in fascinating ways, making seemingly opposite claims about what language can and cannot do. As the author of the later of them, Wittgenstein, referred specifically to the work of the first, Mauthner, in order to distance himself from it, it is clear that he knew that work and must, therefore, have been aware of how his own thought was like a negative image of the German's.

3.1. Wittgenstein

Wittgenstein's approach is very different from that of the conceptual engineers, and his inclusion here is not to be taken as a suggestion that he is a direct forerunner of that movement. What they have in common is the idea that an improved language can have significant positive consequences—in his case clarification of philosophical puzzles, in theirs, usually, a fairer society—by removing certain difficulties which the common language has introduced or solidified in the minds of its speakers. Whilst it is true that Wittgenstein is focussed on the more specialised use of language by philosophers and the engineers seek a wider influence, the essence of their intention is the same: deficiencies in language hold back progress.

Wittgenstein discusses two very different languages in the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus and the unsuspecting reader might be tripped up by this. One is the ideal, logical language in which the propositions expressing

the facts of which the world is built are formed, and the other is language as we know it. His purpose is to describe the former and critique the latter. In his introduction to the TLP (Wittgenstein 1974), however, Bertrand Russell writes confidently:

> The essential business of language is to assert or deny facts. Given the syntax of a language, the meaning of a sentence is determinate as soon as the meaning of the component words is known (TLP, x).

The first statement reads as though it applies to language in general, the second can only be true of an ideal language in which context plays no part. There is some uncertainty here as to whether the ideal language is an improved version of what we currently have, better able to fulfil its "essential business," or a quite separate entity to be used about facts and only facts.

In this paper, we shall not go deeply into Wittgenstein's theory of the logical sign-language, or how it relates to the work of Frege and Russell: we are, rather, interested in what he has to say about the shortcomings of language as we know it, and as philosophers had used it thitherto.

Some of what he says falls more into the category of dangers. In 3.323 he bemoans the imprecision and ambiguity of everyday language, where one word can have multiple meanings and two words "are employed in propositions in what is superficially the same way." He concludes that: "3.324 In this way the most fundamental confusions are easily produced (the whole of philosophy is full of them)."

Thus, like those thinkers cited in section 2, he believes that linguistic representation can lead us astray in our philosophical understanding. This leads on to the deeper accusation in 4.002 that "language disguises thought" and the claim that "Philosophy aims at the logical clarification of thoughts" (4.112). The nature of the relationship between language and thought is too large a topic for us to address here, but clearly, now we are dealing with a more systemic deficiency which stems from the fact that the "outward form" of language is not designed to reveal the shape of the thought but for "entirely different purposes" (4.002). These purposes of the form of language are not elaborated on, but we can understand that much greater interest is paid to them in the Philosophical Investigations (Wittgenstein 1953); perhaps it is they that allow us to play so many language games with the same lexicon and grammar. The important problem for Wittgenstein's project with language as we usually employ it is made explicit in 4.003: "Most of the propositions and questions to be found in philosophical works

are not false but nonsensical." It is not that ordinary statements are wrong, it is that they make no sense—they have no meaning.

This brings us to Verificationism, which is a theory of meaning rather than language. Towards the end of TLP, Wittgenstein makes some broad statements about the nature of language and its relation to philosophy, and, in particular, its shortcomings. Much of this concerns what cannot be said:

6.5 When the answer cannot be put into words, neither can the question be put into words.
The riddle does not exist.
If a question can be framed at all, it is also possible to answer it.

This thought is central to the Verificationalist ideas of meaning developed by the Vienna Circle and is expressed at greater length by Moritz Schlick:

We must say that a question is meaningful, if we can understand it, i.e., if we are able to decide for any given proposition whether, if true, it would be an answer to our question. And if this is so, the actual decision could only be prevented by empirical circumstances, which means that it would not be logically impossible. Hence no meaningful problem can be insoluble in principle. If in any case we find an answer to be logically impossible we know that we really have not been asking anything, that what sounded like a question was actually a nonsensical combination of words. A genuine question is one for which an answer is logically possible. (1936, 352).

As one expects, Wittgenstein's version is terse, elegant, and not particularly clear. Obviously, things which sound like questions—riddles, if you like—do exist. Schlick explains why they are not genuine questions, on the basis of the central tenet of Verificationism that: "The meaning of a proposition is the method of its Verification" (1936, 341). It is not that we cannot say that which cannot be verified, it is that we cannot say it meaningfully.

Both Schlick and Wittgenstein think that a lot of the questions we ask, especially but not only, in philosophy are simply meaningless. The problem is that their linguistic form makes them look like genuine questions. Schlick ends his essay by stating that philosophy's "troublesome problems arose only from an inadequate description of the world by means of a faulty language" (1936, 369), putting him too very much in our tradition of critics of language. It might be the case that the conceptual engineers, who are discussed below, would say the same about the troublesome problems of society.

The inability to express certain things meaningfully is why Wittgenstein states that "it is impossible for there to be propositions of ethics" (6.42) and "It is clear that ethics cannot be put into words" (6.421). Obviously, ethical concerns are very often expressed in words, but Wittgenstein is suggesting that such statements are not truly meaningful; language is not suited for making them. This is a great deficiency. It does not mean, of course, that we can have no ethical discourse in our everyday language—we can and we do—it is only to say that such discourse could not take place in the logical language, and, therefore, could not be part of any meaningful description of the world.

Over the final four sections of the work, Wittgenstein introduces a series of major comments on the nature of language and how it relates to his writing. 6.522 states that: "There are indeed things which cannot be put into words. ... They are what is mystical"; while 6.53 famously advises philosophers "to say nothing except what can be said, i.e. propositions of natural science—i.e. something that has nothing to with philosophy"; in 6.54 he describes his own foregoing propositions as "nonsensical"; and finally in 7: "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence."

Taken together, his claim is that all questions of philosophy fall into the category of mystical things which cannot be verified so cannot be put into words meaningfully: thus, any propositions of philosophy are bound to be nonsensical, and should be avoided. Just like Lao Tzu, however, that conclusion has not stopped him writing at length in such propositions.

3.2. Mauthner

For Mauthner, the main shortcoming of language is that it is fundamentally unsuited to the description of reality. The ideal logical language is an impossibility. Language is metaphorical, poetic, and fitted to express our experience of the world, but not its unfiltered truth. In his view: "The insufficiency of language as an instrument of knowledge is due to its failure to refer precisely" (Bredeck 1990, 47)—an apparent failure which looks very similar to Wittgenstein's complaint at 3.323, described above.

As with Wittgenstein, this is both a comment on the deficiencies of language and a warning to us who look into language that we should not take what we find there to represent anything more than an individual's subjective human experience. As a result, for Mauthner, not only does language not describe reality, it cannot even describe our perception of reality in a way which might be understood by others, since meaning is

a result of experience and each of us has different memories, rendering true communication impossible.[3]

Mauthner's key work, his "Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprach," or Critique of Language, was first published in three volumes in 1901–2. It remains unpublished in an English translation, and English language scholarship generally starts with reference to a short paper by Gershon Weiler (1958)[4]. Weiler notes that, for Mauthner, "Language is something which has to be transcended in order to be understood" (1958, 80) and cites his analogy which is so strikingly similar to that of Wittgenstein at the end of the TLP:

> If I want to ascend into the critique of language, which is the most important business of thinking mankind, then I must destroy language behind me and in me, step by step: I must destroy every rung of the ladder while climbing upon it. (1901, I, 2)

This need to destroy language in order to understand reality, while at the same time using language in one's ascent into the light, is another way of expressing the dilemma of Lao Tzu—the truth cannot be spoken, but can only be got at through speech. Unfortunately, climb as we might, our attempts are doomed to failure: "what we get at every new step is nothing but words" (Weiler 1958, 80). And so, while language functions as a crucial part of our mental life and the construction of our own psychological reality, it has no contact with anything more: "in language only memories can be kept, but no knowledge can be formed" (Mauthner 1902, III, 535).

Mauthner's work is dense and complex and there is no room to do justice to his thinking here. His work on metaphor and the psychology of language has been influential in literary criticism[5] and his notion of language as a "Gesellschaftsspiel," a "social game," foreshadows the Wittgensteinian "language game" concept. At the same time, Elizabeth Bredeck (1990) points to the "discrepancies," "contradictions," and "tension" between the different elements of his work. This is bound up with the essential problem that philosophy cannot be conducted otherwise than in language, and is, therefore, a poor tool for the analysis and clarification of that language. Mauthner, like Wittgenstein, sees philosophy as "kritische Aufmerksamkeit auf die

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3. For an interesting discussion of how Mauthner's thought relates to that of Franz Brentano on these points, see (Seron 2021).

4. Weiler later published a book on the topic (1970). Translations of citations are either my own or from Weiler.

5. Particularly in reference to Borges, Joyce, and Beckett. See, e.g., (Skerl 1974; Dapia 2006; Carrera de la Red 2008; Kager 2018).

sprache" or "critical attention to language" (1901, I, 705) and he "argues that the real subject matter of philosophy is language" (Bredeck 1990, 41), but he does not see any possibility that a logical language of the empirical sciences can be constructed to describe the facts of the world. The difference between them is summed up by Weiler: "M[authner].'s silence is more desperate than the one Wittgenstein commended at the end of the Tractatus. Wittgenstein confined his remark to those subjects whereof one cannot speak; according to M. we should not speak at all" (Weiler 1958, 85).

Their critiques, therefore, though related, are different. For Wittgenstein the question is where to draw the boundary between what can and what cannot be spoken of meaningfully, forms of language hide thoughts and do not match with reality, but these may be untangled in a logical language for factual propositions. For Mauthner, the root of language in human experience and memory, makes it inherently unsuited to bear truth or yield knowledge.[6] This is a very different variety of concern from that we shall describe in the subsequent section, and yet there is a link: our language reveals our perception of the world and thus the way we use our words both shows our attitudes and goes on to shape those of others. As we shall see, it is those attitudes and the social relations they reflect and reinforce which are the main target of the conceptual engineers. Language may not be able to express an objective reality, but perhaps it can be brought to express a preferred subjectivity.

4. The Conceptual Engineers
In this section, I shall describe how conceptual engineering relates to these two categories of critique, but, first, it will be necessary to explain what is meant by the term and point to some of the preoccupations and assumptions of those who populate the movement to which it refers.

As Herman Cappelen points out in the introduction to his book "Fixing Language," the term conceptual engineering is a useful and rather attractive one, but may not describe the practice it refers to very well. Cappelen is of the opinion, as his title suggests, that the efforts of conceptual engineers are actually aimed at the amelioration of language, he talks of "representational devices" rather than concepts or words, but does refer to the goal of conceptual engineers as "conceptual amelioration." This is explicitly stated to be linked to bringing about change in society: "Conceptual amelioration is better understood as amelioration of the world" (Cappelen 2018, 8).

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6. For a brief comparison of their positions, see (Najera 2014).

The question of what exactly is being engineered is a matter of some disagreement amongst those writing on the topic (see Isaac 2023) but what is certain is that the examples used in their papers feature attempts to change the way words are used and to illustrate the meanings that they should have for achieving social improvements. We find Cappelen explaining that "amelioration sometimes involves improving the meaning while keeping the lexical item fixed, and sometimes it involves the introduction of a new lexical item with an improved meaning" (2020, 135), which contains both a criticism of language as it stands and an implication that it could be somehow better. The very suggestion that meanings can be better or worse, and, thus, good or bad, is a challenging one for a linguist. Words mean what they mean—whatever that means—and the evaluation of meanings steps well outside the scope of Semantics. A meaningless phrase might be considered "bad" syntactically, but once a meaning is present, the notion that it could be a "good" one simply doesn't exist in linguistics. It is hard to see how it can make sense at all unless we add a "for the accomplishment of goal X." This is the position taken by Löhr (2024), who notes that a project for change may be successful even if it has negative moral consequences and, thus, encourages us to focus rather on an evaluation of the goals of conceptual engineers—what social change are they trying to bring about?

In certain cases, of course, a common goal amongst members of the language community is evident or may safely be assumed, so what constitutes a "good" meaning may be uncontroversial. That scientists want their specialist terminology to be as clear and precise as possible, while also being useful in their research is obvious. Any attempts to improve clarity, precision or functionality are likely to at least receive a hearing, even if opposition to change is a universal human trait. The same perhaps ought to be true for philosophers, and the Carnapian idea of explication is an illustration of this, but there is a difference: while scientists seek a vocabulary that best fits the description of the facts of the universe, philosophers are engaged, to a large extent, in describing phenomena which are the products of the human mind, human society, or, possibly, human language itself. So while scientists may play with the meaning of "planet" so as to include or exclude certain lumps of extra-terrestrial rock, epistemologists cannot do the same with "knowledge," because any definition of knowledge will always be tested against the existing understanding of the word (see Nelson 2016, Hinton 2024).

Very often, one assumes, members of one language community do not all share common goals. In such cases, the attempt to make a better meaning must mean an attempt to make a meaning which is better for some

members, but perhaps not for others. To that extent, conceptual engineering is largely a political rather than a philosophical project. Its practitioners seek to change society by changing the way that certain concepts are understood. This is awkward on a number of levels. At the purely theoretical stage, it is not at all clear that any concepts are being engineered rather than simply replaced. At the practical stage of implementation, not only are there concerns about feasibility[7] but also about the ethics: when does the attempt to "ameliorate" meaning become an attempt to manipulate meaning and the users of that meaning along with it? No matter how benign and benevolent one's intentions, the practice of changing people's attitudes through the subtle manipulation of the meanings of the words in their language is questionable at best.[8]

This brings us back to the subjects of persuasive definitions and the ethics of defining. We may ask whether attempts at engineering concepts, in fact all acts of definition, are not inherently "persuasive," and, indeed, whether all persuasive definitions are inherently bad. Pruś and Aberdein (2022) address these questions and in particular Douglas Walton's, "new dialectical," view on them. Walton sees persuasive definitions as essentially arguments, as they are designed to support a particular position. The acceptability of introducing one will depend on the dialogue type in which one is engaged. Walton finds a middle ground wherein definitions do not have to be justified on an essentialist basis, but can still be subject to some form of evaluation: there is no free-for-all.

> The new dialectical view recognizes the argumentative function of many definitions, unlike the essentialist view, which sees meaning as fixed and objective. But the new dialectical view does not draw the postmodernist conclusion that all definitions, even highly loaded, persuasive, or coercive ones used to promote special interests, are equally justifiable. (Walton, 2001, 127)

Whether or not a definition is persuasive is, on this view, a matter of context, and even when it is persuasive, its acceptability is a matter for further argument. Pruś and Aberdein take on board these insights and thus conclude that not all definitions are persuasive, and that not all persuasive definitions are fallacious. They provide the following definition:

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7. See the debate between Deutsch (2020) and Koch (2021), as well as responses from Henne (2024) and Matsui (2024).

8. Matthew Shields has written on this topic, describing the practice of "conceptual domination" (2021, 2023).

PD can be distinguished from the other types of definition due to its role in the discussion in which it was used: it is used to support a claim, which is controversial, rather than merely report the meaning of a given term, or precise it and so on (2022, 40),

and go on to provide four rules for the evaluation of persuasive definitions:

1. Definition used in discussion should be treated as an argument.
2. The burden of proof is always on the definer.
3. There must be a sufficient reason for replacing the existing meaning.
4. Does the context in which the definition occurs allow for the use of persuasive definition?

There is then good reason to think that what conceptual engineers are engaged in is a form of persuasive definition: their attempts at redefinition can certainly be understood as arguments, but also that they are not necessarily fallacious. So long as they accept that they bear the burden of proof and must provide good reasons for making the change, rather than simply asserting that their re-conception of how a word should be understood is better, it seems obvious that dialogues centred on a philosophical discussion of what words should mean are an appropriate place for suggesting new, even controversial definitions.

Several important themes relevant to this discussion are presented in Manuel Kienpointner's (1996) fine article on Whorf, Wittgenstein, and world views, and their relation to argumentation. Following the later Wittgensteinian emphasis on the role of use in meaning, he notes that: "Ideologically relevant usage differences appear in the lexicon most of the time" (1996, 482). This certainly chimes with the concerns of conceptual engineers who are focussed exclusively on what is "ideologically relevant" in meaning. He discusses norms of usage and how a norm "usually favours a world view in which powerless groups and/or minorities are at a disadvantage and are discriminated against linguistically" (1996, 483) and describes how the hidden assumptions about world view are contained within forms of expression and thus find their way into the minds of the speakers of that language. These assumptions feature as implicit premises in argumentative discourse. He stresses "that it is not language as a system, but the use of language according to the rules of language games which connects language, thought and world view, especially if some particular usage becomes the commonly accepted norm" (1996, 492). Consideration of the consequences of usage ties in with the concerns of Schiappa, discussed above, about the ramifications of acts of definition. It is also reflected in the discussion of

Jorem and Löhr on what it could be that conceptual engineering is setting out to improve:

> we need to suppose that there is more to meaning than having an extension and intension, if meaning is to be an apt object of revision. What seems to be missing is the downstream significance of using a word with a given meaning (2024, 940)

This significance is described in terms of an inferentialist semantics: what engineering changes is what we can infer from certain expressions. It is, thus, linked to Kienpointner's view of the argumentative quality of assumptions behind word usage. His point that those assumptions can be discriminatory—and are, therefore, potentially harmful—is what makes conceptual engineering worthwhile:

> Inferentialism about conceptual engineering captures the fact that only in the context of having significance for further thought, speech and action does it matter what it takes for a concept to apply (Joren and Löhr 2024, 950–1)

Kienpointner's arguments may also be of some relevance to the debate amongst conceptual engineers as to "whether the method is conceived as attempting to change the *semantic* meanings and referents of existing terms, or instead merely the *speaker*-meanings and *speaker*-referents conveyed by their use" (Deutsch 2020, 3660). This debate has centred on the feasibility of the methods, with Deutsch suggesting that altered speaker-meanings are easy to produce but trivial, whilst changing semantic meanings is largely unfeasible. In reply, Koch has suggested that: "There is room for a plausible, implementable and non-trivial project that lies between the two" (2021, 2283). There is, however, an interesting question to ask as to which of these has more relevance to the norms of use, as practised by the language community. While it may seem like a greater success to change the semantic meaning of a term, it might be the case that it is exposure to individual speaker meanings which influences the formation of beliefs and thus the impact of a term on future action and thought. That is not a question to be answered here; suffice it to say the roles of ideological assumptions in arguments[9], and that of theories of linguistic determinism in understanding the formation of the world views of language speakers

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9. See also Hinton (2024) on this topic.

warrant further consideration in the critique of language being offered by conceptual engineers.

When we look to compare the conceptual engineering movement with the philosophical critiques of language described above, we can draw a series of, I believe, illuminating conclusions. Firstly, conceptual engineers appear to subscribe to both varieties of criticism: they find fault with individual terms and believe them to lead astray the thinking of the population. In this, they follow Bentham directly, and perhaps Berkeley; they too implicitly endorse the so-called Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and are hopeful that by changing the meanings of terms they can change the way certain groups are seen in society, via the mechanisms described by Kienpointner. That is to say, they believe that the way language users think can be changed by making adjustments to the language. At the same time, the project contains within it a more fundamental systemic criticism of meaning as expressed through language: the natural development of language, it is claimed, leads to "bad" meanings which require ameliorative intervention. As a system, language does not, at least not always, tend towards the "best" meanings. This is a deficiency in its very nature and, therefore, akin to the positions of Wittgenstein and Mauthner. Where Wittgenstein advised us to keep silent about that which we could not meaningfully speak, the engineers advise us to intervene in the process of semantic determination and make our language fit the social reality they wish to see whilst remaining aware of how difficult that may be.

Second, unlike most of the other critics, the ameliorators have a practical project at hand, and one which is capable of achieving success. While Aristotle and Berkeley could point to dangers to our thinking hidden in the language we hear and speak, they did not seriously propose to change that language; and even if the views of Wittgenstein and Mauthner on the meaninglessness of much of common discourse had reached the general public, it is unlikely the public would indeed have been moved to silence. Bentham's case is different. Like the conceptual engineers, his was a political project, and one, taken on by John Stuart Mill, which achieved great acknowledgement. There is much uncertainty as to how feasible conceptual engineering projects are, but there is little doubt that the meanings of certain words have been changed as a result of what we might term "semantic activism." What these examples have in common, as I have argued elsewhere (Hinton 2024) is that they bring meanings into line with social changes, rather than effecting those changes, although this may be a subject of debate. For instance, the changing definition of the word "rape," alluded to above, to include attacks by husbands on their wives, all sex with minors,

and non-violent manipulations and deceptions, has taken place against a changing social background of attitudes towards marriage, teenagers, and sexual autonomy (particularly of women)[10]. Given these changes, a new way of talking about non-consensual sexual activity was needed and one way to do that was to alter the meaning of the existing word. A similar story can be told concerning the concept of "marriage" and social attitudes towards same-sex couples.

As proponents of a practical project, conceptual engineers need to be particularly aware of their ethical responsibilities. Although Berkeley would presumably have maintained that the belief in "abstracts" had induced men to all manner of folly, his campaign against them can hardly be considered to be of an ethical nature; Wittgenstein's criticism could even be described as "anti-ethical" given that he specifically rules out the meaningfulness of moral terms in an ideal language. Aristotle and Bentham, on the other hand, are certainly interested in the effects of their discussions of language, one seeking to educate the unwary in the ways of manipulative arguers and the other basing an entire moral system on a "correction" in the meaning of the term "good." Bentham, along with conceptual engineers, wants to impose a redefinition in order to improve the lot of his fellow man and woman. The ethical burden this imposes has been discussed.

Lastly, the criticism inherent in conceptual engineering is, as with the early examples, in reality a criticism of language users. The "bad" meanings which are in need of improvement have not arrived from outside the language community, they have been given to words and used by speakers. It seems reasonable to suggest that they reflect beliefs those users have, or had, about how the world was to be divided up. Those beliefs are rejected by the engineers who wish to divide the world according to a different set of beliefs. It is not so much the language that they wish to change, then, as the people speaking it. Having legally-recognised same-sex relationships referred to by the same word as similarly recognised heterosexual relationships is not an end in itself: the hope is that they will then be treated in the same way by society.

Sally Haslanger states clearly: "My priority in this inquiry is not to capture what we do mean, but how we might usefully revise what we mean for certain theoretical and political purposes" (2000, 34) and "the task is to develop accounts of gender and race that will be effective tools in the fight against injustice" (2000, 36). The political cause of fighting injustice can only mean the desire to change attitudes. The danger is that this leads to

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10. See Burgess-Jackson (1995) for a discussion.

the type of manipulation Bentham saw with the concept of "good" or into a series of fallacies of language, where an unsuspecting public is subjected to persuasive definitions, designed to nudge them into a change of view which they would reject in an open argument. The goal of conceptual engineers, then, goes well beyond the warnings of section 2 or the systemic laments of section 3: the claim is not that we should be careful how terms are used because they might lead us astray, nor that our semantics is such that there is a systemic need to address the accuracy of meanings at regular individuals; rather, the aim is to reveal both of these and advocate for a proactive campaign of meaning adjustment in order to change the way people think and achieve certain political ends.

5. CONCLUSION

The principal aim of this work has been to place the currently fashionable conceptual engineering project within the longer tradition of philosophical dissatisfaction with language by comparing its assumptions with the views of some earlier philosophers. This is simultaneously an attack on and a support of that project: despite the claims of some engaged in this engineering, or in discussing it, the desire to improve language, to coax and cajole, to stretch and twist, to eliminate and replace words and their meanings is nothing new and is unlikely to have any great effect in the advancement of philosophical knowledge. At the same time, by targeting the use of individual items of vocabulary, rather than focussing on the implied deficiency in the system of language as a whole, the conceptual engineers have a mission which is, their own doubts over feasibility notwithstanding, better able to have practical consequences than projects which address the fundamental relationship of words to reality. Words do change their meanings. There are examples of words in modern discourse which have undergone radical changes not by chance but through the efforts of those who were determined to make language better fit a more contemporary worldview which gives greater equality and respect to all members of society.

Given that these changes are specifically designed to affect the thinking of individuals through the manipulation of language, however, the importance of dialogue amongst scholars working in semantics, definitions, argumentation, rhetoric, and conceptual engineering cannot be overstated. It is to be hoped that the greater attention now being paid to conceptual engineering by linguists and philosophers outwith the movement, and the collective publications this contact produces (e.g. Stalmaszczyk 2024, Hinton and Macagno 2024) will lead to a more rounded and complete understanding

of the background to linguistic change and the place of the project within the history and the practice of philosophy, and to an appreciation of the possible dangers involved in the attempt to "fix" language and its users.

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