Lexicalized Concepts from the Perspectives of Meaning Eliminativism and Dynamic Conventionalism: An Austinian Account of Conceptual Change and Amelioration

In 1818, James Maurice, a New York inspector of fish oil, imposed a fine on Samuel Judd, who had purchased three barrels of unexamined whale oil. According to Maurice, Judd had violated a law enacted by the New York State Legislature requiring fish oil sold in New York to be inspected and branded. Judd countered by arguing that a whale is not a fish, and therefore, whale oil should not be subject to the regulation. At the trial, Maurice's attorneys maintained that the term 'fish oil', as used in everyday contexts, encompassed whale oil. In contrast, Samuel L. Mitchill, a professor at Columbia University, supported Judd by asserting that whales were mammals. After a 15-minute deliberation, the jury ruled in favour of Maurice.

This case illustrates the central idea behind our proposed project. We contend that the meaning of a word, such as 'fish', 'book', 'woman', 'justice', 'equality', and 'sovereignty', is not an abstract, stable entity. Instead, it should be viewed as a collection of the word's past uses, which form different precedents. Consequently, its new uses are subject to negotiation among conversation participants, who may reference various precedents to justify their interpretative choices. In the discussed case, Judd appealed to scientific authority, arguing that the concept of 'fish' did not include whales. Conversely, Maurice's attorney referred to the ordinary usage of the words 'fish' and 'fish oil.' These opposing perspectives initiated a process known as 'metalinguistic negotiation', which culminated in the jury's decision.

Metalinguistic negotiations can take various forms and employ multiple mechanisms and linguistic tools. While they are sometimes open and explicit, they are often tacit and implicit, employing a range of more or less covert techniques and methods. Our project aims to describe this variety. Specifically, we plan to develop a model of lexicalized concepts, which we call 'Austinian,' to explore how concepts are used, evolve over time, and are negotiated, refined, and improved.

Our proposed Austinian model synthesizes two seemingly contradictory theoretical perspectives: eliminativism about meaning, which posits that words do not have meanings understood as abstract objects that form the stable structure of our language, and the view of linguistic practice as a convention-governed activity. We argue that the family of past uses of a word constitutes a conventional lineage of linguistic precedents. Importantly, while these elements underdetermine the properties of possible new members, inviting metalinguistic negotiation, they also impose constraints on what can be considered a new application of the word, preventing uncontrolled drift and excessive inclusivity. We term this model 'Dynamic Conventionalism' and use it to address several topics in metasemantics and conceptual engineering.

As part of this project, we develop two theoretical models: one describing the structure of conventional precedents and another explaining our ability to comprehend and replicate them. To develop the first model, we utilize the framework of speech act theory. The latter model is based on the psychological concept of subjective construals — our personal understandings of the situations we encounter, including the people, objects, and actions within them. These models will help us analyse real linguistic data from media reports, as well as shed light on several topics discussed in conceptual engineering.

The outcomes of our project will deepen our understanding of the mechanisms behind our use of concepts and our control over processes of conceptual change. Importantly, it will also provide insights into discursive activism, which seeks to enhance the conceptual frameworks that shape and organize our social life.