

Directival theory of meaning as a framework for conceptual engineering

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In recent years, conceptual engineering has gained some popularity and established its position as a renowned and fruitful philosophical project. Roughly, the main idea is that it is feasible to ameliorate, re-shape or eliminate from the public discourse concepts that, in one way or another, seem to function in problematic or otherwise defective ways. The range of such concepts that are put into scrutiny includes both classical philosophical concepts, e.g. truth (Scharp 2013, 2020, Reuter&Brun 2021), responsibility (Goetze 2021, Ciarria 2022), beauty (Ravasio 2022), and concepts from the public discourse, e.g. gender (Haslanger 2000, 2012, McKenna 2018) or race (Haslanger 2010, Gray 2023).

There is also a great deal of attention paid to the theoretical aspects of conceptual engineering. Among the most pressing problems the one that stands out relates to the semantic framework of the project. If one wishes to change or replace the meaning of certain concepts, the argument goes, it has to be known what the meaning is in the first place. The problem is very often introduced as 'metasemantic': to understand how meaning change is even possible one needs to develop a full-blown conception of what makes our words (and other representational tools) have the meaning they have. Even though some argue that the metasemantic problem is not that pressing for conceptual engineers (e.g. Nado 2020, Pinder 2021), it is still a widely disputed theoretical issue.

In my talk, I am going to argue that conceptual engineers should focus first on a more general question: what kind of semantic theory do we need in order to successfully execute the engineering project. In particular, as I claim, we should target linguistic entities rather than representational devices (cf. Thomasson 2021). Moreover, those prime entities of our target should be seen as sentential. This, in turn, leads to the claim that the adequate semantic theory for conceptual engineering needs to be holistic and broadly inferential. I am going to argue that one particular theory merits special attention in that matter. The theory in question is called directival theory of meaning and was developed already in the thirties by the Polish philosopher and logician Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz (1931, 1934), and has recently regained some popularity (cf. Grabarczyk 2017, 2019). I will try to show why and how the theory in question can provide an appropriate semantic framework for fruitful conceptual engineering.