

# *Revision, endorsement, and the analysis of meaning*

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## 1. The Standard View

After forming a belief, we may come to find that it is defective. In what sense? A simple answer is that it doesn't accurately represent how things are in the world. For example, you might have believed that whales were fish until you took a class in biology and discovered that they are mammals. In the face of a defective belief, what *should* one do? This normative question has an intuitive answer: One should revise a belief to correspond with the facts.

Like beliefs, our more basic forms of representation can be defective. Concepts and lexical items (henceforth just concepts)<sup>1</sup> can stand in need of improvement in a variety of ways. Sally Haslanger (2000) has argued that we should revise the concept WOMAN on the grounds that it would serve the interests of feminist philosophy, as well as advance pursuits in the project of social justice. Here, the revision is driven by social, moral and political aims.

Evaluating concepts to determine whether they should be removed, revised or replaced is called *conceptual ethics*.<sup>2</sup> And after a concept has been evaluated and found wanting, the next step is to propose how

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<sup>1</sup> We will assume that concepts are representational devices that have semantic properties or meanings.

<sup>2</sup> See: Burgess and Plunkett (2013a, 2013b), Plunkett (2016), Cappelen and Plunkett (2018).

a concept can be improved, and to offer suggestions for how to implement such improvements. This is called *conceptual engineering*.<sup>3</sup> Call the entirety of this process *revisionary conceptual analysis* (RCA).

It appears to be standard practice in the process of undertaking RCA that one engage in *descriptive analysis*, and then make *normative endorsements*.<sup>4</sup> Conceptual ethicists attempt to discern facts about the meaning of a concept, and then judge whether a revision should be made on the basis of this. Conceptual engineers propose alternative meanings and offer ways to realize this change in meaning. Call this *The Standard View*. It has the general structure:

(1) Conceptual Ethics:

- (i) Identify a concept  $C$  to be evaluated, and discern its meaning  $M_1$ .
- (ii) Make a judgment about whether  $C$  should be revised given an assessment of  $M_1$  relative to the aims of the practice.

(2) Conceptual Engineering:

- (iii) Propose that  $C$  should have an alternative meaning  $M_x$ , where  $M_x = M_2, M_3, \dots, M_n$  depending on the meaning that is judged to be best relative to the aims of the practice.
- (iv) Suggest ways that  $C$  could come to mean  $M_x$ .

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<sup>3</sup> See: Cappelen (2018), and Burgess, Cappelen, and Plunkett (2020).

<sup>4</sup> This can be seen in a number of works. See: Haslanger (2000, 2020), Plunkett (2016), Thomasson (2020), Cappelen and Plunkett (2020).

According to *The Standard View*, (i) and (iv) constitute the *descriptive* work of RCA, whereas (ii) and (iii) constitute the *normative* work.<sup>5</sup> We want to draw attention to (i). It appears to imply a thesis about meaning claims whereby sentences of the form ‘A means B’ (and cognate phrases) describe meaning facts. However, some theorists argue that meaning claims are essentially normative; that sentences of the form ‘A means B’ are properly understood as endorsements for conceptual usage. Thus, we can ask:

If claims about meaning... are themselves always normative in some sense, how does this affect our understanding of the relationship of descriptive and normative theorizing about concepts?  
(Cappelen and Plunkett 2020: 9)

It appears that there is no substantive distinction between (i) and (iii); it appears that there is no substantive distinction between descriptive and normative work. This looks to pose a problem for *The Standard View*. Before we spell this out, let’s examine meaning claims.

## 2. The Normativity of Meaning

There are a number of senses in which meaning might be normative. One concerns metaphysical questions about what meanings *are*, contrasting *normativism* with *non-normativism*. Another sense relates to the question of the *function* of meaning discourse. This is our primary interest. We will explore the idea that *meaning claims* are themselves normative: rather than being *descriptions* of existing meanings (e.g. patterns of use, or causal relations between linguistic expressions, mental tokens and objects), meaning claims are *prescriptions* or *proposals* for the use of a concept.<sup>6</sup> Call this *prescriptivism*, in contrast to *descriptivism*. We will focus on this

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<sup>5</sup> Not all practitioners of RCA follow this methodology. For example, Clark and Chalmers (1998) do not first engage in a descriptive analysis of BELIEF, and then make an evaluation. All that matters for our argument is that *The Standard View* involves two distinct parts: one descriptive, the other evaluative/normative.

<sup>6</sup> For more, see: Lance and Hawthorne (1990, 1997, 2002), Gauker (1995, 2007, 2011), Gibbard (2012), Peregrin (2012), and Glüer and Wikforss (2018).

sense of ‘the normativity of meaning’ as it directly ties to the way that practitioners of RCA make meaning claims about particular concepts rather than claims about meaning per se.

Many prescriptivists are motivated by the idea that there are no descriptive features of past and current usage of an expression that settle its meaning (Gauker 1995, 2007, 2011: 277–283; Lance and Hawthorne 1997: 44–55; Gibbard 2012: 16). A further motivation is the ability to explain the purpose of meaning claims: directing a linguistic practice in a particular direction. ‘A means B’ may be a proposal for how a word should be used that aims to solve coordination problems among speakers (Gauker 1995, 2007, 2011: 277–283), or resolving indeterminacy (Gibbard 2012: 10–13, 109–112). Alternatively, it may be a prescription establishing the appropriateness of inferences from ‘A’ to ‘B’ and of censure of those who do not endorse such inferences (Lance and Hawthorne 1997: 55–65, 2002). Whatever the case, meaning claims do not describe something that we may then separately evaluate. Meaning claims are themselves evaluative or normative with respect to directing conceptual usage.

### 3. A Tension

We will accept the prescriptivist view of meaning claims. By accepting this, we stand in tension with *The Standard View*. Why? According to *The Standard View*, descriptive meaning claims mark an important stage of RCA. We must locate an existing concept, describe its meaning and evaluate it. If we find the concept is defective, then we offer a proposal for how to fix it. Prescriptivism fails at this stage. For the meaning claim, according to prescriptivism, is itself a prescription or a proposal, rather than a description of existing practice. So, what should a prescriptivist think about RCA? We believe that there are two options. Either (1) the prescriptivist maintains that RCA is only possible if one accepts *The Standard View*, and therefore reject the possibility of RCA, or (2) the prescriptivist provides an account of RCA that is consistent with the idea that meaning claims are normative, and therefore rejects *The Standard View*. For the remainder of the paper, we will argue in favour of (2). We will articulate *The Prescriptivist View* of RCA.

Some might worry that this tension is merely apparent. We have relied on the claim that practitioners of *The Standard View* are making meaning claims about what concepts currently mean, and what concepts ought to mean. However, perhaps not all practitioners construe RCA as involving the revision of meaning. It might be that some practitioners aim to change our practices directly rather than doing so *via* meaning change. We grant that there might be such philosophers. However, RCA is typically motivated by concerns about meaning. Consider what Herman Cappelen calls *The Master Argument* (for RCA):

1. If *W* is a word that has a meaning *M*, then there are many similar meanings,  $M_1, M_2, \dots, M_n$ , *W* could have.
2. We have no good reason to think that the meaning that *W* ended up with is the best meaning *W* could have: there will typically be indefinitely many alternative meanings that would be better meanings for *W*.
3. When we speak, think, and theorize it's important to make sure our words have as good meanings as possible.
4. As a corollary: when doing philosophy, we should try to find good meanings for core philosophical terms and they will typically not be the meanings those words as a matter of fact have.
5. So no matter what topic a philosopher is concerned with, she should assess and ameliorate the meanings of central terms (Cappelen 2020: 134 - 135).

Here is the core of the argument: If a word (concept) could mean other than what it does now, then we ought to evaluate and improve it if we have all-things-considered reason to do so.

*The Master Argument* is clearly couched in terms of meaning, and requires one to make meaning claims. It is motivated by the improvement of meanings. And Cappelen attributes this argument to a number of paradigm practitioners of RCA, including: David Chalmers (2011), Matti Eklund (2014), Sally Haslanger (2012), and David Plunkett and Tim Sundell (2013). Thus, while it might be the case that some RCA practitioners are less interested in meaning, we direct our concerns to those who are.

## 4. Rethinking RCA

To motivate *The Prescriptivist View* we first want to find some common ground with those who endorse *The Standard View*. Specifically, we will look at what is taken to be the *aims* of RCA. We believe that it is the aims of RCA that define it as a form of epistemic and practical enquiry. After all, discerning whether the meaning of a concept is defective or stands in need of improvement must be sensitive to one's aims. We will show that the aims of RCA are included in the aims of prescriptivist meaning claims. Both are concerned with directing the character of our discourse and practices through the revision of concepts.

### 4.1. *The Aims of RCA*

Why undertake RCA? Burgess and Plunkett (2013a) argue that concepts play a substantive role in our thought and talk. What we think and convey is constrained by the set of available concepts (ibid.: 1097).

Cappelen echoes this, suggesting that

thinking and talking with defective concepts will make speech and talk defective in the sense that the thoughts we entertain or express will inherit the defects of our representational devices (2018: 42).

Such constraints further influence our actions (Burgess and Plunkett 2013a: 1096). For example, the concepts of GENDER and RACE used to render intelligible our place in the world have significant influence over our decisions (e.g., what clothes to wear). Concepts define the range of activities considered fitting for

the categories that we take ourselves and others to belong. Thus, undertaking RCA is a move forward in the direction of changing the character of our lives and practices. A ‘terminological shift calls us to reconsider who we think we are’ (Haslanger 2000: 47). In short, ‘the clearest reason to care about [conceptual choice and conceptual change] is just that their non-conceptual consequences are pervasive and profound’ (Burgess and Plunkett 2013a: 1097). RCA can shape the character of our social lives (Cappelen 2018: 43).

Articulating the purpose of RCA in this way is common. Beginning with Sally Haslanger’s (2000) ameliorative definitions of GENDER and RACE, many theorists are now motivated to offer revisions of existing social concepts for reasons to do with their non-conceptual consequences.<sup>7</sup> Crudely, the reasoning runs as follows. Our social relations are unjust. This is determined in part by the concepts that make possible thought and talk, and subsequently constrain the activities that constitute our social practices. Thus, we can achieve more just social relations by changing the meaning of the concepts responsible for giving rise to unjust social practices.<sup>8</sup> From this reasoning, we can infer that RCA is not just about ameliorating bad concepts for the sake of conceptual change. It is a form of *social engineering* (Cappelen 2018: 44). RCA aims at *directing the character of our social practices*.<sup>9</sup>

We will understand practices as ‘certain kinds of normatively unified regularities [in behavior]’ (Haslanger 2018: 240). To engage in a practice is to act

in ways that are (interpretable as) part of a pattern or system of coordination, and to be responsive to the relevant demands and expectations of others (ibid.: 247).

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<sup>7</sup> See: Barnes (2016) on DISABILITY, Dembroff (2016) on SEXUAL ORIENTATION, Manne (2018) on MISOGYNY and SEXISM, Jenkins (2018) on GENDER IDENTITY.

<sup>8</sup> See Haslanger (2000, 2015, 2016). She offers a stronger view which suggests that concepts are *constitutive* of social reality.

<sup>9</sup> This includes discursive practices. Thus, we can accommodate projects such as Railton (1989), Scharp (2013), and Eklund (2014).

The aims of RCA, then, are to change systems of coordination, and the demands and expectations that undergird them. Successful RCA requires not only a change to the concept that is the target of enquiry, but also a change to the aspect of the world that the concept has influence over.

#### 4.2. *The Aims of Meaning Claims*

We will now show that the broader aims of RCA are compatible with prescriptivism. Further, we argue that such aims are already viewed by prescriptivists as part the aims of meanings claims. This can be seen by the way prescriptivists *justify* meaning claims.

In §2, we said that meaning claims aim at directing practices in a particular direction by establishing norms licensing, and censuring the rejection of, certain inferences.<sup>10</sup> *Conservative meaning claims* are those that aim to reinforce and preserve *current* usage. Such meaning claims are given *prima facie* or default justification, putting the onus on would-be reformers to justify revision. But, how might a *revisionary meaning claim* be justified? One might identify an incoherence. However, incoherence itself cannot justify a particular revision, for incoherence can always be resolved in more than one way. Instead, we need to attend to the aims of our practice (Lance 2001: 131). The justification of meaning claims ultimately comes down to whether a particular norm of usage serves the ends of our practices. This may extend beyond discursive practice involving concepts to related social practices.

Consider MARRIAGE. Prior to the institution of marriage equality in Australia there was an incoherence in our practice. The purpose or function of the institution appeared to be the socio-legal recognition of

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<sup>10</sup> We focus on the prescriptivism defended by Peregrin (2012), Lance and Hawthorne (1997) and Lance (2001). These views more immediately translate over to socio-political concerns. We believe that Gauker (1995, 2007, 2011) can tell a similar story. For Gauker, meaning claims aim to resolve coordination problems. It may not be Gauker's view, but we see no reason to think such coordination problems need to be linguistic, narrowly construed. Oppressive practices may just as well be seen as forms of *mis*-coordination. Something similar may also be available for Gibbard (2012).

committed romantic relationships. Yet, it excluded same-sex couples. Although some opponents of marriage equality argued on descriptivist lines, many gave reasons to the effect that it would not serve the purpose of the institution, such as false claims that gay couples were inferior parents (Karp 2017). In doing so, proponents of ‘traditional marriage’ were assuming that the purpose of marriage was closely tied to procreation and child rearing. This highlights a further element of the prescriptivist position: the aim or purpose of a practice is itself up for grabs. Many proponents and opponents of marriage equality disagreed about the purpose of the institution. So while we might justify a revisionary meaning claim via the purpose of the practice it is involved in, this may rise to a disagreement about that the aims of that practice itself. In this sense ‘meaning is normative *all the way down*’ (Lance 2001: 132).<sup>11</sup>

For concepts like MARRIAGE, it is fairly immediate that changes to our concept are closely tied to changes in our social practices. Hence, it is hard to distinguish the purpose of a practice (e.g., marriage) from the purpose of our discourse (e.g., marriage-talk). In contrast, concepts like TRUE seem less tied up with any particular practice. How TRUE should be used appears to be justified in terms of the purpose of truth-talk, such as expressing endorsements of what others say (‘That’s true’), including what we could only say with a truth predicate (‘Everything Karen says is true’). That said, logical vocabulary, or near logical vocabulary, may be more entangled with our social practices than it seems. For example, some philosophers have argued against classical logic on feminist grounds (e.g. Plumwood (1993, 2000) and Jay (1981)). In either case, meaning claims aim at directing our practices in a particular direction, whether this be our discursive practices or wider social practices as well.

Conservative meaning claims aim at directing our practices in the current direction. Once the default justification has been successfully challenged, keeping to current usage must be justified in the same way as the revisionist. The conservative must show that the practice is currently well-functioning and that its

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<sup>11</sup> If meaning were not ‘normative all the way down’, then disputes about meaning would bottom out in descriptive features of the world. This would result in the correctness of a meaning claim being determined by something descriptive. Yet, this clashes with the prescriptivist commitment that no descriptive feature of a practice determines meaning (see §2). We assume the latter for the sake of argument.

purported aim worthwhile. Consider someone defending a bourgeois notion of FREEDOM, where freedom means something like ‘self-ownership and the ability to acquire and dispose of one’s property within a legal framework’. Plausibly, such freedom ‘has existed only for the individuals who developed within the relationships of the ruling class, and only insofar as they were individuals of this class’ (Marx and Engels 1971 [1845], Chapter 1d). Defence of bourgeois freedom requires demonstrating that the telos or ideal of freedom is appropriately realized under such restricted conditions.

We have now reached a point where the aims of meaning claims according to prescriptivism align with the aims of RCA. In §4.1, we said that RCA ultimately aims at directing our social practices. According to prescriptivists, meaning claims also aim at directing our social practices, where this may be limited to discursive practices or extend to broader social practices. Therefore, *the aims of RCA can still be pursued within a prescriptivist framework.*

#### 4.3. *The Prescriptivist View*

*The Standard View* involves stating the meaning of a concept, evaluating this meaning, and making a normative judgment about what the meaning should be. Prescriptivists can’t accept this. No such meanings can be described. So, what does RCA look like given prescriptivism? We suggest *The Prescriptivist View*:

(1) Conceptual Ethics:

- (i) Identify concept C and discern its existing pattern of usages  $U_1$ .
- (ii) Make a judgment about whether C should conform to  $U_1$  relative to the aims of the practice.

(2) Conceptual Engineering:

- (iii) Propose that C should have an alternative use  $U_x$  where  $U_x = U_2, U_3, \dots, U_n$  depending on the usage that is judged to be best relative to the aims of the practice.
- (iv) Suggest ways that C could come to be used in way  $U_x$ .

*The Prescriptivist View* involves identifying a concept, and discerning its existing patterns of usage. It requires that one make a judgment about whether the concept should continue to conform to such usage. If it is judged that the concept should have a different usage, the next step is to propose or prescribe the use it should have. This involves making a prescriptivist meaning claim.

There are a number of differences between *The Standard View* and *The Prescriptivist View*. The primary difference is the nature of the meaning claim that is made. On *The Standard View*, a meaning claim marks a stage at which a theorist is *describing* the meaning of a concept. On *The Prescriptivist View*, it marks a stage at which a theorist is *prescribing* what the meaning of a concept should be. This distinguishes between *descriptivism* and *prescriptivism*. Then, there are related differences. First, stage (i) of *The Prescriptivist View* is not about discerning the meaning of a concept, unlike *The Standard View*. Instead, it is about discerning existing patterns of usage, where such patterns do not suffice to constitute prescriptive meaning claims. Second, the evaluation of a concept in stage (ii) of *The Prescriptivist View* is not an evaluation of meaning, unlike *The Standard View*. It is an evaluation of existing patterns of usage, where, again, such patterns do not ground meaning claims. In short, *The Prescriptivist View* is a form of RCA that does not require the identification and evaluation of meaning.

## 5. Conclusion

The foregoing explored the incompatibility between RCA as it is usually conceived, what we have called *The Standard View*, and prescriptivism. This incompatibility owes to descriptivism being built into *The Standard*

View. If descriptivism were an essential part of RCA, then arguments for RCA would function as refutations of prescriptivism (and *vice versa*). Our primary aim has been to show that a commitment to descriptivism is an optional, rather than essential, part of RCA. The aims of RCA fit closely with the aims of prescriptivist meaning claims. This gives rise to *The Prescriptivist View*.

*The Prescriptivist View* differs from *The Standard View* largely in terms of the stage(s) at which meaning claims are made. One might worry that this is unimportant for the practice of RCA. This could be true. However, our primary argument, that descriptivism is inessential to RCA, concerns the self-understanding of those undertaking RCA rather than its first order practice. Further, there is reason to think that *The Prescriptivist View* will have downstream consequences for RCA. We note two.

First, debates about topic continuity in RCA concern questions about meaning (Cappelen 2018, 2020; Haslanger 2020, Forthcoming). Meaning, and meaning claims, play a substantive role in determining when a topic has been changed. And the question of topic continuity is important for practitioners of RCA to avoid engaging in merely verbal disputes. *The Prescriptivist View* is a form of RCA that does not require a change of meaning. What is evaluated and altered are merely our patterns of usage. Instead of changing meaning, revisionary meaning claims prescribe norms as binding for the whole practice, including its past (Lance 2001; Tanesini 2006, 2014). Therefore, topic continuity comes cheap.<sup>12</sup>

Second, as outlined in §4.1, a large number of practitioners of RCA take its ultimate aim to be social engineering, rather than just the engineering of concepts. The connection between conceptual and social change is often thought to occur through the role of meaning in constituting social facts, that ‘changing the meaning of a lexical item might contribute to a change in social reality’ (Cappelen 2020: 146). Granting this, the construction of social reality is another area where meaning matters for RCA. *The Prescriptivist View*, given its commitment to prescriptivism, makes explicit the (direct) relationship between the use of meaning claims and (re)direction of our social practices: Meaning claims aim to shape social practices, and thereby

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<sup>12</sup> When *does* topic change? Prescriptivists such as Lance (2001) and Tanesini (2006, 2014) don’t explicitly discuss this. However, consistent with their view, one might say that a change of topic comes whenever one does not assume sameness of function in prescribing a new pattern of use. For more, see Haslanger (Forthcoming) and Brigandt (2010).

influence social reality. Hence, compared to other views, *The Prescriptivist View* is less open to worries about the plausibility of RCA, such as the inscrutability of semantic values and our lack of control in changing them (Cappelen 2018). Those who endorse *The Prescriptivist View* do not have to worry themselves with discerning the meaning of a concept because they are committed to the idea that meanings are instituted through prescriptions rather than determined by patterns of usage.<sup>13</sup>

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