

‘You’re changing the subject’:

An Unfair Objection to Conceptual Engineering?

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Abstract

Conceptual engineering projects are sometimes criticised for ‘changing the subject’. In this paper, I first discuss three strategies that have been proposed to address the change of subject objection. I notice that these strategies fail in similar ways: they all deploy a ‘loose’ notion of subject matter, while the objector can always reply deploying a ‘strict’ notion. Based on this, I then argue that at least current formulations of the change of subject objection (together with the response strategies just mentioned), create an overall *defective dialectic*, whereby no progress can be made on either side. After considering how such defective dialectic could be (at least partly) fixed, it is concluded that current formulations of the change of subject objection may be dismissed *on dialectical grounds*, even though some practical lessons may still be retained from the objection.

Keywords: conceptual engineering, subject matter, subject change, concepts, revision, dialectic

1. The change of subject objection

Conceptual engineering typically involves the assessment and revision of conceptual representations. According to a common picture, a conceptual revision changes aspects that pertain to the concept’s semantics: for example, its intension, its extension, or both. These changes may, however, have the unpalatable consequence of altering *too much* of a concept’s semantics. The result may be a revised concept that *changes the subject* with respect to its predecessor – a concept that is about *something else*.

The change of subject objection can be traced back to Peter Strawson's (1963) critique of Rudolf Carnap's method of explication, considered an ancestor of conceptual engineering. Strawson argues that scientifically regimenting (explicating) certain ordinary or philosophical concepts, in the attempt to solve related philosophical problems, would just 'change the subject' – and thus fail to help solve said problems. Today, this threat remains in a more general form and is a cause of concern for conceptual engineering theorists. Sally Haslanger, for instance, explicitly mentions the risk of answering 'questions that weren't being asked' (2000: 34). Cappelen (2018), too, worries about the objection, and links it to disruptions of inquiry, merely verbal disputes, and distorted speech reports.

Why is changing the subject so undesirable? We may say that the undesirability of subject change has to do with aspects or consequences of it that seem to be equally undesirable (see Cappelen 2018; Prinzing 2017). First, there is *discontinuity in inquiry*. Inquiries that incorporated the pre-revision concept cannot – the objection says – be addressed by using the post-revision concept. If the pre-revision concept occurred in a certain question, *q*, that question cannot be properly answered by using the post-revision concept, whose subject matter departs from *q*'s subject matter. Second, any speaker who were to deploy the post-revision concept may have *communication troubles* when linguistically engaging with speakers who still deploy the pre-revision concept. Misunderstandings, merely verbal disputes, and false speech reports may result from such semantic mismatch.

Discontinuity in inquiry and communication troubles are, arguably, bad consequences that anyone would rather avoid. In some cases, these consequences may follow a change of subject that was unavoidable, or even welcome. In these cases, the conceptual engineer cannot do much besides *embracing* the change of subject and coping with its displeasing consequences. Subject-change is, therefore, not a real problem in these circumstances – to the extent that the conceptual engineer can comfortably 'own' it.

In other cases, though, the conceptual engineer may want to resist the critic's allegations of subject-change. She may want to argue that, no, the subject matter did not change, and that no inquiry discontinuity or communication trouble should worry us. The subject-change objection seems to be a problem in these circumstances, i.e. whenever the conceptual engineer is not willing to concede that a change of subject happened, and is prepared to 'fight back'. Presumably, these circumstances are frequent enough for the subject-change objection to appear philosophically troubling and in demand for a response strategy.

Discussion on the subject-change objection has been growing in the last few years and remains lively to this day. Authors who take the objection seriously offer accounts that aim at regaining continuity of subject matter in the face of conceptual revisions. Thus, Herman Cappelen contends that there are such things as 'topics', which can persist despite changes in a concept's intension and extension (Cappelen 2018; 2020). Function accounts hold that subject matter continuity is preserved as long as a concept's function is preserved (Simion and Kelp 2020; Haslanger 2020; Thomasson 2020; 2022; Nado 2019; 2023). Externalist accounts maintain that subject matter continuity is linked to continuity of reference externalistically established (Sawyer 2018; 2020a; 2020b). All these accounts are liable to criticism, which has been articulated in recent literature. Cappelen's topic account is criticised by Schroeter and Schroeter (2020), Shields (2020), Sundell (2020), Belleri (2021). The function account is critically assessed by Riggs (2021), Belleri (2021), Jorem (2022), Queloz (2022), Köhler and Veluwenkamp (2024). Plus, alternative takes on the problem of subject matter continuity are proposed by, among others, McPherson and Plunkett (2021), Kocurek (2022), Dobler (2022), Hopster and Löhr (2023), Löhr (2023), Koch (2023), Knoll (2020), Reiland (2023). The problem of subject-change thus appears to be centre-stage in the current discussion within the conceptual engineering philosophical community.

In continuity with this debate, the first aim of this paper is to argue that the strategies just mentioned (in terms of topics, functions, and externalism) fail 'in the same way', that is to say, in ways that can be traced to a common root. The second aim of this paper is to locate this common

root in the *defective dialectic* that is arguably generated by the change of subject objection and by the very response strategies that have been devised to contrast it. This will ultimately lead to a dismissal of the subject-change objection *on dialectical grounds* – which had not received sufficient attention so far. All this notwithstanding, something can still be retained from the objection – for instance, the fact that it points out a number of potential *practical* difficulties, with which the conceptual engineer should be ready to cope.

This paper is structured as follows. In sections 2, 3, and 4, I discuss three distinct strategies that have been proposed to counter the change of subject objection: Cappelen’s topics strategy, the function strategy, and the externalist strategy. All these strategies, I argue, fail in similar ways. In sections 5-6 I explain why this is so: they all try to recover a loose sense of subject matter, but neglect that there is a narrow sense too, to which the proponent of the objection can always appeal in response. In section 7, I notice how this contrast between loose vs. strict sense of subject matter leads to a *defective dialectic*, in which both the proponent of the subject-change objection and the conceptual engineer remain stuck. In section 8, I clarify how this dialectical defectiveness can be remedied, even though the proponent of the subject-change objection and the conceptual engineer may ultimately have to agree to disagree on a ‘meta’ level. In section 9, I conclude that, in virtue of this dialectical defectiveness, current formulations of the change of subject objection can be dismissed, even though I list a number of practical lessons that we can retain from the objection.

2. Topics, Samesaying and Shiftiness

Herman Cappelen defends a response to the change of subject objection that promises to recover continuity wherever the objector sees discontinuity. In Cappelen’s view, even if a concept can undergo a change of intension, extension, or both, that concept can still be about the same *topic*. A topic is a representation of what a concept is about that is more coarse-grained than the concept’s intension or extension. Topics therefore promise to ensure a certain unity of subject matter.

How is sameness of topic established? Cappelen suggests the following heuristics: whenever two speakers can be reported as ‘Having said the same’ while using the same term occurring in different utterances of the same sentence, in different contexts, and with different intensions or extensions, then they are talking about the same topic. For example, if I say ‘Charles is old’ in context C1, meaning ‘old for a golf player’, and you say ‘Charles is old’ in C2, meaning ‘old for a king’, it is possible for a third person in context C3 to report us as having said the same: that Charles is old. This would also indicate that we are talking about the same topic – Charles’ being old.

Samesaying as a heuristic tool is scarcely helpful, as several theorists have pointed out (see Schroeter and Schroeter 2020; Shields 2020; Sundell 2020; Belleri 2021). This is because two speakers who are judged as same-sayers in one reporting context may be judged as saying different things in another reporting context – depending on each context’s salient interests and purposes. Even within one and the same reporting context, samesaying criteria could shift, so the reporter could describe the speakers as same-sayers in one respect, but not as same-sayers in another respect. For instance, you and I may be reported as having both said that Charles is old (hence, as having said the same), but also as having said different things (that Charles is old *for a golf player* and that Charles is old *for a king*). If samesaying is used to establish sameness of topic, judgements about the latter will suffer from the same shiftiness of the former.

Cappelen is fully aware of the shiftiness of samesaying judgements, and admits that samesaying is relative to context (Cappelen 2020: 596). This, however, does not improve his position. If samesaying, and consequently topic, is shifty, the stability of the strategy he proposes is undermined, as any sameness-of-topic judgement can potentially be overturned in any context, as soon as different criteria for samesaying are granted salience.

Indeed, the notion of samesaying could be used by the supporter of the change of subject objection to show that, in each context wherein the conceptual engineer sees sameness of topic, there is divergence in what the speakers say, and therefore divergence in topic. If the notion of

samesaying – which is central to Cappelen’s strategy – can be used by Cappelen’s *opponent* to pursue the opponent’s very line of reasoning, this is a bad sign for Cappelen’s strategy.

One may reply that, at the very least, Cappelen’s strategy causes a *halt in the dialectic*, creating a standoff between the theorist who claims sameness of topic and the theorist who denies it. Still, this is somewhat unsatisfactory. Recourse to topics seemed to be more than just a tactical ploy. Cappelen seems to aim for a positive point – showing that there can be topic continuity. If my considerations are on the right track, though, this positive point may always be potentially overturned. The result is an unstable, scarcely useful strategy.

3. Function: broadly and narrowly construed

Several authors maintain that, as long as a concept’s *function* is the same, subject matter is preserved. A concept’s function may be identified with the role it is *intended* to serve. This presupposes a designer, though, which several of our concepts do not plausibly have. According to an alternative account, a concept’s function may be linked to its history or aetiology – what made it *evolve* into the concept that it now is (‘aetiological function’). This account is presented as compatible with the function strategy by Thomasson (2020) and by Simion and Kelp (2020).¹ Another view ties a concept’s function to its contribution within a certain representational or cognitive system (‘system function’). This is mentioned by Thomasson (2020; 2022) as well as by Haslanger (2020). Alternatively, one may hold that a concept’s function is simply ‘what the concept is for’. This may be conceived in a robust way: Prinzing (2017) views function as necessary for concept identity; Haslanger (2000) talks of a concept’s ‘central function’. Others opt for a more minimalist view: Nado (2019) shies away from central or essential functions, and remains open to function plurality and function malleability (see also Brigandt 2010). It’s not my aim to adjudicate

¹ Simion and Kelp envision an intentional, design function which evolves into aetiological function.

between these different options; rather, I am interested in the stability of function-individuation, which seems vital to ensure the desired continuity.

If concept- and subject matter continuity depend in any helpful way on function, individuating function had better be a procedure that ensures sufficiently stable results. Unfortunately, this is not so. It has already been pointed out how specific theories of function, and even how the generic notion of function, fail to provide stable enough criteria for individuating a concept's function (see Riggs 2021; Belleri 2021; Jorem 2022). In continuity with these contributions, I wish to draw attention on a further way in which function-individuation can be unstable, and on a dialectical consequence of such instability.

Arguably, a concept's function may be characterized in a *broad* way and in a *narrow* way. The broadly construed function of *marriage* is that of categorizing unions that have such-and-such features: for instance, unions between two consenting adults that undertake certain commitments regarding mutual care and family duties. The broadly construed function abstracts away as much as possible from historical, social and cultural circumstances; that seems a totally legitimate way of construing concept function. It is, however, possible to construe the function of *marriage* in a much narrower way, which includes details concerning a variety of historical, cultural and social circumstances. For example, one may say that the function of *marriage* up until the late twentieth century was that of categorizing unions that have such-and-such features in a hetero-normative, patriarchal culture and normative system. The function of the contemporary marriage-concept is, by contrast, that of categorizing unions that have such-and-such features in a (still in progress) non-hetero-normative, non-patriarchal culture and normative system. This way of characterizing function is richer and context-relative in a way that could help one understand several aspects of the genesis, propagation, and subsequent dismantling of the old concept of marriage, as well as aspects pertaining to the genesis and uptake of the contemporary notion of marriage. It seems, therefore, another totally legitimate way of characterizing that concept's function. Arguably, similar things

could be said about other concepts, whose function can be described in a broader, abstract way, as well as in a narrower, context-embedded way.

If both ways of characterizing a concept's function are legitimate, then the following difficulty arises. The conceptual engineer could legitimately appeal to broadly characterized function in order to advocate for subject continuity. The supporter of the change of subject objection could, however, equally legitimately appeal to narrowly construed function in order to reiterate that subject matter changed. Consider again the example of *marriage*. The conceptual engineer may invoke the fact that the contemporary concept of marriage has the same broadly construed function as the older concept of marriage. In response, the proponent of the change of subject objection may argue that the narrowly construed function of the contemporary marriage-concept and that of the older marriage-concept differ, because the historical, cultural and social circumstances which were part of the function's description have changed. If so, one cannot claim conceptual continuity on the grounds of function sameness, because function is allegedly changed.

The conceptual engineer may reply that what counts in adjudicating the matter is broadly construed function: as long as it is *plausible* to claim that broadly construed function did not change, the change of subject objection is taken care of. Yet, who's to say which way of construing function is the one that matters? The supporter of the change of subject objection could offer plausible reasons to think that it is narrowly construed function that matters, or at the very least, that narrowly construed function matters *as much as* broadly construed function. One plausible reason may be that, when function is narrowly identified, one can *learn more and understand more* about the concept, compared to what one would learn and understand only with the help of broadly construed function. This seems true: if I explain to you that *marriage* serves this-and-that goal in (say) a hetero-normative and patriarchal normative system, you can infer more things and draw more conceptual connections involving *marriage* than you would be able to do if I only explained to you that *marriage* serves this-and-that goal, full stop. Being able to draw more inferences and

conceptual connections is certainly valuable, so narrow function seems like a legitimate contender of broad function.

If this is correct, no decisive considerations seem to favour one notion of function to the detriment of the other. The likely result is another dialectical standoff, in which each party invokes concept function in support of their own point, each appealing to (*prima facie*) legitimate considerations. If this reasoning is on the right track, it seems like the function strategy – no matter how it accounts for functions – fails to deliver an effective response to the change of subject objection.

4. The externalist strategy: between world and mind

A further way of addressing the change of subject objection appeals to externalist mechanisms of concept determination. Sarah Sawyer (2018; 2020a; 2020b) proposes a picture in which the content of a concept is fixed by external properties, or by natural/social kinds. For example, the content of *marriage* is fixed by the social kind marriage; the content of *water* is fixed by the natural kind water, and so on. Conceptual engineering is best thought as the engineering of our conceptions, i.e. the sets of beliefs associated with a certain concept. In the case of marriage, according to Sawyer, the last decades witnessed a change in our *beliefs* associated with the concept of marriage – for example, we came to believe that it can obtain between individuals of the same sex, and so on. The content of the concept *marriage*, however, did not change, as the concept continued to refer to the same social kind (whose nature was never completely stipulated, nor transparent to us). In this picture, as long as the concept keeps referring to the same kind, it ensures preservation of subject matter and, presumably, a relevant continuity in inquiry and communication (Sawyer 2020b: 1015).

Sawyer certainly captures aspects that are important to the preservation of subject matter. It is indeed important that, at least in some contexts, a single element (like a property or kind) plays this unifying role when it comes to establishing a conversation's or an inquiry's topic. Still, sometimes, the beliefs language users have, and the descriptions by means of which they frame a

certain topic, may become relevant. If we pay attention to these beliefs and descriptions, we may end up judging that two language users, who associate different beliefs or descriptions to one and the same property or kind, differ in the subject matter they are tackling. For example, we may say that, in the 1950s, people referred to the social kind marriage with their concept *marriage*; still, this social kind was *presented* as promoting values and social structures that belonged to a hetero-normative, patriarchal society. In 2022, the concept still refers to the social kind marriage, but it is *presented* as promoting values and social structures that belong to a (still in progress) non-hetero-normative, non-patriarchal society. Why shouldn't these 'modes of presentation' (or equivalent internalistic ways of representation) enter into an account of what the concept *marriage was about* in the 1950s, and of what *it is about* in 2022? On a pre-theoretical level, nothing seems to preclude these diverging construals of what the concept was/is about.

If these considerations are on the right track, the proponent of the change of subject objection may legitimately contest Sawyer-style judgements as to sameness of subject by drawing attention on these differences in beliefs or descriptions. In response, Sawyer may insist that *only* reference to kinds matters for subject determination. Still, the critic may ask: why? Who's to say what factors matter for (pre-theoretic) judgements about topic? Since no general, conclusive considerations seem forthcoming, the externalist strategy seems to, once again, lead to a draw in which none of the parties is in a position to settle the issue. Since we may presume that this result is not the intended goal of Sawyer's theory, we may conclude that the externalist account she champions is – similarly to the other strategies – dialectically ineffective as a response to the change of subject objection.

5. Failures of subject matter: the strict vs. loose distinction²

² See also Dobler (2022) and, partly, Prinzing (2017), for a strategy that relies on the strict vs. loose distinction of subject matter.

There is a common thread to the failures that have been attributed to the approaches just surveyed: they fail to give *principled identification criteria* for the element that, in each theory, purportedly ensures continuity of subject matter. The topic strategy, which rests on samesaying as a heuristic tool, fails because samesaying judgements are shifty. If samesaying judgements are shifty, and they are the main tool for settling sameness of topic, then sameness of topic is also shifty. The function strategy fails because, generally, function can be legitimately rendered in a narrow or in a broad way. Broad characterizations of function may drive sameness-of-subject-matter judgements, while narrow characterizations may drive opposed judgements. The externalist strategy also fails because it has externalist mechanisms play an exclusive role in establishing subject matter, when internalist factors may be legitimately thought to enjoy pride of place too. If so, this could easily generate opposite judgements, where externalism-driven sameness judgements are contrasted by difference judgements prompted by more internalistic considerations.

It is no accident that these strategies fail.³ Forget for a minute about identifying subject matter *via* topics, functions or externalist metasemantic mechanisms. Focus on identifying subject matter *per se*, whatever that amounts to for present purposes. Arguably, identifying the subject matter of a single concept, of a single inquiry, or of a single conversation is no straightforward task. We could also expect that identifying the subject matter of concepts, of inquiries, or conversations *across relevant conceptual variations* will be equally challenging. To see this, let's consider some toy examples.

Let us start from the sentence 'The leaves are green'. What's the subject matter of an utterance of this sentence? For convenience, we could try to express this by using a nowadays

³ The instability of the notion of subject matter seems to go well with another recent view, spelled out by McPherson and Plunkett (2021): that the terms 'topic continuity' stand for a *context-sensitive* notion, which encapsulates different dimensions, namely 'Communicative Continuity', 'Representational Continuity', and 'Inferential Continuity'. Speakers' interests determine, in each context, how these dimensions are weighted against each other and what degree of continuity is required. Kocurek (2022) also highlights how continuity of topic may depend on the kind of question being asked – and hence on the interests at stake in a context of use. If one is asking a *covertly metalinguistic, practical* question (called 'interpretative question') conceptual revision or replacement would not go off topic. Eklund (2021: 22) also hints at the interest-sensitivity of topic and topic-talk.

popular tool, namely, ‘partitions’ of logical space, following Lewis (1988) (or ‘divisions’ thereof, following Yablo 2014). So, let us ask: Is the subject matter of the uttered sentence ‘The leaves are green’ the set of possible worlds in which the (salient) leaves are green *in any way* of being green (for instance, olive-green, laurel-green, forest-green, and so on)? Or is it the possible worlds in which the (salient) leaves are green in some specific way (e.g. they exhibit a specific shade of green, such as olive-green)? This is already a tricky issue to solve, and we are only dealing with one single occurrence of that sentence.

On a strict construal of being about, let us say that the sentence’s subject matter should be *as precise as possible*. To get a reconstruction of subject matter that is as precise as possible, we may look at different factors depending on the context. Suppose, for example, that Mia used ‘The leaves are green’ to *mean* that the salient leaves are green in a specific way – say, olive-green. Looking at her intentions may help maximize precision. Given that the simple occurrence of ‘The leaves are green’ articulates no details as to specific shades of green, considering Mia’s intentions, we may say that the utterance’s subject matter, in its *maximally precise* reconstruction relative to Mia’s context, is all the possible worlds in which the (salient) leaves are olive-green.

Yet, there is arguably also another, looser way of being about, such that there is no need to maximise precision. In the present case, we may look at other factors for reconstructing this *non-maximally precise* subject matter. For instance, the semantic content of the simple occurrence of ‘The leaves are green’ may suffice to state that Mia’s utterance is *also* about the leaves’ being green, broadly construed. This would be a non-maximally precise reconstruction of subject matter. The utterance’s subject matter would be all the possible worlds in which the (salient) leaves are green *in any way* of being green (for instance, olive-green, laurel-green, forest-green, and so on).

Given this distinction,⁴ one may then wonder what the subject matter of Mia’s utterance is. Is it the strict subject matter (the maximally precise one), or the loose subject matter (the non-

⁴ Maximal and non-maximal precision can be achieved in different ways depending on the context’s specifics. One may look at speaker intentions in one context, at semantic content in another, and at speaker-meaning in yet other occasions.

maximally precise one)? There is no conclusive way of responding to this question. Both ways of reconstructing the subject matter of her utterance appear legitimate, each for different purposes. For example: maybe Mia's capacity for colour-recognition is to be tested. On previous occasions, she called 'green' objects that exhibited different shades of green. On this occasion, it is important for the tester that she recognizes olive-green as green, so whether she is talking about *olive*-green leaves carries importance. By contrast, loose subject matter seems to be relevant in situations where the standards of precision are more relaxed, or where details simply do not matter. For example, if someone is simply interested in the leaves being green for the purpose of adding further greenery on one's balcony – the shade is not important – it only matters that Mia's utterance, which counts as a piece of testimony, was about the leaves being green in some way or other.

One could argue that the strictest possible subject matter should be generally privileged, unless there are reasons that license glossing over the details. Suppose it were true that, by some objective standards, it is this type of subject matter that counts in every circumstance. Still, these objective standards could be easily and legitimately overridden at any moment, as soon as practical interests licensed a looser reconstruction of subject matter. In other words, even if the strictest possible subject matter enjoyed some objective priority, this priority wouldn't count for much in practical circumstances. Strict subject matter and loose subject matter would be *de facto* on a par.

6. Strict vs. loose subject matter across semantic variations

Let us now take two occurrences of the sentence 'The leaves are green', one uttered by Sia, who wishes to attribute the property of being olive-green, and the other uttered by Pia, who wishes to

Here is one case: Suppose Mia utters 'It is sunny in Philadelphia'. In this case, supposing that there are no context-sensitive, vague, or indeterminate expressions in the sentence, we could use the sentence's *semantic content* as a guide to strict (maximally precise) subject matter. We would say that it is all the possible worlds in which it is sunny in Philadelphia. On a non-maximally precise construal, we would instead say that Mia's utterance is about the weather in Philadelphia, or about the weather, or about the US. Here is another (odder) case: Suppose Mia uttered 'The rose is vermillion', thinking that vermillion means the same as 'red'. This is a somewhat special case, since it involves a non-competent language user. In this case, maximizing precision would require saying that the utterance is strictly about the rose being vermillion if we interpreted Mia as speaking *ordinary English*. If we did *not* interpret Mia as speaking ordinary English, but rather her own idiolect, and absent further details concerning her intentions regarding meaning or reference, we could say that the strict (maximally precise) subject matter of her utterance is the rose being red.

attribute the property of being laurel-green. Is the subject matter of their utterances one single set of worlds where the salient leaves are green *in any way* of being green (for instance, olive-green, laurel-green, forest-green, and so on)? Or is it two separate sets of worlds where the salient leaves are green in some specific way – namely, olive-green and laurel-green respectively?

Here again, we find ourselves conflicted between a loose (non-maximally precise) and a strict (maximally precise) sense of subject matter. This in turn affects our disposition to state whether the subject matter of these utterances is the same or not. Depending on which aspects we focus on, we may get different answers. If we focus on what Sia's and Pia's utterances have in common, namely the sentence 'The leaves are green' and its semantically underdetermined standing meaning, then we might be inclined to say that they have the same (loose, or non-maximally precise) subject matter, i.e. the set of worlds in which the salient leaves are green *in any way* of being green (for instance, olive-green, laurel-green, forest-green, and so on). If we focus on the aspects that set Sia's and Pia's utterances apart, namely their intentions to refer to different shades of green, we may be inclined to state that their utterances have *different* (strict, or maximally precise) subject matters, namely, the possible worlds where the salient leaves are olive-green (in Sia's case) and the possible worlds where the salient leaves are laurel-green (in Pia's case).

Establishing subject matter across multiple sentences that feature semantic variations is, therefore, tricky. The machinery of possible worlds partitions did not quite help settle the issue. There seems to be a deeper problem: it is unsettled which sense of 'subject matter' or 'being about' is relevant in each of these occasions, as the strict (maximally precise) and the loose (non-maximally precise) strike us both as legitimate. Strict subject matter is legitimate to the extent that having high standards of precision is legitimate, and loose subject matter is legitimate for opposite reasons. Even if, objectively, strict subject matter enjoyed some sort of priority, practical interests

could easily and legitimately lead one to disregard it. We have good reasons to keep all the involved senses of ‘subject matter’ around.⁵

The points I have just developed arguably also hold for examples that are closer to the interests of conceptual engineering. Let us then focus on a non-toy example. Going back to the marriage case, consider Paul the conservative and Saul the progressive. Paul believes that marriage can only happen between a man and a woman, while Saul believes there can be same-sex marriages too. When Paul utters ‘John and Mary are married’ he is talking about conservative marriage – call it $\text{marriage}_{\text{con}}$. When, by contrast, Saul utters ‘John and Mary are married’ he is talking about progressive marriage – call it $\text{marriage}_{\text{prog}}$. Is the subject matter of their utterances of ‘John and Mary are married’ all the possible worlds in which John and Mary are married in *any way* of being married (for instance, they are $\text{married}_{\text{con}}$ in w_1 , $\text{married}_{\text{prog}}$ in w_2 , and so on)? Or is it two separate sets of possible worlds, wherein John and Mary are $\text{married}_{\text{con}}$ (in Paul’s case) and wherein John and Mary are $\text{married}_{\text{prog}}$ (in Saul’s case)?

If we go for the first option, namely non-maximally precise subject matter, we may say that Paul and Saul are talking about the same thing, and thus they share the *same* loose subject matter. If we go for the second option, namely maximally precise subject matter, we may say that Paul and Saul are talking about different things, and thus they are dealing with *different* strict subject matters. All these ways of rendering subject matter appear legitimate for the purposes that matter in the present discussion. There appears to be no absolute answer as to which notion of subject matter is relevant for evaluating this situation.

⁵ Because of this deeper problem, adopting equally popular and discussed formal approaches to subject matter would not, arguably, make a difference. Kit Fine’s approach to subject matter (see Fine 2017; 2020) does not deploy possible worlds, but states, which are much more flexible than worlds. Still, states don’t seem helpful in resolving the ambiguity between loose and strict subject matter. Considering Sia’s and Pia’s utterances of ‘The leaves are green’, we may wonder whether the subject matter of the propositions they express is: (i) the (mereological fusion of) states whereby the leaves are green in any way of being green (for instance, olive-green, laurel-green, forest-green, and so on), or whether it is (ii) the states in which the leaves are green in a specific way, namely, olive-green in Sia’s case, and laurel-green in Pia’s case. States qua formal posits don’t seem to allow a univocal distinction that can favour an attribution of strict or loose subject matter. Thus, at least pre-theoretically and for the purposes that matter in this discussion, all senses of ‘being about’ remain legitimate – irrespectively of the formalism that is deployed by Fine’s machinery.

The lesson to be learned is that subject matter, whatever subject matter should be for the purposes of the subject-change objection, is somehow *elusive and ambiguous* (even under the possible-worlds formalization just considered). The distinction between strict and loose subject matter is always lingering, and there seems to be no principled or conclusive way of getting rid of one notion or another. When conceptual engineers try to capture subject matter *via* notions such as that of topic, function or externalist mechanisms of content determination, it is plausible to think that the ‘strict vs. loose’ dichotomy affects their attempts as well, thus undermining the effectiveness of their strategies.

If so, attempts at addressing the change-of-subject objection may be doomed. Given the ‘strict vs. loose’ dichotomy, any such attempt will plausibly be vitiated by the elusiveness and ambiguity⁶ of the notion of subject matter.

7. An unfair objection?

Current formulations of the change of subject objection are rather rough. Strawson’s objection, which is frequently cited in the literature, is formulated in broad terms, and with the rhetorical aid

⁶ The idea of elusiveness and ambiguity of subject matter plausibly goes hand in hand with the idea of context-sensitivity of topic-talk, as articulated by (among others) McPherson and Plunkett (2021). According to McPherson and Plunkett, when we talk about topic continuity being preserved or broken, we use an expression (‘topic continuity’) whose character encodes different dimensions, which are in turn applied according to the speakers’ interests. Speakers may, for instance, judge that a certain revision did (or did not) preserve ‘what matters’ in the current use of a certain concept. For instance, one may judge that revising the concept *free will* so as to be able to say that an agent has free will even in a deterministic world fails to preserve ‘what matters’ in the current way we speak about free will (namely, one’s ability to do otherwise). Alternatively, one may tie topic continuity to inferential continuity – namely to preserving the inferential patterns that count for conceptual competence. Thus, in the case of a Scharp-style revision of the concept *truth*, one may care about the extent to which truth-concepts *à la* Scharp uphold familiar disquotation-based inferential patterns. Finally, one may assess topic continuity based on how much communication would be damaged by the revision. For instance, one may worry about merely verbal disputes, semantic mismatches between questions and answers, and confusion ensuing revision of the concept *woman* in Haslanger’s revisionary project. McPherson and Plunkett’s account is more sophisticated than the account presented in this paper; as such, it could certainly help describe in closer detail some of the examples examined in the previous sections. For instance, when addressing the degree of subject matter continuity between different concepts of marriage, the focus was on the extent to which their ‘loose’ subject matter or ‘strict’ subject matter is the same. This talk of ‘loose’ and ‘strict’ could be rendered in more refined terms by the McPherson and Plunkett account. For instance, they may interpret ‘sameness of loose subject matter’ as ‘sameness of certain relevant inferential patterns’; or they may interpret ‘differences in strict subject matter’ as ‘differences in extension that could cause communicative breakdowns’.

of analogy.⁷ Other formulations, like Haslanger's (already cited in section 1) or Cappelen's,⁸ mention questions and the adequacy of answers that deploy the engineered concept. Other versions yet illustrate the problem by means of examples – such as *free will* (Cappelen and Plunkett 2020), *justice* (McPherson and Plunkett 2021), *belief*, *woman*, *knowledge*, *moral responsibility* (see Cappelen 2018, who also cites Kauppinen 2007 and Railton 1989, among others). Still, they too don't go beyond offering a broad statement of the issue. In fact, on closer look, no one seems to have put forward a precise formulation of the objection, and especially no sufficiently sharpened notion of subject matter has been used. Conceptual engineers, however, worry about changing the subject. They seem to think that a critic could use subject-change to level an objection against this method, and also that a change of subject could actually undermine (some of) their projects. Subject change is, therefore, a cause for worry, even though only rough statements of the problem are currently available.

In response to these rough formulations of the problem, as we have seen, advocates of conceptual engineering devise strategies that identify a continuity of subject matter *via* some proxy – be it samesaying (in Cappelen's strategy), function, or externalist mechanisms of content determination. The problem is that none of these proxies can ensure a stable enough answer.

Now that the 'strict vs. loose' distinction is on the table, we can explain this dynamic more easily. Response strategies to the change of subject objection identify subject matter in a way that is *loose enough* (non-maximally precise enough) to ensure sameness of subject despite semantic changes (e.g. changes in intension or extension). Yet, loose subject matter is just one type of subject

⁷ In the following quote, Strawson makes a broad statement about the gap between scientific and philosophical problems, and uses an analogy: 'to offer formal explanations of key terms of scientific theories to one who seeks philosophical illumination of essential concepts of non-scientific discourse, is to do something utterly irrelevant – [...] like offering a text-book on physiology to someone who says (with a sigh) that he wished he understood the workings of the human heart'. Here again, Strawson reiterates the science vs. philosophy gap: 'Typical philosophical problems about the concepts used in non-scientific discourse cannot be solved by laying down the rules of use of exact and fruitful concepts in science. To do this last is not to solve the typical philosophical problem, but to change the subject.' (Strawson 1963: 504, 505).

⁸ Thus Cappelen: 'the answers employing terms with the new extensions fail to answer the original questions. These answers concern something new—not what we were originally talking about [...]. We have the illusion of an answer, but it's a purely verbal illusion.' (2018: 101-102).

matter. The proponent of the objection can oppose sameness of subject verdicts by appealing to *strict* (maximally precise) subject matter. She can recruit fine-grained distinctions in the proxies (e.g. in what is said, function, or metasemantic mechanisms) to reach more fine-grained subject matter attributions, which can in turn lead to a difference-of-subject-matter verdict, whereby the pre-revision concept and the post-revision concept differ in what they are about. As noted before, the strict subject matter invoked by the objector is just another, fully legitimate type of subject matter. If the friend of conceptual engineering insists that loose subject matter is the same after all, the objector can *always rebut* this claim by insisting that strict subject matter is not the same. In other words, each attempt by the conceptual engineer to establish sameness of subject matter can be opposed by appealing to an equally legitimate claim as to difference of subject matter. The conceptual engineer, then, gets stuck in a loop with no easy exit.

Given this reconstruction, the conceptual engineer may allege that the change of subject objection, or at least the formulations of the objection that are currently available, are *unfair*, in that they *trade on the elusiveness of the notion of subject matter*. The unfairness consists in not specifying *in advance* which notion of subject matter (strict vs. loose) is relevant for the objection's formulation, thus putting the objector in a position of dialectical advantage, from which it is possible to refute the addressee's response by taking advantage of a notion that was *not* previously made clear. In response, the proponent of the objection could also reply that the conceptual engineer's answer is *unfairly* trading on the fact that no notion of subject matter was specified in advance, and that they invoke a loose notion of subject matter just because it helps them make the point that continuity in this respect was preserved. In general, we could say that unclarity concerning how to understand 'subject matter' generates a *defective dialectic*, in which each side seems entitled – in virtue of said unclarity – to appeal to the notion of subject matter that seems to best favour their interests. The dialectic is defective because, owing to this lack of clarity on how to interpret the term 'subject matter', it does not allow the parties to make progress on the issue of subject matter continuity, as both would be appealing to different and irreconcilable ways of

construing subject matter and of portraying the results, advantages, and disadvantages of the relevant conceptual revisions.

8. Making the debate fair(er) on both sides?

How to fix such a defective dialectic? To start with, the proponent of the change of subject objection could produce a version of the objection that refines the notion of subject matter *from the very beginning*. This would improve the objection's fairness, in that it would allow the addressee to deal with a clearer notion, in terms of which to devise a response strategy – if at all possible. Maybe this is the objection that the theorists cited above ultimately mean to articulate, or that it would be most charitable to consider in an exchange with the change-of-subject objector. If so, we have reasons to examine it as well.

Suppose that 'subject matter' is operationalized so that it is equated with *strict* (maximally precise) subject matter. Then, the change of subject objection would have it that 'conceptual engineering alters strict subject matter'. Suppose now that, after looking at how the meaning of 'marriage' is specified in conservative legal texts, it is established that the maximally precise subject matter of *marriage_{con}* is a set of possible worlds wherein the union sanctioned by marriage is only between people of opposite sexes. Conversely, after looking at how the meaning of 'marriage' is specified in progressive legal texts, it is established that the maximally precise subject matter of *marriage_{prog}* is a set of possible worlds wherein the union sanctioned by marriage is *not* only between people of opposite sexes. If *marriage_{con}* is engineered to become *marriage_{prog}*, and the maximally precise subject matter of *marriage_{con}* differs from the maximally precise subject matter of *marriage_{prog}*, then every speaker who talks about marriage post-revision is addressing a *different strict (maximally precise) subject matter* than the one addressed by speakers who talk about marriage pre-revision.

The conceptual engineer could *concede* the objection phrased in terms of strict (maximally precise) subject matter. Still, they could reply that there is a sufficiently loose (non-maximally

precise) notion of subject matter whereby *marriage_{con}* and *marriage_{prog}* are about the same subject matter. The pre-revision and the post-revision speakers are, after all, both speaking of unions between consenting adults, from which certain rights and obligations ensue, and so on. What's wrong with putting matters this way? – the conceptual engineer may ask. Note that, at this point, the discussion has explicitly moved to a different, 'meta' issue, namely that of how to construe subject matter. To the extent that each party is *clear* about what notion of subject matter they are putting on the table, the discussion is dialectically less defective, since each contender's point of view is explicitly articulated.

In this new 'meta' discussion, the objector may reply that strict subject matter counts because it grants certain explanatory advantages that are not granted by loose subject matter. Strict (maximally precise) subject matter *explains why* speakers pre- and post-revision might talk past each other, get into misunderstandings, or cause disruptions in inquiry. One may say, for instance, that it is because of a change in strict subject matter that confusion, or merely verbal disputes, may arise between speakers who deploy the concept of *marriage_{con}* and speakers who deploy the concept of *marriage_{prog}*. Also, it is because of a change in strict subject matter that inquiries spelled out in terms of *marriage_{con}* cannot be addressed with the concept of *marriage_{prog}*.

Yet, the conceptual engineer may rejoin that communication- or inquiry breakdowns can be explained by *simply* appealing to *semantic changes*, for instance, changes in intension and extension; or even by simply appealing to *pragmatic changes*, e.g. changes in speakers' intentions, speaker meaning, or contextually salient information. There is no need to invoke strict subject matter, or *any* notion of subject matter at all, in the explanation of these phenomena (see Koch 2023). In fact, one may even maintain that misunderstandings and inquiry-disruptions happen while also maintaining that the speakers are still talking about the *same* subject matter (see Knoll 2020). That is to say, these troubles can be acknowledged while holding that *loose* (non-maximally precise) subject matter did not change from pre-revision to post-revision. The involved speakers are

using words that *mean* different things (or *are meant* in different ways), although they are still *talking about* the same (loosely construed) thing.

This ‘meta’ disagreement may not come to a resolution. It could be that the conceptual engineer and the proponent of the change of subject objection fundamentally disagree on what matters (in terms of aims, interests and values) when it comes to assessing whether two concepts share the same subject matter or not, and it may be that none of them is willing to yield to the opponent’s position. That this fine, however. Irresolvable disagreements can happen. What matters is that this ‘meta’ disagreement – though irresolvable – is *not dialectically defective because of an unaddressed lack of clarity* on one of the key notions and terms used in the discussion – namely the notion of subject matter and the term ‘subject matter’. Since, by hypothesis, both parties would be sufficiently clear on each other’s preferences about ‘subject matter’ and about each other’s goals and interests, the discussion would rest on fair premises, even though it may not be resolved.

9. What can be retained of the change of subject objection?

Given all this, is the conceptual engineer entitled to dismissing⁹ the change of subject objection, at least the one presented by the unrefined versions currently available in the literature? Yes and no.

On the one hand, dismissing the (currently available versions of the) objection seems okay, to the extent that it seems okay to dismiss a critique cast in elusive terms, which engenders a defective dialectic. The conceptual engineer would be within their right to ignore the unrefined versions of the objection and to demand a sharper formulation – either in terms of loose or in terms of strict subject matter – with which they would be able to contend on firmer dialectical ground, even though ultimately the dispute may end in an irreconcilable ‘meta’ disagreement.

⁹ Reasons for dismissal are offered by other theorists: Knoll invites conceptual engineers to ‘embrace the consequence of changing topics’ (Knoll 2020: 20), as changing topics may be beneficial, for instance because it leads one to focus on better questions. For Koch (2023), topics are taken to constrain conceptual engineering from a metaphysical, normative, and terminological point of view. Yet, he discards the relevance of metaphysical constraints, and argues that normative/terminological constraints do not set any serious, inflexible limits.

On the other hand, it would seem unreasonable to dismiss *all* the elements of the change of subject objection – even in its unrefined versions. Some of the phenomena connected to the objection, such as misunderstandings, merely verbal disputes, and inquiry disruptions, are likely to happen in real life, irrespectively of whether they relate to a change of subject. The conceptual engineer should have the resources for coping with these potential communication- and inquiry related troubles no matter what.

These troubles are, however, *practical* in nature, and merely *likely*. One should be ready to cope with them were one to encounter them in real life, but that is quite far from ‘responding to the change of subject objection’ understood as a theoretical critique. Responding to the change of subject objection *on a theoretical level* would involve opposing the objector’s contention by providing identification criteria for subject matter that could help establish that subject matter does not change (in relevant examples). As we have seen, though, this strategy leads to a defective dialectic – or to an irreconcilable ‘meta’ disagreement at best. Still, the conceptual engineer could acknowledge that *practical* difficulties *may* be caused by processes of conceptual engineering, while devising strategies to address them – were they to arise.

One of the ways in which the conceptual engineer could prepare for dealing with communication- and inquiry related troubles is by enhancing their own and their audience’s *metalinguistic and metaconceptual ‘awareness’ or ‘sensitivity’*. This might involve paying closer attention to semantic differences that might explain communication breakdowns, or that might explain ineffective ways of answering certain questions or of tackling certain problems. This enhanced metalinguistic/metaconceptual awareness could both prevent and help to resolve problems related to concept-change in communication and inquiry. Ultimately, developing this type of awareness could even help one see that, in many cases, irrespectively of how one characterizes subject-matter, a change of subject is not a problem, and it may even be advisable.¹⁰ Thus, for

¹⁰ Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting incorporating this point.

instance, a concept user with an enhanced metalinguistic or metaconceptual awareness could be able to quickly diagnose communication breakdowns arising from diverging uses of the concept *marriage* in a conversation (meaning, respectively *marriage_{con}* and *marriage_{prog}*). Once the communication problem is removed, they might be able to realize that, if any change of subject happened, that might be viewed as non-problematic, or even as a good thing for (e.g.) ethical reasons, and not just as a bad thing because of potential communication breakdowns and disruptions. This would provide further reasons for dismissing the change of subject objection, at least in some specific cases, besides the dialectical considerations already mentioned.

If anything should be retained from the change of subject objection, then, it is the objection's highlighting of a range of practical difficulties – related to communication and inquiry continuity – that may be caused by conceptual engineering. Any worry about such practical difficulties would certainly be pressing. Yet, it would be a practical worry that is not obviously related to subject matter – however one wishes to construe it.

Conclusion

The change of subject objection, at least in its current formulations, arguably gives rise to a defective dialectic stemming from a lack of clarity on how to interpret 'subject matter' – whether in terms of strict or loose subject matter. The defective dialectic could be fixed if the parties converged on a univocal formulation of the objection (in terms of either strict or loose subject matter), even though they could still fundamentally disagree at a 'meta' level about what construal of subject matter takes priority. Ultimately, the change of subject objection may be dismissed (at least in its current formulations) although it may still be valuable, but for reasons that are unrelated to subject matter *per se*: it is because it reminds us of some likely, practical difficulties related to conceptual engineering.

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