**The Practical Implementation Challenge:**

**A Pragmatist Response**

**to Deutsch’s Dilemma for Conceptual Engineers**

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**Abstract**

According to Max Deutsch, conceptual engineers face a dilemma: either they target semantic meanings, in which case they are engaged in an infeasible activity (the “implementation challenge”), or they target speaker meanings, in which case they are engaged in a trivial enterprise (the “trivialization challenge”). Focusing on the first horn of the dilemma, I argue that the “transubstantiation version” of the implementation challenge only holds for representationalist approaches to conceptual engineering, according to which concepts are individuated by their representational relation to phenomena or sets of objects in the world. From a non-representationalist (e.g. pragmatist) perspective, the dilemma is therefore dissolved. Nevertheless, Deutsch’s article still deserves a response from the pragmatist, since it raises a more general challenge to conceptual engineering that I dub the “practical implementation challenge”. I offer a pragmatist solution to that challenge, drawing on John Dewey’s theory of inquiry and Robert Brandom’s inferentialism. This solution includes recommendations distributed across all stages of the engineering process, in privileging projects that are (1) problem-driven, (2) bottom-up; ensuring that the proposal is (3) clearly justified, (4) maintains continuity with the existing inferential role; and finally, in (5) enforcing the novel concept in practices of deontic scorekeeping, (6) backed up by institutional or intellectual authority.

**Keywords**

Conceptual engineering, implementation challenge, representationalism, inferentialism, pragmatism, Max Deutsch

# 1 Introduction

According to Max Deutsch (2020; 2021), conceptual engineers face a dilemma: either they aim at revising the semantic meanings of words, in which case they are engaged in an unfeasible enterprise (“the implementation challenge”), or they aim at doing something else – revising speaker meanings, introducing new technical vocabulary, revealing the meaning that a term already has – in which case they are engaged in a trivial or unoriginal enterprise (the “trivialization challenge”). In this paper, I identify the representationalist roots of Deutsch’s dilemma. According to representationalism, concepts (or here, semantic meanings) are individuated by their representational relation to phenomena or sets of objects in the world. This leads to what I call the “transubstantiation version” of the implementation challenge, which sees conceptual engineering as the utterly mysterious process of transforming speakers’ uses of terms into representational functions. By contrast, according to non-representationalism (or pragmatism), semantic meaning is abstracted from speakers’ attitudes and uses of linguistic expressions. For anyone who holds that view, the dilemma is therefore dissolved. Nevertheless, Deutsch’s article still deserves a response from the pragmatist, since it raises a more general challenge to conceptual engineering that I dub the “practical implementation challenge”. This version of the challenge is the primary focus of much of the literature on the topic (e.g. Fischer 2020; Nimtz 2021; Queloz and Bieber 2022). The question of implementation then becomes a matter of finding the most efficient means for a difficult (but not infeasible nor mysterious) enterprise. I offer a pragmatist solution to this challenge, drawing on John Dewey’s theory of inquiry and Robert Brandom’s inferentialism. In particular, I argue that the question of implementation should be addressed in *all* phases of conceptual engineering, not merely as an after-thought once the novel or revised concept is ready to be disseminated in the population. What results is a modest but realistic view of conceptual engineering.

The chapter is divided into two main parts. In the first part, I explain how Deutsch’s representationalist assumptions lead to both horns of the dilemma, while non-representationalism does not face this version of Deutsch’s dilemma. In the second part, I introduce the practical implementation challenge and provide a pragmatist solution to it, consisting of recommendations for each part of the process: pre-engineering, engineering, and post-engineering.

# The Representationalist Roots of Deutsch’s Dilemma

In its most general formulation, Deutsch’s dilemma does not appear to presuppose any particular metasemantics. It only explicitly relies on the basic distinction between semantic meaning and speaker meaning. Any theory about the nature of meaning or the way meaning is determined should account for the fact that sometimes words can be intentionally or unintentionally used in an idiosyncratic way that does not correspond to their genuine meaning, as when a patient mistakenly says that they might have arthritis in their thigh (the example comes from Burge 1979). According to Deutsch, the dilemma arises for “*any* metasemantic view that requires more, for an existing term to have a particular semantic meaning and reference, than just the *intention* on the part of some group of speakers to *use* the relevant term *as if* it had that very semantic meaning and reference” (Deutsch 2020, 3953). If this is true, it is bad news for conceptual engineering. However, I argue that Deutsch’s specific formulation of the dilemma is tied to representationalism, so that there *is* a way out of the dilemma, as long as conceptual engineering abandons representationalism.

## **Representationalism vs. Non-representationalism**

By representationalism and non-representationalism, I understand a family of views about conceptual content (thought) and semantic meaning (language). Since Deutsch’s dilemma is about meaning, I will focus on the latter. Under “representationalism”, I include positions also called “referential approaches to meaning” or the “picture theory of meaning”. Under “non-representationalism”, I include positions labelled “use theories of meaning”, “inferentialism,” and pragmatism.

According to representationalism, the semantic meaning of an expression is understood in terms of representation. The semantic meaning of an expression is what this expression is *about* or what it *stands for*. Semantic meanings are usually individuated by an intension-extension pair. Representationalism is compatible with different views of how the semantic meaning of a term is determined or what it supervenes on. According to the externalist version of representationalism, by far the most popular view today, the semantic meaning of linguistic expressions is determined by causal relations to objects or set of objects in the world, sustained by continuity of use. According to the internalist version, the semantic meaning of linguistic expressions is determined by or supervenes on beliefs or collective intentions. Importantly, what makes all of them representationalist is the view that *semantic meaning is distinct from the use of an expression* and that *semantic meaning determines the correct use of an expression*. It is because “arthritis” refers to an inflammation of the joints that claims such as “I have arthritis in my thigh” are incorrect.

By contrast, non-representationalism reverses the order of explanation for meaning. Instead of explaining correct use by appealing to meaning or content, it explains meaning or content by appealing to correct use (Brandom 1994; 2000). As Steinberger and Murzi note, this means that the fundamental difference lies at the level of metasemantics, and that it “need not necessarily reveal itself at the level of semantic theory” (Steinberger and Murzi 2017, 5). For example, non-representationalists do not have to deny that linguistic expressions have intensions and extensions, that they refer to things in the world, or even that one can give a truth-conditional semantics for sentences. What makes them non-representationalists is that they explain such semantic notions *downstream* from how linguistic expressions are used in linguistic practices; they are useful heuristic tools to formalize meaning and meaning relations, but they are not explanatory with respect to meaning. Non-representationalism also comes in externalist and internalist versions. Especially on the widespread *normative* versions of use or inferentialist theories of meaning, it is generally admitted that linguistic norms involve deference to experts and deference to the world (Matsui 2021) and even future use (Jackman 2020).

## **2.2 Representationalism and the First Horn of the Dilemma**

My goal here is to show *how* Deutsch’s representationalist assumptions naturally lead to both horns of the dilemma. Starting with the first horn of the dilemma, my reconstruction of Deutsch’s reasoning is as follows:

1. [**representationalism 1**] The semantic meaning of an expression is understood in terms of representation.
2. [**representationalism 2**] The semantic meaning of an expression is distinct from its use.
3. [**view of conceptual engineering**] Conceptual engineering at the semantic level consists in replacing a semantic meaning by another semantic meaning. (1)
4. [**view of conceptual engineering method**] The method of conceptual engineering at the semantic level is stipulation: commanding others to use linguistic expressions as if they had a different semantic meaning. (additional assumption, supported by 1, 3)
5. [**implementation challenge**] Therefore, conceptual engineering at the semantic level is (largely) unfeasible. (2, 3, 4)

Let us quickly look at how Deutsch understands premises 1 and 2. Regarding the first premise, for Deutsch, semantic meaning goes hand in hand with semantic reference (the two are always mentioned together). While he is silent about the specific nature of semantic meaning (given the purported generality of his dilemma), semantic meaning seems to be understood in terms of mappings of linguistic expressions onto objects or phenomena in the world. The linguistic expression “dog” semantically means *dogs*, semantically refers to dogs, and has dogs in its extension (Deutsch 2020, 3939–40). Likewise with more abstract philosophical terms such as “knowledge” or “free action”, which semantically refer to knowledge and free action, respectively (Deutsch 2020, 3955). Regarding the second premise, Deutsch assumes that semantic meanings are independent of how linguistic expressions are actually used. Semantic meaning might partly *supervene* on facts about use, but semantic meaning is a wholly distinct kind of phenomenon. This is visible in the sharp distinction he draws between speaker meaning and semantic meaning, which he takes to be two completely different kinds of things. According to Deutsch, the semantic meaning of a word is a property of *the word itself*, by contrast with the speaker meanings associated with it, which pertain to the *ways the word is used by speakers*: “while terms often do have meanings and referents that are best thought of as properties of the terms *themselves*—the terms’ *semantic* meanings and referents—they can also be *used* by speakers to mean and refer to things other than their semantic meanings and referents [i.e., speaker meanings]” (Deutsch 2020, 3939).

While Deutsch is explicit about the way premises 3 and 4 lead to the implementation challenge, he does not make explicit the moves from premises 1-2 (representationalist premises) to premises 3 and 4 themselves. Let us see how premise 1 leads to premise 3, Deutsch’s view of the kind of conceptual engineering that targets semantic meanings. Since the semantic meanings of terms are exhausted by their representational function, the only kind of engineeringor revision that can happen at the level of semantic meanings is the *replacement* of one semantic meaning by another semantic meaning. There is nothing else to “revise”. For example, conceptual engineers could decide to replace the semantic meaning of “dog” so that henceforth, it shall mean *cats*, rather than *dogs* (Deutsch 2020, 3939–40).[[2]](#footnote-2) Even when the new semantic meaning has an extension that overlaps with the previous one – as in Haslanger’s ameliorative analysis of gender and race – we are still talking about the replacementof one representational function by another.

Now to premise 4, Deutsch’s view of the *method* of conceptual engineering. This is an additional assumption in the sense that it does not directly follow from the other premises, but it is supported by them to some extent. According to Deutsch, “attempts to engineer concepts” can be understood as “efforts to stipulate new semantic meanings and referents for terms whose semantic meanings and referents are already fixed” (Deutsch 2020, 3936). In its simplest version, linguistic stipulation consists in using a linguistic expression *as if* it already had the desired semantic meaning, and enjoining others to do the same.[[3]](#footnote-3) Deutsch cites Nado as an explicit proponent of this method (Deutsch 2020, 3941), and interprets Haslanger as stipulating that, henceforth, “woman” should be used as if it had the semantic meaning and reference of the much longer expression “person who faces subordination on the basis of perceived biological features indicating a female role in reproduction” (Deutsch 2020, 3943). This method fits with the view of conceptual engineering as replacing semantic meanings. Deutsch recognizes that this might not be the only or preferred method for conceptual engineers,[[4]](#footnote-4) but claims that we are “ignorant of what more must be done, or what else must occur, in order to bring about semantic changes” (Deutsch 2020, 3940).

We now have all the ingredients for what I call the “transubstantiation version” of the implementation challenge. Together, premises 2, 3, and 4 lead to the view that conceptual engineering (at the semantic level) is largely infeasible. While Deutsch focuses on the role of premises 3 and 4 in his argument, the assumption that semantic meaning is distinct from use is doing some heavy lifting. Of course, if semantic meanings are representational functions that are metaphysically distinct from linguistic use, and are fixed largely independently of linguistic practices, then using a linguistic expression *as if* it had a different semantic meaning and referent will not have any effect on its real semantic value, which is “already fixed.” As Deutsch puts it: “How can the water of stipulation and speakers’ intentions be transmuted into the wine of genuine semantic change?” (Deutsch 2020, 3947). We can try all we want, but the genuine semantic meanings and referents of our expressions remain on a different metaphysical plane, untouched by the way we actually think and talk.

As Deutsch (2020, 3953), Cappelen (2018, 82), and Jorem (2021, 194) note, both externalists and internalists face this challenge. According to (some version of) externalism, conceptual engineering involves recalibrating the reference-fixing events that determine semantic meanings. How do we know which causal events are responsible for the determination of semantic meaning? How can we recreate such events, in particular for linguistic expressions whose referent is already fixed? According to (some version of) internalism, conceptual engineering involves changing collective intentions or what sufficiently many speakers intend or mean by a term. What is “sufficiently many speakers”? Whatever the cut-off point is, it is probably very large: “there are just too many individuals one would have to affect” (Jorem 2021, 194). What is responsible for the failure of *both* approaches is the metaphysical break between linguistic use and semantic meaning, even in the internalist case. Since we are dealing with two kinds of entities (semantic meanings on the one hand, intentions, dispositions, beliefs on the other hand), even when they are related by a supervenience relation, we face the “transubstantiation version” of the implementation challenge.

## **2.3 Representationalism and the Second Horn of the Dilemma**

Deutsch focuses on the first horn of the dilemma because he considers it the only charitable interpretation of conceptual engineering as a novel and interesting enterprise (Deutsch 2021, 3668). But it is worth also looking at the second horn of the dilemma, especially since the options that fall under this second horn have been attractive to many conceptual engineers. According to the second horn of the dilemma, if conceptual engineering is anything else than the revision of semantic meaning, it ends up being “trivial” in some way. Let us have a look at the different options.

1. ***Introduction of new terminology***. According to Deutsch, the only successful way in which conceptual engineering can target *semantic meanings* is to introduce a new term and give it a new semantic meaning (Deutsch 2020, 3944), or to use an old term and give an additional technical semantic meaning in certain contexts (e.g. “credence”, “supervenience”, “grounding”) (Deutsch 2020, 3945). This option is feasible because linguistic use can attach a new representational function to a linguistic expression that does not already have one. However, it is trivial in the sense of not being novel nor special in any way: “philosophers who introduce technical philosophical terms should not be credited with engaging in some newfangled, potentially revolutionary method of philosophy” (Deutsch 2020, 3946). This is just what philosophers have always been doing.
2. ***Changing speaker meanings****.* Perhaps conceptual engineers only want to change what some community of speakers *speaker-mean* or *­speaker-refer* to when using a certain term. Again, this option is feasible: “perhaps a conceptual engineer might convince some speakers to speaker-refer to something other than the semantic reference of ‘free action’ when using the term” (Deutsch 2020, 3941). In that case, conceptual engineering is trivial in the sense of being philosophically uninteresting. For example, in changing what some philosophers *speaker-mean* or *speaker­-refer to* when uttering “freedom”, they will not solve any deep philosophical problems about freedom (what the term “freedom” really refers to). Furthermore, from a representationalist perspective, this option leads to a more serious problem, which Koch calls “linguistic confusion”: “we lead people to use words incorrectly and thus to assert many falsehoods” (Koch 2021a, 1958–59). Since semantic meaning is fixed independently of linguistic practices, and determines correct use, changing the way some speakers use the terms can only lead them to utter false sentences, for example, by misapplying a concept to an object that falls outside of its real extension. This is an even a more disastrous consequence than being philosophically uninteresting.[[5]](#footnote-5)
3. ***Aligning speaker meanings with semantic meanings***. To avoid the problem previously mentioned, one solution is to change speaker meanings (or anything that accompanies them: conceptions, beliefs, theories) to *align them* with semantic meanings (Sawyer 2020; Ball 2020). In that case, conceptual engineering consists in *correcting* the way we speak and think in order to utter more truths. This option is fully in line with Deutsch’s representationalist picture of semantic meaning: since those are already fixed in virtue of representing or referring to objects or phenomena, the only enterprise that is left for us is purely *descriptive*. We can either describe the semantic meanings that our terms already have (conceptual analysis) or describe what our terms already refer to (theorizing). As Deutsch notes, these descriptive or revelatory enterprises can be difficult and interesting: conceptual analysis often involves “overturning mistaken intuitions, platitudes, and theories about what counts as knowledge, freedom, goodness, responsibility, causation, justice” (Deutsch 2020, 3950). The problem here is similar to the *introduction* option: conceptual engineering is not novel at all, hence it deserves neither a new name nor the hype it is receiving.

## **2.4 Pragmatism and the Dissolution of Deutsch’s Dilemma**

I have shown that representationalism, construed as involving a metaphysical break between linguistic use and semantic meaning, underpins Deutsch’s original formulation of the dilemma. This is not the place for mounting an attack against representationalism or a defence of non-representationalism (for such a defence, see Brandom 1994; Price 2011; Knowles 2023). Instead, the goal in this section is to show that non-representationalist views of conceptual engineering are not liable to Deutsch’s dilemma. I will take the inferentialist account of language defended by Brandom (1994; 2000) as a paradigmatic example of non-representationalism.

Inferentialism rejects both representationalist premises (1 and 2). According to inferentialism, semantic meanings are abstracted from social norms that govern the use of expressions in discursive practices (more specifically, the use of expressions in inferences). On the version I favour, inspired by both Brandom and Dewey, these inferential norms are not purely discursive, but embody ways of behaving towards things: including ways of interpreting, manipulating, and reacting to them.[[6]](#footnote-6) Obviously, this means that semantic meaning is not distinct from use. However, this is not to say that no distinction can be made between speaker meaning and semantic meaning. If the “speaker meaning” of an expression is the way an individual speaker (or group of speakers) uses a certain expression and draws certain inferences from it, the “semantic meaning” of an expression is the inferential norms that we can extract from the way speakers draw inferences and correct each other’s inferences involving that expression.

Since pragmatists are not committed to the identification of semantic meanings with representational functions, they have a different view of what conceptual engineering entails. On Deutsch’s representationalist account of conceptual engineering, the revision of semantic meanings consists in replacing one semantic meaning (representational function) by another (Premise 3). By contrast, on the inferentialist account, conceptual engineering consists in changing the inferential norms governing the use of an expression. For example, “the conceptual engineer will try to change when we are committed or entitled to infer that some particular counts as a woman, a marriage, as knowledge etc., where the consequences of counting as a woman, a marriage, as knowledge etc. are generally kept intact” (Jorem and Löhr 2022, 14–15). Or they might want the reverse, i.e., to change the inferential consequences of an expression while keeping its application conditions intact (for example, eliminating the negative consequences of the expression “queer”). According to inferentialism, such conceptual engineering projects *do* target semantic meaning rather than speaker meaning: they consist in changing inferential norms in a linguistic community, introducing new ways of categorizing the world, not merely having a group of speakers use a word in an idiosyncratic way. They do so by a range of methods that target inferential norms – methods that will be detailed in the next sections. What is certain is that conceptual engineering neither involves nor needs transubstantiation.

This means that the family of views that adopts a broadly pragmatist or non-representationalist view of the targets of conceptual engineering is not liable to Deutsch’s dilemma. This family of views include views that are strongly committed to non-representationalist metasemantics (Thomasson 2020; 2022), and pragmatist-friendly views that are quietist about metasemantics (Nado 2021; Isaac 2021; Nimtz 2021; Löhr 2021; Jorem and Löhr 2022). These views are all to be distinguished from the “speaker-meaning” view of conceptual engineering, which Deutsch misleadingly calls “pragmatic conceptual re-engineering” (Deutsch 2021, 3668). Certainly, what is revised on that view of conceptual engineering is close to the pragmatist view (patterns of inference, dispositions to use an expression in a certain way, etc.). However, the speaker-meaning approach to conceptual engineering, *insofar as it is committed to a representationalist view of semantic meaning*, will be liable to two of the objections falling under the second horn of Deutsch’s dilemma. By their own lights, if the speaker meaning changes but the (representationalist) semantic meaning remains the same, we end up with “linguistic confusion” (speakers will systematically make false utterances, from the semantic point of view). Or, if the goal is to align speaker meaning with (representationalist) semantic meaning, the changes advocated are nothing but good old conceptual analysis or theorizing. It is worth noting that quietists about metasemantics are potentially liable to the second horn of Deutsch’s dilemma, as long as they accept the possibility that a representationalist metasemantics is the correct one.[[7]](#footnote-7)

# A Pragmatist Solution to the Practical Implementation Challenge

## **3.1 The Practical Implementation Challenge**

This is not to say that Deutsch’s dilemma does not raise any interesting challenge for non-representationalists. In fact, the implementation challenge has had a life of its own in the conceptual engineering literature, independently of Deutsch’s original formulation. In this section, I will lay out the *practical* version of the implementation challenge.

There is a minimal version of the implementation challenge that is applicable to any conceptual engineering project. Such a version is already hinted at in Deutsch’s papers. Whatever conceptual engineers claim to revise, they “owe us an account of *how* they can actually succeed in doing so” (Deutsch 2020, 3940–41). They must explain what “must take place or be done in order for a semantic shift to actually be implemented” (Deutsch 2020, 3953–54). Just because a certain view of conceptual engineering makes it *feasible* does not mean that it does not face an implementation challenge. For example, if conceptual engineering is about changing the way people make inferences, we need to know how such changes can actually be implemented in a given community. By contrast with the original implementation challenge, which postulated a metaphysical wedge between the procedures of conceptual engineering and the kind of objects that are targeted for revision, this one simply asks the practical question: What procedures are needed in order to make conceptual engineering successful? As Jorem puts it, “We have traded an intractable metaphysical problem for a feasible practical challenge” (Jorem 2021, 202). Accordingly, the solution to this challenge will not be found in metasemantics or in the metaphysics of meaning grounds,[[8]](#footnote-8) but instead, “we are looking for a *practical* solution to a *practical* problem” (Nimtz 2021). This means stating what conceptual engineers can actually *do* in order to facilitate the implementation of novel or revised concepts. Such solutions are to be found in concrete examples of successful conceptual engineering in science, philosophy, and society at large, rather in the use of a priori methods.

There is a growing literature on the practical implementation challenge in the conceptual engineering literature. While I will not be able to discuss all of them in this chapter, I would like to make two remarks on the way the problem is currently approached in the literature. Because “implementation” is the last phase in the engineering process (Isaac, Koch, and Nefdt 2022, 4), the implementation challenge is often interpreted as “the challenge of securing uptake of engineered concepts” (Queloz and Bieber 2022). This suggests that conceptual engineers should be concerned about implementation *after* a concept has been revised. However, as I will argue below, the question of implementation is also relevant earlier in the engineering process. This is because the practical implementation challenge consists in finding the best meansto achieve success in conceptual engineering (Nimtz 2021, 4), and these means can be found throughout the entire process. This also means that, while the implementation challenge is generally treated independently of other foundational questions in the field, it actually intersects with many of them, including the question of justification (How do we evaluate concepts? How do we justify conceptual revisions?) and the question of legitimacy or authority (Why should anyone accept the revised concepts?).[[9]](#footnote-9) The implementation challenge should not be trivialized as a mere question of “advertising,” as Nado calls it (Nado 2020, 23).

There is no recipe or algorithm for dealing with the practical implementation challenge, but many piecemeal practicalrecommendations. The pragmatist solution I develop in the next subsections is distributed across *three* phases of the entire process: the emergence of a conceptual engineering project, the conceptual engineering process itself (assessment and creation or revision of concepts), and what comes after the process (once a novel or revised concept has been chosen). My approach is inspired by John Dewey’s theory of inquiry and Brandom’s inferentialism.

## **3.2 Before: Problem-based and Bottom-up Conceptual Engineering**

Conceptual engineering is often thought to start with the assessment of concepts, but not much is said about the context in which the question of evaluation comes up in the first place. We do not usually go around examining or assessing the concepts we have. If they work well for us, we use them without holding them up to scrutiny. In fact, this is precisely why most of our concepts are transparent: we think and talk *through* them, rather than about them (Burgess and Plunkett 2013, 1097; Queloz 2022, 1248). Dewey made the general point that inquiries (including those involving the creation or revision of concepts) start with an “indeterminate” or “problematic situation,” in which a need or problem is felt (Dewey 1938, 109). Such problematic situations include experiences of defective concepts and experiences of a need for new concepts. This is for example the case in situations of “hermeneutical injustice” described by Miranda Fricker (2007), in which victims of rape, sexual harassment, or postpartum depression lack the concepts to render their experiences intelligible to others, either because they do not possess the concepts or the concepts do not exist yet. What is important to note is that such conceptual engineering projects are *anchored* in problematic situations. The problem-based approach defended here should, therefore, be distinguished from the kind of engineering that “isolates concepts from the practical contexts in which they are put to work and concentrates on the inherent defects of concepts” (Queloz 2022, 1254). The goal of is not merely to fix a defect relative to an abstract evaluation standard (e.g. precision or consistency). Instead, in Dewey’s terms, the goal is to move from a problematic situation to a resolved situation, or from an indeterminate situation to a determinate (meaningful, intelligible) situation.[[10]](#footnote-10)

What does this have to do with the implementation challenge? Quite simply, an engineered concept will be more readily accepted and will spread faster if it responds to a need felt in the target population. In Queloz’s words, “an engineered concept must tie in with our concerns as they are *before* the engineer’s intervention” (Queloz 2022, 1253). Let us take the example of the concept disability. In the past decades, activists and disability theorists advocated for a shift from the purely medical conception of disability, according to which disability is an individual impairment, to a social conception of disability, according to which disability is always relative to a social context(for an interpretation of these debates in the context of conceptual engineering, see Cantalamessa 2021). The critical examination of the concept of disability did not start out of nowhere: it came from the experience of the problems generated by the existing concept: feelings of injustice from disabled people, confrontations with the inadequacy of social structures, etc. Such situations initially drove activists and theoreticians to assess the existing concept, articulate its failures, and propose a new concept, and they are the kind of situations that are (intended to be) transformed by the engineering process.

Importantly, the need does not have to be consciously articulated as such by all speakers in the target population. Most of the time, it is only when the novel concept is shared in the community that speakers become aware of the need or problem. Disabled and especially non-disabled persons may not have reflected on the ways in which the existing concept was problematic, but when encountering the new definition, they might have an “aha” moment in which they become consciously aware of the defects that the previous concept had. This is also what Fricker describes in the case of reparation of hermeneutical injustice, in which a confused and troubled experience suddenly becomes intelligible, as the person finally gains understanding of her situation thanks to the new concepts she is equipped with.

Of course, *in principle*, it is always possible to improve concepts that are not particularly problematic or defective, as Simion argues (2018). In practice, however, it will be much more difficult to implement these concepts, unless the benefits of the new concept far outweigh the cost of changing the way we think and the risk of miscommunication. In specific contexts, such as scientific practice, the drive for conceptual amelioration can suffice to motivate conceptual engineering projects and enable successful implementation. For example, the development of DNA sequencing motivated the revision and refinement of biological classification, although the old classification worked well for most purposes. But even in scientific practice, conceptual innovation is generally driven by certain needs. For example, the new definition of “planet” issued by the International Astronomical Union in 2006 was not issued out of a mere desire for a more precise definition. It was driven by a major problem in the existing astronomical nomenclature. Following the discovery of thousands of Kuiper belt objects, the existing definition was unable to draw a clear boundary between planets and asteroids, and it would have added hundreds of planets to the solar system.

Another aspect of the problem-driven view of conceptual engineering that is important for implementation is that it tends to make conceptual engineering a *bottom-up* process rather than a *top-down* one. Because the novel concept responds to a need felt in the target population, the novel concept is not merely imposed on the population from above – even when the engineering process itself is conducted by a handful of people. While the “planet” example could be interpreted as a case of top-down conceptual engineering, in which an institution with formal authority decides on a new definition that is then implemented in the scientific and wider community (Nimtz 2021), this is not the case at all. The engineering process was initiated and conducted by astronomers themselves, the primary intended audience of the conceptual change. The bottom-up aspect of conceptual engineering has epistemic advantages, which are shared with other democratic processes (Serrano-Zamora 2022): the problem has higher chances of being well-defined if it is articulated by the users of the concept, and the revision has higher chances of being justified if the proposals emerge from and are evaluated by the users of the concept. It also has political advantages: the revised concept has more legitimacy if it emerges from a process started and/or conducted by the users of the concept – hence its authority comes from the users of the concept themselves. Both these aspects in turn facilitate the implementation of the revised concept in the target population. Here, the question of implementation explicitly intersects with those of justification and authority.

## **3.3 During: Inferential Continuity and Justification**

I have just indicated ways of facilitating implementation from the outset, namely, anchoring conceptual engineering in problematic situations and adopting a bottom-up approach. The question of implementation is also relevant to the “core” activity of conceptual engineering, in which concepts are assessed, revisions are suggested, tested, and refined.

The difference between the representationalist and non-representationalist conceptions of conceptual engineering is crucial with respect to the question of implementation. We have seen that, for Deutsch, conceptual revision amounts to changing the semantic values of our expressions, that is to say, trading intension-extension pairs. For example, the revision (or rather, replacement) of the semantic meaning of “dog” so that it means *cats* instead of *dogs*. This contributes to the perceived arbitrariness of the process. By contrast, according to the inferentialist approach to conceptual engineering, the goal is to change the inferential norms that govern the use of linguistic expressions. These inferential relations can usually be divided into the application conditions and consequences of application of a linguistic expression. Conceptual revision consists in changing *some* of these inferential relations. For example, conceptual engineers can maintain the application conditions while changing some of the inferential consequences, or vice versa. In the disability case, the revision maintained much of the application conditions (we still apply the term “disabled” to the same persons) but the inferential implications changed. As Catalamessa notes, the term gained “political connotations” (Cantalamessa 2021). This means that “x is a student and a wheelchair-user” still commits us to “x is a disabled student”, but rather than being entitled to the additional inference that “x has a worse student experience”, we will be entitled to infer something like “x’s university should have wheelchair access”. This aspect of the inferentialist approach to conceptual engineering is crucial for implementation: the more radical the revision is, the less likely it is that the conceptual revision will be successfully implemented in the linguistic community (all other things being equal). Conceptual engineering does not involve trading semantic meanings that have nothing to do with one another (such as Deutsch’s example of “elbow” being used to mean *milkshakes*), but instead requires the preservation of much of the existing inferential role of a linguistic expression (Jorem and Löhr 2022, 17–19). This is largely due to the risk of linguistic miscommunication and the importance of coordination in linguistic practices.

The second important aspect of the inferentialist approach to conceptual engineering that is directly relevant for implementation is the *justification* of conceptual revision. This is not the place to give a full-fledged account of the kind of justification involved in non-representationalist conceptual engineering, but it will help to get the main idea. According to the inferentialist approach, changes in inferential norms are justified by various criteria including the overall coherence of the conceptual scheme, the empirical adequacy of the inferential relations involved, the purposes that the concepts serve, etc. For example, in the case of “planet”, several possible definitions were evaluated according to various criteria, including simplicity (does the definition involve a small number of characteristics or does it involve a collection of disjunctive characteristics?), inferential fruitfulness (does the definition single out a few characteristics that can explain other shared characteristics between the members of the class, or does it bring together objects that do not share any other characteristics beyond the ones in the definition?), precision (can the definition clearly demarcate between the members of its class and the members of another class?), etc. All of these, in turn, are guided by the problem that initiated the conceptual revision (including the discovery of Kuiper belt objects, and the inability of the previous definition to clearly demarcate planets from asteroids), although the original problem can itself be refined and redefined.

Both externalist and internalist aspects of justification are important for implementation. By the externalist aspect of justification, I mean that a revised concept can be justified even if conceptual engineers are ignorant or mistaken about what makes it justified. In that case, it still has a high chance of spreading because it is highly useful, like a felicitous genetic mutation (Richard 2019; Simion and Kelp 2020). By the internalist aspect of justification, I mean having access to what makes the concept justified – being able to explain and communicate why the revised concept fulfils certain needs. The latter is crucial in overcoming the initial confusion that a novel or revised concept creates. As Shields notes, those who advance a stipulation “incur a certain justificatory burden: when we stipulate, we are subject to the felicitous challenge to justify why the stipulation will be useful” (Shields 2021b, 6). Conceptual uptake is more likely to happen if speakers recognize that or understand why the new inferential relations will help them to think and talk in better ways.

The justification of new inferential relations goes together with the preservation of inferential relations. According to Jorem and Löhr’s inferentialist method,

we need to treat some part of a concept’s inferential role as fixed, then assess how we should fill out that role: Paradigmatically, by identifying what its application conditions ought to be in light of consequences we are holding fixed, but potentially also by holding fixed when we may infer that the concept applies and revise the consequences thereof. (Jorem and Löhr 2022, 19)

For example, we change the application conditions of “marriage” to extend it to same-sex couples while keeping the inferential consequences intact (e.g. legal rights), because we believe that same-sex couples should have the same legal rights as heterosexual couples. Or conversely, we maintain the application conditions for “queer” but discard the inferential consequences related to social stigma. However, trade-offs are possible between the level of justification of a conceptual change and the radicality of such a change. This means that a radical conceptual change can be implemented successfully as long as it has a high level of justification – for example, the change undergone by theoretical terms such as “time”, “space”, and “mass” in classical mechanics and relativistic physics. Even then, theoretical terms preserve much of their inferential role (Sellars 1974).

## **3.4 After: Deontic Scorekeeping and Intellectual Authority**

I now turn to post-engineering implementation, which has been the main focus of the literature concerned with the practical implementation challenge. These are the procedures that are deemed to help with implementation *after* a revised or novel concept has already been judged adequate by some speakers and is now being communicated in the larger linguistic community. They include all the “advertising” procedures for spreading a new concept, or what Cappelen (2018) and Löhr (2023) call “conceptual activism”. For example, conceptual engineers can “make appearances on radio or tv, create newsworthy events, mobilize stakeholders, seek access to decision makers, etc.” (Nimtz 2021, 16). As Löhr notes, this kind of activity “requires … monetary means or influence in society and trust from the stakeholders” (Löhr 2023). What procedures are most efficient in implementing conceptual changes is a question to be studied empirically, by looking at the history of some concepts (e.g. by looking at the history of science, in the case of scientific concepts), or even by means of controlled experiments. Kevin Reuter and Ethan Landes (2023) did such an empirical study. Taking the new definition of “planet” (which now excludes Pluto) and the biological category “dinosaur” (which now includes birds) as case studies, they tested the efficiency of different ways of communicating the change (e.g. textual explanation or image-based communication).

I will not be concerned with these procedures here, although they are directly relevant to the question of post-engineering implementation. Rather, I will focus on the aspects of the inferentialist framework that are relevant to post-engineering implementation procedures, looking more specifically at Brandom’s account of inferential norms and the way they are articulated and communicated in discursive practices. When asserting *p*, a speaker commits herself to *p* as well as to the inferential consequences of *p* (in conjunction with other commitments *q*, *r*, etc.). These inferential consequences are determined by the inferential norms that govern the practice. All the speakers engaged in a discursive practice *keep track* of their own as well as others’ commitments and, importantly, they *hold each other accountable* with respect to such commitments. For example, if in a conversation about Toby you assert that Toby is a cat, I attribute the commitment to you that Toby is a cat, but also various inferential consequences of your initial commitment, such as the commitment that Toby is an animal. If later in the conversation you assert that Toby is a plush toy, I will “sanction” you and enjoin you to retract one of your assertions (e.g., by acknowledging that Toby is not a *real* cat). This is what Brandom calls “deontic scorekeeping” (Brandom 1994). The practice is “deontic” because it keeps track of the obligations (commitments) and permissions (entitlements) of speakers given the norms of the linguistic practice.Importantly, everyone can implicitly keep track of other people’s inferential commitments and entitlements and our own inferential commitments and entitlements with respect to the norms of the linguistic practice, without necessarily having an explicit awareness of such norms. That is to say, deontic scorekeeping is a kind of practical *know-how* that does not necessarily require propositional knowledge of the norms in question.

In the case of an engineered concept, situations will happen where speakers in the practice take themselves and others to be governed by *different* inferential norms: some are using the “old” norm, while others are using the “new” (engineered) norm. What is relevant for implementation is that the new norms can be enforced by speakers in the practice of scorekeeping, by taking themselves *and others* to be governed by the new norm, and by rejecting, licensing, or correcting other people’s assertions accordingly. For example, someone who wants to spread the social model of disability will correct inferences that presuppose individual responsibility rather than social responsibility. They can do so either by explicitly stating the inferential norm itself (in the same way that, while playing a game, a player can restate one of the rules of the game to another player), or they can implicitly enforce the norm by rejecting the other speaker’s assertion (just as a player can reject another player’s move).

This practice will encounter resistance if it is not immediately obvious to the interlocutors that the conceptual innovation is useful or felicitous – in short, if it is not obvious to them why they *ought to* be governed by this new norm rather than by the old norm. This is where the “internalist” aspect of justification becomes important. In order to facilitate its implementation, speakers must be able to counter resistance by *offering reasons* for the new norms. It is, therefore, of crucial importance that conceptual engineers communicate the kind of justifications or reasons for their proposal very clearly. Of course, the reasons communicated in discursive practices by the speakers who adopted the new norm do not have to be identical to the ones that were advanced in the process of conceptual revision, but implementation will be facilitated if speakers are readily equipped with reasons to defend the new norm to recalcitrant interlocutors. For example, proponents of same-sex marriage can emphasize the similarities between heterosexual or same-sex couples, or the legal consequences of a marriage contract to which they believe all kinds of couples should be entitled. If such reasons are accepted by the interlocutors, who undertake a commitment to the new norm, they can be passed along to future recalcitrant interlocutors.

Of course, the reasons offered are always defeasible, and they can lead to counterarguments. Or perhaps new reasons for the conceptual revision are provided, or similar reasons are advanced in favour of a different proposal. What happens in deontic scorekeeping practices is part of considering conceptual engineering as a bottom-up process. It is not only the case that the need for a conceptual revision emerges from speakers’ practices themselves, or that the speakers are responsible for enforcing the new norms, but speakers also contribute to the evaluation, refinement, or rejection of conceptual engineering proposals. Even in the case where conceptual engineering appears to be top-down (for example, in fields where the writings of academics or activists are influential and deferred to), the revised concepts have a life of their own once they are used in a linguistic community.

My last remarks concern the role of institutional authority in post-engineering implementation. As Cappelen noted, institutional authority (for example, with the help of a law decree) is neither necessary nor sufficient for implementing a conceptual change. Even if the legal system has “police power to back up their proposals,” and could force everyone to use a term in a certain way, this does not mean that a conceptual change has occurred (Cappelen 2018, 76). However, institutional authority plays an important role in the implementation of certain concepts, especially in highly regimented languages, such as scientific languages (for example, the IAU for astronomical nomenclature). I would add that beyond institutional authority, it is helpful for conceptual revisions or innovations to be registered in documents with intellectual authority – texts by influential philosophers or activists, dictionaries or encyclopaedias. This gives formal authority to the proposal, which is important insofar as conceptual norms are *social* norms. Furthermore, such authorities can be appealed to when defending the new norm against recalcitrant interlocutors. However, it is important to note that the authority of such sources is (in the best of cases) itself derivative on the justifiability of the proposal itself and the legitimacy of the procedures that led to it. That is to say, if the committee of the IAU suddenly decided that “planet” shall mean *stars* without consulting astronomers and without providing any scientific justification, the decision would have no effect among astronomers. Similarly, if an influential activist or philosopher suggested a preposterous conceptual revision, one would hope that their proposal would not be followed (although the mechanisms of social influence are far from reliable). Institutional or intellectual authority is therefore a powerful *aid* for implementing a conceptual innovation, but it cannot replace other desiderata (in particular, the justification of the proposal).

# 4 Lessons for Conceptual Engineers

I have provided elements for a pragmatist response to the implementation challenge. The question of implementation is complex, and no recipe or algorithm can be provided that can guarantee successful conceptual engineering. Nevertheless, the process is neither mysterious nor impossible, and conceptual engineers can rely on successful examples of conceptual engineering taken from the history of various concepts in order to learn empirically what works and what does not.

A few normative lessons can be drawn from the pragmatist approach to implementation that I have defended in this chapter. First, the question of implementation should be addressed at each stage of the process, not merely at the post-engineering stage. This is because post-engineering uptake depends mainly on what happens in the previous stages.[[11]](#footnote-11) I have provided recommendations at every stage of the process in order to facilitate implementation. At the outset, privilege projects that are (1) problem-driven and (2) bottom-up. During the engineering phase, ensure that the proposal is (3) clearly justified and (4) maintains continuity with the existing inferential role. When the novel concept is ready to be disseminated, (5) enforce the novel concept in practices of deontic scorekeeping, (6) backed by institutional or intellectual authority.

Secondly, this list of recommendations is not a guarantee for success. Even if all the recommendations are successfully followed, other factors might impede implementation that are beyond the control of engineers, such as stronger social incentives to follow the old norm, or linguistic inertia. Neither does this list consist of jointly necessary conditions for conceptual engineering. Successful implementation can rest on trade-offs between different desiderata, so that if one recommendation is not followed, it can be compensated by others. For example, a radical conceptual revision might not be a problem for implementation if it is highly justified. Or little to no public advertising might be needed for spreading the conceptual change if it answers a need highly successfully.

Thirdly, conceptual engineering should have modest aims from a *quantitative* point of view: the proliferation of new or revised concepts is neither needed, desirable, nor realistic. A problem-based conception of conceptual engineering limits the ambitions of conceptual engineering by anchoring projects in concrete *needs*, rather than a pure drive for improvement. My view, therefore, differs from more ambitious approaches, such as Mona Simion’s “conceptual amelioration” approach, according to which “proposals of improvement for perfectly functional concepts will do just as well” (Simion 2018, 909). I suspect that such approaches take the question of implementation as a mere after-thought. *In principle*, conceptual amelioration is perfectly possible, but such projects will be more likely to face an implementation problem.

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ORCID: 0000-0002-3180-5149 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This premise also plays an important role in another objection introduced at the end of his paper, namely, that conceptual engineering lacks a good rationale, because the notion of semantic defect makes no sense. There is no way of improving the semantic meanings of expressions such as “‘knowledge’, ‘free action’, and ‘woman’”, since they already “allow us to speak of, and communicate about, things like knowledge, free action, and women” (Deutsch 2020, 3955). On Deutsch’s “lack of rationale” objection and how inferentialism can provide an answer, see (Jorem and Löhr 2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. What stipulation amounts to on Deutsch’s account also depends on his representationalist premises (Shields ms). For a pragmatist account of stipulation, see (Shields 2021b). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In fact, some conceptual engineers’ responses to Deutsch consist in rejecting this premise – externalist conceptual engineering, for example, will target the externalist meaning grounds of linguistic expressions (Koch 2021b; see also Cappelen 2018, 65–68). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Koch’s solution in that paper consists in defending a “dual content account of concepts” as the targets of conceptual engineering: conceptual engineers should change both the semantic meaning and speaker/pragmatic meaning (the way terms are used). But in that case, his option falls under Deutsch’s first horn of the dilemma. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See (Westerblad 2022) for a reconstruction of Dewey's account of concepts in the context of conceptual engineering. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Nado considers this possibility without taking it very seriously. In response to the problem of linguistic confusion, she writes (taking the example of “marriage”) “Well – so what? If a community has the dispositions just described, do we really think that we still need to *further* ensure that the *meaning* of ‘marriage’ has actually changed?” (Nado 2021, 4). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. One could think that this is precisely what I have been doing in the first sections. But the nonrepresentationalist approach is meant to provide a *dissolution* of the transubstantiation version of the implementation challenge, not a *solution* to it. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This is the question raised by Queloz (2022), generally asked from a political perspective (see also Shields 2021a; Queloz and Bieber 2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For a more exhaustive account of Dewey’s theory of inquiry in the context of conceptual engineering, see (Westerblad 2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Pinder (2017) makes a very different argument for integrating implementation concerns in the earlier stages of conceptual engineering, namely, by adding conceptual uptake as a criterion of fruitfulness. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out to me. My account remains silent on whether presumed or predicted conceptual uptake could be a criterion of selection or evaluation of engineered concepts. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)