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Meaning change

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Abstract

The linguistic *meaning* of a word in a language is what fully competent speakers of the language have a grasp of merely in virtue of their semantic competence. The meanings of words sometimes change over time. 'Meat' used to mean 'solid food', but now means 'animal flesh eaten as food'. This type of meaning change comes with change of topic, what we are talking about. Many people interested in conceptual engineering have claimed that there is also meaning change where topic is retained. For example, they claim that the meanings of 'fish' and 'pasta' have undergone such change, and that the meaning of 'marriage' would change this way after gay marriages become legal and widely accepted. In this paper, I relate two sets of relatively independent literatures: mainstream philosophy of language and conceptual engineering to argue that on a plausible and widely accepted *Minimalist* view of meaning that is part and parcel of anti-descriptivism, none of the above sorts of cases involve meaning change with topic retention. I do this by showing how to distinguish minimalism about *meaning* from the related theses of externalism and anti-individualism about *intension* and how to separate meaning from intension in a way that allows meaning and topic to remain the same despite changes in intension. The larger lesson is that much like we should not disregard

"We should resist the temptation to build all qualifications for participation in the practice of using a term into its meaning, on pain of turning a semantic theory into a ragbag of miscellaneous considerations." Tim Williamson, *Philosophy of Philosophy*, p. 129

the boundary between the narrowly meaning-related ('semantics') and the more broadly communication-related ('pragmatics'), and we should not disregard the boundary between the former and the more broadly thought-related, conceptual or cognitive ('cognition').

1 | INTRODUCTION

Words have meanings in languages like English, Estonian, or Esperanto. The linguistic *meaning* of a word in a language is what fully competent speakers of the language have a grasp of merely in virtue of their semantic competence (Dummett, 1975/1993; Higginbotham, 1992; Kaplan, 1989). It's what second-language learners aim to grasp. And it is in virtue of which the word can be used to speak the relevant language.

The meanings of words sometimes change over time. What we commonly think of as meaning change consists in the co-occurrence of two more fundamental processes: meaning acquisition and meaning loss. These two processes lead to four possible situations. First, a meaningless word comes to possess a new meaning (e.g. theoretical terms like 'hyperintensional'). Second, a meaningful word loses its meaning and goes out of use (e.g. 'tittynope' which used to mean, roughly, 'a very small quantity of something left over'). Third, a meaningful word acquires a new meaning while retaining the old one. For example, in the 20th century, 'gay' came to mean not only 'happy' and 'joyful', but also 'homosexual', while the old meaning was still retained (but probably will not be for long, except in translations of Nietzsche's *Fröhliche Wissenschaft* and Christmas songs). Finally, there's the paradigmatic case in which a meaningful word acquires a new meaning while losing the old one. 'Meat' meant 'solid food' in the middle ages, but now means 'animal flesh eaten as food' (The original meaning is retained in the phrase 'meat and mead'). Similarly, 'vulgar' used to mean 'popular' but now means 'crass', 'obscene', 'rude', etc.

The most familiar kind of meaning change like in the case of 'meat' or 'vulgar' comes with change of *topic* or subject, what we are talking about. However, given that there are both 'descriptive' ('meat') and 'expressive' kinds of meaning ('Ouch!'), and some words have both ('feminazi', 'kraut', and 'libtard'), there's also meaning change where it's the expressive meaning that changes while topic is retained. The standard example is provided by reappropriated or reclaimed slurs. For example, when 'queer' was reappropriated it retained its descriptive meaning and the topic, who we are talking about, remained the same as well, while the expressive meaning, the expression of contempt, was done away with.

Many people interested in conceptual engineering have thought that there is also a third type of meaning change, one where it is the descriptive meaning that changes while topic is retained. For example, it has been claimed that the meaning of 'fish' and 'whale' changed once we found out that whales are not fish, while the topic has remained the same (Sawyer, 2018). Similarly, it has been claimed that the meaning of 'salad' and 'pasta' changed once we started acknowledging warm salads not containing many greens and pasta made of seaweed, but we are still talking about the same things (Cappelen, 2018; Richard, 2019). Finally, it has been claimed that the meaning of 'rape' changed when marital rape became acknowledged, and that the meaning of 'marriage' would change once gay marriage becomes legal and widely accepted, while we would still be talking about the same things (Richard, 2019; Sawyer, 2018).

My aim in this paper is to relate two sets of relatively independent literatures, philosophy of language and conceptual engineering, to argue that on the above understanding of linguistic meaning and a plausible and widely accepted *Minimalist* view of it that is part and parcel of the anti-descriptivism of Kripke, Putnam, Burge, Kaplan, Perry, Fodor, Salmon, Soames, Recanati, Williamson, and others, and none of the above sorts of cases involve meaning change with topic retention. Crucial to the argument is properly distinguishing minimalism about *meaning* from the related theses of externalism and anti-individualism about *intension* and separating meaning from intension in a way that allows meaning and topic to remain the same despite changes in intension. To show how this is possible, I will sketch a picture of how the meaning of kind terms relates them to concepts. The essential idea is that while the meaning of a kind term like 'water' together with context/use determines as its content a *concept*, WATER, it never encodes everything that there is to the latter. Rather, meaning sets a *pointer* to a concept which typically contains further linguistically unencoded information or has further properties that, in the case of non-natural kind concepts, play a role in determining its intension.

The above picture makes it possible to argue that in the above cases one of three things happens: first, meaning changes, but it comes with topic change; second, neither meaning nor concepts change, just people's conceptions of the topic; and finally and most interestingly, neither meaning nor topic changes while the linguistically unencoded aspects of the concept change and therefore intension changes as well. The larger lesson is that much like we should not disregard the boundary between the narrowly linguistic or meaning-related ('semantics') and the more broadly communication-related ('pragmatics'), we should not disregard the boundary between the former and the more broadly thought-related, conceptual or cognitive ('cognition').

I will proceed as follows. I'll start by sketching a background framework for talking about meaning, content, reference, intension/extension, and the intuitive notion of topic (Section 1). I'll then continue by discussing two unproblematic types of meaning change and look in more depth at the sorts of cases which have been claimed to involve the third type (Section 2). Next, I'll present the meaning minimalist view, distinguish it from externalism and anti-individualism, and sketch a picture of how meaning relates to concepts (Sections 3 and 4). Then, I'll tackle the cases and argue that none of them involve meaning change with topic retention (Section 5). Finally, I'll briefly contrast the view presented here with the meaning maximalist view of Richard (Section 6).

2 | MEANING, CONTENT, REFERENCE, INTENSION/EXTENSION, AND TOPIC

The *linguistic* (conventional, literal, standing, and timeless) *meaning* of an expression in a language is what fully competent speakers have a grasp of merely in virtue of their semantic competence with the language.[1] It's a context-invariant, particular-use-independent property of the expression type. The words 'I' and 'this' and the sentences 'I am here now', 'Are you here?', and 'Come now!' have a single meaning in English no matter what they are used to refer to, say, ask or tell someone to do on a particular occasion. In terms of Kaplan's famous distinction, meaning is a matter of *character*, rather than *content* or what is said (Kaplan, 1989). For example, when Gottlob and Bertrand use 'I am a philosopher', they use the same sentence with a single meaning or character. However, what they say is different, respectively, that Gottlob is a philosopher versus that Bertrand is a philosopher.

[1]Note that this claim is emphatically not intended as a reductive analysis of the notion of meaning which would be circular. Rather, it just gives us a different a different way of talking about it that relates it to semantic competence.

If you put meaning together with a context or a particular use by a speaker you get a *content*. Content, as I use the term, is a contribution to a representation or something representational. For example, it's a concept that has a reference or a proposition qua something that *has* truth-conditions.[2] Many people in the past used 'meaning' for contents, and this use is still widespread, but from the point of view of current philosophy of language it should be resisted since it just creates confusion. Meanings and contents are radically different sorts of things since many expressions like 'I' have stable meanings but varying contents, and expressives like 'Ouch!' and situationals like 'Hello!' have meanings but no contents at all.

Some contents are referential, and they have referents. 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' have different contents, the concepts HESPERUS and PHOSPHORUS. But they refer to the same thing, the planet Venus. 'Water' and 'H20' have different contents, the concepts WATER and H20. But they refer to the same thing, the natural kind water. Furthermore, some words like 'water' have an intension, a function from circumstances from evaluation (possible worlds, situations) to extensions, the set of everything that is an instance of water at that circumstance. Many people have also used 'meaning' for intension, including Putnam in 'The Meaning of "Meaning"' and Cappelen in his work on conceptual engineering (Cappelen, 2018: 62, Putnam, 1975/1996: 5). But this should again be resisted, for the above reasons.[3]

Now, let us draw a different distinction between types of or aspects of meaning. The sort of meaning that has been in central focus in philosophy of language since its inception is *referential-descriptive-logical* (I'll use 'descriptive' for short). This includes everything that is related to the direct determination of representational and inferential properties. Names, descriptions, indexicals and demonstratives, kind terms, verbs, adjectives, logical terms, declarative sentences, interrogative sentences, imperative sentences, etc., all have descriptive meaning in this sense. In contrast, some expressions have a very different sort of meaning, one that is expressive or situational (I'll use 'expressive' for short). For example, 'Ouch!' is an expressive and it is for expressing pain (Kaplan, 1999). 'Hello!' is a situational, and it is for greeting. Some words have both 'primary', at-issue descriptive meaning, and 'secondary', non-at-issue meaning which is frequently modelled as conventional implicature or presupposition (Potts, 2005). For example, the demonstrative pronouns 'he' and 'she' are all plausibly directly referential, but their secondary meaning sets the restriction that the person referred to must be male/female. Furthermore, for some words, their 'secondary' meaning is expressive. For example, slurs like 'kraut' have been thought to have both a descriptive meaning which makes it for talking about someone who belongs to a particular group of people, Germans, and an expressive dimension which expresses a derogatory attitude towards anyone from that group (Jeshion, 2013; Kaplan, 1999).

Finally, let us introduce a more intuitive notion: *topic* or subject, what we are talking about when we are using a particular expression (compare Sawyer, 2021: 6, Schroeter, 2012: 179). How does this notion relate to the above distinctions? First, how are meaning, content, and reference related to topic? The obvious intuitive starting point is the view that referent = topic. Consider names. Even though

[2]This is essentially a Fregean notion of content or proposition, in one sense. Contents are thoughts, they live at the level of *sense*, a partial perspective on the world. They are things that are themselves representational and *have* truth-conditions. This notion is not only adopted by direct followers of Frege, but all of those who think that propositions are representational, even if they reject lots of other aspects of Frege's picture. For example, King, Soames, and Hanks all think that propositions qua contents are things that themselves represent or have truth-conditions (Hanks, 2015; King, 2007; Soames, 2015). It contrasts starkly with the Russellian notion on which contents are not things that are representational and have truth-conditions, but are the truth-conditions, the things our thoughts are *about*.

[3]This leaves it open, for now, how a word's meaning, content, and reference are related to its intension. Let me also emphasize that the way I use 'reference' it's emphatically not the same as extension. 'Water' refers to the *kind* water, the kind itself has an extension which consists of all instances of water (compare Schroeter, 2012: 179). We'll come back to both points later.

'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' have different contents, they refer to the same thing, the planet Venus. This is also what we are talking about when we use these words. Similarly, 'Water' and 'H20' have different contents but refer to the same thing, the kind water. Again, this is also what we are talking about when we use these words. Absent strong arguments to the contrary, this is the view we should start with.[4]

Second, how does the distinction between descriptive vs. expressive dimensions of meaning relate to topic? Clearly, only the descriptive aspect of meaning has anything to do with the determination of topic. If a term has both, then the expressive aspect just serves to express an attitude about it.

With this background framework at hand, let us proceed to meaning change.

3 | TYPES OF MEANING CHANGE

The most common type of meaning change is descriptive meaning change with topic change. This sort of meaning change is ubiquitous. We get it in the case of names. For example, in Evans' famous example of 'Madagascar', it changed its meaning, shifted its reference, and the topic obviously changed as well (Evans, 1973). Similarly, when 'meat' and 'vulgar' changed their meaning, what we are talking about changed too.

The second type of meaning change can happen to expressions which have both descriptive and expressive aspects to their meaning. In the most standard cases, the descriptive aspect remains unchanged and therefore topic is retained, while the expressive aspect changes. As we already saw above, the simplest example is provided by reappropriation or reclamation of slurs where the expressive derogatory aspect is lost and sometimes even replaced with an approving, pride-expressing aspect. This is arguably what happened with the expressions 'black' and 'queer' (Jeshion, 2020: 112–114). Similarly, a non-slur term can undergo slurrification by retaining its descriptive meaning but acquiring the derogatory aspect.

Many people interested in conceptual engineering have thought that there is also a third type of meaning change, one where it is the descriptive meaning that changes while topic is retained. Let us look at three different classes of putative cases, all of which have slightly different features.

3.1 | 'Fish', 'whale'

In the past, people had a belief that they would've expressed with 'Whales are fish'. So, they used 'fish' to talk about whales (hunting whales was called whale fishery). Nowadays, we know that whales are mammals. So, we do not use 'fish' to talk about whales. It's not utterly implausible to claim that the meaning of 'fish' has changed (Sidelle, 2007; Sundell, 2012). However, some philosophers in the conceptual engineering literature seem to think that despite the meaning change the topic has been retained. Similarly, the meaning of 'whale' has changed, says Sawyer, but topic has been retained (Sawyer, 2018).

What is distinctive about this class of cases is that, at least the way we use the words now, 'fish' and 'whale' are *natural kind terms*.[5] As biologists showed us, killer whales or orcas are more closely

[4]This notion of topic or subject as what we are talking about when we are using a *particular* expression is quite distinct from the notion of topic in pragmatics where it is used to to pick out the subject of the whole *conversation* which can be thought of as a question under discussion etc.

[5]It's not clear that fish is considered a natural kind in biology, but we'll go along with this standard assumption here.

related to dolphins than whales. That we use the terms as natural kind terms is evidenced by the fact that this led us to conclude that killer whales are not really whales.

3.2 | 'Salad', 'pasta'

In the past, we thought of salad as a cold dish that consists mostly of leafy greens. Nowadays, we think that there can be warm salads containing no greens. The meaning of 'salad' has changed, says Cappelen, topic has been retained (Cappelen, 2018). Similarly, in the past, we thought of pasta as foodstuff made of wheat. Nowadays, we make pasta out of rice, seaweed, etc. The meaning of 'pasta' has changed, says Richard, topic has been retained (Richard, 2019: 124–130).[6]

What is distinctive about this class of cases is that they are not natural kind terms. Rather they are what I will call *classificatory kind terms*, terms picking out kinds the natures of which seem closely related to our classificatory practices. Furthermore, at least in the above cases, there is not much moral or legal involvement.

3.3 | 'Rape', 'marry'

In the 19th century, it was written into the law that rape could not have occurred within a marriage. Now we think there is marital rape. The meaning of 'rape' has changed, say Richard and Sawyer, but the topic is retained (Richard, 2019: 182–183, Sawyer, 2018: 143–144).

In many places in the world, gay marriage is a legal impossibility and socially unaccepted. Suppose both the legal practice and wider social opinion changed, making it possible and widely accepted. Many think that this would result in a case of meaning change + topic retention (Richard, 2019).

What is distinctive about this class of cases is that they are not natural kind terms, but *moral* or *social kind terms*, ones which are heavily morally or legally and socially involved. Let me also pre-emptively note that I'm not claiming that the two cases in this class are similar, I will later argue that they are dissimilar since one is a moral term and the other is not. I'm just classifying them together for the time being since they are frequently (mistakenly) treated analogously.

Having looked at the cases, I will now present the minimalist view which enables us to argue that none of the above cases constitute meaning change with topic retention.

4 | MINIMALISM, EXTERNALISM, AND ANTI-INDIVIDUALISM

There's a lot one can take to be related to the meaning of an expression, one way or another. But how much of it is part of the grasp of which is required for full semantic competence, and how much is a matter of something else?

Let us start with some simple examples of what is and what is not part of meaning to orient the discussion. First, everyone thinks that the truth conditions of declarative sentences, *if* they have any context-invariantly, are a part of their meaning. But their truth-value is not since it depends also on the world. Second, Grice taught us that a word's or sentence's truth-conditional contribution and what he called *conventional* implicatures are part of its meaning (Grice, 1989). For example, the sentence 'Elizabeth is strong, but gentle' is true iff Elizabeth is both strong and gentle. Furthermore, the word 'but' conventionally implicates a contrast between being strong and gentle. That this is

[6]Richard would put this by saying that in the case of 'pasta' there's been no change *of* meaning (this would entail topic change), but there's been change *in* meaning (Richard, 2019: 106).

part of the meaning is evident from the fact that the sense of contrast cannot be *cancelled* without felt inconsistency by adding '…, but there's no contrast between these things'. Thus, knowing these things is required for full semantic competence with the sentence. But the *conversational* implicatures sentences generate, even if generalized, are not. For example, if you respond to the question where one can get gas with 'There's a gas station around the corner' you conversationally implicate that it is open, has gas, etc. But these conversational implicatures are not part of the meaning of the sentence as is evident from the fact that they can be *cancelled* without any felt inconsistency by adding '…, but unfortunately it's closed.' Similarly, 'Some died' *generally* conversationally implicates that not all did. But even this generalized implicature is not part of the meaning of the sentence as is evident from the fact that it too can be cancelled without any felt inconsistency by adding '…, indeed, all did'. Thus, knowing even generalized implicatures is not required for full semantic competence, but only for broader, undifferentiated linguistic-communicative competence (Davis, 1998: Ch. 6). Finally, the descriptive and expressive aspects of a word's meaning can be contrasted with certain mere facts of use, for example, that that the synonymous expressions 'coke', 'pop', and 'soda' are used by different groups of speakers in the United States, or that some expressions are frequently used as dogwhistles ('inner city' and 'traditional family'). The latter sorts of facts have nothing to do with meaning. One can be fully semantically competent with English without knowing such things.

Late 20th century philosophy of language was characterized by the anti-descriptivist revolution which insisted on a similar separation between what is part of meaning, required for full semantic competence, and what is not. Kripke taught us that what you need to know to use a proper name like 'Gödel' is minimal and does not require any knowledge about the name's bearer. Descriptive claims about the bearer like that Gödel is the inventor of the incompleteness theorem are not part of the meaning (Kripke, 1972/1980). Putnam and Burge taught us that what you need to know to use natural and social kind terms like 'gold', 'water', 'arthritis', and 'sofa' is similarly minimal. Descriptive claims about kinds like that gold is yellow or arthritis is a disease of the joints are not part of the meaning (Burge, 1979/2003, 1986/2003; Putnam, 1975/1996).[7] More generally, Salmon, Soames, and others who have defended direct reference have suggested that perhaps all nouns have minimal meaning and Williamson famously thinks this is true of even logical vocabulary (Salmon, 2012; Soames, 2002; Williamson, 2007). We can generalize this to the following thesis:

> ***Minimalism*:** linguistic meaning, the knowledge of what's required for *full* semantic competence, is minimal in the sense that grasping it doesn't involve knowing descriptive information about the subject matter nor grasping any inferential connections between terms.

Two points. First, this is a thesis about what meaning is like. Following standard usage, let us take *semantics* to be about the description of meaning and meaning-related semantic properties of expressions and the explanation of the meanings of some expressions in terms of the meanings of others.[8] In contrast, let us take *metasemantics* to be about what makes it the case, determines, that expressions have the meanings, contents, reference, intension, etc., that they do. Both projects need to be distinguished from one that tries to tell us something about the *nature of meaning*, which seeks an explanation of what meaningfulness and meanings are in reductive terms (Reiland, 2022). Minimalism is a very high-level generalization about semantics, not a claim about metasemantics or the nature of meaning. As such, it contrasts with *Maximalism* on which grasping meaning requires knowing either

[7]Things are actually trickier with Putnam since he thought that semantic competence requires knowing the associated stereotype (Putnam 1996: 30–31). But I'm generalizing above and this aspect of Putnam's discussion has anyway been mostly neglected.

[8]See Szabo (2019) for an argument as to why we should not take semantics to be only about description, but also explanation.

descriptive information, or, like on inferentialist views, grasping inferential connections between terms (Brandom, 1994; Glasgow, 2020; Richard, 2019).

Second, it's an interesting question what types of expressions the minimalist thesis is true of or plausible for. Since we are here mostly interested in kind terms, let us just restrict it to those for the time being.[9]

The anti-descriptivist revolution is not only associated with the thesis of minimalism which was mostly stressed by Kripke and others like Kaplan, Salmon, and Soames, but also the theses of externalism and anti-individualism stressed by Putnam and Burge. The distinction between minimalism on the one hand, and externalism/anti-individualism on the other hand, is frequently not noticed, especially in the conceptual engineering literature, and this tends to hide from view interesting theoretical possibilities like the one defended in this paper. Things are made even worse by the fact that the latter two are frequently run together under a wide notion of externalism which can be defined roughly as follows:

> *Internalism*: a word's intension in a person's vocabulary is fully determined by something 'internal' to them: a definition or a description that they believe, a set of dispositions for use, a theory, etc.
> *Externalism*: a word's intension in a person's vocabulary is at least partly determined by something 'external' to them: causal relations to things in the environment and their underlying natures ('physical externalism'), causal or normative relations to their community's past and current use ('social externalism') (Burge, 1979/2003; Putnam, 1975/1996), and causal or normative relations to the contingent future development of their community's use ('temporal externalism') (Ball, 2020; Jackman, 1999, 2005).

I want to make three points. First, these theses are primarily not about the determination of linguistic meaning, but *intension-determination*. This is why they were quickly seen to be not only about language, but also, or even primarily, about thought (Burge, 1982/2003). Second, even though people frequently talk like this, internalism and externalism are not metasemantic theories proper. As stated, they are not full answers to the question what determines a word's or a concept's intension. They're just constraints on full theories.[10] Finally, we really should distinguish within the wider use of externalism the separate theses of externalism proper and anti-individualism (Burge's favoured term) since they set very different constraints:

> *Internalism*: a word's intension in a person's vocabulary is fully determined by something 'internal' to the person like a definition or a description they believe, etc. (if combined with Individualism) or 'internal' to the community like a communally accepted definition, etc. (if combined with Anti-Individualism).

[9]Meaning minimalism should not be confused with "minimal semantics" as defended by Borg in the debate over the boundary between semantics and pragmatics. Although the views share many of their motivations, especially the idea that the properly linguistic is minimal and perhaps modular, minimal semantics as developed by Borg is a much more committal thesis since it requires that linguistic meaning together with a narrow, objective context always deliver a semantic content that is fully propositional or truth-conditional or referential (Borg, 2004, 2012; for discussion of an alternative interpretation of her view see Harris, 2020). In contrast, minimalism is entirely compatible with views that claim that linguistic meaning does not deliver anything fully propositional without input from wide, subjective context/pragmatics.

[10]This is why it makes sense to talk about metainternalism and metaexternalism as views about what makes first-order internalism or externalism true (Cohnitz & Haukioja, 2013). If you had a full metasemantic theory it would not make much sense to ask in virtue of what it is true (that way lies an infinite regress…).

Externalism: a word's intension in a person's vocabulary is at least partly determined by causal relations to things in the environment.
Individualism: a words' intension in a person's vocabulary is entirely determined by something about them qua an individual rather than their relation to the community.
Anti-Individualism: a word's intension in a person's vocabulary is at least partly determined by causal or normative relations to their community's use.[11]

It is entirely possible to be an internalist anti-individualist and an externalist individualist.[12]

How are meaning minimalism and externalism/anti-individualism related? It's important to see that even though they are partly motivated by the same sort of anti-descriptivist perspective, they are not equivalent! For starters, meaning minimalism is a view about linguistic meaning, externalism and anti-individualism are views about intension-determination. Crucially, there are two very different ways of thinking about the relation of meaning to intension. Consider Putnam's Anti-Individualist notion of division of linguistic labour or Burge's *deference*: the idea that we do not individually have a grip on the intension-determining criteria for many or most of our kind terms, but we defer to our wider linguistic community or experts who know more. What do we conclude from this about the connection between meaning and intension, and our grasp of meaning? There are two options:

Connection: we take linguistic meaning to be connected to intension in a way that they cannot come apart: same meaning = same intension (as mentioned above, Putnam just used 'meaning' for intension, Putnam 1996: 5). It follows that *full* semantic competence, grasp of meaning, is not an individual state and is partly a matter of deference. Only partial semantic competence is an individual state. As Putnam put it: 'Cut the pie any way you like, "meanings" just ain't in the *head*!' (Putnam 1995: 13).

However, this view is neither forced on us, nor is it particularly plausible. Even though from a public-language-oriented perspective, it's obvious that linguistic meaning is an anti-individually constituted property, few working in philosophy of language would want to deny that your semantic competence is an individual state, a fact wholly about you. The much more natural option is the following:

Separation we take meaning to be connected to intension in a way that they can come apart: same meaning does not entail same intension. Full semantic competence is an individual state and is not a matter of deference. It's in our knowledge of the intension-determining criteria that we defer to others.

The meaning minimalist perspective is naturally coupled with the second point of view. Meaning is minimal, but anti-individualist, full semantic competence is individual, but meaning comes apart from intension.[13] In the next section, I'll sketch a picture about the relation between meaning and concepts, which shows how meaning can come apart from intension.

[11]Anti-Individualism so stated can then be further given either a future-excluding or future-including, temporal externalist reading, depending on whether we understand 'use' as including only past and current use or also future development of the use.
[12]For example, I will argue below that Sawyer's notion of meaning is internalist anti-individualist (see fn. 18). In contrast, there is no reason why a Robinson Crusoe could not coin a new term as a natural kind one to pick out an unfamiliar species in his environment.
[13]From this point of view externalism and anti-individualism are primarily theses about thought and concepts. One sharp way to bring it out is by noticing the fact that the experts we defer to, for example, the scientific ones, do not even have to speak our language. They just have to be using the same concept.

5 | MEANING AND CONCEPTS

Many minimalists have been silent about how linguistic meaning is related to concepts. But to better understand how meaning can come apart from intension and how intension is determined, we need a concrete picture of this. In this section, I will sketch such a picture, but, for reasons of space, I will not be able to fill in all the details. Luckily, some minimalists have provided a picture of how names are related to concepts which we can use as a model (Recanati, 2012). Nothing depends on it being the correct view in the case of names, it's just provided as an analogue.

Suppose you think names are directly referential and that all you are going to get from semantics for 'Hesperus' is something like: 'Hesperus' refers to Hesperus. But you also think that this cannot be the whole story and that we need to say more about how exactly a name gets its reference and how to account for phenomena of cognitive significance. Then you could think that names are associated with certain types of concepts, *mental files*. Mental files are non-descriptive modes of presentation of their referents which nevertheless contain all sorts of descriptive information about them, all of which can be mistaken (Recanati, 2012). On this view, a name's reference is a product of the fact that it is associated with a mental file together with the fact that the mental file refers non-descriptively. Thus, a name's reference is inherited from the mental file's reference. However, typically, the mental file contains also descriptive information which does not play any role in determining reference but does play a role in cognition.

How does a name's linguistic meaning in a *public language* relate it to our *individual* mental files? It's natural to think that the name's meaning, one way or another, just sets something like a *pointer* to our individual mental file. More specifically, let us assume for the sake of discussion a common view of names on which names are massively homonymous such that each 'David' is basically a different word with a different meaning (Soames, 2002: 98). Then the name's meaning makes it directly referential by *requiring* that the user have a mental file that refers non-descriptively to a particular referent. For example, the meaning of 'David Kaplan' requires each of us to have an individual mental file that refers non-descriptively to David Kaplan. The name's meaning thus sets a *pointer* in the sense that it semantically encodes the referential aspect of the file but does not set any further restrictions on what other information there can be in it. It follows that the non-reference-determining aspects of mental files can vary radically between people and can change over time without any changes of meaning or reference.

This gives us the following sort of picture:

> 'Hesperus' encodes *pointer* to HESPERUS which refers to Hesperus.

To sum up, on this picture, the meaning of a name sets a pointer to a mental file that non-descriptively refers to Hesperus. The mental file can contain descriptive information, but this does not play a role in determining reference and is not linguistically encoded. As a result, meaning and reference can stay constant, while the descriptive information that's in the file can change.

I'm not claiming that the above picture is the one we should accept in case of names. But I *am* suggesting that we think of the meanings of kind terms and their relation to concepts analogously. However, since here there's also a question of intension-determination, it gets a bit more complicated. Let us take natural kind terms first. All we are going to get from semantics is: 'water' refers to water. The meaning of 'water' just sets a pointer to a concept, WATER, which non-descriptively refers to the kind water. Like in the case of mental files, the concept WATER can contain further descriptive information, but that information does not play a role in determining the reference. Let me stress that although mental files are usually thought of as something like 'theories' or repositories of descriptive

information, we do not need to assume this to be true of concepts in general. Rather, we can just remain neutral between views of kind concepts on which they are prototypes or exemplars or theories or whatever. All that matters for us here is the idea that there can be more to the concept than is linguistically encoded.

So far, like names. But what about intension? In the case of *natural kind* terms like 'water', externalism is plausibly true of the associated concept and the intension of both the word and the concept is just set by the kind it refers to. The kind water has itself a *metaphysical intension*, a function from circumstances of evaluation to all instances of the kind at the circumstance (Salmon, 2012). Thus, the word encodes a pointer to the concept WATER that refers to the kind. Both the concept and the word simply inherit the kind's intension. This gives us the following picture:

'WATER' ENCODES *POINTER* → WATER → REFERS TO WATER (WHICH HAS AN INTENSION).

The blue arrows illustrate the fact that the word inherits its intension from the concept, which in turn inherits its intension from the natural kind itself. It's the kind which has its intension fundamentally. In a recent, related discussion, Sawyer puts this by saying that natural kind concepts have a *world-to-mind* direction of determination: their intension is determined by the world (Sawyer, 2021: 10–11). Note that this means that a natural kind term's intension is not *wholly* a linguistic property. It depends on the kind's metaphysical intension and that is a non-linguistic fact about the nature of the kind. To make this vivid, if a biological kind would itself evolve over time so that requirements for kind membership change, then the word's intension would change as well. But this would neither be a change of meaning nor a linguistic change of any sort! It would be a straightforward change in the world.

What about *classificatory kind* terms? Take the culinary kind term 'salad'. Again, all we are going to get from semantics is: 'salad' refers to salad. Furthermore, the meaning of 'salad' just sets a pointer to the concept SALAD, which, I claim, again non-descriptively refers to the kind salad. And, as before, the concept can contain further information, but that information does not play a role in determining the reference.

The difference from natural kind terms comes with intension. In the case of natural kind terms like 'water', the intension is determined by the nature of the kind itself. But, one might think, classificatory kinds do not have a nature independently of our classificatory practices. Rather, their nature seems to be determined by the practices: what salad is, is just what we, in some sense, take it to be. Thus, the linguistically unencoded descriptive information or some other property of the concept determines its intension. This gives us the following picture:

'SALAD' ENCODES *POINTER* → SALAD (HAS INTENSION) → REFERS TO SALAD.

The blue arrows illustrate the fact that both the word and the kind inherit their intension from the concept. It's the concept which has it fundamentally. In a related discussion, Sawyer puts this by saying that such concepts have a *mind-to-world* direction of determination: their intension is determined by our classificatory practices (Sawyer, 2021: 11–12). One clue to this is given by the fact that massive communal error seems impossible. Note that this still means that a classificatory kind term's intension is not wholly a *linguistic* property. It depends on the concept's intension, and I've argued

that on a minimalist view of meaning this is a non-linguistic, more broadly cognitive fact about the concept. Of course, none of the above tells us how exactly the concept's intension is determined and whether this is an individual or, as Burge has argued at length, a social matter. These are important questions, but ones we do not need to answer, here. All that matters for us here is the idea that the meaning and reference of both natural and classificatory kind terms can come apart from intension such that the former two could stay the same while intension changes.[14]

This completes my presentation of minimalism and development of the picture of how meaning is related to concepts such that meaning can stay the same while intension changes.[15] Let us proceed to using it to explain what happens in the cases.

6 | EXPLAINING THE CASES

One of the things that changes in all the cases we have considered is people's *conception* of the topic, roughly, the set of beliefs about it they hold. The question is what sorts of further consequences this has, if any. Let us go case by case.

6.1 | 'Fish', 'whale'

The simplest and most natural thing for a minimalist to say is that in these cases there is no meaning nor topic change. The medieval whale-fishers were already using 'fish' and 'whale' as natural kind terms and were simply mistaken that whales are fish. The only thing that has changed are people's conceptions of what fish and whales are (compare Deutsch, 2020: 3948).

The obvious objection to this is to question the claim that the medieval whale-fishers were using 'fish' and 'whale' as natural kind terms. Isn't it more likely that they were using the former as a functional kind term for anything that is catchable from the sea and edible, etc., and the latter as something

[14]The picture presented is compatible with a dual nature view of concepts which distinguishes between their referential and cognitive aspects, as presented by Weiskopf (Weiskopf, 2009). However, this is so only on the assumption that the referential aspect is not thought to be intension-determining. For example, Koch has recently suggested that conceptual engineers should accept a dual nature view of concepts on which they have both an intensional, extension-determining aspect, and a cognitive aspect having to do with classification (Koch, 2021). This contrasts with the picture here since I take the reference of a classificatory kind concept to be divorced from its intension such that the former can remain the same despite changes in the latter.

[15]We arrived at meaning minimalism and the picture of meanings as setting pointers to concepts by considering the anti-descriptivist revolution and the idea that names are associated with mental files. However, there are several alternative routes in philosophy of language to the same place. For example, Borg and Harris have argued for a minimalism-related picture based on the idea that the properly linguistic is modular (Borg, 2004, 2012; Harris, 2020). Second, Glanzberg has argued that genuine semantic explanation stops when we arrive at disquotational clauses like 'Hesperus' refers to Hesperus and 'salad' refers to salad. This is the point where semantics hands it over to theories of concepts (Glanzberg, 2014, 2018, compare Szabo, 2019: 374). On his view, linguistic meaning is thus also only a partial determinant of intension. He has mostly focused on verbs which is why I did not take his view as a model, above, but he thinks of their meanings exactly like we do, as setting pointers to concepts which belong to the wider cognitive domain. In fact, I take the term 'pointer' from him. Notice that from our shared perspective a lot of what is called *lexical* semantics is not really about linguistic meaning or what's linguistically encoded, but about concepts in general. From this point of view many maximalist views like Brandom's and Richard's (see final section) are also primarily views about concepts. Finally, Pietroski has developed a view on which lexical meanings can be thought of in terms of instructions of how to access addresses which can host a multitude of concepts which share certain properties (Pietroski, 2018). This is similar to the idea that meaning set pointers to concepts that share certain properties.

with certain superficial descriptive characteristics (Sidelle, 2007; Sundell, 2012)? I think that this is indeed plausible for 'fish' (but quite implausible for 'whale'). Suppose, then, that we grant that medieval whale-fishers were not using 'fish' as a natural kind term, and we are. Then there's clearly been meaning change. However, and this is the important point, this has come with topic change! They were talking about a functional kind; we are talking about a natural kind. So, this is simply a straightforward example of the first kind of meaning change and not the third.

To generalize, in all cases where we have a natural kind term where people's conceptions have changed over time are either cases where there's been no meaning change and people in the past were simply mistaken (and maybe we are still mistaken), or where there's been both meaning change and topic change.

6.2 | 'Salad', 'pasta'

Can the meaning minimalist say that here too there has been no meaning or topic change? It will be immediately objected that in these cases at least the *intension* of 'salad' and 'pasta' has changed. But on the picture sketched in the previous section, both claims can be true!

Neither meaning nor topic has changed because the meanings of 'salad' and 'pasta' have meanings that determine as their referents the kinds salad and pasta. This is why we can still report 19th century chefs as having prepared a salad, despite the fact that our concepts have different intensions. What have changed are the linguistically unencoded, but intension-determining aspects of the concepts SALAD and PASTA. Since these determine the nature of the kinds, it's also true to say that the kinds themselves have changed. In other words, even though the topic has not shifted from one to another, there have been changes *within* the topic.

To generalize, in all cases where we have a classificatory kind term and the fact that people's conceptions have changed seems to point to intension change with topic retention are cases where there's been no meaning change nor topic change, but just changes in intension and therefore also within the topic.[16]

6.3 | 'Rape', 'marriage'

I find a lot of the discussion of 'rape' in the conceptual engineering literature problematic. 'Rape', like 'murder', as we use it in ordinary language is plausibly a thick *moral* term. Murder and rape are the sorts of actions which are morally wrong by conceptual necessity. If we come to the judgment that purported cases of murder and rape were not morally wrong, then we will say that they were not murder and rape. But if 'murder' and 'rape' are moral terms, they have their intensions necessarily. Moral terms are like natural kind terms, but even more stable since in their case there is even no possibility of intension change due to the world itself changing since we do not think that basic moral norms forbidding murder and rape can change. Thus, the right view to take is that in the 19th century, they were all simply mistaken to think that there is no marital rape. Of course, it's possible to stipulatively define 'murder' and 'rape' and change the associated concepts of MURDER and RAPE to *non-moral*

[16]It's an entirely separate question whether this sort of topic-retention is enough to satisfy those who are worried that conceptual engineering changes the subject. For example, both Sundell and Belleri have recently objected to Cappelen's view of topic-retention which is quite similar to ours that this is not the sense of topic those who were worried about changing the subject care about. Rather, they were worried about intension-change (Belleri, 2021; Sundell, 2020).

concepts, but then that would be a case of meaning change with topic change – we just would not be talking about the same thing anymore. Similarly, when 'rape' is used as a legal term such that the associated concept and its intension can change via legal redefinition, then it simply does not have the same meaning as the ordinary language moral term.

The above view is not really central to this paper. If you resist the characterization of 'rape' as a moral term and think that rape is not morally wrong by conceptual necessity then the case patterns with 'salad' and 'pasta' – there's been neither meaning change nor topic change, just changes in intension and therefore also within the topic.

'Marriage' is not a moral term, but a social one. I find it a hard case to think about. The easy answer is that it's like 'salad' or 'pasta'. That is, when gay marriages would become widely accepted we would get no meaning or topic change, only the intension would change. However, I think it's far from clear that we should grant this. Did 'marry' change intension when interracial marriages were legally recognized and became widely accepted? Does 'marry' have a different intension for Mormons who accept polygamy? More generally, there is a huge variety of different relations that anthropologists have taken to be marriages: not only different forms of polygamy or same-sex marriages, but also group marriages, temporary marriages, marriages between close relatives, marriages to the dead (apparently legally possible in France even now), etc. (for fascinating discussion, see Ludwig, 2020; Nolan, 2022). I think there's at least some pull to say that when gay marriages become widely accepted, then the only thing that changes is (some) people's conception of marriage.

7 | COMPARISON TO RICHARD'S MAXIMALISM

I want to conclude by comparing the view presented here to one of the views of those who have claimed that there's meaning change with topic retention, Richard's view.[17] This is because Richard is explicit in using 'linguistic meaning' in the sense of what competent speakers grasp, in his terms, 'the anchor of competence' (Richard, 2019: 3, 49). Nevertheless, he is not a minimalist, but a maximalist. He takes a word's meaning to be equivalent to the concept it expresses (Richard, 2019: 50, 53–54, compare Glasgow, 2020). The meaning of a word in a group's language is what he calls its *interpretive common ground* or ICG. For example, the ICG of 'cousin' in the English of the residents of Boston is the set of presuppositions about the term they normally make and are expected to make: 'that cousins are relatives, that cousins are the children of your folks' sisters and brothers, that people have cousins but dogs and bumblebees do not etc.' (Richard, 2019: 49).

[17]Let me briefly also compare my view to Cappelen's and Sawyer's views which are quite similar to mine with most of the differences stemming from what look like, from the point of view of philosophy of language, their non-standard uses of 'meaning'. For example, Cappelen explicitly uses 'meaning' for intension whereas his notion of 'topic' is similar to ours (Cappelen, 2018: 62). His claim that there can be meaning change with topic retention therefore amounts to the claim that topic can remain the same throughout changes in intension, which is exactly what I've argued for. Where I go beyond him is explaining how this can happen.
Similarly, Sawyer uses 'meaning' for "what dictionaries aim to record" or a reflective communal description of its subject-matter (Sawyer, 2018: 130–131). This makes it clear that her use of 'meaning' is quite different from the use in philosophy of language, since many meaningful words do not have stable subject-matters ('I', 'ouch'), only concept-words do. She uses 'concept' much like we do, for constituents of thought. Her claim that there can be meaning change with topic retention therefore amounts to the claim that topic (set by her concepts) can remain the same throughout changes in intension which I grant as well. Where I go beyond her is in explaining how there can be more to concepts than their topic-determining aspect and using that to explain intension-change.

Richard's identification of the word's meaning with the concept it expresses is problematic. First, lots of expressions have meanings while they do not express the same concept on different occasions ('I', 'this') or do not express concepts at all ('Ouch!', 'Hello!'). Second, Richard grants that we need to add the following sort of information to the ICG of words: 'in uttering "snow" the speaker is referring to snow, in uttering "is white" the speaker is ascribing the property of whiteness to what she referred to with "snow"; to do this sort of thing – refer to x and go on to ascribe y to it - is to assert that x is y' (Richard, 2019: 71). But no such information is presumably included in characterization of concepts, since these aren't things we use this way. The essential difference between our view and Richard's is that we distinguish the narrowly linguistic meaning which in the case of content-words sets a *pointer* to a concept, and the concept itself, whereas he runs them together. A point in favour of the minimalist perspective is that it seems that the sort of information mentioned above seems entirely sufficient for an account of the specifically linguistic meanings qua anchors of competence with the relevant words. If I tell you that in Estonian, 'lumi' is for referring to snow, 'on valge' is for predicating whiteness and to do that is to say that snow is white, what more do you need for full competence with 'Lumi on valge' in Estonian? Of course, this only works because of your prior conceptual competence. To see this, consider the following sales speech from the Amazon series *Patriot*:

> *Leslie Claret*: Hey, let me walk you through our Donnelly nut-spacing and cracked-system rim-riding grip-configuration. Using a field of half-seized sprats and brass-fitted nickel slits, our bracketed caps, and splay-flexed brace columns vent dampers to dampening hatch depths of ½ meter from the damper crown to the spurv plinth. How? Well, we bolster twelve Husk Nuts to each girdle jerry, while flex tandems press a task apparatus of ten vertically composited patch-hamplers, then pin flam-fastened pan traps at both maiden apexes at the rim-joints.

Might as well have read the Jabberwocky. The problem here is indeed naturally put in terms of us not knowing the meaning of all the technical terminology (if it has any). But this is partly because we lack the relevant concepts. In contrast, in the above case, you get all you need from me since you already have the concepts SNOW and WHITE.

All of this points to the fact that when Richard talks of meaning qua an anchor of competence, he has in mind the sort of linguistic-cognitive competence one needs to succeed in conversation (Richard, 2019: 122–123). While this is clearly an interesting notion, it seems to me that there is no benefit in taking it to be a theoretically basic one or an interesting thing to theorize. In contrast, separating the notions of linguistic meaning and semantic competence from concepts and conceptual competence makes sense both the fact that many expressions have meanings but express different concepts on different occasions or do not express concepts at all, and the fact that conceptual competence is language-transcendent. Learning a first language and learning a second language are fundamentally different sorts of processes. The former coincides with acquisition of normal conceptual competence necessary for engagement in rational discourse. The latter requires acquiring grasp of linguistic meanings of the expressions and usually only limited concept-learning. As Woodfield beautifully puts it:

> The process of first language learning can be regarded as a series of preparations to become a member of two clubs in tandem. The major club is the association of rational discourse. Its membership is worldwide. The minor club is the neighbourhood of speakers of a particular language L in which the child is brought up. By joining both the

> rational discourse association and the L-users' club at more or less the same time, the child becomes qualified to take part in rational discourse conducted in L.
>
> (Woodfield, 1997: 95)

In fact, Richard himself grants that a lot of what he has to say, especially about meaning change, sounds much more plausible when put not in terms of meaning, but concepts (Richard, 2019: 128). But a fuller engagement with his maximalist point of view is best left for another occasion.

8 | CONCLUSION

My aim in this paper was to relate two sets of relatively independent literatures, philosophy of language and conceptual engineering, to argue that on the understanding of linguistic meaning as what fully competent speakers grasp and a plausible and widely accepted *minimalist* view of meaning none of the sorts of cases that people interested in conceptual engineering have taken to be cases of meaning change with topic retention qualify as such. Crucial to the argument has been properly distinguishing minimalism about meaning from the related theses of externalism and anti-individualism about intension and separating meaning and topic from intension in a way that they can remain the same despite changes in intension. To show how this is possible, I sketched a picture of how the meaning of kind terms relates them to concepts on which meaning sets a *pointer* to a concept which typically contains further linguistically unencoded information or has further properties that, in the case of non-natural kind concepts, can play a role in determining its intension. This enabled me to argue that the cases divide into those where:

1. nothing changes, except people's conceptions (natural kind and moral terms, 'marriage'?);
2. there's meaning change of the first sort, the kind that comes with topic change ('fish')
3. there's neither meaning change nor topic change, but changes in the linguistically unencoded aspects of concepts that determine intension ('salad', 'pasta', 'marriage'?).

One way to react to the argument of the present paper is to claim that the two literatures are just talking past each other: philosophers of language mean one thing by 'meaning' which is minimal, while the people interested in conceptual engineering mean something different. This is perhaps partly right for at least some people interested in conceptual engineering. But the point of the exercise has been to do three things. First, to demonstrate that the usual sense of linguistic meaning central to philosophy of language is plausibly construed in a very minimal manner and in a way that is divorced from intension, in contrast to how people in conceptual engineering think about it. Second, to provide a concrete proposal about how to think of meaning change and intension change vis-à-vis each other. Finally, to show that conceptual engineering is not plausibly thought of as being concerned with meaning change in the sense of 'linguistic meaning' operative in philosophy of language. There are perhaps some rare cases where an engineer aims for meaning change, but then it's almost exclusively of the first sort, the kind that comes with topic change. In most cases, the engineers do not care at all about changing the linguistic meanings of ordinary terms. Rather, what they care about is changing our classificatory practices and thereby the classification-constituted kinds like genders and races themselves.[18]

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