**Conceptual Change in Perspective**

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Abstract: I argue that Sarah Sawyer’s and Herman Cappelen’s recent accounts of how speakers talk and think about the same concept or topic even when their understandings of that concept or topic substantially diverge risk multiplying our metasemantic categories unnecessarily and fail to prove explanatory. When we look more closely at our actual practices of samesaying, we find that speakers with seemingly incompatible formulations of a subject matter take one another to samesay when they are attempting to arrive at a *correct* understanding of that subject matter. These speakers adopt what I call a *prospective externalist* perspective on the subject matter in question. I then argue that once we appreciate the way that a speaker’s perspective (and attendant practices) impact judgments of samesaying, we find that there are other perspectives a speaker can occupy that will in turn yield different verdicts on questions of conceptual change. In particular, there are contexts where judgments of samesaying are more routinely defeated because speakers are taking up a perspective I call *retrospective internalism*. From this perspective, speakers are aiming to render maximally intelligible the linguistic behavior of other speakers that appear to them to deviate from their own. Whether or not we count speakers as samesaying with us will therefore depend on the kind of the perspective we adopt. Different perspectives, it will turn out, often yield different verdicts. On the perspective-based approach I recommend, there is no need to hypostatize or inflate our metasemantic taxonomies.

Ever since the publication of Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, philosophers have wrestled with the puzzle of conceptual change. A central concern of the subsequent literature is that if Kuhn is right that scientific revolutions do not simply revise, but fundamentally change the concepts utilized by a community of researchers, then we cannot say that the post-revolutionary concepts are in any way an “improvement” on the pre-revolutionary concepts.[[1]](#footnote-1) In fact, we cannot even say that the community is utilizing the same concepts before and after the revolutionary episode; they are simply utilizing different concepts that, while they may be expressed by the same word strings, nonetheless correspond to fundamentally different content. In turn, it seems Kuhn’s account of conceptual change gives rise to an unacceptable relativism, where important changes in how we understand concepts generate incommensurable linguistic communities that cannot genuinely disagree or even communicate with one another.

An emerging interest among philosophers in conceptual engineering has led to novel proposals for addressing the question of how speakers can continue to talk and think about the same subject matter even when their understandings of that subject matter substantially diverge. Herman Cappelen (2018) and Sarah Sawyer (2018) have both recently offered accounts of how speakers manage to samesay – to talk and think about the same subject matter – in such cases. Cappelen argues that we should introduce the category of a “topic” that is more coarse-grained than the intensions and extensions speakers associate with a particular term. Because of their more coarse-grained, capacious nature, topics allow speakers to count as talking and thinking about the same thing (the same topic) across differences in associated intensions and extensions. Sawyer argues that we should clearly distinguish between the linguistic meaning of a term and the concept expressed by that term, where a “concept”, as Sawyer understands it, can remain the same even if speakers associate different linguistic meanings with that concept. Concepts in Sawyer’s sense provide the needed metasemantic defense against the “kind of incommensurability that Kuhn…thought plagued theory change, and [that] entails an unacceptable relativism” (Sawyer 2018, 141).

But what are “topics” and “concepts” exactly? A first concern here is that Cappelen and Sawyer’s accounts are unnecessarily inflationary: we should only posit additional theoretical categories where we have very good and independent reason to do so, not as a *deus ex machina* to solve difficult philosophical questions. Similarly, we might worry that Cappelen and Sawyer’s notions of topics and concepts risk being explanatorily vacuous. We cannot simply introduce further metasemantic categories (as Cappelen does), or re-sort them (as Sawyer does), and claim that this act of demarcating categories itself manages to solve the problem of samesaying across seemingly disparate understandings. It needs to be explained exactly how these further categories provide us with additional, unique insight for solving this problem – insight that we did not have prior to the introduction of these categories. Cappelen and Sawyer anticipate versions of this worry, but I do not think either ultimately escapes it. (I consider their replies below.)

After considering Cappelen and Sawyer’s views in more detail in the first section of the paper, I will argue that there is a way to capture what both are after without running any risk of unnecessarily multiplying metasemantic categories or introducing categories that are explanatorily vacuous. I will argue that rather than positing additional categories to ensure that speakers count as samesaying, we should look more closely at our actual practices of samesaying. What we find, I argue, is that speakers with seemingly incompatible formulations of a subject matter take one another to samesay when they are attempting to arrive at a *correct* understanding of that subject matter. These speakers are adopting what I will call a *prospective externalist* perspective on the subject matter in question. Because speakers are taking up the perspective of trying to arrive at a correct understanding of this subject matter, they take other, conflicting formulations to be concerned with this same subject matter, rather than as evidence of talking past the other speakers.

In the third section, I argue that once we appreciate the way that a speaker’s perspective (and attendant practices) impact judgments of samesaying, we discover that there are other perspectives a speaker can occupy that will in turn yield different verdicts on questions of conceptual change. In particular, there are contexts where judgments of samesaying are more routinely defeated because speakers are taking up a perspective that I will call *retrospective internalism*. From this perspective, speakers are aiming to render maximally intelligible the linguistic behavior of other speakers that appear to them to deviate from their own. In these contexts, speakers are not trying to get the relevant subject matter correct; they are trying to get other speakers’ respective understandings of the subject matter correct. Speakers adopting this perspective are more likely to judge that they have acquired a novel or different concept from their own because utilizing this novel or different concept allows them to make sense of these other speakers’ linguistic behavior. They are therefore likely to judge that they are not samesaying with the relevant other speakers, even if they all express their concepts using the same word strings.

More generally, when we operate from within the *prospective externalist* perspective, even seemingly radical differences among speakers recede and we treat one another as all after the same subject matter. But when we adopt a *retrospective internalist* perspective, differences come to the fore and speakers treat one another as possessing fundamentally different understandings or concepts that cannot be subsumed into an overarching subject matter. Whether or not we count speakers as samesaying with us will therefore depend on the kind of the perspective we are adopting. Different perspectives, it will turn out, often yield different verdicts. In the fourth and final section of the paper, I apply the perspectives I have outlined to two cases and demonstrate how they yield helpfully different verdicts on whether conceptual change and samesaying obtain.

1. ***Sawyer’s concepts and Cappelen’s topics***

In this first section, I take a closer look at Sawyer’s and Cappelen’s views and explain the worries facing them. I turn first to Sawyer’s account. For Sawyer, linguistic meaning should be understood as corresponding to the use of a term within a particular community (2018, 130). Linguistic meaning therefore regularly changes because our use of terms regularly changes. She explains that, given this view, we should distinguish between two types of meaning change. There are cases where the linguistic meaning of a term changes and, in turn, we end up with a change in subject matter. For example, the use of the term ‘bachelor’ has changed enormously over time: it was once used by speakers to mean *young knight*, whereas now it is used to mean something closer to *unmarried man*. Here we would say that the change of meaning was accompanied by a change in subject matter: we are simply not talking about the same thing as – we are not samesaying with – speakers who used the term ‘bachelor’ to mean *young knight*.

But there are other cases where a shift in meaning is not accompanied by a change in subject matter. Kuhn-style cases seem to offer clear examples of this second type of meaning change. In these cases, speakers have diverging uses of the term in question, but they nonetheless seem to be talking and thinking about the same subject matter; they are samesaying with one another. Consider, for example, the change from earlier understandings of ‘whales’ as a kind of fish (at, let’s say, t1) to our contemporary understanding of ‘whales’ as mammals and not fish (at t2). Sawyer applies her distinction between linguistic meaning and concepts to this case:

Note that the concept expressed by the term ‘whale’ in the actual world remains constant through the change in its linguistic meaning, and hence through the change in its extension. As such, members of the linguistic community at *t*1 and members of the linguistic community at *t*2 are able to think and talk about whales despite the difference in linguistic meaning and extension of the term ‘whale’ at the different times. It is thought – specifically concepts – that provides stability through linguistic change…It is the concept expressed by a term that determines its subject matter (136-137).

The concept of a whale is what explains how speakers manage to samesay despite using the corresponding term ‘whale’ in radically diverging ways (and therefore despite having radically diverging linguistic meanings they associate with this term). Sawyer endorses an externalist understanding of concepts, according to which they are “mental representations that are components of thought…[that] depend…constitutively on non-representational relations between a subject and her environment. Concepts, then, are individuated, in part, but essentially, by relations between a thinker and objective properties in her world” (136). Sawyer’s externalist understanding of concepts is important because proponents of her view will point to this externalism to answer my charge that her view fails to be explanatory. For Sawyer, concepts hook directly onto the world, so her view *does* provide a clear explanation for how stability of subject matter is guaranteed: different speakers track the same features of the world via concepts, even if they have different linguistic meanings they associate with this concept. It follows that “[t]he distinction between the linguistic meaning of a term and the concept expressed by that term provides an understanding of genuine disagreement, thus avoiding widespread linguistic and conceptual relativism” (129). For example, we improve on our previous understanding of ‘whales’, despite our divergence in linguistic meaning from previous speakers, because we are all utilizing the same concept, i.e., we are all tracking the same “objective properties” in the world that correspond to this kind.

It is not quite clear, however, what explanatory value this appeal to “objective” features of the world has. A key question in the metasemantic dispute between those who are inclined to affirm verdicts of samesaying among speakers with divergent understandings (like Sawyer) and those who are inclined to reject these verdicts (like Kuhn) is whether there is any sense to be made of “objective properties” that somehow outstrip our linguistic activity and could therefore ground genuine samesaying and communication in difficult cases. Kuhn, for example, would take any story that appeals to “objective properties” to anchor samesaying to beg the question. He takes his own view of conceptual change to challenge the very idea of Sawyer’s “non-representational relations between a subject and her environment”. He writes: “There is…no theory-independent way to reconstruct phrases like ‘really there’; the notion of a match between the ontology of a theory and its “real” counterpart in nature now seems to me illusive in principle” (Kuhn 1970/2012, 205). Sawyer’s appeal to an externalist story regarding concepts and samesaying therefore does not seem to escape the charge of explanatory vacuity. Anyone who is not already a dyed-in-the-wool externalist will not be moved by Sawyer’s carving up of metasemantic categories. The question remains whether we are in fact talking and thinking about the same thing if our understandings of the relevant objective properties fundamentally differ. The specter of “widespread linguistic and conceptual relativism”, in turn, looms.

Herman Cappelen recommends introducing a novel category of “topics” to ground samesaying among speakers with disparate understandings.[[2]](#footnote-2) He explains the category as follows:

As soon as you recognize that *what we talk about* and *what we say* is more coarse-grained than extensions and intensions, then *we can say the same* and *talk about the same things (the same topics)* – more general have continuity of talk and thought – even when our representational devices differ with respect to their extensions and intensions…We can talk about the *same topic*, e.g., knowledge, belief, freedom, or marriage, even though the extension and intension of ‘knowledge’, ‘belief’, ‘freedom’, and ‘marriage’ change. As those terms undergo semantic changes we can still use them to talk about the same topic (103).

Two worries face this approach. First, introducing a further category to capture our intuitions about samesaying only seems to push the problem back a step further: we will now wonder whether speakers with different understandings of a topic should count as samesaying (much as we will still wonder if speakers with different understandings of Sawyer’s objective properties should count as samesaying). Second, we will want an account of the metaphysical status of “topics”, an account of what kind of entity “topics” are.

Cappelen anticipates these criticisms: “What are topics? I don’t have a metaphysics of topics and their identity conditions over time. Instead, I have an account (or a description) of the contestation over when it’s legitimate to say, ‘They’re still talking about (or discussing, describing, or…) marriage (or freedom or…)’” (140). Cappelen explains that we should not think that “topics” correspond to a “new level of content that [speakers] converge on. That would lead us into a regress and be non-explanatory…[T]here’s no point postulating a new entity – topics, to account for the continuity in topic – that will do no explanatory work” (140). But it is not clear that Cappelen can quite so easily dismiss the explanatory or metaphysical worries for his account. What his category of “topics” captures is the fact that we *appear* to one another to samesay in contexts where our understandings of the relevant terms differ. But the question at issue is not whether there is such a phenomenological appearance, but whether this appearance in fact corresponds to a genuine reality – whether we do not just appear to samesay, but are in fact samesaying in these cases. Presumably we are not infallible in our judgments concerning samesaying, especially in cases where our understandings diverge substantially. But then in order to know whether we are in fact all talking and thinking about the same “topic”, we will have to know what topics are: what the thing is that we are all samesaying about. If we do not “have a metaphysics of topics and their identity conditions over time”, then I do not see how we can know whether there is a genuine topic and so samesaying in any particular case. The explanatory value of the view, in turn, remains unclear, and we incur the further cost of an inflated metasemantics and possibly inflated metaphysics as well.

There is a certain detail in Cappelen’s account, however, that points to an alternative approach.[[3]](#footnote-3) He writes that “[f]or there to be topic continuity is for the groups to be *treated* as samesayers for certain purposes” (198, emphasis mine). Here Cappelen takes “topic continuity” to arise from how we *treat* one another as samesayers. This approach is also reflected in the fact that Cappelen cites our disquotational practices – where, for example, we use (rather than mention) a particular term to report what other speakers have said, even when we know their understanding of the relevant term differs from ours – as evidence for his conclusions about topic continuity. Cappelen is on the right track here, but I think we should go much further. If we are going to extrapolate conclusions about the nature of topic continuity and conceptual change from our actual practices surrounding samesaying, then we need to make sure we have an in-depth account of these practices.

My position in the remainder of this paper will be that both Sawyer and Cappelen have failed to appreciate the full complexity of and variability of our samesaying practices, and, as a result, they have jumped too quickly to their metasemantic conclusions. Our assessments of samesaying and conceptual change should change, I argue, depending on the kinds of practices speakers are engaged in. In the next section, I offer an alternative account of how we samesay across seemingly disparate understandings that is fully practice-based. In the third section, I offer an account of a further set of our linguistic practices surrounding samesaying that, in turn, produces different verdicts on questions of conceptual change.

1. ***Prospective externalism***

In this section I will present an account of what I call a *prospective externalist* perspective that we often adopt when we engage linguistically with others. We adopt this perspective whenever we are engaged in a dispute over a particular concept or topic and are attempting to get that concept/topic correct while taking others to be doing the same.[[4]](#footnote-4) In adopting this perspective, we assume there is “something” in the world that corresponds to what our own understanding and the understandings of other speakers are attempting to capture and to which we are all accountable. As long as I take up a prospective externalist perspective, I treat other speakers who articulate seemingly incompatible or contradictory formulations of the concept or topic in question as nonetheless samesaying because I will take them to have a *mistaken* understanding of the same concept/topic, the same “something”, which I take myself to be correctly capturing.[[5]](#footnote-5)

First, a clarification on ‘perspectives’. By ‘perspective’, I mean a specific way of approaching, engaging with, or relating to the linguistic behavior of other speakers. A perspective in this sense is similar to a lens: it frames how the linguistic behavior of other speakers show up to you and how you then go on to interact linguistically with others (what sort of linguistic practices you go on to engage in). Perspectives, as I will understand them, need not be intentionally taken up. We may not even be aware that we are occupying a particular perspective. (In fact, I will argue that this is something quite a few philosophers have not been aware of.)[[6]](#footnote-6) This account of ‘perspective’ is intended to be non-controversial. What other philosophers, such as Dennett and van Fraassen, have called “stances” would work equally well for my purposes, though I use different terminology to avoid the impression that I am assuming any of their specific commitments for the sake of this discussion.[[7]](#footnote-7) I turn now to the first perspective I will highlight that we can adopt on our linguistic behavior – the prospective externalist perspective.

To bring this perspective into view, it will be helpful to begin with simpler cases of samesaying in order to build up to more complex cases where speakers diverge in more pronounced ways. Consider the following case: I have a colleague who I know cares a great deal about coffee. She knows all about different kinds of beans, different styles of preparation, and different brands. We have talked about coffee before, and I have explained that I know little about it: I drink coffee to wake up in the morning and purchase the least expensive, generic type from the store.[[8]](#footnote-8) We are both in the department kitchen, and I see her brewing a fresh pot. She turns to me and asks if I would like a cup of coffee when she is finished. I say yes.

In this case, we have two speakers who have very different understandings of a certain subject matter who nonetheless manage to samesay regarding this subject matter. One explanation might be that despite the differences in our understandings, there is a certain shared content that we each associate with ‘coffee’ that binds us together as samesaying – for example, that coffee is a drink, that it looks a certain way, that it is the kind of thing we find in a kitchen, etc. But now consider that for any particular assumption we might initially think is necessary for counting as talking or thinking about coffee, it seems possible we can imagine an interlocutor who does not subscribe to this assumption but whom we nonetheless count as samesaying with us. If, for example, another speaker has strange views about the color of coffee or claimed that coffee was not a drink, our initial response would likely be to correct that speaker. And to correct a speaker is to take them to have the same subject matter in mind, but to be mistaken about it, rather than to view them as talking about something else altogether. Of course, this default and initial judgment can be defeated. If another speaker says that coffee is, say, a kind of car, then we will conclude that they are just talking about something else when they use the word – that we are not samesaying with them.

Laura and François Schroeter have argued in various papers that our theories of meaning should center this phenomenological datum that when we communicate with other speakers, our default assumption is that they are samesaying with us – that they mean the same thing by their words as we do (Schroeter and Bigelow 2009; Schroeter 2012; Schroeter and Schroeter 2014; Schroeter and Schroeter 2015). The Schroeters develop their view by criticizing descriptivist and neo-descriptivist views of meaning that take the properties we associate with a particular term to determine the meaning of that term. The Schroeters’ “connectedness” model of meaning, by contrast, argues that we can only comfortably accommodate the substantial latitude we grant other speakers in their use of a term without taking this latitude to defeat our judgments of samesaying if we take the phenomenological appearance of samesaying – rather than any determinate content – to be primary. The Schroeters summarize these aspects of their view as follows:

[I]n parsing another person’s speech, you automatically hear their use of a familiar English expression as pertaining *de jure* to the very same topic you yourself associate with that expression. Even if you think your interlocutor is saying something false when she says “This action is morally wrong”, you’ll immediately understand her as thinking and talking about the very same topic you yourself associate with the term ‘morally wrong’…Moreover, we take ourselves to be *de jure* samesaying not just with our immediate acquaintances but also with those with whom our acquaintances take themselves to be *de jure* samesaying. As in the intrapersonal case, chains of apparent *de jure* sameness can be used to construct historically extended representational traditions: chains of apparent *de jure* samesaying demarcate shared representational traditions within a given linguistic community (2014, 11-12).

The Schroeters’ point about “historically extended representational traditions” here is that not only do we assume that when an interlocutor uses a word that they have in mind the same meaning that we do; we also assume that we are samesaying with an entire linguistic community of other speakers who use this word with (what we assume is) the same meaning as we do. For example, when I respond that I would like a cup of coffee to my colleague, I do not take us to have generated a *sui generis* concept that applies only in the immediate and ephemeral context of our conversation; I take us to be samesaying with a community of past and present speakers about something that is mutually understood.

The descriptivist, however, might insist that in cases such as my exchange with my colleague, there is *always* a content shared among the relevant speakers that makes it so that they all count as samesaying. Consider a case, then, where speakers make explicit that they understand a certain subject matter in incompatible ways:

Larry and Jeff are at an art museum where they come across several abstract expressionist paintings. Larry says: “I really don’t get how these are art. I think what makes something art is whether it represents what the world is actually like and in a way that requires some unique skill. I feel like I could paint these, and I’m not even remotely artistic!” Jeff says: “I disagree. I don’t think art only needs to represent how things actually are. I like that these are imaginative and don’t necessarily correspond to anything specific in the world; they intentionally evoke a whole range of feelings through the use of different materials, and that’s all I think something needs to do to count as art”. Larry replies: “That can’t be right! Lots of things are intentionally made to give me a range of feelings, and they aren’t works of art”. Jeff says: “Why not? Especially given that we’ve often expanded our sense of what counts as art over time”.

Unlike the coffee case, Larry and Jeff make their different understandings of the concept of art explicit: Larry says that, on his understanding, anything we call ‘art’ must aim to represent the world in a way that requires a certain unique skill, while Jeff says that, on his understanding, art does not need to aim at being representational. Despite this divergence in the content they associate with the subject matter and despite making this divergence explicit, they continue to take one another to be samesaying. That is why they assume they are engaged in a genuine disagreement and not merely talking past one another – where, for example, Larry would have his concept (say, ARTL) and Jeff would have his (say, ARTJ).[[9]](#footnote-9)

But if the descriptivist is right, then we should likely conclude that Larry and Jeff are mistaken – that, contrary to how this exchange shows up to them, the difference in the core content they associate with this subject matter means that they are in fact talking past one another, especially since they make this difference explicit. But such an approach risks widespread revisions to and disruptions of our judgments of samesaying. The Sawyer-Cappelen move is to avoid this judgment of widespread, systematic error in our judgments of samesaying and disagreement by identifying a metasemantic register at which speakers nonetheless count as samesaying – here, for example that Larry and Jeff would be samesaying about either the concept of art or the topic of art.

But before reaching for and adding to our metasemantic toolbox, we should pause to consider the significance of the fact that even in cases of this kind – cases where speakers make explicit that they understand the relevant term, concept, or topic in fundamentally different ways – speakers nonetheless often take one another to samesay. This is a more surprising result than in exchanges like the coffee case, where I and my colleague do not migrate to any kind of metalinguistic or metaconceptual register that makes explicit that we understand the relevant concept in fundamentally different ways. If there is any context where we would expect to find judgments of samesaying routinely defeated, it would be here, where speakers make their conflicting understandings of the concept explicit. But this is often not what we find: speakers continue to take one another to samesay *despite* making their conflicting views explicit.

Now, as the Schroeters argue, this appearance of samesaying is in part grounded in syntactic, phonological, and pragmatic cues that indicate that our interlocutors intend to talk and think about the same concept or subject matter we are talking and thinking about. But this is only part of the story. If I were exclusively updating information I have about the meaning or concept another speaker might have in mind, this would not entail anything about how I in turn view the meaning or concept this other speaker has in mind. I might, for example, view this information with indifference or as a curiosity that I then ignore. But this is not the stance of Larry and Jeff in response to the different understandings of the concept or topic of art they articulate. They do not just indifferently update their internal ledger for how the other speaker understands this concept/topic. They take one another to be engaged in the project of capturing the same thing – the concept/topic of art. Because they view one another as engaged in this same project (of getting the concept/topic in question correct), they therefore do not take the other’s different understanding to be a marker of a lack of samesaying, but as a formulation of a *mistaken* understanding of the very same concept/topic. I can only count an understanding as mistaken, however, if I assume it concerns the same concept/topic I have in mind: it concerns this same concept, but it gets it wrong. I therefore take us to be samesayers despite our seemingly incompatible understandings because I take us both to be attempting to correctly capture the same thing.

Larry and Jeff, for example, assume that there is something that art *is* that their own understanding gets right and that the other person’s understanding gets wrong. Because Larry and Jeff are taking up the same perspective on their exchange – i.e., because both are assuming that they are after the correct understanding of what art really is – they do not treat their differences in understanding, even when made explicit, as evidence of a lack of samesaying. Because they take up this perspective, they assume the other speaker is concerned with the very same thing they are, but simply has a mistaken understanding of that thing (rather than a preoccupation with an entirely separate concept).[[10]](#footnote-10)

Joseph Rouse has pursued a similar approach in analyzing cases of purported conceptual change in the sciences. Rouse asks whether “our current uses of ‘electron’ or ‘gene’ preserve ‘a sufficient number of entrenched beliefs and applications’ from J. J. Thomson’s or Wilhelm Johannsen’s original invocations of these terms to count as part of the same linguistic practice?” (2014, 36). He explains that rather than any content needing to be shared among speakers in order for them to count as samesaying, “[w]hat matters instead are the interrelations among the various uses of a term over time, and the constitutive sense that something has been continuously at stake in the development of the practice in which they occur” (37). We allow for “alternative, inconsistent formulations” of a concept to count as samesaying with us because we assume they are attempting (but failing) to correctly capture the concept in question (30).

Rouse explains that even in these cases speakers treat one another as samesaying because they hold each other “accountable to…‘something’ (an issue and what is at stake in that issue) that outruns any particular expression of what it is” (2007, 6). This is why Rouse refers to his view as a form of externalism. Because speakers in these cases care about correctness, they take there to be “something” that their linguistic activity is accountable to that would make a formulation count as correct or incorrect. For a formulation to count as such requires that there be “something” speakers’ respective internal understandings are aiming towards, but that is not reducible to these understandings (as the internalist would have it).

There is no need, on the approach Rouse and I recommend, to further hypostatize the “something” that both speakers are aiming to capture when they are trying to get a certain concept right. The sense that there is “something” that we are attempting to capture stems from the fact that we are adopting a particular perspective – that we are trying to have (and take others to be trying to have) a *correct* understanding. Because we adopt this perspective, we take there to be something that outstrips our understanding that we are both attempting to get right, that we are both accountable to. Metasemantically, however, we can remain maximally non-committal about the nature of this “something” that we project from within this perspective. That we take there to be a “something” we are all after is a phenomenon that appears from *within* the specific perspective we adopt in these exchanges. We need not say anything else about the nature of this “something” metasemantically, including whether it ultimately corresponds to a specific entity, a topic, or a concept that exists over and above our linguistic practices in the extra-linguistic world.

If we instead direct our attention, as Rouse and I do, to the perspective and attendant practices that give rise to the sense that there is a shared “something” we are all trying to get right, then we need say nothing further about the nature or status of this “something” beyond diagnosing how such an appearance comes to be. How concretely this “something” gets cashed out will likely shift radically over time; in the case of natural kinds, our understanding of a kind will shift as our scientific theories change and evolve over time. To avoid ruling out dissenting or novel understandings of this kind or any concept/topic in advance, we should opt for the perspective and practice-based approach to externalism that remains entirely non-committal about what this “something” is that the relevant speakers are samesaying about.

The fact that the perspective-based approach I have urged allows us to remain silent about the nature of the subject matter speakers are prospectively trying to get right is why I have also utilized a range of terminology in this section to refer to the target of different speakers’ understandings. I have, for example, variously referred to the ‘entities’, ‘concepts’, ‘terms’, ‘topics’, and ‘subject matters’ speakers are attempting to get right. How speakers will choose to characterize the precise nature of the “something” they are trying to get right will depend on the specifics of each case and is not something we should try and dictate from the armchair. Again, we should not settle in advance through our metasemantics how inquiry will play out by positing additional hypostatized categories or entities, such as a specific “topic” speakers are samesaying about or a “concept” all speakers are tracking. We can avoid this trap by working instead to characterize the perspective and practices of speakers that give rise to the sense that there is something of mutual concern they are all after.

In this section, I have offered an alternative approach to the one Cappelen and Sawyer take on how we manage to samesay with speakers whose understandings fundamentally diverge from our own. I have suggested we first consider the perspective we adopt that gives rise to our judgments of samesaying and have offered an account of this perspective, which I have called a *prospective externalist* perspective. We adopt this perspective whenever we are engaged in the forward-looking project of trying to get some subject matter right and therefore take fundamentally diverging understandings of this subject matter to be samesaying with us (but to be wrong or mistaken), rather than concerned with an altogether different subject matter. I have also argued that a key advantage of this approach over other externalist views that are not sensitive to the role of perspective and practice is that we do not have to hypostatize or inflate our metasemantic categories: there are no “topics”, “concepts”, or anything determinate a speaker must subscribe to or pick out in order to count as samesaying. Speakers count as samesaying because they are taken to be by other speakers – other speakers who assume they are all trying to get the same thing right.

Perhaps, though, it seems odd to call this prospective externalism a ‘perspective’. It may seem that what I have described in this section is simply how we should approach disagreements over concepts *generally* – that this perspective is not, as I seem to imply, just one of many we might adopt. In the next section, however, I will show that there is at least one alternative perspective we can adopt on our linguistic practices that, in turn, yields different verdicts on whether samesaying and conceptual change obtain in particular cases.

1. ***Retrospective internalism***

In this section I will present an account of a further perspective we can adopt when we engage linguistically with other speakers – what I call a *retrospective internalist* perspective. We adopt this perspective whenever we are attempting to make sense of a speaker’s linguistic behavior that deviates radically from our own and are trying to grasp the underlying concept that could explain this behavior. When we take up this perspective, we are not engaged in the forward-looking project of trying to get the concept itself right; we are trying to get the concept another speaker has in mind right. Once we do so, we are likely to judge that this concept differs fundamentally from any of our own.[[11]](#footnote-11) We will in turn likely judge that we are not samesaying with these speakers and that a conceptual change has indeed occurred in this case. To draw out the nature of this perspective, I will begin by tracing a line of thought in Thomas Kuhn’s lateressays.

In his post-*Structure* essay “What Are Scientific Revolutions?”, Kuhn describes trying early in his academic career to make sense of Aristotle’s account of motion and finding Aristotle’s texts riddled with “egregious errors, both of logic and observation” that seemed to be the speculations of a “dreadfully bad physical scientist” (2002, 16). Kuhn felt that this could not be the case given Aristotle’s foundational contributions to other areas of inquiry. After “wrestling with [these] nonsense passages”, Kuhn comes to a realization: “[T]he fragments in my head sorted themselves out in a new way, and fell into place together. My jaw dropped, for all at once Aristotle seemed a very good physicist indeed, but of a sort I’d never dreamed possible” (16). This experience of a seemingly nonsensical text becoming intelligible follows from the realization that the author’s “words had not always meant to him and his contemporaries quite what they meant to me and mine” (16). To take the example in Aristotle’s work that was a catalyst for Kuhn’s insight, “[w]hen the term ‘motion’ occurs in Aristotelian physics, it refers to a change in general, not just to the change of position of a physical body. Change of position, the exclusive subject of mechanics for Galileo and Newton, is one of a number of subcategories of motion for Aristotle” (17). We can understand why Aristotle views motion-as-change, Kuhn explains, when we keep in mind the importance of qualities to his physics: “[I]t is precisely seeing motion as change-of-quality that permits its assimilation to all other sorts of change – acorn to oak or sickness to health” (18). According to Kuhn’s reading, it would not make sense within Aristotle’s physics to construe motion as change of position because Aristotle’s is a qualitative physics where “matter is very nearly dispensable”; what individuates objects within this physics is rather different concentrations of qualities such as heat and color (29). Change therefore “occurs by changing qualities, not matter” (18). Once we appreciate this qualitative dimension of Aristotle’s physics, we can then understand why he takes examples such as the changes from “acorn to oak or sickness to health” to be paradigmatic of motion, whereas, for Newton and for us, these are not examples of motion at all. Kuhn draws the following conclusion from these observations: “[A]s one recognizes these and other aspects of Aristotle’s viewpoint, they begin to fit together, to lend each other mutual support, and thus to make a sort of sense collectively that they individually lack” (18).

Now I am not interested here in whether Kuhn’s interpretation of Aristotle is right, but in his claim that we can render otherwise confounding linguistic behavior – e.g., Aristotle’s use of the concept of motion – intelligible when we consider how the speaker’s use of this concept interacts with their other commitments. It is important to emphasize here that Kuhn’s observations do not just point to routine considerations in favor of semantic holism – where the meanings of terms or content of concepts are importantly interanimating. Kuhn’s further point here and in the other cases of conceptual change he analyzes is that in such cases, one has to *change* the concepts one is utilizing in order to make sense of the text: there is simply no way of making sense of the relevant concepts by attempting to translate them into one’s current stock of concepts. What leads us astray in these cases is the superficial homophonic similarities between our language and the language of the text. We fail to understand that the underlying concepts of the two texts are not the same, even though they may be expressed by the same word strings.

The evidence for a conceptual change on the later Kuhn’s view is therefore this failure of translation. If we try to replace the word strings of earlier speakers with our own understanding of that term, we will often find that the target community’s linguistic behavior becomes utterly confounding to us. Aristotle’s text, for example, becomes mystifying when we substitute our understanding of ‘motion’ for instances of this term in Aristotle’s text. It is this failure that signals a conceptual change – that our concept has changed from the concept utilized by the target community. If the concepts being expressed by the target community were the same as ours, we would have no trouble making sense of their linguistic behavior.

Kuhn helpfully makes this point by distinguishing between the “translation” and “acquisition” of concepts. When we attempt to make sense of the linguistic behavior of historical communities, we often forget that we are *learning* or *acquiring* a set of concepts, rather than simply assimilating or translating them back into our home language:

Members of one community can acquire the taxonomy employed by members of another, as the historian does in learning to understand old texts. But the process which permits understanding produces bilinguals, not translators, and bilingualism has a cost…The bilingual must always remember within which community discourse is occurring (2002, 93).

Kuhn’s point is therefore not – as it is often taken to be – that we are somehow barred from understanding previous scientific paradigms or lexicons; his claim is that we *can* understand them, but that in doing so, we must recognize and remember that we have gone bilingual. This process of acquiring the novel concepts of a linguistic community, however, tends to quickly fade from view. Once we possess the concepts of the target community, we tend to assume the concepts were fully intelligible to us all along, that there was no process of learning or acquiring their language, i.e., no point at which their language showed up to as nonsensical and work had to be done to render it intelligible. We therefore forget that we are switching between concepts – that we are going bilingual – in many cases where we are referring to or utilizing the concepts of the target community. Previous speakers quickly show up to us as forming a single, seamless linguistic community where we are all concerned with the same concept or subject matter, our understanding of which has improved over time. For Kuhn’s historian, however, deviations from our own linguistic behavior are treated more circumspectly. They are treated as data to be explained, rather than as marks of ignorance or serious error. Kuhn’s historian takes this approach because their goal is different from the prospective inquirer. The historian is not in the middle of the fray, trying to get the concept/topic in question right; they are instead more detached, trying to get the target speakers’ own linguistic behavior right.[[12]](#footnote-12)

At various points, Kuhn describes this later view as a form of internalism or “internal realism” (2002, 312). He characterizes this view as internalist because it says that for a speaker to possess a concept, this speaker must have a certain core, determinate understanding of that concept. Kuhn is right, in my view, to insist that internalism is a necessary feature of the perspective on linguistic behavior his historian adopts. This is because such a core, determinate understanding of a concept needs to be ascribed to a speaker to render their linguistic behavior maximally intelligible. The price to be paid for this intelligibility, however, is the following one: the more fine-grained the underlying understanding of the relevant term or concept we ascribe to a speaker, the less likely it will be that this understanding is shared *across* speakers, particularly speakers who are spread out over time. Conversely, the more lax we make the restrictions on a speaker’s understanding of a term or concept, the more inexplicable their linguistic behavior inevitably becomes to us – the more it will seem that they are making baffling errors in their use of this term or concept (which we assume to be the same as our own). Given the historian’s goal of rendering the linguistic behavior of other speakers fully intelligible, it becomes necessary to ascribe a core, determinate understanding of a concept to speakers to count them as having that concept – hence the appropriateness of calling the perspective of the Kuhnian historian *internalist*.

For a conceptual change to occur, on this later Kuhnian view, is therefore for speakers to associate *different*, core, determinate content with a particular term. Such a conceptual change, however, may well be obscured by the homophonic stability in the words speakers use to express these different concepts. The later Kuhn would therefore dispute Rouse’s claim that we should take our concepts of ELECTRON and GENE to be, in some sense, the same as Thomson’s and Johannsen’s. If we take the prospective externalist approach to be decisive, we will inevitably encounter consistent failures of translation in our attempts to substitute our understanding of these concepts into these earlier speakers’ linguistic contexts and their use of the terms ‘electron’ and ‘gene’.

Here is a representative formulation of this line of thought from Kuhn’s later work: “Consider the compound sentence, ‘In the Ptolemaic system planets revolve about the earth; in the Copernican they revolve about the sun.’ Strictly construed, that sentence is incoherent. The first occurrence of the term ‘planet’ is Ptolemaic, the second Copernican, and the two attach to nature differently. For no univocal reading of the term ‘planet’ is the compound sentence true” (2002, 15). There is no “univocal” interpretation of the term ‘planet’ or concept PLANET that could make these Copernican and Ptolemaic formulations count as samesaying because each understanding of the term or concept differs in terms of the core content speakers associate with it. There is nothing further – such as Cappelen’s “topics” or Sawyer’s “concepts” – that could subtend these speakers’ disparate understandings to make it the case that they nonetheless count as samesaying. From within Kuhn’s retrospective internalist perspective, there is no sense to be made of a concept of PLANET, GENE, or ELECTRON *simpliciter*: there are only fundamentally different understandings and so fundamentally different concepts that fail to be intersubstitutable and whose differences are obscured by stability in associated word strings.

Rouse’s reply here would be that if we consider the perspective of the scientific inquirers *themselves* who were or are arguing over how to correctly understand these concepts, we will find that from their prospective outlook, these inquirers take one another to be samesaying. A proponent of a Ptolemaic system and a proponent of a Copernican system count as samesaying with respect to the term ‘planet’, on this view, just insofar as they take one another to be after the same thing – the same concept/topic. Interestingly, the later Kuhn has a certain sympathy for something like this alternative, prospective approach to conceptual change:

In recent years I have increasingly recognized that my conception of the process by which scientists move forward has been too closely modeled on my experience with the process by which historians move into the past. For the historian, the period of wrestling with nonsense passages in out-of-date texts is ordinarily marked by episodes in which the sudden recovery of a long-forgotten way to use some still-familiar terms brings new understanding and coherence (2002, 87).

We therefore must be careful, Kuhn warns, to keep in mind that “[i]nsofar as the historian’s gestalt switch provides the model, the magnitude of the conceptual transpositions characteristic of scientific development is exaggerated. Historians, working backward, regularly experience as a single conceptual shift a transposition for which the development process required a series of stages” (88). Kuhn’s later position is therefore that even if, prospectively, all speakers appeared to one another to be invoking the same concept, there is still nonetheless good reason from the historian’s perspective to make fine-grained distinctions among concepts used by particular speakers where, as a result, these speakers will not count as samesaying and a conceptual change should be judged to occur.

Kuhn’s concessions here towards critics of his incommensurability thesis are helpful, but he nonetheless goes on in later essays to focus almost exclusively on his historian’s perspective on conceptual change. He therefore never develops in any detail the observation implicit in the above passages: the way in which assessments of samesaying and conceptual change may be altered when viewed from the perspective of the engaged or prospective, rather than retrospective, inquirer. My addendum to Kuhn’s line of thought here is to bring to the fore that *both* the retrospective view (and its corresponding internalism) *and* the prospective view (and its corresponding externalism) are perspectives we adopt when engaging linguistically with others. Which perspective we take up will depend on our aims: are we trying to get the linguistic behavior of other speakers right, or are we trying to get the concept/topic we all take one another to be after right? Different perspectives will, in turn, yield different verdicts on whether we count one another as samesaying and therefore on whether we believe that a conceptual change has occurred. It is not that one perspective gets it “right” and another “wrong” in any particular case; they are simply different perspectives with different aims that, in turn, generate different verdicts on samesaying and conceptual change.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Kuhn misses the importance of the prospective extenalist perspective because he is preoccupied with the curious process of how seemingly nonsensical texts and linguistic behavior nonetheless become intelligible to us. Philosophers like Cappelen and Sawyer, by contrast, are preoccupied with exorcizing the specter of “widespread linguistic and conceptual relativism” and therefore turn their attention to vindicating speakers’ judgments in the midst of an ongoing disagreement that they are samesaying with one another across disparate understandings. My position in this paper is that both groups of philosophers get something importantly right here, but also move too quickly to extrapolating their metasemantic conclusions. We adopt various perspectives on our linguistic engagement with others, and these perspectives alter our judgments about the nature of this linguistic behavior. Without a thorough account of these perspectives and their attendant practices, our metasemantics end up skewed. We risk, for example, hypostatizing and inflating our metasemantic categories, claiming that there are such things as “topics” and “concepts” in the world that can vindicate judgments of samesaying and conceptual change one way or the other. The perspective-based approach I have argued for in this paper bypasses these risks, fully grounding our account of samesaying and conceptual change in the linguistic perspectives and practices speakers adopt. This approach also escapes any charge of explanatory vacuity. It explains exactly how it is that we come to make these judgments concerning samesaying and conceptual change and shows why such judgments, even when they conflict, can all be equally justified as long as we keep in mind the different perspectives of the speakers making them.

1. ***The Two Perspectives On Display***

To further illustrate the explanatory power of my perspective-based account, I want to turn now to two cases that will allow us to consider how the two perspectives on samesaying I have elaborated in this paper play out with respect to the same case.

*Case 1: ‘Marriage’ in perspective*

The first case I will consider involves the following scenario: a historian lives in a future society where ‘marriage’ is understood as a unique and public romantic commitment that individuals undertake. Our historian is attempting to understand the cultural and political debates in the late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century United States.[[14]](#footnote-14) Our historian encounters the debate over so-called ‘gay marriage’ and is deeply puzzled. On the one hand, proponents of gay marriage seem to make sense of marriage in ways that are very similar to the historian’s own understanding of the concept: it is an institution that reflects a unique and public romantic commitment that individuals undertake. But, at the same time, our historian is confused why anyone would bother to utter such trivial truths.

On the other hand, the claims and utterances of opponents of gay marriage make even less sense to our historian. They claim that the concept of marriage entails that only certain individuals can count as married. They generally hold this view, they say, because what they call the “purpose” of marriage is procreation. But our historian remains perplexed because the opponent of gay marriage does not believe the inability to procreate precludes everyone from counting as married; this inability is taken to exclude only so-called “same-sex” marriages. To try and make sense of this linguistic behavior, our historian examines this group’s other commitments: the historian notices that they tend to have a specific religious background and that, seemingly as a result of their religious commitments, they believe that there is something morally problematic about romantic relationships between same-sex individuals and something morally important about romantic relationships that they take not to fit this description.

Our historian therefore carries out extensive research into these religious commitments and how these commitments inform individuals’ views about the morality of romantic and sexual practices. They also carry out extensive research into making sense of how the concepts of gender, sex, and sexual orientation are understood by these same individuals. After doing so, our historian realizes how to make sense of what ‘marriage’ means for this group: this group understands the concept of marriage in the context of a religious worldview that treats what they call “gay” romantic relationships as morally inferior. Based on these observations, our historian suggests that in order to understand what ‘marriage’ as a term means at this historical moment, we need to appreciate that there are at least two different concepts at stake when this term is used. This difference in concepts, however, is masked by the fact that both groups use the same word strings to express these different concepts. Our historian suggests we call these two different concepts MARRIAGEromantic and MARRIAGEreligious. Our historian explains that if we take the term ‘marriage’ when used by opponents of gay marriage to express the concept MARRIAGEromantic, their linguistic behavior will show up to us as mystifying, but once we understand that when they use the term ‘marriage’ they are using it to express MARRIAGEreligious, their linguistic activity becomes intelligible. Our historian takes these clear failures of translation to be the mark of an important conceptual change: MARRIAGEreligious reflects the dominant understanding of the concept of marriage for many years, but this understanding is subsequently changed to MARRIAGEromantic. We can therefore say that a conceptual change has occurred.

Our historian here is adopting a retrospective internalist perspective. To render the perplexing linguistic behavior of distant speakers intelligible, the historian posits an underlying concept or set of concepts that speakers are utilizing that are importantly different from their own. These concepts are linked to a core, determinate content that, in turn, explains the linguistic moves these speakers make. But the parties to this dispute are engaged in a very different project from our historian. They are engaged in the project of trying to get the concept of marriage right. They therefore take up a different perspective: the prospective externalist perspective. They take one another to be samesaying, despite their fundamentally different understandings, because they assume they are all after the same concept/topic – what marriage is – and take speakers on the other side to be mistaken about this concept/topic. Viewing opponents and proponents of gay marriage in this way will push us towards denying that any conceptual change has occurred in this case or that the speakers are all systematically mistaken and in fact talking past one another. The perspective of these speakers is a prospective externalist one that accommodates samesaying across disparate understandings because all the speakers in question are trying (and take one another to be trying) to get the concept/topic in question right. Our imaginary historian, by contrast, opts for a verdict of conceptual change and against samesaying here because their aim is to get the linguistic behavior of these speakers right. To treat these different speakers as samesaying will make their linguistic behavior seemingly inexplicable.

As I explained in the previous section, my point here is not to say that either the retrospective or prospective view is the “correct” one for figuring out whether samesaying or a conceptual change obtains in this or any case. My intervention in this paper concerns how we should go about arriving at these metasemantic conclusions, and my position has been that we need to clearly demarcate and describe the perspective and attendant practices speakers are utilizing in their linguistic dealings with others *before* we extrapolate our metasemantic conclusions. In particular, we need to be scrupulous not to take for granted that the perspective adopted by the speakers we are analyzing is the *only* perspective on this case speakers might adopt. To do so will inevitably vitiate our metasemantics, stacking the deck in favor of a particular verdict on samesaying and conceptual change that may well shift – as it seems to in this case – based on the perspective adopted by the relevant speakers.

*Case 2: ‘Fish’ and ‘Whales’ in perspective*

The second example I want to analyze using the two perspectives and broader framework I have sketched in this paper involves two philosophers clashing over how to make sense of samesaying with respect to the very same case, though their two accounts are developed entirely independent of one another. (One is writing over fifty years before the other.) On my reading, these philosophers both make the mistake I have been warning against. Each assumes a particular perspective on linguistic practice – either prospective or retrospective – and forms their metasemantic conclusions from there.

Consider first Alessandra Tanesini’s account of encountering a text from a previous historical era. Tanesini takes for granted that the authors of the text and subsequent speakers interacting with this text all operate from within a prospective externalist perspective. She writes: “When one reads past texts referring to whales and dolphins as fish, one is not inclined to think that the writers did not know how to use ‘fish’ given their linguistic commitments. Rather, one takes their error to be factual: they did not know that whales are not fish. That is, one takes them to be committed to the same norms to which we are committed” (2014, 16). In what sense do we “take” these previous speakers’ “error to be factual”? We take them to have made a factual mistake because we assume they were after the same concept/topic we are (that they are “committed to the same norms” as we are), but that they made certain empirical mistakes. In other words, Tanesini is taking for granted here that the relevant speakers (these previous speakers and current speakers) are all engaged in the same prospective project of getting the concepts of whale and fish right. As such, we can take them to be bound by the same norms we are – to be samesaying with us – and the differences in their linguistic behavior should therefore be taken to be the result of various empirical mistakes, rather than evidence that they were bound to fundamentally different norms (i.e., not samesaying with us). The speakers Tanesini has in mind to defend her metasemantic conclusions are therefore all operating from within the prospective externalist perspective of trying to get a concept/topic correct, and she forms her metasemantic conclusions exclusively with this perspective in mind.

But Tanesini does not consider that there are linguistic contexts where we do not take speakers from “past texts” to be “committed to the same [linguistic] norms to which we are committed”. When we encounter texts and speakers that utilize terms or concepts in ways that seem radically differ from our own, we sometimes switch to the perspective of the Kuhnian historian: we do not assume these speakers are bound to the same norms as we are, and we work to acquire the different concepts they are operating with.[[15]](#footnote-15) Consider, for example, the following discussion of the very same example as Tanesini from Carnap:

The situation is not adequately described by the statement: ‘The previous belief that whales (in German even called ‘Walfische’) are also fish is refuted by zoology’. The prescientific term ‘fish’ was meant in about the sense of ‘animal living in water’; therefore its application to whales, etc., was entirely correct. The change which zoologists brought about in this point was not a correction in the field of factual knowledge but a change in the rules of the language; this change, it is true, was motivated by factual discoveries. That the explicandum Fish has been replaced by the explicatum Piscis does not mean that the former term can always be replaced by the latter; because of the difference in meaning just mentioned, this is obviously not the case (1962, 6).

How can Carnap come down so differently on the very same example as Tanesini and Sawyer, arguing that this is a clear example of conceptual change (“a change in the rules of the language”) when Tanesini and Sawyer have come out with the opposite but equally unequivocal verdict (that it is “a correction in the field of factual knowledge”)? The answer is that Carnap is taking up a different perspective on the linguistic activity of the relevant speakers than both Tanesini and Sawer. For Carnap, treating whales as fish is “entirely correct” by the lights of those speakers who understand fish as an “animal living in water”. If we do not utilize this understanding of FISH to make sense of the texts of these speakers, we will find their linguistic behavior inexplicable: there is no way to seamlessly replace our understanding with theirs without losing the ability to make sense of their linguistic behavior. Carnap, in other words, is saying we must go bilingual here and ascribe different concepts to these speakers.

It is striking how confident Carnap is in his conclusion: there *must* be a conceptual change in this case because the failure of translation shows that the notion that we could be samesaying with these earlier speakers is “*obviously* not the case” (emphasis mine). But Tanesini is equally confident in her conclusion: it would be absurd to say that, instead of speakers making straightforward empirical errors, they were somehow plagued by a confusion about the status of their own language. How should we explain this striking discrepancy in these two philosophers’ metasemantic conclusions? My diagnosis is the one I have defended throughout this paper – the one I applied to the differences between Kuhn and Rouse in section (iii) and to the differences between our imaginary historian and the proponents/opponents of gay marriage earlier in this section. Carnap and Tanesini have in mind different perspectives on how speakers engage linguistically with one another. Different perspectives, I have shown, lend themselves to drawing different metasemantic conclusions about samesaying and conceptual change. Carnap’s retrospective internalism here, where he aims to get the linguistic behavior of these earlier speakers right, lends itself to verdicts of conceptual change and a lack of samesaying among the target speakers. The prospective externalist perspective Tanesini has in mind, where speakers are aiming to get a certain concept/topic correct, is one where samesaying is taken to persist across disparate understandings and verdicts of conceptual change are met with skepticism.

Sawyer and Cappelen, then, are certainly not alone in taking a certain perspective on our linguistic activity for granted and then extrapolating various metasemantic conclusions. What I have shown in this paper is that we can avoid the problems that inevitably arise for all of these approaches – in particular, the worries that arise of hypostatzing and inflating our metasemantic categories (worries these authors themselves raise) – by closely investigating the different perspectives speakers adopt on their linguistic engagement with others. When we do so, we find that there is in fact a variety of metasemantic conclusions to be drawn about any particular case – that from at least one perspective, it will make sense to judge that samesaying obtains and conceptual change does not, while from another perspective, it will make sense to deny this judgment.[[16]](#footnote-16)

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1. I use italics for stress, for certain terms-of-art, and to represent the meaning(s) of terms. I use small caps to refer to concepts as well as the language of ‘concept of’ followed by the concept without small caps. I use single quotes to mention terms, and double quotes for quoting other authors and for scare quoting. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For Sawyer’s criticisms of Cappelen’s view of topics and Cappelen’s reply to Sawyer, see (Sawyer, forthcoming) and (Cappelen, forthcoming). Their disagreement, however, reflects that they share the aim of vindicating that speakers are indeed samesaying across different understandings of expressions by inflating and re-arranging their metasemantic taxonomies. My practice and perspective-based approach rejects this aim. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In his (forthcoming), Cappelen makes various observations that suggest his approach may be more congenial to the one I advocate for in this paper. In particular, his emphasis on topics not tracking an invariant property shared among all speakers and on how topics may show up differently to different types of interpreters resemble the view I defend here. But then, in my view, we should simply abandon the category of topics and opt for a fully perspective-based approach. In failing to do so, Cappelen’s approach inevitably invites questions and criticisms concerning the ontological and (meta)semantic status of topics. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I shift between the language of ‘concepts’ and ‘topics’ here intentionally. I explain why I opt for this approach at the end of this section. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. As I explain below, my approach here has a great deal in common with and is in part inspired by the work of Joseph Rouse on what he calls the “normative” view of practices (e.g., his 2007; 2014; 2015). Rouse also uses the language of the ‘prospective’. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Thanks to Jason Farr for discussion of these points. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See, for example, Dennett (1987) and van Fraassen (2002). Kukla’s (2018) account of Dennettian stances is particularly congenial to the sense of ‘perspective’ I have in mind. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This kind of example is similar to Putnam and Burge-style expert cases. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. If you are inclined to think that a version of this case would play out with Larry and Jeff accepting that they are in fact talking past one another, then imagine a different version where they are both expert inquirers (art historians or theorists, say). The details of the example would of course be different (and more sophisticated), but we can still imagine that they each make explicit their fundamentally diverging understandings of the concept of art and nonetheless continue to argue, not taking this divergence to be a defaeater for samesaying. Various further examples in this vein will be introduced below. Thanks to Herman Cappelen for discussion of these points. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The Schroeters are also sensitive to this prospective dimension of appearances of samesaying: “When interpreting your representational tradition, you construe it as a practice with a *point* or *rationale*: a set of categorizing and inferential dispositions that allow you and other participants in your linguistic community to keep track of a topic that’s of mutual interest” (2015, 434). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. I adopt the language of “concepts” in this section for reasons I clarify later on. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. It is important to note that beyond taking up this perspective when encountering “nonsense passages” in out-of-date texts, there are other contexts in which we take up the retrospective internalist perspective. Confounding linguistic behavior that requires concept acquisition and a bilingual approach can also arise in exchanges where speakers are our contemporaries. When, for example, a speaker articulates a radically novel understanding of a seemingly familiar concept, this novel view can itself show up to us as similarly “nonsensical” or “absurd”. (Kuhn was particularly interested in such cases in the context of scientific practice in *Structure*.) In these cases, if we do not reject the view outright, we will similarly work to try and acquire the novel understanding or concept this innovative speaker is articulating. I nonetheless call the perspective we adopt in both of these cases ‘retrospective’ to distinguish it from the forward-looking, prospective project of getting a particular concept/topic right, as opposed to trying to get any particular speaker’s understanding right. ‘Prospective’ and ‘retrospective’, as I use these terms, therefore cannot be mapped neatly onto determinate temporal trajectories: I might argue from a prospective externalist perspective with the author of a distant text (as, for example, we often do in philosophy), and I might adopt a retrospective internalist perspective with a contemporary speaker whose linguistic behavior I cannot yet make sense of, but believe might have an exciting, novel way of thinking about the world that I want to acquire (and then may prospectively go on to endorse). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. In *Articulating the World*, Rouse cites a deficient but dominant “retrospective” view that is implicit in much contemporary philosophy of science: “The predominant philosophical accounts of scientific understanding are retrospective, looking back at the structure and content of what has already been understood and codified as scientific knowledge[…]This retrospective philosophical orientation sharply contrasts to the understanding driving the practice of scientific research. Research workers take a more prospective view of their field as oriented toward outstanding problems and opportunities…The concepts employed are understood as open textured in ways that both permit and encourage further articulation or correction of previous patterns of use. What scientific claims say about the world is thereby always open to further transformation” (2015, 212). This is not the sense of ‘retrospective’ I have in mind in this paper. The Kuhnian retrospective approach generally rejects the simplistic “compilation” model Rouse refers to here because it is sensitive to the difficulty of narrating a seamless, progressive history of a research field; the Kuhnian historian knows they will likely encounter repeated failures of translation that make compiling such a seamless, progressive history impossible. Interestingly, Rouse elsewhere attempts to recover Kuhn’s insights in *Structure* and adapt them for his more prospective view of scientific practice (Rouse 2003). While Rouse’s reading here represents an important corrective to influential but misleading readings of *Structure*, he also overlooks the viability of the later Kuhn’s retrospective view of incommensurability that I am arguing in this paper should not be subsumed into – should in fact be carefully distinguished from – the prospective view Rouse emphasizes. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. A real-world version of this project would be *far* more complex than this toy case implies. For a sense of the range of data this project would have to account for, see Sally McConnell-Ginet (2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Again, such speakers need not be temporally distant from us (even though these are the most likely cases). Someone who articulates a dissenting or novel understanding of a concept may similarly show up to us as engaging in bizarre or confusing linguistic behavior, where we then shift to a retrospective internalist perspective in analyzing this speaker in order to render their linguistic behavior intelligible. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Thanks to Bryce Huebner, James Mattingly, Kate Withy, Trip Glazer, and Francisco Gallegos for comments on an early draft of this paper. Many thanks to Henry Jackman for his helpful feedback. Thank you as well to an (online) audience facilitated by the ConceptLab at the University of Oslo from whom I received valuable comments. Special thanks to Hailey Huget for discussing these ideas with me at length and for her insightful comments on various drafts. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)