

Mind, Matter, and Language

Lecture 12: Social Constructivism

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Review

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- According to direct reference theory, the meaning of our words (and thoughts) depends on our social and natural environment.
- Competent speakers needn't know that two expressions in their language ('Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus', 'water' and 'H₂O') are synonymous.

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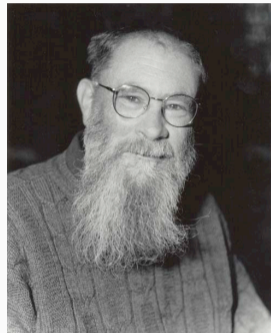
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- Speakers and hearers do associate various properties/descriptions with names, but these aren’t part of the name’s meaning.
- ‘Vulcan is smaller than Mercury’ could be used to convey a belief, but it doesn’t have a literal meaning.
- If Hammurabi believed that Hesperus is visible in the evening, then he also believed that Phosphorus is visible in the evening.

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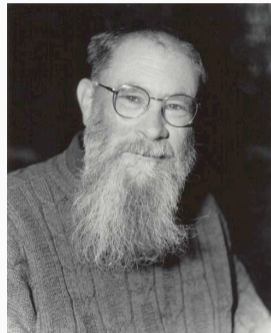
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Descriptivists and anti-descriptivists tend to have different conceptions of what meanings are supposed to do.

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Possible exceptions: taste, morality

Social constructivism about race:

[A race is a group whose] members are socially positioned as subordinate or privileged along some dimension – economic, political, legal, social, etc. – [...], and the group is ‘marked’ as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of ancestral links to a certain geographical region.
Haslanger, “What good are our intuitions?” (2000)



Constructivist analyses are often counterintuitive.

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It is an important part of the social constructivist picture that, to put it simply, our meanings are not transparent to us.

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Direct reference theorists disagree.

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Haslanger: our classification may be guided by external factors.

Terms/concepts pick out an objective type [...] by virtue of the fact that their meaning is determined by ostension of paradigms (or other means of reference-fixing) together with an implicit extension to things of the same type as the paradigms.

Intuitions about the conditions for applying the concept should be considered secondary to what the cases in fact have in common: as we learn more about the paradigms, we learn more about our concepts.

Haslanger, "What good are our intuitions?" (2000)



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- Are adoptive parents parents?
- Are trans-women women?

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Suppose gender is not socially constructed but we want it to be.

We could promote a **change** in our use of gender terms to **make** gender socially constructed.

Conceptual change

Language evolves.

- 'meat'
- 'nerd'
- 'blog'

Conceptual change

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As a society, we have a choice of how our words are used.

Conceptual change

Why does it matter?

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- It's easier to do biology if you have a word for fish that doesn't include whales.

Conceptual change

Why does it matter?

- It's easier to do biology if you have a word for fish that doesn't include whales.
- Existing words are often entangled in a wide network of social norms and practices: 'marriage', 'parent', 'woman', ...

Conceptual change

- Are adoptive parents parents?
- Are trans-women women?

Perhaps it would be better to ask:

- Should we call adoptive parents parents?
- Should we call trans-women women?