What's In a Name?

On the Problem of Meaning-Change

Uwe Meixner, University of Augsburg

1. Names and conventions

In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, in Act 2, Scene 2, Juliet is meditating on the fact that Romeo bears the name of the family which is her own family's enemy, and she asks rhetorically [lines 45-46]: "What's in a name? That which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet." Which is true enough. Names, whether they be singular names (like "Romeo", "Montague", "Verona") or general names[1] (like, *substantivally*, "man", "family", "town", and, *adjectivally*, "male", "blue", "oblong"), attach to what they name *by convention*.[2] Thus, in principle, what they name could be named, without distortion of *the facts*, by another name and not by them – *and*, in principle, what they do not name could be named, without distortion of *the facts*, by them and not by another name. Thus, Romeo, if he were named "Mercutio", would nevertheless "retain that dear perfection which he owes [owns – in the eyes of Juliet]" [Act 1, Sc. 2, l. 48] and marry Juliet, and Mercutio, if he were named "Romeo", would nevertheless be "a gentleman […] that loves to hear himself talk" [Act 2, Sc. 4, l. 145-146] and be killed by Tybalt.

As far as general names are concerned – the present paper will focus on them – there is a complication: General names do not only name whatever they name, they also have a *meaning* or *sense* – said to be *expressed* by them –, and they do their naming only *via* the meaning they express.[3] That meaning is a *concept*, and no matter how concepts are ultimately conceived of in the ontological regard, the following is clear enough: A general name names *every* item that fulfills ("falls under") the concept which is the name's meaning,

[1] I prefer calling the expressions in question "names", rather than "terms"; for the former metalinguistic term points, already by its meaning, to the semantic function of the expressions in question, while the latter term does not.

[2] The convention need not be established by explicit stipulation, by a sort of law ("By $\alpha\beta\gamma$ shall be named XYZ"). It can also become established within a community of language-users without explicit stipulation – automatically, so to speak. How this can come about is treated in David Lewis's classic *Convention*.

[3] For *singular* names this is far less clear than for general names. The matter is famously (but hardly conclusively) discussed in Saul Kripke's *Naming and Necessity*.

and it names *only such* items. As a consequence, general names which express the same concept (as for example “mariner” and “sailor”) name the very same items (“have the same extension”), no matter what are the circumstances under which they name. The converse of this is not generally true: The general names “equilateral triangle” and “equiangular triangle” name the very same items, not only under *the actual* circumstances (as also do “animal-with-a-heart” and “animal-with-kidneys”) but also under *any possible* circumstances (as “animal-with-a-heart” and “animal-with-kidneys” *do not*); nevertheless, they certainly do not express the same concept.

The complication described in the previous paragraph does nothing to fundamentally change the verdict that naming is a matter of *convention*; for general names have their meaning – express the concept which is their meaning – *by mere convention*; and in a derived sense, then, also what they name, *via* their meaning, is a matter of *convention*. Thus, a rose, if it were named “stinkweed”, would smell just as sweet, and a stinkweed, if it were named “rose”, would smell just as foul. Names do not affect *the (non-semantic) facts*. In particular, it does not affect *the (non-semantic) facts* if a general name has this or that meaning: No matter what is meant by the general name “rose”, *the facts* remain just as they are – namely, just as they are in fact described (veridically) by using the general name “rose” with its factually given meaning.

“But can it be true that a rose is a rose merely by convention?” – This question (expressive of doubt), if it were really asked, would reveal a serious confusion, a confusion, however, one can easily fall into. True, the general name “rose” has its meaning *by mere convention*, and thus names *by convention* whatever it names via that meaning. But nonetheless it is not true (and has not been asserted at all) that a rose is a rose *merely by convention*. The truth of the matter can be put as follows: *Given* the actual meaning-convention for the general name “rose”, it follows that whichever item it is that according to that convention – thus: “by convention” – turns out to be a rose, or not to be a rose, in each case the resulting truth is, just as indispensably as it is due to convention, also due to *the (non-semantic) facts* (and is found out by looking, smelling, touching, perhaps even tasting).

2. Meaning-change

It is a fact of the history of (any) language that general names change their meanings in the course of time. And what is to be understood in this essay under the word "meaning-change" is, precisely, *this*: a general name drops its old meaning (in the community of language-users) and acquires a new meaning. (Note that meanings *in themselves* – being concepts: certain abstract entities – cannot change, and hence cannot "become wider", and cannot "become narrower", and cannot "develop" at all.)

Disregarding changes that go from some degree of vagueness or of ambiguity to a lesser or a higher degree of vagueness or of ambiguity, *assuming* in this essay for the sake of perspicuity that all general names mean what they mean *precisely and non-equivocally*,[4] and *disregarding* changes that cannot affect the naming *done* (so to say) by a general term (leaving that naming, under any circumstance, *as it is*),[5] there are the following, especially salient structural possibilities of meaning-change:

(A) The new meaning is either "stronger" or "weaker" than the old meaning, that is: either one-sidedly conceptually ["analytically"] contains the old meaning, or is one-sidedly conceptually ["analytically"] contained by it.

(B) The new meaning is neither "stronger" nor "weaker" than the old meaning, but nevertheless agrees with it to some extent.

(C) The new meaning is conceptually exclusive of the old meaning, that is, it conceptually contains the *negation* of the old meaning.

Examples for each one of these three structural possibilities of meaning-change are the following:

(A*a-Example*) The new meaning of the general name "complete human being" is *weaker* than the old meaning: the new meaning is one-sidedly conceptually contained by the old one. As a consequence, everything that was *formerly* [that is: at a time in the past] designated by "complete human being" [in conformity to the meaning, *then in force*, of "complete human being" and to *the facts*][6] is still being designated by "complete human

[4] This assumption, of course, is counter to fact, but for the purposes of this essay non-detrimental: none of the issues in this essay is distorted by it.

[5] If the general name "equilateral triangle" dropped its old meaning and acquired the (given) meaning of "equiangular triangle", then this change could not affect the naming *done* by "equilateral triangle": No matter what are the circumstances, *everything* designated by "equilateral triangle" *before* would still be designated by "equilateral triangle", and *nothing* not designated by "equilateral triangle" *before* would be newly designated by "equilateral triangle".

[6] Note that the grammatical subjects of "to designate" are here limited to linguistic entities *only*; it is the impersonal, objective designation effected by linguistic entities which is *exclusively* intended.

being"; but something that was *formerly* not designated by "complete human being" may *now* be designated by "complete human being". In fact (as we know), slaves, and even women, were *formerly* not designated by "complete human being" but are *now* being designated by it.

(A*b-Example*) The new meaning of the general name "fish" is *stronger* than the old meaning: the new meaning one-sidedly conceptually contains the old one. As a consequence, everything that was *formerly* not designated by "fish" is still not being designated by "fish"; but something that was *formerly* designated by "fish" may *now* not be designated by "fish". In fact (as we know), whales were *formerly* designated by "fish" but are *now* not being designated by it.

(B-*Example*) The new meaning of the general name "woman" is neither *stronger* nor *weaker* than the old meaning, but it nevertheless agrees to some extent with the old meaning. Indeed, *in the main* what was formerly designated by "woman" is still being designated by "woman", and *in the main* what was formerly not designated by "woman" is still not being designated by "woman". But something that was *formerly* not designated by "woman" may *now* be designated by it, and something that was *formerly* designated by "woman" may *now* not be designated by it. In fact (as we know), all grown-up XY-chromosomal people were *formerly* not designated by "woman" (and most of them still are not designated by that general name), but some grown-up XY-chromosomal people are *now* being designated by "woman"; and all grown-up XX-chromosomal people were *formerly* designated by "woman" (and most of them still are), but some grown-up XX-chromosomal people are *now* not being designated by "woman".

(C-*Example*) The new meaning of the general name "primary thinker" is conceptually exclusive of the old meaning. As a consequence, everything that was *formerly* designated by "primary thinker" is *now* not being designated by it, and everything that is *now* being designated by "primary thinker" was *formerly* not designated by it. *Formerly*, all and only problem-solving nonphysical subjects of conscious experience were designated by "primary thinker", but *now* no problem-solving nonphysical subject of conscious experience is being designated by "primary thinker". For "primary thinker" *now* designates all and only problem-solving physical brains, be they natural brains or artificial ones (that is, AI-CPUs), and no problem-solving physical brain can be a problem-solving nonphysical subject of conscious experience (and vice versa).

As these examples should strongly suggest (to present-day readers), meaning-change, like climate-change, is humanly induced, or in another word: *man-made* – that is, man-made hardly by anybody individually, but, rather, *collectively* (though ultimately, of course, it all comes down to – countless – individual human actions). And, as with all changes, the question can be asked whether a particular meaning-change is for the better or for the worse. As far as the above examples of meaning-change are concerned, it seems clear that the A*a*- and the A*b*-Example – *finished* meaning-changes – are meaning-changes that are (for quite different reasons) *for the better*; *whereas* one may well suspect that the B- and the C-Example – *ongoing* meaning-changes – are meaning-changes that are (again for quite different reasons) *for the worse*.

Since meaning-change is not decreed by fate or inscrutable necessity, or by natural laws, the question can be asked what general rational guideline one should follow when opting "progressively" *for*, or "conservatively" *against*, a particular meaning-change. Such a guideline will be sketched – *merely* sketched – in the second-to-next section of this essay.[7] The next section, in turn, is preparatory for it.

3. Towards a general rational guideline for making, respectively for abstaining from making, a meaning-change at a general name

If there were such a thing as *the objectively required meaning* for a general name, then, if the name already has that meaning, changing it for another meaning ought to be intransigently resisted; and if the name does not already have that meaning, the change from the meaning it has to *the objectively required meaning* for it ought to be brought about a.s.a.p. Unfortunately, since the relationship between a general name and its meaning is purely conventional, there is no such thing as the objectively required meaning for a general name (or for any word at all). More precisely speaking, there is no *absolutely, unconditionally* objectively required meaning for a general name. The prospects for a *conditionally*, *relatively* objectively required meaning for a general name are somewhat less

[7] In a limited, because specialized, way, Carnap's expositions on *explication* (in other words [my words]: *scientifically reformatory definition*) are relevant for the formulation of a general rational guideline for making, respectively for abstaining from making, meaning-changes. The expositions can be found in his books *Meaning and Necessity*, pp. 7–8, and, more fully, in *Logical Foundations of Probability*, pp. 3–8.

bleak (but only *somewhat*): *If* one already uses a general name N (no matter what is its meaning, N may even be vague in meaning or, as yet, meaningless) merely to attach a "label" to certain items ("This is an N, this is another N, this another …"), these items being considered *paradigmatic* for a certain kind of entity, and *if*, moreover, the question arises which definite meaning should be given to N – a meaning fitting the given "labeling" of paradigms, but *usually*, in its consequences for designation, going indefinitely beyond that "labeling" –; *then*, in this situation, one *might* be able to search for the *conditionally* objectively true concept of an N with some chance of finding it – and this concept, if found, would, of course, be the *conditionally, relatively* objectively required meaning for N. The *conditionally* objectively true concept of an N is *that* concept, in the network of all concepts, which best fits the several (perhaps very many) N-labeled *paradigms* within a true and complete description of *the world*. However, there is, usually, no guarantee that such a concept exists and, to boot, uniquely exists; and even if it does uniquely exist, there is no guarantee that it is humanly possible to find it.

The upshot of all this is that *what is to be meant* by a general name N is, usually, a thoroughly *human* and, therefore, often an utterly *controversial* affair. The *absolutely, unconditionally* objectively required meaning for N is not to be had; and even the only *conditionally, relatively* objectively required meaning is, usually, not available – *far* from it. It may, perhaps, be available *if* there are *universally agreed on* N-labeled paradigms. Typically, however, this condition is not fulfilled: If a general name is of social importance, if it has an important social function, then it is unlikely – almost impossible – that there are universally agreed on N-labeled paradigms. Consider two examples, one historical, the other topical: (i) *For some* in the past *all* the "complete human being"-labeled paradigms were male, grown-up, white-skinned, not handicapped, and not enslaved;[8] but *for others* in the past the "complete human being"-labeled paradigms also included entities that were not male, or were not grown-up, or were not white-skinned, or were handicapped, or were enslaved. (ii) For *some* today, *all* the "woman"-labeled paradigms are genetically female, and *all* the "man"-labeled paradigms are genetically male; but for *others* today, the "woman"-labeled paradigms also include entities which are not genetically female, and the "man"-labeled

[8] They may also have labeled women, children, blacks, disabled people, and slaves as "human beings", but only in the sense of "deficient, incomplete human beings" (making the various *alleged* degree-of-humanity-diminishing deficiencies the basis for discrimination and cruelty), *not* in the sense of "human beings" in the full sense, which is the sense of "*complete* human beings".

paradigms also include entities which are not genetically male. And, to boot, it may easily happen, and it does happen, that the latter (the *others*) *refuse* to include among the "woman"-labeled paradigms entities that the former (the *some*) *do* include among the "woman"-labeled paradigms; and the same is true with regard to the "man"-labeled paradigms. Thus, one is confronted with the situation that *some* today assert "This is a woman, and that is a man", whereas *others* today declare, referring with "this" and "that" to the very same two entities that *some* referred to, "This is not a woman, and that is not a man" (*in addition* to the situation that *some* today assert "This is not a woman, and that is not a man", whereas *others* today declare, referring with "this" and "that" to the very same two entities that *some* referred to, "This is a woman, and that is a man").

4. General rational precepts for making meaning-changes

A general rational guideline for making, respectively for abstaining from making, a meaning-change at a general name N cannot be founded on the proper respect for the *conditionally, relatively* objectively required meaning for N, or, what is the same, for the *conditionally* objectively true concept of an N. For, usually, even this conditional-relative (not absolute-unconditional) item is ontologically – and certainly epistemologically – *problematic* (to put it somewhat euphemistically).

Readers may ask: Why do you qualify what you assert with "usually" (here just now, and already in the previous section)? Because there are exceptions – and exceptions are, qua exceptions, *unusual*. There is, for example, the following exception: It is universally agreed that the "digit-number"-labeled paradigms are 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9; it is universally agreed that there cannot be other "digit-number"-labeled paradigms than exactly these ten numbers. The *conditionally* objectively true concept of a digit-number – the *conditionally, relatively* objectively required meaning of "digit-number" – is, therefore, easy to find; it is this: *non-negative integer smaller than* 10.

Note that this case is *unusual* in several respects. *First*, *all* the items that bear the general name "digit-number" can be, and are above, completely listed; for the finitely many "digit-number"-labeled paradigms already exhaust *all* the name-bearers. *Second*, under all circumstances, the very same items (namely, the non-negative integers smaller than 10)

bear the general name “digit-number”. *Third*, “digit-number” is decidedly *not* a general name with social importance.

I turn to the question that now – *after* the negative assertion this section started out with – must be looming large indeed: *What* is it that a general rational guideline for making, respectively for abstaining from making, a meaning-change at a general name N *can be founded on*? Or coming directly to the point: *What* are the *fundamental precepts*, *and their rationales*, for making a meaning-change at a general name N, respectively for abstaining from making it?

The first answer to this question is as true and self-evident as it is not particularly helpful: A meaning-change – indeed, *any* change within the semantic system – should not make the existing semantic system worse than it is; rather, it should lead to an *improvement* of it. The following three more substantial precepts, however, will prove helpful for achieving the laudable goal just pointed out; they, together with their rationales, constitute *the foundations* of a general rational guideline for making, respectively for abstaining from making, a meaning-change – in particular, at a general name N:

Precept I: In most cases of envisaged meaning-change, meaning-*distinction* is better than meaning-change.

Explanatory commentary: Suppose one intends to replace the old meaning of a general name by a new meaning. Wouldn’t it be better if the name kept its old meaning and use, and the new meaning were attached to a new name? In this way one avoids any subsequent confusion of the new meaning with the old meaning, and one also avoids that the old meaning falls, so to speak, into anonymity and thence into oblivion. For, we human beings need general names to be reminded of, and keep a hold on, concepts; it is always a *loss* if a concept is lost from the mind.

The motivation for proposing that the meaning of “chunk of gold” be changed in such a way that, precisely, also chunks with an admixture of pyrite, in the limiting case: chunks of pure pyrite, are among the items designated by “chunk of gold” is far too weak for instigating this very proposal. Yet, even if that motivation were stronger (perhaps because one lived in a society for which the difference between *aurum* and pyrite is not that important), it still would be better to let “chunk of gold” keep its old meaning and to create a new name for the new meaning, say, “chunk of appearance-gold”. (Then, every chunk of

gold [*aurum*] would be a chunk of appearance-gold [*aurum*, pyrite, or *aurum*-pyrite], and so would be every chunk of pyrite; and every chunk of appearance-gold would either be a chunk of gold or a chunk of pyrite or a chunk of *aurum*-pyrite. *But*, of course, not every chunk of appearance-gold would be a chunk of gold; in fact, every chunk of appearance-gold that is a chunk of pyrite or *aurum*-pyrite would not be a chunk of gold.)

As its wording indicates, Precept I is valid only in most cases of envisaged meaning-change, not in all cases. Indeed, when the historical, morally-motivated meaning-change was envisaged for the general name "complete human being", it would, presumably, not have been a good idea to let "complete human being" keep its old (and highly restrictive – *discriminatory* – meaning) and to create a new name for the new meaning, say, "complete human-being *morally considered*".

Indeed, especially this latter ploy would not have been a good idea: Whereas every complete human being would have been a complete human-being *morally considered*, many complete human beings *morally considered* would not have been complete human beings. One can count on it: *this* – and *any broadening addition* to "complete human being", but especially *this* explicitly moral one – would have subverted the morally good intentions one started out with, namely, to help bring about the abolishment of *discrimination*. For this unfortunate socio-psychological effect,[9] society need not even be *Nietzschean*: need not even be such that an explicit appeal to *morality*, instead of being respected, is generally defamed as subservient to "false values": to values supposed to be harmful to so-called "true life-values", like superior strength, ruthless power, mercilessness, etc.

Precept II: In most cases of meaning-change, meaning-*reform* is better than meaning-*revolution*.

Explanatory commentary: Suppose one intends to replace the old meaning of a general term by a new meaning *in a radical way*. Suppose on some isolated island where there is no *aurum* the local wise men have managed to convince first themselves and then the whole local population that the chunks of *gelberz* – as they call it, *gelberz* being a yellow metal found on the island (actually, it is pyrite) – are chunks of gold, whereas the ancient stories of

[9] The result of a *broadening addition* to a general name N, N+φ, has a wider extension than N: the extension of N is properly included in the extension of N+φ. Very often, unfortunately, N+φ also transports, as a socio-psychological reflex, the connotation of a detrimental meaning-*dilution*: of including in its extension items that are *not* true N*s*, *not* genuine N*s*.

chunks of gold that are not (and cannot be) chunks of *gelberz* are just "myths" without any foundation in *the facts*. In this situation, the wise men propose that the traditional meaning of the general name "chunk of gold" be changed, namely, in such a manner as to make "chunk of gold" mean the same as "chunk of *gelberz*". This, if brought about, would be a *radical* meaning-change, a meaning-*revolution*.

Proposals of meaning-revolutions are often the outcome of severe epistemic limitations, whether self-imposed or not. As the wise men on the island, due to their isolation, can encounter only chunks of *gelberz*, other philosophers, for whatever reason, can encounter only physical objects and physically determined behaviors. No wonder, then, that they propose radically to change the traditional meanings of the following general names: "experience" and "mental episode" on the one hand, "free action" on the other. Just like the wise men on the island, they are quite misguided – *or so I think*. Indeed, if the epistemic limitations of those philosophers were due to ontological facts (and, thus, were not really limitations) – if there were in fact no experiences and mental episodes in the traditional and established sense, if there were in fact no free actions in the traditional and established sense – then the meaning-revolutions they propose would be far from absurd. The best reason for giving a general name – a general name we just cannot do without – an entirely new meaning, one incompatible with its old meaning, is that the old meaning forces us (logically or empirically) to acknowledge that the general name designates *nothing at all* (this outcome being quite unacceptable for us).

However, leaving exceptions aside (where one is confronted with an indubitable ontological insight[10]), meaning-reform is better than meaning-revolution, in other words: a meaning-change at a general name that fits the structural categories (A) or (B) in section 2 is better than a meaning- change at that same general-name that fits the structural category (C) in section 2. The reason is that a meaning-change of the former kind is less disruptive of, and less likely to be detrimental to, the entire system of expressed meanings than a meaning-change of the latter kind, especially if the general name concerned is of theoretical or social importance.

[10] But note that it was *indubitable* for the wise men on the isolated island that there is no gold in the traditional sense (i.e., that there is no *aurum*); they were wrong *nonetheless*.

Precept III: Any (acceptable) justification for making, respectively for abstaining from making, a meaning-change must include moral aspects if it is appropriate to include them, and must not include moral aspects if it is not appropriate to include them.

Explanatory commentary: First, it is necessary to obviate a potential misunderstanding: If normative – for example, *moral* – aspects contribute to a general name's acquiring of a certain meaning, then this does not entail that that meaning itself – a certain concept – includes normative aspects. No, that meaning itself, that concept itself, may be purely descriptive: without any normative aspects at all, even if normative – say, *moral* – aspects contributed significantly to the general name's acquiring of that meaning.

However, the modern meaning of "complete human being" – which meaning this general term acquired by the massive contribution of *moral* aspects (as motivational factors) – is, indeed, *not* purely descriptive: it does include, besides descriptive aspects, also moral aspects; it is not only a general *name* but also a *positive valuing-name* (as are, for example, "hero" and "benefactor"; negative valuing-names are, for example, "coward" and "murderer"). The normative – namely, moral – importance of the general name "complete human being" (and of its modalized derivatives: "*potential* complete human being", "*future* complete human being"[11]) does not merely derive from that name's crucial descriptive and designative function in countless morally relevant situations; it *also* derives from that name's meaning having normative aspects: from its meaning being partly normative.[12]

The change from what "complete human being" formerly meant to what it now means is the perfect example of a – first envisaged, then brought about – meaning-change where it was appropriate to include moral aspects in the justification for making the change and where, therefore (following Precept III), moral aspects had to be included in the justification. The old meaning of "complete human being" was, truly and simply, utterly unjust – *not* the meaning itself, the concept, but the fact that "complete human being" expressed *that* concept; *this* fact was utterly unjust because it led to the situation that beings that ought to

[11] The *modalizers* "potential" and "future" need definition, of course. In that definition the notion of a *normal and to-be-expected development* of something that is *not yet* a complete human being will play a large role.

[12] *Both* sides of the meaning of "complete human being" – the normative side and the descriptive side – are indispensable to it. The normative meaning-content in question is perhaps nowhere more evident than in Article 1 of Germany's Basic Law (the constitution of the Federal Republic of Germany from 1949), which begins with the following words: "The dignity of all human beings is inviolable. To respect and protect it is the duty of all state-authority" (my translation). But note that these words, in themselves, do not already define *what* being a (complete) human being *descriptively* amounts to. The normative content needs to be complemented by a descriptive content. And *which* descriptive content it is going to be is a matter for political decision (which decision, in historical fact, has been the outcome of a long struggle against discrimination, not just in Germany).

have been treated (exactly) like complete human beings were often not treated like complete human beings (often far from it) – because they were not even designated by the name "complete human being" (given *the old meaning* of "complete human being").
Now, in what follows, two unrealistic and, subsequently, a realistic example of an *envisaged* meaning-change will be presented where, in all three cases, it is *not* appropriate to include moral aspects in the justification for making that meaning-change.

In *Webster's New World Dictionary* (Second College Edition), we read under the entry "prime number" [p. 1129]: "an integer that can be evenly divided by no other whole number than itself and 1, as 2, 3, 5, or 7". Under the entry "integer", in turn, we read [p. 732]: "any positive (e.g., 5, 10) or negative (e.g., −5, −10) whole number or zero"; and under the entry "whole number" we read [p. 1623]: "zero or any positive or negative multiple of 1; integer". From these dictionary-definitions one can extract that the general names "integer" and "whole number" are intended to be synonyms and to designate (to name) – in fact, under all possible circumstances ("in all possible worlds") – the numbers in the following, on both sides infinite sequence: ∞ …, −3, −2, −1, 0, 1, 2, 3, … ∞; this is *standard*. Unfortunately, the *New-World*-definition of "prime number" has consequences which, given what one expects of prime numbers, can only be considered *weird* – *given* that "integer" and "whole number" have the just-indicated identical *standard* meaning. For *every* integer/whole number, with the exception of 0, can be evenly divided by itself *and* by its negative counterpart, as well as by 1 *and* by −1; thus, according to the *New-World*-definition of "prime number", *nothing* is a prime number.[13] Nobody is ready to believe *this*; therefore, nobody, we may be certain, would propose replacing the actual, the given meaning of "prime number" by the *New-World*-meaning of "prime number" – which change, if effected, would constitute a meaning-revolution *par excellence* for that general name (namely, a catastrophic one). Yet, if somebody *did* propose this meaning-change, then it would be a blatant violation of Precept III if they did so on the *moral* ground that the authority of well-established dictionaries ought to be respected and obeyed.

However, one *can* reasonably propose changing the actual, the given meaning of "prime number" for another, slightly different meaning. The actual, given meaning of "prime

[13] Every integer *n*, different from 0, is evenly divisible by *n*, −*n*, 1 and −1; in no case (not even in the case of 1) the *n* evenly dividing whole numbers are just *n* and 1. If, however, *n* is 0, then *n* is not divisible by *n* or −*n* (for such division is undefined), but *n* is evenly divisible by every whole number which is greater or smaller than *n*, and again the *n* evenly dividing whole numbers are not just *n* and 1.

number" is this: *integer, different from* 1 *and* −1, *that can be evenly divided by no other positive whole number than* 1 *and the absolute value of itself*.[14] One can reasonably propose – and I, for the nonce, do propose – that "prime number", instead of its actual meaning, should have the following meaning: *integer that can be evenly divided by no other positive whole number than* 1 *and the absolute value of itself*. This new meaning, if adopted, would leave everything as it is, *except* that, according to it, also 1 and −1 would belong to the prime numbers. It is *inappropriate* to include moral aspects in the justification for making the proposed meaning-change, and I, obeying Precept III, do not include such aspects (which is *easy*, since it is certainly *not easy* to think of any moral aspects which might be included in the justification). However, my actual justification for making the proposed meaning-change still includes a *normative*, though not a moral, aspect: I think that the new meaning of "prime number" which I (for the nonce) propose in replacement of the old meaning is simpler and more elegant – hence *more esthetic* – than the old meaning. Needless to say, my proposal to make the envisaged meaning-change has absolutely no chance of "catching on"; *at the very best*, one might follow Precept I – "Meaning-distinction is better than meaning-change" – and introduce a new general name with precisely the meaning I, for the nonce, would like to give the general name "prime number". (Perhaps this meaning-distinction by introduction of a new general name actually took place already; I am unable to follow all the ramifications of terminology in mathematical science.)

It is by no means *always* clear whether it is appropriate, or on the contrary *not* appropriate, to include moral aspects in the justification for making, respectively for abstaining from making, a certain meaning-change. A topical proposed meaning-change is to drop the old meaning of "woman" and to give that general name a new meaning, according to which some complete human beings that were formerly named a "woman" would now not be named a "woman", and some complete human beings that were formerly not named a "woman" would now be named a "woman". It may seem that every justification that could be given *at all* for making this meaning-change is bound to include *moral* aspects. What, if not moral reasons, could be adduced in its favor? But is it *appropriate* to include moral aspects in the justification for making that (hotly disputed) meaning-change? If it is

[14] This is the *generalized* actual meaning of "prime number", the meaning it *in fact* has when the prime numbers are to be taken from *all* the integers. If, however, they are to be taken from all the *positive* integers (usually called "the natural numbers"), then the actual meaning of "prime number" is this: *positive integer, different from* 1, *that can be evenly divided by no other positive whole number than itself and* 1.

appropriate, then, following Precept III, moral aspects must, indeed, be included in the justification (and the need one feels for such an inclusion is justified); but if it is *not* appropriate, then, again following Precept III, they *must not* be included in the justification (and the need one feels for such an inclusion is misguided).

The matter is highly controversial, but it seems to me that the general name "woman" is best defined by the general name "grown-up and XX-chromosomal complete human being", which, I take it, also spells out what is (still) the currently given standard meaning of "woman" (*if* one cares to be precise, and, moreover, does not allow oneself to be semantically misled by *accidentia*, hormonal abnormalities not excluded). And to me it is evident that it is appropriate and mandatory to include moral aspects in the justification for making *complete human being* a part of the meaning of "woman", as the *genus proximum* in the definition of "woman": it is appropriate and mandatory to argue also *on moral grounds* that women are (not accidentally, but by conceptual inclusion) *complete human beings*. However, today, *this* particular argumentative campaign for human rights (human rights on the most fundamental level, on the level of semantics), namely, for accepting that women are by their very concept complete human beings, *is over*, and has been decided in the positive for a rather long time already (at least in the northwestern quarter of the globe): it is today acknowledged as an analytical, or conceptual, truth that women are complete human beings (marginal contrary opinions discounted). Now, is it *also* appropriate and mandatory to include moral aspects in the justification for making *grown-up and XX-chromosomal* or *any other concept* (in place of the just-mentioned concept) the *differentia specifica* in the definition of "woman"? To me, it is evident that it is *not* appropriate to do so, and *consequently* (following Precept III) that it is mandatory *not* to include moral aspects in the justification for making, respectively for abstaining from making, a change in the meaning of the general name "woman" that concerns, in particular, the *differentia specifica* in the definition of "woman".

Others, however, think that "woman" ought to be defined by "grown-up *and existentially* [hence deeply, constantly, and behaviorally] *fem-emotional*[15] complete human being"; they think that the given meaning of "woman" should be changed in favor of this new meaning, specified by the definition just presented (where the old *differentia specifica* is replaced by a new one). Their justification for making this meaning-change is *purely moral*. They urge that

[15] The artificial word "fem-emotional" means what is meant by "in emotions feminine".

it is unjust, indeed cruel, to deny the name "woman" to grown-up complete human beings who fervently wish to be considered what they feel themselves to be: a woman, even though they are not XX-chromosomal; it is, they urge, likewise unjust, indeed cruel, to force the name "woman" on grown-up complete human beings who fervently wish *not* to be considered what they do not feel themselves to be: a woman, even though they are XX-chromosomal.

To my mind, it is inappropriate to argue thus, and thus to my mind (sticking to Precept III), no justification – no *legitimate* justification – is given to the proposed meaning-change by arguing thus. Here is *why*: The *basic* socio-linguistic function of the general name "woman" is not, has never been, and should not be the function of describing *what one feels oneself to be*, but rather of describing *what one is biologically*. And *what one is biologically* has nothing to do with any moral aspects (with how things morally should be or should not be); *what one is biologically* is and ought to be, in itself, a purely descriptive matter (entirely without moral content); moreover, also the justification for any definition that might be given of *what one is biologically* ought to be entirely without moral (morally motivational) aspects.

It is true indeed that the general name "woman" is of moral relevance and also has, in part, semantic moral content; this much is agreed on all sides. But the semantic moral content of "woman" is transported, in its entirety, already by the name "complete human being", expressing the *genus proximum* of "woman". In other words, the semantic moral content of "woman" is transported, in its entirety, by a moral term – a positive valuing-name (as we have seen) – which is a proper part in the definition of "woman"; *which* term, however, at the same time *basically* (only basically, certainly not completely) describes what a woman is *biologically*. The modern, nondiscriminatory biologically descriptive *and* moral (hence also normative) meaning of that term – i.e., of "complete human being" – is, uncontroversially today, conceptually included in the meaning of "woman". Whatever content, then, is added to "complete human being" in defining "woman" (or "man", where "man" does not mean the same as "complete human being" but the same as "grown-up complete human being who is *male*"[16]), it is, and ought to be, *purely* biologically descriptive; as such, it nevertheless serves to give the – undisputable – moral relevance and semantic moral content of "complete human being" a *specific* (biological) direction.

[16] In turn, the first and entirely uncontroversial step in the analysis of "woman" is this: "grown-up complete human being who is *female*". All that is controversial is what "male" and "female" ought to mean.

The sole center of moral relevance and of semantic moral content is always: "complete human being". Thus, the real injustices and cruelties that are committed *specifically and expressly* against grown-up and existentially fem-emotional complete human beings who are not XX-chromosomal but calling themselves "women" would be avoided if they were simply treated *as complete human beings*, while taking into account their unusual – but in itself morally neutral – psychological constitution; there is no need (and it is indeed misleading) to call them "women". And the real injustices and cruelties that are committed *specifically and expressly* against grown-up and existentially *masc-emotional*[17] complete human beings who are XX-chromosomal but calling themselves "men" would be avoided if they were simply treated *as complete human beings*, while taking into account their unusual – but in itself morally neutral – psychological constitution; there is no need (and it is indeed misleading) to call them "men".

5. Political meaning-changes and semantic relativism

A meaning-change, to come about, need not wait for justification (let alone for a rational guideline for making meaning-changes). It may come about without any (acceptable, legitimate) justification, being *simply caused* by sufficiently strong social or political forces (anonymous or not, with or without the use of violence). Conversely, there may be the best possible justification for making a certain meaning-change, and nothing whatever happens in this regard.

There are highly reprehensible – morally and rationally appalling – possible meaning-changes which can only be conceived to be brought about by brute, in fact totalitarian, political power, as, famously, the meaning-changes that are implicit in the three Orwellian slogans (in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*): "war is peace", "freedom is slavery", "ignorance is strength". Consider the first slogan; on the face of it, it is simply an absurd assertion, made by *the Party* (in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*). Alternatively, the slogan can be taken to demand that the old meaning of "war" or the old meaning of "peace" or both old meanings – which are still not quite extinct in the population – be changed in such a way that every war is a period of peace. In going from *Oldspeak* to *Newspeak*, there are countless non-self-contradictory

[17] The artificial word "masc-emotional" means what is meant by "in emotions masculine".

ways of effecting precisely such a change. In any case, *once* the change has been being made, the slogan asserts a truth that is intended to be obvious: *war is peace*.

However, there is a rather more extreme reading of the slogan "war is peace": It can also be taken to demand that everyone (in *Oceania*) believe, *even with the old meanings of* "war" *and* "peace" *maintained in one's mind*, that every war is a period of peace – just as *the Party* requires everyone, if asked to do so, to believe, *sincerely* to believe, *that two and two make five*, with the old meanings of the words being maintained in one's mind.

Such demands – aspirations to absolute power – are psychologically unrealistic: they cannot be fulfilled by anyone, even under torture.[18] Rather more realistic is this: The best way for a dictator to make people believe *an untruth* – a "normal" political untruth (for example, "China and Russia are democracies, the USA is not"), not an untruth like "two and two make five" or "war is peace" – is to keep the old words and give them new meanings, at the same time making one's followers (and, it is best, also oneself) believe that one is telling, under the *true* meanings of words, a *truth* which "the enemies of the people" had so far concealed by denying it. In this way, one may *in fact* be telling a truth: something to be believed; whereas *under the old meanings* – accepted by *the outsiders* ("the enemies of the people": those who are neither the dictator nor the dictator's followers) – it is an untruth and to be denied. Who is right here? Who is, in a sense, *lying*?

These questions can only be answered in a perfectly objective true way if there are such things as the *absolutely, unconditionally objectively required* meanings of words: the *unconditionally objectively true* meanings of words (which a dictator, say, is replacing by *false* meanings, contrary to his claim of upholding the *true* meanings). But, as has already been argued and determined, there are no such things as *absolutely, unconditionally objectively required* meanings of words. Thus, incompatible semantic systems will coexist[19] – *till* one of the competing political entities supporting these systems is overcome by the other or perishes due to other causes. Not truth and rationality, *something else* decides the issue.

[18] Orwell certainly succeeds in making them *seem* realistic; but this *fictional* realism must not be confused with nonfictional (or documentary) realism. Torture may make one uncertain about the falsity of "2+2 = 5" and may make one sincerely assent to an assertion of "2+2 = 5". But this is because torture may make one uncertain about the meanings of "2", "+", "=", and "5" and may make one believe that these expressions really have other meanings than one thought they had – and then the old meanings are *not* being maintained in the victim's mind (falling short of what the satanic power would like to have).

[19] They are incompatible in the sense that one and the same sentence (qua syntactic entity) with a crucial socio-political role (which role it has, no matter whether it is asserted or denied) is true according to one semantic system, but false according to the other.

Bibliography

Carnap, Rudolf: *Meaning and Necessity. A Study in Semantics and Modal Logic*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press 1970. [First published in 1947.]

Carnap, Rudolf, *Logical Foundations of Probability*. Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press/Routledge & Kegan Paul 1962. [First published in 1950.]

Kripke, Saul A.: *Naming and Necessity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1980. [First published in 1972.]

Lewis, David K.: *Convention: A Philosophical Study*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1969.

Orwell, George: *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Harmondsworth: Penguin 1982. [First published in 1949.]

Shakespeare, William: *Romeo and Juliet*. New York: Washington Square Press 1972.

Webster's New World Dictionary (Second College Edition). Toronto: Nelson, Foster & Scott 1976.