



Universiteit
Leiden

When Philosophers Meet Linguists: the Conceptual Engineering Project

Applicants

Supervisor Name	Discipline
Dr. Lauren Fonteyn	Linguistics
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Project description

Many lines of scientific inquiry result in some type of ‘improvement’ to our concepts. Mathematics and economics, for instance, have given us much clearer concepts of ‘size’ and ‘money’, and sometimes concepts are improved by better demarcations (e.g. when physics clarifies the difference between weight and mass, or when social sciences help recognize the difference between gender and sex). Yet, although research in many disciplines has resulted in conceptual improvements, it is rarely framed as a deliberate and explicit aim; currently, concepts change more or less implicitly, as part of general linguistic change or as part of theory change.

Recently, philosophers started to argue that this ought to change, encouraging us to think about how to change a concept for a desired aim (e.g. clarity, better operationalization in experiments, but also social effects), and try to engineer concepts by stipulating new (partial) meanings for them. The hope is that becoming more aware of the ways in which we have attempted to improve our concepts, and pinpointing the best methods for changing current concepts, may help conceptual progress in all domains of science. This is known as conceptual engineering.

By venturing into this new project, philosophers realized there is potentially much to gain from (re-)opening a discussion with linguistics on conceptual representation in language. (Socio-)linguists have made substantial progress in determining whether language can deliberately be altered, and if so, when and how such linguistic innovations spread within and across communities. Simultaneously, engaging with the conceptual engineering project in philosophy adds a novel, non-descriptive application of (socio-)linguistic findings. Given that the aim of conceptual engineering is no longer descriptive (what *is* concept X like?) but normative (what *should* our concept of X be?), the descriptive observations of (socio-)linguistics can be seen in a new light – for example, as a means of pointing to potential ‘problematic concepts’, as well as laying bare factors that may help the conceptual engineering project succeed.

Research Trainee Profile

The main aim of the traineeship will be to exchange linguistic and philosophical perspectives on conceptual and linguistic change. The two students will meet every two weeks from February through to May, and try to engage in inter-disciplinary conversations on a series of research questions set by the supervisors. There will be readings for each meeting, but also ample room for independent research.

The traineeship is academically challenging, and tackles questions that currently remain unaddressed. It involves a considerable component of independent research and independent attempts at forging an interdisciplinary approach to the topic. For this reason, the research traineeship is in principle restricted to MA and ResMA students, although exceptions may be possible in certain circumstances; third year BA students may contact us to ask whether their profile will be suitable.

Collaboration

The main aim of the traineeship is to create room for a cross-pollination between linguists and philosophers. When it comes to the topics of linguistic change and conceptual engineering, we think that this may result in new observations and approaches. Part of the challenge will be to find a good way to communicate in non-technical ways the scholarly/philosophical discourse on the topic, and to mobilize insights from (socio-)linguistics for use in concrete projects beyond discipline boundaries.

The topic of conceptual engineering is very recent and currently gaining plenty of attention – although it is generally acknowledged that there will be much to learn from linguists, there have to this day been few attempts to bring these lessons into philosophy.

At the same time, the project of conceptual engineering might provide a new way of framing research into meaning representation and lexical innovation. In particular, (socio-)linguistic studies have predominantly focussed on descriptively mapping how locally introduced linguistic change (e.g. in slang) diffuses across a wider community, but these insights have not been used to evaluate and facilitate philosophical projects. As such, the inter-disciplinary dialogue we aim to set up will reveal a new set of research questions to be explored (such as how one can most effectively have a deliberate influence on linguistic change).

By means of this traineeship, we hope to familiarize the next generation of thinkers with the challenges, but also – and perhaps, most importantly – the unearthed potential of inter-disciplinary discussions. We hope to help the research trainees navigate disciplinary jargon, identify overlap between scholarly disciplines, and develop a means of translating and uniting insights.

Deliverables

As our deliverables we intend that each student writes an accessible article on Medium with lessons from the other discipline, and possible future questions and lines of research to pursue. We furthermore want to stress that we the traineeship to serve an excellent basis for complementary work towards an MA thesis with interdisciplinary engagements, and to put the students in a position to write informed research proposals for postgraduate study if they so wish.

For this research traineeship we will ask two students, one from linguistics and one from philosophy, to bring together perspectives on the possibility of deliberately changing (the language we use to discuss) concepts. Key questions that we will ask the students to address are the following:

- Q1: To what extent does the project of conceptual engineering require that we can change how linguistic forms map onto concepts?
- Q2: What exactly are the terms of success, what sort of improvements are we aiming for, and when is a case of conceptual engineering successful?
- Q3: To what extent is such change local, and restricted to communities of practice? Which factors make diffusion across communities possible?
- Q4: What are the sorts of practices that seem to result in changes or improvements to the meanings of expressions?

Planning

As indicated above, the traineeship will consist of independent study and a series of meetings. The tentative schedule may look as follows:

- February 3: introductory meeting with students and supervisors
- February 10: meeting students
 - Discussion on the topic of conceptual engineering (esp. Q1) led by philosophy student
- February 24: meeting students
 - Discussion on the topic of lexical change (esp. Q3) led by linguistics student
- March 10: 'taking stock' meeting between students and supervisors
- March 24: meeting students, topic on conceptual engineering
 - Discussion on the topic of conceptual engineering (esp. Q2) led by philosophy student
- April 7: meeting students, topic on deliberate linguistic action
 - Discussion on the topic of lexical change (esp. Q3) led by linguistics student
- April 21: 'taking stock' meeting between students and supervisors
- May 6: meeting students, outlining overview
- May 19: meeting students, outlining desiderata
- June 2: final mini workshop between students and supervisors
- August 31: deadline of Medium post (or, if applicable, a research proposal)

The final mini-workshop will consist of the students presenting their joint findings, and instructions on the project's deliverables with the supervisors. In case the mini-workshop will be online, we will each consider inviting a colleague that may be interested to hear these results. The Medium posts will be written in the period between the workshop and the traineeship's deadline, and will include peer review by the students on each other's articles.

Of course, this is just a tentative schedule, to be adjusted in discussion with the students. The same goes for the topics of our sessions: there is some leeway in fitting the topics of discussion to the interests of the students. Given that we want to give the students room to shape the discussion through what they learn, we will leave room for new questions that may arise and new topics that may seem fruitful to include.

Student Application

Students are asked to send us (1) a CV, (2) a motivation letter and (3) a writing sample (not necessarily on the topic of the traineeship). The motivation letter should address why they are motivated to apply, what they hope to get out of the traineeship, and any familiarity with the topic in their field or any experience with interdisciplinary work.