

WARSAW WORKSHOP IN PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE PROGRAMME

Speakers:

Michael Devitt

Alexander Dinges

Nathaniel Hansen

Teresa Marques

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Department of Philosophy
University of Warsaw

Warsaw Workshop in Philosophy of Language, September 4, 2026

UW Philosophy Department, room 209

10:30 – 11:45 Michael Devitt (Graduate Center, City University of New York)

Reference Borrowing and the Sharing of Thoughts and Concepts

What is it to share thoughts and the concepts that constitute them? Why should we care? My approach to these questions is naturalistic. So, I am guided by what I take to be the best empirical theories, particularly of reference. I conclude that concepts and thoughts can be “coarse”-shared or “fine”-shared. Coarse-sharing is a matter of shared referents. Fine-sharing is a matter of shared modes of reference. The latter is made possible by reference borrowing. I reach these conclusions via a discussion, first, of the inner representational states of nonhuman organisms; then, of the nature of human concepts and thoughts; then, of their *intra*-subjective sameness; finally, of their *inter*-subjective sameness. An unusual feature of my discussion is that Frege’s famous criterion of difference receives only passing mentions. Rational relations between thoughts are important but the focus in discussing thoughts should be on their role in causing behaviors.

12:00 – 13:15 Teresa Marques (Universitat de Barcelona)

Beyond Contestation and Manipulation: Rethinking Meaning Perversions

In earlier work, I argued that meaning perversions can be distinguished from legitimate conceptual amelioration by their harmful consequences or by the constitutive misuse of normatively loaded terms. This paper revises that account in response to Inga Bones’s comparison with essentially contested concepts and Justin D’Ambrosio’s analysis of manipulative speech. I concede that Bones’s objection requires revising my original view. I then examine D’Ambrosio’s account of manipulative speech as the covert strategic exploitation of conversational norms, a framework developed to explain Orwellian doublespeak. I argue that this framework fails to capture the core of meaning perversions, and that recognizing this failure answers Bones’s criticism. While some meaning perversions may involve ambiguity, vagueness, or semantic underspecification, many paradigmatic cases do not. Meaning perversions often consist in outright misapplications: a term is applied to something to which it does not apply under any admissible interpretation, while presupposing that its evaluative or normative force is warranted. Crucially, this misapplication is intentional: it aims to shape, constrain, or compel the audience’s practical attitudes and conduct toward the misdescribed referents. Describing sham plebiscites as free elections, the rule of law as authoritarian, or systematically repressive regimes as democracies is not strategic ambiguity but a form of normative coercion. Meaning perversions thus constitute a distinct pathology of public language: practices that mobilize evaluative force, sever it from its conditions of fit, and deploy it to direct collective behavior.

13:15 – 14:15 Lunch break

14:15 – 15:30 Alexander Dinges (Freie Universität Berlin)

The Content and Scope of Consent

When you consent to a haircut, and your consent is valid, an infinite range of actions becomes permissible. I can cut your hair at this angle or that, use these scissors or those, etc. Still, there are limits. For instance, I cannot cut your hair while cutting off your ears in the process or using a chainsaw. What determines the range of actions that become permissible when one's consent is valid? This is the question of the scope of consent. After criticizing existing proposals, I offer a novel answer to this question by drawing a parallel to David Lewis's "problem about permission".

15:45 – 17:00 Nat Hansen (University of Reading)

Stop Talking about Individual Words! We Have Sentences—Paragraphs, Even!—to Say What We Mean

Two influential projects, one in psychology, one in philosophy, have been centrally concerned with how the meanings of individual words change. Researchers in psychology have argued, on the basis of corpus and experimental evidence, that harm-related terms like "trauma" are undergoing a process they have called "concept creep", whereby their meanings have expanded in scope to incorporate less severe harms than they once did. And in philosophy, would-be conceptual engineers and their critics have argued over what it would take to shift the meaning of terms to improve their theoretical usefulness or their contribution to attempts to improve society. These projects share interconnected worries: those concerned with concept creep worry that words important for thinking about mental health are becoming less useful because they are becoming too broad and bleached; conceptual engineers who want to engineer our words to be more useful for various theoretical or practical projects have to contend with the objection that the project is impossible because the meaning of terms is basically outside of our control. Both of these projects neglect a basic fact about our language, namely that even if we do not control what individual words mean, we have the freedom to compose complex phrases, sentences, and longer stretches of discourse to say exactly what we mean. When we expand our field of vision even slightly to include complex phrases (like "interpersonal trauma" or "traumatic brain injury"), the evidence concerning "concept creep" looks very different; and worries about our inability to engineer individual word meanings seem far less pressing when we shift our attention to the fact that each of us has a conceptual engineering lab in our heads capable of synthesizing new concepts out of ready-made materials just by sticking words together.