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A step toward dynamic externalism*

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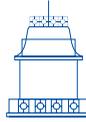
Abstract: Dynamic externalism offers a promising framework for explaining meaning change. However, despite references to it in foundational works and Cappelen's incorporation of it into conceptual engineering, its theoretical foundations remain largely unexplored. This paper clarifies the relationship between Cappelen's externalist conceptual engineering and dynamic externalism, distinguishing their operational and meta-level structures. Drawing on critical analyses of Woodfield and Burge, this paper develops an expert-centric approach to dynamic externalism that integrates the core principles of future externalism while proposing a modified version with an inverted direction of fit. The approach employs this expert-centric framework to provide explanatory resources for semantic change in specialized domains. The resulting account emphasizes the interplay between synchronic and diachronic relations, identifies mechanisms driving semantic evolution, and offers a systematic framework for understanding how technical terminology develops within expert communities.

Keywords: Conceptual engineering, externalism, dynamic externalism, metasemantics, cognitive value, meaning change

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Un paso hacia el externalismo dinámico

Resumen: El externalismo dinámico ofrece un marco prometedor para explicar el cambio de significado. Sin embargo, a pesar de las referencias presentes en obras fundacionales y de su incorporación por parte de Cappelen en la ingeniería conceptual, sus fundamentos teóricos siguen siendo en gran medida inexplorados. Este trabajo aclara la relación entre la ingeniería conceptual externalista de Cappelen y el externalismo dinámico, distinguiendo sus estructuras operativas y de meta-nivel. A través de un análisis crítico de Woodfield y Burge, el trabajo desarrolla un enfoque centrado en expertos para el externalismo dinámico que integra los principios centrales del externalismo del futuro y propone una versión modificada con una dirección de ajuste invertida. El enfoque emplea este marco centrado en expertos para ofrecer recursos explicativos del cambio semántico en dominios especializados. El resultado destaca la interacción entre relaciones sincrónicas y diacrónicas, identifica los mecanismos que impulsan la evolución semántica y ofrece un marco sistemático para comprender cómo se desarrolla la terminología técnica dentro de las comunidades expertas.

Palabras clave: Ingeniería conceptual, externalismo, externalismo dinámico, metasemántica, valor cognitivo, cambio de significado

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...thought is rational only so far as it recommends itself to a possible future thought. Or in other words the rationality of thought lies in its reference to a possible future.

Ch. S. Peirce

Introduction

Cappelen (2018) grounds conceptual engineering in semantic and social externalism. While acknowledging the limitations of these approaches in explaining conceptual change, he proposes a complementary dynamic externalism—an externalist metasemantics that explains meaning change. Yet the mechanisms of dynamic externalism and its relation to conceptual engineering remain underspecified. This article clarifies their distinctions and connections, developing foundational elements for an expert-based formulation of dynamic externalism.

Section 1 introduces Cappelen's externalist framework for conceptual engineering, examining how intensions and extensions figure in externalist accounts of conceptual change. Section 2 critically analyzes Cappelen's dynamic externalism, highlighting divergences between the domains of dynamic externalism and conceptual engineering. Section 3 establishes relationships and distinctions between metasemantic operational levels, including dynamic externalism and conceptual engineering, elucidating two senses of dynamic externalism and temporal constraints on its evolution. Section 4 presents a dynamic externalism model that focuses on two empirical criteria for meaning change and consensus challenges within knowledge fields. It introduces *standby proposals* as resolving consensus issues, categorizing them synchronically and diachronically while engaging Jackman's (1999, 2005) and Thuns' (2020) work on future externalism. Finally, the article develops ideas concerning split situations and diachronic contests regarding standby proposals.

1. Cappelen's externalist conceptual engineering

Conceptual engineering has recently emerged as one of the most ambitious projects in contemporary philosophy of language and mind, seeking to explain and improve the representational tools through which we think and communicate. Within this broad field, Herman Cappelen (2018) advances a distinctly externalist approach, according to which conceptual engineering operates through the modification of metasemantic facts—the external conditions that ground meaning and reference. Drawing on Kaplan's (1989) conception of metasemantics, as the theory explaining those grounding facts, Cappelen argues that any attempt to alter meanings necessarily involves altering the external facts that constitute them. Accordingly, a dynamic metasemantics becomes

indispensable for explaining how such facts evolve and thereby enable meaning change.

For instance, consider the astronomical community revising the concept of “planet” after advances exclude Pluto from that category. On Cappelen’s view, this change does not stem from altered linguistic usage alone but from a shift in the metasemantic base: the community now treats gravitational clearing, rather than mere orbital behavior, as the dominant source of reference. The external reconfiguration of what grounds “planet” thereby re-engineers the concept itself, exemplifying meaning change through metasemantic modification.

Within this framework, meaning change—particularly amelioration—proceeds through modifications of expressions’ extensions and intensions, which together constitute the operative mechanism of Cappelen’s externalist model of conceptual engineering. While extensional change often precedes or accompanies intensional revision, Cappelen allows that shifts in intension can occur independently of any alteration in extension. For example, revising “planet” may initially change both extension and intension—Pluto is excluded while the concept is redefined—but subsequent refinements can shift the intension alone without affecting the extension, showing how the two dimensions of meaning can vary independently or together.

1.1. Cappelen on reference change

Externalist approaches complicate the explanation of reference change, as they primarily “explain how extensions can be stable across individuals and over time despite differences in beliefs, use, dispositions to use, dispositions to infer, etc.” (Cappelen, 2018, p. 64). Since conceptual engineering aims to alter words and referents, traditional externalism appears inconsistent as a supporting framework. Nevertheless, Cappelen maintains that reference change has been integral to externalist theories, stating that his externalism “incorporates the constant possibility of reference change” (Cappelen, 2018, p. 64).

Cappelen (2018) contends that meaning-grounding facts can shift over time, altering the reference of expressions. Drawing on several externalist insights, he invokes Evans’s (1973) notion of dominant source information, Devitt’s (1981) related account, and Kripke’s (1980) view that an intention to preserve reference may be overridden by an intention to refer to a specific object. He also appeals to Dorr and Hawthorne’s (2014) argument from abundance, which maintains that expressions may possess numerous possible meanings depending “very sensitively on the exact values of whatever microphysical parameters are relevant to the determination of meaning” (p. 282). As Cappelen notes, this “rough picture can be endorsed without any commitment about the exact nature of the supervenience base for semantics” (Cappelen, 2018, p. 66). Yet he ultimately concedes that our understanding of reference change remains incomplete.

He further remarks that

there's unlikely to be an algorithm for figuring out how these changes can be [e]ffected...if we're looking for an algorithm for how to change meanings, we are in effect asking for a recipe for extracting meaning from use, and we have no good reason to think such a recipe exists (Cappelen, 2018, p. 67).

Hence, no procedure determines what counts as a dominant source in Evans's account or what triggers an override in Kripke's model of referential intention. Even so, Cappelen entertains the possibility that an algorithm for meaning change could, in principle, be formulated to integrate these perspectives. Nevertheless, he concludes that the core commitments of externalist theories fall short of providing such a recipe, since they "don't enable us to understand why each of the listed changes happened, why they happened the way they did, and why other changes didn't happen" (Cappelen, 2018, pp. 68–69).

2. On Cappelen's reference change

Cappelen asserts that "since the very beginning of the externalist tradition, the possibility of reference change (or shifts) has been an important element of such theories" (Cappelen, 2018, p. 65). While he discusses reference change in Kripke, Evans, and others, claiming that their externalist framework incorporates the constant possibility of reference change, it remains debatable whether this has been central to the externalist tradition. Externalist theories being compatible with reference change instances differs from reference change being crucial across all externalist accounts. What remains absent is an approach explaining reference change—a dynamic externalist theory. Cappelen earlier stated that conceptual engineering requires "a dynamic metasemantics—an account of how the ways in which grounding facts can change over time" (Cappelen, 2018, p. 58). Yet while employing externalist approaches to support his metasemantics and conceptual engineering, he appears to conflate levels of analysis.

This distinction is overlooked. Cappelen merely concludes that reference change occurs frequently, but it remains poorly understood. He emphasizes that established externalist tenets—baptismal events, division of linguistic labor, deference to experts—provide no clear recipe for reference change. However, three distinctions need attention. First, understanding processes through which reference changes differs from, second, having prescriptive procedures for deliberately effecting such change. Third, as Cappelen (2018) acknowledges, situating externalist metasemantic principles within a stability framework, preserving term extensions across individuals and time, differs substantially from exploring how those principles might operate dynamically, where extensions shift across interpersonal and temporal boundaries.

Let us elaborate on these three points. Understanding how reference change occurs belongs to metasemantics, particularly to its dynamic strand; devising a prescriptive method for effecting such change belongs instead to conceptual engineering. Hence, explaining reference change differs fundamentally from prescribing how to bring it about. Additionally, while externalism acknowledges that reference change occurs, it does not fully articulate the conditions under which such change takes place. This explanatory gap accounts for the limited understanding of the mechanisms by which reference shifts are effected.

Furthermore, Cappelen's cursory treatment of the operational levels of metasemantics and conceptual engineering in his discussion of a "recipe" for reference change reveals a deeper ambiguity. When he asserts that "there's unlikely to be an algorithm for figuring out how these changes can be [e]ffected" (Cappelen, 2018, p. 67), two readings emerge. On one interpretation, the claim reflects a theoretical gap: the absence of a developed account of reference change—specifically, a dynamic externalist metasemantics—on which conceptual engineering could properly operate. On another interpretation, it expresses a form of theoretical pessimism: that such a metasemantic theory may, in principle, be unattainable. Both interpretations converge on the point that effecting reference change presupposes a prior understanding of its mechanisms. Yet the remark might also be read as conflating two distinct questions—how meaning changes *can be explained* and how they *can be enacted*—thus blurring the boundary between metasemantic explanation and conceptual engineering practice.

A few lines later, citing Williamson's (1994) claim that no algorithm can derive meaning from use (Cappelen, 2018, p. 67), Cappelen remarks: "if we're looking for an algorithm for how to change meanings, we are in effect asking for a recipe for extracting meaning from use, and we have no good reason to think such a recipe exists" (Cappelen, 2018, p. 67). This makes his stance clearer: the search for a formula to extract meaning from use is futile, given the improbability of a comprehensive dynamic metasemantic theory. Hence, an algorithm for meaning change, conceived as a theory of conceptual engineering, also appears unlikely. Cappelen should have more clearly distinguished the operational levels of dynamic metasemantics and conceptual engineering—a distinction elaborated in the next section.

3. Metasemantics and levels of conceptual engineering

The relation Cappelen draws between metasemantics and conceptual engineering remains opaque. While he maintains that any metasemantics constitutes a theory of semantics and grounds conceptual engineering in externalist metasemantics, he seems to conflate their respective functions. He claims, for instance, that an externalist

framework explains semantic change, since such change stems from alterations in the facts determining reference (Cappelen, 2018, p. 69). Yet this explanation belongs to a still undeveloped approach—dynamic externalism. This lack of theoretical development, however, is not problematic within a conjectural or exploratory framework.

More problematic is Cappelen's lack of articulation of the relation between externalist metasemantics and conceptual engineering. He merely notes that, as semantics evolves, so too must metasemantics. Moreover, he conflates their operational levels, equating the idea of metasemantics being in flux with "the rules for how to change the semantics can also change," and treating as equivalent the claim that "what it takes to change meanings can change" (Cappelen, 2018, p. 69) with the possibility of metasemantic evolution.

The section, therefore, examines the relation between externalist metasemantics and conceptual engineering. To that end, the account draws on Rorty's conception of metaphilosophy, which Cappelen (2018, p. 69) invokes in this context. Rorty writes:

philosophy is the greatest game of all precisely because it is the game of "changing the rules." This game can be won by attending to the patterns by which these rules are changed, and formulating rules in terms of which to judge changes of rules. Those who take this view hold that philosophy in the old style—philosophy as "metaphysics, epistemology, and axiology"—needs to be replaced by metaphilosophy. Members of this school are, as it were, the metaphilosopher's metaphilosophers: since any metaphysical, epistemological, or axiological arguments can be defeated by redefinition, nothing remains but to make a virtue of necessity and to study this process of redefinition itself (Rorty, 1961, p. 9).

Given that a form of conceptual engineering oriented toward implementative semantic change and grounded in externalist metasemantics entails the latter's redefinition, such an updated metasemantics, when addressed, involves a new meta-level within externalist metasemantics. Considering this feedback loop, the resulting view holds that externalist metasemantics is primarily descriptive, whereas conceptual engineering is prescriptive and performative. The analysis further examines how the reestablishment of object-level relations, along with the emergence of new explanatory rules and their implementations, generates additional theoretical meta-levels. Finally, following Rorty, although redefinition involves first-order metaphilosophical reflection, its reliance on object-level analysis as foundational supports the view that metatheoretical levels arise only once *the study of redefinition* itself becomes possible.

That said, the following paragraphs systematize the elements presented above, tracing the relations between object-level and meta-level domains through their rule redefinitions.

Level-1 Metasemantics: This level accounts for the rules governing how semantic relations are grounded, sustained, and redefined in accordance with social and

environmental facts. It thus delineates a metasemantics that integrates both non-dynamic and dynamic approaches—that is, theories explaining how semantic relations are constituted and how they change.¹ Non-dynamic accounts comprise synchronic theories such as Putnam’s (1975) *semantic externalism* and Burge’s (1986) *anti-individualism*, as well as diachronic yet rule-stable variants like Bernecker’s (2009) *pastist externalism* and Jackman’s (1999, 2005) *future externalism*.² In contrast, dynamic approaches, exemplified by theories of *Dynamic Externalism*, aim to explain the mechanisms by which semantic content evolves in response to shifts in its grounding conditions.

Level-1 Conceptual Engineering (Level-1 N-Metatheory):³ Building on the rules established at Level-1 metasemantics, Level-1 Conceptual Engineering operates as a prescriptive framework that formulates principles for modifying the rules governing semantics. Its focus is implementation-oriented: to establish normative criteria for assessing, improving, and generating meanings,⁴ and to provide prescriptive guidelines for effecting semantic change.⁵ A consolidated example would be an advanced form of Cappelen’s conceptual engineering—one that integrates dynamic metasemantic principles to structure its own rules for semantic modification.

Level-2 Metasemantics (Level-1 D-Metatheory): This level explains the rules governing how Level-1 Metasemantics arises, changes, and is redefined in accordance with the relations between semantics and their underlying grounding facts. More specifically, it examines how the rules governing those relations are themselves redefined. In non-dynamic approaches, this involves explaining redefinitions of the rules governing synchronic and diachronic relations, whereas in dynamic approaches, it concerns redefinitions of the rules governing how semantics interacts with its grounding facts over time.

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- 1 Dynamic externalism is positioned at the theoretical level of externalist metasemantics rather than as a redefinition of its non-dynamic counterparts. Placing dynamic externalism at this meta-level makes explicit that its explanatory target is the metasemantic grounding of meaning change, not meaning change itself. It is therefore best understood as a theoretical completion of the non-dynamic framework, not a theory about it.
 - 2 Although pastist and future externalism are *diachronic*—since time figures essentially in their explanatory framework—they remain *non-dynamic*. Both construe temporal reference as extended yet composed of discrete, fixed states: meaning is anchored in determinate temporal points (past or future) rather than in an ongoing process of semantic change.
 - 3 The distinction between D-Metatheory and N-Metatheory reflects the core methodological divide between metasemantic externalism and the forms of conceptual engineering derived from it. The former is descriptive, explaining how linguistic expressions acquire meaning through social, causal, historical, or psychological processes, how the grounding relations among these facts evolve, and how theories about those relations develop over time. The latter is normative, evaluating and prescribing how conceptual and linguistic repertoires should be revised, replaced, or preserved in order to better serve epistemic, ethical, or practical goals. Although foundational, this distinction is not absolute: effective conceptual engineering depends on robust metasemantic accounts of meaning constitution and change, while normative aims can reciprocally inform descriptive inquiry.
 - 4 Chalmers (2020) observes that conceptual engineering not only ameliorates existing terms but can also introduce new ones when required.
 - 5 Since implementation-oriented approaches combine prescriptive theory, empirical follow-up, and practice, they belong to the N-metatheoretical level.

An instance of the first case occurs when explanatory mechanisms are developed to account for how the rules of semantic externalism—whether synchronic or diachronic—are redefined to address theoretical limitations or explanatory gaps. The second case is exemplified by the evolution of Level-1 Metasemantics, in which conceptual engineering is introduced as an underlying grounding fact that facilitates semantic amelioration. This development yields a metasemantics that redefines the rules governing both Level-1 Metasemantics and Level-1 Conceptual Engineering, thereby laying the foundation for Level-2 Conceptual Engineering.

That said, some clarifications are needed regarding the emergence of Level-2 Metasemantics. The evolution of conceptual engineering into a social factor in semantic change redefines it from a purely prescriptive theory into an applied framework that both prescribes and implements meaning change. This shift entails: (1) the differentiation of conceptual engineering as a theoretical and applied field, alongside isolated projects deliberately modifying the semantics of particular terms; (2) the distinction between rule redefinitions in Level-1 Metasemantics occurring before and after its evolution into a prescriptive and implementation-oriented approach; and (3) the emergence of higher meta-levels in both domains. Notably, the consolidation of Level-2 Metasemantics does not depend on conceptual engineering being fully prescriptive and applied; it suffices that Level-1 Metasemantics redefines its own rules.

Level-2 Conceptual Engineering (Level-2 N-Metatheory): Level-2 Conceptual Engineering applies the rules of Level-2 Metasemantics to explain how those governing Level-1 Metasemantics and Level-1 Conceptual Engineering can be revised. Its development may follow two paths. The first involves redefining a Level-1 framework restricted to theoretical prescription, yielding either (a) a Level-2 variant that remains theoretical, or (b) one that shifts toward an implementation-oriented form. In the latter case, such evolution may operate retroactively, affecting Level-1 Conceptual Engineering. Alternatively, progress may begin within Level-1 Conceptual Engineering itself, triggering a process that redefines the rules of Level-1 Metasemantics and generates higher meta-levels—first Level-2 Metasemantics, and subsequently Level-2 Conceptual Engineering.

The first of the three envisioned forms of Level-2 Conceptual Engineering prescribes how to modify and refine the theoretical tools and explanatory devices of Level-1 Conceptual Engineering. The second form, representing a further step toward an implementation-oriented approach, revises the rules governing those same tools and devices. This development establishes a framework that Level-1 Conceptual Engineering can draw upon to advance toward its own implementation-oriented stage.

The third form corresponds to the implementation-oriented version of Level-2 Conceptual Engineering that arises once Level-2 Metasemantics has consolidated, following the evolution of Level-1 Conceptual Engineering through its own

contributions. Its consolidation begins when Level-2 Metasemantics is employed to explain and modify the rules governing Level-1 Metasemantics and Level-1 Conceptual Engineering. By performing object-level redefinitions, it becomes incorporated as a new social condition of change within its own explanatory structure; consequently, a new mechanism capable of generating further meta-levels comes into operation.

Level-3 Metasemantics (Level-2 D-Metatheory): This level accounts for the rules governing how Level-2 Metasemantics arises, transforms, and is redefined. As the implementation-oriented approach to Level-2 Conceptual Engineering becomes a condition for change within Level-2 Metasemantics, its contributions to redefining that level—and its own subsequent redefinition—mark the transition to a new domain of inquiry: Level-3 Metasemantics. In this framework, the implementation-oriented approach to Level-2 Conceptual Engineering functions as a social grounding fact for Level-2 Metasemantics, introducing theoretical, explanatory, and applied refinements. Moreover, the redefinition of the rules governing Level-2 Conceptual Engineering, as incorporated into the explanatory domain of Level-3 Metasemantics, sets the stage for the emergence of Level-3 Conceptual Engineering.

As previously noted in Level-2 Metasemantics, higher metasemantic and conceptual-engineering meta-levels may emerge even without mechanisms linking them to lower levels. Accordingly, Level-3 Metasemantics can consolidate through the redefinition of a version of Level-2 Metasemantics that accounts for redefinitions of Level-1 Metasemantics, even in the absence of an implementation-oriented approach to Level-1 Conceptual Engineering.

Some conclusions

Change implementation will likely emerge within conceptual engineering, through initial descriptive-theoretical (D-theoretical) and normative-theoretical (N-theoretical) tools. Owing to their proximity to metasemantic domains and the simpler modeling of change, these early efforts can later extend to semantics. Thus, conceptual engineering may initiate implementation by developing higher metasemantic and conceptual-engineering stages, rather than starting from an implementation-oriented Level-1 approach.

The implementation advances of conceptual engineering activate mechanisms that drive interactions between lower and higher levels. However, as the distance from the initial feeding levels increases, the redefinition of rules governing higher levels becomes progressively delayed. Consequently, certain later meta-levels may remain practically unattainable within the lifespan of individuals or even entire communities. For instance, Level-3 Conceptual Engineering can consolidate its prescriptive framework only once Level-3 Metasemantics is established. Its implementation-oriented stage, in turn, depends on information about the redefinition of its governing rules. Similarly,

the emergence and consolidation of Level-3 Metasemantics rely on the redefinition of the rules governing Level-2 Metasemantics and Level-2 Conceptual Engineering, which in some cases presuppose prior redefinitions of Level-1 Metasemantics and Level-1 Conceptual Engineering.

How long does it take for a consistent and useful redefinition of the rules governing a theoretical approach to yield a coherent metatheoretic explanation—or even to develop an implementation-oriented approach capable of effecting change? Could a single redefinition suffice to explain the rules governing change within a metasemantic framework, or are multiple redefinitions required? Given that consistency often demands several, and that each depends on prior redefinitions of the rules it builds upon, the process is necessarily protracted. The higher the meta-level, the more layers of redefinition are needed for its consolidation, and the slower both consolidation and subsequent redefinition become. Consequently, the emergence of each new meta-level takes increasingly longer.

A suitable perspective must recognize how theoretical advancements integrate across frameworks, giving rise to metatheories capable of redefining prior approaches through reflection on their processes of rule redefinition. Thus, once externalist metasemantics—including conceptual engineering—redefines its own rules, it can begin to examine that very process. Such inquiry lays the groundwork for higher-level conceptual engineering focused on implementation-oriented strategies.

This proposal highlights the need to elaborate Cappelen's conception of conceptual engineering as a metatheory grounded in dynamic externalism and inspired by Rorty's metaphilosophical framework. Specifically, it calls for a clearer account of how theoretical levels are structured and operate through rule redefinition—a dimension absent from Cappelen's treatment. A robust perspective must acknowledge the integration of theoretical advances across frameworks, enabling higher-order metatheories to reassess and revise their foundations. Once externalist metasemantics, including conceptual engineering, redefines its own rules, it becomes capable of examining the very process of redefinition. Such inquiry, in turn, lays the groundwork for advanced conceptual engineering focused on implementation-oriented strategies.

By definition, semantic and metasemantic changes effected through conceptual engineering cannot be fully attributed to it when treated solely as a metatheory. Moreover, externalist conceptual engineering cannot become the object of inquiry within its own prescriptive or performative domains unless it is first examined through descriptive metasemantic analysis.

Although a fully developed dynamic metasemantics is not yet available, recent developments suggest its emergence. Conceptual engineering, when grounded in externalist metasemantics, depends on such a framework to fulfill its dual role as metatheory and implementation-oriented practice. Alternatively, by extending

classical metasemantics and integrating early insights from dynamic externalism, conceptual engineering can help shape dynamic metasemantics while advancing its own practical dimension. Two senses of dynamic externalism are thus discernible: (1) a framework for explaining semantic change, and (2) a multi-level dynamic metasemantics encompassing explanation, prescription, and implementation of rule redefinition.

However, the role of conceptual engineering as a dynamizing agent of terminological change, forming a gear that connects different levels, can also be seen as a type of dynamic metasemantics, albeit differentiated from dynamic externalism and from multi-level dynamic metasemantics, which involves the entire gear of non-dynamic and dynamic levels within externalism and conceptual engineering. Thus, conceptual engineering, as assumed by Cappelen as dynamic metasemantics, operates on three levels: the n-metatheory level (level 3), which is its core, where it employs d-metatheory in its dynamic externalist metasemantic version (level 2) as a theoretical basis to develop prescriptions and implement changes at the semantic level, which is its object level (level 1).

4. Further developments toward dynamic externalism

In the absence of a fully developed dynamic externalist account of meaning, this section identifies and motivates several of its core elements. In 4.1, the account proposes that meaning dynamics among experts form the metasemantic basis for dynamic externalism. This view aligns with a dynamic interpretation of Recanati's (1997, 2000) groundedness thesis, where meaning is fixed at the point where deference ends. Therefore, the approach focuses on expert communities within specific knowledge domains, rather than on ordinary language users.⁶

This approach identifies two key processes in semantic change driven by expert dynamics: one that structures meaning through generalization and preservation, and another that initiates change within that structure. To develop this proposal, it draws on various perspectives that address the dynamics of technical term meanings within externalist frameworks. The starting point is Woodfield's (2000) account of indeterminate deference among experts and his insights into improved empirical criteria for identifying samples relevant to terminological shifts.⁷

Since accepting such criteria depends on consensus, the present framework appeals to additional elements from Burge's (1986) account of conventional meaning

6 A representative externalist account for ordinary language users is Burge's (1986), which is adapted here to model a dynamic externalist approach grounded in knowledge fields.

7 Unless otherwise indicated, all mentions of *terms* and *terminological uses* refer to technical terms.

change through cognitive values. In 4.2, the account introduces *standby proposals* as a response to the consensus problem, engages Jackman's (1999, 2005) view of temporal externalism—conceiving meaning as a diachronic phenomenon—and considers Thuns' (2020) notion of deference to ideal virtual speakers, though it instead appeals to what is termed *virtual content*. Finally, in 4.3, the account outlines criteria based on elapsed time, split situations, alternative standards, and diachronic contests between proposals.

4.1. Expert's deference and meaning change

Experts within a knowledge field constitute a fundamental component of the metasemantic base for an externalist account of term meaning. Their operational dynamics are examined through two characterizations of expert deference discussed by Woodfield (2000), contrasted with Recanati's (1997, 2000) groundedness thesis, which asserts that deference must ultimately cease. Both accounts share the premise that deferential criteria are grounded in empirical facts concerning a term's extension—though Woodfield notes this applies to intensions as well, i.e., to the adequate construal of a term's sense.⁸ The first model describes a linear deferential process: a layperson defers to an expert to determine whether a sample falls under a term; that expert, in turn, defers to another; and so on, until a final authority is reached. This scenario depicts experts relying on others whose domain-specific expertise is presumed to offer superior criteria—the best judgment available at the time—for categorizing the sample.

The second description concerns circular deferential processes involving experts within the same domain. In these cases, improved empirical criteria for identifying samples as referents of a term are central.⁹ As time progresses, experts redirect their deference toward those they regard as possessing superior criteria. They shift from being deferees to deferrers, or cease deferring once they themselves acquire such criteria—thus becoming deferees. The use of a term is thereby constrained by its optimal application to its referents.

An important aspect of the second description is that deference occurs among experts within the same knowledge field (or specialty). Unlike the first case, this form of deference pertains to novel elements that another expert in the same domain associates with the extensional aspects of a term. Can any change in meaning be considered within such a deferential process? Our initial answer is affirmative.

8 The case in question comes from the field of linguistics. In continuous deferential processes, for example, linguists defer to those who offer the most precise definitions of a term.

9 This idea draws upon Woodfield's (2000) example of improved methods for detecting disease.

Improved empirical criteria for identifying the referents of a term can be understood as new information intrinsically related to it, thereby adding elements to its use and modifying its intension without necessarily altering its extension. In this sense, meaning change may occur through the incremental enrichment of information relevant to the term's use. A familiar case arises in molecular biology, where the term *gene* has undergone intensional refinement through increasingly precise empirical criteria while retaining its extension.

Furthermore, since meaning change—as described above—can introduce elements that conflict with a term's established extension, improved empirical criteria for identifying referents may serve as a bridge to such change. This change may involve altering part of the meaning, adding new elements, or both. Accordingly, meaning change can result from new elements intrinsically related to a term, manifesting as: (1) changes in related information concerning its use (altering its intension without changing its extension); (2) changes to elements of its extension (without adding new elements); (3) the addition of new elements to its extension; or (4) both changing and adding elements to its extension.

Nevertheless, improved empirical criteria for identifying a term's referents—even when proposed by experts—may not be immediately adopted or deferred to by the broader specialty community. For such criteria to be considered “better,” they require community approval. Similarly, if standby proposals introduce elements that conflict with existing uses or add new ones (or both), expert endorsement is necessary for those changes to be accepted. Consequently, meaning change occurs. Expanding a term's informational scope—such as incorporating new samples into its extension or removing others—can introduce tensions with established meanings. Because such changes require expert approval, they challenge the existing conceptual framework. A clear example comes from astronomy: the redefinition of *planet*—from geocentric to heliocentric and eventually to dynamical criteria—required expert consensus to revise established standards and accept new referents, including the exclusion of Pluto.

What additional conditions are required for consensus on meaning change within a knowledge field? Further criteria are indeed necessary. These are clarified by turning to Burge (1986), whose account of ordinary terms, analogous in many respects to technical ones (p. 716), offers insights highly pertinent to our aims. Our focus remains on conventional and lexical meanings, diverging from approaches addressing natural-kind terms (e.g., Alexandrov, 2020).

Burge offers a metasemantic account of empirically applicable ordinary terms, grounded in user competence and dialectical influence. He argues that a select group of highly competent users can formulate meaning-giving characterizations (Burge, 1986, p. 703), which establish norms for identification and standards for linguistic conventions.

According to Burge (1986, p. 706), the truth of normative characterizations partly resides in reason-based processes and the invocation of extralinguistic facts by competent users. These users engage dialectically to explicate meaning by formulating normative characterizations grounded in paradigmatic examples, indexical uses, and synonyms. Although their normative assessments may reach equilibrium—i.e., agreement—such convergence offers no intrinsic guarantee of truth.¹⁰

Doubt plays a central role in Burge's account: both competent and non-competent users may question an established conventional meaning, and under certain conditions, such doubt can challenge the consensus of the most competent speakers. Beyond mere doubt, novel empirical facts and insights arising in dialectical engagement can undermine normative characterizations and prompt meaning change. Burge elucidates meaning change by introducing the relation between conventional meaning and cognitive value. For instance, the conventional meaning of 'sofa' might be defined as 'a piece of furniture made for sitting.' The corresponding cognitive values represent the potential information, from the perspective of term users, associated with the linguistic elements in this definition.¹¹ Thus, the conventional meaning of 'sofa'—'a piece of furniture made for sitting'—differs in cognitive value from the term itself, as doubts may arise when equating the two, unlike in the identity judgment 'sofa is sofa.'

Meaning change, Burge argues, can occur when dialectical discussions of a term's conventional meaning transcend established norms. A highly competent user might apprehend well-founded doubts and associate the term with a distinct cognitive value—a non-conventional theory of its use. If this new cognitive value, representing novel insight, is supported by empirical facts (e.g., newly identified applications), the established convention may be undermined and replaced (Burge, 1986, p. 714). For Burge, conventional meanings are inherently open-ended, given their perpetual susceptibility to alteration through emerging cognitive values. He further maintains that intentional mental states and events can only be individuated by considering cognitive values, as authority resides either in the original convention¹² or in the new one that challenges it.

Also, for Burge, the open-ended character of conventional meanings and their perpetual susceptibility to alteration through new insights (cognitive values) are intellectual norms governing meaning change. These allow the derivation of subsidiary

10 Although Burge contemplates the deference patterns of more experienced users, he does not provide a characterization of them (Burge, 1986, p. 703).

11 Burge (1986, pp. 715–718) defines 'cognitive value' as a tripartite notion: (1) a concept, (2) a unit of potential information, and (3) an explication of the cognitive perspective.

12 Though a full understanding of cognitive value may correspond to an ideal understanding of conventional meaning, Burge distinguishes them by their criteria of individuation: in the first case, the relevant elements depend primarily on mental states; in the second, they depend on both mental aspects and their relations among multiple individuals (Burge, 1986, p. 718).

norms: (1) every conventional meaning is subject to doubt; (2) founded doubt challenges conventional meanings; (3) new, well-supported ideas offering alternative ways of conceiving a term can alter its meaning; and (4) Dialectics must be employed to demonstrate the suitability of the new meaning—using required examples—to the most competent users.

Returning to our central question, additional conditions for consensus on meaning change arise from subsidiary intellectual norms. Specifically, well-founded doubts¹³ and/or novel insights (cognitive values or non-conventional theories) linked to newly identified applications of a term to empirical entities, combined with the strategic use of dialectics by a highly expert user experiencing these doubts or insights, constitute challenging conditions to an established meaning, thereby demanding consensus for its revision.

Note that, improved empirical criteria for identifying a term's referents can lead to newly identified applications of that term to empirical entities. This shift alters the associated cognitive value and, consequently, its intension and extension, effectively superseding past uses. Thus, newly identified applications have their own empirical criteria, which may in turn generate further refinements and additional applications. Nevertheless, such applications can also emerge independently of prior developments in identification criteria.

It is also crucial to recognize that novel methods for identifying a term's referents can induce meaning change through an extensional shift (as outlined in points 2, 3, and 4 above), not strictly as a consequence of cognitive value but as a result of serendipitous encounters with new elements.¹⁴ Consequently, not every extensional shift can be attributed solely to cognitive values, even if these become relevant after the change has been conceived.

Furthermore, the conceptualization of intellectual norms for meaning change, specifically the perpetual possibility of altering conventional meanings through the emergence of cognitive values and the resulting open-ended nature of such changes, along with challenging conditions derived from subsidiary norms and the implementation of dialectics to support any viable challenge, should ideally culminate in expert adherence and deference through persuasion and conviction. Nevertheless, these challenges may persist even without consensus on meaning change, deference, or adherence.

13 Well-founded doubts are understood as those agreed upon by the relevant expert parties during dialectical processes.

14 One might ask whether encountering new elements serendipitously already entails cognitive value. The answer is no, or at least not entirely. Peirce's semiotics (see *Atkin, 2013*) helps clarify this: the relationships between the object-sign, the sign-sign, and the interpretant-sign progress through stages, and the interpretant changes depending on its perception of the object during these phases. Thus, an expert's initial view of new elements encountered serendipitously can be understood as limited to qualitative experiential aspects and early links between sign-objects and sign-signs (in the first stage or initial stages), before a non-conventional theorist interpretant arises.

4.2 Standby proposals, consensus, and deference

Achieving consensus depends on multiple factors, many of which exceed a discipline's internal epistemic values.¹⁵ Even partial consensus or limited deference fails to yield a clear set of conditions under which meaning change occurs. To address this gap, the present framework examines proposals whose associated referents are linked to technical terms and that can prompt such change. These proposals are characterized as neither adopted nor deferred to by the expert consensus of an epistemic community, yet not discarded. The framework designates them as *standby proposals*. The account shows that, even in the absence of full consensus or partial adherence, alternative views can persist and develop.

Computational qualia, artificial general intelligence (AGI), and embodied AI exemplify what may be termed *standby proposals*: technically articulated views whose associated terms remain in active use, yet lack the expert consensus required for adoption while also resisting outright dismissal. Computational qualia illustrate this status insofar as attempts to model phenomenal properties in computational terms continue to generate debate without settling the referential commitments of terms such as *experience* or *phenomenal state* (Edelman & Fekete, 2011). Likewise, AGI functions as a technical term whose extension and theoretical role remain contested across research programs, producing a proliferation of partially compatible but unstandardized definitions (Goertzel & Pennachin, 2006; Marcus, 2020).

Embodied AI offers a further case in which alternative conceptions of cognition grounded in sensorimotor dynamics persist without displacing classical computational models, thereby maintaining parallel, non-convergent usage within the field (Pfeifer & Bongard, 2006; Froese & Ziemke, 2009). These examples align with broader patterns in which alternative views on a term persist and evolve, as illustrated by ongoing disputes regarding the definition of “consciousness” in philosophy of mind (Van Gulick, 2025), “emotion” in philosophy of mind and psychology (Scarantino & de Sousa, 2021), and “planet” in astronomy (Wrona, 2025).

In this vein, a standby proposal is understood as a phenomenon that persists even without adherence, deference, and consensus. Since it involves an *elapsed time* during which circumstances and the proposal itself may change, it can be viewed as a promoter seeking the status of a contender supported by others. This constitutes an additional condition for achieving consensus.

15 For example, epistemic values such as internal and external coherence, explanatory power, economy, and innovation may be satisfied, yet some colleagues often remain reticent. Even when proposals equal or surpass existing approaches in these respects, adoption can be hindered by interests beyond epistemic values (e.g., collective, political, or financial). Such resistance may persist despite lacking solid justification. Consequently, securing full consensus proves highly challenging.

From an externalist perspective of conceptual engineering, standby proposals arise as alternatives to established ones (i.e., terms with fixed extensions) and represent *potentially supported contenders*. They outline two main scenarios: in the first, different proposals concerning phenomena that share extensions, whether a current one and any that begin to gain support, or whose concerns are presumably about the same subject,¹⁶ coexist. The second scenario involves the complete adoption of the new proposal, with the established one being superseded.

Given that the first scenario can transition into the second, the analysis now turns to the elements intrinsic to standby proposals and the feasible factors involved in their potential shift toward gaining support. The examination begins with the early stages of such proposals. At least three scenarios characterize their initial reception, depending on how their newly introduced elements align with empirical facts: (a) a well-established contender that is neither adopted nor discarded; (b) a standard contender that remains in suspension; and (c) a weaker contender that likewise persists without being adopted or rejected.¹⁷ In any case, elapsed time is a crucial factor for standby proposals. Over time, any contender may ultimately be either discarded or adopted (gaining adherents, deferrers, or supporters) depending on its own theoretical progress, the evolution of established approaches, or the emergence of new contender proposals with their corresponding developments and followings.

The elapsed time during which a proposal remains in standby status creates the possibility for its eventual adoption as an alternative to established views. As a proposal, along with its aim of pursuing current expert adherence, there are developmental setting conditions for achieving future expert adherence (encompassing future deferrers, supporters, and consensus).¹⁸ However, in many instances, such developments or settings for future expert adherence are absent. Furthermore, these settings do not guarantee future expert deference and support. Conversely, the standby status of proposals, coupled with developments and strategies aimed at expert adherence, can be seen as fostering expert deference and even stimulating their willingness to contribute when their interest in the issue is engaged.

16 A full treatment of the varieties of meaning change lies beyond the scope of the present discussion. Two points are central for present purposes. First, proposals yielding alternative, derived, or ameliorated uses presuppose subject continuity, even when deep revisions are involved. Second, amelioration is understood in terms of increased empirical adequacy—reflected in refined criteria for identifying referents and their applications—together with a greater potential for deference or endorsement within linguistic practice.

17 A proposal attains *standby* status only if its novel elements satisfy the field's minimal empirical adequacy criteria, preventing its premature exclusion.

18 Current adherence functions as a critical objective in standby proposals. However, considering that they can be reset and developed according to their constitution, their aim to garner deference and support can be expanded to include future developments and experts.

Accordingly, standby proposals are characterized by possessing a *virtual content*—a world-to-mind fitness content in which adherence, deference,¹⁹ support, and consensus are the intended targets. Such content seeks to foster these attitudes within the relevant community. In the present case, standby proposals serve as the means through which adherence to their use is pursued.

Thuns (2020) advances a similar idea through his notion of *teleological terms*, defined as terms whose meaning is sensitive to epistemic considerations. He invokes a form of future externalism, drawing on Peirce's idealized future experts and Jackman's (2005) version of future externalism, to challenge a groundedness thesis often attributed to such kind of experts. However, Thuns' approach rejects the Platonist construal of this thesis in favor of what he calls a *psycholinguistic hypothesis*. According to this hypothesis, many teleological terms are indeterminate and not decisively established; rather, "their boundaries evolve with our dealings with the world" (Thuns, 2020, p. 430). Consequently, it is presumed that many teleological terms possess the concrete meaning generally attributed to them. Thuns concludes that "only virtual semantic deference to future idealized linguistic collectives seems able to secure the intended semantic import of our teleological terms" (Thuns, 2020, p. 432).

The present approach diverges from Thuns' concept of teleological terms in several key respects. One difference concerns the scope of term users: teleological uses are restricted to experts. The primary difference, however, lies in the broader scope assigned to these terms. The account does not fully embrace Jackman's (1999, 2005) future externalism.²⁰ Accordingly, although the framework supports *future-proximal* uses and maintains that there are degrees of determination extending from the present to the future—thus denying any determination from the future to present uses—Thuns emphasizes *distal-future* uses and their virtual influence on the present. The present approach, therefore, proposes an inverse perspective to his psycholinguistic hypothesis: one that explains stability in meanings from the viewpoint of social settings. This stability is understood not as proceeding from the future (even if virtual) to the present, but rather from the past, through

19 Deferrers can be categorized as either passive or active. Passive deferrers use a term without intending to alter its meaning, whereas active deferrers are open to employing a term in novel or alternative ways. The latter are particularly relevant in the development of new technical or theoretical meanings and are thus the primary target in virtual deference.

20 Language is understood to evolve over time and to require diachronic examination. However, the notion that the future determines present uses is not free from paradoxes. The *paradox of diachronic future externalism* holds that future applications of a term determine or affect its current use (via shared reference and equilibrium of uses). Yet future uses are indeterminate because (1) they may or may not occur, (2) the manner of their occurrence may vary, and (3) they may develop inaccurately. Thus, under future externalism, an indeterminate future event determines present uses, a position that strains the temporal coherence of meaning determination.

present changes, and via present proposals that aim to modify elements in the very proximal future. Thus, neither future elements nor virtual expectations about the future are treated as stabilizing factors for current meanings. Instead, the virtual content of teleological terms²¹ is construed as a present force tending to stabilize proposed meaning changes.

Returning to standby proposals, when such a proposal fails to gain adherents, the question arises of how to secure a colleague's deference and stimulate their interest in contributing. As noted, establishing conditions for future expert adherence and developments does not guarantee either outcome. What, then, can tip the balance toward deference and engagement? Within epistemic fields, interest in a subject is tied to the ongoing demand for generating new knowledge and fostering innovation. Given continuous shifts in social perspectives,²² the novelty of a proposal can be regarded as a prerequisite for eliciting interest. Heightened interest in a proposal, particularly when its novelty aligns with empirical adequacy, depends on its demonstrated fitness with the subject.²³ Thus, epistemic values such as fitness with the subject and originality, beyond merely eliciting deference, can significantly enhance interest in contributing to a proposal.

The challenge, then, is to ensure that both conditions are met. A new proposal's empirical adequacy must be firmly rooted in the subject to be recognized as a continuation of it. This is evident in cases where improved criteria for identifying a term's referents emerge: the overarching subject remains constant, with only the techniques of identification being refined. A different situation arises when new applications of a term to empirical entities are identified. Here, empirical adequacy is grounded in the subject when the new use of the term shares the extension of the established one and when clear connections exist between this shared extension and the aims guiding its use—aims that must be similar or closely related to those underlying the established use.²⁴

Insofar as the term's use and, consequently, its subject evolve without altering their fundamental characteristics while incorporating new elements, it can be said that a new subtype of the term and its subject has emerged. When empirical adequacy is thus ensured for the new term use, the subject is preserved, and the novelty introduced within the field constitutes an added contribution.²⁵ In such

21 Or, as designated here, *technical terms*, insofar as their meanings are sensitive to epistemic considerations.

22 The scope of proposals is conditioned by multiple dimensions of societal outlooks, notably moral and ethical ones.

23 Note that a term's fitness to a subject matter depends primarily on the aims underlying its use, though it also rests on empirical adequacy. These aims clarify how new forms of empirical adequacy contribute to meaning change (see discussion below).

24 For example, the aims underlying the use of *water* as "the spirit of the mountain" differ from those guiding its chemical description as "a substance composed of molecules made up of particles with specific properties," and so on. Likewise, from an ecological perspective, *water* is conceived as a crucial factor for the maintenance of life or ecological niches under certain conditions.

25 Adherence to new uses of a term does not entail that a field discards its established usage. Given the connections already formed,

cases, one may speak of cumulative developments and advancements within both the subject and the field.

4.3. Two types of dynamics in meaning change

When empirically adequate, new uses of standby proposals of a term open the way, over elapsed times, to adherence in the form of deference and consensus. Before any rising interest in contributing to the proposal, such elapsed times can occur while two related and differentiated processes are already at stake. These temporal gaps can be further understood in terms of the deference dynamics that unfold among experts within the same field.

Thus, deference among experts can occur in at least two distinct processes: one in which a proposal is developed until its release, and another in which released proposals interact and evolve. The first process functions as the triggering condition for changes in the second and typically unfolds more rapidly. The second process concerns the formally released (standby) proposal, which begins to contend with established uses, presenting itself as an advancement, an alternative, or a successor.

The notion of *elapsed time* is instrumental in explaining meaning change and in articulating the structure of dynamic externalism. Elapsed time facilitates both adherence and split situations, which in turn lead to the establishment of new branches—either by consolidating themselves as established uses or by replacing other ones. In this context, when individuals employ a term deferentially and more than one accepted use coexists (that is, when some experts adhere to a proposal without an overall consensus), a suitable synchronic relation among this plurality can be determined to identify the term's meaning. This can be achieved by linking its use or content to the standard use and by appealing to the convergence between their respective extensions and the aims for which the accepted proposals are employed.²⁶

In a synchronic externalist framework, meanings are neither exclusive nor univocal.²⁷ Expert deferrers within a knowledge field are best positioned to determine their target, that is, the proposal to which they defer. This element, inherent in the elapsed time of standby proposals, enables the formation of early support, a period in which early diachronic resets occur as new synchronic relations take shape. Given that any endorsement may initiate deferential chains or minimal connections with term users (minimal passive synchronic relations), early supporters can shift a standby

it is likely that a new proposal provides additional resources to the field, competes for a more prominent position within it, or both, by articulating its adjustments. New proposals thus operate as additions, as parallels, or in both ways relative to established ones.

26 This reflects a version of De Brabanter and Leclercq's (2023, pp. 1040–1041) *use-dependent externalism*, according to which meaning arises from communal linguistic practices, and deference, when it occurs, is directed toward those very practices.

27 For example, consider the two related processes mentioned above and the variations in adoption within a knowledge field where deferrers' terminological uses are split.

proposal toward becoming a somewhat established one. Subsequent diachronic resets then affect the use of the established proposal.

Yet, determining when a proposal becomes established within a knowledge field goes beyond the mere formation of early deferential chains; it requires a consensus regarding its use within that field, even if it is not yet accepted as the primary proposal. Consequently, externalist synchronicities must be distinguished from standards of use. In any case, standardization—arising from technical consensus—is what effectively establishes a proposal within a knowledge field. The notion of externalist synchronicities, as distinct from consensual standardization, requires distinguishing two types of standby proposals: those that have not yet received endorsement and those that have been endorsed but lack consensus about their status within the field.

Still, some experts may establish standard uses on technical grounds even in split situations where full consensus within a knowledge field is lacking. In such cases, an appeal is made to *alternative standards*. Both standby proposals and alternative standards evolve within a *diachronic contest*—a period during which an established proposal faces tension when challenged by a new one. This new proposal may begin as an unendorsed standby proposal, later receive endorsement, and eventually become an alternative standard or its substitution. In this sense, full standardization marks the point at which a diachronic contest concludes, provided that no new standby proposal initiates another contest for the same term use.²⁸

Such an elapsed time also opens the way for subsequent endorsements, marking one in which a new switch to a different synchronic relation, a subsequent diachronic reset, occurs. This process enables standby proposals to gain adherence and become established each time as more adequately fitted kind or subkind terms. However, with each contribution or related proposal, new resets may take place as additional subkind terms are introduced. Changing meanings, through the addition and replacement of elements, entails the inclusion of new subkinds and the exclusion of others. This suggests that meaning may evolve without an alteration of the subject, being temporarily composed of heterogeneous elements that include both preserved and newly introduced aspects.

Conclusions

The article assessed Cappelen's conflation of dynamic metasemantics and conceptual engineering, arguing instead for their distinct operational levels. It stated that conceptual

28 A clear example can be found in metrology, where competing definitions of the *kilogram*, one based on a physical artifact and another on Planck's constant, coexisted for decades until the latter became the official standard. This shift was formalized on 20 May 2019, when the kilogram ceased to be defined by the international prototype's mass and was redefined through the fixed numerical value of Planck's constant (Massa, 2024, p. 11).

engineering, grounded in externalist metasemantics, requires the development of a dynamic metasemantics to fulfill its dual role as meta-theory and as implementer of change. In the end, two main senses of dynamic externalism are thus discernible: (1) as a framework for explaining semantic change, and (2) as a multi-level dynamic metasemantics encompassing the explanation, prescription, and implementation of rule redefinition, within which any level of conceptual engineering can also be seen as a type of dynamic metasemantics operating across three levels.

Meaning change was analyzed as driven by novel empirical criteria for identifying a term's referents, manifesting in changes to intension, extension, or both. Such changes, however, were said to require community consensus to be adopted as "better" criteria, thereby challenging established meanings. It was further argued that consensus is demanded by conditions tied to Burgean subsidiary norms—well-founded doubts, novel insights, or dialectical strategies arising from new empirical applications of a term. Thus, while novelty and empirical adequacy (ensuring fitness with the subject and avoiding complete transformation of it) were upheld as prerequisites for generating interest in proposals, meeting these consensus-dependent conditions was shown to be insufficient for guaranteeing actual meaning change.

Standby proposals were introduced as a solution—proposals neither accepted nor discarded by expert consensus, persisting as potential challengers. Elapsed time was deemed crucial, allowing circumstances and the proposal itself to develop, enabling it to gain adherents and potentially become a supported contender. This teleological view conceived terms as possessing *virtual content*, aiming at stabilization through adherence and consensus. The final section advanced dynamic externalism by integrating diachronic elements into synchronic meaning accounts. It distinguished two dynamics: established proposals (characterized by adherence and consensus profiles grounding meaning) and the process of establishment itself. Diachronic adherence explained how synchronic relations evolved: standby proposals could challenge established meanings over time, leading to splits, operative branches, parallel sub-kinds, and the potential standardization of new uses through contests unfolding within deferential chains and structured or passive relations.

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