

Disentangling Linguistic Boxes for Enhanced Cooperation

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ABSTRACT

A conceptual scheme is generally described as the framework through which people make sense of the world. The ongoing debate on conceptual schemes centres on scientific practice. However, making sense of the world is not solely a matter of scientific description; our moral language, and the so-called thick concepts within it, is also part of how we make sense of the world. In fact, moral language plays a relevant role in bringing the dominating conceptual scheme into action. A closer look at the different meaning assumed by thick concepts, and at the different implicit power that they bring to action in different communities, shows that there can be a plurality of conceptual schemes also among people who share the same culture and language. The effect on action played by thick concepts is hidden; it implicitly reinforces the dominating conceptual scheme with the risk of turning it into a box, with blinkering effect on judgment. Disentangling, then, helps to unveil the implicit load of meaning in thick concepts, which is not only evaluative and descriptive, but also action guiding through the conceptual scheme that regulates the specific context. Such 'explicitation' of tacit meaning is auspicated to raise awareness and reflection upon how words become a means through which a conceptual scheme implicitly drives judgment and action, and hence to facilitate interagency understanding and collaboration.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

A conceptual scheme is generally described as the framework through which people make sense of the world. The ongoing debate on conceptual schemes centres around scientific practice. However, making sense of the world is not solely a matter of scientific description; our moral language, and the so-called thick concepts within it, is also part of how we make sense of the world. In fact, moral language plays a relevant role in bringing the dominating conceptual scheme into action. A closer look at the different meaning assumed by thick concepts, and at the different implicit power that they bring to action in different communities, shows that there can be a plurality of conceptual schemes also among people who share the same culture and language.

When thick concepts are involved, although translatability is fully satisfied, a correspondence of words does not always indicate a correspondence of meaning. We should then turn to disentangling, in order to unravel the load of meaning that is kept hidden in thick concepts, rendering explicit its connection to the conceptual scheme in the specific context. To highlight the evaluative, the descriptive and, I add, the contextual action-guiding components of thick concepts, including their relations among themselves and with the conceptual scheme, is a step towards increased awareness of how the scheme affects the judgment and action within a community.

In operations within a Comprehensive Approach, various organisations are called to collaborate towards the achievement of a common end state. Each of these organisations is a community with its own conceptual schemes and thick concepts. Although we speak the same language and even use the same terminology in an operation, the meaning given to some specific crucial thick terms can vary considerably. We need to pay more

attention to the role played by thick concepts (loaded words) in such an environment, because meaning and implications for action change in various communities, since it is the manifestation of the dominating conceptual scheme, which is community bound. If this happens, true understanding is hindered and so is effective collaboration, in spite of the best intentions. Disentangling can then be a strategy to unravel these hidden implicit components, not only to increase awareness within the organisation of how some key words drive understanding and action without people being fully aware of it, but also as a tool to contrast and compare the different meanings that are given to the same word, in order to build collaboration on a clearer common ground.

2.0 ON SCHEMES, GRAMMAR, AND MEANING

A conceptual scheme is generally considered the framework through which we make sense of the world. Having conceptual schemes is compared to having a language. (Davidson, 1974) Indeed, to a large extent we can consider schemes as language, particularly if we refer to language in its broader sense as communication¹, and a closer look at moral language reveals cases that strengthen the idea of a plurality of conceptual schemes. A puzzling case is that where one word assumes (at times radically) different meanings in different ethical communities and guides different (at times opposite) actions. I illustrate this further focussing on thick concepts, which show that language can be a powerful driver of action, and that identical words assume different meaning depending on the ethical community in which they are used.

This approach finds support in Glock's (2009) picture of conceptual schemes, which he associates to the concept of 'grammar' in Wittgenstein's last work. Here the focus is on the difference between factual and conceptual enquiry, and on the contextualisation of concepts in relation to practice and community. In Wittgenstein's words: 'Our concepts reflect our life' (RC III §302), they are 'expressions of our interest and direct our interest' (PI §570) and 'grammar is not dictated by any putative essence of reality [...] it cannot be correct or incorrect in a metaphysical sense' (Glock, 2009, p. 656). When Wittgenstein uses the word 'grammar' he refers to the system of rules that regulate a language, not only in its formal use but also rules that determine 'what makes sense to say' (Glock, p. 656). This is not determined by a transcendental entity, but by practice, and practice takes place in communities. A grammar, and a conceptual scheme, in Wittgenstein's terms is the set of rules that regulate a community and its practice, and which determines 'what makes sense to say'. In order to understand the role played on action by thick terms, we need to shift focus from words to meaning. This will be exemplified by looking at the term 'courageous'.

3.0 THE MANY FACETS OF BEING COURAGEOUS

Individual x, individual y, and individual z speak the same language, profess the same religion and share the same culture, although they belong to different communities of practice. Individual x immediately associates the word 'courageous' to killing herself taking with her the highest number of casualties. Individual y associates the term 'courageous' to surrendering and initiate negotiations, choosing to make a statement against violence in favour of dialogue and diplomacy. Individual z associates the concept 'courageous' to saving the life of a criminal to allow fair trial. The list could continue: we could add individual 'w', which associates being courageous to taking a big financial risk, and so forth. Naturally, in several circumstances they would also view a various number of other acts as courageous, but these are the very first pictures that they visualise when they hear the word.

¹ See Austin for performatives and speech acts

All three individuals x, y, and z speak English and each can explain the meaning that they attribute to the word courageous: their concepts are not untranslatable, but they are far from each other in terms of moral values, and implications for action. The general description of the word courageous applies to all the above mentioned interpretations: “not deterred by danger or pain”. Yet, the manner in which the subject is not deterred by danger or pain translates in radically different actions and such actions are contextual to the very conceptual scheme dominating in their ethical community (terrorist group, Red Cross, law enforcement). Such sort of word carries a powerful load in terms of meaning, but if we stop at the surface we do not see this load: what we see is only the general description of what being courageous entails, and whether it is regarded positively or negatively.² ‘Courageous’ and other similarly loaded concepts do assume specific meaning within the community where they are used, as shown in the example. In each community, when I call someone courageous I implicitly, and unconsciously, convey not only the general lexical description of the term (not deterred by danger or pain), and an evaluative component (whether it is good or bad to do so), but also an action specific description of what one does (or is expected to do) in this community when one acts in a courageous manner.

4.0 THICK CONCEPTS, LOADED WORDS, AND BOXES

Courageous is what in moral philosophy is defined as a thick concept, or ‘loaded word’³. Thick and loaded are used interchangeably in the remainder of this paper. A thick moral concept is one that includes a descriptive as well as an evaluative component (fact and value, is and ought), examples are bravery, courage, cute, rude, and many others. They are different from thin concepts in that thin concepts are considered purely evaluative (good, bad) and lack the descriptive component. According to Williams ‘to grasp a thick ethical concept, an intelligent outsider observer may first need to grasp what Wittgenstein calls *the point* of the ethical system in which the concept occurs’ (Quinn, year p. 205).

In order to understand a thick concept, one must understand the context from which it has emerged and in which it is applied; the conceptual scheme that regulates the practice and judgment of the community. The ‘thickness’ of a concept is due to the fact that it absorbs and carries much implicit load concerning ‘the point’ of the ethical system in which it occurs. This implicit load must be unveiled and made explicit, in order to see how the underlying scheme drives action through the word. Because a loaded concept entails fact and value, *is and ought*, it directs action according to the predominant framework in the community in which it originates. In this sense a loaded concept is more specific because it can be applied only ‘in a restricted range and to a particular area of human life’ (Williams in Payne, p.91). The case of courageous shows that there might be a gap of meaning when using loaded terms: people use the same word, which satisfies the general description and evaluation, but they mean very different ways of acting.

In each community the use of the word assumes the specific meaning connected to the dominating conceptual scheme, and in turn reinforces the dominating scheme in a silent manner. The implications for action are contained in the word and not made explicit, hence alternative meanings cannot be considered because, not even the predominant one is explicitly considered. This creates conceptual boxes which blinker people’s judgment and understanding of situations. The problem of blinkering is a relevant one in various areas, but it certainly is a serious one for international operations, where coalition partners are supposed to work towards the same end. In practice, all work towards the same end and even use the same terms, but if some thick concepts are not disentangled, the load of meaning that they bear in different organisations differs, and the gap increases. We say the same, but mean slightly different.

² I will not consider, at this stage, the extra load that can be expressed by the sole tone of voice in uttering the concept.

³ Advocates of ‘disentangling’ prefer to call these concepts ‘loaded’, since the term ‘thick’ implies the conflation on the evaluative and descriptive components.

Payne (2005) claims that ‘thick concepts do not only convey information and have a descriptive content, but this content is not so much about physical behaviour [...] as it is about the intentions and the desires which help to constitute action’ (p. 93). I disagree: in its practical use, the thick concept is very much about what physical behaviour constitutes the appropriate action to count as ‘courageous’ in that specific scheme. It is most definitely about intentions and desires, as Payne claims, but such intentions and desires provide also the *emotional* framework (disregarded in discussions so far) within which actions take shape. The thick concept projects the values of the conceptual scheme in directing action, but because of its evaluative and *emotional* load it also reinforces the implicit values of the scheme. It is the interplay of evaluative, descriptive, implicit action-guiding, and emotionally evoking components that makes loaded concepts powerful, and this is why disentangling does a favour to judgment and critical thinking.

Gibbard’s (2005) definition of a thick concept is enlightening in this sense: ‘it praises or condemns an action as having a certain property’ (p. 269), since it highlights the *prescriptive* (not only evaluative) effect of the concept. And because the prescriptive function is hidden in the entanglement of fact and value, it gets away with being one harmless little word, while in fact it does much more than that.⁴ What determines whether the action shall be praised or condemned in relation to which properties is ultimately the conceptual scheme that dominates in that community, but the thick entangled concept is a powerful conveyer that does not draw much attention to itself. ‘What puts meat on the bone of a particular thick concept is the role it plays in the moral life of a community, and this depends both on features of the concept, which can be characterized abstractly, and on contingent features of the community [...] the obligation of being truthful comes from cultural circumstances’ (Williams in Elgin, 2005, p. 347).

5.0 UNRAVELLING THICK CONCEPTS

As seen with the case of ‘courageous’, the same word can assume radically different meanings. Disentangling *reveals* the implicit components of the term: the descriptive (‘not deterred by danger or pain’) and the evaluative. However, another level should be added: the one that reveals what specific actions are related to the concept in the specific community. Focussing on ‘how the term is used, rather than on a theory of how it should be used’ (Blackburn, p. 287), and revealing its facets and their interactions (synergies), stimulates reflection. As long as all these elements are kept implicitly hidden within the thick term reflection, awareness, and critical thinking are hindered. Thick terms, if not disentangled, contribute to turning conceptual schemes into conceptual boxes, which have a blinkering effect.

We can hence distinguish into the following components:

- Evaluative (it is good or bad to be courageous)⁵
- Descriptive / generally action driving (general definition of courageous: not deterred by danger or pain)
- Specific Action guiding / Contextual: it fits the general description (“not deterred by danger or pain’), but implies specific actions (Surrender and face the shame connected to it, Blow yourself up, Take an incredible risk that might lead to great economic gain, and so forth) that are *the reflection of the conceptual scheme in action*.

⁴ Blackburn’s discussion of the word ‘cute’ is a remarkable example of this.

⁵ I also hold that there is an emotion evoking component, but will not consider it at this stage.

In all the specific actions illustrated above the evaluative component and the generally descriptive are still valid, each one is a case where people act in a way that is ‘not deterred by danger or pain’. However, what specific actions are symbolic of being ‘courageous’ depend on the dominant scheme within the specific community, and is ‘implicit’: it is common sense in a group of terrorists that the courageous act is to drive a van filled with explosives and place it in a strategic location, risking to die while getting there. When people in that community are using the word ‘courageous’ the totality of this tacit meaning in terms of what actions would be courageous is locked into the word. There is no need to spell it out, making it explicit. But this also leads to the fact that, implicitly, the more the word is used, the more this function of tacitly guiding action crystallizes and becomes a driving force of the community. It strengthens the conceptual scheme and diminishes the space available for contemplating *other* meanings. This effect might be stronger if the load is also emotionally evoking, as well as actionable. Critical thinking and reflection are annulled.

The more the action guiding elements and the evaluative are kept conflated in what is called a thick term, without *revealing* its load of meaning, the more the implicit power of the concept increases, because it acts undisturbed. When a loaded concept assumes this power in a community it can be blinkering: the only way people in the community conceive of a courageous act is the one that corresponds to the implicit shared meaning. And because this is the only shared conception of ‘how to act in order to be courageous’, nobody reflects upon alternatives. In fact, not even the fact that ‘this is how to act’ is reflected upon: the thick concept carries this load. This is the very reason why disentangling does a service to judgment, and to moral reasoning in general. When fact and value conflate into a thick concept, and they are kept entangled, the result is a problem for moral judgment: how is there to be room for reflection and critical thinking when *is* and *ought* become the same? Unless we live in a utopian world where things *are* exactly as they *ought to be*, this entanglement can conceal a situation where how things *are* is considered how they *ought to be*. The latter is a dangerous place to be, as it eliminates the possibility to conceive that how things are might not be how they ought to be, which requires inquisitive thinking and debate of a healthy sort to acknowledge and evaluate alternatives. Opening the loaded word and unveiling the intrinsic components and layers that constitute it allows *not only* to better understand, and evaluate the concept, but also to *retake control over it*. Increased awareness of the implicit load of a concept, which is only possible if the components are revealed, is a starting point for ethical reflection and meaningful collaboration. What suggested here shall not be mistaken as a suggestion to find a general shared meaning for each thick concept, one that all agree upon or, even worse, the mean of all possible meanings: the very fact that there is a plurality of conceptual schemes would make this impossible. On the contrary, I hold that the variety of meanings that is available within a coalition through the different partners can be a valuable and rich resource, but must be made explicit and visible: as long as it is hidden into conflated terms, it only works in the dark, exercising its negative effects and not allowing to draw the positive ones.

6.0 DISENTANGLING AS A TOOL TO ENHANCE REQUISITE VARIETY

To advocate an increased awareness of the implicit components of a loaded word (and I have indicated at least three components) does not necessarily imply saying that one component shall be considered more relevant than others, nor that the others are useless. Contrary to what Croom (2009) states ‘That is, in order to master the thick concept ‘courageous’, the non-cognitivist claims that we needn’t understand the practice of moral evaluation at all’, I hold that it is the very interplay of descriptive, evaluative/emotionally evoking, and specific action description that results in the implicit power of the loaded word to condition judgment and action. And it is by looking at the interaction among *all* components that we increase awareness about the use of the term in its context. In order to look at their interactions, such interactions must be made visible, and so components as well.

In order to increase reflection about the effects that a loaded word implicitly exercises on driving action, we need to see the connection between praising (or condemning) the action in relation to the specific physical behaviour (blow yourself up) as a manifestation of the generally descriptive component (not deterred by danger or pain). Disentangling as suggested in this paper is then not about disregarding the evaluative component of thick terms in order to focus on the descriptive. On the contrary, *if all components are made explicit, as well as the links among them (and with the conceptual scheme) can we reflect upon their relations, facets, and implications.* As long as we like thick concepts in their conflated version we hinder critical thinking and reflection because entangled thickness *conceals* the prescriptive implicit effect on action⁶, and hence exercises a blinkering effect.

‘We need to understand why certain actions, and not others, are considered the ones apt for falling under the extension of that thick concept.’ (Mc Dowell, 1998, p. 214) McDowell’s argument supports the idea of disentangling because understanding ‘why certain actions, and not others, are considered the ones apt for falling under the extension of that thick concept’ requires awareness of the descriptive and action-specific components of the loaded term (discerning which certain actions) as embodiment of the dominating conceptual scheme (the relation that links ‘certain actions’ to the evaluative component, which is expression of the values and beliefs of that community). This implies and requires that the descriptive, the evaluative, and the action-guiding elements be revealed, as well as the relations among them: how would I otherwise be able to discern ‘certain actions’ from ‘other actions’?

7.0 CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR PRACTICE

Contemporary operations do not only pose the issue of understanding in relation to foreign cultures and operational environments. Whole of Government and Comprehensive Approach also highlight the importance of understanding among coalition partners to achieve common goals. Comprehensive approach encompasses a broad array of organisations that, even when sharing the same language, are characterised by their own worldview and conceptual schemes. Such variety within an apparently homogeneous system (all coalition partners, all speak English, all Westerners, and so forth) becomes more evident when we turn our attention to moral language: the language of evaluation and judgment.

Through an exploration of the so-called thick concepts we see that saying the same word does not necessarily imply meaning the same thing. Thick concepts carry an evaluative and a descriptive element, and I further argue that a third component, a specific action guiding element must be revealed, as it is *the projection of the conceptual scheme in action*. A thick term, such as ‘courageous’, carries implicit meaning with a descriptive and an evaluative component. Moreover, it implies specific ways of acting, which are bound to the community in which the term is employed.

Disentangling is held as a strategy to facilitate reflection and critique by unravelling the variety of meanings that thick concepts entail across coalition partners. Disentangling reveals the facets of a loaded concept and makes explicit what is otherwise an implicit power on action. To let a loaded word be entangled discourages reflection on *why* is it so that ‘certain actions, and not others, are considered the ones apt for falling under the extension of that thick concept’. More importantly, it makes way for its implicit action guiding power to exercise its effect undisturbed, with the consequent blinkering effect. *If is* and *ought* conflate into one entangled concept the way things are is considered as the way things ought to be without reflection: any possibility to consider alternatives

⁶ Disentangled concepts can be more readily understood and evaluated, and abstracting the relation between concepts and scheme, if any, can serve this purpose.

that fall outside the dominating scheme is erased. The negative consequences for judgment are likely to be higher than the gains.

Instead, we can turn what is potentially blinkering into a source of richness. As long as we let the thick term be entangled and implicit, it is used without thinking and, silently, it reinforces the action guiding meaning of the specific community. We would all sit at a common table talking about Freedom, Legitimacy, Rule of Law, or Courage, literally understanding each other, but semantically meaning different concepts. When turning to action each community takes the direction of action that is obvious to them. If we choose to reveal the load that these concepts carry and make explicit what is so far hidden, not only we become more aware of the predominant scheme that act as blinker on our own community, but we also see a variety of alternative meanings. Such shall not be standardised into one agreed and general meaning shared by all, but rather used as a valuable source of inspiration to develop richer and more various courses of action.

Disentangling is an activity that may start at the individual level, by reflecting upon the most used loaded words in one's community and within a coalition: what meaning is implicitly attached to these words? What actions do they silently drive? A comparison with other organisation can reveal substantial differences. Disentangling is, however, also a state of mind, one that can be facilitated by participation in various and diverse activities and groups, but also, more simply through reading various subjects: actively engaging and being exposed to different 'languages' of practice widens one's conceptual schemes and prepares an agile mental ground for collaboration and critical thinking. Last, but not least, disentangling people, metaphorically, from their core organisation through regular immersion into other organisations (and subjects) strengthens the capability of understanding the 'language of practice' of other organisations and enhances collaboration across coalition partners, facilitating the generation of synergies.

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