

## Summary of talk:

Title: *Normative lexical semantics*

Traditionally, lexical semantics has been mostly occupied with how to describe the meaning of words and the lexical relations (e.g. synonymy, metonymy, antonymy) that obtain between them in virtue of meaning; a purely descriptive project. I argue that next to descriptive questions, like “what does the word 'w' mean?”, there are legitimate *normative* questions, like “what *should* 'w' mean?”. Normative lexical semantics, then, I take to be the theoretical study into whether or not we can, and if so, how to answer such questions.

To establish that there is a normative dimension to word meaning I start out by arguing for the following two claims:

*Semantic plasticity*: The meaning M of a word ‘w’ is, in principle, capable of change, both in the long run and over short periods of time (even within conversations).

*Meaning control*: In principle, we have some control over M of ‘w’ and can, by collective decision/activity, shape M as we see fit (at least to some extent).

Mainly, I draw on the work of the philosopher Peter Ludlow and the linguist Herbert Clark to support these claims.

Since the meaning of words are variable and we're capable of instigating change in word meaning (at least to some degree), we have a choice about revising (or not revising) the meaning of our words. In any attempt at doing so it's natural to assume that there will be several possible meanings M for a word 'w'. Given this, we could ask “what should 'w' mean?”.

One important area of application for a theory of normative lexical semantics is what some call metalinguistic disputes. Such disputes happen when we quarrel over the meaning of a word. For example, we could quarrel over what it means to be a 'citizen'. Call such a quarrel a meaning negotiation. If it is true that the meaning of the word 'citizen' is plastic and something we control, then it would not be sufficient to resolve the dispute by appealing to descriptive facts about current usage. One would have to argue that a certain meaning state for the word 'citizen' is *better* than another. This could be done if one had a normative framework to adjudicate such disputes by.

The last leg of my talk focuses on the feasibility of postulating very general norms for meaning negotiation, supposed to be applicable as part of meaning negotiations across a range of different contexts. I try to show how difficult formulating such norms will be.