The Meaning of Pragmatism:
The Ethics of Terminology and the Language of Philosophy[1]

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RESUMEN

I. La tradición pragmatista clásica; distorsiones contemporáneas del pragmatismo. II. La tesis de Peirce del "crecimiento del significado"; su relevancia para el vocabulario de las ciencias y la racionalidad de la tarea científica. III. La "ética de la terminología" de Peirce; su conexión con su aspiración de hacer "científica" a la filosofía. IV. Por qué, en el lenguaje actual de la filosofía, constatamos empobrecimiento del significado y violaciones de la ética de la terminología.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *pragmatismo, pragmaticismo, neopragmatismo, C. S. Peirce, filosofía científica, enriquecimiento/empobrecimiento del significado, ética de la terminología, lenguaje de la ciencia, lenguaje de la filosofía*.

ABSTRACT

I. The classical pragmatist tradition; contemporary distortions of pragmatism. II. Peirce's thesis of the "growth of meaning"; its relevance to the vocabulary of the sciences and the rationality of the scientific enterprise. III. Peirce's "ethics of terminology"; its connection with his aspiration to make philosophy "scientific." IV. Why, in the language of philosophy today, we see impoverishment of meaning and violations of the ethics of terminology.

KEYWORDS: *pragmatism; pragmaticism; neo-pragmatism; C. S. Peirce; scientific philosophy; enrichment/impoverishment of meaning; ethics of terminology; language of science; language of philosophy*.

> ... men and words reciprocally educate each other.
>
> C. S. PEIRCE

I. THE MEANING OF "PRAGMATISM"

When I speak of "the meaning of 'pragmatism'" I have in mind, of course, not the meaning of the word in its ordinary-language use, but its phi-

losophical meaning – the sense in which "pragmatism" refers to the tradition that grew out of Charles Peirce's and William James's discussions at the Metaphysical Club in Cambridge, Massachusetts in the early 1870s.

Peirce first introduced the "Pragmatic Maxim of meaning," as it would later be called, in 1878, in what he described many years afterwards as "a little paper expressing some opinions I had been expressing [at the Metaphysical Club] under the name of pragmatism" (5.13, c.1906). This "little paper" was the now-celebrated "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" (5.388-410); and the maxim was formulated in these terms:

> ... the rule for attaining the third [the highest] grade of clearness is as follows: Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object (5.402, 1878).

However, though he presented the core *idea* of philosophical pragmatism in this early paper, Peirce didn't yet use the *word* "pragmatism,"[2] as he had at the Metaphysical Club; for, as he later explained, "in those medieval times I dared not use in type an English word to express an idea unrelated to its received meaning" (5.13, c.1906). No wonder; for at the time the usual meaning of "pragmatism" in everyday English was "officious meddlesomeness," and to describe someone as a pragmatist was to call him a busybody.[3]

In fact, the word "pragmatism" didn't appear in print in its new, philosophical sense until 1898, in James's "Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results." "[Mr. Charles S. Peirce] is one of the most original of contemporary thinkers," James wrote; and "the principle of practicalism – or pragmatism, as he called it, when I first heard him enunciate it at Cambridge in the early '70's – is the ... compass by which I find myself more and more confirmed in believing that we may keep our feet on the proper trail" (1898, 158). But, he writes, he would interpret the principle of pragmatism "more broadly" than Peirce: "the effective meaning of any philosophical proposition can always be brought down to some *particular* consequence, in our future practical experience ... " (159, my emphasis).

Peirce first used the word "pragmatism" in print the following year;[4] but he didn't take his bows as the founder of pragmatism until four years after that, in a 1903 lecture at Harvard where he wrote that, though the dove he had let fly decades before had not returned to him, "of late quite a brood of young ones have been fluttering about, from the feather of which I might fancy that mine had found a brood" (5.17, 1903).

As both Peirce and James conceived it, pragmatism was not a new philosophical system, but a new approach that would renew and revitalize philosophy; and had, in James's words, "no dogmas, and no doctrines" except the method expressed in the pragmatic maxim. Certain shared philosophical

attitudes – among them, a distaste for dogmatism and for false dichotomies, a naturalistic disinclination to philosophize in an *a priori* way, a willingness to take evolution seriously, and a tendency to look to the future – can be seen throughout the evolving classical pragmatist tradition, in the work not only of Peirce and James but also of John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, and, in legal theory, Oliver Wendell Holmes. But there was never really a body of core pragmatist *theses*.

In fact, the classical pragmatists differed significantly among themselves. They had divergent interests: Peirce focused primarily on logic, semeiotic, theory of inquiry, philosophy of science, and metaphysics; James – who was no logician – was more concerned with philosophy of religion, philosophy of mind and psychology, and moral philosophy; Dewey's wide-ranging philosophical interests also included philosophy of education and social and political philosophy; and Mead was primarily interested in understanding the evolutionary, and the social, roots of language and mind. Moreover, on some questions the classical pragmatists held different, and in some instances incompatible, philosophical positions. For example, while early and late Peirce stressed that philosophy should aspire to become, in certain respects, more like the special sciences (5.384-87, 1877; 5.407, 1878; 5.413, 1905), James was more concerned to find an approach that could accommodate the best of both the "tough-minded" and the "tender-minded" temperaments (1907, 9-26).

From the beginning, as we saw, there were differences between Peirce's and James's understandings of the pragmatic maxim; and these differences became more marked as Peirce's thought matured. In 1893 Peirce explained that when, in 1878, he had referred to the conceivable "practical" consequences of a concept's applying, this should not be understood in any "low and sordid sense" (4.402, n.3), but should be construed in what he came to call a "scholastic realist" way. In 1905 he wrote that he had been seriously mistaken when, in 1878, he had suggested that what we mean by calling a thing hard is that it will not be scratched by many other substances, and that whether a diamond that is never rubbed is really hard is a merely verbal question: on the contrary, the diamond really *is* hard if it *would not* be scratched if it *were* rubbed (5.457). The contrast with James's lifelong inclination to nominalism is striking.

This divergence also shows up in the differences between Peirce's and James's accounts of truth. Peirce characterized truth as "the opinion that is fated to be agreed by all who investigate" (5.407, 1878); or in the mature, subjunctive version, as the Final Opinion that would be agreed by a hypothetical community of inquirers were inquiry to continue long enough. On this account, a proposition that would eventually be part of that ultimate opinion is true now. James, however, offered an account of abstract truth as verifiability and of concrete truths – on which, *qua* nominalist, he preferred to focus – as being made true when we verify them (1907, 95-113). In 1911, like James, Dewey de-

scribed propositions as becoming true – "tried and true" – as we verify them; but in 1938 he cited Peirce's early (indicative) characterization as "the best definition" of truth.

When, in a manuscript entitled "Reflections Upon Pluralistic Pragmatism and Cenopythagorean Pragmaticism," Peirce observes that "there are certain mummified pedants who have never waked to the truth that the act of knowing a real object alters it. They are curious specimens of humanity, and ... I am one of them" (5.555, c.1906), he is explicitly trying to understand in what sense the true can be described (as James had described it) as "satisfactory." But the passage also strongly suggests that he would have disapproved of Dewey's quasi-constructivist conception of reality, and of his description of truth as a kind of "co-respondence" or mutual adaptation of proposition and reality. Peirce also seems to have been somewhat dismayed by James's doctrine of the "Will to Believe," writing rather pointedly, the year after this celebrated paper was published, of the "Will to Learn" (5.583, 1898). Again, while Dewey's account of "The Construction of Good" has some affinity with James's conception of "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," its focus on what is really desirable contrasts with James's emphasis on what is actually desired. And so on.

Not surprisingly, as time has passed, it has become less and less clear what it takes to qualify as a pragmatist. It's not simply, as some commentators suggest,[5] a matter of a split between more Peircean, realist, and more Jamesian, nominalist, wings of neo-pragmatism; rather, there has been fragmentation into a whole range of intermediate and mixed positions. And by now the word "pragmatism" has only too often been borrowed for philosophical (and sometimes anti-philosophical) ideas very far from anything in the classical tradition.

Already in the early decades of the twentieth century F. C. S. Schiller, whom James aptly described as the "butt-end foremost" representative of pragmatism, had proposed an overtly relativist "humanism." And in our times Richard Rorty has out-Schillered Schiller, transmuting the emphatically reformist spirit of classical pragmatism into a vaguely postmodernist, revolutionary neo-"pragmatism" that repudiates epistemology and metaphysics – the core projects of philosophy since Plato – outright. Peirce had written that the truth "Is SO, whether you or I or anybody believes it is so or not" (2.135, 1902), and James that "those of us who give up the quest for certainty do not thereby give up the quest or hope of truth itself" (1897, 17). Rorty breezily assures us, in the name of pragmatism, that he "do[es] not have much use for the notion of 'objective truth'" (1992, 141).[6] Obviously, there is only the most superficial resemblance between this Vulgar Pragmatism of Rorty's and the real thing. I won't even *mention* the Vulgar Rortyism that passes for pragmatism in Louis Menand and his admirers.

As I said, Peirce wanted to make philosophy scientific, meaning in part

that it should set aside all forms of dogmatism and set out from a genuine desire to discover the truth. Yet Paul Churchland informs us, in the name of pragmatism, that connectionist neuroscience has shown that the traditional epistemological projects are misconceived, and the idea that truth is the goal of inquiry out of date (1982, 150-51). James was unambiguously clear that the "the true is ... the good in the way of belief" (1907, 112). Yet Stephen Stich assures us, in the name of pragmatism, that "once we have a clear view of the matter" we will see that there is no value in having true beliefs (1990, 101). Here too, obviously, any resemblance to the classical pragmatist tradition is superficial to say the least.

Mead and Dewey stressed that the roots of language (and of mind) lie in the combination of human biological inheritance and of our social interactions. Robert Brandom offers, in the name of "analytic pragmatism," an account of the pragmatics of language which – to the limited extent I can make sense of it, so impenetrably tangled is his prose – seems better described as neo-later-Wittgensteinian than as pragmatist.[7] Others seem to take for granted that any approach to philosophy of language that focuses on pragmatics, or for that matter any approach to any philosophical question that invokes "pragmatic" considerations – i.e., practical considerations of expediency or convenience – is appropriately classified as "pragmatism." And, of course, there are now, as there have long been, those who simply identify pragmatism with this or that idea from one or another of the classical pragmatists – Dewey's political philosophy, say, or James's Will to Believe – whether or not it was shared by them all; and others who conflate philosophical pragmatism with "pragmatism" in its current ordinary-language sense, of concern for the practical, for expediency over principle.

These multifarious distortions of pragmatism are much to be regretted; not just because of the casual disrespect for history that they reveal, but more importantly because the classical pragmatist tradition they so casually distort remains such a rich source of philosophical insight. So, rather than spend this paper exploring – or deploring – the many ways in which the ideas of the classical pragmatist tradition have been abused and misunderstood, I want, instead, to focus on its insights.

Elsewhere, I have tried to build on Peirce's distinction between pseudo-inquiry or "sham reasoning," and the real thing (1996a); on his Critical Common-sensism (1994; 2003; 2007b); on his distinctive conception of "scientific metaphysics" (2007a); and on his regulative principle of synechism (2005). Here, I will begin with Peirce's idea of the growth of meaning, its application to the vocabulary of the sciences, and its relevance to an understanding of the rationality of the scientific enterprise; and then turn to his reflections on the "ethics of terminology," their connection with his aspiration to make philosophy scientific, and their relevance to the language of philosophy today.

II. THE GROWTH OF MEANING

Peirce thinks about meaning in a very different way from Frege (of whose work, it seems, he knew little or nothing).[8] In his work there is no hint of the fixed, abstract "senses" posited in Frege's "*Über Sinn und Bedeutung*," but rather a conception of a language as an organic, living thing, adapting to new needs and new knowledge; and of the meanings of words, and our beliefs about the things or stuff to which those words refer, as intimately and inextricably intertwined. And, since recent analytic philosophy of language is strongly influenced by Fregean ideas, it's no surprise that Peirce's approach also differs very significantly from this tradition. When Donald Davidson shifted his attention from the relatively well-behaved areas of natural language most amenable to his Tarskian regimentation project to less manageable linguistic phenomena such as metaphors, puns, and malapropisms, he was forced to the conclusion that, after all, "there is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers have supposed" (1986, 445-6).[9] Peirce would have been quite surprised that those "many philosophers" to whom Davidson alludes had such a narrow, and such a static, conception of what a language is.

For, early and late, Peirce shows a keen awareness that meaning is not static, that any language is constantly shifting and growing, and that words gradually take on new meaning and shed older connotations. In the late 1860s, he has scientific concepts in mind: "[s]cience is continually gaining new conceptions," he writes, and as it does so the meaning of words is enriched. "How much more the word *electricity* means now than it did in the days of Franklin," he comments; and "how much more the word *planet* means than it did in the time [of] Hipparchus. These words have acquired information."[10] "[M]en and words," he continues, "reciprocally educate each other." (7.587, 1866-7). Decades later he returns to this theme, but now he applies it not to scientific but to social concepts: "[a] symbol, once in being, spreads among the peoples. In use and in experience, its meaning grows. ... Such words as *force*, *law*, *wealth*, *marriage*, bear for us a very different meaning than they bore to our barbarous ancestors" (2.302, 1895).[11]

Though Peirce's observations about the growth of meaning are not exactly a corollary of (his version of) the pragmatic maxim, there is a close connection. Look, for example, at this passage, where Peirce applies the maxim to the meaning of the word "lithium" (the name of a chemical element discovered in 1818):

> [I]f you search among minerals that are vitreous, translucent, grey or white, very hard, brittle, and insoluble, for one which imparts a crimson tinge to an unluminous flame, this mineral being triturated [*sic*] with lime or witherite ratsbane, and then fused, can be partially dissolved in muriatic acid; and if this solution can be

evaporated, and the residue be extracted with sulphuric acid, and duly purified, it can be converted by ordinary methods into a chloride, which being obtained in a solid state, fused, and electrolyzed with half a dozen powerful cells, will yield a globule of a pinkish silvery metal that will float on gasoline; [then] the material of *that* is a specimen of lithium (2.330, c.1902).

As I understand him, Peirce intends that the list of conditionals that gives the meaning of a concept be open-ended, so that a word will acquire new meaning as we learn more about the thing or stuff to which it refers. When it is discovered that lithium is useful in the treatment of manic-depression, for example, another conditional is added; when it is found that it improves the life and power of batteries, another; and so on.[12]

So, not surprisingly, there is also no hint in Peirce of the idea, popular in the latter part of the twentieth century, that "meaning-variance" is an impediment to the supposed rationality of the scientific enterprise; on the contrary, he sees the growth of meaning as *contributing* to the progress of science. Devising concepts, and developing vocabularies, that match up adequately to real "generals," i.e., to real kinds of thing or stuff, is an important element of that enterprise. I believe this idea is a key to an adequate understanding of explanation and prediction; to a resolution of the "grue" paradox; and to recognizing that scientific inquiry can be a rational enterprise even though it is not remotely like an exercise in formal logic.[13]

The concept of DNA, which over the course of a century or so has taken on layer upon layer of meaning, illustrates Peirce's point to a nicety; for in the history of this term scientific advance and conceptual innovation are almost inextricably intertwined:

c.1844: the word "protein"– derived from the Greek "*protos*," meaning "first" – entered the scientific vocabulary. Proteins (complex combinations of amino acids that contain carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, often sulfur, and sometimes other elements as well) were generally assumed to be biologically fundamental.

1869: Friedrich Miescher discovered a substance in the nucleus of cells distinct from protein, and coined a new word, "nuclein," for this stuff.

1889: Richard Altmann purified "nuclein" of proteins and, noticing that it contained many phosphate groups and so was acidic, named it "nucleic acid." By the end of the nineteenth century "nucleic acid" had been found in the sperm of salmon, herring, and sea-urchins.

1922: Hermann Staudinger introduced the concept of macromolecule, i.e., of very long molecules held together by bivalent bonds, and compactly folded in cells.

1944: the term "DNA' (for "deoxyribo[se]nucleic acid") was intro-
duced – the chemical composition of "nucleic acid" was by then well-
established; since then, scientists have distinguished A-DNA, B-DNA
(the less-ordered paracrystalline form, with a higher water content), and
Z-DNA (in which the helices twist to the left).

1948: the term "RNA" was introduced for "ribonucleic acid" (which
scientists had formerly called "pseudo-nucleinic acid," because it was
found – not, like "true nucleinic acid," in the nucleus of cells – but in
the cytoplasm); since then, cellular biologists introduced the terms
"messenger RNA" (for the RNA carrying the code for a particular pro-
tein from the nuclear DNA to a ribosome) and "transfer RNA" (for the
RNA transferring a particular amino acid to a polypeptide chain).

1960s: after the discovery that mitochondria have their own DNA, the
term "mtDNA" was introduced.[14]

By now, the standard dictionary of American English gives this definition of
"DNA":

DNA: ... [deoxyribonucleic acid] (1944): any of various nucleic acids
that are usu. the molecular basis of heredity and are located esp. in cell
nuclei, and are constructed of a double helix held together by hydrogen
bonds between purine and pyridamine bases which project inward from
two chains combining alternate links of deoxyribose and phosphate
(Merriam-Webster 1993, 340).

In 1944, when Oswald Avery and his colleagues discovered that DNA was
the genetic material, and in 1953, when James Watson and Francis Crick dis-
covered the structure of DNA, these were major biological discoveries; by
now, that DNA is the genetic material, and that it is a double-helical, back-
bone-out, macromolecule with like-with-unlike base pairs, etc., has become
part of the very meaning of the term. Which sentences express tautologies
changes as language evolves.

As Peirce's own examples reveal, the importance of the growth of
meaning is not restricted to the sciences. Anyone who has ever read George
Orwell's *1984* will remember that Newspeak was designed to make politically-
undesirable ideas not merely inexpressible, but unthinkable – by impoverishing
the English language, and leaching meaning from the impoverished vocabu-
lary that remained. ("Free," for example, could have *only* the sense it has in
"my dog is free of fleas," and could not convey any dangerous political
meaning.) Most to the present purpose, anyone who has ever engaged in seri-
ous intellectual work will recognize the feeling of frustration when you realize
that the vocabulary you have inherited just won't do, and the experience, as you

fumble your way towards a hitherto-unnoticed distinction or a new idea, of adapting or inventing a term to tag it and, as you explore and develop the idea, seeing your term gradually become much more than just a tag.[15] That lapidary observation that "men and words reciprocally educate each other" reminds us that, as new information is acquired, the meaning of words is enriched, and that as we learn new vocabulary we absorb the information that is built in; or, as Peirce puts it, that "each increase of a man's information is at the same time the increase of a word's information, and *vice versa*" (7.587, 1866-7).

III. THE ETHICS OF TERMINOLOGY

In 1905 Peirce coined "pragmaticism" for his version of pragmatism – famously hoping that *this* word would be "ugly enough to be safe from kidnappers" (5.414).[16] The word is constructed precisely in conformity with his ideas about the "ethics of terminology." As his use of the term "ethics" indicates, Peirce regarded philosophical nomenclature as a serious matter – and a matter on which we have to make choices. As a step towards clarifying philosophical "ism" words, specifically, he proposes "ic" as a suffix to distinguish a more specific version from the more general idea of which it is an instance, and "prope" as a prefix to indicate a broader idea of the same family (5.413, 905). Hence his description of pragmat[ic]ism as a form of "prope-positivism," to indicate that it is, in a broad sense, akin to the positivism of Auguste Comte; though unlike other forms of prope-positivism in acknowledging the legitimacy of metaphysics (5.423, 1905).

Peirce's ideas about philosophical terminology are themselves closely connected with a key theme of his pragmat[ic]ism, that philosophy can and should become "scientific" – though what he means by this needs delicate handling. First: in Peirce's day the English word "science" was still in the process of acquiring the now-usual narrow sense in which it refers specifically to the natural, and perhaps also the social, sciences, rather than, as its etymology suggests, applying to *any* kind of systematic knowledge or inquiry;[17] it was still appropriate to speak, for example, of "the science of jurisprudence." Peirce's term for what we would now call "the sciences" is "the special sciences." Second, when Peirce said that philosophy should become "scientific," he emphatically did *not* mean that it should put itself out of business by handing over its questions to the special sciences to resolve, nor that philosophers should ape the special sciences by beginning to conduct experiments or set off on expeditions. He meant, rather, that philosophy should be approached with the "scientific attitude," and should use the "scientific method."

The scientific attitude is, simply, a genuine desire to discover the truth of the question(s) that concern you, "regardless of what the color of that truth may

be" (7.605, 1903). Peirce contrasts the "laboratory philosophy" he proposes with "seminary philosophy" (1.620, 1898) – i.e., philosophy undertaken for the purpose of devising philosophical theories compatible with theological dogmas taken for granted ahead of time; and the scientific attitude with "studying in a literary spirit" (1.33, 1903) – i.e., instead of systematically seeking the truth, exercising your wit and intelligence in a more playful way (as an essayist like Emerson might do).

Of course, "seminary philosophy" is not found only in seminaries; and "laboratory philosophy" does not require a laboratory. What Peirce means when he says that philosophy should use the scientific method is that rather than being, as it has so often been, a purely *a priori* exercise relying on nothing more solid than "what is agreeable to reason," it should be a kind – albeit a distinctive kind – of empirical inquiry. Like the special sciences, philosophy should use, not the A Priori Method, but the method of experience and reasoning. However, Peirce is very clear that, though philosophy is empirical inquiry, it is empirical inquiry of a quite different kind from the special sciences, "distinguished from all of these by the circumstance that it does not undertake any special observations." Indeed, he continues:

> Microscopes and telescopes, voyages and exhumations, clairvoyants and witnesses of exceptional experience are substantially superfluous ... [Philosophy] contents itself with a more attentive scrutiny and comparison of the facts of everyday life, such as present themselves to every adult and sane person ... (*EP*: 2.146, 1903).

Making laboratory experiments to determine whether there is any uniformity in nature, Peirce observes a couple of years later, would be like "adding a teaspoonful of saccharine to the ocean in order to sweeten it" (5.522, 1905).

If it were conducted in the right spirit and with the right methods, he argues, philosophical inquiry need not be, as it has so long been, bogged down in never-ending disputes, but could and should make real headway with its problems – in the same collaborative-and-competitive way as the special sciences. But if this is to happen, philosophy will find that, though it doesn't need special instruments or fancy experiments, it *does* need a specialized, technical vocabulary, as the special sciences do. This, of course, is where the "ethics of terminology" comes in.

Peirce begins by explaining why such a thing is needed. First, as he sees it, "the woof and warp of all thought and all research is in symbols"; all thought, that is, is in signs. And precision, he continues, is increasingly important as inquiry advances; a vague idea may be a good starting point, but as inquiry proceeds an initially vague idea will be need to be made more specific, more precise.[18] Moreover, inquiry could hardly progress without collaboration, which would be impossible without communication among inquirers; and communication requires a mutually understood, shared terminology (2.220, 1903).

At the same time, Peirce continues, inquiry requires "the most absolute mental freedom." So the common terminology that is needed cannot be imposed by fiat, but must arise by inquirers' realizing the need for, and finding a reasonable way to devise, a suitable vocabulary; as Peirce puts it, "by the power of rational principles over the conduct of men." He describes the ideal to be aimed at:

> [I]t is, in the first place, desirable for every branch of science that it should have a vocabulary furnishing a family of cognate words for each *scientific* conception, and that each word should have a single exact meaning, unless its different meanings apply to objects of different categories that can never be mistaken for one another (2.222, 1903).

> [E]very new *scientific* conception should receive a new word, or better, a family of cognate words (2.222, 1903).

> [W]hen a man has introduced a new conception into science, it naturally becomes both his privilege and his duty to assign to that conception suitable scientific expressions ... (2.224, 1903).

And – here his disappointment at the fate of his word "pragmatism" is apparent:

> [W]hoever uses a word or any other symbol in any other sense than that which was conferred on it by its sole rightful creator commits a shameful offense against the creator of that symbol and against science (2.224, 1903).

While the last two of these are principles about priority (one might even say, about intellectual property), the first two more strictly concern the kind of terminology that is helpful to intellectual advance. At first blush, however, Peirce's requirement that "each (scientific) word should have a single exact meaning" seems to be at odds with his acknowledgment that meaning inevitably shifts and grows. But he is aware of the problem; indeed, he writes in "The Ethics of Terminology" itself that "every symbol is a living thing ... its meaning inevitably grows, incorporates new elements and throws off old ones." And he offers a solution: the requirement that each word have a single exact meaning must be understood in a flexible way compatible with the growth of meaning:

> [T]he effort of all should be to keep the essence of every scientific term unchanged and exact; although absolute exactitude is not so much as conceivable. (2.222, 1903).

Unfortunately, however, he says nothing more about what it means to keep the "essence" of a term unchanged.

The kind of shift and change of meaning to which the term "growth" seems most appropriate is seen in Peirce's example of "lithium," and mine of

"DNA"; where, as scientists learned more about the stuff in question, additional information was built into the meaning of these concepts (and what turned out to be *mis*information gradually dropped out of the meaning). This is the desirable kind of growth. It is by means of this fruitful "enrichment" of meaning, as I shall call it, that "men and words reciprocally educate each other." But not all shifts and changes of meaning are desirable; some are damaging. Sometimes there is impoverishment of meaning, as words that once conveyed something substantial are abused or overused until they convey little or nothing; or fragmentation of meaning, as words that once conveyed something definite are used in so many different ways that they come to carry utterly discrepant messages, and so, again, convey little or nothing.[19] This time, the examples that come first to mind are from political discourse – "progressive," "democratic," "liberal," and so forth; and from the language of advertisers, public-relations men, realtors, and the academic administrators in whose hands once-honorable words like "innovation," "excellence," etc., have turned into bureaucratic foam-rubber.[20]

Different sciences, Peirce writes, will have differing terminological requirements. He was especially interested, naturally, in the language of philosophy; writing that, because philosophy is empirical inquiry of a quite distinctive kind, the technical vocabulary it requires is also quite distinctive. In particular, in addition to a specialized, technical language, "distinct from and detached from common speech," philosophy also needs "popular words in popular senses" (since such words in their usual meanings may themselves fall under its scrutiny as objects of study) (2.223, 1903).

Most to my present purpose, in the same paragraph Peirce observes that:

> [i]t is good economy for philosophy to provide itself with a vocabulary so outlandish that loose thinkers shall not be tempted to borrow its words. ... Kant's adjectives "objective" and "subjective" proved not to be barbarous enough, by half, to retain their usefulness in philosophy... . The first rule of good taste in writing is to use words whose meanings will not be misunderstood; and if a reader does not know the meaning of the words, it is infinitely better that he should know he does not know it (2.223, 1903).

A little later, he describes the rules he has decided to follow: e.g., to use anglicized forms of scholastic philosophical terminology where appropriate; to invent technical terms for philosophical conceptions that differ subtly from those for which suitable terms already exist; to introduce new systems of expressions when new conceptual connections are discovered; and to consider himself no less bound than others are to use a symbol he has introduced in the sense he gave it (2.226, 1903). It would be a fascinating exercise to track Peirce's own philosophical neologisms to see how well they conform with these precepts;[21] but my present concern is, rather, to explore the relevance of these ideas to the language of philosophy today.

IV. THE LANGUAGE OF PHILOSOPHY TODAY

In the language of contemporary philosophy one can find *both* examples of the kind of enrichment and evolution of meaning that Peirce envisages, *and* examples of the kinds of impoverishment and devolution of meaning that I described above; but, sad to say, it's much easier to come up with the latter than the former. Indeed, in some ways the language of philosophy now seems more like the language of politics, advertising, or public relations[22] than the languages of the natural sciences. One has only to think of the fate of the word "pragmatism," sketched in the first section of this paper; for by now this much-abused word has taken on so many different and incompatible connotations that its meaning seems to have dissipated almost beyond recovery. In fact, the analogy with public-relations talk is especially poignant here: for – no doubt because pragmatism is the only philosophical tradition native to the United States – the labels "pragmatist" and "pragmatism" seem to carry a certain *cachet* that makes them especially appealing to some would-be kidnappers[23] (and also, doubtless, a suspicion of brash Americanism that may have made pragmatism especially objectionable to some critics).

"Objective" and "subjective" are in worse shape, probably, even than when Peirce complained about them. Popper's seductive but misleading title, "*Objective Knowledge*," seems to have succeeded in persuading many readers that he has – well, a theory of objective knowledge; when in fact his epistemology is really a kind of closet skepticism. "Objective knowledge," in Popper's sense, is never justified, may not be true, and need not be believed.[24] (Of course, "*The Logic of Scientific Discovery*" is no less misleading, given that a key thesis of this book is that there *is no* logic of scientific discovery.)[25] Words like "relativism" and "realism" have become so fragmented and confused in meaning that they are barely usable.[26] Quine made "epistemology naturalized" seem enormously attractive in part by running together the modestly reformist idea that epistemology cannot be conducted wholly a priori with the more ambitious idea that psychology might explain the concept of evidence, or evolutionary biology resolve that part of the problem of induction that makes sense, and this in turn with the outright revolutionary idea that epistemological projects are simply misconceived, and should be abandoned in favor of the sciences of cognition.[27] Then there's Rorty, who not only runs together epistemological with meta-epistemological meanings of "foundationalism," but compounds the confusion by describing his own conversationalist position – apparently for no better reason than that it repudiates "foundationalism" – as "coherentist"; and who seems to specialize in a kind of content-stripping, reducing such key epistemological terms as "inquiry" and "justification" to conversational *Ersatzen*.[28]

And by now, even in its most straightforward epistemological use, "foundationalism" (which used to refer to theories of epistemic justification positing a distinction of basic versus derived beliefs and one-directional relations of support) is sometimes used in a way that is both broader and narrower, to apply to any and every theory which allows experiential input; and "coherentism" (which used to apply to theories according to which epistemic justification is a matter solely of the coherence of a person's belief-set) is sometimes twisted in one direction, to accommodate any purely doxastic theory, whether or not it requires coherence, and sometimes twisted in the opposite direction, to accommodate any theory that allows mutual support, whether or not it is purely doxastic. And "reliabilism" (which once meant "theory which explains epistemic justification in terms of truth-ratios") is now sometimes applied to any epistemological account that acknowledges *any* place for truth.

"Veritism," which apparently refers to the bare claim that social practices of belief-formation should be judged by the truth-ratios they produce, looks like nothing so much as a snazzy brand label (and, perhaps, also a way of ducking the many serious difficulties into which reliabilism ran).[29] And the phrase "social epistemology" has proven so seductive that some speak of "using social epistemology" to resolve this or that problem – as if there were a well-established body of theory to which the phrase referred; which, I'm afraid, there is not. In short, over just a few decades, the vocabulary of epistemology has become less and less discriminating, more and more inadequate to make essential distinctions. Specialists in other areas of philosophy will no doubt think of other examples.

In fact, sometimes it seems almost as if philosophers are deliberately doing exactly what Peirce urged them to avoid: instead of devising technical words outlandish enough to discourage "loose thinkers" from borrowing them, deliberately seeking attractive labels for their positions in hopes of drawing followers to their camp; instead of using "words whose meanings will not be misunderstood," choosing terminology obscure enough to convey an aura of profundity;[30] and, instead of acknowledging that, if readers don't understand the technical terminology used, it is better they know they don't, preferring to write in such a way that readers *think* they are following when they aren't.

Why *is* this? After all, if we really wanted philosophy to advance, wouldn't we do everything we could to rid ourselves of ambiguous, obscure, or misleading terminology – which really is an obstacle to progress in inquiry? Absolutely. "As fast as the students of any branch of philosophy educate themselves to a genuine scientific love of truth" (2.225, 1903), they have an incentive to devise a good terminology. But, painful as it is to admit, we all know that we *don't* always want to figure something out as thoroughly as possible – at least, not as much as we want to publish something that will enable us to land a tenure-track job, or to get tenure or a raise or a promotion or a grant, or to become rich and famous. And, of course, if *that*'s what you want, then

ambiguous or confusing or obscure terminology might well be advantageous, and "vocables which have ... such sweetness or charms as might tempt loose thinkers to abuse them"[31] might be exactly what best serves your purposes.

In our times, the problem is not so much "seminary philosophy" as what I will call (echoing Peirce's "studying in a literary spirit") "studying in an academic spirit." Peirce writes that:

> ... thinking ... may serve to amuse us..., and among *dilettanti* it is not rare to find those who have so perverted thought to the purposes of pleasure that it seems to vex them to think that the questions upon which they delight to exercise it may ever finally get settled (5.396, 1878).

In such circles, he continues, any positive resolution of a problem "is met with ill-concealed dislike." "This," he observes, "is the very debauchery of thought."[32] Indeed. But isn't it almost exactly what goes on, much of the time, in philosophy journals today? (I say "almost" exactly, rather than "exactly," only because today perverting thought to the purposes of profit is commoner, probably, than perverting thought to the purposes of pleasure.)

I speak of "studying in an academic spirit" in part, of course, because contemporary philosophical writing is seldom "literary" in the usual sense; on the contrary, much of it is abominably awkward, heavy-handed, self-important – or else timid and bland. In fact, given philosophers' readiness to adopt the superficial trappings of the special sciences – the technical terminology, the peer-review system, the culture of grants-and-research projects, the names-dates-and-page numbers reference system, even the practice of using the date of the most recent rather than the original edition – the phrase "pseudo-scientific" might come to mind. But then, mimicking the mores of the natural sciences is much easier than resisting the perverse incentives of an academic ethos that positively discourages that "genuine scientific love of truth."[33] It's a real shame.[34]

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NOTES

This is a kind of successor-paper to the one I presented at the meeting of the Spanish Society for Analytic Philosophy in Murcia in 2008. It was prompted by two concerns: to clarify the history of pragma-

tism (with which not all the conference participants were familiar), and to think through the consequences of Peirce's ideas about the growth of meaning (the subject of my conference presentation) to the language of philosophy itself.

[2] The editors of Peirce (*CP*) supplied the headings "The Pragmatic Maxim" for section 2 of the paper, and "Some Applications of the Pragmatic Maxim" for section 3; but these did not appear in Peirce's original text.

[3] I discovered this by accident: noticing that my new-ish edition of Merriam-Webster's Dictionary gives "officious meddlesomeness" as an obsolete meaning of "pragmatism," I checked my old edition of the *Oxford English Dictory*, and found that this was still given as a current meaning of the word as late as 1952. In 2005 the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* offered this example of the nineteenth century usage: "[Malvolio] is a moral teetotaller, a formalist, a pragmatist" (Clarke, 1863). Dictionaries are, I might add, often unreliable on the matter of philosophical usage; I was wryly amused when I checked in the *OED Online* again in 2009 to read that pragmatism was "the doctrine that an idea can be understood in terms of its practical consequences; hence, the assessment of the truth or validity of a concept according to the rightness or usefulness of its practical consequences."

[4] His first published use of the word (so far as I have been able to determine) was in his August 1899 review of John Fiske, *Through Nature to God* (reprinted in Ketner and Cook (1975-79)), 2: 210-211.

[5] See for example Mounce (1997) and Rescher (2005).

[6] So scornful is Rorty of the notion of objective truth that even in this passage, where he is explicitly repudiating the concept, he can't resist putting the term in scare quotes – even though this undermines the point he is trying to make!

[7] Brandom (2008). Brandom alludes to Dewey and, once, in passing, James; but none of these allusions is anchored by any specific citation details. There are no references to Peirce or, even more surprisingly, to Mead. (To be sure, James's work – in particular, his *Principles of Psychology* – had some influence on Wittgenstein; still, the connection seems weak to say the least.)

[8] There is no reference to Frege either in his *Collected Papers* or in his *New Elements of Mathematics*, and the few references in the *Writings* are in the editors' introductions and notes. However, we know that Schröder sent Peirce a copy of his review of the *Begriffsschrift*, and that Peirce's student Christine Ladd (later Ladd-Franklin) refers to this review and to the *Begriffsschrift* itself in her article in the *Studies in Logic* published by members of the Johns Hopkins University, edited by Peirce. It seems likely that Schröder's not-very-favorable review, and in particular his claim that Frege was in effect just transcribing Boole's calculus into a clumsy new notation, may have disinclined Peirce to take any further interest in Frege's work.

[9] On metaphor, see Davidson (1978); and compare Haack (1995). On malapropisms, see Davidson (1986); and compare Hacking (1986).

[10] Recently, the term "planet" took a notable turn when an international congress of astronomers voted to demote Pluto to the status of "dwarf planet." See Chang (2006).

[11] Recently "marriage" has also taken a notable turn with efforts, successful in some jurisdictions, to legalize same-sex marriages. See Shishkin (2009) for up-to-date information about U.S. jurisdictions.

[12] "**lithium**: ... Oxide of lithium ... 1. A soft silver-white element of the alkali metal group that is the lightest metal known and that is used in chemical synthesis in

storage batteries ... 2. a salt of lithium (lithium carbonate) used in psychiatric medicine." Merriam-Webster (1993), 680. See also Miller (1994).

[13] The argument is made in detail in Haack (2003), chapters 3 and 5.

[14] In telling this story, I have relied on Levine and Bass (1931); Taylor, ed. (1965); Olby (1974); Portugal and Cohen (1977); Crick (1988); and (on the dates by which various terms were adopted) Merriam-Webster (1993).

[15] Certainly this was my experience with "foundherentism," initially just a label for the kind of theory I saw was needed – an intermediate theory combining certain ideas of foundationalism with other ideas from coherentism; but over the years, as I gradually developed a theory meeting these broad specifications, the word became richer in meaning as previously unrecognized consequences and presuppositions became clear. The story is told, in part, in the Foreword to the 2nd edition of Haack (1993/2009).

[16] At the time, it seems, he was less concerned about the differences between his pragmatism and James's or Dewey's, or even F. C. S. Schiller's, than about the abuse the word "pragmatism" was suffering in the literary journals.

[17] The *OED Online* (2009) tell us that in modern usage "science" is often treated as synonymous with "natural and physical science," "and thus restricted to those branches of study that relate to the phenomena of the material universe and their laws." This, it continues, "is now the dominant sense in ordinary use." The earliest example cited dates from 1867, from W. G. Ward in the *Dublin Review*: "We shall ... use the word 'science' in the sense which Englishmen so commonly give to it; as expressing physical and experimental science to the exclusion of theological and metaphysical."

[18] The procedure of "successive approximation" that I adopt in chapter 4 of *Evidence and Inquiry* (1993/2009) is exactly in conformity with this Peircean thesis.

[19] This distinction, though adequate for present purposes, is not as precise as I would ideally like; in particular, as I noted above, what I have called the "enrichment" of meaning includes some instances of meaning-loss, as misinformation drops out of our understanding of a concept.

[20] I allude, of course, to Jacques Barzun's marvelous phrase, "foam-rubber public-relations words." Barzun (1983), 223. "Prestigious," I note – which seems to be especially loved by administrators – was *never* truly honorable; it derives from the same root as "prestidigitation," sleight of hand!

[21] See for example 2.316, n.1 (c.1902), where Peirce explains why he uses "conditional" rather than "hypothetical" for propositions such as "If it freezes tonight, your roses will be killed"; and 5.449 (1905), where he argues that we would do well "to keep prescind, preciss, and precissive ... to refer to dissection in hypothesis, while precide, precise, and precisive are used so as to refer exclusively to an expression of determination which is made either full or free for the interpreter."

[22] This is not a new thought: David Stove's book *Popper and After* is dedicated to George Orwell, and its wickedly funny first chapter, in which he deconstructs the literary styles of Popper, Lakatos, Feyerabend and Kuhn – explicitly evokes Orwell's "Politics and the English Language."

[23] Contrast Peirce's "pragmaticism," the meaning of which was gradually enriched as he traced out the consequences and presuppositions required (e.g., that the "experiential consequences" to which the pragmatic maxim appealed had to be general experiential *phenomena* rather than particular experiential *events*, and so required

a kind of realism with respect to "generals." The word "pragmaticism" has put off all but a few; though Rosa Mayorga's delightful coinage, "realicism," for Peirce's distinctive form of realism, is noteworthy. (Mayorga 2007).

[24] See Haack (1993/2009) chapter 5 (where I argue that there can be no solution to "the problem of the empirical basis" within the constraints of Popper's anti-inductivism and anti-psychologism; and that, in consequence, he can no more allow that scientific theories can be shown false than that they can be shown true.)

[25] It should be noted, however, that it is also a poor translation of the original German title, *Logik der Forschung*.

[26] See Haack (1996) (disambiguating "relativism"); and Haack (2002) (disambiguating "realism").

[27] Quine (1969). See also Haack (1993/2009) chapter 6 (disambiguating Quine's use of "naturalism"). At a recent conference on naturalized epistemology (the Kazimierz Naturalised Epistemology Workshop (KNEW), 2008) I was not altogether surprised to hear "naturalism" used by the various participants to refer to umpteen incompatible ideas ranging all the way from radical forms of scientism to neo-analytic philosophical business-as-usual.

[28] See Haack (1993/2009) chapter 9 for a detailed examination of Rorty's use of "foundationalism," etc.

[29] Difficulties spelled out in great detail in Haack (1993/2009) chapter 7.

[30] This is not, to be sure, a new phenomenon; already in 1690 John Locke was complaining eloquently about "affected obscurity."

[31] Peirce, *CP* 5.413 (1905). The ellipses indicate that I have taken out a "not" – unlike myself, Peirce is talking about *good* philosophical terminology.

[32] And, many years later, he distinguishes pragmatists like himself from "those overcultivated Oxford dons – I hope their day is over – whom any discovery that brought quietus to a vexed question would evidently vex because it would end the fun of arguing around it and about it and over it" (5.520, 1905).

[33] On those perverse incentives, see also Haack (1996a).

[34] In section 1 of this paper I have drawn a little material from Haack (2009a); there is a more detailed history of pragmatism in my introduction to Haack (2006). In section 2 I have drawn a little material from Haack (2009b). I am grateful to Mark Migotti for very helpful comments on a draft, and to Rachel Herdy for help in tracking down some Peirce citations.

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