

Project B05: Open texture as a source of semantic creativity

Project leaders: Julia Zakkou, Christian Nimtz

Project Summary

Our project aims for an in-depth understanding of open texture and its role in linguistic creativity. Recent philosophy of language witnesses a renewed interest in the idea that many ordinary predicates enjoy an ‘open texture’ (Waismann, 1945). A predicate *F* is said to be open textured if it is objectively indeterminate – i.e., if there is no fact of the matter – as to whether it does or does not apply to actual or merely possible candidate objects beyond *F*’s standard domain. (Collins, 2019; Gauker, 2017; Ludlow, 2014; Shapiro, 2006, 2007; Tanswell, 2018; Vecht, 2020). Key examples of this specific variety of interpretative indeterminacy are ostensibly literal applications of predicates to novel or newly considered objects where the predicate’s semantics do not seem to settle the matter either way – such as, for example, the application of ‘sandwich’ to burritos (Ludlow, 2014), of ‘money’ to bitcoin (Vecht, 2020), of ‘athlete’ to racehorses (Plunkett and Sundell, 2013), or (as we think) of ‘intelligence’ and ‘creativity’ to AI systems.

Our research project aims to do two things – to analyse the nature, grounds, and consequences of open texture in classificatory predicates, and to trace the foundational role of this phenomenon in the emergence of linguistic creativity. It does so by relating the phenomenon of open texture to well-explored theoretical issues in the philosophy of language and linguistics, notably the role of semantic indecision and the impact of semantic externalism (meta-semantics), the relation of open texture to standard vagueness (semantics), and the strategies for speakers to extend application via metaphorical extension/meaning transfer/loose use and to contextually negotiate meanings (pragmatics). By thus combining approaches from meta-semantics, semantics, and pragmatics, we expect our approach to also bring out how open texture fares vis-à-vis rival explanations of language’s power to accommodate apparent indeterminacy. We will buttress our discussion in meta-semantics/semantics/pragmatics by a separate methodological inquiry into creativity. We will institute a public research forum called ‘think!lab creativity’. Bringing together philosophical expertise on creativity from invited experts with empirical results from the ongoing research across the CRC, the think!lab will embark on a methodological inquiry into how standards for novelty and dimensions of success affect (judgements of) linguistic creativity that will eventually allow us to conceptually engineer a notion of creativity suited for the CRC as a whole.

Open Positions

PhD position (65%)

Profile: The ideal candidate has a completed academic university degree at Master's level (Master, M.A. or comparable) in a subject relevant to the project. The candidate has a suitable background in the philosophy of language or in linguistics, and a keen interest to join a research team on open texture.

Main research focus within the project: The Doctoral researcher will develop and conduct a research project on open texture, collaborating both with Prof. Nimtz and Prof. Zakkou. The design of the research project will be jointly agreed upon by the project leaders and the doctoral researcher, whom we encourage to contribute their own experiences, preferences, and ideas. The doctoral researcher will co-organize and co-host the 'think!lab creativity. The doctoral researcher will coordinate with Prof. Nimtz (Bielefeld) and Prof. Zakkou (Düsseldorf) to secure joint research results, and to explore their bearing on linguistic creativity.

For further information please contact the project leaders:

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