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Each book its own Babel

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Propositions accompanying the dissertation

Each Book Its Own Babel:
Conceptual Unity and Disunity in Early Modern Natural Philosophy

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1. The meaning of words can be partially recovered computationally by considering what other words they co-occur with. Additionally, we can extract differences in meaning by comparing these contexts of occurrence in different books, as meaning is not only social, but also, partially, idiosyncratic. (Intro + Ch.1)

2. The three major schools of early modern natural philosophy (scholastics, Cartesians and Newtonians) form stable semantic groups and are thus helpful historical categories for understanding early modern natural philosophy. (Ch.2)

3. By differentiating between computationally modelling with complete vectors and collocates, we can computationally extract different facets of word meaning, namely, the more and the less salient conceptual connections a term has. (Ch.3)

4. Early modern natural philosophy pivots around the concept of body, as this word combined extensive conceptual disagreement with an underlying shared understanding, thus evading incommensurability. (Ch.3)

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5. As historians of ideas, we should differentiate between conceptual closeness (or membership of a language) and (dis)agreement with the major doctrinal tenets held by members of that community of speakers. (Ch.4)

6. The conceptual language in which Anne Conway (1631–1679) writes is that of Cartesian mechanicism despite this being her most clearly identified opponent. (Ch.4)

7. We can quantify the extent as to which authors build on each other's use of language within large corpora and extract centrally innovative figures. (Ch.5)

8. The Cartesians were necessary for the overturning of scholasticism. But the revolutionary fervor implicit in this overturning stopped them from forming a stably innovative semantic strategy. The Newtonians, on the other hand, closed their ranks more capably, allowing for outward unity and internal innovation. (Ch.5)