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≡ The Oxford Handbook of
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ACCOUNTABILITY

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PART I

ANALYTICAL
PERSPECTIVES



CHAPTER 2

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ACCOUNTABILITY AS A CULTURAL KEYWORD

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MELVIN J. DUBNICK

WORDS MATTER

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WORDS matter, and at any specified time and place some words matter more than others.¹ Raymond Williams, often cited as the founder of cultural studies, regarded certain words as “keys” to understanding cultures and changes in the society. In his study of industrialization from 1780 to 1950, Williams highlighted five such *keywords* as pivotal: industry, democracy, class, art and culture. “The changes in their use” during that period

bear witness to a general change in our characteristic ways of thinking about our common life: about our social, political and economic institutions; about the purposes which these institutions are designed to embody; and about the relations to these institutions and purposes of our activities in learning, education and the arts. (Williams 1958, xiii).

In 1976 Williams extended his list of culturally significant keywords to 110 terms and published his examination of each in a volume under the title “Keywords”; an additional 21 terms were included in a 1983 revised edition, and one can assume there would have been more additions and changes had he published further revisions (Williams died in 1988).²

This chapter focuses on a particular word—*accountability*—that, despite its absence from Williams’s original lists, would likely have taken a prominent place among contemporary cultural keywords. In support of that contention, Figure 2.1 provides evidence of the growing frequency of the term’s use in a sampling of books based on a million

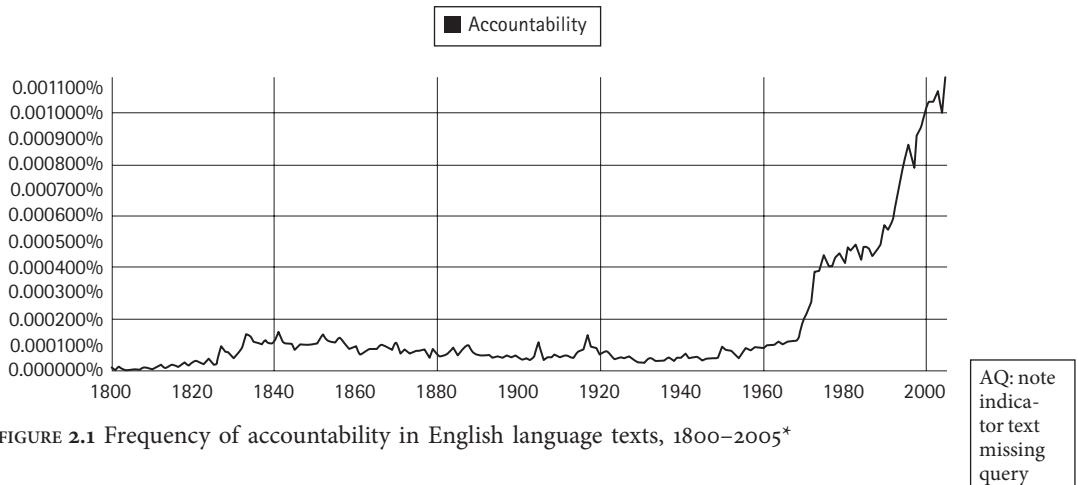


FIGURE 2.1 Frequency of accountability in English language texts, 1800–2005*

scanned volumes drawn from works published in English (in the US and UK) between 1800 and 2005.³ While accountability first appears in the plotted sample during the early 1800s, it remains a culturally innocuous term until the 1960s and 1970s, when we start to see a sharp and significant upturn in its usage.

Accountability's claim to cultural keyword status can also be based on *how* the term has been used in this period, for it has gone from a relatively narrow range of applications reflecting a simple sense of its meaning (typically indicating a condition where one party is answerable to another for some X) to an expansive, ambiguous, and often enigmatic, term with considerable cultural gravitas cutting across many cultural domains (Mulgan 2000).

Evidence of this development is literally everywhere. There is hardly any aspect of our lives that has not been touched by the growing obsession with accountability. Teachers are held accountable for the performance of their students, and presidents are assumed accountable for the state of the economy; we hold parents accountable for the behavior of their children, and police accountable for higher crime rates; we demand accountability for bankers who we believe caused a financial crisis, and call for greater accountability when the potholes in our local roads go unrepaired. We react to all crimes and scandals (and even natural disasters!) by calling for someone to be held to account, and we expect there to be accountability systems in place to prevent the recurrence of just about any untoward behavior. Pervasive is one way to characterize our collective obsession with accountability. Pollitt and Hupe (2011) note it as one of the “magic words” shared widely by students and practitioners of governance.⁴

The emergence of accountability to cultural keyword status is as puzzling as it is important for our comprehension of changes that are taking place in the domains of politics and governance. Here is a term that has been part of the modern governance paradigm for nearly a millennium (Dubnick 1998), but has only of late become the iconic manifestation of “good governance.” While treated positively for decades as a desirable characteristic of modern states (Fukuyama 2011), there have been no new major

theoretical breakthroughs in the study of politics or government pushing accountability to the foreground as the defining feature of modern governance.⁵ Nor has its recent rise to global salience been the result of any coherent social movement or reformist ideology; in fact, the push for greater accountability seems to be a point of agreement in even the most partisan and divided political contexts. In that regard, accountability has truly become a “golden concept” (Bovens, Schillemans, and ‘t Hart 2008).

Whatever the cause of accountability’s emergence as a keyword, there is little doubt that its newly gained importance as a cultural icon has transformed its form and function in governance and politics. Accountability is no longer merely a term of the governance arts—a useful instrument to be pulled from the policy or management toolbox to deal with some specific problem. There is now the aura of legitimacy associated with its use, even in instances where it is obviously an irrelevant or inappropriate instrument for the job (Mashaw 2006). In addition, over the past several decades a strong belief has developed in the capacity of accountability to achieve some of our most highly-valued objectives. Expressed as the “promises of accountability” (Dubnick and Frederickson 2011), these include unquestioned—and often unsubstantiated—assumptions that various forms of accountability will result in a more democratically responsive government, improvements in the efficient and effective performance of government agencies, a more ethical public sector workforce, and the enhanced capacity of government to generate just and equitable policy outcomes.

In short, given its emergence as a cultural keyword, we can no longer rely on our knowledge of accountability in its older, simpler and more precise forms. What we are dealing with is not merely a set of institutional arrangements or managerial mechanisms, but a cultural phenomenon that is dominating, altering and consuming our traditional notions of governance. Our objective here is to enhance our understanding of this emergent form of accountability as it relates to the domains of governance and politics.

This exploration of accountability as a cultural phenomenon is limited to the lexical and conceptual manifestations of our subject, and in that sense touches on just two among a wider range of culturally significant forms taken by account-giving norms and actions in socio-cultural relationships. Accountability is also a social psychological phenomenon (Lerner and Tetlock 1999), and even its utterance within various contexts can be treated as linguistic speech acts with social impact and cultural significance (Lupia 2011). In that sense, this chapter is only an indication of what is yet to be explored in the study of accountability as a cultural phenomenon.

AND THEN THERE WAS “THE WORD”

We start with the most obvious manifestation of accountability-as-cultural phenomenon—the word itself. There are three options open to those who would analyze the pedigree and development of any particular word. First, one can focus on the definitions

offered in authoritative dictionaries or carefully collected from other sources. Second, we can explore the etymological origins of the word. Finally, we can seek insight through studies of the usage of a term.

The definition: Seeking a definition for this “notoriously ambiguous” (Brooks 1995) term can prove very frustrating, and often results in adoption of a version deemed best suited to the narrowly delineated topic at hand. Unfortunately, this tactic generates problems of conceptual omission or commission (cf. Keohane 2003).

We begin our search for meaning in the usual place, with the authoritative *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED):

The quality of being accountable; liability to account for and answer for one’s conduct, performance of duties, etc. (in modern use often with regard to parliamentary, corporate, or financial liability to the public, shareholders, etc.); responsibility. Freq. with modifying word.

Three notable features of that definition include: (1) it is an abstract noun designating an immaterial “quality” or characteristic; (2) its definition is strongly tied to synonyms, such as liability, answerability, responsibility; and (3) it is often accompanied by a “modifying word” that effectively renders it meaningful only in context. These points, individually and together, makes the task of defining accountability at best problematic.

The first problem is that upon close scrutiny one realizes that the definition begs the question of what constitutes “accountableness” rather than providing any substantive basis for a definition. What is the nature of that quality or characteristic? The state of “being accountable” would suffice if there was some way of characterizing that condition, but what we are provided with is circular:⁶ accountability is what it means to be accountable, and being accountable is what it means to possess accountability. This is a definition going nowhere, requiring reliance on the second feature of the definition—synonyms.

As we see below when addressing accountability as a concept, the reliance of the OED definition on synonyms makes sense in the attempt to generate a meaningful understanding of the term but is a weak basis for a definition that truly differentiates the word within the linguistic community. This is most evident when we try to deal with the word in translation or out of specific contexts.

Although English speakers take the term accountability for granted, few languages have an equivalent word. Until recently, romance languages translated accountability as “responsibility,” and languages like Japanese and modern Hebrew relied on awkward transliterations when necessary (Dubnick 1998). To be responsible—to possess the quality of responsibility—does not communicate what it means to be accountable, answerable, liable, obliged, etc. Synonyms are often more similar than they are equivalent, and that gap (the dissimilarity) can prove troublesome, not only across language boundaries but also across contexts.

Which brings us to the third feature of the OED definition—its notation that the word accountability is frequently accompanied by a modifying term, e.g., *political* accountability, *financial* accountability, *corporate* accountability, *legal* accountability, etc. Here

the word's definition is surrendered to its contextualized meanings, and thus to the various synonyms associated with those settings. In law, accountability is liability; in politics it is answerability and responsiveness; in finance and corporate governance, it is fiduciary relationships and fidelity; etc. Whatever substantive meaning might be in the word accountability is overwhelmed and subordinated to the demands of the specific task environment.

The problems with the definition highlighted here help explain the relative ease with which accountability was elevated to cultural keyword status. The lack of any inherent definable characteristic that could act as an anchor for the notion of accountability rendered it vulnerable to assuming a broadened meaning tied to either the modifying contexts and or the synonyms with which the word is often associated.

Origins: Additional insight can often be gained by turning to a word's etymology—a search for meaning in its origins and roots. But here too we confront an ambiguity fostered by the very structure (or morphology) of the word. Among students of etymology, a word such as accountability is regarded as a complex noun of two parts (e.g., in the OED, the adjective *accountable* + the suffix *-bility*) and the etymological task seems simple enough—find and combine the meaningful roots of each word. The next step, however, proves somewhat more challenging, for the word's roots tend to justify a much narrower sense of what accountability means than common contemporary usage implies.

For the adjective *accountable*, the roots are deep (Old French) and deeper (Latin). The deep roots are in the Old French, and are commonly cited as still another complex term, the verb *aconter* (*a-* + *conter*), to count, to reckon. This, in turn, is linked to the Latin verb *computare*, to compute or calculate. Taken literally, an accountable person is “able” (has the capacity) to offer an account or reckoning of some sort, and accountability can be seen in that rather limited light as characterizing someone having the quality of being able to provide a response to those calling for a count or calculation.⁷

In basic terms, an accountable person is an “accountant” in the strictest, most literal and legalistic sense of that word. The label was once formally applied to those individuals called to testify before the court because they maintained the books for an enterprise that was part of some legal dispute.⁸ If there is a sense of qualities usually attributed to the appellation “accountable person” (someone with accountability)—responsibility, obligation, liability, etc.—they are not inherent in the meanings derived from etymological roots. If there is any sense of designating someone with responsibility, it is the implication that the accountant will fulfill the role of offering the expected “count” on demand.

In this seemingly trivial exercise in etymology, an important point stands out: nothing in the word's origins supports its contemporary use as a higher standard by which to operate or judge individuals, groups, or nations. The characteristic of accountability was narrowly associated with the actions of an individual engaged as a bookkeeper in the nascent profession of accounting.

Usage: If neither dictionary definitions nor etymological analysis can help us with the meaning of accountability, we need to turn to pragmatics—the examination of meaning

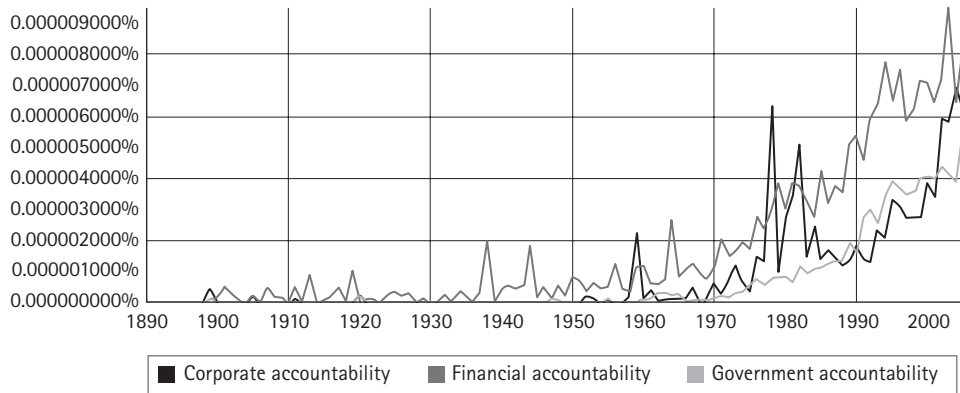


FIGURE 2.2 Frequency of mediated forms of accountability in English language texts, 1890–2005**

AQ: note
indica-
tor text
missing
query

derived from usage. There are several analytic approaches to the study of word usage,⁹ but under the heading of pragmatics are those that emphasize the role of context in shaping meaning.

The Google scanned books data in Figure 2.1 can be used to indicate meanings derived from word usage at a more contextualized level. As noted in the comments about the definition of accountability, the term often derives its meaning from the adjectives it is associated with. Pursuing that logic, Figure 2.2 tracks the phrases “corporate accountability,” “accountable government,”¹⁰ and “financial accountability” from 1890 to 2005 using the English language corpus developed by the Google project team. The plotted patterns follow the more general trends in Figure 2.1 related to the unqualified term itself, but the findings also reflect some interesting variations related to the question of meaning. It is not surprising to see financial accountability emerge first and most prominently over this extended period, and we can speculate that there is some relationship between its first occurrence during a time characterized by our first major nationwide economic and banking crises. The phrase “corporate accountability” seems to have its initial boost during the 1950s when the power of corporations became a major issue, and given shifting political views during the 1960s, it is not surprising that government accountability starts to draw increasing reference during the 1970s. While these conjectures should be treated with caution given the nature of the dataset, each of these trend lines indicates just how sensitive the word accountability has been to political and economic conditions.¹¹

Of course, noting increased frequency of usage is not the same as analyzing the meanings of words derived from such usage. The most common pragmatics approaches have been associated with the concept of “language games,” a perspective developed by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein in his later works (1968) that has had a profound effect on the study of what words “mean.” As with other pragmatics approaches, the emphasis is on the role that context plays in determining the meaning of words and their related discourses (Stalnaker 1970).

There are many kinds of language games that use (and shape the meaning of) accountability, and those relevant to the present effort occur within the context of discourses and narratives about governance. While we use the terms in our daily lives, the concepts of “discourse” and “narrative” are analytic tools in the hands of linguists and philosophers¹² interested in human communication. Analytically, discourses are the most general form of language-based verbal communication produced as a means to generate a response from the receiving population, and narratives are a particular form of discourse based on the use of “stories” (broadly defined; Rudrum 2005). Within the context of such stories of governance, we can see how the meaning of accountability has been altered from the core *OED* definition (“quality of being accountable”)—a definition that all but disappears as the word is transformed through a variety of narrative means.

In Figure 2.3 we see that in some discourses, the word is *institutionalized* by its association with constitutional and electoral arrangements designed to constrain and control the power of political authorities, rendering them more answerable and responsive. More than just mechanisms (see below), these arrangements provide a framework within which accountability is to be achieved and sustained, even if any or all the players involved lack (or never achieve) the “quality of being accountable.” This is the discourse of democratic accountability, and the language game that takes place within it raises accountability to the level of the legitimizing standard (i.e., ends) for modern governance. It is supported by a narrative in which there is an implied promise that such arrangements will result in greater degrees of democratic governance (e.g., Fukuyama 2011).

Discourse focused on	Narrative	Accountability as	Examples
Institutionalization	Promise of democracy	Arrangements (usually constitutional) intended to constrain power and foster answerability and responsiveness of officials.	Constitution making, Self-Restraining State; Accountability forums; Horizontal accountability
Mechanization	Promise of control	Means used to oversee and direct operations and behavior within organized context.	Administrative control; Bureaucratization; Rules; Reporting; Auditing
Juridicization	Promise of justice	Formalization (usually legal in nature) of rules and procedures designed to deal with undesirable and unacceptable behavior.	Formalization; Legal Rulemaking; Criminalization; Enforcement; Truth & Reconciliation
Incentivization	Promise of performance	Standards and metrics designed to influence behavior.	TQM; Performance measurement; Performance management; Standards

FIGURE 2.3 Discourses and Narrative of Accountability

In other discourses, accountability has been *mechanized*—that is, reconfigured as a means for facilitating control. While the institutional form is designed to achieve answerability, responsiveness, etc., here organizational arrangements (e.g., hierarchies, bureaucracies, audits, reporting) are designed to solicit obedience and greater efficiency. In this language game, to be accountable is to be subject to active control, but from the perspective of those charged with managing organizations, it fosters a positive narrative of control.

In a third type of discourse, accountability has been *juridicized* and incorporated into the language games of both criminal and civil legal systems as well as the formalized sanctioning process within organizations. Here the underlying narrative is that accountability produces justice for those victimized by malicious or damaging behavior.

In still another discourse, accountability has been *incentivized*—turned into a set of benchmarks or metrics against which performance is measured. Here, the meaning of accountability becomes the basis for assessment in an effort to promote (or force) adjustments in performance in order to demonstrate that one has become more accountable. The narrative is based on a view of human nature that assumes individuals will respond in a positive way to information about their performance.

What is interesting about these discourses is that they are frequently about more than descriptions of governance (public, private and third sector); they are also generating narratives of reform. Whether focused on attaining higher ends (democracy and justice) or basic means (facilitating control or enhanced performance), discursive forms of accountability are closely tied to efforts to bring about change and reflect views that accountability (however it is defined) is either lacking or insufficient under current circumstances. In this regard, within these language games, accountability carries the burden of being either the cause or cure for what ails the governance system.

We obviously learn a good deal more about the meaning of accountability by relying on pragmatics, most significantly that the word draws its meaningfulness not from its defined content, but from its context and functionality, or dysfunctionality, within the realm of modern forms of governance. Again, we can see that this tendency to be contextualized and fitted into different discursive formats helps explain why accountability was suitable for cultural keyword status. The question as to why it attained that status when it did remains unanswered.

CONCEPTUALIZING ACCOUNTABILITY

As a cultural phenomenon, accountability is more than merely a distinct and “definable” term. It is also at the center of a powerful conceptual construct that plays a major role in how we perceive the operations of modern government. In this section we examine the nature of that conceptual construct to see if it can add to our understanding of the cultural primacy of accountability among that class of terms that shape our understanding of politics and governance.

We begin by highlighting a central fact about the definition of the word accountability; it is a term characterized by an exceptionally high degree of synonymy. Whether focusing on typical definitions or efforts to translate this very English word, we find frequent reliance on several common synonyms—words that users or translators accept as sufficiently similar in “meaning” to substitute for accountability. What this synonymic condition implies is that our efforts to develop a meaningful understanding of accountability as a cultural keyword may require that we abandon our focus on the word *per se* and reset it on the more general **concept** of accountability that has emerged in recent years.

In its purest form, a synonym of one word is another that can be used interchangeably with the first regardless of context. They are in the strictest sense identical in meaning. A “bachelor” is an “unmarried man,” a “mother” is a “female parent,” “car” is an “automobile,” etc. Is accountability *identical* in this way to responsibility, liability, answerability, etc.? Not quite, especially in light of the contextual (i.e., pragmatic) variation in usage of each of those terms. In our complex and interconnected world, I can be responsible for some event, for example the marriage of two people who met because I did not take the empty seat between them on the bus) without being held to account for it (nor for whatever happiness or miseries that befall the couple in the years that follow). Nevertheless, there is some degree of overlap in meaning among these terms as they are put to use in everyday language games. They may not be synonyms in the “purist” sense, but they share a level or degree of synonymy.

Implied in the high degree of synonymy characterizing accountability and related terms is the suggestion of a more general idea—a concept—that ties them together despite their autonomous existence in various language games and discourses. Shifting our focus from word to concept can prove significant in comprehending the keyword status of accountability. Lexicographers define a concept as some basic unit of thought reflecting an idea, “an abstraction from a number of ideas about individual referents” that share something in common (Svensén 2009, 213). To grasp the nature and importance of accountability in this conceptual sense, we need to explore just how the associated terms relate to each other in a cultural sense.

To uncover concept-defining ideas, some analysts look for some core term around which conceptualizations cluster (Motter et al. 2002; Wille 2005). Others find concepts emerging from a variety of common metaphorical tropes (Morgan 1980; 1983). For example, as already noted, the synonymic character of accountability is frequently treated metonymically, as if it is one among several interchangeable terms that roughly conveys the same meaning. We hear this conceptual device at work when reporters frequently use the word accountability in lieu of more obtuse (at least for the layperson) terms such as legal liability or to communicate the meaning of fiduciary relationships. The problem with this approach, as well as the cluster analysis method, is that neither provides leads as to why it is accountability, rather than other terms in the synonymic class, that has become so central to the ideas being represented.

Another relevant metaphorical trope (synecdoche) involves viewing accountability as part of a family of synonymic terms sharing a close relationship to some referent

concept. We see this in the common association of accountability with the concept of democracy. Discourses on democracies reflect an assumption that some form of accountability to the public is among the defining features of political systems that warrant that label. An accountable government is (more often than not) understood to be democratic, and vice versa. In such discourses, certain of the standard synonyms for accountability (e.g., answerability, responsiveness) tend to be applied freely, generating a sense of what it means for a system of governance to be (democratically) accountable.

Nevertheless, the discursive relationship between democracy and accountability is hardly direct or precise, primarily due to the impreciseness of meanings associated with both terms. Tilly (2007, 7–11) has highlighted at least four types of definitions for democracy: constitutional (based on legal form of the regime), substantive (focused on quality of life under a regime), procedural (tied to the use of a range of “democratic” practices, e.g. contested elections, universal suffrage, etc.), and process-oriented (highlighting the existence of certain conditions, e.g., rule of law, voting equality, effective participation, transparency, etc.). The tethered relationship assumed to exist between democracy and accountability is reflected in the role various forms of accountability plays in each of these approaches, from constitutional provisions related to suffrage, to holding regular elections and public hearings, to guaranteeing a number of political rights and civil liberties.

In searching for a meaningful sense of the concept of accountability, however, such an approach poses a major challenge. Here the concept melds into its referent concept, democracy—and in the process falls back into the chameleon-like state that has rendered it a widely applied cultural phenomenon. What is lost, however, is the idea of accountability as a distinct form of behavior and social relationships that are as much a part of authoritarian hierarchies as they are a characteristic of democratic regimes. The fact that democracy is itself a keyword (Williams 1976) makes the task even more challenging. The same holds true for attempts to derive a meaningful sense of accountability by tethering it to the management of private firms or corporate governance (Sinclair 1995)—in each instance, the concept of accountability is transformed and reconstructed, often to the point of obscuring its essential characteristics as a social relationship.

There remains the question of why, among this cluster of accountability-related concepts, it is accountability that currently holds such a prominent place. Certainly, there are other members of this synonymic class of words (e.g., responsibility: Bovens 1998) that are not as parochial in their origin and are far more translatable across many languages. In addition, there are words in that synonymic class far more meaningful within specific domains as “terms of art” (e.g., liability in law). Nevertheless, at least within the past half century, it is accountability that has emerged as the salient concept—the keyword—among this collection of concepts.

One possible reason why accountability has become so prominent among its synonymic class may be its discursive association with what are perceived to be higher public values. As the concept of accountability became narratively intertwined with the promises of democracy, justice, efficiency (control) and greater administrative performance, its status as a public virtue (Bovens 2010) also rose, to the point that it has come

	Legal Setting	Organizational Setting	Professional Setting	Political Setting
<i>Moral pulls</i>	Liability	Answerability	Responsibility	Responsiveness
<i>Moral pushes</i>	Obligation	Obedience	Fidelity	Amenability

***Source: Dubnick(1998).

FIGURE 2.4 Species of the Genus Accountability***

to dominate its class of related concepts.¹³ Whatever the relationship among the concepts in the past, the centrality of accountability is now well established.

As Bovens (2010) has noted, however, accountability is more than a virtue; it is also a mechanism and instrument of administrative and political power that can be applied to bring about policy compliance as well as to force changes in governance. Nevertheless, these two aspects of accountability are related. As a highly regarded (virtuous) public value, accountability has emerged as a moral force which can be—and often is—used to promote and foster the application of compliance mechanisms and instruments of change. This moral force can be brought to bear through both external pressure stressing the desirability of accountable governance—what Nozick (1981) called “moral pull”—and managerial efforts to instill and internalize an ethical commitment to accountability within public agencies (i.e., “moral push”).

It would be a mistake therefore to see the relationships among these related concepts as merely hierarchical or simplistically metaphorical. A more appropriate means for framing the current (keyword-based) relationship is through the substantive metaphor of genus and species, with accountability situated as the concept-encompassing genus to which each species (sub-concept) relates. Such a scheme requires that we establish rules that define the relationship between accountability and its sub-concepts as well as articulate characteristics that distinguish among the different species. As illustrated in Figure 2.4, the different species can be sorted not only by the relevant settings within which they are likely to appear, but also by whether they are related to accountability through the process of moral push or moral pull.

This conceptual framing of accountability provides a broader sense of meaning than the earlier focus on definitions and etymology. It also addresses the enhanced (cultural) reach of the idea of accountability in recent decades and its elevated status within its family of synonyms. By viewing it within this genus-species framework, we are adopting the view that today the concept of accountability encompasses (rather than replaces) many of synonymic terms and ideas with which it has been associated. In common usage today as a cultural keyword, to be accountable is to be responsible, and amenable, and answerable, and obliged, etc. As importantly, this framing also provides a contextual basis for understanding the variations in what the concept of accountability means in various settings.

CONCLUSION

There is a growing consensus among students of contemporary governance that we are in the midst of major changes requiring a basic reformulation of how we view the institutions through which we govern our social, economic and political relationships (OECD 2001). Some see these changes as foundational, involving the disassembling and reassembling of nation-state focused governance patterns (Sassen 2008; Valaskakis 2001), while others have noted the capacity of the modern governments to adapt to changing conditions without altering the fundamental arrangements of state-based governance (Weiss 1998).

The increased attention to accountability and its development as a cultural keyword can be regarded as an indicator and measure of the unsettled nature of governance in this tumultuous and transitional time. Implied as well is the strong likelihood that, if and when the debates over the nature of governance are somewhat settled, accountability will likely assume a central role in the dominant discourse that emerges. It is reasonable to ask what form that central role will take.

The answer perhaps lies in the historical precedent of two other governance-related keywords: efficiency and planning. In his classic study of ideas that underpinned the rise of the American administrative state, Waldo (1948) took note of how efficiency—“a term generally regarded as descriptive, ‘mechanical’”—had become “invested with moral significance” during the Progressive era, developing into a “key concept” in the political theory of the administrative state.¹⁴

Similarly, the concept of planning has a history extending back to efforts to build defensive fortifications around ancient and medieval cities (Mumford 1961), and yet by the mid-20th century it had gained keyword status reflecting the widespread acceptance of corporate, social and national economic planning (Galbraith 1971; Scott 1998; Miller and Rose 2008). Despite analytic critiques (Dahl and Lindblom 1953; Wildavsky 1973), powerful ideological challenges (e.g., Hayek 1944), and its association with the failed economies of the Soviet bloc, planning has remained (albeit in more subtle forms) a basic part of the logic of modern governance thinking—part of what Foucault (1991) terms our collective “governmentality.”

Accountability seems to be following the same historical arc as both efficiency and planning—terms initially associated with certain mechanisms of governing transformed into culturally salient concepts that became the very definition of “good governance” at the height of their popularity. Accountability has already transfigured from an instrument of governing to what MacIntyre (1984) characterized as a “virtuous practice”—an endeavor in which the act of holding to account (or being held to account) is now regarded as an end in itself within the context of governing. But as a cultural keyword, accountability is also becoming something much more—a lens through which we perceive, understand and shape all aspects of our social lives.

For those engaged in the study of accountability, the implications of this “culturation” of the concept are significant. It not only challenges the myopic perspectives that currently inform accountability research (cf. Ebrahim 2005), but also begs for a radical rethinking of the ontological foundations upon which current thinking is based (Dubnick 2011). Moreover, it establishes the need for a theory of accountable governance rooted in a greater appreciation of how the words we use both reflect and determine the lives we lead.

NOTES

1. On the power of words in different contexts, see Bourdieu (1991), Tambiah (1968), and Edelman (1977; 1985).
2. An updated revision incorporating Williams’s terms was attempted in Bennett et al. (2005). For a more historical approach to keyword analysis, see Frantzen (2012).
3. This analysis is based on books scanned by Google as part of its effort to digitize the holdings of major libraries; see <http://www.google.com/googlebooks/library.html>. A major sub-project aimed at facilitating the use of data generated by the Google Books Library Project is reflected in the “N-Gram” initiative explained at <http://books.google.com/ngrams/info>. See Michel et al. (2011) for further elaboration.
4. To some critics the term “perverse” might be a more fitting characterization; see O’Neill (2002); Stein (2002, Ch. 2); Flinders (2011).
5. Ferejohn (1999, 133) initiated an effort to develop an accountability-based theory of democracy by laying the groundwork for what he termed a “fuller theory of endogenous accountability,” but there has been little effort to follow through on that project.
6. See Burgess (2008) for the case for circularity in definitions.
7. The relationship of accountability to its Old French roots is clearer in Samuel Johnson’s 1755 *A Dictionary of the English Language* in which he defines the word “comptible” as “ready to give an account.” He notes the reference source as Shakespeare.
8. Originally (c. 15th century), in British law the term “accountant” designated any “defendant in an action of account” (i.e., anyone capable of being held to account in matters of trust, such as in financial relationships). By the 16th century it was used to designate anyone (defendant or witness) who made a living through the keeping of accounts; eventually the designation was applied to those legally certified as accountants (in contrast to bookkeepers). See Garner (2011, 117).
9. The Google book scan project cited earlier (see Figure 2.1) has opened up the possibility of a more empirically based examination of word usage that goes beyond mere frequency counts; see Michel et al. (2011). At this juncture, however, that capacity is limited and the significance of the analysis should be approached with caution.
10. The phrase entered into the viewer was government accountability, but that was integrated by the program with the more commonly used “accountable government.”
11. As another indicator of usage patterns, we attempted to find out if the word accountability—not in any translated form or transliterated—appeared in foreign language books that are part of the Google Books database. With all due consideration for the limitations of this measure, it was clear that the word had crossed language barriers and become part of the discourse in at least three European languages: French, German and Spanish. During

the post-World War Two period, but especially since the early 1970s, the word itself has become globalized—the result, perhaps, of Anglo-American dominance of the legal aspects of globalization as well as its influence in other aspects (cultural, social and political) of the constantly expanding international arena.

12. For a general overview of the logic and structure of discourse and narrative analyses, see Brockmier and Harre (1997).
13. There is historical precedent for this situation in parliamentary systems in which the concept of “ministerial responsibility” became the standard measure of what we would today term “good governance”; see Barberis (1998); also Flinders (2002a; 2002b).
14. “The high point in the popularity of “efficiency” came in the years immediately preceding the First Great War. It was a rallying cry of Progressivism. Indeed, it was recognized as a “movement” within the larger movement, and became in certain circles a veritable fetish.” (Waldo 1948, 190).

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