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978-0-521-09998-1 - Why Does Language Matter to Philosophy?

Ian Hacking

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1. Strategy

I shall not begin by saying why language matters to philosophy, but start with some evidence, examining a few familiar problems in metaphysics and epistemology that have been influenced by theories about language. The main body of the book will illustrate how language has, from time to time, mattered to philosophers. It is a collection of case studies, which can usefully introduce newcomers to the subject. Only the final chapter tries to guess about the nature of language and philosophy in an attempt to explain some features of the case studies. Only then do I try to answer the question Why does language matter? The final conjectures, although by no means original, are at present non-standard. The reader is not obliged to accept them. In the case studies I aim at objectivity, providing data on the basis of which you can judge the situation for yourself. This objectivity is slightly spurious because I inevitably select and interpret the data in my own way. I try to refrain from editorializing until the end.

Before getting down to work, a variety of remarks are needed, mostly negative. First, many philosophers writing in English seem to have settled down to discuss the *pure* theory of meaning. They do not appear to study language and meaning in order to understand some philosophical problem – what we could call *applied* philosophy of language – but write almost exclusively about the nature of meaning itself. A sizeable proportion of potential philosophy graduate students applying to English-speaking universities say they want to do

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

2

Strategy

research in the theory of meaning. So in the short run we may expect articles about the pure theory of meaning to form an increasingly large part of many philosophical journals, dissertations, and university examination papers. But if we look at older works in the same 'empiricist' tradition as ours – Hobbes, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, or Mill, say – we find that discussions of language are almost always directed towards central non-linguistic issues in philosophy. Equally, G. E. Moore, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and J. L. Austin, so often regarded as the founding fathers of philosophy of language, were all preoccupied with traditional problems: Moore, for example, with ethics, perception, and knowledge of the external world, or Wittgenstein, in his *Philosophical Investigations*, with the nature of the human mind. It is notable that Noam Chomsky, by trade a linguist, has also urged striking views about the nature of mind on the basis of his work on grammar. The Olympian figures of our time do not in this respect differ from their predecessors. Theories about language enter the most memorable philosophy in order to be applied to central philosophical issues. So my contrast between 'pure' and 'applied' theory is not between the most significant contributions of now and of the past, but rather between present hack work and that of previous generations. Only recently have day-to-day routine teaching and writing in philosophy become embroiled in theories of meaning for their own sake. This book will be more like older hack work: the case studies will mostly be theories about applications, rather than philosophizing about language for its own sake.

This introduces a prejudice, and loads the scales against some possible answers to my question. You might expect a book with my title to explain why meaning matters to philosophy, whereas I shall sometimes argue, paradoxically, that the pure theory of meaning does not matter much to philosophy, although language does. The situation may prove to resemble that of philosophical psychology. Psychology was once part of philosophy and now is one or several independ-

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Strategy*

3

ent disciplines. The stimulus–response model of behaviour comes out of the empiricist philosophy, and quite specific models – like the association theory of learning that has by now acquired a fully mathematized format – go back through a chain of philosophers: to James Mill, to David Hartley, to David Hume (who called the theory of association his most novel contribution). Thus what was once deemed a central topic for philosophers became a separate study with its own canons of investigation and its own standards of excellence. This does not mean it is of no interest to philosophers, for the philosophical mind turns to any discipline where there is conceptual difficulty. Philosophical groping about in experimental psychology is, however, no more central to philosophy than philosophical speculation about quantum mechanics (part of what would once have been called natural philosophy) or statistical inference (part of what would once have been called logic).

Some philosophy of language can likewise be expected to hive off its own new sciences. But despite the fact that there is an autonomous academic discipline called experimental psychology, there remains a residual subject called philosophy of mind, arguably the most recalcitrant of topics with which philosophers now engage. The parallel that I foresee is this. Much of the pure theory of meaning that preoccupies our generation of philosophers will very quickly become autonomous, but a body of essentially philosophical questions about language will persist.

A fine example of this trend is furnished by the theory of ‘presupposition’ advanced by P. T. Geach and P. F. Strawson about 1950, by way of criticism of a theory propounded by Bertrand Russell in 1905. Both writers, but especially Strawson, held that presupposition was an important concept for understanding the nature of meaning. This had a good run in the philosophical arena, but within twenty years had been picked up by the linguists, and in 1970 became almost a steady diet for papers and seminars in some schools of lin-

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

4

Strategy

guistics. I do not know if this was a passing fad, or will prove a permanent part of any future linguistic theory. Here we have an idea, first promulgated by Russell in a theory of meaning that had immediate metaphysical applications, then transformed into philosophers' pure theory for its own sake, and finally lifted wholesale into linguistics, which may be its proper site. Yet although some applied theory of meaning thus becomes first 'pure' and then autonomous linguistics, some leftover philosophical problems about language will perhaps prove as intractable as problems in the residual philosophy of mind.

At the end of the book I shall try to say why there will be a philosophical labyrinth with language at its centre, but before doing the case studies, I should put aside some quite unimportant ways in which language has mattered to philosophy. To call them unimportant is once again to prejudice the outcome. Some philosophers would say that these unimportant ways are precisely why language is so crucial to philosophy. The vindication of my prejudice can only come later, by displaying something more important than the following elementary ways in which language has affected our discipline.

As a matter of course, language matters to philosophy in the way it matters to all extended thought: we express and communicate our ideas in language. But why should the study of language matter more to philosophy than to, say, zoology? There is one answer to this question which is correct but which is not the important answer. It lies in the fact that philosophy has to do with a special kind of perplexity where we hardly know what questions to pose. The problem of free will is readily felt by many people in many walks of life. Indeed, although most of our problems arise in the historical context of Western culture, the malaise about free will is more widespread. The problem is not open to any 'scientific' enquiry thus far imagined, and many will argue that it could not be. Some thinkers attack the problem of free will by distinguishing different notions of freedom or meanings of the word

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Strategy*

5

'free'. In one sense we are free – free enough for concepts of morality and responsibility to come into play. In another sense we are not free, and all that happens now is determined by what has happened earlier. According to this 'soft determinism', as William James called it, determinism is supposed to express a true doctrine in one sense of the words, and a false doctrine in another. Plenty of philosophers have argued that the problem about free will arises from what Hobbes called the 'inconstancy' of language. The same word, they say, is inconstant – it can have several meanings. Even philosophers who argue for a simple determinism have to show that in their arguments the word 'free' is used with a constant sense, leading up to the conclusion that we are not free.

Thus one reason why language matters to philosophy and not to zoology is that philosophers are often concerned with domains where our common ways of thinking and arguing lead us not to clarity and a satisfactory technical language, but rather to ambiguity, equivocation, contradiction, and paradox. A plausible way to attack the difficulty is to try to trace the paradoxes to confusions between different concepts. The symptom is confusion between different senses of words. In particular, if you think that some earlier philosopher has got things wrong, you may say with Francis Bacon, in *The Advancement of Learning*, that,

Although we think we govern our words, . . . certain it is that words, as a Tartar's bow, do shoot back upon the understanding of the wisest, and mightily entangle and pervert the judgment. So that it is almost necessary, in all controversies and disputations, to imitate the wisdom of the mathematicians, in setting down in the very beginning the definitions of our words and terms, that others may know how we accept and understand them, and whether they concur with us or no. For it cometh to pass, for want of this, that we are sure to end there where we ought to have begun, which is – in questions and differences about words.

This pleasing aphorism is echoed in many another writer. Careful attention to words is an important feature of philo-

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Ian Hacking

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6

Strategy

sophical debate, and definition can help avoid equivocation. This is an unimportant way in which language matters to philosophy. We do indeed have a danger, graver than in other disciplines, of entanglement, 'perversion', and empty speech. This trifling feature of language and philosophy will not dominate our case studies.

There is a second minor way in which language has mattered to philosophy, and which seems almost the opposite of what I have just described. It arises from the belief that we shall avoid confusion if only we attend closely enough to distinctions actually present in common speech. So on the one hand language has been held to matter to philosophy because common speech leads us into confusion; the solution, often urged, is to produce exact definitions. But now we have the opposite opinion: reflective use of common speech is the very way to avoid confusion, and defining new terms will actually augment confusion.

This second opinion is often thought to be a new thing, epitomized by Wittgenstein's opinion that 'ordinary language is all right'. The only thing new is the widespread use of techniques of linguistic analysis. For example, Locke's Cartesian predecessors had much debated questions about the essence of matter, Descartes himself contending that its essence lies in extension, taking up space. Incidental to this debate is the question of how *matter* and *bodies* are related. Locke thought that he had a short proof that matter and body are not identical:

if the ideas these two terms ['matter' and 'body'] stood for were precisely the same, they might indifferently in all places be put for one another. But we see that though it be proper to say, There is one matter of all bodies, one cannot say, There is one body of all matters: we familiarly say one body is bigger than another; but it sounds harsh (and I think is never used) to say one matter is bigger than another.¹

Locke claims that we can learn something relevant to a deep

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Strategy*

7

philosophical debate by considering the nuances of seventeenth-century English, of what 'sounds harsh', and of what it is 'proper to say'.

Nor is this technique restricted to negative conclusions. Thus Spinoza, in the course of evolving a remarkable theory of truth, begins by telling us that we cannot hope to get the matter right unless we start to examine how the word 'true' is used in common speech:

Since common use first discovered these words ['true' and 'false'] which were only afterwards used by the philosophers, it seems pertinent for anyone who inquires into the first meaning of a word to see what it first denoted in common use, especially in the absence of other causes which might be drawn from the nature of language for the purposes of the investigation. The first meaning of true and false seems to have had its origin in narratives; a narrative was called true when it related a fact which had really occurred, and false when it related a fact which had nowhere occurred.²

To conclude: there are two well-known minor ways in which language has mattered to philosophy. On the one hand there is a belief that if only we produce good definitions, often marking out different senses of words that are confused in common speech, we will avoid the conceptual traps that ensnared our forefathers. On the other hand is a belief that if only we attend sufficiently closely to our mother tongue and make explicit the distinctions there implicit, we shall avoid the conceptual traps. One or the other of these curiously contrary beliefs may nowadays be most often thought of as an answer to the question Why does language matter to philosophy? Neither seems to me enough.

I have now avowed two prejudices: I opt for applied theory of meaning rather than pure theory of meaning, and I hold that no kind of conceptual minesweeping – neither Bacon's definitions to avoid the errors of the 'vulgar', nor

2. *Thoughts on Metaphysics*, I., vi.3; trans. by F. A. Hayes in *Spinoza, Earlier Philosophical Writings* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill), p. 122.

Cambridge University Press

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Ian Hacking

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8

Strategy

Locke's attention to what in vulgar speech it is 'proper to say' – is the central reason why language matters to philosophy. My case studies will be severely constrained by these prejudices. There are other constraints. First, the case studies should be relatively easy. By 'easy' I mean fairly easy for many of us, here, now, to get our minds around. As an example of something that is not easy, one may take those discussions that fall loosely under the heading 'private language argument', and which derive from Wittgenstein. These are among the more profound speculations of modern times. They have deep implications for the philosophy of mind. They are much too difficult for any case study. I do not understand the ramifications of the argument and it is clear that various commentators take the argument in different, incompatible, senses.

As an example of something that is easy, take Norman Malcolm's little book called *Dreaming*. Descartes crystallized an old question, 'How do I know I am not dreaming right now?' Malcolm proposed a completely novel answer which is, aside from matters of fine detail, quite intelligible to most of us. I shall use it in Chapter 10. We may think it a fine analysis or a ghastly absurdity or something in between, but at least we can understand what the argument is. I do not mean that it is easy for us to reach agreement on whether the argument is valid, but only that there is no problem about what is being argued, and how it is being argued. One critic has said of a recent collection of papers about Wittgenstein's private language argument, that the accounts in that anthology are so disparate that subsequent scholars would have to imagine that the authors worked from different texts of Wittgenstein, or that there were several Wittgensteins.³ No such problem arises for most of my cases under study.

3. C. W. K. Mundle, *Critique of Linguistic Philosophy* (Oxford: University Press, 1969), p. 4, referring to G. Pitcher's anthology, *Wittgenstein, The Philosophical Investigations: A Collection of Critical Essays* (New York: Anchor, 1966).

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Strategy*

9

There are, however, many reasons why I cannot be entirely faithful to the intention to have 'easy' case studies. For example, we ought to have some contemporary work before us, for fear that our conjectures have not already been bypassed or falsified. This entails chapters on material that has not yet entirely crystallized. I shall take two very different metaphysicians who have had much impact on recent philosophy of language: Donald Davidson and Paul Feyerabend. Neither has yet given us a definitive book. They present an ample collection of interrelated doctrines in scattered essays. Each has an important group of disciples. Since the work of each man is complicated and not yet fully nor even consistently articulated, it is not easy. We must take it up because the speculations at the end of the book would be worthless if they were made in ignorance of the present.

The work of Davidson and Feyerabend is hard to obtain: it lies in many journals and volumes, some obscure. This already provides a reason for trying to summarize *their* work, rather than choosing more familiar figures of the immediate past. Some readers will be surprised to find hardly a reference to the late J. L. Austin. The two philosophers of language now living who have exercised the greatest influence on Anglo-Americans are surely P. F. Strawson and W. v. O. Quine. In attempting to assess certain elements in the contemporary scene, I shall say relatively little about them. This is partly because each has already given us at least one classic, epitomizing much of his system of thought. We possess Strawson's *Individuals* and Quine's *Word and Object*; moreover the philosophical magazines are full of excellent argument, pro and con, concerning these great systems of our time. The situation with Austin is less satisfactory, for he died in full vigour, but we do at least have the totality of his incompleted work, and the interested reader can easily follow this for himself. Moreover, I shall not say much about the body of work sometimes called 'Oxford linguistic philosophy'. One can learn a good deal about its practitioners, and how they and

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

their opponents conceive of themselves, in several excellent anthologies listed in the bibliography at the back of this book.

In trying to say something about contemporary matters I shall severely restrict myself in one respect. I shall gratify the requirement of 'ease' for the present audience by examining only work in the Anglo-American traditions. So I shall seem to be tackling the question 'Why does language matter to philosophers who write, or have come to write, chiefly in English?' Yet I shall be trying to answer a much more general question which, for convenience, is illustrated by English case studies. I should be delighted to top up with the work of Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, or other prominent contemporary French figures, and indeed their cases might provide better evidence for the conjectures of my concluding chapter than the material presented here. It would also be very helpful to study the linguistic turn in contemporary German Marxism. I regretfully leave all these aside because it would be unprofitable to provide enough background to understand the various idioms which are so relatively alien to most of us. It is a manifest fact that immense consciousness of language is at the present time characteristic of every main stream in Western philosophy. We are, ultimately, not concerned with why language mattered to some people in Oxford in the 1950s or to other people in Cambridge, Massachusetts in the 1960s or to yet others in Paris after 1968. We are interested in why language matters to (Western) philosophy.

Clearly, then, we wish to examine what is happening now. But we require historical perspective because it is important to know when language has mattered to philosophy. As far as the quest for definitions or the attempt to avoid conceptual confusion go, the answer is surely 'always'. Plato's *Euthyphro* is explicitly a quest for a definition to end confusion. But if there are other, deeper, reasons why language matters to philosophy, it is not a foregone conclusion that they have always been major reasons. Indeed there may be transformations in