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Frontmatter
More information

Linguistic Turns in Modern Philosophy

This book traces the linguistic turns in the history of modern philosophy and the development of the philosophy of language from Locke to Wittgenstein. It examines the contributions of canonical figures such as Leibniz, Mill, Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein, Austin, Quine, and Davidson, as well as those of Condillac, Humboldt, Chomsky, and Derrida. Michael Losonsky argues that the philosophy of language begins with Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. He shows how the history of the philosophy of language in the modern period is marked by a dichotomy between formal and pragmatic perspectives on language and that modern philosophy has not been able to integrate these two aspects of human language. Language as a human activity and language as a syntactic and semantic system remain distinct and competing focal points, although the interplay between these points of view has driven the development of the philosophy of language.

Michael Losonsky is professor of philosophy at Colorado State University. He is author of *Enlightenment and Action from Descartes to Kant* and coauthor and coeditor, respectively, with H. Geirsson of *Beginning Metaphysics* and *Readings in Mind and Language*.

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Frontmatter
More information

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Frontmatter
More information

There are some qualities – some incorporate things,
That have a double life, which thus is made
A type of that twin entity which springs
From matter and light, evinced in solid and shade.
There is a two-fold *Silence* – sea and shore –
Body and Soul. One dwells in lonely places,
Newly with grass overgrown.

E. A. Poe, *Sonnet – Silence*

Die *Sprache*, in ihrem wirklichen Wesen aufgefasst, ist etwas beständig und in jedem Augenblicke *Vorübergehendes*.

[*Language*, regarded in its real nature, is an enduring thing, and at every moment a *transitory* one.]

W. v. Humboldt, *Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues*

Perhaps neither of these abstractions is so very expedient: perhaps we have here not really two poles, but rather an historical development.

J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*

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Michael Losonsky
Frontmatter
More information

Contents

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Michael Losonsky
Frontmatter
More information

Preface

The pioneering historian of linguistics R. H. Robins began one of his essays with this important warning:

> The selection of what is significant within the history of a subject and the reasons for such significance, and even what falls within the bounds of the subject whose history is being traced, must be affected by the author's current standpoint, in part at least the product of his own upbringing.
>
> Such an approach may be deliberate and explicit, and is probably justified if the readership aimed at is wide . . . in that it provides a unifying and easily grasped viewpoint from which to interpret and assess the work of earlier generations; but it does reinforce the theme of unitary development. Earlier scholars are noticed, and commended or criticized according as they comply with working precepts in current favour and to the extent that a contemporary scholar can view their work without serious change in the attitude towards his subject. Persons, and the topics they discuss or expound, are selected for attention as "milestones" (notice the implications of this common metaphor) in the progress of the subject up to the present day. (Robins 1976, 14)

This warning holds for anyone preparing to read or write a history of any field or discipline, but it applies especially to the study of language, which is still ruled by several competing paradigms. It also applies to the history of philosophy, where the diversity of paradigms is as great as philosophers' convictions that they are traveling on the only road worth taking. So, anyone writing on the history of the philosophy of language embarks on a doubly treacherous journey.

Nevertheless, in this book I deliberately take the approach of finding milestones in the history of the philosophy of language in the modern period. I aim to describe the characteristic features at each milestone and then look backward and forward to see where the road came

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Frontmatter
More information

from and where it leads. What I find is surely influenced by my current standpoint and past training, yet I have been careful to recognize diverse developments and distinct roads with their own milestones and also to appreciate the many roads that crisscross this philosophical landscape.

I am particularly interested in milestones on important crossroads, which mark the distances of several directions. What stands out for me in the history of philosophy is that important contributions are such milestones, and the history of the philosophy of language in the modern period is no exception. John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* begins the evolution of the philosophy of language and linguistics in the modern period (Chapter 1). Not only is Locke's work a culmination of a long-term turn to natural language (Chapter 2), but it also initiates two distinct lines of development (Chapter 3). One begins with the work of Leibniz, who highlights the underlying formal structure of natural language, particularly its logical form, which is distinct from the empirical appearance of language. The other begins with Condillac, whose focal point is the empirical appearance of language in human action: language as human behavior on a continuum with cries and gestures.

What Leibniz and Condillac separated, Wilhelm von Humboldt attempts to reunite in his work on human language as dual aspects of language: it is a determined, rule-governed formal and biological system as well as a free, undetermined human activity beyond the scope of science (Chapter 4). Although Humboldt is concerned with form and develops the Leibnizian idea of a linguistic form that underlies linguistic appearances, he is concerned not with logical form but with the phonological structure of natural language. It fell to John Stuart Mill to rekindle work on the logical form of natural language within a naturalistic framework (Chapter 5). In the twentieth century, the logical form of natural language becomes the centerpiece of the philosophy of language, but only after Frege purges it of Mill's psychologism and interprets form in terms of mathematical function (Chapter 6). Ironically, the evolution of the philosophy of language in the twentieth century – for example, the work of Wittgenstein, Carnap, Quine, and Davidson – is an ongoing attempt to renaturalize logical form and function (Chapter 7). The various attempts to naturalize logical form on the basis of linguistic appearances, however, could not sustain a robust conception of language as a formal semantic system and instead encouraged various forms of irrealism about semantic structure. In fact, the turn to linguistic

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More information

performance as the guide for linguistic theory threatens the very idea of a theoretical treatment of natural language (Chapter 8).

Accordingly, my understanding of the philosophy of language is ecumenical. I do not identify the philosophy of language with a discipline that has its "beginnings . . . in the work of the German philosopher and mathematician, Gottlob Frege" (Searle 1971, 2). Frege's work is certainly an important milestone, but so are the works of Condillac, Humboldt, and Saussure. Similarly, it is a mistake to maintain that "Condillac is the first real philosopher of language" (Trabant 1990, 27), because for him language does not simply mirror human thought and cognition, but is an essential or constitutive part of thought and cognition. Neither is it right that a philosopher of language must believe that there is a "logical necessity that the structure of a thought be reflected in the structure of a sentence expressing it" (Baker and Hacker 1984, 66). It should be possible for a philosopher of language to arrive at the conclusion that there is a gap between the structure of thought and the structure of language.

The primary limit I have placed on the subject matter of this book is that the philosophy of language is concerned with natural human language. Thus I agree that "to qualify as a philosopher of language one must . . . investigate . . . ordinary language" (Baker and Hacker 1984, 67n). Accordingly, the philosophy of logic, for instance, even when understood as the philosophy of the languages of logic, is not, as such, part of the philosophy of language. It is treated here only as far as work in logic and the philosophy of logic is explicitly understood as shedding light on the workings of natural language.

What I wish to document is how natural language becomes an object of philosophical and then scientific theory, and how significant features of natural language seem to resist the net of theory. Two competing poles dominate the study of natural human language in the modern period. On the one hand, human language can be seen as something human beings do voluntarily to achieve certain ends, typically communication. I find this to be Locke's perspective, and on this issue he is a successor to the philosophy of language that defines Renaissance humanism. On the other hand, human language can be seen as a structured syntactic and semantic system, whose structure can be studied apart from the particular uses human beings make of this system. This perspective stands out in the philosophy of Scholasticism, and it is the perspective that Leibniz resurrects and develops in light of the critique that logic is irrelevant to understanding the nature of natural language.

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Frontmatter
More information

In the latter case, to borrow from Austin's *How to Do Things with Words*, the focal point is locution: the construction of the linguistic utterance or inscription together with its literal meaning – for instance, its sense and reference. In the former case, the focal point is what a writer or speaker aims to do with the locution, for what ends we produce meaningful utterances and inscriptions, that is, the linguistic performance. Perhaps both of these poles are abstractions and, as Austin notes, "neither of these abstractions is so very expedient," but as Austin adds, "perhaps we have here not really two poles, but rather an historical development" (Austin 1975, 146). I take Austin's observation as my point of departure and try to show that these two poles are two intersecting lines of historical development.

Moreover, I believe there is a lesson to be learned from this history. Although these may just be abstractions from "the total speech situation . . . the *only actual* phenomenon which, in the last resort, we are engaged in elucidating" (Austin 1975, 147–8), without these abstractions a theory of human language is not sustainable. The actual phenomenon of the linguistic performance of a speaker or writer has a tendency to resist theory and undermine the idea that language is a determinate and rule-governed system.

Even the abstraction to what Austin calls "locution" – the sentence with its literal meaning – is insufficient to preserve the systematicity of natural language. Language as a system requires a further abstraction from locution to a structure of possible locutions. The actual locution as a unit of analysis needs to be placed in a system of all possible as well as actual locutions of a language, but actual locutions by themselves do not determine such a system. Language as a rule-governed system, if there is such a thing, will be an abstract structure distinct from actual locutions or performances. But that also means that language as a system will be distinct from the empirical basis for its study – the phenomena of human linguistic activity, that is, human linguistic performances. This distinction has the paradoxical consequence that the empirical basis of the study of language tends to undermine the very idea that language is a system that can be represented by a theory.

This paradox is especially striking because philosophers in the modern period have turned to language in order to solve philosophical problems, particularly problems of mind and cognition, on an empirical and, ultimately, naturalistic basis. Part of the empirical and naturalizing trend in philosophy is to turn to language to better understand the human mind. This is the essence of Locke's linguistic turn, which,

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I argue, begins a series of linguistic turns that motivate and sustain both the science and philosophy of language in the modern period. But the empirical linguistic phenomena by themselves undermine those components of language, particularly linguistic meaning and structure, which could best serve as evidence for the nature of mind and cognition. The view that language is a system with a determinate semantic and syntactic structure is best sustained when this system is understood to be an abstract object that is the object of primarily formal, and not empirical, investigations.

Of course, some linguistic turns, such as Frege's turn to language, were reactions to naturalism and turns to Platonic objects. Following Leibniz's lead, Frege turned to the systematicity of concepts and propositions that language, when properly constructed, represented, and he believed that an accurate representation of this structure would contribute to advancement in philosophy and the sciences. Unfortunately, this turn to systematicity is a turn away from, to adapt Austin's words, "the *only actual* phenomenon which, in the last resort, we are engaged in elucidating" – namely, actual linguistic activity. Therefore, it labors under the suspicion that it is irrelevant to understanding linguistic performances. Moreover, its conception of language is so rich that it cannot well serve as a neutral source for resolving fundamental philosophical disputes. The dispute between Platonism and nominalism, for instance, cannot be resolved by an appeal to an abstract noncausal structure that is the subject of nonempirical knowledge.

It is the contention of this book that modern philosophy was not able to integrate these two faces of language. Language as human activity and language as system remain distinct focal points despite various attempts to develop a unified view. The various attempts to bring these perspectives together have contributed to the development of the philosophical and scientific study of language and have engendered various paradigms for this study, but no consensus has emerged regarding the integration of system and performance, suggesting that these are dual aspects of language that cannot be integrated. This conclusion is contingent, based on the persistent diversity of competing views and historical development, but I believe it is the one best supported by the evidence so far.

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Michael Losonsky
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More information

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