

1

Philosophy of Language: Definitions, Disciplines, and Approaches

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1.1 Introduction: Areas of Investigation

Of the various disciplines which investigate different aspects of human language, this *Handbook* concentrates predominantly on philosophy of language (with some additional discussion of linguistic philosophy and philosophy of linguistics) and, to some necessary degree, also on linguistics. Linguistics, the scientific study of language, is concerned with theoretical and applied analyses of human natural language and with constructing appropriate levels of linguistic representation. Philosophy of language, on the other hand, provides philosophical investigations into the phenomenon of language in general, concentrating especially on the problems of meaning, reference, truth, and understanding. Linguistic philosophy is a philosophical method, an approach to philosophy. And finally, philosophy of linguistics offers philosophical reflections on linguistic inquiries and linguistic theories (brief working definitions of these disciplines and approaches will be proposed before the end of the next section).

In this chapter I provide an overview of different publications devoted to philosophy of language (predominantly in the analytic tradition) in order to reveal the topics and subjects pertaining to the field and to show its width; I also compare individual definitions and descriptions, and propose a set of my own informal definitions of the individual disciplines. Throughout the discussion numerous quotations from sources are given, sometimes in an extended form. Direct contact with sources (and not just summaries and reviews) is beneficial; additionally, it limits the danger of possible distortions of the original formulations.

The chapter also introduces the contents of the volume and concludes with a brief discussion of possible further developments and research options for philosophy of language and some adjacent areas of study. For

the purpose of the forthcoming discussion, I use terms such as *discipline*, *approach*, and *area/field of research* in an intuitive and informal way.¹

Philosophers quite often point to the bifurcation of philosophy and linguistics; Michael Dummett's observation is typical: "General linguistics . . . parted company with philosophy, which had nurtured it, and largely took over the independent subject of philology" (2010: 3–4). Dummett also mentions experimental psychology and logic "disentangling" themselves from philosophy, and, "in yet more recent times, cognitive science has raided philosophical territory and set itself up as a science in its own right" (2010: 4). Massimo Pigliucci traces the development of linguistics (and philosophy of language) within the general context of changes affecting philosophy and science:

One of the most obvious indications that philosophy has been reinventing itself over the past century or so is the stark onset of a panoply of "philosophies of." "Philosophies of" are the way the field has been responding to the progressive emancipation of some of its former branches: science is no longer natural philosophy, but that simply means that now philosophers are free to philosophize *about* science (and, more specifically, about biology, quantum mechanics, etc.) without *doing* science. The same idea applies to linguistics (and philosophy of language), psychology (and philosophy of the social sciences), economics (and philosophy of economics), and so on. (Pigliucci, 2017b: 88)

Histories of linguistics, especially within what is known as the "Western Classical Tradition" (Allan, 2009), point to a similar line of development in language studies (with an origin in early philosophical inquiries), though concentrating rather on the stages mentioned already by Ferdinand de Saussure in his *Course in General Linguistics*: grammar, philology, comparative philology, and linguistics proper. As stressed by the Swiss linguist, linguistics proper owes its origin to the comparative and historical studies of the Romance and Germanic languages (Saussure, 1966: 4–5). However, since this *Handbook* focuses on philosophy of language rather than linguistics, the historical development of linguistics will not be discussed any further; interested readers might consult numerous overviews of the subject, e.g. Allan (2009), Harris and Taylor (1997), and Robins (1997). It is worth stressing here that all these studies start with investigating the philosophical roots of contemporary linguistics, explicitly commenting on the legacy of classical philosophy, especially Plato and Aristotle, in accordance with Zeno Vendler's dictum: "at this point, as it often happens

¹ For a comprehensive discussion and appropriate definitions, see Hvidfeldt (2018), especially chapter 2, on "disciplines and approaches." Fornigari (2004) offers a useful "map of the area," i.e. a discussion of philosophy, linguistic philosophy, and the language sciences, within a broad historical context. Losonsky (2006) discusses linguistic turns in modern philosophy, from Locke to Wittgenstein.

in philosophy, we suddenly realize that the path of inquiry we hoped to open is already marked by the footprints of Aristotle” (1967: 194). Keith Allan quotes Vendler and further elaborates:

if any single individual can be credited with founding the Western Classical Tradition in linguistics it is Aristotle ... Aristotle’s footprints are found in many parts of the linguist’s garden. His view of language would not be greatly out of place within the discipline of linguistics today. This is remarkable, because his primary interest was not grammatical analysis, but the pursuit of a definition for truth through epistemology and logic, or for the arts of rhetoric and literary composition. Aristotle recognized that language is conventional; that the tokens in the mind for things which human beings perceive are symbolized using different forms in different speech communities. ... It was Aristotle who established the importance of explaining the whole from the nature and relationships of its parts; so, of course, he recognized the compositionality of language. ... Aristotle’s analysis of propositional structure, negation, and modality set the grammatical foundations for the Western Classical Tradition in linguistics. (2009: 40)

A quick perusal of selected earlier studies and investigations within philosophy of language (e.g. Searle, 1969; Vendler, 1967), and also introductions and textbooks published within the last fifteen years (e.g. Daly, 2013; McGinn, 2015; Miller, 2018; Morris, 2007; Lycan, 2019a; Szabó and Thomason, 2019) demonstrates that there is a close link between philosophical and linguistic research, and that both the core issues (truth, meaning, reference, understanding) and some less obvious areas (nonliteral uses of language, deception, slurs, properties of discourse) are studied by both disciplines.

A slightly different perspective was offered by Noam Chomsky, who, during a symposium on linguistics and philosophy held at New York University in 1968, explored in his lecture the points of contact between contemporary linguistics and philosophy (in particular, epistemology and philosophy of mind) and concluded:

To summarize, I doubt that linguistics can provide “a new technique” for analytic philosophy that will be of much significance, at least in its present state of development. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the study of language can clarify and in part substantiate certain conclusions about human knowledge that relate directly to classical issues in the philosophy of mind. It is in this domain, I suspect, that one can look forward to a really fruitful collaboration between linguistics and philosophy in coming years. (Chomsky, 1972: 172)

Different aspects of the linguistics and philosophy interface have been extensively discussed on several occasions (to be mentioned below), most recently in the contributions to Altshuler (in press); this *Handbook* also engages in the current debates.

As has been often remarked, topics important for contemporary research in philosophy of language (and, as stressed above, modern linguistics) were introduced and discussed in the very early phases of the development of philosophy in general:²

Though both the philosophy of language and linguistic philosophy are pursued nowadays with more self-consciousness than ever before, both are in fact as old as philosophy. When in the *Euthyphro* Plato asks what is piety, he may be regarded as asking a question concerning the concept *pious* . . . When in the *Phaedo* he advances the theory that general terms get their meaning by standing for the Forms he is advancing a thesis in the philosophy of language, a thesis about how words mean. (Searle, 1971: 1)

The Philosophy of Language has a history almost as long as the history of Philosophy itself. Plato's *Cratylus* and *Sophist*, and Aristotle's *De Interpretatione* and *Prior Analytics*, contain important reflections on topics such as the conventionality of language, the subject–predicate structure, valid inference and its relations with the structure of language and thought, truth, or the ontological implications of linguistic categories.

(García-Carpintero, 2012b: 1)

There is also general agreement that contemporary research in reference, meaning, modality, problems of compositionality, and the relations between semantics and pragmatics stems from the work of Frege, Russell, and Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* (cf. Baldwin, 2006; Davies, 2006; Fennell, 2019; García-Carpintero, 2012b; Potter, 2012, 2020; Soames, 2012). As Michael Potter stresses, the principal contribution of Frege, Russell, and Wittgenstein to the philosophy of language was not so much connected with the fact that “they applied philosophical methods to the study of language,” but rather that:

they applied linguistic methods to the study of certain problems in philosophy. In the course of this work they did develop ideas which shed light on language and how it functions. However, even this must be heavily qualified, since their main contributions were much more to the philosophy of logic (the study of the inferential role of sentences) than to the philosophy of language (the study of how language means what it does).

(2012: 852)

Also, Scott Soames observed in his *Philosophy of Language* that:

Although philosophers have long speculated about language, it wasn't until the late nineteenth century that the philosophy of language emerged as a self-conscious and systematic area of study. Four publications by Gottlob Frege marked this emergence. . . . His systems were the starting points for the stunning development of mathematical logic in the

² The merits of Aristotelian thought for linguistics mentioned by Allan (2009: 40), and quoted above, hold equally well for contemporary philosophy of language. For the most important historical developments in philosophy of language, see Formigari (2004), and the contributions in Cameron and Stainton (2015).

twentieth century, and for the use of logical ideas and techniques in the study of natural languages. (2010b: 7)

The above fragments demonstrate that contemporary philosophy of language has strict ties with logic and formal approaches to language (devised for nonlinguistic purposes). However, even if the discipline originated partially as a “byproduct” of research into the foundations of logic and mathematics, its status has changed immensely: “philosophy of language is, above all else, the midwife of the scientific study of language, and language use” (Soames, 2010b: 1).

The importance of analytic philosophy for contemporary philosophy of language is beyond any doubt (and probably vice versa). William Lycan has recently observed that analytic philosophy contributed several new subdisciplines:³

First, *philosophy of language* as a serious subdiscipline of philosophy. Of course, there were dribs and drabs of philosophizing about language prior to the twentieth century, Plato’s *Cratylus* being an obvious example, but they were puerile, never at all illuminating about the ways in which real language actually works. (Some of the medievals were best at it, and they ingeniously developed Aristotelian logic as best they could.) Thanks to Austin, philosophy of language now includes *all of Speech-Act theory*, affording all philosophical appeals to illocutionary force. Not to mention all appeals to force in linguistic pragmatics and other branches of linguistics; *syntax* is affected by force. (Lycan, 2019b: 209–210)

For the purpose of these introductory remarks, the development of philosophy of language might be tentatively divided into the following periods: classical (with the achievements of Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics), from medieval to modern (including the contributions of Scholastics, Renaissance philosophy, Leibniz, Kant, Humboldt, Mill), early twentieth century (connected with the rise of analytic philosophy and ordinary language philosophy, the “linguistic turn” in philosophy), late twentieth century (influenced by developments in different areas of philosophy, formal semantics, and modern linguistics, especially generative linguistics, and research in semantics and pragmatics), and the most recent phase (with further sources of influence, resulting from the interdisciplinary research in cognitive science and neuroscience, and critical and applied philosophy of language, and the advent of metaphilosophy of language). Individual chapters in this *Handbook* concentrate predominantly on the recent developments, especially at the linguistics/philosophy interface; however, some remarks on the historical background are also provided (especially in Chapters 2 and 3).

³ Apart from philosophy of language, Lycan mentions two more disciplines: action theory and metaphilosophy (“the self-conscious philosophy of philosophy itself,” Lycan, 2019b: 210).

1.2 Defining the Disciplines and Approaches

John Searle, a prominent figure in American philosophy, especially the philosophy of language (earlier), and the philosophy of mind and philosophy of society (more recently), identified in the opening paragraph of his *Speech Acts* (1969) the following questions as forming the subject matter of the philosophy of language:

How do words relate to the world? . . . What is the difference between saying something and meaning it and saying it without meaning it? . . . How do words stand for things? What is the difference between a meaningful string of words and a meaningless one? What is it for something to be true? or false?
 (Searle, 1969: 3)

In the introduction to his later book *Expression and Meaning*, Searle adds another question: “one of the most obvious questions in any philosophy of language is: how many ways of using language are there?” (1979: vii). All these questions still remain foundational for the discipline, as observed more recently by Davies (2006: 29): “foundational questions in philosophy of language concern the nature of meaning, understanding, and communication.” Scott Soames observes that the foundational concepts of philosophy of language (and philosophy as a whole) are “truth, reference, meaning, possibility, propositions, assertion, and implicature” (2010b: 1). For Michael Morris (2007: 1), the three basic questions of the philosophy of language concern language, meaning, and the relation between words and meaning; Daly (2013) extends the list to ten key questions focusing on meaning, reference, understanding, truth, and thoughts. Similar questions are also provided by Colin McGinn, for whom philosophy of language is “concerned with the general nature of meaning” (2015: 1). Alex Miller observes that language has been a major topic of philosophical concern and points to the systematic dimensions of investigation:

philosophy of language deals with some of the most profound and difficult topics in any area of philosophy . . . Philosophy of language is motivated in large part by a desire to say something *systematic* about our intuitive notion of meaning.
 (2018: xi, 8)

This systematic dimension is also stressed by Hans-Johan Glock, who, in contrasting linguistic philosophy and philosophy of language (a topic to be mentioned again below) remarks that “philosophy of language requires a systematic account of language” and that “philosophy of language is interested in the workings of actual languages rather than in the construction of artificial ones” (2008: 52). For many philosophers, especially within the analytic tradition, philosophy of language is mainly concerned with meaning, which has considerable consequences for philosophy in general:

For Frege, as for all subsequent analytical philosophers, the philosophy of language is the foundation of all other philosophy because it is only by the analysis of language that we can analyse thought.

(Dummett, 1978: 441–442)

The concept of meaning is the bridge between the philosophy of language and the philosophy of thought; it is obviously because words have meanings that thoughts can be expressed in language and that the theory of meaning is a path – perhaps the most direct path – to an analysis of the contents of our thoughts. Likewise the concept of truth is the bridge between the philosophy of language and metaphysics, because metaphysics is that branch of philosophy that aims at giving a coherent picture of the reality we inhabit. ... The concepts of meaning and of truth are inextricably linked: they can only be explained *together*. Their explanation will be comprised in a theory of meaning. That is why I continue to believe that the philosophy of language is the foundation-stone of all philosophy.

(Dummett, 2012: 21)

Although Dummett's claim that the philosophy of language is the foundation of all philosophy is far from being generally accepted (see, e.g., Searle's, Williamson's, and Cappelen's comments quoted in the final section of this chapter), the study of meaning, and the relations holding between meaning and truth, meaning and thought, meaning and understanding, etc., is crucial for philosophy in general.

One of the most recent (and advanced) introductions to the field, Szabó and Thomason (2019), is divided into three parts dealing with philosophy of semantics, philosophy of pragmatics, and meaning as a philosophical problem. Very characteristically, *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Language* (Devitt and Hanley, 2006) is divided into two major parts, devoted to "meaning" and "reference." The former investigates issues such as thought and meaning, meaning skepticism, formal semantics, speech acts and pragmatics, propositional attitudes, conditionals, and vagueness, whereas the latter focuses on descriptions, indexicals, anaphora, and truth. Also, most of the canonical texts collected in four volumes in the *Critical Concepts in Philosophy* series (Martinich, 2009b) clearly show that problems of meaning and reference remain the core of philosophy of language, even if extended to different aspects of language communication and understanding. On the other hand, *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Language* (Lepore and Smith, 2006) is divided into parts dealing with "the nature of language," "the nature of meaning," "the nature of reference," "semantic theory," "linguistic phenomena," "varieties of speech act," and "the epistemology and metaphysics of language." Another recent major work, *Companion to the Philosophy of Language* (Hale, Wright, and Miller, 2017), is divided into parts focusing on the following topics: "meaning and theories of meaning," "language, truth, and reality," and "reference, identity, and necessity." Lycan's (2019a) contemporary introduction to philosophy of language (the third edition) extends the

field considerably, though meaning and problems related to meaning remain the core. The four parts of Lycan's volume discuss reference and referring, theories of meaning, pragmatics and speech acts, and finally, the expressive and the figurative (very significantly, in the first and second edition of Lycan's introduction, this last part was entitled "The dark side" and dealt with metaphor only).

One of the most recent introductory textbooks, Green (2020), apart from the more "traditional" chapters on meaning, sense, reference, context, and speech acts, includes also chapters on "despicable discourse" (discussing, among other things, slurs and epithets) and "artful language" (with sections on fiction, metaphor, irony, and jokes).

A very interesting list of topics belonging to the field is presented in Swart's introduction to philosophical and mathematical logic:

the difference between use and mention, Frege's notions of Sinn (sense) and Bedeutung (reference), Mannoury's significs, speech acts, definite descriptions, Berry's and Grelling's paradox, the theory of direct reference, Kant's notions of analytic versus synthetic, logicism, logical positivism, presuppositions, Wittgenstein on meaning, syntax – semantics – pragmatics, conversational implicature, conditionals, Leibniz, de dicto – de re distinction, and grammars. (Bergmans et al., 2018: 329)

The above choice might be motivated by the fact that the "book was written to serve as an introduction to *logic*, with special emphasis on the interplay between logic and *mathematics, philosophy, language* and *computer science*" (Swart, 2018: xi), and one of the aims of the chapter on philosophy of language is to show the applicability of philosophical logic and possible world semantics to that study.

Whereas Swart concentrates on the applicability of philosophical logic, Emma Borg concentrates on the "applied dimension" of philosophy of language itself:

I think philosophy of language might ... be construed as an applied discipline through the methodology and ontology it adopts ... In this sense, philosophy of language is applied not only in virtue of studying some specific part of language but more generally because as a theoretical discipline it stands in a certain relation to empirical data. (2016a: 180)

Jennifer Saul comments on yet another turn within the discipline, and the shift to "consider the ethical and political dimensions of language," which has consequences for the choice of the central notions:

Now ... philosophers of language are working to understand hate speech, political manipulation, propaganda and lies. These issues – vital in the real world – have not yet become central to philosophy of language. But they are at least a part of the conversation, in a way that they weren't twenty years ago. With this shift (though not wholly as a result of it), has come an

increasing philosophical interest in matters other than semantic content and reference. Implicature, accommodation, and speech acts are the central notions in these new debates, rather than semantic content.

(2018: 360–361)

Saul also pays attention to “covert speech acts,” such as “dogwhistles,” brainwashing, insinuating, flattering, and other acts of deception; the phenomenon of covert exercitives is further studied by McGowan (2018, 2019). Such covert acts provide evidence for research covering both formal semantics (cf. Attardo, 1999) and more recent areas of research connected with formalized analyses of intentions, applied philosophy of language, and analyses of “despicable discourse” (see also Hess, Chapter 25, this volume, on the semantic and pragmatic analyses of slurs, and Dynel, Chapter 33, on deception).

This brief perusal of selected textbooks and companions demonstrates that the field of philosophy of language is constantly expanding, a tendency visible also in the choice of topics discussed in the present *Handbook*. It also clearly demonstrates that philosophy of language is far more than “analyzing alleged relations between expressions and things,” which is Chomsky’s opinion (connected with his skepticism about referential semantics):⁴

A good part of contemporary philosophy of language is concerned with analyzing alleged relations between expressions and things, often exploring intuitions about the technical notions “denote,” “refer,” “true of,” etc. said to hold between expressions and something else.

(Chomsky, 2000a: 130)

The approaches and divisions mentioned so far, characteristic of the analytic tradition, are quite close to Umberto Eco’s position in his discussion of semiotics and philosophy of language. He mentions among the problems raised by philosophy of language the “classical issues such as meaning, reference, truth, context, communicational acts (be they vocal or else), as well as many logical problems as analytic vs. synthetic, necessity, implication, entailment, inference, hypothesis, and so on” (Eco, 1984: 7) and stresses that: “a general semiotics is simply a philosophy of language which stresses the comparative and systematic approach to languages (and not only to verbal language) by exploiting the result of different, more local inquiries” (Eco, 1984: 8). However, the Italian semiotician also focuses on other, more phenomenologically oriented issues, as according to him: “Every philosophy of language . . . must ask itself not only ‘To what do we refer when we talk, and with what degree of reliability?’ (a problem

⁴ Hence Chomsky’s (otherwise puzzling) claim: “It is possible that natural language has only syntax and pragmatics” (2000a: 132). He further explains: “natural language has no semantics in the sense of relations between symbols and mind-independent entities . . . it has syntax (symbol manipulation) and pragmatics (modes of use of language)” (Chomsky, 2013b: 44). On semantics in generative grammar, see Chapter 21 by Jakielaszek, this volume, and the references therein.

certainly worthy of consideration) but also ‘What makes us talk?’” (Eco, 1999: 12–13). Eco also comments on problems with providing an appropriate definition of philosophy of language:

It is rather difficult to provide a “catholic” definition of philosophy of language. . . . I am not sure that a general semiotics can answer all the questions raised during the last two thousand years by the various philosophies of language; but I am sure that all the questions a general semiotics deals with have been posited in the framework of some philosophy of language. (1984: 4)

Notwithstanding Eco’s objections, a brief overview of different definitions and descriptions is both necessary and unavoidable. Out of numerous older and most recent definitions, the descriptions proposed by Searle in the introduction to an early anthology of texts in philosophy of language remain close to the approach advocated in this *Handbook*:

Linguistic philosophy consists in the attempt to solve philosophical problems by analysing the meanings of words, and by analysing logical relations between words in natural languages. This may be done in order to solve such traditional philosophical problems as those concerning determinism, scepticism, and causation; or it may be done without special regard to *traditional* problems but as an investigation of concepts for their own interest, as an inquiry into certain aspects of the world by scrutinizing the classifications and distinctions we make in the language we use to characterize or describe the world. The philosophy of language consists in the attempt to analyse certain general features of language such as meaning, reference, truth, verification, speech acts, and logical necessity.

“The philosophy of language” is the name of a subject matter within philosophy; “linguistic philosophy” is primarily the name of a philosophical method. But the two, method and subject, are intimately connected. (Searle, 1971: 1)

A complementary approach to the relation between philosophy of language and linguistic philosophy (and linguistics) was offered by Ian Mackenzie (1997: ix), who defined the discussed areas of study in the following way:⁵ “Linguistics is the empirical study of natural language. Philosophy of language is concerned with the underlying nature of the phenomena that linguists study. And linguistic philosophy is an approach

⁵ Typical definitions of linguistics focus on the discipline’s “scientific approach to language,” cf. the following formulations from three different, highly influential textbooks: “General linguistics may be defined as the science of language” (Robins, 1989: 1); “Linguistics is the scientific study of human natural language” (Akmajian et al., 1995: 5); and “Much is unknown about the nature of human languages, their grammars and use. The science of linguistics is concerned with these questions” (Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams, 2011: 34). A different perspective, also with huge philosophical potential, is offered within functional grammar: “Linguistics is the study of how people exchange meanings through the use of language” (Halliday, 1994: 14). This last definition is connected with the conception of language in Hallidayan Functional Grammar, where it is understood to be a systematic resource for expressing meaning in context (see Halliday, 1978, 1994).