

The Philosophy of Theoretical Linguistics

What is the remit of theoretical linguistics? How are human languages different from animal calls or artificial languages? What philosophical insights about language can be gleaned from phonology, pragmatics, probabilistic linguistics, and deep learning? This book addresses the current philosophical issues at the heart of theoretical linguistics, which are widely debated by not only linguists but also philosophers, psychologists, and computer scientists. It delves into hitherto uncharted territory, putting philosophy in direct conversation with phonology, sign language studies, supersemantics, computational linguistics, and language evolution. A range of theoretical positions are covered, from optimality theory and autosegmental phonology to generative syntax, dynamic semantics, and natural language processing with deep learning techniques. By both unwinding the complexities of natural language and delving into the nature of the science that studies it, this book ultimately improves our tools of discovery aimed at one of the most essential features of our humanity, our language.

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The Philosophy of Theoretical Linguistics

A Contemporary Outlook

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Preface

Philosophy and linguistics have had a long and storied history together. Analysing language has been central to philosophical analysis since ancient times and well after the so-called Linguistic Turn of twentieth-century analytic philosophy. With the incorporation of more logical techniques and models before and after the advent of the generative tradition in linguistics (*circa* 1957), the data and tools of each discipline become almost indistinguishable at times. This is apparent especially in the case of model-theoretic or truth-conditional semantics where both philosophers and linguists have contributed equally to its foundations. But the connections between these subjects don't only follow the purely mathematical path designated by proof theory and model theory, respectively. There are deep philosophical issues embedded in sociolinguistics, cognitive linguistics, and evolutionary and computational approaches to language. These topics often go underexplored.

In the present work, the aim is to mine the significant philosophical resources and puzzles at the heart of the linguistic enterprise, across frameworks. Perhaps the most philosophical work has been done with generative grammar in mind (both in terms of internal accounts and external critiques). Naturally, generative theories and the philosophical questions they pose will be covered in this text. However, our focus won't be on the mainstream linguistic theory exclusively. Questions over formal approaches to pragmatics, the role of constructions in grammar, sign language phonology, deep learning, complexity-theoretic views on language evolution, and many others will be addressed.

The goal is to provide not only a songbird's-eye view of the interconnections between different subdisciplines and frameworks of linguistic theory but to showcase common problems and present novel analyses of the study of language that only a contemporary philosophical overview can offer. Each chapter can be considered a sustained, self-contained argument based on the subfield at hand. The reader shouldn't expect the standard arguments for and against specific views to be rehashed without qualification here. Such claims will only receive emphasis when they contribute to the agenda of unearthing the connections and theoretically interesting divergences between accounts or

revealing the commitments of theorists. References to those classical debates will be included in the *Further Reading* section at the end of each chapter.

The length of each chapter will in part be determined by the amount of philosophical work already present on the relevant topic, however inchoate that literature may be. This, of course, produces an imbalance in which syntax, semantics, and pragmatics seem to receive more investigation than topics such as phonology, sociolinguistics, and computational approaches do. Despite the inherited imbalance, I aim to do justice to these latter subfields by highlighting the unique philosophical issues that often go unnoticed in the philosophical work on linguistics as well as possible connections with the subfields that generally command more of the reflective real estate.

Thus, the primary target of this book is advanced students of either philosophy or linguistics and experienced practitioners at the intersection between these fields. Despite, or rather because of, this integrated focus, there will be enough explanatory resources for those unfamiliar with various topics to follow the narrative and argument. In spite of any author's best efforts at comprehensiveness, some topics will fall beyond the present scope. Where this is an unavoidable choice, it'll be flagged, and where it's deemed an omission, I beg the reader's compassion at the sheer task ahead.

The study of language is both a behemoth and a chimera. There's a plenitude of diverging theories of everything from syntax to lexical semantics to phonological structure. There are also around eighty years of analysis, frameworks, data, and reflection (and that's ignoring American Structuralism, historical linguistics, and much of the Stoic and Arabic work on early grammar). In order to keep the task manageable, I'll therefore devote myself to only contemporary accounts of various theories. For instance, when discussing generative grammar, my attention will be focused primarily on Minimalism as it's the dominant instantiation of the general programme. 'Cognitive linguistics' will refer mostly to extant versions of the theory such as construction grammar. 'Formal semantics' will cover model-theoretic as well as dynamic approaches and so on. Active research will supersede historical reflection, except in cases where leaving out the latter will create an inescapable lacuna (such as in Chapter 5 on pragmatics).

At the end of the book, the reader should have a clear grasp of the theoretical landscape in linguistics across prominent frameworks and formalisms. More importantly, the reader should have a renewed appreciation for the philosophical fecundity of the broader field of theoretical linguistics, both its contemporary outlook and its future prospects.

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