

# THE BLOOMSBURY COMPANION TO THE PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE



EDITED BY  
MANUEL GARCÍA-CARPINTERO  
AND MAX KÖLBEL



B L O O M S B U R Y

# **The Bloomsbury Companion to the Philosophy of Language**

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# Preface

This book aims to provide a comprehensive guide for those who want to embark upon research in the philosophy of language. We have selected nine central areas of the philosophy of language, and were able to enlist the help of nine leading experts to write accessible, yet high-level and up-to-date introductions to each of these areas. Their contributions make up the main body of this book. We complemented this with an introduction recounting the history of the field, an essay on new directions of research, an A–Z of key terms and a bibliography containing suggested further readings in each of the areas. The result will, we hope, be a useful tool for advanced undergraduates, beginning researchers and anyone wishing to gain an overview about where the philosophy of language, or some of its sub-disciplines, stands today.

*The Continuum Companion to the Philosophy of Language\** has been a long time in the making, and we are very grateful for all those who have helped bring it together. First and foremost, we thank the contributors, some of whom have been patient in waiting for their contribution to appear and some of whom have managed to find time to write their contribution when many more urgent demands were eating up their time. We would equally like to thank the editors at Continuum for their support and patience, in particular Sarah Campbell and Tom Crick. Finally, we would like to thank John Horden for preparing the index and helping with the proofreading.

Manuel García-Carpintero  
Max Kölbel

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# Contents

Contributors	vi
Preface	vii
1 Editorial Introduction: History of the Philosophy of Language <i>Manuel García-Carpintero</i>	1
2 On the Nature of Language: A Basic Exposition <i>James Higginbotham</i>	26
3 Formal Semantics <i>Josh Dever</i>	47
4 Theories of Meaning and Truth Conditions <i>Kathrin Glüer</i>	84
5 Reference <i>Genoveva Martí</i>	106
6 Intensional Contexts <i>Michael Nelson</i>	125
7 Context Dependence <i>Kent Bach</i>	153
8 Pragmatics <i>François Recanati</i>	185
9 Semantic Normativity and Naturalism <i>José L. Zalabardo</i>	203
10 Analyticity, Apriority, Modality <i>Albert Casullo</i>	228
11 New Directions in the Philosophy of Language <i>Max Kölbel</i>	251
A–Z of Key Terms	266
Select Bibliography	279
Index	286



# 1 Editorial Introduction: History of the Philosophy of Language<sup>1</sup>

*Manuel García-Carpintero*<sup>2</sup>

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. Medieval philosophers carried out studies of reference ("suppositio") and generalization as sophisticated as any. The *Port-Royal* logicians, Hobbes and Locke took those discussions forward, and, in the latter case, anticipated current concerns about the way natural kind terms work. In the following few pages, however, I will limit myself to drawing a very rough (and rather idiosyncratic) map of the terrain of the contemporary scene, as it was set out in the work of Frege, Russell and the early Wittgenstein – the presupposed common background, taught to beginners in the discipline, for the themes to be further explored from a present-day perspective in the ensuing chapters. In the first part of the chapter, I will outline some core issues as they are presented in what in my view is the insightful systematic articulation of Frege's and Russell's themes in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. In the second part, I will sum up the main issues, describe some contributions to them in Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein and other historical landmarks, and indicate how they are approached today, as presented in the ensuing chapters. The introduction concludes with a brief discussion of research methods and problems in the field.

## **Meaning and Modality in the *Tractatus***

The core issues in the philosophy of language are first put forth with compelling self-conscious depth in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, his appraisal of the presuppositions of Frege's and Russell's Logician Program

– even if the book would not have been possible without Frege's and Russell's ground-breaking research. It is true that, in contrast with Frege's and Russell's works, the *Tractatus* is an opaque piece, whose claims (and even more, the reasons, arguments or at least motivations for them) are difficult to make out, in this respect a reflection of the rather dogmatic methodological attitude of its author. It is also true that such dogmatism appears to have precluded Wittgenstein from seeing the, in some cases glaringly manifest, difficulties for the views he had put forward, and the extent to which the alternative views of his two predecessors, which he had haughtily dismissed, were much more sensible. However, in my view it was in the *Tractatus* that the proper dimensions and interconnections of the main problems confronted afterwards in the discipline are clearly envisaged for the first time. Neither Frege nor Russell appears to have paid much thought to what has become, since the *Tractatus*, a core issue in the philosophy of language – the link between grasping the representational contents of thoughts and sentences, and knowledge of modality; or so I will try to suggest in the next few paragraphs. For the most part they aim not mainly to establish this perhaps idiosyncratic historical point, but to sketch out these core problems, so that later we can trace the relations with how they are approached today, as presented in the chapters to follow.

Those core problems in the philosophy of language only perspicuously adumbrated in the early history of analytic philosophy in the *Tractatus* concern the relations between meaning, modality and our knowledge of them. Frege's project, which he pursued relentlessly for most of his intellectual life and whose (from his perspective) tragic failure Russell spotted, was the *Logicist Program*, aimed at proving that arithmetic reduces to pure logic. Frege's work was hardly a fully-fledged failure: he had come very close to at least reducing arithmetic to logic and set theory, along the lines used later in Russell's and Whitehead's *Principia* or in the independently pursued Cantorian program. In the process, he came up with outstandingly significant conceptual innovations, from modern logic and semantics to an original and influential view in the philosophy of mathematics that many still think fundamentally correct. However, a full appraisal of the epistemological and ontological yields of the project required an examination of the epistemological and ontological status of logic and logical validity themselves; and that in its turn leads to a thorough examination of the nature of the representational devices through which we carry out logically valid inferences: natural language and the thoughts it conveys (what we may call a *theory of intentionality*). Frege and Russell somehow saw this, and in fact made suggestions about the matter (outlined below) at times more sensible than those in the *Tractatus*, at times simply incorporated into it. But it is only in that work, I think, that the nature of the problems and their interconnections is systematically realized, through the

realization that representation in natural languages and in thought is inextricably tied up with discrimination between possibilities.

Notoriously, the *Tractatus* contains a flawed theory of intentionality, the so-called “picture theory”; but, more than its failures, what is interesting for our present purposes is to appreciate what it set out to achieve – especially how Wittgenstein hoped that it would deliver what in his view Frege and Russell had failed to provide: a philosophically adequate account of logical validity and hence of the foundations of their *logician* project.<sup>3</sup> To put it in the metaphor he later used in the *Investigations*, criticising his earlier views, Wittgenstein’s objection in the *Tractatus* to the view on the nature of logical validity that Frege and Russell had defended is that it does not account for the “sublimity” of logic: they did not account for the characteristic modal properties of logical truths and validities, and our knowledge thereof, as resulting from essential properties of the representational means in which they are cashed out. It is such an account, according to him, that the picture theory provides.

According to Frege and Russell, logically valid propositions, and inferential transitions among them, are distinguished by their *maximal generality*; for instance: given that *a* equals *b*, and *b* equals *c*, we can infer that *a* equals *c*, no matter what *a*, *b* and *c* are. According to the *Tractatus*, however, this is wrong (*Tractatus* 6.1231). On the one hand, some logical truths are not literally speaking general (if *Hesperus* is *Phosphorus*, and *Phosphorus* is *Venus*, then *Hesperus* is *Venus* is itself a logical truth); on the other, a general truth may well be only accidentally true (we can express in purely general terms the claim that there are infinitely many things, which according to Wittgenstein is not a logical truth). Logical validities are *necessary*; and they are *a priori*.<sup>4</sup> Frege’s and Russell’s proposals do not account for this crucial fact: why should *maximal generality* entail *necessity* and *apriority*? It was the fact that, in his view, the picture theory accounted for it that mainly recommended it in his eyes. The picture theory is relevant to solve the problem because for Wittgenstein logical validities are expressed in natural languages (*Tractatus* 5.5563) – or the thoughts they convey – whose essential representational properties the picture theory characterizes. Artificial languages, far from being “ideal languages” worth studying in their own right as more adequate to carrying out valid inferences – as Frege and Russell thought – are mere “frictionless planes”; they are useful fictions whose study is a convenient means to exhibit in a simpler way the logical properties of our ordinary assertions and thoughts.

Aside from its motivation as a way of accounting for the modal properties of logical truth and validity, Wittgenstein supported his picture theory of intentionality arguing that only such a theory accounts for two fundamental facts about representation in language and thought. First, we understand linguistic representations and grasp thoughts (at least in paradigm cases, let us say, so as not to prejudge any relevant issue) without knowing whether or not they are

correct, whether or not the represented reality is in fact as represented; I will summarize this henceforth with the slogan "representations may fail". Second ("representations may be new"), we can understand or grasp immediately, without further explanation, representations that we have not encountered before.<sup>5</sup> How is the picture theory supposed to deal effectively with these explanatory issues? (There will be no point in considering the further issue of whether it really is the only theory that accounts for them.) The picture theory, as I understand it, ascribes to any intentional system, i.e., any system exhibiting the two properties to be explained, two crucial semantic features, which we may describe as an *external* and an *internal* one. The external ingredient comprises a lexicon and the correlations of the items in it with independent objects, correlations which Wittgenstein thought of as consisting of implicit ostensive definitions. The internal ingredient is an abstract syntax applying to the items in the lexicon which signifies, by way of what Goodman (1976, 52) calls *exemplification*,<sup>6</sup> identical relations between the items correlated with them by the external ingredient. It is the latter feature that makes sentences and thoughts into *pictures*: the distinguishing feature of pictures is that they represent properties that they themselves exemplify; they represent thanks to the fact that there is a range of properties they literally *share* with the represented situations.

Let us see how this is supposed to solve the first problem, that representations may fail. The syntax determines a class of well-formed elementary sentences; not just any concatenation of items in the lexicon is acceptable, only some are permitted. Each of them is in that respect a *possibility*: it is possible to say it, as opposed to abstaining from saying it, independently of the others. *Saying* is here the lowest common factor of different speech acts – asserting, ordering, conjecturing, requesting, and so on – whose distinguishing differences Wittgenstein thought irrelevant for his concerns. The syntax thus determines a class of maximal "discourses" – allowed combinations of the two designated possibilities for each elementary sentence. Correspondingly, given that the syntax is *shared* by the lexicon and correlated items, it determines the possibility that the combination of items corresponding to the names in any given elementary sentence (a state of affairs) obtains, and the possibility that it does not obtain. It determines thereby a corresponding logical space of maximal combinations of these two possibilities for each state of affairs; only one of them can be actualized, constituting the actual world. What is required to understand a sentence is to know the interpreted lexicon from which it is built, and its logical syntax; what is thereby known is a possible state of affairs, the class of maximal combinations constituting the logical space compatible with its obtaining, what Wittgenstein calls (following Frege) the sentence's *truth-condition*; it is not required to know whether or not this class includes the actual world.<sup>7</sup>

According to this, all (and only) truth-conditions are (contents of) possible sayings, not only those expressed by elementary sentences. Some appropriate set of expressions (the "logical constants", on the Tractarian account) is needed, to gain the additional expressive potential needed to express all truth-conditions. But the claim made about the explanatory virtue of the picture theory for the case of elementary sentences is intended to apply also to complex sentences including these expressions. Understanding them requires, according to the picture theory, knowing the interpreted lexicon, their logical syntax and the identical "syntax" in the world signified by exemplification, plus the set of logical constants needed in order to express every possible truth-condition thereby determined. This assigns to any non-defective (neither tautologous nor contradictory) sentence a truth-condition, without thereby establishing whether or not it actually obtains. Wittgenstein (*Tractatus*, 2.1511; cf. *Investigations*, §§ 95, 194) particularly liked the fact that this little theory accounts for the first problem of intentionality, that representations may fail, while preserving an essential connection between linguistic representations and the world – and thus representations are of real items, not some intermediate ghosts, as in representationalist accounts of perceptual experience. This is achieved in that the represented possible states of affairs are made of real objects, constituting the actual world (all possible worlds, given that all lexical items are on the Tractarian view Kripkean "rigid designators", designating the same entity with respect to all possible worlds) and of equally real, possibility-determining, "syntactical" relations between them.

Accounting for the second explanatory issue (that representations may be new), assuming the picture theory as presented, is straightforward. Knowing the lexicon, the logical syntax that as we have seen signifies by exemplification, and the relevant set of logical constants suffices for understanding sentences beyond those that one has in fact encountered; in contrast, the meaning of any new lexical item must be explained to us.

Finally, this is how the picture theory is supposed to account for the "sublimity" of logic, the fact that we know *a priori* necessary truths and relations of necessary truth preservation, to conclude this sketchy outline: "It is the peculiar mark of logical propositions that one can recognize that they are true from the symbol alone, and this fact contains in itself the whole philosophy of logic" (*Tractatus*, 6.113). If the relations that determine which states of affairs are possible are reflected by identical relations determining which combinations of lexical items are logico-syntactically well formed, we have at the very least the impressionistic beginnings of an explanation. Knowing the facts that determine which possibilities there are, which ones correspond to a given saying, and which ones, expressed by a given saying, are included in the ones expressed by others is already a presupposition of understanding those (or any) sayings. Logical truth is just truth with respect to all possibilities, and

logical validity the containment of all the possibilities for the premises in the possibilities for the conclusion. All these matters are determined by the logico-syntactical relations determining well-formedness, signified by exemplification (what I called the "internal" semantic relations). No particular set of "external" semantic relations (no specific lexicon, set of correlations with external objects) must be known for that, although some must; in that respect, the knowledge might be considered *a priori*.

I have summarily sketched the picture theory of representation that appears to be propounded in the *Tractatus*, the evidence allegedly supporting it, and how it is supposed to deal with what appears to be its main motivation, providing an account of the modal properties of logical truths and validities and our *a priori* knowledge thereof. But there are good reasons to remain sceptical about this account, to say the least. For starters, when one leaves behind the toy examples that Wittgenstein considered early on (such as three-dimensional models of car accidents) and moves to the paradigm cases to which the theory is supposed to apply – linguistic representations in natural languages and the thoughts they express – it seems unbelievable that there are any properties shared by the representation and the objects they are about. How could identical relational properties, no matter how abstract, relate lexical items to determine logico-syntactical well-formedness, on the one hand, and the items they stand for to determine possible situations, on the other? Agreed, this is not obviously wrong. Wittgenstein mentions, to justify his view, the case of transitive relations and the sentences representing them (*Tractatus*, 3.1432). At first sight, the syntactic resources that "accusative" languages and "ergative" languages use to represent transitive eventualities are indeed very different. However, some grammarians argue that, at a sufficiently abstract level, all languages use the same syntactical relations (Baker, 1997). Granting this, however, does not yet take us to the claim that *the very same* abstract syntactic relations are instantiated in the represented transitive eventualities.

Aside from this, the theory appears to be plainly false, and therefore actually unable to provide the explanations predicated of it. If the picture theory were true, at most elementary logical validities would be necessary, and known *a priori*. But modal intuitions as strong as those establishing the necessity and apriority of elementary logical validities credit the same modal status to *red is a colour* or *nothing can be entirely red and entirely green*, and the suggestions by Wittgenstein to deal with these cases on behalf of his theory lead nowhere; not to mention his suggestions of how to deal with mathematical truths, or alleged philosophical truths, like the picture theory itself. And there also are Kripkean examples such as the necessity, given its truth, that *water contains oxygen*, also established by compelling modally relevant intuitions (more on them below). None the less, even though the picture theory stands as refuted



as any philosophical view might be, one can see how it is supposed to account for some philosophically relevant data; and, in so doing, it draws attention to the data: there must be a philosophical account of logical validity, which should explain, or at least explain away, the “sublimity” of logic – our *a priori* acquaintance with modal reality manifest in this case; such an account should rely on a philosophical account of intentionality; a philosophical account of intentionality should explain our capacity to understand new thoughts, and our capacity to understand false thoughts.

Some psychologists are prouder of discovering “effects” (unexpected data for any theory to account for) than of the theories they put forward to account for them: the theories will probably be superseded, while the effects will probably remain. A similar attitude might well prevail in philosophy. The picture theory highlights what in my view makes the *Tractatus* important, which is the conglomerate of philosophical “effects” just mentioned. In the second section, I will indicate how they (and related suggestions by Wittgenstein’s predecessors) have been developed in the current literature, as discussed in the ensuing contributions. I will refer the reader to the chapters in which further elaboration can be found, expanding only on a few issues not taken up by our contributors.

## Contemporary Themes from Frege, Russell and the *Tractatus*

(i) *Reference*. Genoveva Martí’s chapter, “Reference”, presents the debates that have occupied centre stage in contemporary philosophy of language between the descriptivist accounts rooted in the work of Frege and Russell and the New Theory of Reference put forward since the 1970s by philosophers such as Burge, Donnellan, Kaplan, Kripke, Perry and Putnam. Here I will present some differences between Frege’s and Russell’s forms of descriptivism – in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein hails Russell’s Theory of Descriptions as a philosophical turning point, adopting the Russellian view.

The core claim of the Theory of Descriptions (cf. Neale’s (1990) excellent discussion) is that, in at least one of their semantic functions, definite descriptions such as “the King of Spain” or “my father” make contributions to the contents expressed by sentences in which they occur analogous to those of quantifiers such as “every” or “some”, and contrasting with those of genuinely referential expressions, such as some proper names and indexicals. Russell himself made the point by contending that descriptions are “incomplete symbols” which, having merely “contextual definitions”, lack a meaning of their own, and disappear on analysis; but this was just a product of the theoretical tools – the formal system – by means of which he presented the view. Thus, consider a sentence such as (1):

- (1) The King of Spain is tall.

The way Russell put it, the main claim of the theory is that, in at least one of its semantic interpretations, this sentence expresses a content equivalent to the one expressed by (2) – a more or less strained natural language equivalent of (3), (1)'s formalization in the sort of formal system Russell was using, assuming the obvious translation key.

- (2) Someone is such that he is King of Spain, there is no King of Spain other than him, and he is tall.

- (3)  $\exists x (Kx \wedge \neg \exists y (Ky \wedge y \neq x) \wedge Tx)$

Indeed, in (2) the definite description has vanished as a specific constituent, distributed into quantifiers, negation, and the identity relation. However, as Neale explains, this aspect of Russell's view can be shown to be idiosyncratic by presenting the core of Russell's theory by means of a different formal system.

In contemporary semantics, quantifiers are analysed in the framework of the theory of Generalized Quantifiers. I refer the reader again to Neale (1990) for additional details and references; Josh Dever's chapter in this book, "Formal Semantics", has a useful introduction to the use of formal frameworks in semantic theorizing, and, in Section 7, further information about the Generalized Quantifiers framework. In an intuitive version of this framework, quantifiers such as "every" and "some" contribute to express quantity relations between the classes of objects to which two predicates apply. For instance, "some writer smokes" expresses the claim that the class of writers and the class of smokers share at least one object; and "every writer smokes", the claim that the difference between the class of writers and the class of smokers has no members. One advantage of this framework, relative to the one Russell was using, is that it allows us to account for other similar expressions, such as "few", "most", "many", etc.

In this framework, what I take to be the core of Russell's theory can be put like this: in at least one of its semantic functions, "the" is an expression in the general category of determiners, including also "every", "some", "most", "few", "many" etc; when it occurs in sentences of the form *the P Q*, it helps to make the claim that the class to which *P* applies has just one member, and it is fully included in the class to which *Q* applies. Put in this way, descriptions do not disappear after analysis: in the semantic analysis, "the *P*" is as much a specific constituent as "every *P*" in "every *P Q*". What remains is what I take to be the core claim of a Russellian Theory of Descriptions; to repeat: in at least one of its semantic functions, definite descriptions contribute to making general, quantificational claims, exactly like quantificational expressions such



as “every child” do, in contrast with the singular claims made with the help of genuine referential expressions such as some proper names and indexicals.

Before moving on to explain what this contrast might be between making singular and general claims, I need to elaborate on a few issues I have passed by quickly in the previous paragraphs. In the first place, I have been speaking of *at least one* of the semantic functions of definite descriptions because, as we are about to see once we have said more about the difference between singular and general terms, the Russellian should allow for the possibility that definite descriptions also have a referential function. Russell himself, and many Russellians, reject that view; but the core Russellian claim, I take it, is only that descriptions behave like quantifiers in at least one of their semantic uses. The second warning I need to make at this point is that I have been ignoring issues of context-dependence. Thus, “tall” in (1) is a context-dependent expression: what counts as being tall in a context differs from what counts as such in other context. Also, for the predicate “King of Spain” with which “the” forms the definite description in (1) to apply to just one object, some hidden context-dependence must be presumed; it might be that the predicate is somehow “*present* King of Spain”, or that quantificational expressions somehow presuppose a contextually given “domain of discourse”. The other example of definite description I mentioned, “my father”, is more obviously context-dependent. Kent Bach’s chapter, “Context Dependence”, discusses this issue in general, and Dever’s chapter, “Formal Semantics”, describes ways for formal theories to encompass the phenomenon.

Let us go back now to the contrast between general and singular claims. Following Kripke (1980, 14), by relying on the Tractarian view that a crucial component (if not the whole) of the contents of sentences and thoughts that we grasp are their *truth-conditions* (the way they discriminate between possibilities, those relative to which the relevant content would obtain from those relative to which it would not) we get the following characterization. When we consider different possibilities for a general claim such as “every writer smokes” to be true, the smoking writers in some of them might well differ from those in others; all that matters is that all writers in each possible state of affairs smoke. The same applies to definite descriptions such as “the first Spaniard to win the Tour de France”, in the sense that Russell’s Theory of Descriptions captures. The false sentence “the first Spaniard to win the Tour de France was born in Cuenca” is easily intuitively understood in such a way that it selects possible worlds where F. M. Bahamontes, the actual first Spaniard to win the Tour de France, was born in Cuenca rather than being born in Toledo as in fact he was, but it also selects possible worlds where the actual second Spaniard in winning the Tour, L. Ocaña, who was actually born in Cuenca, is in fact the first Spaniard to win the Tour. In other words, the person satisfying the description might differ from possibility to possibility, among those where the content obtains.