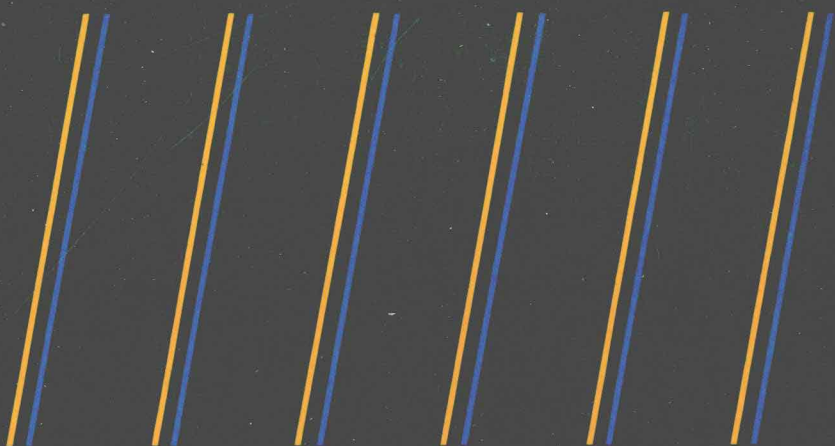
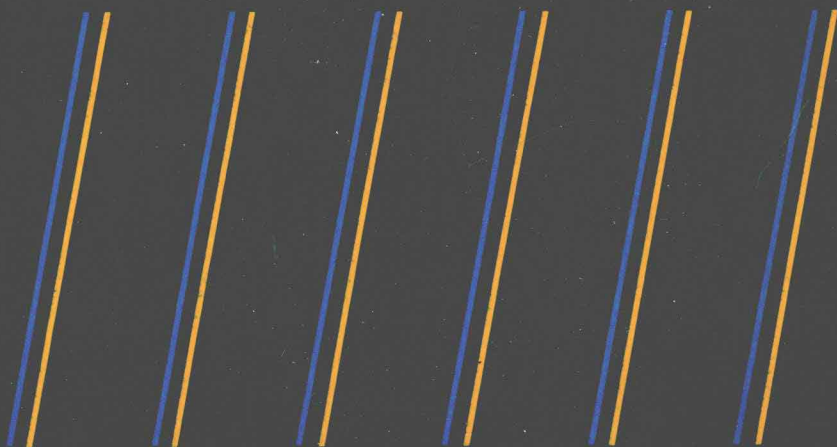


SPREADING THE WORD



FOUNDATIONS IN THE
PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE



SIMON BLACKBURN

SPREADING THE WORD

Groundings in the Philosophy of Language

by

SIMON BLACKBURN

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Preface

Modern philosophy has been dominated by a concern with language. But modern philosophy of language is highly inaccessible. It is very hard for the ordinary student, let alone the layman, to appreciate the problems it explores, or the methods it uses. The interest of the results and their relations to other philosophical or intellectual concerns is thus largely hidden. Everyone who has any interest in modern philosophy knows the great names of the subject – Frege, Russell, Tarski, Quine – but too often even conscientious students know little more. Every philosophy teacher or examiner will know how fragile is the ordinary student's grasp of the issues they tackled, the methods they used, or the interest of their results. This book is an attempt to introduce the problems, and methods, and some of the results.

When I formed the intention of writing such a book, it seemed a modest enough aim. I felt I had at least two qualifications. One is that I like my philosophy to be clear. I tend to believe that too many of the complexities of the subject are really covers for confusions, so that when these are removed the real beauties can be revealed in clear and striking colours. I believe that too few philosophers frame the golden words of Quintilian above their desks: 'do not write so that you can be understood, but so that you cannot be misunderstood.' The other qualification I felt was that I believe in the importance of the subject. I believe that the philosophy of language ought to be widely studied, and that its results and methods are of more than merely specialist interest. I think that confusions about language underlie many other philosophical problems, and that any serious study of, for instance, the metaphysics of morals or of persons, of groups and of psychology demands at least an initial baptism into the issues I want to introduce. In sum, I believe that the great perennial problems of philosophy can be felt by any reflective persons. If we practitioners believe that we have new and better approaches to them, and that philosophical reflection upon language is a part of those

approaches, then it is up to us to address that interest. We ought to be able to show why our discussions are worth hearing.

This motivation, however, soon made me realize how difficult the aim really was. Naturally, it would not do merely to survey various positions on various issues. For the point of the book was not to enable a student to go through the hoops, but to enable him to understand why the hoops are placed where they are. The keynote was to be *appreciation* of issues, not mere acquaintance with them. On the other hand, nearly all the issues have been studied in immense depth. There is no topic here on which more cannot be said, or has not already been said in the immense literature. So I began to feel that I was walking naked through a landscape where every bush concealed an army of snipers. Proper academic caution would demand digging fortified trenches after every step; but the audience I wanted to reach does not need a trench-eye view, any more than it just wants a bird's-eye view. I began to understand why the book I had in mind had not yet been written.

The solution, I felt, was to take the reader into issues by myself arguing them through: I found I could make no real distinction between introducing problems and wrestling with them, but in a way which took the intended audience with me. And this is what I have tried to do. So this is not so much an introductory 'text', or something like a survey of its domain. It is an attempt to show the student what is done by philosophizing about language. It is my own reaction to philosophical problems about language which interest me. But it is written with an audience of beginners in mind. In a sense, it is an indication of the place of the philosophy of language in many other intellectual endeavours – in particular, in the philosophy of understanding, of knowledge, and of truth. It is therefore an attempt to place some of the investigations that go under the philosophy of language, and to indicate not only their implications, but sometimes their limitations as well. Naturally, I hope that the material serves as the basis for courses on the philosophy of language. If it does, it will need supplementing, and I have indicated what I take to be the right supplements in notes to each chapter.

Because I believe that there is no deep study of language which is not also concerned with philosophy of mind, and with

the nature of truth and reality, this book contains more general philosophy than its title might indicate. The philosophical aspects of language I have selected include the whole interaction between thinkers, their language, and the world they inhabit. It is these large themes, rather than detailed technical problems, which I have tried to explore. So, for example, in connection with truth I include quite detailed treatment of particular domains of truth, such as moral truth, and of some aspects of the theory of knowledge. My main regret is that space prevented inclusion of more such examples, for instance on the theory of conditionals, or of possibilities, or of mathematics.

One of the casualties of the trench-eye view is that not only students, but thinkers from other countries and traditions, find much of the philosophy of language incomprehensible. They can then come to dismiss it as irrelevant to their concerns – the product of a “linguistic” or “analytical” school within philosophy, which can be regarded as optional or misguided. But in so far as these labels suggest some particular body of doctrines or of techniques, then I could not accept them. Indeed, in the course of the work I suggest reasons for avoiding some doctrines associated with these titles (chapters 5 and 6). The only sense in which they are appropriate is that we are concerned to think about issues raised by reflecting upon language, and to do it carefully. But doing that is something which no self-respecting philosopher, from any school at all, can hope to avoid.

I have tried to keep footnotes to a minimum, and they mention only works specifically quoted or discussed in the text. Notes giving fuller sets of references, suggestions for further reading, and sometimes subsidiary comments, are included at the end of each chapter. In order not to break the flow I have not generally included indicators to these notes in the text. I have included a small glossary of philosophical terms at the end of the book.

Conversation with many friends and students has helped to shape the book. I should like to thank especially David Bostock, Alberto Coffa, Elizabeth Fricker, Martin Davies, John Kenyon, and Ralph Walker. Edward Craig read the penultimate manuscript with enormous care and his comments helped me in many ways. I should also like to thank the Open University for

permission to use parts of material which I originally prepared for them, in the chapter on reference. I owe especial gratitude to the Radcliffe Trust, for a Fellowship which freed me from my teaching duties and enabled me to contemplate the work. I owe thanks as well to the Master and Fellows of Pembroke College for allowing me to benefit from this release. Finally the text has been endlessly improved by my wife's editorial and literary skills; I owe a debt to her greatly over and above that which all writers must owe to those around them.

Pembroke College
May 1983

S.W.B.

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PART I

**OUR LANGUAGE
AND OURSELVES**

CHAPTER 1

The Shape of the Problems

"When you come tomorrow, bring my football boots. Also, if humanly possible, Irish water spaniel. Urgent. Regards. Tuppy."

"What do you make of that, Jeeves?"

"As I interpret the document, sir, Mr. Glossop wishes you, when you come tomorrow, to bring his football boots. Also, if humanly possible, an Irish water spaniel. He hints that the matter is urgent, and sends his regards."

"Yes, that's how I read it, too . . ."

P. G. Wodehouse, 'The Ordeal of Young Tuppy'.

1. *A Preliminary Map*

A philosophy of language attempts to achieve some understanding of a triangle of elements:

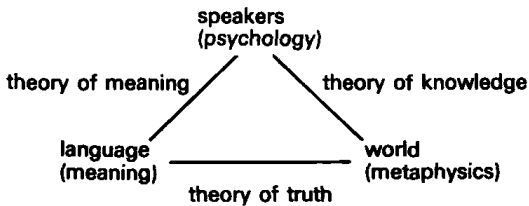


Fig. 1

The speaker uses the language. With it he can put himself into various relations with the world. He can describe it, or ask questions about it, issue commands to change it, put himself under obligations to act in it in various ways, offer metaphors, images, jokes, about what it is like. The task of the philosopher is to obtain some stable conception of this triangle of speaker, language, and world. This aim will appear somewhat different to different generations and times. The things which seem reliable and unpuzzling to one thinker come to seem crucially

problematic to another. One of the difficulties of appreciating the area is just that of seeing which questions should be framed first, and which concepts are reliable and legitimate aids to answering them. Even at this point the choices are contentious. There is no one proper selection of questions and aids which philosophers of language unite in respecting. But there are more or less intelligent guides to choosing, and one good guide will also enable one to come to respect the virtues of other good guides.

At a given time, in a given philosophical tradition, one or another of the points of this triangle will appear prominent. That point will represent the primary source of understanding, so that the natural direction of enquiry is to use that knowledge to aim at conclusions about the other elements. Thus in the European tradition from Descartes until this century the moving conception has been that of the individual, with his particular capacities for experience and reasoning. The aim of metaphysics has been to attain a conception of the world which would enable this individual to know something about it (or enable him to put up with scepticism about it). The nature of his mind determines what kind of language this individual can intelligibly speak: which ideas the language can express for him. In Locke, or Kant, the prime investigation is into the kind of mind the individual has; given this, the nature of language, so far as it is important, or of the world, in so far as it is intelligible, follows on.

In a different tradition, for instance that of the Greeks, it would seem more natural to establish by metaphysical enquiry some feature of the world, of reality. Thus metaphysical argument might show that values are real, or that numbers are real, that they are unchangeable, and so on. It would then appear that we must have capacities large enough to enable us to comprehend these established objects, and from this fact would follow conclusions about our rationality, our minds, and our epistemic (knowledge-gaining) natures. More familiarly, a culture may reasonably accord such respect to the science of the day that the world as depicted by that science becomes the sole and immediate metaphysical reality. Both the nineteenth century and our own have seen philosophy dominated by scientific naturalism, in which the results and (alleged) method

of the natural scientist are regarded as the real philosophical data. In the nineteenth century this attitude found expression in the views of Mill in England and the anti-Hegelian, anti-speculative empiricism of Germany: it led to a vague belief that a science of psychology would produce the only real advance in our understanding of logic, language, and thought. The same attitude has persisted throughout much empiricist philosophy of language this century, although the science which is to provide the eventual source of understanding tends to shift: psychology, formal logic, formal semantics, or structural linguistics.

But the noteworthy change is towards concentration upon language itself, rather than the mind of its user or the world he inhabits. Now it may seem odd to roll the triangle so that the investigation of language assumes primacy. A language has to be capable of describing whatever world the metaphysician allows. It has to be intelligible to whatever creature the psychologist paints. But, it might seem, its interesting properties would first be discovered by settling the nature of that world or that creature. For example, if we ask whether our numeral expressions like '6' or '7'¹ refer to things, and think of that as a question in the philosophy of language, it might seem that we have to wait until the metaphysician tells us about the reality of numbers, and until the psychologist or epistemologist tells us how we can know about them. If numbers are real and we can know about them, then presumably we can regard our numerals as referring to them. Otherwise, we must regard them in some other light. It is not clear how there could be a self-governing investigation into language with enough authority to issue commands to the other philosophical areas. But ideologies change, and it has become natural to give the nature of language considerable autonomy, and even sovereignty over the other elements of the triangle. An individual's psychology becomes whatever is needed to enable him to understand the language which stands revealed, and the world becomes whatever is necessary to make true the true statements made with

¹ In this work I put single quotes around a word or sentence which is being talked about. Sometimes, where it helps clarity, or a lot of words are being mentioned, I also use italics. Double quotes are used for direct quotation from other writers, and to register a deliberate distance from a particular phrasing.

that language. This is the “linguistic turn”, for better or worse, of most of the important philosophy this century: this book will assemble some of the materials necessary for evaluating it.

Not only can the triangle be rotated, but whole aspects of it can wither away. It can diminish to a straight line, or even a point. This will seem a good or bad thing according to whether we want to do away with one kind of subject-matter. One concern can dominate philosophy so entirely that questions in other corners of the triangle become dismissed. One of the few things everyone has heard about logical positivism is that it claimed that metaphysics – the study of the “world” element in the triangle – was dead; at present many writers believe that epistemology has just died, and the investigations traditionally thought of as part of the theory of truth are given regular obituaries. All this arises because people find it hard to see how there can be any enquiry except into the relations of speakers and their language. We see what we are committed to by surveying the language we speak and the beliefs we express by it. There is no other philosophical study of our “world” or our relations to it – although, of course, there are scientific studies of the nature of the things it contains. It is characteristic of any dominant philosophy to be hostile to some one of the corners of the triangle and to shunt all interesting questions into the line between the other two.

Even if we believe that some one element of the triangle dominates the rest, we should beware of forgetting other possible orientations. Amongst other things, this would make it impossible to appreciate the concerns of people who have a different perspective, and it thereby causes distorted history of philosophy. To take a plain example: if we are convinced that all worthwhile philosophy is ultimately the analysis of the meanings of terms which we use, and if we are sure that Hume, or Kant, or whoever, was doing worthwhile philosophy, then we must regard them as analysing the meanings of terms. Unfortunately this corresponds to very little that they appear to have been doing. So if we persist in this diagnosis, we run the risk of judging their work by quite inappropriate standards (in the case of Hume, I show why in chapter 6). But there is in any case a more general reason for tolerating different attitudes towards elements of the triangle. This is that the flow of implica-

tions around it is subtle and hard to perceive, and it is something to which any thinker needs great sensitivity. A theory of language is likely to affect any metaphysics and epistemology, but they in turn affect most of our ideas about language. Or so I shall try to show.

2. *Kinds of Question*

What is to be done to approach this stable conception of the triangle of terms and their relations? Or to put the question another way, how is there scope for a philosopher to improve some untutored, common-sense appreciation of how we stand in relation to our language, and to the world we depict with it?

Suppose we start with the individual. The person who has mastered a language *understands* its sentences and the terms used to make them up. He gives them a meaning, and members of his linguistic community do the same. What kind of fact is this? Understanding the sentences of a language is knowing what they are used to say – which thoughts or questions or commands or wishes they express, in the mouths of speakers of that language. But what is the difference between having such knowledge and lacking it? Or is it wrong to think of some one kind of knowledge; is there only the criss-crossing of ways in which we do understand each other's sayings, and ways in which we do not – a continuous ebb and flow of tides of incomprehension? My experiences, beliefs, ideas, and attitudes are different from yours, and different again from those of people in other places and times. How can we give our words the same significance? But if we do not, how is communication possible at all – how do I pass you information, or tell you what to do, or learn anything about what is believed by other people? There is a tension between the rooted, organic, place of language in particular persons and people, at particular places and times, and the common stock of thoughts which we seem to express, enabling me to understand you, or understand and translate what was written five hundred years ago, or even timeless truths and certainties which do not change. Different temperaments feel this tension differently. Some, like the later Wittgenstein, stress the first aspect, the place of any language in the activities and relations of people at times: "Language has