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# Linguistic Content

*New Essays on the History of  
Philosophy of Language*

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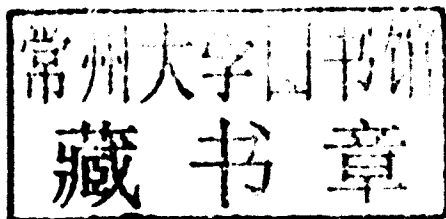
Margaret Cameron  
& Robert J. Stainton

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# Introduction

*Margaret Cameron and Robert J. Stainton*

## 1. Preliminaries

The present volume treats linguistic content across the history of Western philosophy of language, from Plato through Brentano's student Marty. As befits careful and cautious history of philosophy, in addressing this broad topic our contributors go where their chosen texts and historical figures lead them. The summaries of the chapters—presented at the end of this Introduction, and designed to help readers decide which dovetail most closely with their interests—will make this clear. Nonetheless, while we are wary about anachronistically reading the historical texts as overtly and directly answering them, there are two questions that emerge repeatedly as unifying themes. These will be our focus in most of what follows:

Q1: What varieties of linguistic content did the author or period countenance?

Q2: What metaphysical groundings for linguistic content were considered?

In this Introduction, we will clarify Q1–Q2 by surveying some highly simplified (and mostly ahistorical) answers to them. We then highlight a range of answers from the figures and texts addressed herein.

## 2. Ahistorical Answers to Q1 and Q2

There are two ways of understanding Q1, and we are interested in both. The first is robustly metaphysical, taking as its starting point views according to which meanings are: *mental* things, whether representations or acts, in the same family as pains, tickles, and beliefs; *concrete physical* items, in the same family as rocks; *abstracta*, in the same family as numbers; and *social performances* such as promising and betting.

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The question then is which ontology of contents, or which combination of ontologies, was embraced? Since we take that sort of debate to be quite familiar, our focus will be on explaining another reading of the question, more focused on the details and complexities of languages.

In this light, consider caricature versions of Russell and Frege. Meanings for Russell, in the very early years of the twentieth century, were entities external to the mind. Meanings were to be sharply distinguished from mental states or processes. Similarly for Frege. Within that general rubric, and crucially for our purposes, Russell countenanced several varieties of such externalia: particular objects such as Mont Blanc; propositions, such as that Mont Blanc is snow-covered; and functions from an object to a proposition, such as that picked out by 'x is snow-covered'. The foregoing shows already that, to discover an author's view on the broad ontological category to which meanings belong, is not yet to have completely sorted out "the varieties of meaning" he allows for. The range of variation possible is driven home if we consider that Frege proposed a taxonomy that closely paralleled Russell's, but at two levels. Again very roughly: at the level of reference, Frege introduced objects, truth-values, and unsaturated functions from the former to the latter; at the level of sense, he posited individual concepts (that is, modes of presentation of objects), his Thoughts, and (something like) properties. The lesson is, when it comes to the general-ontological-rubric aspect of Q1, Frege and Russell are in the same ballpark, but they nonetheless differ on essential details.

Here is another way at the same point. Two semantics *A* and *B* could adopt the caricatured Russellian view above, not only in terms of taking meanings to belong to the broad family *concrete and abstract externalia*, but even in assigning objects, propositional functions, and propositions as meanings for names, predicates, and declarative sentences respectively—yet still disagree about other varieties of linguistic content. Regarding logical connectives, *A* might take them to stand for functions from two truth-values to one (or, in a Fregean vein, to refer to a function from two truth-values to one while having some rather peculiar mode of presentation as sense). Thus, for *A*, 'and' might stand for a function from  $\langle T, T \rangle$  to  $T$ , and from every other pair of values to  $F$ . *B*, meanwhile, instead of assigning an entity to 'and', 'or', 'if', and so on, might take logical connectives to express a syncategorematic rule (as per Davidson–Tarski). On this view, the meaning of 'and' is given as follows:

*Sentences of the form "p and q" are true iff p is true and q is true.*

So understood, there is no "thing" that 'and' refers to. (The same basic idea is captured by the *Tractarian* proposal that the meaning of logical connectives is given entirely by the truth tables for them.) Similarly, *A* and *B* could embrace the same general ontological rubric yet disagree about quantifiers. *A* might propose that words such as 'something', 'nothing', and 'everything' express second-order properties of sets: the first is true of non-empty sets, the second is true of empty sets, and so on. *B* could urge, to the contrary, that these are syncategorematic. Another meaning

theorist *C* might even deny that quantifiers introduce a different variety of content, proposing instead that they are simply names for abstract particulars, namely SOMETHING, NOTHING, and EVERYTHING. (Put in the formal mode, in terms of varieties of meaningful expressions, all three agree that names, predicates, and sentences are distinct logico-linguistic categories. *A* and *B* agree that quantifier-words are another one. *C* denies this.)

To be clear, the question about sub-varieties of meaning is not specific to the Frege–Russell tradition. Those who take meanings to belong in the general family of mental states and processes are prone to distinguish among the linguistic contents of names, sentences, and logical connectives just as much as the Frege–Russell tradition does. For instance, a familiar line of thought has it that a name corresponds to an idea of an individual, and predicates to mental concepts, while natural language sentences correspond to mental sentences, or judgements. Use theorists, for whom meanings are potential social performances, also distinguish among names (which are governed by conventions for referring) and sentences (which are governed by conventions for various speech acts: stating, promising, commanding).

One could explore this topic at much further length. One could, indeed, devote an entire book-length survey of philosophy of language and philosophical semantics to it. For present purposes, we rest content with clarifying what our first unifying theme is: both what general ontological famil(ies) linguistic contents belong to, and what sub-categories are required within them.

The other question that arises throughout, and unifies the chapters, is Q2: the origin of meaning, in the sense of its metaphysical grounding. In explicating the desired sense of ‘origin’ and ‘grounding’, the usual parallel is with metaethics. Even when all hands concur that torturing babies for fun is wrong, philosophers can disagree about why this ethical fact obtains. Is it because it reduces the overall number of hedons; because it treats the infant as a mere means; because God forbids it; and so on? This is not a question of the *cause* of the fact, so much as what lower-level facts constitute it. In the same vein, whereas Q1 pertains to what sort of thing linguistic content is (or, maybe better, what sorts of things contents are), Q2 asks, instead, in virtue of what linguistic expressions mean what they do. For instance, assuming the meaning of ‘Bertrand Russell’ is simply the person so named, the question remains: what makes this the case? Or again, what more basic facts undergird the semantic fact that ‘cow’ has a meaning at all, and has the particular meaning it does?

There are three familiar options here. The relation of resemblance, in some sense of that term, seems a natural candidate for metasemantic grounding: what makes it the case that ‘cow’ means what it does is that the symbol is similar, in the right sort of way, to cows. Equally familiar is the suggestion that meaning emerges from causal-historical links: what makes it the case that ‘cow’ means what it does is that tokens of this form have been reliably caused by cows. (Or something like that.) Finally, the way that the expression is used by a group is an obvious source of its meaning: what



makes it the case that ‘cow’ means what it does is that the appropriate group of people use it to talk about cows.

As with Q1, settling on one of these general conceptions is not the end of the story. Whichever path one pursues, there are further choice points. A first is whether the meaning of “linguistic sounds” is grounded directly, or whether they are directly paired with something else (typically something mental), and then an additional metasemantic story is told about the latter. Consider, in this light, the resemblance theory. Though Plato toyed with the idea that spoken words resemble what they stand for, or anyway that an ideal language would have this feature, this view has found little favour. In contrast, as will become clear below, it has been extremely common from Aristotle’s *De interpretatione* forward to suppose that (i) mental representations have the content that they do because they are images, or likenesses, of their external world reference and (ii) that public words are paired with mental representations by some non-resemblance mechanism. Similarly, tokens of the spoken word ‘cow’ are not reliably caused by cows. (Thankfully so.) Possibly, however, the mental concept cow is so caused, thereby having its meaning grounded—and then the English word is connected to that concept by some non-causal mechanism.

Another choice point is whether the theorist takes the origin/grounding to be natural or conventional. There is a link between this and the direct/indirect contrast. Though some philosophers have been tempted by the idea of a natural connection between public language words and their meanings (with *natural resemblance* being a preferred case in point), this strikes most as far-fetched. The mere fact of massive cross-linguistic variation—English ‘cow’ versus Greek ‘*agelada*’ versus Spanish ‘*vaca*’—militates strongly in favour of a merely conventional connection. On the other hand, a natural connection (for example, an innate one) between at least some concepts and some of their referents has been taken very seriously both historically and nowadays.

One last clarification before we move on. Though we present Q1 and Q2 as orthogonal, this overstates things. It is important not to run them together, and there do not seem to be entailments from one to the other. Nonetheless, if one takes meanings to be, say, imagistic mental representations, almost inevitably one will think that both the mental and resemblance will have a key role to play in metasemantic grounding. And, if one takes meanings to be, say, use-potentials, almost inevitably one will think that usage does the fixing of meaning facts. Such interconnections show up repeatedly in the historical studies included here.

In sum, we have surveyed very briefly and schematically two questions about linguistic content, clarifying each by presenting postage-stamp answers. Q1 pertains both to the general ontological family to which linguistic contents belong (mental, physical, abstract, use-theoretic?) and to which sub-varieties are required (for names, predicates, sentences, logical connectives, quantifiers?). Q2 pertains to the general issue of what grounds linguistic content (resemblance, causation, use?) and to various sub-options for each (direct or indirect, natural or conventional?).

### 3. Q1 and the History of Philosophy of Language

In addressing Q1 historically, we begin with the broad ontological family to which meanings are held to belong. Looking for a figure who took meanings to be abstract, a candidate is not hard to find: the original Platonist, the Plato of the later works. Granted, to pigeonhole any historical figure, cleanly and unequivocally, within one of our categories is a mistake. Then again, the contrasting ontological categories are useful for getting an overview of the philosophical terrain, and taken with that important grain of salt, if we ask which category the meanings of ‘justice’, ‘piety’, or ‘goodness’ belong to for Plato, the natural answer is that they stand for Forms.

As for an arch Mentalist, Locke comes immediately to mind. To quote the famous passage from book III of the *Essay*: “Words, in their immediate signification, are the sensible signs of his ideas who uses them.” And yet, as Hill explains in his contribution, Locke’s position is also far more subtle and complex than a cursory reading would suggest. (The same holds for much of the Early Modern period: what looks to be crude Mentalism about meaning in everyone from Descartes and Hobbes, through Hume and Berkeley, emerges as something more sophisticated below the surface.) In particular, Locke seems to have held that ideas are merely the *immediate* signification, while the ultimate signification of a word is something external that corresponds to the idea. The same point applies to what look to be Mentalist theories in the later Medieval period. What is most characteristic of theories of meaning in, say, Aquinas, Ockham, and Buridan is the postulation of a mental language, and the suggestion that public language words stand for representations therein. However, as Klima explains, if one asks what the items in the *lingua mentis* mean in their turn, they stand for concrete particulars in the external world. Thus the actual views are something more like a hybrid of Mentalism and Physicalism about the broad ontological category of meanings. In this, all take a leaf from what may be the single most important passage in the history of Western philosophy of language, at the very outset of the *De interpretatione* (16<sup>a</sup>3–8):

Now spoken sounds are symbols of affections in the soul, and written marks symbols of spoken sounds. And just as written marks are not the same for all men, neither are spoken sounds. But what these are in the first place signs of—affections of the soul—are the same for all; and what these affections are likenesses of—actual things—are also the same.

If one were to boil down the debate about the metaphysics of meanings up to the Renaissance, it would be tempting to describe a contest among Mentalists. Platonism in the contemporary sense of human-independent meanings in a “third realm” was essentially unheard of. And thoroughgoing Physicalism was rare. Being staunch Materialists, the Epicureans had to reject any role for the mental, and for the abstract, but this approach had little sway. (See Cameron’s chapter on the Stoics for more.) A radical departure from this consensus appears with Valla, and re-emerges with Reid and Herder. As explained in the chapters by Nauta, Forster, and Rysiew, one

begins to find the idea, reminiscent to a degree of Ordinary Language Philosophy, that meanings are not “things”, either inside the mind or in the third realm, but are instead quotidian social action-potentials.

Having canvassed examples of the four broad categories, we turn now to exploring sub-varieties of linguistic content within the history of philosophy of language. Rather than trying to flag every place in which the topic arises in the chapters that follow, we will focus on three innovative varieties: propositions, syncategoremata, and use-theoretic contents.

At the risk of embracing an overarching narrative of philosophical advancement, there is a tale to be told about a progressive move away from a name-centred theory of linguistic contents. The obvious initial view, possibly not held in all seriousness by anyone, is what has become known as the ‘Fido’-Fido theory, according to which every word stands for an object. (This is the view Wittgenstein targets at the start of his *Philosophical Investigations*.)

A very first insight into the varieties of linguistic contents is that not all words work this way. Put otherwise, the insight is that there *are* varieties. The recognition that languages have, roughly speaking, both names and predicates was, of course, already present in Ancient Greece. A closely related insight, but one that is nonetheless more hard won, is that these distinct parts—the Greek’s *onomata* and *rhemata*—can sometimes come together to form a unity. *Rhemata* can blend with *onomata*, to yield something complete, namely the complex sentence—so that there is a difference between, for example, a list consisting of the name ‘Theaetetus’ and the predicate ‘flies’, and the sentence ‘Theaetetus flies’. As Francesco Ademollo explains, Plato addresses this mystifying union in the *Sophist*. Deeper still, though merely a glimmer in Ancient Greek philosophy, is the idea of a meaning-gluer (rather than just a name-predicate glue), and a meaning-complex (rather than just a name-predicate complex). Aristotle’s fascinating take on this, argues Ademollo, involves time. Crudely put, the meaning-complex, which we would now call a proposition or a state of affairs, is a matter of something-now-holding. The *onomata* and *rhemata* jointly contribute the something-which-may-hold. That which joins these expressions together, namely tense, provides that crucial “now” as meaning-gluer.

This line of thought comes to fruition, as Margaret Cameron explains, in the Stoics. They stress the notion of the sayable—which, importantly, is mind-independent yet is not a Platonic Form, consonant with their deflationary metaphysics. Cameron also describes how the same notion re-emerged independently with Abelard, who shared many Stoicist motivations.

Denying that predicates are names for (peculiar) objects, for example, Forms outside space and time, and instead have a *sui generis* variety of linguistic content, represents a crucial step away from the ‘Fido’-Fido picture. Greater progress still is to recognize meaningful expressions that simply do not have meaning-relata—to recognize, that is, syncategoremata such as ‘if’, ‘or’, ‘only’, and ‘necessarily’. Spruyt and Novaes survey and contrast medieval accounts of these “funny words”. They do not

stand for anything. Yet, as they stress, syncategoremata cannot be dispensed with, since they are absolutely crucial to argumentation (for example, because of the logical connectives) and to metaphysics (for example, because of the meaning of modals like ‘necessarily’). As they explain, in making sense of these words, the medieval tradition built on the Aristotelian theory of meaning. When combined with the idea of an entire mental language, of the sort mentioned above, an ingenious new option opens up. Unlike names or predicates, ‘or’ and ‘if’ cannot correspond to ideas that then represent some external thing. Indeed, ‘or’ does not seem to be a symbol of any “affections or impressions”. However, syncategoremata can correspond to mental operations/processes on the *lingua mentis*. In fact, they are mental acts rather than mental items. A final innovation is underscored by Hill. According to him, Locke treats mixed modes as a *sui generis* kind of linguistic content, a sort of meaning-idea unlike any other in terms of how simple ideas get combined therein. Specifically, it is the attachment of a name to a complex cluster of ideas of various sorts that *creates* a meaning!

In sum, the texts and figures discussed in this volume represent a wide range of answers to Q1. There are differing answers with respect to the broad ontological rubric to which meanings belong: abstracta in Plato, mental representations (at least in the first instance) in Locke and Ockham, physical entities in the Stoics, uses in Valla, Herder, and Reid. And, with respect to the sub-varieties, one can see progressive richness and diversity across time, for example, with the addition of special meanings for predicates, declarative sentences, and logical connectives.

#### 4. Q2 and the History of Philosophy of Language

In Section 2 we encountered three choice points with respect to the origins/grounding of meaning facts:

- direct or indirect?
- natural or conventional?
- resemblance, cause, or use?

We now revisit these with an eye to history.

Our discussion has already made clear that very many figures, taking off from Aristotle, endorse an indirect link between public words and external things. The immediately mental/derivatively external approach can be found from al-Farabi and Ibn Adi, to Ockham, to Locke. (See the contributions by Adamson and Key, Klima, and Hill respectively.) Starkly contrasted to it, is that associated with Plato’s *Cratylus*. Plato’s view there seems to be that linguistic sounds are directly correlated to external things.

Plato is also usually cast as a proponent of a natural connection between linguistic sound and linguistic content. However, as is by now well known, this misses the nuances and complexities of Plato’s view. At a minimum, Plato supposed that an

ideal language should work like this, and that actual spoken languages had degenerated from this ideal. Deborah Modrak presses the complexities and nuances still further, proposing that there are actually two contrasting notions of metasemantic grounding in Plato. There is a normative, prescriptive issue, which pertains to what words are “groping for” in their confused way—that is, to true underlying natures rather than mere appearances. What grounds the latter transcends humans, and it is this latter that involves resemblance. On the other hand, there is a descriptive issue, which pertains to the superficially observable meanings of words, found in ordinary, confused usage. These kinds of semantic facts are grounded by actual talk and convention. (As Modrak stresses, it is essential to contrast these twin notions, because the latter is a very poor tool for the philosopher: one might say that it is the linguistic counterpart of sensory observation. And she paints Plato’s evolving philosophical methodologies across the *Phaedo*, *Sophist*, and *Thaetetus* as diverse attempts to bypass the superficial/conventional/descriptive, to arrive instead at the underlying/natural/prescriptive.)

One might also propose, with some reason, that philosophers like Ockham embrace a natural connection too, this time between mental representations and their denotations—the connection being natural because it rests on brute world-to-idea causation. Contrast this, for instance, with the Lockean idea that certain meanings have to be created by the active powers of the human mind: that the world, acting on its own, cannot furnish such ideas.

Speaking of causation, consider the resemblance–cause–use choice point. The former two have been illustrated already, by Plato on the one hand, at least with respect to “ideal” grounding, and by Ockham et al. on the other. We have also flagged several use theorists: As Lodi Nauta explains, Valla happily grounded meaning in nothing more than custom of usage. So did Herder—though, both of them recognized that, in some cases, it is how a word ought to be used that gives it its meaning. What is more, not all uses are of equal weight: for example, the *hoi polloi* do not fix the meaning of specialized terms within a genre, and contemporary vulgar usage does not fix what Latin words meant in Ancient Rome.

The most pervasive position of all is some kind of hybrid among the options canvassed above. Most salient here is Aristotle. Unpacking the quotation from *De interpretatione*, Aristotle brought to light three stages for metasemantics:

Written Words ► Spoken Words ► Affections/Impressions of the Soul ► External Objects

His view, taking these from right to left, was that the mental impressions represent external objects by means of likeness. The former are, in a sense proprietary to Aristotle’s hylomorphic conception of the soul, copies of the latter. The connection is natural, rather than conventional, and is to be found across humankind. Spoken words are then signs, in the first instance, of these impressions, and only derivatively signs of the corresponding external objects. This connection, being highly variable, cannot be natural, but must rather be conventional. Presumably, then, it does not

involve resemblance (though what it does involve is left unsaid). At the final step, written words are signs of spoken words. What more basic facts ground this connection is also left open, but, given that Greek orthography was not the only possible one, Aristotle might easily have supposed it to be non-natural. Putting this all together, and continuing with our prior example, the written words (as we might have it, the orthographic forms) ‘cow’, ‘agelada’, and ‘vaca’ signify the spoken words (presumably, as we would now put it, the linguistic sounds) /cow/, /agelada/, and /vaca/ respectively. These are all “primarily” signs of cow, the mental symbol. The semantic object of the latter is the animal itself.

Reid’s position was a sophisticated hybrid as well, as Patrick Rysiew explains. Reid agrees with Plato, and with Aristotle, that there is an important role for “natural signs”. But what Reid has in mind are not internal images that naturally stand for externalia (consonant with his rejection of the way of ideas), nor sounds that are somehow like what they mean, but rather “natural signs” like facial expressions and automatic gestures. These, for Reid, play a role in grounding what he terms artificial languages, like English: the former allow us, by a process of bootstrapping, to enter into social compacts or agreements about the conventional signs of spoken tongues. Precisely this, by the way, allows Reid to provide a metaphysical grounding for the meaning of general terms without appealing to “general ideas” as an intermediary (the latter being anathema, as they were for Berkeley).

Finally, Cesalli’s article introduces a twist on the use-theoretic grounding story that will be familiar to contemporary readers. For Marty, what makes ‘Cows moo’ mean what it does is, very roughly, that it is used *to induce the belief* that cows moo. Thus, anticipating Grice, Marty took the mental to be an intermediary, but in a very different way from “the way of Ideas”.

## 5. Chapter Summaries

**Deborah Modrak** looks at the different ways that Plato investigates what words mean and how they should mean. Plato’s project is both descriptive and prescriptive, and throughout his dialogues he explores the ways in which linguistic meanings can and should express the true natures of the things they name, even though they fail at their task. Beginning with the *Phaedo* Modrak identifies a process of determining linguistic meaning similar to the Socratic method of prompting a variety of ‘ambiguous and confused linguistic definitions’ among his interlocutors to find the correct (that is, normative) one. The quest for an explanation for the correctness of names is taken up explicitly in *Cratylus*, where the etymologies of names are explored for their descriptive content, and ‘correctness of a name is a function of its describing the intended referent correctly’. But Socrates and his interlocutors encounter a problem—a recurring problem, as it turns out—that words or even word-parts (which Plato considers to have a certain meaningfulness) for things in the sublunary world with changing natures fail to get a ‘linguistic fix’ on reality. Modrak identifies in *Sophist* that the new

method for ascertaining definitions by means of division provides a sort of improvement, since the method of division along generic and specific lines provides a 'conceptual framework in which to comprehend the actual nature' of a thing, and this gives a better ontological footing for linguistic meaning than that 'implied by ordinary language'. Finally, in *Thaetetus*, in which there is a long (and unresolved) investigation of the nature of knowledge and belief, it once again emerges that, given the instability of perceivable objects by which we come to many of our beliefs, language turns out to be inadequate to the task of fixing the natures of potential objects of knowledge. In the end, it seems that for Plato words do not achieve what they should, which is to express reality as it is. Modrak is aware that contemporary philosophers might not recognize their interests in linguistic meaning in Plato's philosophy, although she rightly points out that the differences are not so great after all: there remains a driving interest in achieving conceptual clarity by means of linguistic analysis. But, whereas Plato begins with ordinary words and tries to find in their meanings the expression of transcendent reality (that is, the Forms), 'the modern solution is to stipulate meanings and then in light of the stipulated meaning determine the reference of the term'. It is a difference of starting point, but not of overall aim.

Francesco Ademollo starts out examining Plato's and Aristotle's claim—whose interpretation is controversial—that there are two kinds of basic components of a simple declarative sentence, *onoma* and *rhema*. He argues that in both authors these are primarily two distinct word-classes, 'name' and 'verb', but that, from Plato's *Cratylus* to his *Sophist*, and from this to Aristotle's *De interpretatione*, we can trace the emergence and refinement of the notion that these two word-classes play different syntactic roles and that, in particular, part of the function of verbs is to signify predication. Ademollo also shows how in the *Sophist* this idea carries with it another, connected one—namely that a sentence has a signification of its own over and above that of its components, and how in Aristotle this might take the form of a glimmer of recognition that what is signified by a sentence is a propositional item. The post-Aristotelian aftermath of this recognition, Ademollo suggests, must have been 'momentous'. One piece of that aftermath is preserved in the writings of the Stoics, taken up in the next chapter.

Margaret Cameron takes up this new type of meaning—propositional meaning—in the Stoics and Peter Abelard (1079–1142). Abelard developed a theory of propositional meaning without, apparently, access to the work of the ancient Stoics, and while working strictly within an Aristotelian logical context. Both the Stoics and Abelard introduce the notion of a 'sayable', a kind of content that is mind-independent and has as its meaning some sort of state of affairs or way things are. Cameron's chapter outlines the ways in which the Stoic theory might have evolved out of a critical response to Plato's philosophy, since the Stoics seemed adamant to eschew the view that linguistic meanings are Platonic Forms. Abelard introduces the idea that sayables are the content of what is said by spoken utterances, and they

correspond and are made true by what he calls *status*, or ways that things are according to their natures (or, as God made them). Both the Stoics and Abelard restrict their focus to natural kind terms, and both seem to have been motivated by a desire for a deflationary metaphysics.

**Peter Adamson and Alexander Key** present, through a vivid retelling and reconstruction of a debate between a tenth-century Arabic philosopher (a logician) and a traditional Arabic grammarian, the site of encounter, conflict, and resolution between two traditions. Although the traditions seem on the surface to hold two different theories of linguistic content (a bipartite theory from grammar, and a tripartite theory from Aristotelian logic), the authors show that at root the two traditions are not in such conflict, and in fact share many of the same features. The Arabic grammatical tradition was deeply suspicious of Greek philosophy, regarding logic as a foreign tool, subject to the conventions of the Greek language; but these were complaints of a cultural sort. The deeper criticism was that, by prioritizing the mental over the verbal, the logical analysis of language was unprepared to deal with problems of polysemy and synonymy, and the grammarians urged that only a greater attention paid to the art of eloquence could properly capture the relation between what we think and what we say. In response to the public debate over this issue, which portrays that the philosophers lost the argument, philosophers such as al-Farabi and Ibn Adi redescribed the mental content associated with spoken language in terms of its being a kind of mental language, a ‘discourse’ (along the lines described by Plato) that is not in any particular language. But what continued to drive debate between these two traditions was, at base, the competing claims to truth: the logicians believed that logic was the path to divine understanding, whereas the grammarians insisted that hermeneutics, the poetical interpretation of revealed Scripture, was the only way. For the latter, context and linguistic interpretation were paramount. Adamson and Key explain that, in the end, it was the work of the great logician Avicenna who provided the means for the two traditions to begin to coalesce, and he did so by constructing an Arabic, as opposed to an Aristotelian (Greek), logic; Avicennian logic was then reapplied back to poetics and literary theory.

There are particular sorts of words that do not seem to have their own linguistic content. **Joke Spruyt and Catarina Dutilh Novaes** take up this issue in their chapter on the medieval study of syncategorematic terms, such as ‘if’, ‘because’, ‘or’, ‘only’, and ‘necessarily’. Medieval authors were keenly interested in these sorts of terms, not just because of their role in argumentation and the study of fallacies, but also because of deeper metaphysical concerns (such as how modal terms such as ‘necessarily’ and ‘contingently’ function, or what ‘one’ means in the sentence ‘Only one is’). Syncategoremata are difficult to characterize, and little help on this front is given by medieval thinkers themselves. Logically, they do not have complete signification, but in some way or other rely on their combination with other meaningful terms to function. Grammatically, they cannot be used as either the subjects or the predicates of sentences. Some logicians described syncategoremata as ‘affects of the intellect’,



such as ‘if’, which is not itself a concept, but instead functions to order components such that one follows another (for example, ‘If Socrates is running, he is moving’). Syncategoremata are tracked into the tradition, beginning in the fourteenth century, of mental language, in which they are considered to be mental ‘acts and operations’. Spruyt and Dutilh Novaes consider, but then reject, the suggestion from others that syncategoremata can be thought of as logical constants. While there is a widespread belief that the boundaries of logic are demarcated by the class of logical constants, the authors explain that this cannot be how syncategoremata were considered: what was considered ‘logic’ in the Middle Ages was far more expansive than it is today (including, for example, epistemology), and there were different senses in which logic was thought to be formal.

In the wake of contemporary turns to externalist theories of mind and language, historians of philosophy have re-evaluated philosophical theories of linguistic content from the past. Motivated in part by the frequent mischaracterization of most pre-twentieth-century theories as ‘internalist’, locating linguistic content somehow ‘in the head’, scholars point to philosophers such as the fourteenth-century Franciscan philosopher William of Ockham (c.1287–1347), who seem to have certain externalist commitments about linguistic (and mental) content. Gyula Klima’s ‘Semantic Content in Aquinas and Ockham’ elaborates upon this characterization of Ockham, first given by historian of philosophy Claude Panaccio. If Ockham is a semantic externalist, then Thomas Aquinas (1225–74)—and a host of philosophers before him—ought to be characterized as ‘hyper-externalists’. To elucidate this characterization and to compare it to the nominalist-variety of externalism espoused by Ockham, Klima examines how these thinkers explain the relation between concepts and their objects. Klima argues that it was an Ockham-style nominalism about semantic externalism that rendered possible the ‘Demon scepticism’ famously entertained by Descartes.

Lodi Nauta’s chapter focuses on the linguistic views of Lorenzo Valla (c.1406–57), the great Renaissance humanist, and in addition provides a broad characterization of the humanists’ approach to language and meaning. Along the way, Nauta helpfully corrects the over-embellished comparison of Valla to various contemporary movements in the philosophy of language, while carefully noting points on which they do bear comparison. Nauta explains that, for Valla, it is linguistic *custom* that grounds meaning: he explains, ‘linguistic usage should sanction the rules of grammar and the meaning of words’. Valla’s emphasis on ordinary usage of language is meant in part as a contrast to the Scholastic tradition of philosophy of language grounded in Aristotelian logic, specifically the *Categories*, in which terminology is taken out of its usual context and grossly adulterated. Valla’s ordinary language was Latin, which might strike us as a strange choice on which to base his common-sense ontology. But the Latin Valla endorsed was not the language of the elite and educated, nor the garbled Latin of the Scholastics, but the language as it was spoken by ancient Romans, which Valla attempted to recover by his study of ancient texts. For Valla, using Latin