

The Linguistic Turn

To what extent is knowledge in the use of language rather than what language is about?

MRes Philosophy of Knowledge:

(slides available at <http://cfpm.org/mres>)

An Example Conversation

Boss: *Why are you late?*

Employee: *Sorry, the traffic was terrible.*

Boss: *But the traffic is always terrible, why don't you start for work earlier?*

Employee: *I put a lot into this company, I work later than most.*

Boss: *We've all been waiting for you, the meeting started 20 minutes ago.*

Employee: *Anyway, you were late last week.*

Boss: *But that was unavoidable, my plane was delayed.*

- *How can we understand what is going on here?*
- *Are we justified in imputing intentions, motivations etc. onto the participants?*
- *Don't we have to understand this as part of a "language game"?*
- *Isn't our response just part of a wider language game?*

Basic Idea of the Linguistic Turn

- That many **problems of philosophy** (and wider, the relation of meanings) are better considered as **linguistic problems**
- For example: “**Does God exist?**” might be answered by exploring what was *meant* by “**God**” and “**exist**” (e.g. by looking at other sentences where these occur)
- Marks a shift away from **knowledge about an external world to how language works and is used**

Some simple consequences of the linguistic turn

- Issues of **truth** and **knowledge** are superseded by issues of **usage** and maybe **meaning**
- **Ideas** and **concepts** (which, *at best*, are difficult to pin down) are replaced by **considering linguistic examples**
- Philosophy is not (at all) ***outside*** the things it studies but very much **part of it**, since it is also (only) a linguistic activity

Key dispute – special or ordinary language?

- There is an obvious difference between how philosophers talk and other people (e.g. their abstractions such as “Truth”).
- Should philosophers use a “pure” language to talk about ordinary language and meaning (a meta-language), or use ordinary language for this?
- Does it help to use such a meta-language or does it create problems?
- Is it really ever possible to separate them?

Examples for Discussion

1. In small groups...
2. Choose some of the questions from **Section D** on the distributed sheet
3. Decide which are examples of ordinary language and which are meta-language (about language in some way)
4. Are there difficult cases which are a bit of both?

Analytic Linguistic Philosophy

- It is claimed that many **apparent** problems in philosophy are merely the result of **linguistic confusion** (Ayer and after)
- That the job of philosophy is to “**dig down**” into the **meaning of words** and hence clear up these linguistic confusions
- Dummett’s **fundamental axiom of analytical philosophy** is that “*the only route to the analysis of thought goes through the analysis of language*”

Wittgenstein and *Ordinary Language Philosophy*

- That (almost always) the meaning of a word is defined by its use in ordinary language
 - “*The limits of my language mean the limits of my world*” (Tractatus)
 - “*the meaning of a word is its use in the language*” (Philosophical Investigations)
 - “*What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence*” (Tractatus)
- Thus rejected any special role for philosophers in unearthing “true” meaning

More on Wittgenstein

- Ordinary language is accepted as the given rather than idealised or ‘clarified’
- No such thing as a ‘private language’
- Original reference established by language use in context
- Linguistic meaning often involves circular chains (or webs) of words and phrases
- Considered how language is often used in “language games”, e.g. formal greetings

After Wittgenstein: Austin, Searle, Gardenförs etc.

- Many *utterances* such as commands, expletives, questions etc. can not be understood as being either *true* or *false*
- Thus language is often better considered as just another form of action – a *speech act*
- *Action is primary, pragmatics consists of the rules for linguistic actions, semantics is conventionalised pragmatics and syntax adds markers to help disambiguation (when context does not suffice).* Gardenförs

Influence of the linguistic turn in Social Science

- Motivates a move away from finding the truth *behind* social situations (e.g. the *intentions* of participants) towards studying what people *say* and *do*
- Social science concepts valued less for their *representational properties* as their *ability to effect change* when used
- Academics seen not as *outside* their phenomena (as observers) but as participants *involved in* the phenomena

Examples for Discussion

1. In small groups...
2. Choose some of the questions from **Section A** on the distributed sheet
3. Decide which come about because of confusions with/different uses of language
4. Could they be phrased differently to avoid problems with language?

Two incommensurable worlds?

1. That of **narratives** in language that relate to other language in an identifiable and richly meaningful (albeit subjective) way - the ‘**qualitative**’
2. And that which can be represented as the results of (somewhat objective) measurements and other **formal models** – the ‘**quantitative**’

Can these paradigms be bridged by any means other than subsumption?

Is language self-contained?

- If one asks for the **meaning of a word** what one is told **is itself composed of language** – this ‘move’ does not escape language
- But if one asks for the **meaning of a map** and is told “**Its a map of Australia**”, does this imply that the meaning of this bit of paper is some words?
- Do the **great apes** (who do not have a language) **have no knowledge** (e.g. when showing their offspring how to get ants out with a stick)?
- Does this not ignore the fact that language is first **learned** by an infant who has none?

The Cognitive Turn

- That since cognition *comes before* language that it is more *basic*
- E.g. things that seem to be real for the great apes (objects, social relations etc.) seem to exist *without language*
- Aspects of our *psychology* determine the *shape of our thought* and hence is the foundation of our knowledge
- Thus *attempts* to reassert the philosophical concerns of belief, knowledge etc.

The Cultural Turn

- Language is a part of culture – more, it is inextricably *embedded* in culture (although culture is primarily expressed using language).
- Much cognition is also culture-dependent
- Truth claims and other “*meta-narratives*” need to be critiqued in terms of the *interests* and *power* relations that underlie them
- This is related to
 - *Post-modernist* philosophies
 - *Feminist* philosophies

Post-modernism

- A strong critique – *that one cannot ignore the power relationships behind any text* – questions of truth and power cannot be separated
- Playfully “disrupts” received conceptions by exploring different meanings and interpretations of texts (deconstruction)
- Often mixes in ideas/styles from different schools and eras
- Has a strongly relativist flavour – “there is no meta-narrative”
- Unclear as to what one *can* do

Feminism (as a philosophical position)

- That the whole way in which argument and truth is dealt with is biased by the historical male domination and methods
- In the past many conceptions/frameworks *have* been shown to be biased by culture
- A whole range of positions within this
- A denial of the right of one group to insist its version/framework about truth etc. is right
- In terms of style tends to use narrative, synthesis and example more than argument

Discussion

- Is there such a thing as truth?
- Does everybody have their own truth?
- What do people mean when they talk about “facts” or “alternative facts”?
- How do we collectively decide what to do together if we can not agree on any facts?
- IF there is such a thing as truth and facts, who gets to determine what is true?
- And, in that case can we trust them, not to have their own biases?

Conclusion

- Turning the focus to language brings a change into how things are discussed and what is discussed.
- The roles of truth and language are highly contested...
- ...especially if there are any meta-narratives we should accept or can rely on.
- Being stuck “within” language does have consequences for how we think and how we can agree things.