

Philosophy of language

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philosophy of language, the study of the essence of language and its importance to mankind and culture, is concerned with the relationship between linguistic signs and thought, knowledge (including linguistics as a science), consciousness, logic, communication, truth, reference, and reality

die Sprachphilosophie beschäftigt sich sowohl mit der Frage nach dem Wesen der Sprache und ihrer Bedeutung für den Menschen und die Kultur im Allgemeinen als auch mit dem Zusammenhang zwischen Sprachzeichen und Denken, Erkenntnis (einschließlich der Sprachwissenschaft), Bewusstsein, Logik, Kommunikation, Wahrheit, Referenz und Wirklichkeit

Any attempt to give a reasonably comprehensive overview of the philosophy of language (hereafter: PhoL) is faced with the problem that the term does not refer to a well-defined subject area and even less to a unitary discipline. It was not until the second half of the 18th century that the term PhoL and its cognates in other languages gained general acceptance in the study of language, but the roots of PhoL can be traced back much further. Designations such as *linguistic philosophy*, *analytic philosophy* and *philosophy of linguistics* refer to different approaches within the broad field of PhoL rather than to separate, clearly delimited subdisciplines (Trabant, ed. 1995). Hence, the present article distinguishes between PhoL in a narrow sense, PhoL in a broader sense, and PhoL in the most general sense. Its aim is to explore PhoL and its many ramifications in as succinct a form as possible from a historiographical point of view. Due to space limitations, the focus is bound to be on the most important Western scholars, ignoring the work of many who would also have to be discussed in a comprehensive account.

PhoL in a narrow sense is the philosophical investigation into the essence of natural language, its role in human cognition, behaviour and culture, its functions in the way human beings interact with one another, and its status vis-à-vis reality. Historically speaking, this understanding of PhoL emerges in Greek Antiquity and coincides with the beginnings of the Western study of language in general. It is important to note, however, that the modern concept of language as an abstract system (i.e., in the Saussurean sense) is unknown to the ancient philosophers, whose interests revolve around ‘speech’.

One of the relevant questions raised by the Presocratics (Heraclitus, Parmenides, the Sophists, among others) is about the correctness of sentences and words. A prominent issue is the relation between speech/language and the all-encompassing *lógos*, the fundamental principle that governs the universe, including thought and language. Here lie the roots of the debate on the ‘origin of language’ which permeates the history of PhoL from Antiquity until the 19th century. The two opposing views dominating the early discussion are designated by

the terms *phýsei* (language came about ‘by nature’) and *théseí*, or *nómoi* (language is ‘conventional’). With Plato’s dialogue *Cratylus*, PhoL enters a new phase. Attention is paid to empirical issues of linguistic form and meaning, and the hypothesis that not only sentences but also words are either true or false is brought to a stalemate, which is eventually resolved by Aristotle’s distinction (e.g., in *De interpretatione*) between the meaning of words and the truth (and falsehood) of discourse (cf. Coseriu 2003, Borsche et al. 1995, De Rijk 2002, De Cuyper/Willems 2008). In the subsequent period, the empirical study of language (esp. grammar and stylistics) is established in the work of the Stoics, Dionysius Thrax, Apollonius Dyscolus, Varro, and others.

The development of linguistics out of PhoL is typical of the Graeco-Roman tradition. This order is not universal. In India, for instance, descriptive linguistics emerged several centuries before Pānini (5th century BCE) in preliterate times, and it was not until a few centuries later that the Indian tradition of PhoL began. Incidentally, this tradition did not exert any influence on the Graeco-Roman tradition.

Among the important stages in the further development of Western PhoL are the writings of Augustine and the Scholastics in the Middle Ages. The contribution of the latter (Abelard, Thomas Aquinas, Thomas of Erfurt, William of Ockham, among others) is particularly significant. Although their work is uneven by modern standards because heavily biased by religious concerns, the scholastic discussion of universals in thought and language (realism vs. nominalism vs. conceptualism), modes of signifying (*grammatica speculativa*), logic, and, most importantly, the theory of “suppositions” (based, inter alia, on the distinction between *significatio*, *suppositio* and *appellatio*, cf. Verburg 1998, Pinborg 1972) invariably reflects a keen interest in problems of meaning and conceptualization. Ever since, meaning has remained a key issue in the history of PhoL.

A decisive turn occurred in the 17th century in the wake of the controversy between empiricists like F. Bacon, Berkeley, and Hume, and rationalists like Descartes and Leibniz. Both parties present arguments amounting to a systematic critique of language (Cloeren/Gründer 1995). Although these arguments testify to the importance attributed to natural language vis-à-vis human cognition (which would become the central claim of 18th century philosophers such as Condillac and Herder), language is not held in great esteem in either theory of knowledge. Language is rather considered a source of sophistry and errors which render clear, unprejudiced reasoning and the scientific search for truth impossible. Fostered by Locke’s influential empiricist view of language as primarily an instrument of communication, the tradition of criticising language for its alleged shortcomings would become a pervasive undercurrent in PhoL, especially in the English-speaking world. The rationalist project of *characteristica universalis* as developed, e.g., by Leibniz, reflects the belief that the objects of human cognition may be marshalled in a universal way that abstracts away from the semantic peculiarities of particular languages. Leibniz’ most important contribution to PhoL, however, is to be found in his detailed response to Locke’s famous *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

Apart from Vico, whose work remained largely unnoticed in his own era, W. von Humboldt was foremost in opposing the empiricist and rationalist view that language hinges upon (empirical or innate) thought and is only an additional instrument of communication. To Humboldt, language is nothing less than the ‘organ’ that shapes thought. He goes beyond the observations in the work of Hamann and Herder (e.g., the latter’s seminal *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*) and thinks of PhoL, and the study of language in general, as a part of cultural anthropology. While this view did not catch on in his own time, it would prove a major contributing factor in the development of 20th century linguistics, esp. through the work of Boas, Sapir, Bloomfield, Coseriu, and – albeit not without certain qualifications – Chomsky. Humboldt’s extensive writings arguably represent the culminating achievement of PhoL in the narrow sense. They cover the widest range of issues to date within this scope, among which the following deserve special mention: the fundamental historicity of language, whose true existence rests in dialogue; the conception of language as *enérgeia*, a uniquely human activity and form of knowledge, and the central role of linguistic creativity; the essential variation among the languages of the world, couched in Humboldt’s theory of “innere Form”, and the view that each language has to be studied as an individual with a specific “Charakter” epitomizing a “Weltansicht”; the relation between matter and form in language which Humboldt considers under the heading of ‘articulation’; the belief that speaking a language simultaneously relies on repetition and renewal; language as a systematically structured organism (in a metaphorical sense) and the foundational role of analogy; the definition of the linguistic sign in contrast to mere conventional signs on the one hand and pictures on the other, which enables Humboldt to account for the broad range of functions words may serve, including iconicity (cf. Borsche 1981, Trabant 1986, Di Cesare 1998). Humboldt not only draws on the history of philosophy (e.g., Aristotle and Kant) but elaborates his ideas on the basis of extensive empirical research into a plethora of languages and argues that these have to be analysed in their own right. Finally, Humboldt is occasionally mentioned in connection with the theory of linguistic relativity in the 20th century (Whorf), which states that linguistic habits shape understanding. However, for Whorf language is based on shared “patterns of reference”, and since he is not concerned with language as *enérgeia* and as a condition of cognition, the contributions of both scholars to PhoL should not be conflated.

The extent of Humboldt’s influence on PhoL has long been limited, despite the efforts of certain interpreters in the 19th century (e.g., Steinthal). The same applies to the few, consistently idealistic, remarks on language and signs by Hegel. Schleiermacher’s PhoL fared better, esp. because it was received favourably among students of literary studies (Frank 2001). Authors such as Marty and Wundt discuss issues of PhoL in the spirit of the prevailing psychological paradigm of their time. On the whole, the second half of the 19th century is characterized by a gradual decline of PhoL in the narrow sense, all the more so because the burgeoning study of language is conducted in the spirit of a brazen positivism, to which historical-comparative and neogrammarian linguistics bear witness.

In the 20th century, a multitude of developments contribute to a significant expansion and diversification within the field of PhoL (cf. Dascal et al. 1992-1996 for a series of succinct papers on different topics and perspectives). The most conspicuous development is the unmistakable tendency towards two different conceptions of PhoL that are increasingly disconnected from one another, i.e. a continental one and an Anglo-American one.

On the one hand, issues falling within the scope of PhoL in the narrow sense continue to be addressed by Husserl, Heidegger, Cassirer, Croce, Gadamer, Pos, Merleau-Ponty, and Derrida, among others. Their work – on the meaningfulness of language in society, on the symbolic and semiotic nature of linguistic signs, on the relation between language and literature, language and knowledge, language and science etc. – is increasingly informed by a historical understanding of the discipline itself. This focus fosters a deepened awareness of the place of PhoL in the context of the humanities as a whole (cf. Schmitter 1987ff.). The thrust of this strand in 20th century PhoL is not uniform, though. Cassirer (1994 [1923]) represents a Kantian, idealistic stance, in which language is approached from a viewpoint rooted in cultural semiotics and anthropology. Although natural language is regarded as just one among the many “symbolic forms” through which man creates and structures his universe (along with myths, arts, sciences etc.), language stands out as pivotal in the way it manifests the synthesis of the individual/particular and the general. On this view, language-specific meanings and structures are no obstacle but, on the contrary, the very precondition to make any experience or cognition communicable in whatever language, not because there is a shared extralinguistic reality, but by virtue of the very essence of language itself. Conversely, Heidegger, Gadamer and their followers argue that language is part of ontology and hence not amenable to objective analysis or evaluation. On this view, PhoL is at best equivalent to a hermeneutic understanding of what a language achieves through the speech acts executed by its speakers (Gadamer 1960/1990). Discourse (speaking, listening *and* being silent) ultimately coincides with the mode of being of those engaged in it, and understanding what language really is presupposes the intuitive awareness and comprehension of its immediate presence in discourse. Interestingly, contrary to Heidegger and Gadamer, Cassirer demonstrates a thorough knowledge of the findings of modern linguistics (in particular structuralism) which are integrated in his philosophical observations. However, all three maintain that man is first and foremost a speaking creature and only secondarily a rational one.

On the other hand, philosophers such as Frege, Russell and Wittgenstein give PhoL a new direction by resorting to the application of logic and critical reasoning. This premise is also assumed, from the 1920s onwards, by members of the Vienna Circle (Carnap, Schlick, Waismann, among others) who are the founders of the influential theory of knowledge known as “logical positivism/empiricism”. Issues such as those reported in the previous paragraph are largely considered the result of conceptual and/or linguistic confusion. The method employed in their anti-metaphysical investigations builds on the tradition of a critique of language. The core business of PhoL changes accordingly: the meanings of philosophical

expressions have to be clarified by logical analysis in order to determine whether a particular question addresses a real (philosophical) problem or a pseudo-problem.

This new focus on the relationship between philosophy and language, which became known as the *linguistic turn* in 20th century philosophy (Rorty, ed. 1967, Prechtel 1999), sets the stage for PhoL in the broader sense stated in the introduction. However, at first it is not so much the subject area which is broadened as the focus of inquiry, which does justice to the fact that all rational activity is, one way or the other, mediated through language. This vision of *linguistic philosophy* is buttressed by the introduction of artificial, logical languages in the work of Frege (cf. Dummett 1981) and Russell and Whitehead (*Principia Mathematica*). The aim of artificial languages is to provide unequivocal foundations for the concepts of scientific discourse (including mathematics). In this context, Frege introduces the distinction between an expression's "sense" and its reference. The latter is defined as a truth value, i.e. the conditions that determine whether the object referred to is either that which is true or that which is false. Another major influence is the new style of 'doing philosophy' in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, which exerts great influence on later generations of philosophers not only because of the author's observation that all philosophy has to start off with a critique of language, but also due to the way Wittgenstein probes into the meaning of expressions (sentences and words) by appealing to elementary, seemingly self-evident logical principles such as tautology, contradiction, and the logical structure of simple, atomic sentences.

Linguistic philosophy may be considered the prelude to *analytic philosophy*, still prevalent in philosophy in the English-speaking countries today. In the tradition of analytic philosophy, language advances from method to the proper object of inquiry. The focus is mainly on sentences, proper names and utterances, not lexical items.

Initially, two major trends can be singled out. *Ideal language philosophy* aims at clarifying or replacing natural language expressions by expressions constructed according to the rules of logical syntax and semantics. The basically sceptical idea underlying this approach is that natural language is rife with ambiguities and lexical-conceptual traps that obfuscate the logical form of thought, and is hence unsuited to convey truth. The approach is preoccupied with problems of reference and logic (Tarski, Quine, Kaplan), intersubjectivity (Kripke), beliefs (Davidson), formal semantics and semantic compositionality (Montague) etc., but also seeks to integrate insights from the fields of natural sciences and philosophical pragmatism (occasionally behaviourism as well, as in the work of Quine) in an attempt to minimize speculative assumptions. Contrary to PhoL in the narrow sense, not only reference ("extension") but also the general "meaning" of linguistic signs is analyzed from a referential point of view (cf. Putnam's 'externalism' and Davidson's equation of meaning and 'interpretation'; Davidson 2001). Moreover, contrary to the earlier tradition, reference (e.g., through proper names or definite noun phrases) is studied as a general logico-linguistic phenomenon, and language-specific differences are not taken into consideration (cf. Lepore/Smith, eds. 2006 and Devitt/Hanley, eds. 2006).

Ordinary language philosophy, on the other hand, is informed by G. Moore's common sense criticism of obscure assertions in the work of idealist philosophers and by Wittgenstein's later work, especially his *Philosophical Investigations*. The later Wittgenstein rejects the concept of meaning advanced in Ideal language philosophy and his own *Tractatus*, which was based on the postulate that expressions have a fixed meaning that can be determined in ("Aristotelian") terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. Meaning is now understood in terms of the use of linguistic signs as components of public "language games", i.e. contextualized, partially rule-governed linguistic activities that are part of dynamic forms of life. Furthermore, everyday expressions are considered partly as a source, partly as reliable instruments for the elucidation of philosophical interpretations, which in the *Investigations* are presented in the form of minute descriptions or dialogues.

Analytic philosophers tend to consider the analysis of concepts such as 'truth', 'knowledge', 'belief' etc. as the only viable option to provide philosophy with a secure base. However, most analytic philosophers do not view truth as absolute. Rorty (1980) is among those who point out the limits of analytic and representationalist theories of reference and truth conditions. Brandom (1994) reconstructs reference in terms of inferential relationships by treating discourse as a set of purposive speech acts in which implicit norms are made explicit. Already in the 1950s and 60s, the philosophical focus on ordinary, consensual language had given rise to a number of research practices in which the boundaries between PhoL and linguistics tended to blur, esp. Speech act theory (Austin, Searle) and Grice's theory of conversation. Essentially an intentional social practice, language emerges from discourse, according to these authors, and what is implicitly conveyed in dialogue is as important as what is explicitly coded. Over the last three decades, rapprochement can also be observed between analytic philosophy, the philosophy of mind, and cognitive science (including psychology, neuroscience and computer science), e.g. in the work of Fodor, who argues for the existence of an innate 'language of thought' with its proper syntax and semantics (for a critical account, cf. Saporiti 1997). Finally, philosophical observations are also reflected in the work of many structural, generative, and cognitive linguists. However, to date, the contribution of linguistics to PhoL is a matter of controversy (cf., e.g., Haser 2005 on Lakoff and Johnson's theory of metaphor and embodied realism which was intended as a criticism of the alleged objectivist bias in analytic philosophy).

Efforts such as those reported in the previous paragraph fall within the purview of PhoL in the most general sense mentioned in the introduction. This development is supported by what came to be known as *philosophy of linguistics* since the 1980s (cf. Katz 1985). Crucially, a claim of PhoL in the narrow and broader sense had always been that PhoL, though not autonomous and being dependent on the systematic study of language, is foundational to linguistics, logic, and philosophy alike. Philosophy of linguistics takes the opposite view: PhoL is dependent on sciences, including linguistics, rather than the other way round. Among its main subjects of inquiry are the methods, concepts and theoretical assumptions brought to bear in the language sciences, the status of linguistic intuition, and the

role of social norms in language (Itkonen 2003). Thus, unlike earlier practices, PhoL in the most general sense argues for a pluralistic approach of language on the basis of interdisciplinary theoretical and empirical research at large and sees no intrinsic value in traditional PhoL. The refusal to countenance a distinction between a philosophical and an empirical-linguistic perspective squares with the trend to solve problems of PhoL by reductions rather than by distinctions. Whether this is the right approach, remains to be seen.

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