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The Issue of Language's Authority

Introducing Ernest Gellner's *Words and Things*, Bertrand Russell wrote disparagingly of "linguistic philosophy, which cares only about language, and not about the world."[1] Though this blanket characterization is a travesty, as is Gellner's equally caustic account, the travesty contains some truth. The philosophy that Russell and Gellner targeted—the kind centered in Oxford and Cambridge during the middle decades of the last century—represented an antithetical moment in the dialectical development of Western thought. For millennia, language had not received its due. In reaction, during those several Oxbridge decades it often received more than its due. Now, as subsequent thought swings uncertainly between these prior extremes, we can ask, aided by reflection on discussion to this point in time: where should the pendulum come to rest? What claims can validly be made on language's behalf? Clearly, language serves as a means of communication in philosophy and elsewhere, and as a crucially important instrument of personal reflection. Clearly, too, language can be an object of philosophical or scientific scrutiny, as can history, law, life, evolution, or the galaxies. What more, though, might be claimed specifically for language? One common response is the following.

Foundation

René Descartes made the question of knowledge foundational. More recently, there has been a widespread tendency to place the question of meaning before the question of knowledge and to focus on language as basic. In partial explanation of this shift, Michael Dummett has written that

> once we have achieved a successful analysis of the meanings of the expressions with which we are concerned, then questions of justification may arise, which it may be more or less difficult to

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> settle. But, until we have first achieved a satisfactory analysis of the meanings of the relevant expressions, we cannot so much as raise questions of justification and of truth, since we remain unclear about what we are attempting to justify or what it is about whose truth we are enquiring.[2]

Here, one might wish to distinguish between "satisfactory analysis" of expressions and adequate unreflective understanding of their meanings. However, from at least the time of Plato, philosophers have seen the need to scrutinize the meanings of the expressions they employed. Thus, as Dummett observes, "Someone who accepted Descartes's perspective according to which epistemology is the starting-point of all philosophy might impatiently concede that it was advisable, before undertaking any discussion, first to agree about the meanings of any possible ambiguous terms, but regard this as a mere preliminary to a philosophical enquiry rather than as part of one."[3] Yet it is more than that, Dummett argues; for this initial task is difficult as well as fundamental. "Only when it is clearly grasped how hard it can be to attain an adequate analysis of the meaning of an expression having the kind of generality or depth that makes it of interest to philosophers, can the analysis of meaning be seen as a primary task of philosophy."

With this much many would agree. For reasons like Dummett's, they would see the analysis of meaning as *a* primary task of philosophy, but not necessarily as *the* primary task. Though preliminary to some important matters, clarification of meaning might be subsequent to others. For elucidation of individual meanings would require clarity about the nature of meanings and their proper analysis, and light on these underlying issues might be sought from epistemology, ontology, anthropology, psychology, logic, or elsewhere. Dummett, however, suggests a stronger sense in which the analysis of meanings is "the starting-point, something that must be settled before anything else can be said."[4] He writes that

> the theory of meaning is the fundamental part of philosophy which underlies all others. Because philosophy has, as its first if not its only task, the analysis of meanings, and because, the deeper such analysis goes, the more it is dependent upon a correct general account of meaning, a model for what the understanding of an expression consists in, the theory of meaning, which is the search for such a model, is the foundation of all philosophy, and not epistemology as Descartes misled us into believing.[5]

Examples suggest why even linguistic philosophers might hesitate to go as far with Dummett as these words suggest.[6] To take a single instance, con-

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sider a famed saying of the later Wittgenstein, which was itself an analysis of meaning and laid the basis for other analyses: "For a *large* class of cases—though not for all—in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language."[7] Most philosophers of the past would have contested such an identification, and Wittgenstein might have agreed with them had he shared their metaphysical, epistemological, or psychological views. However, he did not believe, for example, in Plato's eternal, unchanging "Forms," independent of human thought or the flux and flow of temporal, sensible realities. He did not believe in Aristotelian essences or in the corresponding "concepts"—the mental likenesses abstracted from sensible realities and expressed by general terms—with which Thomas Aquinas and others populated the mind. He did not believe in the flow of images, word for word, through the minds of speakers; or in the "felt meanings" that William James correlated with even such expressions as "not," "never," and "not yet." He did not believe in the projective "thinking out" of words that Wittgenstein himself had once postulated, or in the "logical atoms" thus allegedly picked out. He did not believe in any of these candidate meanings for words. This multiple disbelief explains why he could make the suggestion he did, equating words' meanings (in most contexts of their discussion) with the words' established uses. So in this instance as in others, a problem arises for the idea that with the "analysis of meanings" one reaches rock bottom and one's spade is turned. Primacy may often lie elsewhere, in one's views, not of language or word meanings, but of Forms, universals, essences, thought, and the like. The linguistic views may be derivative, and pre-Cartesian philosophers may have been right in recognizing no one part of philosophy as foundational for the rest.[8] However, the foundational perspective is not the only one that assigns a special place to language.

Worldview

In the eighteenth century, Johann Herder pioneered a theme that has since been variously orchestrated by Wilhelm von Humboldt, Edward Sapir, Benjamin Lee Whorf, and others. According to Herder, language "determines the boundary and the outline of all human cognition."[9] According to Whorf, "We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages."[10] For Sapir, the forms of language "predetermine for us certain modes of observation and interpretation"—indeed, "no matter how sophisticated our modes of interpretation become, we never really get beyond the projection and continuous transfer of relations suggested by the forms of our speech."[11] A people's language, it is suggested, shapes their *Weltanschauung*, their worldview.[12]

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Such claims, like Dummett's, might have a stronger or a weaker sense. The idea might be, for example, that different languages just package the same reality differently, much as different metric systems measure the same weights, speeds, or distances differently, without disagreement. Or the contention might be, more significantly, that different languages engender conflicting views of reality: some right, some wrong, or perhaps none of them perfectly accurate. In the Herderian tradition just indicated, the authors' examples and modes of expression may sometimes suggest something more than packaging but they seldom impose a stronger sense.[13] I think this emphasis is right. Yet a case can be made for language's ability to beget reality and not merely to organize it. Thinkers have adduced many individual instances of this ability. At the extreme, it has been suggested that the substantive "God" begot belief in God. More plausibly, the terms "true" and "good" have been held responsible for belief in properties denoted by these allegedly nondenoting expressions. At least as plausibly, Wittgenstein held that single terms for a whole class of things may evoke belief in essences shared by all members of the class, that verbal parallels with verbs that denote mental acts may suggest similar referents for verbs that function differently, and so forth: repeatedly and variously, surface features of language may conjure up nonexistent entities (see chapter 8). However, even if extensive,[14] such influences as these would still be piecemeal, whereas for thinkers in the Herderian tradition the influence of language is systematic and all-embracing: language's influence is comprehensive because thought's coverage is comprehensive and language pervades thought. The connection appears, for example, when Whorf writes: "The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds—and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds."[15] Language shapes our views of the world because it shapes our *thinking*.

Thought

"Concepts and ideas," notes Hilary Putnam, "were always thought important; language was thought unimportant, because it was considered to be merely a system of conventional signs for concepts and ideas (considered as mental entities of some kind, and quite independent of the signs used to express them)."[16] Now the pendulum has swung far in the opposite direction, thanks largely in recent times to the later Wittgenstein.[17] "When I think in language," he observed, "there aren't 'meanings' going through my mind in addition to the verbal expressions: the language is itself the vehicle of

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thought."[18] This does not signify that all thought is linguistic—that, as he had once tentatively put it, "thinking is operating with language."[19] The concept "thinking" is more varied than that.[20] However, Wittgenstein's remarks do raise a question of great interest and importance: can linguistic thoughts—the ones expressed by utterances—be had nonlinguistically?

To spotlight the significance of this query, I suggest the following test. Pick out any sentence so far in this chapter. Let the sentence be short (e.g., "We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages"), or let it be as lengthy as you please. Now do this: have the same thought, nonlinguistically. Do it without words. If, as I expect, you have no idea how even to begin, or if, having made the attempt, you at least have doubts whether what you did, nonlinguistically, really had the same meaning as the words, you may appreciate the importance of language for thought. For, instead of citing the sentences in the preceding pages, I could have substituted those in this chapter, this book, or any other work of philosophy—indeed in any other work on any other topic. Try random statements in the morning paper; try "Thompson was acquitted" or "Stocks climbed higher today."

Though some of Wittgenstein's examples may suggest the possibility of meaning-equivalence between a nonverbal thought and a verbal utterance,[21] in general he, like numerous other linguistic philosophers, reacted critically to the idea that thoughts expressed in a conventional language are simply verbal renderings of thoughts entertained or entertainable nonlinguistically or in a natural, transnational language of the mind. To clarify verbalized thoughts, they would agree, one should look to language—to linguistic practice—and not to any ghostly, nonlinguistic equivalents in the mind. For Wittgenstein and like-minded thinkers, "Words have meaning only in the stream of life."[22]

Dummett becomes more specific. Speaking of what he would prefer to label "linguistic philosophy" rather than "analytical philosophy" (were the former expression not tied, in his view, "to that quite special version of analytical philosophy that flourished at Oxford in the 1950s and 60s"), he writes:

> The basic tenet of analytical philosophy, common to such disparate philosophers as Schlick, early and late Wittgenstein, Carnap, Ryle, Ayer, Austin, Quine and Davidson, may be expressed as being that the philosophy of thought is to be equated with the philosophy of language: more exactly, (i) an account of language does not presuppose an account of thought, (ii) an account of language yields an account of thought, and (iii) there is no other adequate means by which an account of thought may be given.[23]

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The accuracy of this sketch might be questioned for one or the other of the thinkers Dummett lists. Nonetheless, the claims he cites further illustrate the perspective here being suggested. Many linguistic philosophers would agree that to a much greater extent than has often been recognized, an analysis of language is required for an analysis of thought rather than the other way around.

Since language and thought encompass all discourse, on whatever topic, it might seem that no stronger claim than this might be made for language. However, to study language or thought is not to study morality, inflation, continental drift, subatomic particles, or the cosmos. Language or thought is just one reality among many. And to analyze thought or its expression is not to judge or validate it. Analysis of how people do speak or think does not automatically indicate how they should speak or think. So a still more significant claim on language's behalf remains to be considered.

Authority

A passage in G. E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* (1903) can aptly intimate the claim and its significance. For Moore, the question how "good" is to be defined is the most fundamental question in all ethics. This question is not merely verbal, he notes, nor is the desired definition of the sort that interests lexicographers. "If I wanted that kind of definition," he explains, "I should have to consider in the first place how people generally used the word 'good'; but my business is not with its proper usage, as established by custom."[24] How, then, does Moore conceive his task? Though perplexing, his answer is also revealing. "I should, indeed, be foolish," he explains,

> if I tried to use [the word "good"] for something which it did not usually denote: if, for instance, I were to announce that, whenever I used the word "good," I must be understood to be thinking of that object which is usually denoted by the word "table." I shall, therefore, use the word in the sense in which I think it is ordinarily used; but at the same time I am not anxious to discuss whether I am right in thinking that it is so used. My business is solely with that object or idea, which I hold, rightly or wrongly, that the word is generally used to stand for. What I want to discover is the nature of that object or idea, and about this I am extremely anxious to arrive at an agreement.[25]

As I say, this explanation is puzzling. Moore would like his use of the word "good" to agree with its familiar sense, yet he sees no need to determine whether it does, in fact, do so. Though his concern is with the

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object that he believes the word is generally used to stand for, he feels free to ignore whether the object he describes is indeed the one which that word denotes. Who knows? Perhaps it is the object usually designated by the word "value" or "fruitfulness" or "satisfaction"; it does not matter. His account will still be an account of good, regardless of how anyone else uses the word "good." Thus Putnam comments:

> Moore writes as if there were an *object*, "the concept Good," that one could pass about, inspect under a microscope, perhaps take to pieces (be careful not to break it!). The word, on this view, is only a convenient if accidental label for this object. Once we have had our attention called to the object, we can simply forget about the word and concentrate on the object. But what is this object?[26]

If Moore has used the wrong word, how will our attention be called to the intended object? If our attention is directed to some other object, or to no object at all (such, perhaps, not being the customary employment of the word "good"), how can he expect us to accept his account as accurate?

Later, Moore himself characterized the pages from which I have quoted as a "mass of confusions."[27] My present purpose, however, is not critical. I quote Moore because his account is so typical—not in its explicitness, which is relatively rare, but in what it makes explicit. The general stance revealed vis-à-vis language is that of countless thinkers. It would be nice, they might concede, if their use of words agreed with other people's, but that does not really concern them. Words, they hold, can for the most part take care of themselves. If expressions are ambiguous, indicate the intended sense. If they are not sufficiently precise for one's purpose, sharpen them. Where necessary, fashion new ones. Otherwise, get on with the business at hand. Describe or define the good, give an account of causes, explain right action, investigate identity, freedom, time, truth, happiness, or what have you. Only if language is the object of inquiry will language dictate any answers. Otherwise it will not. Such is the overall attitude.

How, though, can any nonlinguistic reality, by itself, dictate any *answer*, in German, French, Hopi, or Swahili? How can Moore's object, for example, tell him what English term to use in naming it? How can it inform him what English words, if any, to employ in describing or defining it? How can it instruct him about defining or describing? How can it teach him the syntax, lexicon, or semantics of any language, actual or ideal? Ever since Plato's failed attempt in the *Cratylus*, philosophers have recognized that words cannot be read straight off from reality. To know what words to use in order correctly, accurately to report, describe, or

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explain any reality, you need something more than just the reality. The question is: will that something more be language, the medium employed in the reporting, describing, or explaining, or will it be something else? Doubtless language has some title to determine what we should say, but how much? If little, where does authority principally reside? What, if not the language employed, can determine, together with the realities described, what words to use in describing them, when making statements in that language?

To clarify the issue, let me highlight the sense, already indicated by the preface's first paragraph, in which the word "language" is here being used. Noting the diversity of conceptions of language, Mario Bunge comments: "As in the case of other important concepts, one may hope that of language to be eventually defined (implicitly) by a comprehensive theory or system of theories."[28] For reasons that will emerge, I do not share this hope or the methodological assumptions that underlie it. In any case, no such definition has garnered consensus, nor is any such needed for present purposes. For the moment, let one basic distinction suffice. Dictionaries, reflecting usage, define language both as communication (e.g., "the use by human beings of voice sounds, and often written symbols representing these sounds, in combinations and patterns to express and communicate thoughts and feelings"[29]) and, more typically, as instrument or medium of communication (e.g., "a system of words formed from such combinations and patterns, used by the people of a particular country or by a group of people with a shared history or set of traditions"[30]). Discussion about the authority of language to determine what we should say implicitly picks out the latter sense: language, in this context, is the instrument or medium, not the communication effected by its means. It is, for example, the natural language I am here employing as I write, not my use of it to say the things I am saying.

A quotation from Gilbert Ryle may help lodge this distinction, so crucial for all that follows, firmly in the reader's memory:

> A Language, such as the French language, is a stock, fund or deposit of words, constructions, intonations, *cliché* phrases and so on. "Speech," on the other hand, or "discourse" can be conscripted to denote the activity or rather the clan of activities of saying things, saying them in French, it may be, or English or some other language. A stock of language-pieces is not a lot of activities, but the fairly lasting wherewithal to conduct them; somewhat as a stock of coins is not a momentary transaction or set of momentary transactions of buying, lending, investing, etc., but is the lasting wherewithal to conduct such transactions. Roughly, as Capital stands to Trade, so Language stands to Speech.[31]

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This is how I shall use the word "language": for the "stock of language-pieces" and not for the "clan of activities." For this is the sense needed in a discussion of language's authority. A natural language may derive its grammar, pragmatics, semantics, and lexicon from the linguistic practice in which it figures; its expressions may derive their meaning from the various "language-games" in which they occur. Still, a language is not a language-game: it is not any mode or style of discourse (narration, argumentation, explanation, prediction, evaluation, exhortation, etc.) in which the language is employed, much less is it identical with the individual utterances that make use of it. The medium is not the message. Hence, to question the message is not to question the medium, or vice versa. To accord authority to the medium is not to accord authority to the message, or vice versa. Despite their intimate connection, the two are distinct.

This first clarification permits a second: using a language must be distinguished from choosing a language. Though obvious, this distinction merits mention since, as a later chapter will bring out, very different considerations apply to the reasonable selection of a language or terminology than to the reasonable employment of the language or terminology selected. Typically, on most occasions, there is little reason to consider what language to speak: one speaks one's mother tongue with those who share it, and their language, if possible, with those who do not understand one's own. Typically, too, there is little reason to make up new meanings for the words of the language spoken. But whatever the idiom adopted, there is always reason to consider how to use it—often much more reason than is recognized. (Witness Moore.) So the question to be considered here (what we should say) has far greater real-life relevance than the other (what language we should say it in), especially since it is a question about which there has been much greater disagreement. Nobody questioned whether Moore should write in English, but critics did seriously question whether he should use that language the way he did, with slight regard for its customary employment.

The notion of language as a determinant of truth or assertability also merits a word of explanation. Many, perhaps most, philosophers have supposed that language alone can furnish answers to some questions (e.g., concerning the marital status of bachelors). Most, however, including linguistic philosophers, have recognized that language cannot by itself furnish answers to most questions. Typically, neither language alone nor reality alone suffices to indicate what we should say, nontautologically, about any reality; but language and the reality to be described may do so, together. If drops of water are falling from clouds, then, given the meaning of "rain" in the English language and a desire to inform English-speaking hearers of the state of the weather, we should say, "It's raining" and not "It's snowing," "It's sleeting," or "The weather is fine."

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The notion of language as a principal determinant of truth and assertability has evoked a common reaction. "This," writes John Mackie, "is the basic problem for linguistic philosophy, to decide whether it is concerned with grammar or metaphysics, with language or the world. And if it is to tell us something about the world, on what evidence or on what arguments will its conclusions rest? If we want to learn about the world, no strictly linguistic evidence will be at all conclusive."[32] True, but the linguistic evidence may be conclusive when joined with the nonlinguistic. The issue that Mackie slights is this: to what extent should language be recognized, in philosophy and elsewhere, as the arbiter of what we should say? Here, I suggest, is the central question for linguistic philosophy in its confrontation with nonlinguistic philosophy; and "the basic problem for linguistic philosophy" is, not to decide whether to talk about language or the world, but to decide what role, in either area of discourse, language should be accorded.

What more, I asked earlier, might be claimed for language, besides its utility for interpersonal communication and personal reflection and its status as a worthwhile object of philosophical and scientific study? The chief response I can now suggest is this: "Authority." It is authority that a long tradition has largely denied to language; that many linguistic philosophers have claimed for it (though not in so many words[33]); and that critics have contested. This three-part story—first negative with regard to language's authority, then positive, then critical—is the one I shall here recount. Though the latter parts of this dialectical tale will be more helpful in reaching a balanced assessment of language's due, the story would not be complete, nor would linguistic philosophers' claims be fully intelligible, without some account at the start of the views against which they have reacted. If, in the famed "linguistic turn," linguistic philosophers turned *to* language, what did they turn *from*, and why?

For an initial sample reply, we can glance again at Moore and at the tradition he represents. In defense of this tradition, Gellner commented: "that usage cannot settle normative issues about how we *should* think, is something so obvious that it has never in the past been doubted. On the contrary, it was taken for granted, and just this was the reason why pre-linguistic philosophers did not appeal to usage."[34] Young Moore was just such a pre-linguistic philosopher. Typically and reasonably, he had stipulated no alternative sense for the word "good" and had introduced no alternative idiom to replace standard English; so if language was to exercise any authority on this occasion, it would have to be through common English usage. Moore, however, saw no point in examining usage. Where, then, did authority reside? What dictated what he should say? According to Peter Hacker, "Moore conceived of himself as engaged in the analysis of mind-independent concepts, which, when held before the mind, could

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be seen to be either composite or simple. . . . According to his official doctrine, it is possible to analyze a concept (or the meaning of a term) without attending to its linguistic expression."[35] Thus Moore could, for example, declare: "'right' does and can mean nothing but 'cause of a good result,' and is thus identical with 'useful.'"[36] Regardless of how people actually employ the term, this is what it must mean. The concept, in concert with other concepts, so decrees.

Disconnected from usage, Moore's "concepts" were disconnected from language as ordinarily defined (a "system of words" or its communicative use).[37] In this they resembled, for example, Plato's Forms (examined in chapter 3), and they therefore raise similar problems. If no answer can be read off from the reality to be described, by itself, how can an answer be read off from these concepts or Forms? How can they tell us what we should *say*? Indeed, what need have we of any such nonlinguistic intermediaries between reality and its expression? Why not pass directly from the reality to the expression via the meanings of the terms employed? Why not turn to language for guidance?

Perhaps we do and should, but how? The answer may look easy: just talk as other people do; speak the language—Spanish, Greek, Russian, or Hindi—as it is spoken. However, speakers frequently make incompatible assertions. Even when they agree verbally, their words are often loaded with conflicting theories and beliefs. They commonly employ forms of speech that, as suggested earlier, may be seriously misleading. They speak vaguely, confusedly, mistakenly. All or most of them may agree in saying things that just aren't so. Their linguistic behavior, as Richard Rorty has piquantly observed, mixes "mumbles, stumbles, malapropisms, metaphors, tics, seizures, psychotic symptoms, egregious stupidity, strokes of genius, and the like."[38] So one wonders: should philosophers and other careful speakers follow suit? Perhaps some wisdom or valid normativity lies concealed within actual verbal practice, but, if so, it is well concealed. It seems at first glance that one might as well consult astrologers as consult everyday speakers as oracles on what to say. But if everyday language cannot guide us, what language can? Linguistic philosophers have no ready response. They may agree (or many may) in stressing the authority of language, but they are far from agreeing on how its authority should be described or exercised. Here is another reason for dwelling on the longer, positive part of the coming account. Not only is it likely to prove more profitable: it will also prove more difficult. It is easy to criticize Moore, but what positive guidance can be offered him? How should he have conducted his inquiry? The answer to such a query is as difficult as it is fundamental.

Such, then, is the direction this study will take. It will focus, historically and critically, on the question of the proper role of language in determining what we say when we make assertions, whether in philosophy

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or elsewhere. (For easy reference, let us label this question, concerning language's authority to govern language's assertoric use, the "Issue of Language's Authority.") In this formulation, notice the verb "say." The utterance "Wor thup banalitous" says nothing. Neither, despite its English words, does "I brain my see." Neither, in the sense of making an intelligible assertion, does "I fly my identity." However, such linguistic aberrations hold slight practical significance for philosophers, or for others. For the most part, philosophers have taken for granted the authority of language to determine grammaticality and intelligibility, but not to determine *what* to say grammatically and intelligibly. Concerning the authority of language to determine truth or assertability, they have been very far from agreement.

So understood, the Issue of Language's Authority is a major theme of linguistic philosophy, but in what sense is it as central to linguistic philosophy as this work's title suggests? This question, opening large historical and theoretical perspectives, the next chapter will address.

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