

EXISTENTIALISTS, POSTMODERNISTS AND ORDINARY LANGUAGE: THE STRENGTH OF EVIDENCE FOR PHILOSOPHICAL CLAIMS

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This is an area of philosophy where linguistics has points to make, but there are also other important considerations.

Main point: Ordinary language is not logically or even structurally consistent (and hence cannot be relied upon to any great extent when addressing philosophical issues).

Still less do different (unrelated) languages express things in similar ways. Indeed, at times different languages are not even necessarily saying the very same things. All languages say some things more readily than others; this relates (both ways) to the fact that all cultures require some things to be said more readily than others. (All this does not of itself imply any view on the alleged equality of languages, and certainly does not imply a relativist world-view.)

It should not be assumed that the structures of human languages do or should correspond with logical structures (even if the latter are universal, as Sampson urges against some anthropologists). Usage may be grammatical (in a descriptive sense) in a given language but not close to logical form or even conforming with logic. Even if usage **is** ungrammatical (same sense), it need not thereby be illogical. Cf Trotter.

Expressions in a given language – even if they concern the same things - need not be compatible in their ways of describing things. They may imply different world-views (whether or not those world-views are still actually held), involve different models/metaphors of specific areas of concern, etc. Note that metaphor is more widespread (at the very least) than most non-linguists realise.

The reasons for such differences within one language (or indeed between languages) are not necessarily (or even usually) related to the requirements of philosophy (clarity, accuracy, etc). If such differences within one language involve ways of describing the same things, it is not necessarily the case that any one of them, and with it the associated conceptualising, is more transparent/ revealing of reality than another (if indeed that can be determined at all). And, if this **is** the case, it is not necessarily obvious **which** is the more/most transparent/revealing way. So: if one such way is held to be more transparent/revealing of reality than another – and therefore more philosophically helpful – this needs to be **argued**.

Such things extend beyond philosophy: eg: the conceptualizing of the concepts 'language' and 'dialect' in English (and in Chinese) in Singapore; two mutually incompatible analyses/pairs of definitions. Linguists have adopted one of them (with changes), but only after careful scrutiny. But this is perhaps especially important for

philosophical issues, which are typically rather abstract and inevitably involve metaphor and other non-straightforward uses of language.

Sometimes even different native speakers of 'the same language' conceptualise the same area of thought & usage differently. This need not involve any difference in the words used, because usage relates only approximately (sometimes only historically; see later) to conceptualisation. Such differences may thus escape notice.

Note that meanings are often – not always - central here, and that meaning, especially of some kinds, is a relatively elusive aspect of language. It is more difficult to agree – or even to disagree clearly - on some aspects of meaning than on more concrete features of language.

Some instances of (arguable) over-reliance on ordinary language:

1) Whorf: Claim that linguistic form strongly determines thought (and hence is especially crucial for philosophy and other abstract pursuits where the structures of ideas are not susceptible to empirical disconfirmation).

Compare claims about Parmenides, etc.

Sampson's criticisms on a) waterfalls, timetables etc, b) gender etc, c) logic (see above).

2) Austin *et al.*: Arguments based on different speech acts (themselves not easy to classify objectively') with shared/different forms.

Unaware of linguistic typology and of modern grammatical ideas (but cf Allan in same vein).

3) Ryle as an example of analytical philosophy's use of ordinary language (note use of term *analysis*):

Attacks on dualism ('ghost in the machine'), claiming partly on the strength of (Ryle's interpretation of) some usage that some other usage is philosophically misleading.

Which usage is to be regarded as accurate/helpful?

Compare claims such as *The Earth is flat* (once very generally believed & not in any way linguistically unusual, but now known to be false) and *The Earth is spherical* (similar in all general linguistic respects, but true).

Maybe applies only to more subtle aspects of language (grammar etc)? How to define these aspects?

Even if we can rationally prefer one type of usage to another: How far can we say we have demonstrated such a point merely on the strength of the usage?

Are there corresponding or contrasting expressions in other languages? Any one language has no special status.

Other example: 'literal' interpretation of originally physical terms such as *suffer* (as in *suffer an injury*) in loosely related/more abstract contexts.

Note role of ideologies & personal ideas in this area (what counts as 'suffering'?)

Also: how to show that any two cases do or do not illustrate the same sense of word (see Singapore dictionary example with *escape*)?

4) Lacan, etc: Arguments based on the equation of technical & non-technical uses of key terms.

Sokal on the inaccuracy of such equations.

5) Derrida, etc: Partial reliance on etymologies (not even known to most speakers) in the exegesis of the meaning and philosophical significance of modern words, eg *forgive* and in searches for 'real meanings' (compare popular use of etymological elements in dictionaries).

Linguists realised around 1920 (if not earlier) that this is basically illegitimate; cf *nice*, *paradise* etc.

6) Some arguments about the perception of reality which run into a problem of how perception occurs and is reported:

Sunrise **could not possibly** be actually perceived as the rotation of the Earth by viewers **on** the Earth (including just above the surface), and until recently all viewers were as a matter of fact always on the Earth. The suggestion that we 'see the Sun rise' and do not 'see the Earth turn' is thus contentious.

7) A tendency (particularly strong among postmodernists, but also found elsewhere) to talk as if one's own (non-analytical or not obviously analytical) philosophical/linguistic claims (and the associated ontological categories) are especially valid and as if one can therefore 'deconstruct' and indeed demolish opposing positions while remaining largely immune oneself; but arguments demonstrating this are seldom produced, and in many cases such a view sits very uneasily (at best) within such theories as wholes.

8) A tendency to talk as if one has proved quite large quasi-empirical claims about the abstract structure of the world merely by stating them clearly, as if they were somehow self-evident and a clear linguistic formulation adequate to show their validity. Eg, claims that souls or spiritual entities do or do not exist, that desires etc are or are not (mental) events/states, that human beings do or do not have a *telos* (purpose, etc).

Note parallels in empirical domains.

Common marker of this: use of terms such as *error*, *false perception*, etc to refer to opposing views, but without evidence or argumentation.

Note that 'logically possible' does not amount to 'likely to be true/universal/common' (see Pellowe on hearers vs speakers, much fringe ancient history, etc).

Note that 7-8 above contribute to many loose arguments (eg, Miller in *Tirra Lirra*).

Note also the use in claims of words with obscure and/or mostly associative meaning, eg *holistic*, *democratic*; such claims may perhaps be understood in general/vague terms but these words hinder any attempt at understanding or assessing a claim/argument in specific terms.