

The Language Revolution
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Class 1
Introduction
Plato and the Moderns

Talking Babies

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_JmA2CIUvUY&feature=player_embedded

Course Description

If there is one unifying theme for twentieth-century philosophy, it is the study of language. Some philosophers believed that all philosophical questions arise from misuses of language. Others believed that clarifying our uses of language can lead us to solutions to perennial philosophical questions, like the mind and body problem, or whether God exists. Still others explored the nature of language and its uses for its own sake. The profound developments in logic in the twentieth century were concomitant with this focus on language.

We will start by looking briefly at some pre-twentieth-century views of language and Frege's seminal work on language in the late nineteenth century, especially his distinction between sense and reference. The second part of the course, roughly the first half of the term, will focus on the nature of reference: How do words hook on to the world? The third part of the course, roughly the second half of the term, will focus on the nature of meaning: How does language get its content? At the end of the term, we will look briefly at linguistic ontology. Along the way, we will read some of the most important philosophers of the twentieth century, including Wittgenstein, Quine, and Kripke.

Syllabus

- Two Prècis
 - Frege
 - Rosenthal - Bonus class on October 17
- Presentations
 - In pairs, mainly
- Two Papers
 - October 6
 - December 6
- Final

On Grades

Grades on assignments will be posted on Blackboard, along with a running total, which I call your grade calculation. Your grade calculation is a guide for me to use in assigning you a final grade. There are no rules binding how I translate your grade calculation, which will appear in Blackboard as a percentage, into a letter grade. In particular, the Hamilton College key for translating your letter grades into percentages, used for graduate school admissions, is not a tool for calculating your final grade. I welcome further discussion of the purposes and methods of grading, as well as my own grading policies.

Plato's *Sophist*

Considering Parmenides' argument that one can not lie

NL1. Lying is saying what is not.

NL2. That which is not has no sort of being.

NL3. When I say something, it has at least some sort of being.

NLC. So, lying is impossible.

Focus on NL2.

- ▶ 'That' attributes singularity, which is some sort of being
- ▶ If NL were sound, the sophist could deny that he is a liar.

Plato's Two Linguistic Claims

1. Assertions are divided into nouns and verbs.

- Stranger: [T]here are two sorts of intimation of being which are given by the voice.
- Theaetetus: What are they?
- Stranger: One of them is called nouns, and the other verbs.
- Theaetetus: Describe them.
- Stranger: That which denotes action we call a verb.
- Theaetetus: True.
- Stranger: And the other, which is an articulate mark set on those who do the actions, we call a noun.
- Theaetetus: Quite true.
- Stranger: A succession of nouns only is not a sentence any more than of verbs without nouns...I mean that words like "walks," "runs," "sleeps," or any other words which denote action, however many of them you string together, do not make discourse.
- Theaetetus: How can they?
- Stranger: Or, again, when you say "lion," "stag," "horse," or any other words which denote agents. Neither in this way of stringing words together do you attain to discourse, for there is no expression of action or inaction, or of the existence of existence or non-existence indicated by the sounds, until verbs are mingled with nouns. Then the words fit, and the smallest combination of them forms language, and is the simplest and least form of discourse (*Sophist* 2-3).

How Plato's First Claim Undermines Parmenides' Argument

NL1. Lying is saying what is not.
NL2. That which is not has no sort of being.
NL3. When I say something, it has at least some sort of being.
NLC. So, lying is impossible.

- Falsity ('Theaetetus flies') results from combining a noun and a verb which do not go together in reality.
- NL1 is shown false because lying is not merely saying what is not.
- At least some form of lying is saying of what is some quality that it does not have.
- That which is not (e.g. 'theaetetus flies') thus may have has some sort of being.
- It can be a false attribution of a property to a real object, e.g. Theaetetus.
- The sophist is refuted.

Plato's Two Linguistic Claims

2. Truth is correspondence to reality.

- Stranger: We agreed that every sentence must necessarily have a certain quality.
- Theaetetus: Yes.
- Stranger: And what is the quality of each of these two sentences?
- Theaetetus: The one, as I imagine, is false, and the other true.
- Stranger: The true says what is true about you?
- Theaetetus: Yes.
- Stranger: And the false says what is other than true?
- Theaetetus: Yes.
- Stranger: And therefore speaks of things which are not as if they were?
- Theaetetus: True (*Sophist* 4).

Truth and Language

- *Sophist* is thus the earliest known instance in the history of philosophy where truth is seen as a property of propositions.
 - ▶ Truth is a correspondence between language and the world.
- The philosopher is a lover of truth.
- She thus has an inevitable focus on language.
 - ▶ “When I had wearied of investigating things, I thought that I must be careful to avoid the experience of those who watch an eclipse of the sun, for some of them ruin their eyes unless they watch its reflection in water or some such material. A similar thought crossed my mind, and I feared that my soul would be altogether blinded if I looked at things with my eyes and tried to grasp them with each of my senses. So I thought I must take refuge in discussions and investigate the truth of things by means of words” (*Phaedo* 99e).

The Best Thing Anyone Ever Wrote About Truth

- “To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true” (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1011b25).
- Plato and Aristotle both hold the correspondence theory of truth

A Worry About Correspondence Truth

- We have no extra-linguistic way to apprehend reality.
- We have no access to the world as it is in itself.
- This is an epistemic problem.



Coherence Theory

The truth of a sentence consists in its consistency with other beliefs we hold.

- Different people apprehend the world in different ways, depending on their experiences, expectations, and background beliefs.
- The coherentist despairs of any method of resolving these inconsistencies among people and their beliefs.
- 'God is omniscient'.
 - ▶ If I believe in a traditional, monotheistic God, it is true for me.
 - ▶ If you do not, it is false for you.
- Coherence theories thus collapse into relativism.

Deflationary Theories of Truth

there is no essence to truth

- There is no single reduction of truth to a specific property, like correspondence or consistency.
 - Correspondence and coherence theories are both inflationary.
- For the deflationist, truth is a device for simplifying long conjunctions.
 - If you said a lot of smart things at the party, I could list them all.
 - Or, I could just say, “Everything you said last night was true.”
 - ‘Truth’ is a redundant term.

The T-Schema

- Inflationists and deflationists agree that a minimal condition for truth is the T-schema.
 - p is true iff x
- Instances of the T-schema:
 - 'The cat is on the mat' is true iff the cat is on the mat.
 - '2+2=4' is true iff 2+2=4
 - 'El gato está en el alfombra' is true iff the cat is on the mat.
- Inflationists and deflationists disagree about whether the T-schema is all there is to know about truth.
 - The inflationist believes that there are explanations of the concept of truth inherent in the truth conditions on the right side of the T-schema.
 - The deflationist believes that the T-schema is all there is to know about truth, and that there is no single kind of explanation of why all sentences are true.
- Everyone agrees that the pursuit of truth turns to language.
 - So, let's put truth aside.

Answering Questions by Appealing to Language

Explaining the Meaning of an Obscure Term

- “You seem very clever at explaining words, Sir,” said Alice. “Would you kindly tell me the meaning of the poem called ‘Jabberwocky’?”
- “Let’s hear it,” said Humpty Dumpty. “I can explain all the poems that were ever invented - and a good many that haven’t been invented just yet.”
- This sounded very hopeful, so Alice repeated the first verse:

*Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.*

Explaining Jabberwocky

*Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.*

- “That’s enough to begin with,” Humpty Dumpty interrupted: “there are plenty of hard words there. ‘*Brillig*’ means four o’clock in the afternoon - the time when you begin broiling things for dinner.”
- “That’ll do very well,” said Alice: and ‘*slithy*’?”
- “Well, ‘*slithy*’ means ‘lithe and slimy.’ ‘Lithe’ is the same as ‘active.’ You see it’s like a portmanteau -there are two meanings packed up into one word.”
- “I see it now,” Alice remarked thoughtfully: “and what are ‘*toves*’?”
- “Well, ‘*toves*’ are something like badgers - they’re something like lizards - and they’re something like corkscrews.”
- “They must be very curious looking creatures.”
- “They are that,” said Humpty Dumpty: “also they make their nests under sun-dials - also they live on cheese.”
- “And what’s the ‘*gyre*’ and to ‘*gimble*’?”
- “To ‘*gyre*’ is to go round and round like a gyroscope. To ‘*gimble*’ is to make holes like a gimblet.”
- “And ‘*the wabe*’ is the grass-plot round a sun-dial, I suppose?” said Alice, surprised at her own ingenuity.
- “Of course it is. It’s called ‘*wabe*,’ you know, because it goes a long way before it, and a long way behind it” (Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, p 4).

Assisting Precision

- “So here’s a question for you. How old did you say you were?”
- Alice made a short calculation, and said “Seven years and six months.”
- “Wrong!” Humpty Dumpty exclaimed triumphantly. “You never said a word like it!”
- “I though you meant ‘How old *are* you?’” Alice explained.
- “If I’d meant that, I’d have said it,” said Humpty Dumpty.
- Alice didn’t want to begin another argument, so she said nothing (Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, p 2).

More on Precision

- “The piece I’m going to repeat,” he went on without noticing her remark, “was written entirely for your amusement.”
- Alice felt that in that case she really *ought* to listen to it, so she sat down, and said “Thank you” rather sadly.
 - “*In winter, when the fields are white,*
 - *I sing this song for your delight -*
- only I don’t sing it,” he added, as an explanation.
- “I see you don’t,” said Alice.
- “If you can see whether I’m singing or not, you’ve sharper eyes than most.” Humpty Dumpty remarked severely. Alice was silent (Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*).

Still More on Precision

- In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus tells the Cyclops that he is nobody.
 - ▶ The Cyclops takes 'Nobody' for a proper name.
 - ▶ One might think that the Cyclops would have benefitted from a more-precise understanding of language, and how Odysseus was using it.
- Frege's mathematical logic revolutionized philosophy precisely because of its unprecedented precision.
- Still, the question remains whether there are philosophical questions that can be resolved by focusing on language.

Hume on Care with Language

- Certain philosophical terms are meaningless and should be stricken from the language.
- Words whose meanings can be explained in terms of our sense experience (which he calls matters of fact) or our most basic logic or mathematics (which he calls relations of ideas) are acceptable.
- But, other philosophical terms have no legitimate use.
 - ▶ “When we run over libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand any volume--of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance--let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames, for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.”
- The logical empiricists made a similar claim.

Berkeley on Care with Language

- Locke had argued for a common-sense realism about the material world.
- Berkeley accuses Locke of appealing to a doctrine of abstract ideas.
- General terms like ‘matter’ and ‘man’ and ‘two’ are illegitimate, since we have no ideas to correspond to such terms.
 - ▶ “How ready soever I may be to acknowledge the scantiness of my comprehension with regard to the endless variety of spirits and ideas that may possibly exist, yet for any one to pretend to a notion of entity or existence, abstracted from spirit and idea, from perceived and being perceived, is, I suspect, a downright repugnancy and trifling with words” (Berkeley, *Principles* §81).
- But, what are the proper, legitimate uses of language?

Language as Nouns

- Before Locke, a common view was that words stood for objects.
- Wittgenstein ascribes this view to Augustine (4th-5th century CE).
 - ▶ “When they (my elders) named some object, and accordingly moved towards something, I saw this and I grasped that the thing was called by the sound they uttered when they meant to point it out. Their intention was shewn by their bodily movements, as it were the natural language of all peoples: the expression of the face, the play of the eyes, the movement of other parts of the body, and the tone of voice which expresses our state of mind in seeking, having, rejecting, or avoiding something. Thus, as I heard words repeatedly used in their proper places in various sentences, I gradually learnt to understand what objects they signified; and after I had trained my mouth to form these signs, I used them to express my own desires.”
- Jonathan Swift, in *Gulliver’s Travels*, satirizes this view.
 - ▶ If words just serve as signs of objects, we could achieve the same purposes of language without words at all.
 - ▶ We could just show the objects for which our words stand.

Locke on Language

words stand for ideas, not for objects

- Locke established the modern's view of language.
- “[It is] perverting the use of words, and bring[ing] unavoidable obscurity and confusion into their signification, whenever we make them stand for anything but those ideas we have in our own minds” (Locke, *Essay* §III.2.5).

Locke's Argument

words stand for ideas in our minds

- LL1. Society depends on our ability to communicate our ideas, so words must be able to stand for ideas.
- LL2. Since my ideas precede my communication, words must refer to my ideas before they could refer to anything else.
- LL3. If words refer both to my ideas and to something else (e.g. your idea, or an external object), then they would be ambiguous.
- LL4. But, words are not ordinarily ambiguous.
- LL5. So, words ordinarily do not stand for something other than my ideas.
- LLC. So, words stand for my ideas.

Language and the Veil of Ideas

While names refer to our own ideas, we just suppose them to refer to other people's ideas, or for external objects.

“A child having taken notice of nothing in the metal he hears called gold, but the bright shining yellow colour, he applies the word gold only to his own idea of that colour, and nothing else; and therefore calls the same colour in a peacock's tail gold. Another that hath better observed, adds to shining yellow great weight: and then the sound gold, when he uses it, stands for a complex idea of a shining yellow and a very weighty substance. Another adds to those qualities fusibility: and then the word gold signifies to him a body, bright, yellow, fusible, and very heavy. Another adds malleability. Each of these uses equally the word gold, when they have occasion to express the idea which they have applied it to: but it is evident that each can apply it only to his own idea; nor can he make it stand as a sign of such a complex idea as he has not...”

General Terms and Abstract Ideas

- A particular term, like a name, stands for one specific object.
- A general term, in contrast, can stand for more than one thing.
 - 'Apple' can be used for any of various apples.
 - 'Green', 'motion', and 'body' are similarly general terms.
 - They stand not for a particular idea or specific sensation, but for abstract, general ideas.
- There are too many particular things for them all to have particular names.
- Scientific generalizations require general terms.
- We use both particular names, for particular ideas when it is useful.
- And we use general terms for communication and for science.
- Locke claims that general terms stand for abstract ideas.

The Representational Theory

- Berkeley and Hume were both attacking Locke's philosophy of language and his doctrine of abstract ideas.
- All of the moderns, including Berkeley and Hume, held what might be called the representational theory of ideas.
 - words stand for internal thoughts
 - thoughts are representations of an external reality.
- By the end of the 18th century, the theory of ideas reached its end in Kant's work.
 - distinction between the noumenal world and the phenomenal world
- Kant saw that the representational theory of ideas blocks any possibility of knowledge.
 - If we know any claim, it must be true.
 - If words stand for my ideas, I can never make the connection to the world that truth requires.
 - We have only our ideas of the world to compare with our language.

The Language Revolution

- The early nineteenth century in philosophy is mostly a wasteland of philosophers trying to come to grips with Kant's insights, and slowly learning to see, and then abandon, the theory of ideas.
- The language revolution begins quietly in 1879.
 - Frege's *Begriffsschrift*
- Frege builds his view in the *Foundations of Arithmetic*.
 - attack's Locke's psychologism
 - defends the context principle: the meaning of a word depends on its use in a sentence
- If the context principle is correct, Augustine and Locke and the moderns were all doomed to failure.
- They thought that the basic unit of language is the word.
- Frege saw that the basic unit of language is the proposition.

Some Terms

- *Inscription*: a written token of a term, or word.
- *Utterance*: a spoken token of a term.
- **Sentence**: An inscription or utterance used for a speech act.
 - ▶ declarative sentences
 - ▶ Questions and commands and exclamations are also sentences.
 - ▶ One can utter a sentence, or write it down.
- **Sentence type**: An abstract object which can be instantiated by either an utterance or an inscription, or maybe even an idea.
 - ▶ Maisy is a mouse.
 - ▶ Maisy is a mouse.
- **Proposition**: The meaning of a sentence, an abstract object.
 - ▶ that- clauses
 - ▶ ‘Maisy es una ratón’ is a different sentence (token and type) from ‘Maisy is a mouse’.
 - ▶ They express the same proposition.
 - ▶ Frege calls propositions thoughts.



More Terms

- Assertion, or statement: A declarative sentence, used to say something that can be either true or false.
- Expression: Usually used to refer to a sub-sentential phrase, either a subject term or a predicate term.
- Concept: An abstract object corresponding to sub-sentential-sized linguistic objects.
 - Different people each have their own ideas, but may share concepts.
 - Some concepts refer to or stand for objects.
- Subject-predicate form: Declarative sentences (and their corresponding propositions, etc.) can be parsed into subject-predicate form.
 - Predicates express, or stand for, properties, which are abstract objects.
 - Properties are sometimes called attributes.
- Name: A term which picks out a particular object (e.g. 'Maisy').
 - Most names apply to more than one object, but we imagine that they do not, because we can disambiguate by the context of their use.
- Definite description: An expression, usually beginning with 'the', which, like a name, picks out a particular object (e.g. 'the all-time home-run leader').
 - denoting phrases
- Singular term: Expressions referring to a specific thing.
 - Names and definite descriptions are singular terms.
 - We might interpret 'whales' as a singular term, referring to the one set of all whales.
 - It is more natural to think of it as referring to many (all) whales.

Use and Mention

- Ordinary instances of language are uses.
- When we talk about the terms of our language, we sometimes mention them.
 - “[T]here are three hundred and sixty-four days when you might get un-birthday presents -”
 - “Certainly,” said Alice.
 - “And only *one* for birthday presents, you know. There’s glory for you!”
 - “I don’t know what you mean by ‘glory,’” Alice said.
 - Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. “Of course you don’t - till I tell you. I meant ‘there’s a nice knock-down argument for you!’”
 - “But ‘glory’ doesn’t mean ‘a nice knock-down argument,’” Alice objected.
 - “When *I* use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less” (Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass* 3)
- When Alice says that she does not know what Humpty Dumpty means, she mentions the term.
- She puts scare quotes around it to indicate that she is using it, rather than mentioning it.
 - The cat is on the mat.
 - ‘cat’ is used
 - ‘Cat’ has three letters.
 - ‘cat’ is mentioned