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ON THE LINGUISTIC TURN IN PHILOSOPHY

Introduction

During the twentieth century, language enters the foreground of philosophy in an unprecedented way. One speaks of a 'linguistic turn' that is to have taken place around the turn of the century and which meant not only a greater interest in language as a subject matter or one field of inquiry among others, but more importantly, a new way of dealing with philosophical problems generally, even those which are not directly concerned with language as such.¹ The concentration on language is commonly depicted in historical accounts as characteristic of the kind of analytic philosophy that was predominant in the United States, England and the Nordic countries during the twentieth century, but it is also described as a distinctive feature of structuralism and hermeneutics, even if the role of language in these traditions is somewhat different.

Before I enter into the question of the significance of this linguistic change of course, I would like to note some difficulties attending the answer to that question as it is presented in standard philosophical historiography.

There is an inclination to portray this change as if it were internal to philosophy, a development arising within the tradition itself, more or less independently of circumstances or factors external to the philosophical discussion. The new orientation in philosophy is seen as having been initiated by the ideas propounded by Frege, Saussure and others and by the influence that these ideas came to have. Thus Frege and Saussure have become the intellectual heroes of their respective traditions. They are seen as having made discoveries or having articulated new ideas and ways of thinking that are taken to be central to the philosophy following in their wake. The question of how they came upon their new ideas, the circumstances in and backdrop against which the ideas were developed and how Frege and Saussure might have experienced them, are usually regarded as of secondary importance within the internal historiography of their respective traditions, as if it were pointless to try to understand a 'hero'. Anders Wedberg introduces his historical outline of Frege's philosophy by saying that Frege, in contrast to Kant, wished "to prove conclusively that the propositions of arithmetic are 'analytic *a priori*'" and that his thoughts about the philosophy of language were a part of that en-

1 Rorty, R. (ed.), *The Linguistic Turn, Recent Essays in Philosophical Method*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1967.

deavour.² But why would anyone make that his life's work, as one could reasonably say that Frege did?

Is the linguistic turn in philosophy merely a new orientation or trend which happened to become the fashion at philosophy departments during the twentieth century? It can appear that way if one looks at many current presentations which take as their starting point a collection of methodological doctrines and slogans formulated from the perspective of the current attitudes, rules and norms of various schools of contemporary academic philosophy. This kind of historiography, however, tends to distort the conditions under which the doctrines discussed were originally formulated, that is, it loses sight of the *problems* which were crucial for the work of Saussure, Frege and others, and which lead to the new interest in language within philosophy.

This kind of historiography is also anachronistic in a number of respects. A recent work by Alberto Coffa is entitled "The Semantic Tradition from Kant to Carnap", which gives the impression that the way of approaching language that has come to be designated 'semantics' and the sorts of problems taken up in that approach existed already before the latter half of the nineteenth century, when the term first came into use.³ Coffa speaks, for example, of "Kant's tacit semantic premises" and of the decline of semantics since Descartes. But the questions concerning the meaning of statements and expressions which we call 'semantic', I would argue, were just the sorts of questions that one *began* to pose when the linguistic turn is supposed to have taken place. Of course, philosophers had been interested in the meaning of words and statements earlier as well, but, as I wish to show in this essay, this interest was not in the same spirit as in our century. Similarly, the questions were not formulated against the backdrop of the specific view of language that is *essential* to twentieth-century semantic theories and discussion of meaning.⁴

The terms 'theory of knowledge' and 'epistemology' are two further examples of terms that are generally used in an almost anachronistic manner in philosophical historiography. The corresponding terms in German and English apparently began to be used around the middle of the nineteenth century as the various so-called special sciences were detached from philosophy and came to be viewed as independent fields of knowledge.⁵ Previously, the subject matter of many of the questions thought to belong to the theory of knowledge was not identifiable in this way. John Locke, for instance, speaks of "human understanding" where we would say "human knowledge". When the physicist was not a specialist in a delimited field, but was rather a natural philosopher, his ques-

2 Wedberg, A., *A History of Philosophy, Volume 3: From Bolzano to Wittgenstein*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984, p. 89.

3 Coffa, J. A., *The Semantic Tradition from Kant to Carnap*, edited by L. Wessels, Cambridge University Press, 1991.

4 One can make a similar point about the term 'linguistics' which is introduced in connection with Saussure and which is often associated with a systematic and structuralist approach to the study of language. I will follow the English and French terminology, however, and use the term 'linguistics' in the broader sense which includes even pre-Saussurean philology and studies of language.

5 See Hacking, I., *Why Does Language Matter to Philosophy?*, Cambridge University Press, 1975, p. 166.

tions also concerned the constitution of ideas, representations and thoughts in human reason or the understanding. Yet in contemporary accounts of the history of philosophy, it is not uncommon to find surveys of the history of the theory of knowledge from antiquity to the present.

I do not wish to condemn such anachronistic or more liberal uses of modern academic philosophical terminology under all circumstances. On the contrary, it can often be illuminating and clarifying to bring some aspect of an older philosophical work into sharper relief by the use of such tools as long as one is aware that this is what is being done. The problem is rather that such aspects can easily be transformed into incontrovertible historical facts within the internal philosophical historiography through the attitude one has to one's own terminological apparatus. Such attitudes or predispositions are constitutive elements of the identity of a discipline or theoretical orientation. In such an attitude, *one is inclined, for example, to treat semantic or epistemological questions as we understand them today as eternal questions which must have been posed in the same way and in the same sense by philosophers throughout the ages, as if the questions must have concerned something which was essentially the same throughout the ages.*

My aim here is not to provide an historical account as an answer to the question of how it *really was*. My main interest in this essay is rather certain problematic features of *our* notions and ideas about how it really was.⁶ These ideas and notions have been formed largely within the internal historiography that has delineated the tradition. It is easy for us to forget that 'the philosophical tradition', as much as the boundaries between the various traditions and schools within philosophy, is not something given a priori, nor something that can be found directly in the historical material. We ought to remind ourselves, more often than we do, that the internal historiography, the disciplinary historiography, the various sciences' 'own' historiography, is a specific genre the purpose of which is largely to confirm, define and support the discipline and to satisfy ideological needs within a certain tradition or orientation. This aim can be more or less explicit or dominant in different internal historical works. It is perhaps most explicit in those cases in which the point is to launch and legitimate a new orientation. In the case of linguistics, Noam Chomsky's *Cartesian Linguistics* is a clear example of this.⁷

There is a pervasive tendency in the internal historiography, within philosophy as well as within other disciplines, to represent an important forerunner within a field through a canonized version of his contributions. The origin of his discoveries and insights is elucidated in terms of 'rational motives' and intellectual standpoints that are

6 This essay to a great extent builds upon certain historical facts (and in a number of cases upon an interpretation of them) found in Hans Aarsleff's book *From Locke to Saussure* (London: Athlone Press Ltd., 1982).

7 It was crucial for Chomsky, for instance, to meet Locke's critique of the notion of 'innate ideas'. Regarding Chomsky's reply, Aarsleff writes: "Chomsky's version of Locke's philosophy – in so far as it is possible (and fair) to judge on the slender evidence we are offered – is plainly false. The consequence of that error is historical chaos." (p. 176) It is also doubtful that Chomsky's *Cartesianism* finds support in Descartes' writing.

supposed to have driven the research forward, as if the thinker saw himself as an exemplary professor of the discipline in question.⁸ One characteristic feature of such a canonized historiography is precisely that one tries to excise or disguise all external influences, all influences from other competing disciplines or factors of a 'non-scientific' nature that might have played a role in the context. One might wonder, however, if it is not the case that most great innovations and achievements, not only in philosophy but also in other fields, arise largely as the result of external influences. Decisive influences and ideas have often come from external sources. The historian of linguistics, Hans Aarsleff, argues convincingly, for instance, that Saussure's new ideas were decisively influenced, *not* by the German philological tradition, but by intellectual ideas prevalent in Paris at the time, especially those of the historian and literary critic Hippolyte Taine, who was not a philologist or linguist, but a professor of art history.

Returning to the significance of the linguistic turn in philosophy, it is not inessential to consider where one draws the line between philosophy and general linguistics or theoretical linguistics. One can question if there can be a history of the philosophy of language that is not at the same time, at least in part, a history of linguistics, and vice-versa. According to Aarsleff, the ideas of the philosopher John Locke, for instance, came to have an enormous influence on linguistics during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, even until Saussure's day. And the influence came via Condillac, among others. The idea of the arbitrariness of the sign is central in Locke's thought (who, however, was not the first or the only one to express the idea).⁹ Was Saussure a linguist or a philosopher? He had a background in philology, but when one looks at the questions that he wanted to answer with his innovative ideas ('la langue', the concept of structure, the synchronic aspect of language, etc.), one is inclined to say that Saussure was no less of a philosopher of language than Frege – who, by the way, was a professor of mathematics. And both Saussure and Frege were philosophers of language to a far greater degree than many contemporaneous professors of philosophy were.

One need not go so far back in time to see how the linguistic and philosophical traditions merge, and it is not always evident which current leads into philosophy and which leads into linguistics, as we define the disciplines today. The departmental boundaries of our day did not exist in earlier centuries, even if one can see tendencies in that direction

8 Aarsleff calls this form of historical writing "the internal history of an institutionalized professorial craft." (Aarsleff, p. 7)

9 Aarsleff writes: "Mersenne and Locke both (without any direct connection) made the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign a cardinal principle, a principle that is best known from Locke's *Essay*, which was the chief source of eighteenth-century linguistic philosophy. It is therefore not surprising that there are evident similarities between Locke and the eighteenth century on the one hand and what we read in Saussure on the other." (Aarsleff, p. 317) That Saussure should find *certain* features of the view of language stemming from Locke mistaken, although sufficiently important to question and correct, ought to be included in the influence described here by Aarsleff. One such feature is, for example, Locke's view that language ultimately consists of the free volitional acts of individual speakers, and not in the fact that they apply or realize a sort of mental system that is socially determined and which stands outside of the control of the individual speaker.

during the nineteenth century; German historical comparative linguistics, for example, like many other disciplines during the same period, aspired to define itself as an independent field of study. Perhaps it is fair to say that the theorizing about language that is connected to and motivated by the demands of language instruction, translation and the study of specific languages (where traditional grammar has been the most important tool), belongs to the linguistic tradition. But there are also numerous examples of theorizing of this kind in which the instruments of linguistics and the introduction of linguistic norms are justified by alluding to philosophical or metaphysical ideas – even in our own century.

The Reaction against Psychologism

Questions having to do with the meaning of expressions or statements which we call semantic, as I said earlier, were just the sorts of problems that had begun to be posed during the period when the linguistic turn is said to have taken place. Naturally, questions concerning the meaning of words and sentences had been posed earlier, but hardly in the same spirit or with the same purpose that characterizes semantic theories or theories of meaning in our sense. The issue is complicated by the fact that there occurred a considerable shift in the sense of these questions within philosophy and linguistic theory during the twentieth century. Frege, for instance, was not primarily concerned with providing answers to general questions as to how expressions and statements in a language have meaning in the way that contemporary linguistic theorists wish to do. In this respect, Frege's philosophy of language was not a 'pure philosophy of language'. It can even be misleading to speak of 'Frege's semantics'. Given the established use of the term 'semantics' in analytic philosophy since Carnap and Tarski, Frege's critical study of language is not 'semantic'. Frege explicitly distanced himself from the metamathematical view of language that is at the core of 'semantics' in this sense.

As Talbot Taylor points out, Frege shows no great interest, at least compared to modern theory of language, in questions such as, "In what does the objective meaning of a statement consist?" or "What does it mean to understand the sense of a statement?"¹⁰ Frege's metaphorical responses to these questions do not constitute much of a 'theory'. In that respect, Frege was not what one today would call a 'philosopher of language'. Yet philosophy's internal historiography (especially Michael Dummett's account) portrays him as a meaning theorist and philosopher of language in precisely this sense. Frege's studies in the philosophy of language, however, were not his principal aim, but were rather part of the process of achieving clarity in other conceptual issues, in particular, issues having to do with the nature of logic and mathematics. Frege writes:

The pictorial character of language presents a difficulty (i.e. in his logical investigations). The sensible always breaks in and makes the expression pictorial and so improper. So one

¹⁰ Taylor, J. T., *Mutual Misunderstanding: Scepticism and the Theorizing of Language and Interpretation*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1992, p. 107.



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