

## THE LINGUISTIC TURN IN ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY

P. M. S. Hacker

### 1. *Terminological clarification*

The expression ‘the linguistic turn’ was introduced by Gustav Bergmann in his review of Strawson’s *Individuals* in 1960. Bergmann (1906-87) was a member of the Vienna Circle and regular attendant at its meetings in the late 1920s and the 1930s. In 1937 he fled from Austria to the USA, where he taught at the University of Iowa from 1940 until his retirement. He was best known for his idiosyncratic writings on ontology and for the school of Iowa ontologists he inspired. His review article, published in the *Journal of Philosophy*, was entitled ‘Strawson’s Ontology’, and was largely concerned with outlining Bergmann’s own methodology and conception of philosophy. Bergmann used the expression again in subsequent articles such as ‘The Glory and Misery of Ludwig Wittgenstein’ (*Rivista di Filosofia* 52 (1961)) and ‘Stenius on the *Tractatus*’ (*Theoria* 29 (1963)).<sup>1</sup>

The linguistic turn, according to Bergmann, is a ‘fundamental gambit as to method’ agreed upon by two different groups of linguistic philosophers: ‘ordinary language philosophers’ (exemplified, in Bergmann’s view, by Strawson) and ‘ideal language philosophers’ (such as Bergmann himself). The methodological gambit is to talk about the world by talking about a suitable language. The disagreement between the two groups of philosophers turns, according to Bergmann, on what is to count as *a language* and what makes it *suitable* as an object of investigation that will shed light for philosophical purposes on the nature of the world, in particular on ontology. Why should the linguistic turn be taken? In Bergmann’s view, for three reasons. First, words are used either ordinarily, i.e. ‘commonsensically’, or philosophically. Philosophical uses of words are *prima facie* unintelligible, and require commonsensical explication. That is a requirement of the method. Second, much of the obscurity of pre-linguistic-philosophy stems from failure to distinguish linguistic statements from meta-linguistic statements. The method is the safest way to avoid the ensuing confusions. Third, there are some things which any language can only show. For example, the relation of exemplification shows itself by subject predicate juxtaposition (e.g. ‘*a* is *F*’ shows that the

---

<sup>1</sup> All these papers are to be found in G. Bergmann, *Logic and Reality* (University of Wisconsin Press, Wisconsin, 1964).

property  $F$  is exemplified by the object  $a$ ). Such things, however, (*pace* Wittgenstein) are not ineffable. Rather they can be spoken about, as we have just done, in a meta-linguistic discussion of the syntax and interpretation of a language. Hence, again, the linguistic turn.

Ordinary language philosophers, according to Bergmann, talk about the language we speak. They study communication, explore how we learn language, and how we communicate by using it. This, he declared, is a psychological study. In the hands of ‘extremists’, like J. L. Austin, that is all it is. Since we use ordinary language to communicate about the world, there is some sense in which it ‘must therefore be a picture of the world’, and must, in a minimal sense, be a ‘suitable’ language by the study of which one can engage in ontological investigation. If that purpose is disregarded, and the three reasons for the linguistic turn neglected, then ordinary language philosophy degenerates into trivial linguistics – this being Bergmann’s judgement on Austin. But because the primary use of ordinary language is communication, it is actually most *unsuitable* as a philosophical tool. What is needed is an ‘ideal language’, or, more accurately, a schema of a language, which adequately pictures the world. And that is the instrumental goal of ideal language philosophers. If it is not, then ideal language philosophy degenerates into trivial design of calculi – this being (presumably) Bergmann’s judgement on Carnap’s philosophy.

The misconstruals of both the Carnapian wing of the Vienna Circle (who can be deemed ‘ideal language philosophers’) and of Strawson and others of the Oxford group of post-war philosophers (whose classification as ‘ordinary language philosophers’ requires clarification, and was rejected by Strawson himself) is startling. Carnap did not construct artificial calculi for ontological purposes. Indeed, in ‘Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology’, he argued that ontological questions are no more than questions about the framework of the language one chose to use – questions about a language and its utility, not questions about reality.<sup>2</sup> Far from inventing artificial calculi for ontological purposes, he invented them in order to shed light on the language of science and to resolve philosophical problems and dissolve pseudo-problems. So called ordinary language philosophers, who would better be denominated ‘natural language philosophers’ (in contrast to ideal language philosophers) were not engaging in psychology or in linguistics. The reasons Bergmann gave for the

---

<sup>2</sup> R. Carnap, ‘Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology’, repr. in his *Meaning and Necessity*, enlarged edition (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1956).

so called linguistic turn are equally spurious. There is indeed something that might be called the linguistic turn in philosophy, but, as we shall see, the reasons for it are very far removed from Bergmann's peculiar list.

Had the matter rested with Bergmann, the expression 'the linguistic turn' would very likely never have been heard again. But the name appealed to Richard Rorty – and he put it to good use in an eponymous anthology of writings he edited in 1967. *The Linguistic Turn – recent essays in philosophical method* contained 37 essays (some of which are replies to others) by many of the leading analytic philosophers of the day (and of the previous thirty years). The book was divided into four parts. The first consisted of essays by Schlick, Carnap, Bergmann, Ryle, Wisdom and Malcolm. These all argued, in very different ways and for very different reasons, that philosophical questions are, in a sense which they duly tried to elucidate, 'questions of language'. Part II was entitled 'Metaphilosophical Problems of Ideal Language Philosophy' and consisted of essays by Copi, Bergmann, Black, Ambrose, Chisholm, Cornman and Quine. Part III was called 'Metaphilosophical Problems of Ordinary Language Philosophy' in which a symposium on Austin (who had recently died) was given pride of place, and various criticisms of so-called ordinary language philosophy were examined. And the final part of the anthology was 'Recapitulations, Reconsiderations, and Future Prospects' in which Shapere, Hampshire, Urmson, Strawson, Black, Katz and Bar-Hillel severally attempted an overview of the state of play in analytic philosophy..

It is clear from this description of the contents of his anthology that Rorty took from Bergmann the division of the linguistic turn into a dual carriageway, one lane of which was 'ordinary language philosophy' and the other 'ideal language philosophy'. Wisely, he did not repeat Bergmann's confused characterization of these two tendencies. Rorty, perfectly correctly, appreciated that a sea-change had occurred in analytic philosophy in the 1930s, and had continued after the Second World War. He characterized philosophers who participated in this change as 'linguistic philosophers' and restricted his selection largely to philosophers active in Britain and America. This included of course some of the emigré Austrian and German logical empiricists who had fled the Nazis and had brought about a powerful synthesis of the spirit of logical empiricism with American pragmatism. Rorty announced that the purpose of his anthology was to provide materials for reflection on linguistic philosophy, which he described as 'the most recent philosophical revolution'.

The revolutionaries were held to include many who would have been loath to accept the banner ‘linguistic philosophy’, such as Carnap, Quine, and Bar-Hillel. For the name ‘linguistic philosophy’ was already associated with the group of Oxford philosophers in the post-war years whom Bergmann had (misleadingly) characterized as ‘ordinary language philosophers’. But Rorty was well guarded against any accusation of misdescription. He characterized linguistic philosophy as ‘the view that philosophical problems are problems that may be solved (or dissolved) either by reforming language or by understanding more about the language we presently use’ – and the first disjunct could safely be held to include the so-called ideal-language philosophers such as Carnap and regimented-language philosophers such as Quine (who did indeed have ontological preoccupations that approximate Bergmann’s specifications).

So, according to Rorty, the linguistic turn in philosophy is exhibited by the distinctive methodologies of two different strands within ‘linguistic’ philosophy. However, there were further claims afoot in both Bergmann’s paper and in Rorty’s essay and anthology. For it is clearly not *only* a pair of methods that is associated with the philosophical movement that they called linguistic philosophy. The methods go hand in hand with the claim that the source (or, at least, one major source) of the problems of philosophy lies in the misleading forms of natural languages. And linked with that is the suggestion that philosophical questions are questions *of* language (*vide* the title of Part I of Rorty’s anthology ‘Classic Statements of the Thesis that Philosophical Questions are Questions of Language’). The latter supposition stands in need of much clarification. Does it mean that philosophical questions are questions *about* language? If so, does it follow that philosophy is just a branch of linguistics? Does it mean that philosophical theories and theses are theories and theses about language? Or does it just recapitulate the methodological claim that philosophical problems – whatever they are – are solved or resolved by one or the other of the two methods suggested?

As we progress, we shall attend to a number of distinct questions:

What, according to linguistic philosophers thus understood, is the subject matter of philosophy?

What is a philosophical problem and how is it to be distinguished from other kinds of problems, e.g. in science or mathematics?

What is the source (or sources) of the problems of philosophy?

What is the appropriate method (or methods) for the solution of philosophical problems?

What is the result of successful philosophical investigations? Is it philosophical truths (akin to the truths produced by successful scientific investigations)? If so, how are they to be characterized? And if it is not, what is it?

What was distinctive about what Bergmann and Rorty called the linguistic turn in philosophy is evident in the kinds of answers given by analytic philosophers to these questions. The linguistic turn was in fact a phase (or more accurately a number of phases) in the development of analytic philosophy in the twentieth century. There was nothing novel about the claim that misleading features of natural languages are responsible for philosophical confusions (Plato and Aristotle pointed *that* out). Nor was there anything new about the suggestion that careful scrutiny of the use of the terms that lead to confusion will help dispel it (Aristotle excelled at *that*). These, out of context, are platitudes that should be known to every philosopher and philosophy student. To see what *was* new about this distinctive movement in philosophy, it has to be located in its historical context.

## *2. Historical stage-setting*

It is evident that the expression ‘the linguistic turn in philosophy’ is used as a characterization of a change of direction in the development of analytic philosophy. It is worthwhile briefly locating analytic philosophy in relation to the development of European philosophy in the nineteenth century.

The linguistic turn that occurred in the 1920s was preceded by a logistic turn that occurred in the mid-nineteenth century, prior to the rise of analytic philosophy. The study of logic had been almost totally neglected from Descartes onward (with the exception of Leibniz) – indeed so much so that Kant, at the end of the eighteenth century, could declare that logic, since Aristotle, ‘has not been able to advance a step and is thus to all appearance complete and perfect’ (*Critique of Pure Reason* B. viii). This illusion (which, incidentally, displayed complete ignorance of Stoic and medieval logic) was to be dispelled by a group of mathematicians and mathematically minded philosophers in the mid-nineteenth century, namely de Morgan, Boole, Venn, Jevons and Schröder in Britain and Germany, and Huntington and Peirce in the USA. Mathematical logic, as de Morgan called it in 1858, was designed to represent the forms of thought by the mathematicization of logic. Boole invented logical algebra, which presented logic as a branch of abstract algebra, and his idea was taken up by

Venn, Jevons, Schröder and others. A quarter of a century later, logical algebra was superseded by Frege's invention of function-theoretic logic, which generalized the mathematical theory of functions in order to show not that logic was reducible to arithmetic, but rather that arithmetic was reducible to logic. Frege's great advances in mathematical logic, e.g. the introduction of the quantifier/bound variable technique for presenting general and existential statements and statements involving multiple generality, the complete formalization of the propositional calculus and the axiomatization of the first-order predicate calculus with identity, were followed by those of Russell and Whitehead in *Principia Mathematica*. The invention of modern mathematical logic inaugurated a century of intense logical research and the creation of further forms of logic such as modal, tense and deontic logics.

Frege's primary concern was to demonstrate that arithmetic is derivable from logic. It was to that end that he invented his function-theoretic logic. He conceived of his logical system as an ideal language for logical and proof theoretic purposes. It was, he suggested, related to natural languages as the microscope to the eye. His philosophical attitude to natural language as a tool for the purposes of the philosophy of logic and mathematics was one of contempt. Natural languages did not evolve for the purposes of logical proofs; for that purpose one needs to invent a logically perfect language – which is what he presented his 'conceptual notation' as. This, broadly speaking, was also Russell's view. He conceived of the Peano-derived symbolism and of the formation rules of *Principia* as the syntax of a logically ideal language.

Does this make Frege into the originator of the linguistic turn in philosophy – belonging to the ideal language wing of the movement? That would be mistaken. First, if the mere invention of formal calculi and ideal languages for logical and proof-theoretic purposes is to introduce the linguistic turn, then many earlier philosophers made the linguistic turn, and it ceases to be a crucial aspect of, and phase in, the development of twentieth-century analytic philosophy. Those whom Rorty called 'ideal language philosophers' (e.g. Carnap and Quine) had a much larger and philosophically more ambitious agenda than that. Secondly, Frege had no *general* view of the sources of, nature of, or methods of solving, philosophical problems. He did not hold that all or even most philosophical questions are questions of language (which, according to Rorty, is one aspect of the linguistic turn). Nor did he claim that all or even most philosophical questions are to be answered or resolved by either examining the use of natural language or by inventing an ideal language (which,

Rorty held, characterizes the linguistic turn. His concerns were exclusively with the philosophy of mathematics, logic and philosophical logic. And he invented his conceptual notation for purposes of his logicist project – not to solve or resolve the problems of epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of mind, etc.

What is true is that the function theoretic logic that Frege and Russell devised was the source of the pre-occupation of twentieth-century analytic philosophy with logic and the philosophy of logic. Moreover, the powerful logic they invented made it possible for their successors, once the linguistic turn had been taken, to devise a variety of putatively ideal languages for the purposes of philosophical analysis. There is no doubt that Frege and Russell were the main influences on the young Wittgenstein, who was stimulated by their work into demolishing much of its alleged philosophical import in the *Tractatus* and replacing it with a quite different vision, as well as on Carnap, who constructed his programme of logical syntax and later logical semantics on foundations they and Wittgenstein had laid. In so far as one lane of the linguistic turn is conceived to be that of ideal or regimented language-construction, then that lane emerged from the confluence of two roads – the logicist turn, on the one hand, and analytic philosophy on the other.

Analytic philosophy, understood as the name of a distinctive philosophical movement of the twentieth-century, had its roots in Cambridge at the very end of the nineteenth century. For its origins lay in the revolt of the young Moore and Russell against the Hegelianism of Absolute Idealism that then dominated British philosophy. It was initially luxuriantly pluralistic by contrast with the monism of the Absolute Idealists. Moore engaged in what he called ‘conceptual analysis’ (which had nothing to do with the analysis of linguistic usage). Russell, inspired by the conceptual elucidations of mathematicians such as Weierstrass, Dedekind and Cantor, practised logical analysis (which he did not conceive of as merely tabulating and analysing the uses of expressions in natural language). Both Moore and Russell thought of themselves as *analysing the elements of reality* – the constituents and forms of facts, and as aiming to describe and catalogue the logical forms of the world. Analysis, as they understood it, involved the decomposition of facts into their ultimate simple constituents and the revelation of their logical forms. How intelligible this idea was is debatable, but it was given support by Russell’s theory of descriptions (1905) in which he purported to show by analysis how sentences containing singular definite descriptions which appear to refer to an object do not really do so.

*Decompositional analysis* characterized the first stages of analytic philosophy, including Moore, Russell and the young Wittgenstein as well as some members of the later Cambridge school of analysis in the 1920s.

After the completion of *Principia* (1910), Russell turned his attention to epistemology (*Problems of Philosophy* (1912) and *Theory of Knowledge* (written in 1913)), logical construction, and to advocating what he thought of as ‘scientific method’ in philosophy (*Our Knowledge of the External World* (1914)). It was during this phase in Russell’s development that he contended that ‘Every philosophical problem, when it is subjected to the necessary analysis and purification, is found not to be philosophical at all, or else to be, in the sense in which we are using the word, logical.’<sup>3</sup> Philosophical method is to determine by logical analysis what kinds of facts there are and how they are related to each other. Philosophy, like science, aims to achieve a theoretical understanding of the world. It was partly under the impact of discussions with young Wittgenstein that Russell moved on to the next phase in his analytical philosophy, namely logical atomism.

Wittgenstein came to Cambridge to study with Russell in 1911/12. While in Cambridge he began work on what was to become his first masterpiece: the *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus* (1921). It is above all this book and its impact upon the Vienna Circle and the Cambridge school of analysis in the 1920s that is the source of *the linguistic turn* in analytic philosophy.

### 3. *The Tractatus starts the turn*

Wittgenstein conceived of the *Tractatus* as solving the most fundamental problems of philosophy (TLP, Preface).<sup>4</sup> The intention of the book was to bring the logistic turn into the heart of philosophy. His work, he observed, ‘extended from the foundations of logic to the nature of the world’.<sup>5</sup> Where Frege and Russell had thought of natural languages as logically defective and of their artificial languages as logically perfect, Wittgenstein conceived of logic as a transcendental condition of representation, and hence as constituting the depth-grammar of *any* possible language. Hence natural

---

<sup>3</sup> Russell, *Our Knowledge of the External World as a Field for Scientific Method in Philosophy* (Open Court, Chicago and London, 1914), p. 33.

<sup>4</sup> References to the *Tractatus* will be given in the text with the abbreviation ‘TLP’.

<sup>5</sup> Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914-1916* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1969), p. 79.

language ‘is all right as it is’ – a language *cannot* be logically defective, for if it were its sentences would not express a sense, and so it would be no language at all. But the surface grammar of natural language is deeply misleading, and it is the task of analysis to reveal its depth structure, for which the essence of the proposition and hence logic itself (which follows from it) provide the adamant foundations. ‘All philosophy’, Wittgenstein wrote, ‘is a “critique” of language’ (TLP 4.0031). This remark heralds the linguistic turn in twentieth-century philosophy. Wittgenstein later laid out the general programme for philosophy that was consequent upon the achievement of the *Tractatus*:

The idea is to express in an appropriate symbolism what in ordinary language leads to endless misunderstandings. That is to say, where ordinary language disguises logical structure, where it allows the formation of pseudo-propositions, where it uses one term in an infinity of different meanings, we must replace it by a symbolism which gives a clear picture of the logical structure, excludes pseudo-propositions, and uses its terms unambiguously.<sup>6</sup>

This imaginary symbolism was not an ideal language, but an ideally perspicuous notation that would display the depth grammar of language. This, however, was a task for the future (and was never fulfilled). What the *Tractatus* itself aimed to do was above all to disclose the nature of logical necessity, the essence of representation, and the limits of thought.

In six different respects, the *Tractatus* introduced the linguistic turn in analytic philosophy, marking a sharp break with the conception of analysis advocated by Moore and Russell.<sup>7</sup>

i. Most of the propositions and questions in past philosophy are not false but nonsensical – transgressing the bounds of sense. Most of the propositions and questions of philosophers arise from failure to grasp the logic of our language (TLP 4.003). So the roots of most philosophical problems lie in misleading features of the surface grammar of natural language, and they can be resolved only by logico-linguistic analysis.

---

<sup>6</sup> Wittgenstein, ‘Some Remarks on Logical Form’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 9 (1929), p. 163.

<sup>7</sup> For a more detailed discussion, see P. M. S. Hacker, *Wittgenstein’s Place in Twentieth Century Analytic Philosophy* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1996), chap. 2, from which the following observations are taken.

ii. Although the book aimed to set the limits of thought (TLP. Preface), this, Wittgenstein argued, can be done only by setting the limits of *language*, i.e. by determining the boundary between sense and nonsense. This put language and its forms, the conditions of sense, and the relationship between language and reality at the centre of philosophical investigation.

iii. The key to achieving this goal was the clarification of the essential nature of the *propositional-sign* (TLP 3.1431). That was done by determining the general propositional form – i.e. by giving ‘a description of the propositions of *any sign-language whatsoever* in such a way that every possible sense can be expressed by a symbol satisfying the description, and every symbol satisfying the description can express a sense, provided that the meanings of names are suitably chosen’ (TLP 4.5).

iv. The most influential achievement of the book was its clarification of the nature of logical truth. This was done by an investigation of *symbolism*. It was argued that the ‘peculiar mark of logical propositions [is] that one can recognize that they are true from the symbol alone, and this fact contains in itself the whole philosophy of logic’ (TLP 6.113). Contrary to what both Frege and Russell thought, the propositions of logic are not essentially general (but essentially true), they say nothing at all, but are rather senseless, i.e. limiting cases of propositions with a sense. In particular, they are not descriptions of relations between thoughts as Frege supposed, nor are they descriptions of the most general facts in the universe as Russell had suggested.

v. The positive programme for future philosophy was committed to logico-linguistic analysis of propositions, i.e. *sentences with a sense*. The task of philosophy is the logical clarification of thoughts, which is to be done by the clarification of *sentences* (TLP 4.112).

vi. The negative programme for future philosophy was to demonstrate the illegitimacy of metaphysical assertions. This is to be done by demonstrating how the attempt to say something metaphysical, i.e. necessary truths about essential features of the world and about essential features of representation by means of language, inevitably transgress the bounds of what can be said in any language. Such truths, by the very nature of *language* cannot be said (although they are shown by well-formed propositions of language).

A corollary of these points is a dramatic curtailing of the aspirations of philosophy. Since philosophy cannot deliver any metaphysical truths or say anything at all about the essence of the

world, since the only expressible necessity is the vacuous necessity of the tautologies of logic, *there are no philosophical propositions*. Any attempt to propound philosophical propositions, as manifest in traditional philosophy and in the *Tractatus* itself, results in nonsense, since it unavoidably employs formal or categorial concepts as if they were material concepts. But formal concepts are akin to unbound variables, and nonsense – an ill-formed word-sequence – ensues. Philosophy is not a cognitive discipline, but a critical and elucidatory one. The analysis of propositions delivers no new truths about the world, but only clarifications of existing propositions and exposure of metaphysical nonsense. This unprecedented idea was pivotal to the ensuing linguistic turn.

These methodological claims, the achievement of the book in clarifying the nature of logic, and the programme for future philosophy had an immense influence upon the next two phases of analytic philosophy – the logical empiricism of the Vienna Circle and its affiliates, and the short lived school of Cambridge analysis (e.g. Ramsey, Wisdom, Braithwaite, as well as Moore from the older generation), which cannot be discussed here.

It would be disingenuous to hold that the *Tractatus* itself completed the linguistic turn. It was too deeply rooted in the idea that there are things that can be shown but not said – in particular things about the essence of the world and the essential nature of representation. The whole of the *Tractatus* was concerned with elaborating such deep truths – therein lay its grandeur. The conception of representation that informs the book is rooted in a metaphysical vision of the world, as well as a metaphysics of symbolism (e.g. that only simple names can represent simple things, that only relations can represent relations and that only facts can represent facts). Of course, the book grants at the end that its very attempt to describe the conditions of representation and the limits of thought and its expression are themselves things that cannot be said but are shown by well-formed propositions with a sense. It is only when this ineffable metaphysical baggage is jettisoned, as it was by the Vienna Circle, the Cambridge analysts, and Wittgenstein himself in the 1930s that the linguistic turn was completed.

#### 4. *Logical empiricism and the linguistic turn*

The Vienna Circle was a group of philosopher-scientists and philosophically-minded mathematicians gathered around Moritz Schlick in Vienna from 1924 until their dispersal by the rising tides of

Nazism. They were the fountainhead of logical empiricism, which was a further phase in the development of analytic philosophy. There were affiliated groups in Germany (especially the Berlin Society of Scientific Philosophy), Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Scandinavia, and a few followers in the USA. The Circle's philosophical outlook was marked by the scientific or mathematical training that most of its members had enjoyed. Their philosophical roots were in the nineteenth-century empiricism of Avenarius and Mach, and also in the neo-Kantianism of the day. They shared a distaste for metaphysics and its attempts to derive substantive (synthetic a priori) truths about the world independently of experience, and shared an interest in logic, philosophy of logic, and philosophy of science. The Circle represents the convergence of the logistic turn with budding analytic philosophy, marrying classical empiricism to the techniques of logico-linguistic analysis. This produced logical positivism (or, more accurately, logical empiricism), which was fated to be the most influential philosophical movement within twentieth-century analytic philosophy – largely due to the flight of most members of the Circle to the USA and the great impact they had there on American philosophy.

The explicit goal of the Circle was to articulate a form of consistent empiricism and to advance the reductive programme of 'unified science' as a part of the Scientific World-View which they advocated. The main barrier to this was the lack of an adequate account of linguistic meaning robust enough to exclude propositions of metaphysics as meaningless, the need for an explanation of the nature of necessary truths of logic, arithmetic and geometry which did not appeal to synthetic a priori truths accessible to pure reason or intuition independently of experience, and a convincing account of the nature and limits of philosophy. The main influence upon members of the Circle was Wittgenstein, first via the *Tractatus*, which they read and discussed line by line at their weekly meetings in the academic year of 1924/5 and again in 1926/7, and later via Schlick and Waismann, who met Wittgenstein regularly on his visits to Vienna between 1929 and 1935.<sup>8</sup> What impressed them above all was that the *Tractatus* seemed to have solved the question as to the status and nature

---

<sup>8</sup> Schlick wrote of the *Tractatus* 'This book in my unshakeable conviction is the most significant work of our time . . . The new insights are absolutely crucial to the destiny of philosophy' (in his 1929 introduction to the projected book by Waismann and Wittgenstein, *Logik, Sprache, Philosophie*. J. Jørgensen, in a history of the Circle wrote that the *Tractatus* 'contributed essentially to the formation of logical positivism', and V. Kraft, in a survey of the work of the Circle wrote 'A common starting point was provided also by the philosophy of language which Ludwig Wittgenstein had developed.' For elaboration, see Hacker, *Wittgenstein's Place in Twentieth-Century Analytic Philosophy*, chap. 3.

of logical truths. Hahn wrote ‘To me, the *Tractatus* has explained the role of logic’<sup>9</sup> and Carnap remarked similarly that Wittgenstein had shown that logical truths ‘are tautological, that is, that they hold necessarily in every possible case, therefore they do not exclude any case and do not say anything about the facts of the world.’<sup>10</sup> The consequence of this, Carnap averred, was ‘that it became possible for the first time to combine the basic tenets of empiricism with a satisfactory explanation of the nature of logic and mathematics.’ The members of the Circle thought that logicism (albeit with further refinements), together with the *Tractatus* insights into logic, explained the nature of arithmetic.<sup>11</sup> They thought that Hilbert had successfully elucidated the conventional nature of pure geometry; and that Wittgenstein had explained the tautological nature of logic. As for metaphysics, they excluded metaphysical utterances as devoid of (cognitive) meaning either on the basis of the principle of verification, which they derived from discussions with Wittgenstein in 1929/30, or on the basis of *Tractatus* considerations pertaining to the logical syntax of language. Carnap later wrote ‘the most decisive development in my view of metaphysics occurred later, in the Vienna period, chiefly under the influence of Wittgenstein.’<sup>12</sup>

The upshot was that the members of the Circle adopted a set of methodological and substantive doctrines that might well be thought to characterize ‘the linguistic turn in analytic philosophy’.

It was generally accepted that philosophy is not a cognitive discipline that may add to the body of human knowledge. There are no special philosophical propositions in the sense in which there are propositions of the natural sciences. Moreover, there is no such thing as first philosophy which provides the foundations for empirical science.

---

<sup>9</sup> A remark reported by Karl Menger in his introduction to Hahn’s *Philosophical Papers* (Reidel, Dordrecht, 1980), p. xii.

<sup>10</sup> R. Carnap, ‘Intellectual Autobiography’ in P. A. Schilpp ed. *The Philosophy of Rudolph Carnap* (Open Court, La Salle, Illinois, 1963), p. 46.

<sup>11</sup> Carnap and Hahn both thought that the difference between tautologies and arithmetical propositions are insignificant. This was never Wittgenstein’s view.

<sup>12</sup> Carnap, *ibid.*, p. 45.

The traditional problems of philosophy (especially of metaphysics) are pseudo-problems that arise through (i) misleading features of natural language, and (ii) the misguided idea that thought can yield substantive knowledge independently of experience.

Philosophy is an activity of clarification of problems that arise out of misleading features of natural language. Its method is the clarification of sentences of natural language that give rise to philosophical problems (Schlick and Waismann, under the influence of Wittgenstein in the early 1930s), or the logical analysis of language and the investigation of the logical syntax of the language of science (Carnap and Neurath). ‘The logic of science’, Carnap wrote, ‘takes the place of the inextricable tangle of problems which is known as philosophy’<sup>13</sup>, and the logic of science just is the logical syntax of the language of science. This polarity within the Circle was associated with a parallel divergence of views in respect of the project of unified science which was Neurath’s dream.

The result of philosophy, Schlick claimed (very much under Wittgenstein’s influence) is that some of its problems ‘will disappear by being shown to be mistakes and misunderstandings of our language and others will be found to be ordinary scientific questions in disguise. These remarks, I think, determine the whole future of philosophy.’<sup>14</sup> Carnap had a less negative conception. ‘In our discussions in the Vienna Circle’, he wrote later, ‘it had turned out that any attempt at formulating more precisely the philosophical problems in which we were interested ended up with problems in the logical analysis of language. Since in our view the issue in philosophical problems concerned the language not the world, these problems should be formulated, not in the object language, but in the meta-language.’ This conviction led to the writing of *The Logical Syntax of Language* (1934), and subsequently, under the influence of Tarski, to the development of Carnap’s formal semantical methods that culminate with *Meaning and Necessity* (1947).

It is this divergence between Schlick and Waismann (most influenced by the middle Wittgenstein), on the one hand, and Carnap and Neurath, on the other, that warranted Bergmann and Rorty in distinguishing two streams within what they termed ‘linguistic philosophy’— the so-called ordinary language philosophers and the ideal language philosophers. But, of course, by the time they

---

<sup>13</sup> Carnap, *The Logical Syntax of Language* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1937), p. 279.

<sup>14</sup> M. Schlick, ‘The turning point in philosophy’, repr. in A. J. Ayer ed. *Logical Positivism* (Free Press, Glencoe, Ill. 1959), p. 131.

were writing (in the 1960s) the Vienna Circle had disappeared, and so-called ordinary language philosophy was represented by Oxford philosophers and their followers in the years after 1945. Ideal language philosophers, on the other hand, were represented by Carnap and Bergmann and their followers in the USA, as well as by Quine. Quine was a self-confessed apostate from the logical empiricism of the Circle, denying the distinction between analytic propositions and empirical ones, hence denying any sharp differentiation of scientific from a priori propositions, and denying that the task of philosophy is purely elucidatory. It is part and parcel of the general human endeavour to achieve knowledge of the world. Nevertheless, he advocated the regimentation of natural language. His idea was that translating our 'theories' into the first-order predicate calculus will reveal our ontological commitments. Redundant commitments can be eliminated by a canonical notation. His goal was as austere an ontology as possible consistent with having a regimented language adequate for all scientific purposes.

I have suggested that it was through Wittgenstein that the logistic turn of the nineteenth century and the linguistic turn initiated by the *Tractatus* merged for a time. The synthesis was transmitted to later phases of analytic philosophy. The route ran via the Vienna Circle and the emigration of many of their members to the USA. Logical pragmatism was a consequence of the marriage of logical positivism with the homegrown American pragmatist tradition. In time this resulted in the Quinean naturalism characteristic of much of late twentieth-century American philosophy, in the quest for a theory of meaning for a natural language that was the main enterprise of the most influential of Quine's followers, Donald Davidson, and in possible world semantics.

##### 5. *Later Wittgenstein and the linguistic turn*

After his return to philosophy in 1929 Wittgenstein rapidly became disillusioned with his first philosophy, dismantled it, and started the long process of developing his second philosophy that came to fruition in his posthumous *Philosophical Investigations* (1953). Although he published nothing after 1929, his influence on British philosophy was immense. He conveyed his new and revolutionary ideas in his classes at Cambridge, and his pupils in due course transmitted them in their own teachings and writings. In addition, the dictations he gave, the *Blue and the Brown Books*, were circulated in Cambridge, Oxford and elsewhere. His criticisms of the *Tractatus* are not pertinent to the tale of the

development of linguistic philosophy.<sup>15</sup> All that is necessary in this context is to delineate in what sense the middle and later Wittgenstein contributed to the linguistic turn – taking it in directions not dreamt of by members of the Vienna Circle other than Schlick and Waismann, who followed Wittgenstein’s ideas closely until 1936.

According to Wittgenstein’s later view, the major source of philosophical problems lies in the forms of natural languages and the immense difficulty of attaining a surveyable representation of the meaning-determining rules of grammar, familiar though they are.

The term ‘natural language’ is more appropriate here than ‘ordinary language’ (even though Wittgenstein did not use it). Ordinary language stands in contrast to the technical language of the sciences<sup>16</sup>, whereas natural language stands in contrast to artificial language (such as the concept-  
scripts of Frege and Russell, or the artificial languages devised by Carnap). Of course, the technical terminology of the sciences gives rise to philosophical, conceptual, problems no less than does non-technical language. Terms such as ‘the unconscious mind’ in psycho-analysis, ‘force’ in Newtonian physics, ‘transfinite cardinal’ in transfinite arithmetic, ‘law of excluded middle’ in formal logic, ‘neural map’ in cognitive neuroscience, ‘depth-grammar’ in Chomskian linguistics are technical terms, all of which notoriously generate conceptual bafflement and confusion. So too do terms of ordinary language, such as ‘mind’, ‘force’ (as that over the use of which the state has a legal monopoly), ‘number’, ‘infinite’ are all pregnant with philosophical, conceptual, problems. Finally, terms of artificial languages, as opposed to natural languages, generate philosophical problems too. It is not for nothing that philosophers of language and logic have spent so much effort on comparing the logical connectives of the calculus with corresponding terms of natural language, or have laboured so hard to compare the use of the existential quantifier with that of natural language expressions such as

---

<sup>15</sup> For examination of Wittgenstein’s criticisms of the *Tractatus*, see Hacker, *Wittgenstein’s Place in Twentieth-Century Analytic Philosophy*, pp. 76-86

<sup>16</sup> See G. Ryle, ‘Ordinary Language’, repr. in his *Collected Papers*, vol. 2, pp. 301-318, for a detailed discussion of the differences between ordinary and technical language, and the quite different contrast between ordinary uses of language and the varieties of non-ordinary (metaphorical, figurative, etc.) uses of language.

‘exists’ and ‘is’, or have striven so futilely to find ways of representing plural reference in the calculus.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, it would be an exaggeration to suggest that *all* the problems of philosophy arise out of misleading features of language. For, as Wittgenstein pointed out, philosophical problems may arise through:

- A. New scientific discoveries and theories (such as the theory of relativity)
- B. Advances in the a priori disciplines, (such as transfinite set theory, the predicate calculus, or Gödel’s incompleteness theorem)
- C. Technological inventions, such as automata in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries or computers in the twentieth
- D. Natural dispositions of the human mind, such as:
  - i. The craving for generality (which is fundamental to our scientific endeavours)
  - ii. The demand for explanation on the model of scientific explanation, where what is really needed is description and comparison
  - iii. The disposition to cleave to an explanatory paradigm or model (e.g. to conceive of the mental on the pattern of the physical, and so to think that mental objects, states, processes are just like physical ones only mental, or to conceive of transfinite cardinals on the model of cardinal numbers, only vastly greater) and hence to extend its usefulness beyond its natural limits
  - iv. The will to illusion

What then is the subject matter of ‘theoretical’ (as opposed to ‘practical’<sup>18</sup>) philosophy? In the sense in which the natural sciences have a subject matter the successful investigation of which yields empirical truths and a body of established knowledge, philosophy has none. In another sense, one may say that the subject matter of philosophy consists of the peculiar problems of philosophy.

---

<sup>17</sup> For a brilliant investigation of the problems of representing plural reference in the predicate calculus, see H. Ben-Yami, *Logic and Natural Language – on plural reference and its semantic and logical significance* (Ashgate, Aldershot, 2004).

<sup>18</sup> The debates about the nature of philosophy in the twentieth-century were focused largely upon what Kant called ‘theoretical’ philosophy, i.e. philosophy of logic and language, metaphysics and epistemology, philosophy of mind as well as the philosophies of special sciences (e.g. of biology, physics, mathematics, social sciences). How those debates bear upon practical philosophy (i.e. ethics, political and legal philosophy), its aims, methods and limits, is worth discussing, but not in this context.

What then is a philosophical problem? Wittgenstein wisely eschewed a definition, instead giving an array of uncontroversially philosophical problems as examples. These, to be sure, do share some features. Philosophical problems are a priori, not empirical. So philosophy is sharply distinct from the natural sciences. Philosophical problems can no more be solved by experiment and observation than can problems of mathematics. They are conceptual problems – difficulties that result from some unclarity or entanglement in our concepts that may, as we have just seen, have multiple and diverse roots, mostly in misleading features of language. These lead us, both in the formulation of philosophical problems and in our often bungled attempts to resolve them, to transgress the bounds of sense in subtle and commonly unnoticed ways.

The methods of philosophy are manifold. They are descriptive and comparative-descriptive, not hypothetical or hypothetico-deductive like the natural sciences. Central among them is the assembling of familiar rules for the use of words, which Wittgenstein idiosyncratically called grammatical propositions. These are familiar meaning-rules for the use of words, given typically in the material mode, e.g. ‘Pain is a sensation’, ‘Different people may have the same pain’, ‘To mean something by a word is not an act’. The careful selection of such propositions and their ordering in a surveyable representation is tailored to the specific philosophical problem at hand. But the recollection and marshalling of ordinary (or even technical) usage is not the sole method available to the philosopher. Wittgenstein introduced and made use of the method of invented language-games – imaginary linguistic activities that are invoked to shed light on our own linguistic practices by way of both similarities and differences. He often invited his readers to reflect on how an expression might be taught to a learner in order to shed light on the primitive core of its use. He insisted on paying less attention to grammatical form and more attention to the role and purpose of expressions. His aim of uncovering the sources of philosophical confusion in a misleading analogy or mesmerizing paradigm that is inapplicable, or in a transposition of a grammatical articulation that obtains in one domain of grammar (or language-game) to another involves a further battery of methods. All these are subservient to the goals of philosophy.

Philosophy has two very general goals, the one subordinate to the other. Its primary task is the resolution and dissolution of philosophical problems. Since these problems are symptomatic of conceptual confusions and bafflement, which may be compared to a kind of intellectual disease,

their resolution may be conceived metaphorically as a kind of intellectual therapy. Philosophy, one may then say, is a cure for diseases of the understanding. Its result is not new knowledge of the world, but the disentangling of the knots we tie in our understanding. Its second goal is to attain an overview of a concept and to produce a surveyable representation of the relevant field of concepts that will facilitate the resolution of the philosophical problems at hand. This he compared to drawing a map – a map that will help us find our way around in the field of our concepts and conceptual structures.

Wittgenstein's work was a major influence upon the further development of linguistic philosophy after the Second World War. His pupils and followers, such as Von Wright, Wisdom, and Anscombe, who succeeded him in his chair in Cambridge, and Ambrose, Black, Malcolm and Bouwsma in the USA ensured the further spread of his ideas and methods. But the centre from which most further advances in linguistic philosophy ('ordinary language philosophy', to use Bergmann's and Rorty's misleading phrase) was Oxford.

#### *6. Oxford philosophy and the linguistic turn*

For a quarter of a century after the war, Oxford was the centre of analytic philosophy in the world. 'Oxford philosophy' was not a school. Unlike the Vienna Circle, it issued no manifesto. It had no ideology akin to the 'Unified Science' of the Circle. Some of the philosophers at Oxford were influenced by Wittgenstein to a greater or lesser extent (e.g. Ryle and Strawson), some were his pupils (Waismann, Paul and Anscombe), and others developed their views quite independently (e.g. Austin, Grice). But Oxford was more of a flourishing field fertilized by Wittgenstein's ideas than bare soil in which Wittgenstein's seeds grew. Unlike both the Circle and Wittgenstein, Oxford philosophers were fairly relaxed about the use of the term 'theory' in connection with philosophy, as long as a 'philosophical theory' was not assumed to be analogous to a scientific theory. They were equally relaxed about the idea of philosophical propositions and their truth or falsity, as long as it was realised that they are not empirical propositions. The leading figures at Oxford exhibited a variety of viewpoints united primarily by agreed meta-philosophical and methodological ideas, as well as a commitment to clarity of expression, perspicuity of argument, and detestation of obfuscation. The following methodological points would have been accepted by almost all:

i. Philosophy is distinct from the empirical sciences, and its problems cannot be solved by observation, experiment and hypothetico-deductive theory. Its problems are a priori, conceptual ones.

ii. Formal calculi, such as the predicate calculus, are neither the depth grammar of any possible language nor ideal languages that illuminate or mirror the logical structure of the world (among other things, the world has no logical structure). Their usefulness in philosophy is very limited indeed. (What venerable philosophical problems have been solved by recourse to an artificial language?)

iii. Metaphysics, understood as an investigation into the essential nature of reality is an incoherent enterprise. Admittedly, in *Individuals* (1959), Strawson introduced the term ‘descriptive metaphysics’, which made the word ‘metaphysics’ philosophically ‘correct’ again after some decades on the Index. But it was misleading of him to do so, since descriptive metaphysics is just more analytic description of the structure of our conceptual scheme, not synthetic description of the structure of the world.

iv. A major source of philosophical problems lies in the misleading forms of natural languages. But there are other sources too – including the misleading forms of artificial calculi.

v. The task of philosophy is the clarification of our concepts and conceptual structures, partly for its intrinsic interest, partly to solve or dissolve philosophical problems.

vi. First and foremost among the methods of philosophy is the descriptive analysis of the uses of words. There are, to be sure, other methods too, but this is a *sine qua non* for successful conceptual investigation.

The latter methodological commitment received divergent descriptions from four of the leading members of the Oxford faculty.<sup>19</sup>

Ryle, following Wittgenstein, characterized his methods as charting the ‘logical geography’ of concepts, describing their logical powers and mapping their connections, compatibilities and incompatibilities. Initially he connected this with the idea of rectifying category mistakes and type-confusions, but later saw that this was no more than an analogy with formal systems. ‘Like a

---

<sup>19</sup> I am, of course, disregarding many important Oxford philosophers whose contribution to philosophy in mid-century was second to none, but in less central domains, and also others who, though no less important, were not at Oxford, but belonged to the same broad movement in the heyday of analytic philosophy in Britain. For more detailed discussion, see *Wittgenstein's Place* chap. 6.

geographical survey’, he wrote, ‘a philosophical survey is necessarily synoptic. Philosophical problems cannot be posed or solved piecemeal.’<sup>20</sup> Austin (influenced by Moore and altogether unimpressed by Wittgenstein) would perhaps not have gone so far, although it is noteworthy that the only two books he wrote: *Sense and Sensibilia* (1962) and *How to do Things with Words* (1962), provided exemplary synoptic surveys. Be that as it may, in his occasional papers he exhibited great skill in detecting distinctions and differences of usage both in the large and in the small. Where our language is rich, subtle and diverse, e.g. in the field of excuses, then it makes sense, in his view, to proceed from ordinary language ‘by examining what we should say when, what words we should use in what situations’.<sup>21</sup> He was, as von Wright later wrote of him, the *doctor subtilis* of his day, and by his skill, and perhaps by his acerbic wit, aroused immense animosity towards what became the favoured term of abuse by its enemies ‘Oxford linguistic philosophy’ or ‘Ordinary language philosophy’. This was unwarranted. Proceeding from ordinary language, Austin stressed, is *one* method in philosophy, apt for the investigation of excuses or perception, but out of place for the investigation, for example, of time. He characterized it, tongue in cheek, as *linguistic phenomenology*. But he was careful not to exaggerate its powers. Certainly, he wrote, ‘ordinary language is *not* the last word: in principle it can be everywhere superseded. Only remember it is the *first* word’. Grice (not in the least influenced by Wittgenstein – and far more prone to construct philosophical ‘theories’ than his peers) said that a proposition that would have commanded universal assent in Oxford at the time was that ‘a careful examination of the detailed features of ordinary discourse is required as a foundation for philosophical thinking’, and wrote of Austin’s methods that

When put to work, this conception of ordinary language seemed to offer fresh and manageable approaches to philosophical ideas and problems . . . When properly regulated and directed, ‘linguistic botanizing’ seems to me to provide a valuable initiation to the philosophical treatment of a concept, particularly if what is under examination (and it is arguable that this should always be the case) is a family of different but related concepts. Indeed, I shall go further, and proclaim it as my belief that linguistic botanizing is indispensable, at a certain

---

<sup>20</sup> G. Ryle, ‘Philosophical Arguments’, repr. in his *Collected Papers* (Hutchinson, London, 1971), p. 202.

<sup>21</sup> J. L. Austin, ‘A Plea for Excuses’, repr. in his *Philosophical Papers* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1961), p. 130.

stage, in a philosophical inquiry, and that it is lamentable that this lesson has been forgotten, or has never been learned.<sup>22</sup>

Strawson was less inclined to the careful examination of usage than Austin, but, unlike his old tutor Grice, he was markedly influenced by Wittgenstein. He described what he conceived as the most appropriate method of philosophy as *connective analysis*. Connective analysis was presented as the appropriate replacement for the discredited forms of decompositional and reductive analysis characteristic of the early phases of analytic philosophy, and for their equally discredited successor – logical construction (e.g. Carnap’s *Logische Aufbau der Welt* and Goodman’s *The Structure of Appearances*). Instead of ‘decomposing’ or ‘constructing’ anything, connective analysis aimed to describe appropriate fragments of the network of our conceptual scheme, tracing the connections between a given problematic concept and adjacent concepts with which it is linked. This was to be done by describing the salient features of the uses of expressions and their logical dependencies, compatibilities, incompatibilities, and implications, their presuppositions and forms of contextual dependencies – all in order to resolve philosophical problems, to explode philosophical illusions and illuminate aspects of our conceptual scheme.<sup>23</sup> This method has remarkable affinities with much of Wittgenstein’s practice – although in Strawson’s hands connective analysis was put to fewer diagnostic and ‘therapeutic’ purposes. Logical geography, linguistic phenomenology, linguistic botanizing and connective analysis flourished side by side – the differences of detail being minimal and tolerated. No one thought that philosophy was exclusively *about* language (save for ‘philosophy of language’ – a term then virtually unknown<sup>24</sup>), nobody thought that philosophy was *a branch of linguistics* and no one thought that scrutiny of linguistic usage was the *sole* method of philosophy.

Philosophers at Oxford from 1945 until the mid-1970s, and their pupils and followers throughout the English speaking world brought the ‘natural language’ branch of the linguistic turn in philosophy to an apogee. Though none of them used the phrase ‘the linguistic turn’, and few if any of

---

<sup>22</sup> H. P. Grice, ‘Reply to Richards’ in R. E. Grandy and R. Warner eds. *Philosophical Grounds of Rationality* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1986), p. 57.

<sup>23</sup> P. F. Strawson, *Analysis and Metaphysics* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1992), chap. 2

<sup>24</sup> What we now call philosophy of language was then known as philosophical logic.

them called themselves ‘ordinary language philosophers’ – there was remarkable unanimity with regard to their conception of the nature of philosophy and the methodology of philosophical investigation.

#### *7. The aftermath, an overview, and two mistaken criticisms*

After the mid-1970s linguistic philosophy declined. The centre of gravity of Anglophone philosophy shifted to the USA. Quinean and Davidsonian logical pragmatism flourished.<sup>25</sup> For a couple of decades theories of meaning for a natural language occupied centre-stage, enjoying, together with Chomsky’s linguistic theory, the thrills of seeking the depth grammar of language and the inner workings of the human mind. The excitement faded as promise exceeded performance. Philosophy of language was gradually displaced from centre-stage by various forms of physicalist philosophy of mind that in turn transmuted into ‘cognitive science’. This was thought to be a synthesis of the best in philosophy of psychology, neuroscience, theoretical linguistics and artificial intelligence. (Critics responded, like Bentham to Blackstone on the mixed British constitution, by wondering whether it might not be a synthesis of the worst in each.) In the USA Quinean naturalism came to dominate the scene. Quine’s superficial criticisms of the analytic/synthetic distinction led to an unreflective acceptance of the old Russellian idea that philosophy is continuous with and in the same cognitive business as science. (It was a sore misconception of Quine’s to suppose that the sharp distinction between philosophical and scientific investigation turned on the viability of Carnap’s distinction between analytic and synthetic statements.) But perhaps this *scientistic* drift was unsurprising in an intellectual culture prone to adulate empirical science as the repository of all that we know and understand about ourselves and the world. The upshot was the dispersal of the broad stream of analytic philosophy that had flowed so powerfully for almost a century into a multitude of rivulets meandering through a delta with little sense of direction or purpose. At its worst, analytic philosophy moved into a characteristically scholastic phase in which pedantry displaced vision, and all that was left of an era of philosophical achievement were empty forms – the employment of the technical tools of analytic philosophy. Misunderstandings of what the linguistic turn had consisted in, and even

---

<sup>25</sup> See H.-J. Glock, *Quine and Davidson on Language, Thought and Reality* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003).

deeper misconceptions of what Oxford linguistic (or ‘ordinary language’) philosophy had been, became widespread. So, before concluding, an overview may be helpful.

As we have seen, the expression ‘the linguistic turn’ is useful to signal an important shift in meta-philosophical reflection and in philosophical methodology that occurred in the 1920s. This merged for a while with the logistic turn that had arisen in the mid-nineteenth-century, producing the ideal- and regimenting-language philosophy characteristic of logical positivism and logical pragmatism. This gave rise to the pursuit of theories of meaning for a natural language. The other, and perhaps more fruitful, branch of the linguistic turn was natural language philosophy, which eschewed the construction of formal languages and pursued connective analysis for purposes of philosophical elucidation and insight.

The meta-philosophical commitment was above all that philosophy is neither a science nor an extension of science. It is *sui generis*. Philosophy is a conceptual investigation that results in the description and clarification of conceptual structures and in the elimination of conceptual confusions. It is not a contribution to human knowledge, as the natural and social sciences are, but a contribution to a distinctive form of human understanding. Some (such as the logical positivists and Wittgenstein) held that there are no philosophical propositions in the sense in which there are propositions of natural science; others (such as Ryle and Strawson) were less fastidious, but held the propositions they advanced to be a priori conceptual truths. This difference is not deep.

The primary methodological commitment was to meticulous examination of linguistic usage (ordinary or technical as the case may be<sup>26</sup>) as a *sine qua non* for successful philosophical investigation. What was then to be done with the conceptual data thus obtained differed importantly both between the two branches of the linguistic turn (e.g. contrast Carnapian explication with Strawsonian connective analysis<sup>27</sup>) and within each branch (contrast Austin with Grice). And, to be sure, this also depended greatly on the skills of the philosophers in marshalling the linguistic/conceptual data.

---

<sup>26</sup> One could hardly investigate the concept of transfinite cardinal by examining *ordinary* usage.

<sup>27</sup> For a fascinating confrontation, see Strawson’s ‘Carnap’s Views on Constructed Systems versus Natural Languages in Analytic Philosophy’ in P. A. Schilpp ed. *The Philosophy of Rudolf Carnap* (Open Court, La Salle, Ill., 1963), pp. 503-18 and Carnap’s response, *ibid.*, pp. 933-39.

There was also a diagnostic consensus that surface features of the sentences of natural language are one major source of philosophical confusion. This, of course, was no novelty. What was novel was the manner in which these confusing features were winkled out, arrayed and used to shed light upon the conceptual problems of philosophy and to explain what leads us to build houses of cards.

The linguistic turn, linguistic philosophy, and so-called ordinary language philosophers were and still are subject to much criticism from many who have not properly followed the linguistic turn. Viewed cursorily and unsympathetically from afar, one cannot see the twists and turns of the linguistic turn, let alone the panoramas to which it gave access and the views across philosophical landscapes that it made possible. I shall conclude by briefly warning against two common, but misconceived, criticisms.

One is the supposition that in order to describe linguistic usage one needs to consult one's linguistic intuitions. And, it is then queried, why should one's own intuitions – especially those of Oxford dons – be preferable to anyone else's? The second, and consequent idea is that if one wants to determine usage, one should do proper empirical surveys in which one would ask people to fill out questionnaires like any other decent social scientist. Then 'ordinary language philosophy' would be revealed as what it is, namely no more than a debased form of sociology of language.

The idea that in order to say what the correct use of a word or phrase is one has to consult one's intuitions is akin to supposing that in order to play chess a chess-master has to consult his intuitions on the rules of chess, or that a skilled mathematician has to consult his intuitions on what  $12 \times 12$  is. An intuition is just a *hunch* or *guess* – and it is no more a hunch of a competent speaker that one says 'he was in the field' not 'he were in the field', than it is a hunch of a chess-master that the chess-king moves one square at a time or of a mathematician that  $12 \times 12$  is 144.

It is precisely because of this that the idea that to specify the correct use of a familiar word one needs to do social surveys is misguided. A competent speaker of a natural language by definition knows how to use the common (and, if he is a specialist, the technical) words he uses, just as a competent chess-player or mathematician knows the rules constitutive of their expertise. That does not mean that he may not slip occasionally, overlook some familiar feature or other, or hesitate over borderline cases. What it does mean is that in marshalling grammatical rules in order to pinpoint the

differences between, say, accident and mistake, or perception and sensation, or mental images and photographic images, one does not need to consult anyone – only to reflect, and occasionally to use a good dictionary to jolt one’s memory. (If one encounters disagreement over usage, that itself is an important datum – and one may proceed from there.) Philosophical skill does not consist merely in remembering features of usage with which any competent speaker or technical practitioner is familiar, but in selecting and marshalling those features of usage that will illuminate the problem at hand and show what linguistic analogies led one up the garden path. This may be no more than the first steps in one’s philosophical endeavours. But unless one learns *how* to take them, and then *takes* them, one will continue barking up the wrong tree.\*

---

\* I am grateful to the editor, to Professor Hans Oberdiek and Professor Herman Philipse for their helpful comments.

## Logistic turn in philosophy

Boole, Venn, Jevons, Schroeder

Frege

Weierstrass, Dedekind, Cantor

## Analytic Philosophy

Moore (conceptual analysis) -----Russell (logico-analytic pluralism)

Russell's logical atomism

## Linguistic Turn in philosophy

Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*

### *Logical Empiricism*

Middle Wittgenstein  
(1929-36)

Schlick-Waismann  
Wing

Carnap-Neurath wing

*Cambridge Analysis*  
Broad, Moore, Ramsey,  
Wisdom, Braithwaite,  
Stebbing

*American pragmatism*  
Dewey, James, Peirce

Later Wittgenstein

*Oxford Analytic Philosophy*

*Wittgenstein's pupils  
and followers*

*American logical  
pragmatists*

Ryle

Austin

Grice

Strawson

Anscombe, von Wright,  
Black, Malcolm, Bouwsma,  
Ambrose

Logical empiricists in USA  
(Carnap, Hempel, Feigl, Tarski,  
Reichenbach, Bergmann)  
Morris, Nagel;

(logical geography) (linguistic phenomenology) (linguistic botany) (connective analysis)

Quine, Goodman, Davidson

*A diagram of the history of the linguistic turn*