

Philosophy 229: Philosophy of Language

Colorado College

Ben Bayer

Fall 2009, Block 2

Course description

The twentieth century, in particular, is known for the “linguistic turn,” the period in which philosophers became convinced that philosophical problems arose from confusions about language. But philosophers were concerned with language long before the twentieth century, and philosophical interest in language was never confined to the figures in analytic philosophy most stereotypically associated with that interest.

In an attempt to show how the philosophic concern with language extends beyond central twentieth century analytic figures, this course will consider a characteristic analytic question usually associated with Wittgenstein, “Can there be a private language?” Versions of this question were debated as early as the 18th century, if not earlier. We will examine some of the earlier philosophers who considered related questions, and then move on to consider how developments outside of analytic philosophy, and outside of philosophy proper, came to bear on Wittgenstein’s question. In particular, we will examine some empirical work in the psychology of language-learning.

We will examine a series of questions closely related to the private language question, such as: Is the function of language primarily to enable social interaction, or to aid in personal cognition? Does the meaning of language rest mostly in adherence to social convention, or in one’s own perception of reality? Are reference-schemes merely arbitrary, or are there determinate facts about the world that determine them?

Grading for the course will be based mostly on a series of papers, each describing and/or evaluating stages in the historical debate about the social function of language.

Course goals

By the end of the course, I hope that you will

1. Appreciate the historical roots and predecessors of the twentieth century debate about private language, and the social/cognitive function of language.
2. Appreciate how the question about private language relates to broader questions in philosophy about meaning and reference.
3. Come to see how empirical questions in psychology and linguistics may or may not bear on philosophical questions about language.
4. Be able to write a series of papers accurately reporting the nature of these debates, and evaluating the outcome of the debate for yourself.

Texts

- *Philosophy of Language: The Big Questions*, edited by Andrea Nye
- Course pack.

Lecture and reading schedule

Monday, September 28, 2009

The theme: language for private cognition, vs. language for public use

- Aristotle, handout or CP pp. 1-4.
- Augustine, handout or CP pp. 5-6.
- Wittgenstein, handout or selection from PLBQ pp. 85-92,

Tuesday, September 29, 2009

The basic problem: accounting for private meaning via abstraction of essences, vs. anti-abstractionist nominalism

- Augustine, CP pp. 7-11.
- Locke, PLBQ pp. 18-24.
- Hume, CP (Handout)

Wednesday, September 30, 2009

Rival early modern theories over the historical origin of language, and their bearing on the public/private meaning dispute

- Rousseau, PLBQ pp. 11-17
- Herder, CP pp. 13-27.

Thursday, October 1, 2009

The roots of the philosophy of language in post-Kantian German naturalism, and Frege's anti-naturalist version of public meaning

- Sluga, CP pp. 29-37.
- Frege PLBQ pp. 72-76, 24-29.

Friday, October 2, 2009

➤ **FIRST PAPER DUE, 5pm**

Post-Fregean attempts at defining private meaning

- (Early) Wittgenstein, PLBQ pp. 42-45.
- Ayer, PLBQ pp. 77-84.

The skirmish reaches its climax

Monday, October 5, 2009

Structural linguistic theories of public meaning: the arbitrariness of the signifier

- Saussure, CP pp. 39-48.
- Benveniste, PLBQ pp. 46-52.

Tuesday, October 6, 2009

The existential response to structuralism: the fusion of the signifier and the signified

- Merleau-Ponty, CP pp. 50-73.

Wednesday, October 7, 2009

The early pragmatist-behaviorist rejection of private meaning

- Dewey, PLBQ pp. 30-41.
- (Late) Wittgenstein, CP pp. 75-83.

Thursday, October 8, 2009

Non-cognitive uses of language and performatives

- (Late) Wittgenstein, PLBQ pp. 85-92,
- Austin, PLBQ pp. 126-131.

Friday, October 9, 2009

➤ **SECOND PAPER DUE, 5pm**

Monday, October 12, 2009

Sociolinguistic determinism, and social epistemology

- Volosinov, PLBQ pp. 131-135.
- Chakrabarti, PLBQ pp. 136-143.

Tuesday, October 13, 2009

Private meaning rebels: developmental psychology and a new epistemology of abstraction

- Bloom, CP pp. 128-138
- Rand, CP pp. 111-125.

Aftermath

Wednesday, October 14, 2009

Public meaning's indeterminacy of translation quandaries, and private meaning solutions

- Malinowski, PLBQ pp. 254-258.
- Quine, PLBQ pp. 259-265.
- Bloom, CP pp. 138-148

Thursday, October 15, 2009

➤ **FINAL PAPER PROPOSAL DUE, 5pm**

The "language of thought" innateness hypothesis and its rejection of linguistic determinism

- Pinker, CP pp. 86-110.

Friday, October 16, 2009

Problems for the innateness hypothesis from linguistic discoveries in the Amazon

- Colapinto on Everett
http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/04/16/070416fa_fact_colapinto?currentPage=all

Monday, October 19, 2009

New externalistic theories of the meaning of natural kinds

- Kripke, PLBQ pp. 159-165.
- Millikan, PLBQ pp. 93-102.

Tuesday, October 20, 2009

Constructivist theories of the meaning of cultural kinds

- Foucault, PLBQ pp. 166-170.
- Butler, PLBQ pp. 171-177.

Wednesday, October 21, 2009

➤ **FINAL PAPER DUE, 5pm**