

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Compare claims about Parmenides, etc.

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

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

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

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

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

Which usage is to be regarded as accurate/helpful?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

