

# A Short History of Analytic Philosophy of Language

## The Second Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

# Quine - Skeptical Challenges

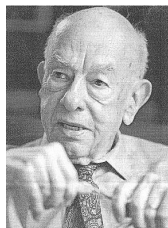
Positivists accept the *analytic/synthetic* divide. What does Quine bring *contra* the positivists?

Skepticism to the idea of meaning as something beyond our behaviour – “the myth of the museum”. He attacks the two dogmas of empiricism, namely

1. **Analyticity** – definitions are either question begging or inadequate.
2. **Empirical reductionism** – each statement cannot be allotted some special empirical content on its own. Sentences work holistically along with other sentences.

What are the consequences of this challenge?

1. **Holism of sentences** - they “face tribunal of experience as a whole”.
2. **Egalitarianism of sentences** - any sentence can be held true by appropriate change to the “web of belief”, radical revision is possible – direct impact on epistemology (no basic/non-derived beliefs, all are *equal*.)



“W.V.O. Quine”

# Quine - Radical Translation & Criticism

Quine jettisons meaning in favour of *assent* and *co-reference*.

The speaker of a language is like a field linguist trying to translate a wholly unknown language.

**Scenario** - Speakers say “Gavagai” when rabbits run by. We are tempted to translate it as “rabbit”. (Notice that translation is doing the work of meaning without the abstract object, i.e., the exhibit) But we may be wrong; they may be saying “Dinner!” or many other things. We can *try* to zero in on the meaning but... we either have to (1) talk to them (communicate with some complex shared vocabulary) or (2) observe further use of the word.

Either way, we will *not* get to logical exclusion of other plausible translations of “Gavagai” - ‘indeterminacy of translation’.

Note however there are two types of indeterminacy - (1) “inscrutability of reference” – sentences can be translated in multiple ways but net import of sentence does not change and (2) “holophrastic indeterminacy” – sentences can be translated in multiple ways and net import also changes (this is only conjectured by Quine).

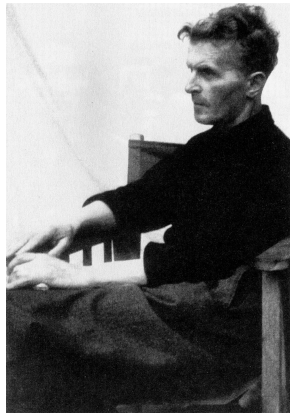
Key idea - ALL language is like this, even when we share the language of communication.

Quine was criticised for the behaviourism in this account.

# Wittgenstein - Language Games

Later Wittgenstein drops ambitions of *elegant, logical systems* in favour of a *fluid, diverse* conception of language.

- Language is a collection of “**language games**” – goal-directed social activities where **words are tools** and not components of an eternal logical structure. Language is not a detached, logical picturing of facts; representation is not exhaustive of language (attacking the foundations in Augustine, Mill).
- Consequence - **pragmatism** about language. How does understanding an expression manifest in action? Two camps: (1) Wright - social conventionalism about meaning and (2) Brandom, McDowell - account of meaning as pragmatic and normative.
- Language-games point at the **rule governed nature of language** (**not strict but conventional and particular**). We cannot find what is common to these activities and also cannot define ‘game’. Here, Wittgenstein rejects *necessary, sufficient conditions* for definitions.



# Wittgenstein - Rule Following

Meaning claims have a certain influence over our actions, but they are not law-like. They reflect **norms of usage**. To follow a rule of the use of an expression, our appeal to something private *does not* suffice.

**Scenario** - Suppose language is private. Suppose you point at a particular sensation and say “I will call this *pain*”. But to ensure, that “pain” means something, the sign must impress a way of correctly using it in the future. So here, what is doing that?

Do we *feel* the same? These impressions are common and cannot constitute correctness. Can we look at previous usages? No, we haven't yet established a *correct* pattern of usage. For a sign to be meaningful there needs to be a normative dimension, i.e., it must be **possible to subject it to some public standard and criteria of correctness** (needs a justification that can be understood by everyone). Hence, *private languages are incoherent*.

# Wittgenstein - Rule Following

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Wittgenstein asks what is it to follow a rule. He does not search for an answer in a Platonic or mentalistic conception of rule but in its **applications**; turns to saying that those who make the same moves with the rules share a “**form of life**”.

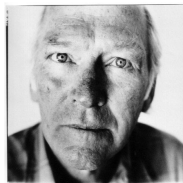
“This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made out to accord with the rule. The answer was: if everything can be made out to accord with the rule, then it can also be made out to conflict with it. And so there would be neither accord nor conflict here.”  
(*PI*120)

# Truth Conditional Theories of Meaning

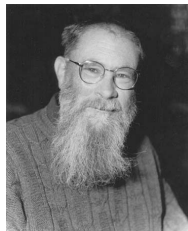
Most philosophers believe – we know meaning of a word when we know the **role** it plays **in a sentence**; we know meaning of sentence – we know the **conditions under which it is true**. On this basis, they give truth conditional theories of meaning.

Important points to remember-

1. Something is a linguistic expression if and only if its significant parts can represent facts of the world.
2. Sentences are basic units of meaning.
3. Sentences are made of finite stock of simpler elements which are reused in novel ways but their meaning is only insofar as what they contribute to the sentence.
4. This approach is appealing to naturalistic and reductionist semantics.



Donald Davidson



David Lewis

# Theories of Reference



Saul Kripke



Hilary Putnam

In the 1970s, more **direct theories of reference** came into truth conditional theories of meaning. Kripke and Putnam attacked the idea that identity statements expressed synonymies, known *a priori* at the time of their introduction.

For example, suppose we stipulate that ‘Aristotle’ is the author of *Nicomachean Ethics*, tutor of Alexander etc. The referent is just the thing that satisfies all or most of the “**cluster of descriptors**” that express the sense of that name. But if most or all of these are not true of the referent that we currently associate with Aristotle, was there no Aristotle at all or was someone else Aristotle?

Putnam and Kripke say proper names and natural kind terms are **rigid descriptors** – expressions that referred to the same objects or kinds in every possible world without that relation being mediated by some form of descriptive content. We say that Aristotle wrote *Nichomachean Ethics* but the reference is fixed and our use preserves reference and not descriptive content. This is an externalism in semantics – Putnam – “**meanings ain’t just in the head**”.



# Verificationism and Use

Michael Dummett brought back verificationism when he argued that a model of meaning is a **model of our understanding** when we know such meanings. Think of this as a set of rules that we grasp to make and use language. We cannot have explicit knowledge of this (**Wittgenstein argument**) but we have some implicit knowledge to deduce meaning of new sentences.

For Dummett, the **ability to recognize when a sentence has been decisively confirmed or refuted** is constitutive of knowing the meaning but.. knowing what it is for a condition to obtain and recognising that a case exemplifies that are different (**We can understand sentences that could never be verified**). Thus, he expanded his account to include (1) providing correct inferential consequences, (2) correct novel use of a sentence, (3) judgments about sufficient or probable evidence for the truth or falsity of a sentence.



Michael Dummett

# Speech Act Theory - Beginnings

Two beginning points of speech act theory are –

1. Sentences are **tools** for doing things. Speech act theorists saw how they play a role in achieving goals.
2. **Pragmatics/Semantics** distinction -
  - pragmatics - context + conditions of speaker allowing expression
  - semantics - truth, reference etc.



J. L. Austin

A **speech act** is a type of act that can be performed by speaker meaning that one is doing so. The two types of intentions –

1. **Illocutionary intentions** - success is to get hearer's recognition of the actual intention itself.
2. **Perlocutionary intentions** - success is to get hearer to do something.

The four subcomponents of speech acts are –

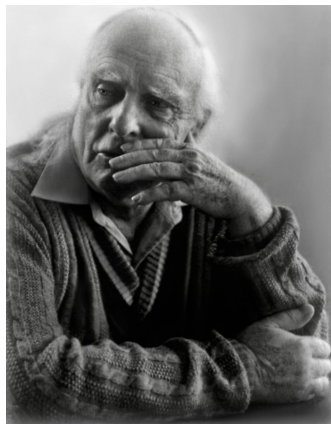
1. **utterance acts** - actually sounding the words
2. **propositional acts** - referring to things and predicating properties of them
3. **illocutionary acts** - speakers interact and utterances constitute moves (**example promising and commanding**)
4. **perlocutionary acts** - speakers achieve something by speaking (**convincing**)

# Speech Act Theory - Implicature

Grice further suggested that pragmatics must be used to understand the two types of implicature–

1. **Conventional** - based on convention of meaning – ex. “Michael is an Orioles fan, but (vs. and) he doesn’t live in Baltimore.”
2. **Conversational** - based on series of maxims by which speakers co-operate – **quantity, quality, relation, manner** – ex. “A: Smith doesn’t seem to have a girlfriend these days. B: He has been paying a lot of visits to New York lately.”

Interest is also present in understanding **presupposition** – (1) how they are triggered in sentences and (2) how they are carried from clauses into higher-level sentences.



H. P. Grice