I. A Conversation

Nothing could be easier than language. We wake to its sound, employ it all day long, and on occasion use it while we are unconscious. Two-year-olds use it, getting and giving what they want. How could anything be as obvious as language? If you want some, I’ll give it to you. I am right now. So what’s the problem? Why do such smart people spill so much ink—and use so much language—in debating something so ubiquitous, so easy, so obvious?

“But think about it,” you can almost hear someone British say, if you listen really close. (If you’re hearing German, it might be someone else…) “As soon as you use it, it’s gone, unless you leave trails or echoes. But surely no one would call ink stains or waveforms language. They are how language shows itself, like how a wrinkle needs a surface without really being the surface. (Or a wave on a whipped rope…) They are its vehicles, its chariots, bringing it to you for your use, your pleasure. Sure—we use it all the time, of this there can be no doubt. But tell me exactly what it is. Try.”


“But take the first. What is this ‘medium’? Perhaps something that comes between speaker and listener that enables them to exchange ideas? OK, but what is this something? Individuate it. Specify it. Pin it down. But not in terms of communication or language, for that won’t do. And not in terms of noises or marks, as those aren’t language. (And the other alternatives—well, they are less satisfying, more problematic…)

Why? Language just is, or so I’ve heard tell.

“Fine. It is. But if this is so, then it should admit of explanation—it should count as a potential object of understanding. We should be able to describe it, characterize it, model it, relate it to related things, differentiate it from different things. Understand it. Right? But then it would really help if we had some preliminary clue about just what it was. And here is where language dips and
dives, the head fake and then gone. (Damn that Sommerville!) If we can’t even agree on a starting point, maybe it isn’t as easy, as obvious, as it might first appear.”

But isn’t it that philosophers and other theorists are like the drunk who looks under the stoplight for his keys not because that’s where he lost them but because the light is better there? Don’t you change the nature of the game to fit your suite of skills, imposing structures that create windmills for you to tilt at (thereby earning paychecks to pay bills and raise future philosophers…).

“I hope not. That is a concern, but it is no more a concern for the philosopher than for any theorist in any other field. Remember that we have linguistic practice to check our tilting tendencies. There is no reason that philosophers can’t avail themselves of the data with which you began, and they should. Language is a part of the world, deserving of an explanation that keeps it in that world. All theory is a dance—the theorist moves, the world moves, the theorist steps on an unseen foot, the world screams, etc… We just have to make sure we don’t mistake screams for applause.”

II. Thinking Skeptically

A. General Skepticisms

1. Against Language Study: Language is not a proper object of study.

   Reasons: we are too close to it and are therefore unable to attain the requisite critical distance to achieve explanatory adequacy; in getting to language, we must violently extract it from the social practices that constitute its essence—compare finding a bottle on the ground in the middle of Africa without having the faintest clue about glass or bottles or …; it’s just obvious and requires no explanation.

   Responses: maybe, but this requires a transcendental argument that doesn’t mistake innocuous circularity for its vicious cousin; there is no question as to the relevance of the social, but surely there are patterns that can be extracted and studied, as work in formal and artificial language suggests—the use of ‘language’ there is not a pun, after all; well, I beg to differ.

2. Against Conceptual Language Study: Language is a proper object of study, but only by empirical scientists, not by philosophers.
Reasons: We can talk about its forms (e.g., sounds), its structures, its impacts, but these are empirically identifiable and should be studied by linguists, psychologists, and neuroscientists, not philosophers; philosophers study metaphysical questions, and there are no metaphysical issues in this place—nothing to see here, move on…

Responses: We must talk about these things, of that there can be no doubt, and we must allow the empirical scientists the last word, at least if we are interested in integrating the account into the Big Explanation, but empirical work is not done free form, amorphously, in a conceptual vacuum—no, it uses concepts that have been clarified and knitted together into frameworks, and this is philosophy (whether done by philosophers or just the philosophically inclined…); sure there are—any time we commit to using terms like ‘meaning’, ‘truth’, ‘reference’, ‘event’, ‘frame’, etc., we make metaphysical commitments.

B. Specific Skepticisms

1. Against Formal Conceptual Language Study: Allowing that conceptual study is relevant to the empirical work required for understanding, there is no need to be overly formal, a la Frege, Russell, Davidson, et al.

Reasons: The languages we use require no special mathematical talent, so there is no need for all the formal mumbo jumbo; there is no reason that we need go formal, or Heaven forbid, mathematical in out theorizing, as this imposes a type of structure that is not evinced in the language itself; language is primarily social, and so our theories should be contributions to social science and not to algebra.

Responses: This inference does not go through—lifting my coffee cup requires no special talent in physics or biology, but try understanding that motion without special talent in those areas and you will be sorely frustrated—likewise, we may be proficient in using something that is essentially mathematical because our biological mechanisms have encoded the relevant mathematical “know how” and require no special assistance from conscious understanding [think Hume here—thank goodness we don’t need to rely on reason…]; who would have thought that something like
a sunset could be so difficult to understand, but it is—this teaches us that we should refrain from making *a priori* stipulations about the character our mature understanding of a subject will take—ultimately, we must let our theory do its talking for itself [it’s the only pudding that matters here...]; even if it were only social, the statistics we would need to introduce into our model would make the formal stuff we’ve seen look like first grade stuff—but even so, there is no reason that we can’t use sophisticated mathematics to understand the social, as Nash and other game theorists have taught us.

2. **Against Logical Conceptual Language Study**: Really a specific form of the last concern, but why impose all the logical structure? Logic is not language, and so should not replace it in our model. (This is so even thought we can correctly speak of languages of logic.)

*Reasons*: Logic is objective, while language is subjective, so providing a logical model of language transforms it into something it is not; overeager interest in things like the Liar Paradox is a sign of deep disturbance, not clarity of theoretical vision.

*Responses*: It is true that logic is objective, in the sense that it makes little room for perspective in some of its incarnations, but this isn’t a necessary part of the discipline—there are perspectival logics and “fuzzy” logics that embed aspects of subjectivity that interest so many students of language + even if language is subjective, in the sense that its use and interpretation depends essentially on specific experiences and perspectives, this does not defeat the possibility that language so construed *has a logic*, i.e., embeds a systematic set of possibly overlapping inference patterns that support epistemic transfer from sentence to sentence—in fact, it seems obvious that it does, even if it is maximally subjective; some theorists like to stay close to home, close to the middle, in the safe zone well away from the marshes on the outer edge, while others are drawn to the periphery where things break down and the monsters of ignorance and confusion lurk—the latter group welcomes the tricky case, the pathology that threatens all things wholesome and good, as this is what tests the theory—one needs an exception to prove the rule, after all, and this is exactly where the Liar comes in.