I. Goal

Our goal is to develop an account—i.e., a theory—of language, and specifically the meaning of language, that will enable us to (a) distinguish good questions about language from bad ones, and (b) answer the good ones.

A. In practice, the goal is usually more circumscribed, although people generally work under the assumption that an übertheory of language is possible and that their contributions fit into it.

B. This is a descriptive theory and not a normative one, and so it is different from theories in normative ethics and more like theories in physics. It is not presumed that the philosophers of language “really” know how the language works and how it should be used, and that philosophy of language sets the standard for everyone else.

II. Method

In developing this theory, we must adopt and apply a method. Our’s will be a theory of natural language, and so we will focus our attention on language as we find it in common discourse, but in doing so we will apply the tools of the analytic trade: logic, careful attention to differences and distinctions, and the concepts that figure into our understanding of language. But what of the starting point? Where should we apply these tools? Here are two arguments for starting where Frege and Russell start, with reference, and in particular linguistic items such as proper names and opaque contexts:

A. The Importance of Proper Names

1. We are after an account of language—an explanation of how language works for us.

2. Clearly, one of the most interesting and important aspects of language is meaning, and this is so because it is the meaning of language that accounts for its utility.

3. One of the most important functions of linguistic meaning is to relate linguistic items to the world. When we seek the meaning of a word, we seek to know what that word will enable us to talk about, and this typically involves the world.

4. The primary relation between language and the world of interest to
philosophers is *reference*.

5. One natural place to start our investigation into reference is with those terms that are transparently referential, such as proper names and demonstratives (e.g., ‘this’, ‘that’, etc.) These are known as *singular referring* terms. This is a methodological commitment, and it is not one that is forced on us.

6. Both Frege and Russell see reference as fundamental to an analysis of meaning and they believe that attention to singular reference is the best route to an account of reference. Thus, given the connection between meaning and our interest in language, we have reason to care about what might appear to be semantic minutiae, such as the way in which proper names refer to the world.

B. The Importance of Opaque Contexts: An Example of Technical Complexity

1. Given the importance of reference, and the methodological decision to attend to names, we now know why we want to develop an account, or *model*, of singular reference.

2. As investigators, we want to know if our model is acceptable. Clearly it will work for the paradigm cases that motivated its construction, but we need to know if it will work in general.

3. Thus, just like engineers who test their models in extreme physical situations, we must test ours in extreme linguistic situations to be sure that it has the explanatory reach it is intended to have.

III. Deliverables

What does the pursuit of such a theory offer us? What value does it have? These are important questions—if we cannot establish that philosophy of language takes us outside of our own little philosophy corner and connects us up with the world in which we actually use language, then so much the worse for philosophy of language! Philosophy of Language does have important connections with the world outside Philosophy Corner, though. We can get at these by distinguishing between the *direct* and *indirect* connections, i.e., between connections that concern language in the world, and those that concern non-linguistic aspects of the world that depend to some extent on language.

A. Direct

1. *Practical*

   a. It helps us to understand communication, which can give us insight into aspects of our majors and careers that are central to our success
b. It can help us appreciate the complexity of language, and thereby put in a new light the linguistic and cognitive challenges that many confront in life – this is important for educators, social workers, therapists, etc.

c. It assuages the sense of mystery and anxiety that you feel when you don’t really understand something that is important to you. Now, granted, we do know how to use language, but there is also much that we don’t know about language, as is clear from the many questions concerning language that we cannot answer. (E.g., are definite descriptions referring expressions or quantifiers?) Thus, there is much we can still learn, and this establishes that our understanding is incomplete.

d. As we learn about language, we learn about ourselves. Thus, philosophy of language increases self-knowledge, the value of which cannot be overestimated.

2. **Theoretical**: There are those who argue (e.g., Michael Dummett) that philosophy of language is the central philosophical discipline, and that our understanding of the nature of reality, the nature of knowledge, etc., depend on language. Thus, philosophy of language can enable us to identify and assess the fundamental position of language in our theory of the world, thereby enabling us to derive conclusions about the structure of this theory and what it permits us to say. (Dummett argues that close attention to language supports an anti-realist metaphysical picture, for instance.)

B. **Indirect**

1. **Practical**: Already we see technological benefit in areas such as computer science (e.g., certain logic-based programming languages), computational linguistics (e.g., translational systems and software), and artificial intelligence (e.g., work in designing rational, communicative agents), to name three.

2. **Theoretical**: Philosophy of Language is devoted to conceptual model building, and the models built here underpin empirical efforts concerning language in areas such as linguistics, psychology, biology, the law, etc. Thus, these disciplines gain when philosophers of language make gains.