LANGUAGE, IDEA AND THING

A. W. Sparkes

University of Papua New Guinea

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We are told that there is or once was something called 'linguistic philosophy' or 'linguistic analysis', or 'ordinary language philosophy'. And, according to a number of people, it is or was, a very bad thing. The linguistic philosophers, we are told, did not concern themselves with real problems. Or perhaps they did concern themselves with real problems, but not with real philosophical problems. They concerned themselves with lexicography instead. Readers of Kivung will be shocked or amused to learn that the critics of linguistic philosophy often preface the noun 'lexicography' with the adjective 'mere'. The linguistic philosophers were unadventurous. They abandoned the great search. Afraid of disturbing the everyday view of the world and man's place in it, they turned their backs on reality and fiddled about with words. Russell, for instance, accused them of having grown tired of serious thinking and of believing that "The desire to understand the world is ... an outdated folly." That much the critics of linguistic philosophy are agreed on. They are also agreed that it had something to do with Wittgenstein, Austin and Ryle.

Beyond that, the indictment grows puzzling. Some of the most hostile critics of linguistic philosophy are themselves included in the lists of villains drawn up by other hostile critics of linguistic philosophy. Clearly, something odd is going on. Whether linguistic philosophy is alive or dead, it must be a much more complicated phenomenon than most of its detractors and some of its practitioners have supposed.

I think all this can be straightened out. I shall not try to straighten it out here. Instead, I shall say why I think the study of language is an important, even an essential part of philosophy. I want also to indicate some of the main thrusts of Wittgenstein's and Austin's thought. (There are many differences between Wittgenstein and Austin which will not be indicated here.) I also want to say why I think philosophy is important. So, if I succeed, I shall have vindicated something which can be called 'linguistic philosophy', though whether it is the "linguistic philosophy" which has led to so much inkshed, I neither

know nor care.

But what is this philosophy for which the study of language is important? Russell, with his tongue well in his aristocratic cheek, once offered us a definition: "Philosophy is what philosophers do". The definition is incomplete. We need to expand it a little : "Philosophy is what philosophers do when they are doing philosophy." Even then the definition is less than perfectly illuminating.

"Philosophy", Aristotle tells us, "began and still begins in wonder". I'm not a Greek scholar, so I'm not sure what the word translated as 'wonder' means, but I suspect that it means something like the Latin 'admiratio', which can have the same meaning as our word 'admiration', but can also be translated by our words 'awe', 'astonishment' and 'puzzlement'. In some contexts, it can combine the meanings of all four of our words.

And the sort of awe, astonishment and puzzlement in which philosophy began and still begins is the sort of awe, astonishment and puzzlement which afflict us when we come face to face with the familiar, when we have an experiences which forces us to look at the familiar in a new light.

The first people called 'philosophers' were certain Ionian Greeks of the sixth century BC. They were caught in a situation which combined leisure with cultural confusion: in other words, the opportunity for speculation with the urgent need for it. The little we have of their speculations concerns that very familiar thing, the world. Their philosophy was primitive physics. But it was the familiar that surprised them, that filled them with wonder and they said the most startling things about it. Later, Socrates and Plato were to tie others - and themselves - into knots over the most ordinary things you can think of. Aristotle was consumed with wonder about everything and noted with equal interest that man partook of the divine and that his nose had a tendency to run. Much later still, St. Albert the Great could speculate on logic and nearly drown himself trying to observe the habits of fish. Descartes not only probed the problem of certainty. He was also a physiologist and, of course, a mathematician.

All this was philosophy, the love of wisdom, beginning with admiratio aroused by the familiar. The age of division of intellectual labour was yet to come. When it did come, when the special sciences ripened and fell Newtonianly into specialised hands, what was left

of the trees? What - to abandon a rather strained metaphor - where philosophers to do? They were to go on being filled with admiratio at the most familiar of things, only now their attention was focussed on the most basic notions, the notions which permeate all discourse, including the discourse of those branches of learning which had become the specialised fields of physicists, botanists, chemists and what have you. Philosophy was also to be concerned with the kind of admiratio which arises from aporia, from conflict in thought: conflicts between commonsense and the results of the special sciences, conflicts within commonsense, conflicts between different kinds of commonsense - in other words, conflicts between different world-views.

The all-permeating and the aporetic have been the subject of philosophical speculation. It is the presence of these concerns which enables us to identify philosophy as an activity in ancient Greece, in mediaeval Europe, in India and China, even in modern Oxford, Cambridge and London.

In all this, there is an inevitable concern with language, since philosophy is concerned with thought, and language and its near relations are not just the means of expressing thought, but also the medium of thought, virtually the stuff of thought. As Aristotle maintains, the distinctive thing about human life is that human beings live by practical skills and reasoning. Both kinds of activity have a semiotic basis.

And yet, many philosophers have tended to treat language as, at best, a necessary nuisance. This tendency is beautifully satirised by Swift in his account of the philosophers of Lagado who gave up using words altogether and conversed only by exhibiting things which they carried round in bags on their backs. That Swift was not merely battling straw-men may be seen by a glance at Locke, the English philosopher, par excellence. As Brian Wicker remarks, "... if you ask the average non-philosophical Englishman any epistemological question, you will nearly always get a Lockeian kind of answer."

Here for instance, is part of Locke's discussion of language:

> Man, though he have great variety of thoughts, and such from which others as well as himself might receive profit and delight; yet they are all within his

> own breast, invisible and hidden from others, nor can of themselves be made to appear. The comfort and advantage of society not being to be had without communication of thoughts, it was necessary that man should find out some external sensible signs, whereof those invisible ideas ... might be made known to others. For this purpose nothing was so fit ... as those articulate sounds which ... he found himself able to make. Thus we may conceive how words ... came to be made use of by men as the signs of their ideas ...

Like Wicker, I have found that the average non-philosophical first-language-English-speaker, once he has found his way round Locke's clumsy prose, says: "Why yes, of course." The view is this : There an individual person stands. He has experiences, he thinks about them, and then he takes up words, as he might take up a pen, to convey those thoughts to other individual persons. The other individual persons are in the same position and behave in the same way. We find strong traces of this view in Hobbes's epigram: "... words are wise man's counters, they do but reckon by them; but they are the money of fools"...; in Russell's complaint that the linguistic philosophers have turned their backs on the world and concentrated on words; in the cry with which readers of all the best newspapers will try to cut short appeals for clarity : "But that is just a semantic question!"

In tutorials recently, my students and I have been devoting a lot of time to the analysis of concepts such as discrimination, racism, sectarianism. Roughly, our method has been to look at actual examples of the uses of the words and to consider hypothetical cases, asking in both cases: "Would it be right to use one of these words here? If so, why? If not, why not?" One of my students objected that we should be dealing with substantial questions, not with mere verbal questions. My reply was that the distinction was not as sharp as he thought. Getting clear on the words means getting our thoughts clear about some complicated and agonising social situations. The question is not just about how we use words. It is the old Socratic question of how we are to lead our lives. Linguistic analysis does not give all the answers, but it may help, just the same.

There is a popular metaphor which we hear quite often: 'a semantic bog'. We need not worry that the word 'semantic' is being used in a non-technical fashion. It is a good metaphor, but people really should look at their metaphors carefully. You don't get out of a bog simply by identifying it as a bog. You get out by taking the appropriate means of getting out, and the only way of getting out of a semantic bog is by more "semantics" (so-called). The result of getting out is not just that you have new words to play with, but that you have a clearer perception of a situation, whether it be the Vietnam War or the state of your book-shelves. "Philosophers have tried to understand the world"' said Marx', "The question, however, is how to change it." He is right, of course, but the question is not how to change the world rather than to understand it. The two go together, and understanding is something we do with language - something we do, a social activity. The view that language is the clothing of thought has some of the absurdity of the social contract theory and, indeed, is closely linked with it. The "thought-clothing" theory ignores the symbiosis of thought and language. Both theories ignore the symbiosis of individual and society, the sociality of persons.

One of the main thrusts of the work of men like Austin and Wittgenstein was an attempt to bring language, thought an d the world into their correct relationship; to show that words and concepts cannot be understood without reference to facts and things and situations and encounters, to show that, if we are to undetstand language and thought, we must see how they function in situations and encounters; that, if we are to grasp concepts, we have to see them working. This is the reason for the constant dissection of examples which is such a feature of their work. Some of these are trivial, some are bizarre. The enemies - and that word is not too strong - of these philosophers have been infuriated by both kinds of examples. But the fury is unjustified. Granted that philosophy is concerned with thought and granted that thought is largely a linguistic activity, then one must look at examples of what people say or might say. If one is to examine thought and perception, one must consider remarks about seeing a broom in a corner or about hesitancy in identifying tastes. (Two examples which make Marcuse so angry that he becomes more than usually incoherent.) One must also consider bizarre examples, examples which are bizarre, either because they fail to make sense or because they make unusual sense, because they point to the limitations of ordinary language or to the existence of frequently overlooked aspects of actual or possible experience. (The well-named John Wisdom is perhaps more aware of the positive uses of

the bizarre than any other linguistic philosopher.)

Since these philosophers saw their task as essentially clarificatory, their work has little of the systematic quality found in that of many philosophers of the past. But many of the systems of the past - both British and European - had a decidedly funny smell about them and Wittgenstein and Austin wanted to track the funny smell down and show why it is funny. Sometimes, they spoke as if the task of all philosophy should be merely clarificatory, that philosophers should give up theorising and simply describe how language worked. This, in turn, led to a tendency amongst linguistic philosophers to dismiss other philosophers' questions and statements with "No one would say that in ordinary language" without classifying or assessing the reasons why "no one" would say such a thing.

Both these tendencies, I am sure, are mistakes and I do not believe that they are logically integral parts of the linguistic approach. They are not entirely borne out by Wittgenstein's and Austin's own work, and they are not borne out by the work of many of their followers who, using Wittgensteinian or Austinian techniques all the way, have gone on to systematise and theorise in a quite traditional, though cautious, fashion. Austin himself insisted that his work was not a be-all or an end-all, but that it was a begin-all. It has been held against him that he never moved much beyond the beginning, but so what? All branches of learning are co-operative endeavours and no one person can do every job.

Another reason for the stress on examples was puzzlement about what previous philosophers had meant. It is well-known that philosophers are given to telling the ordinary person that he is wrong about the things he is most sure of. But one may often ask whether the philosopher is right in thinking that he is talking about the same sort of thing as the ordinary man is. There is a story about G. E. Moore. Moore, as an undergraduate had for his tutor J. E. McTaggart, a highly systematic and high-flying metaphysician, one of whose many surprising theses was that time is unreal. One day, Moore was arguing with McTaggart about this and McTaggart terminated the conversation by saying that he was sorry that they couldn't go on with their interesting talk, but he had to keep an appointment. And Moore asked himself what a man could mean by denying the reality of time if he accepted the reality of appointments. Although Moore never had the sort of interest in language that Wittgenstein or Austin had, this puzzlement about what some philosophers were getting at was one of the stimuli to the dissection of ordinary language. Hence, we have a paper like Austin's "A

Plea for Excuses" in which he examines the uses of locutions like 'inadvertently', 'accidently', 'He is to blame', 'It was his fault', etc. The point is that it is no use investigating whether people are right in thinking they are responsible for their actions, unless you know what they mean when they say they are responsible for their actions. And you don't find this out by asking them to give definitions, but by observing and analysing what they say. This is at least part of the meaning of Wittgenstein's enigmatic injunction: "Don't ask for the meaning: Look for the use."

Similarly with the other great traditional problems: the problem of knowledge. People expecting profundity are likely to feel cheated when a linguistically oriented philosopher begins by asking how the verb 'to know' is used, but they are not being cheated. Traditionally, philosophers have tended to begin by defining 'knowledge' and then go on and argue at length whether we can have it or not. The linguistically oriented philosopher will try to find out what people are doing when they say they know something and then to ask what conditions, if any, would justify them in doing that. The move towards words is not, as Russell said, a move away from the world, but a move towards the world and away from abstract nouns. It is also a move away from the reported linguistic world of definitions towards the actual untidy world of language - and therefore thought - in action.

I can take a similar example from my own special field of social philosophy. There is a very well-known book by J. D. B. Miller The Nature of Politics. A chapter is headed "Is There a General Interest?" Miller offers a definition of 'the general interest' and challenges us to use what he calls "the empirical approach" to see whether such a thing as a general interest exists. He then argues that a general interest rarely if ever exists, and that when politicians and others use the locution, they are either muddled or dishonest. But, although Miller makes great play with the phrase 'the general interest', he himself makes no examination of actual general-interest-talk. My own amateur and incomplete empirical investigations have led me to the conclusion that, in political discourse, as distinct from discourse about political discourse, the phrase 'the general interest' rarely, if ever, functions as part of an adverbial or adjectival phrase. Miller has made the elementary but common mistake of assuming that all those expressions classified as substantives can intelligibly be thought of as referring expressions, so that if there is a substantive 'X', it makes sense to ask 'Do Xs exist?' But, if I am right, Miller's question 'Is there a general interest?' is no more intelligible than countering the injunction 'Do it for Fred's sake' with the question 'But has Fred got

a sake?' A little bit of linguistics, a little bit of linguistically oriented philosophy would have saved Miller from talking a lot of nonsense and possibly misleading a lot of people about a fundamentally important human activity. The important question is 'Under what conditions could it make sense to assert that a policy is in or against the general interest?' Once again, the move towards words is a move towards flesh and blood and away from abstraction.

Clearly, philosophy and linguistics are - or need to be - wrapped up together. This, I think, has been amply demonstrated by critics like Fodor and Katz, though I do not think that they have demonstrated much more than that. I do not hold the view that, if philosophy is to exist, there must be something which people called 'philosophers' do and only people called 'philosophers' do. The boundary between philosophy and other disciplines is and should be a shadow-line. There are linguists who are engaged in definitely philosophical investigations. There are philosophers who are engaged in very serious linguistics. The questions 'Is John Searle a philosopher or a linguist?', 'Is Noam Chomsky a philosopher or a linguist?' are non-questions, if the 'or' is interpretted as an exclusive 'or'. Was Austin a philosopher or a linguist? He was a philosopher and an amateur linguist. He was quite conscious of his amateurism and confessed it on several occasions. Much of his work is programmatic and others, like Searle, are following the program through. The question whether I am a linguist is certainly not a non-question. I am not a linguist. I am a philosopher, concerned principally with conceptual problems about human society. Because of the symbiosis of thought and language, I need some grasp of linguistics. There is a heavy empirical element in philosophy, whether philosophers like the fact or not, and there is a heavy philosophical element in the more complex empirical investigations. Although philosophy and linguistics are separate disciplines, there must be co-operation between philosophers and linguists. This holds for all branches of philosophy, but especially for social philosophy.

Both disciplines are theoretical: in other words, we are in them because there are certain things which we believe that it is worthwhile knowing the truth about. But both disciplines are also highly practical - not just in the old scholastic sense of being concerned with practical activities, but also in the more familiar sense of having a potentially practical effect. It really does matter how people think, because there is an obscure but quite genuine relation between muddled thought and stupid action. All people theorise to some extent and it is important that they theorise carefully and critically.

Papua New Guinea is ripe for and desperately needs speculative thought. Unlike the Ionian Greeks, the Papua New Guineans do not have a great deal of leisure, but they have cultural confusion in abundance. This is so across the whole spectrum of social life - religion, technology and the rest. But my special field is politics, so let me conclude by mentioning the need for more speculative thought about politics.

Whether anyone in this country or in Australia likes it or not, Papua New Guinea is going to be an independent nation, whatever that is. An ingredient of the cultural confusion is a gallimaufrey of socio-political concepts which Australians, encouraged and goaded by the UN, have introduced: nation, national unity, self-government, independence, representation, the rule of law, government and opposition, constitutional liberties, democracy, and the rest. In their native soil, confusion about these concepts does not matter terribly much. To use Ryle's terminology, Australians, Britons and Americans have knowledge-how about these concepts, rather than knowledge-that. In their native soil, these concepts and the customs and institutions which fall under them are part of an ancient, on-going tradition which, most of the time, works moderately well. Confusion about political concepts in countries like Australia is always annoying and sometimes dangerous. But most of the time, it is of no great practical consequence. As we know, most first-language English-speakers, if they have any views about the grammar of their language, have nonsensical views. Nevertheless, most of them can manage their language quite reasonably. Something analogous is true with regard to confusion about political concepts in their native soil.

But transplant these concepts to alien soil and what can we say about them? Most of us, including the hapless Political Education Officers and even academics, can only recite ideological cribs, political myths. The literal sense of these will probably be misunderstood, but, even if the literal sense is understood, it is bound to be pernicious. In its native soil, the fatuities of the ideological crib are counteracted by the unspoken and almost unspeakable workings of political tradition. In Papua New Guinea, there is no such counteracting agency. Here, surely, is a field in which philosophers and linguists can do work which will be of both theoretical and practical value. I am not suggesting a new parody of Plato: that the ills of Papua New Guinea will never end until linguists and philosophers become kings or kings become linguists and philosophers. The most we can be is Socratic midwives. I am suggesting that there is a job for us to do and that linguistics and philosophy should be

central to tertiary education in Papua New Guinea.

From the beginning - and the beginning is a pitifully short time ago - the Political Education campaign has operated in two ways: Select Committees have "consulted the people," and kiaps-turned PEOs have attempted to impart information and inculcuate attitudes. Both parts of the process have had serious shortcomings because the concepts have been alien concepts and because those presenting them have had little articulate knowledge of what they were presenting. Something far more subtle is required. A detailed historical study should have been made of the way in which foreign concepts have been naturalised into British culture. A similar study should have been made of the successes and failures of the Missions in introducing alien religious concepts. Both studies would have been most instructive. Those involved in political education should have worked at grass-roots level, patiently seeking analogues in the old concepts by which the new concepts could have been presented and transformed. This may have led to the evolution of a truly autocthonous political culture, rather than what we have: an almost incomprehensible, incongruous, creaking, gimcrack imitation of Westminster.

'Should have', 'would have', 'may have' - What a melancholy mood the subjunctive is. And what sour pun to end on. But things are not hopeless yet.

NOTES

1. B. Magee Conversations with Philosophers (1972) and V Mehta Fly and the Fly-Bottle (1963) give useful introductions to what has been going on in English philosophy this century. J.R. Searle (ed.) The Philosophy of Language (1971) and V.C. Chappell (ed.) Ordinary Language (1964) are anthologies containing examples of and comments on linguistic philosophy. Chappell re-prints Austin's "A Plea for Excuses". Austin's How to Do Things With Words (1962) is the most developed example of his work. Its main themes are taken up more thoroughly in Searl's Speech Acts (1969). Wittgenstein's best-known work is Philosophical Investigations (1958). Part 2 of D. Pears Wittgenstein (1971) is an excellent commentary.

2. References in the text: Aristotle Metaphysics BK I chs i, ii; J.A. Fodor and J.J. Katz Inquiry V (1962) pp. 197-237, Philosophical Rev. LXXII (1963) pp. 57-71; T. Hobbes Leviathan ch. iv; J. Locke Essay concerning Human Understanding Bk III

ch. ii sec. 1; H. Marcuse One Dimensional Man (1964) ch. 7; B. Russell My Philosophical Development (1959) ch. xviii and Preface to E. Gellner Words and Things (1959); G. Ryle The Concept of Mind (1949) ch.ii; B. Wicker Culture and Theology (1966) p. 21; J. Wilson Philosophy and Psycho-Analysis (1953).

The concept of the political crib is borrowed from a very non-linguistic philosopher, M. Oakshott. See his "Political Education" "Rationalism in Politics" and Other Essays (1962).