

Springer Graduate Texts in Philosophy

Margaret Cameron
Benjamin Hill
Robert J. Stainton *Editors*

Sourcebook in the History of Philosophy of Language

Primary source texts from
the Pre-Socratics to Mill



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Springer Graduate Texts in Philosophy

Volume 2

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to Mill

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Preface

This volume presents primary sources from Western philosophy of language from the pre-Socratics through Mill. It consists of long extracts from nearly one hundred key works – along with brief “executive summaries” for some 40 historical figures/movements, by noted historians, and by leading contemporary philosophers of language.

Its main rationale is to make these essential philosophical writings more easily accessible, at an affordable price, and in high-quality English translation.

We designed the book with several target audiences in mind. The first are researchers already pursuing historical scholarship, though not on language. We hope the book will serve as a handy resource for them – e.g., when beginning to work on a figure or theme. More ambitiously, we hope that the publication of this volume will contribute to the collective development of a thriving, coherent and cohesive sub-specialization of history of philosophy of language, progressing beyond today’s series of individual studies, however insightful and enlightening, towards tomorrow’s larger scholarly portrait of the trends and countertrends over two and a half millennia. The book is also designed as a resource for researchers in problems-oriented philosophers of language. Its instrumental value for such contemporary practitioners is twofold. On the one hand, digging into history enriches our questions, maybe leading us to pursue topics we spend insufficient energy on nowadays. What’s more, the questions we borrow from historical texts tend to be deeply interconnected with other domains: ethics, theology, the law, etc. (Insularity of philosophy of language is a recent, and unhappy, innovation; history of philosophy of language is a partial curative.) On the other hand, the questions that are central for philosophers of language now are mostly not new, and historical texts stand to enrich the answers we can provide. (The “Introduction” provides a host of examples of both enriched questions and enriched answers.)

Another target audience are students and their teachers. The volume is meant to be a pedagogical tool on various fronts. For students of history of philosophy, as for researchers, it is a comparatively concise tool for coming to know an area. For teachers of history, the volume – or better, selected excerpts from it – would serve well those who wish to teach an advanced course on some aspect of history of

philosophy of language. Less obviously, the text can be used in beginning and intermediate courses in problems-oriented philosophy of language. In our collective experience, introducing the problems of philosophy of language partly via its history proves a better way to motivate interest in the area for students new to it. That's because, ordinarily, students initially find 20th century philosophy of language daunting – it is both so technically difficult, and so seemingly detached from issues they have worked on, and which first motivated their interest in philosophy. And too, the skill of struggling with difficult historical texts serves students well. Frankly, the cost to benefit ratio of a standard course consisting of Frege on 'the', Russell on 'the', Strawson on 'the', Donnellan on 'the', etc., is quite uninviting. This is not to say either that the contemporary work lacks for philosophical depth and connection, or that the historical material is easy-going, but students tend to find the balance superior in Plato, Hobbes or Mill than in, say, Richard Montague.

If our first and foremost aim is instrumental – i.e., helping colleagues and students as they pursue research in, and learning of, philosophy of language and its rich history – another motivator is simple justice to the great thinkers of the past. In our view, the development of philosophy of language across the history of Western philosophy merits interest as much as any other sub-field. It is thus lamentable that so many of our peers suppose that "history of philosophy of language" amounts to, say, eschewing anachronism in an especially close reading of Early Analytic texts. It is lamentable that students still graduate with advanced degrees, with a philosophy of language area of specialization, yet do not know, e.g., that Plato wrote a dialogue on the topic, or that John Buridan rivals Frege as one of its half dozen towering figures. The situation, we believe, is comparable to supposing that political philosophy got its start with Rawls, or graduating with a Ph.D. in philosophy of mind having never heard of Descartes' *Meditations*. It is comparable, that is, to something that is downright unfair to our philosophical forbearers. We hope this volume brings us a small step towards overcoming a slight.

As co-editors, our first thanks go to our many contributors, whose "executive summaries" have made the book so much more user-friendly, and to the members of our distinguished Advisory Board: Rachel Barney, Ray Elugardo, Henrik Lagerlund, Martin Lenz, Claude Panaccio, Jeff Pelletier, Lisa Shapiro and Martin Tweedale. Many thanks as well to our three Research Assistants: Anaïs Lenoir, Matthew Lessinger and Anthony Della Zazerra. We are also very grateful to those numerous publishers who, sharing our dedication to pedagogy and scholarly research in this area, made works available for reprinting at a discount rate, or even for free. Finally, we acknowledge generous and needful financial support from: The Canada Research Chairs program, the Rosslyn Swanson Fund, the Smallman Fund, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, and The Provost of the University of Western Ontario.

London, ON, Canada

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Margaret Cameron and Benjamin Hill

1.1 Sourcebook in the History of the Philosophy of Language: Old Texts, New Problems for Philosophy

The philosophy of language covers a wide swath of ground. Topics and issues range from reference, meaning and signification, truth and semantics, pragmatics, syntax and propositions, the language of thought, metaphors, and linguistic usage, to name a few. Diverse approaches and methodological orientations are also possible, which make for quite a thicket of theories, ideas, and works. Just as contemporary philosophy of language can overwhelm when approached without guidance and a basic understanding of its themes and movements, so too can the history of the philosophy of language – maybe more so, in fact, because it is so much larger and diverse than the contemporary field of study.

In this introduction, we hope to make approaching the historical source material more manageable by identifying and describing certain pathways you can take through the material. Our suggestions are not the only ways to explore the area, of course, and we encourage you to wander off our trails, explore in other directions, and blaze new pathways. These we are suggesting are the paths we (and the community of specialists we have consulted) find particularly interesting and significant.

Although these pathways may often intersect, and even occasionally overlap, you should not think that they offer a unified or comprehensive view of the history of the philosophy of language. It is too early in the development of the sub-field to

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consider offering any such thing. Instead you should consider our suggestions as entryways into a fresh, beautiful, and fascinating wilderness.

For students and contemporary practitioners, the most interesting thing about exploring the history of the philosophy of language might be the similarities and contrasts to contemporary concerns and approaches. We feel that these are especially valuable, in particular because it is often the case that the similarities and differences are found together. Even though it is not uncommon to find many of the same questions and methodological assumptions arising in the historical literature, they can still seem somewhat different. And often, what seems to us to be natural groupings, plausible assumptions, or obvious moves prove not to have been so natural, plausible, or obvious to them, and vice versa. In this way, the historical literature can show us conceptual possibilities that we have difficulty now seeing or appreciating. And moreover, wrestling with these differences among the similarities pushes us to confront our own assumptions, assumptions that are often hidden deep within our ways of thinking.

We divide our pathways into two broad types: **Themes** and **Traditions**. **Themes** are particular topics, questions, or clusters of concerns having a degree of unity that reappear at various times and/or across various figures. Interestingly, although it is often the case that later discussions of a theme build on or engage earlier ones (as it is in contemporary philosophy of language), this is not always the case. Sometimes a similar theme pops up without many discernible connections to previous discussions.

Traditions are groups of texts or schools of thought that broadly share a philosophical outlook or methodological approach. Although we are separating individual thinkers into **Traditions** to make the texts more manageable and approachable, you should not think that our categorizations are rigid or mutually exclusive. Indeed, it is common for later thinkers to appropriate ideas from multiple traditions even while standing firmly in one of the others. For example, the **Semiotic Tradition** exerted considerable influence on many later thinkers, thinkers standing squarely in the **Medieval Tradition**, the **Humanist Tradition**, and the **Lockean Tradition**. Reflecting on the appropriations of earlier traditions by later thinkers is an instructive and fun way of analyzing the underlying assumptions and intuitions of the thinker or tradition in question.

1.2 Ways to Engage with the History of the Philosophy of Language

Themes are suggested on the basis of common questions, topics or philosophical problems in the history of philosophy of language. A representative sample of some themes is given here, organized within these topics:

- A1** Linguistic expressions, cognition and reality
- A2** Definitions
- A3** The role of nature versus convention

While there is not as yet a complete history of the many traditions in the history of philosophy of language, there are clear lines of influence that can be profitably grouped together. In the second set of pathways, we organize the history of philosophy of language around important and influential **traditions**. Some of the most prominent ones include:

- B1** The Platonic tradition
- B2** The Aristotelian tradition
- B3** The Semiotic tradition
- B4** The Medieval tradition
- B5** The Humanist tradition
- B6** The Cartesian tradition
- B7** The Lockean tradition
- B8** The Germanic tradition

These suggested pathways through the material focus on only those texts that appear in the *Sourcebook*.¹

1.2.1 (A) Themes

1.2.1.1 (A1) Linguistic Expressions, Cognition and Reality

There has always been a lot of philosophical concern with the relation between linguistic expressions, cognition, and the reality about which we speak from the history of the philosophy of language. We have picked the purposely vague word “cognition” in order to encompass a variety of cognitive things that are involved in linguistic meaning, such as mental representations, psychological processes, cognitive and emotive states, and so on. Some of the questions asked were: Do linguistic expressions exhibit a fixed meaning in all contexts of use? How can we speak about what does not exist? Do linguistic expressions signify only our cognitions, or our ideas? How are linguistic expressions connected to reality? Other questions are: What is the relation between linguistic expressions and cognition? Can we speak about things that we cannot have knowledge about? Does language ever obscure or distort thought? What comes first: language or thinking?

The first explicit statement about the relation between words, thoughts and things is given by Aristotle at the start of *On Interpretation* (Sect. 4.2). Aristotle’s semantic

¹Of course, not all philosophers who have written about the philosophy of language could be included in the *Sourcebook* due to space constraints.

triad claimed that spoken expressions directly give rise to thoughts, and via these thoughts the words connect to (extra-mental) things. This relation between words, thoughts and things came to be called *signification*, such that to signify is to give rise to a concept or an understanding in someone. From the ancient commentators Boethius (Sect. 9.3) and Ammonius (Sect. 9.2), and throughout the middle ages this was the way philosophers defined signification. There were, however, pressing questions and much detail to be filled in. For example, there is the question whether some words have primary and secondary signification (Chap. 10), or denotative and connotative signification (Chaps. 14, 16, and 17). Philosophers also recognized that words can have properties other than signification. To explain how words behave in complex contexts such as sentences, they developed the theory of supposition (Sects. 12.1, 16.1, 16.2, and 17.1), according to which individual words stand for, or supposit for, different types of things (e.g., actually existent things, concepts, etc.). According to most philosophers, words never, however, lose their property of signification, which is a product of their having been imposed, or coined, by a name-giver. There were, however, exceptions, such as Roger Bacon (Sect. 14.1) and John Buridan (Chap. 17).

There was a different view about signification advanced in the ancient and medieval periods that focussed not on the signification of individual words, or of words as they behave in different ways in sentences, but on what we may call propositional meaning. These historical antecedents to Frege's philosophy of language include most prominently the Stoics (Chap. 6), Peter Abelard (Sect. 11.1), and Bernard Bolzano (Chap. 39). However, the Stoic *lekta* theory was harshly criticized by both the Epicureans (Chap. 5) and by Sextus Empiricus (Chap. 7), and with these criticisms in combination with the dominance of Aristotelianism, a fully-fledged propositional theory of meaning did not develop until Bolzano in the nineteenth century.

In the early modern period, the Aristotelian doctrine of signification breathed its last and began transforming into something closer to Frege's *Sinn* or meaning. Although Locke (Chap. 27) used the technical language of signification, largely in its Aristotelian sense, his followers in the Lockean tradition began to evolve the concept. Most likely they were reacting to the rise of the technical language of ideas and the pressure of (as they saw it) the subjective nature of an idea. We can see this pressure being exerted in Berkeley's (Chap. 28) and Leibniz's (Chap. 30) critiques of Lockean semantics. Explorations of these limitations with the Lockean picture of signification led directly to Reid's (Chap. 32) development of signification in terms of natural signs (something reaching as far back as the Stoics (Chap. 6), Augustine (Chap. 8) and prominent in Hobbes (Chap. 24) and, to a more limited extent, Arnauld and Nicole (Chap. 25)). In many ways, Mill (Chap. 40) exemplifies a return to more of a Lockean position, but one in which meaning and reference, rather than signification and supposition, are the fundamental semantic concepts. Although Mill returns to Locke's focus on propositional contents and an intellectualist-centric analysis of semantics, he pushes the gulf between ideas or experiences and things much more firmly than Locke did (or could), with the result that Mill upends Locke's famous semantic thesis that words only ever immediately signify ideas. What is very interesting here is not only how Mill reached his

ultimately un-Lockean position, despite all his similarities to Locke, but also the semantic and cognitive theses over which they must differ, because of this difference in semantic content.

Throughout the ancient and medieval periods there was another issue: do *all* words signify (i.e., give rise to a cognition) or have referents (i.e., pick out some extra-mental thing)? Beginning with the Presocratics, philosophers investigated how our written and spoken expressions relate both to external reality and to the ways we think. An enduring issue for Parmenides (Sect. 2.2), Gorgias (Sect. 2.2) and Plato (Sect. 3.1) is the problem with falsity and empty terms, i.e., how we can speak truly or falsely about what does not exist. What sort of cognition can we have of non-existents, and how can we speak about them? According to Parmenides, “That which is there to be spoken and thought of must be. For it is possible for it to be, but not possible for nothing to be” (Sect. 2.2). The interlocutor Theatetus in Plato’s *Sophist* (Sect. 3.1) sets out to answer these difficult questions: “What should the name, *that which is not*, be applied to? Why do we think [one would] use it, and in what connection, and for what kind of purpose?”

What about words that do not seem to have a referent? Augustine was aware that a word like “if” seems to be a word like any other, but he struggled to identify its signification, i.e., what it makes us think of (Sect. 8.2). The question was treated vigorously in medieval treatises called “*Syncategoremata*,” which dealt with words that must be used with (*syn-*) other independently significant words (*-categoremata*) (Sect. 12.2). (Those independently significant words were simply called “categorical,” i.e., fully significant on their own.) This remained an important topic of discussion into the modern period. Locke (Chap. 27) as well as Arnauld and Nicole (Chap. 25) discuss *syncategoremata* and (in sections not reprinted here) the problem of non-referring terms such as privative and negative terms, as well as *impossibilia*.

Given the relation between linguistic expressions, cognition and reality, philosophers showed enormous concern over how we can speak about general things, such as universals or natural kinds. After all, it is difficult to identify what general terms such as “human” or “whiteness” pick out in the world, either physically or metaphysically. Moreover, it is hard to know what types of cognitions we can have when we use these general expressions. Many nominalists, that is philosophers who held the view that only individuals (and not kinds, or universals) exist, challenged the very idea that there are extramental referents of general terms. To solve this problem, some philosophers held that general terms signify *only* our concepts, without there being any extra-mental referents. In the middle ages, a doctrine of mental language, consisting of mental words and a mental grammar, was advanced in support of nominalist commitments about the nature of reality. The idea that there are mental words has a long history (see Sect 9.3 on the three types of words: spoken, written, and *mental*). The doctrine that written and spoken sentences are signs of, or as he said, “subordinated to,” mental sentences is richly developed by William of Ockham (Sects. 16.1 and 16.2) and followed by John Buridan (Sect. 17.1). Its legacy can be tracked to the early modern period’s John Locke (Chap. 27), for whom distinct gen-

eral names are “annexed” to ideas. The theme reemerges in the works of philosophers in search of a universal language (see Sect. 1.2.2.4 below).

Early modern philosophers, as is well known, began talking about *ideas*. Port-Royal logicians Arnaud and Nicole (Chap. 25), followers of Descartes’ philosophy, declared that the meanings of our words are ideas. They perhaps overconfidently maintained that we have a solid understanding of what ideas are, claiming, “The word ‘idea’ is one of those that are so clear that they cannot be explained by others, because none is more clear and simple.” John Locke (Chap. 27), who followed this shift, claimed that spoken words signify nothing but our own ideas: “The use then of Words, is to be sensible Marks of *Ideas*; and the *Ideas* they stand for, are their proper and immediate Signification.” While this quip has been shown to be an overly simplistic way to characterize Locke’s views on language and meaning, it nonetheless inspired both adherents and critics in the history of philosophy. To speak of meanings in terms of ideas, however, did not necessarily provide any further clarity to the nature of the relation between words, thoughts (or ideas) and things, but it went some way to change the focus of discussion. New questions, such as whether language is prior to ideas or vice versa, or how languages originate in humans at all, began to emerge.

Philosophers recognized that written and spoken expressions can actually obscure the way we think, not just in merely annoying ways but in ways that can be politically and scientifically dangerous. Previously we mentioned the concern voiced since antiquity about how to evaluate sentences that use non-referring terms, as well as the difficulties for the meanings of words for things we cannot or do not experience. But philosophers had even broader concerns about the relation between linguistic expressions and the cognitions associated with them. Aristotle takes up this issue in *Sophistical Refutations*, recognizing that certain word uses can be systematically misleading and can thereby be used to trick us into faulty or “sophistical” thinking (Sect. 4.6). Augustine, seeing that words can mislead our thinking because they are being used metaphorically or otherwise non-literally, wrote an entire manual on the importance of knowing the meanings of spoken (and other) signs (Sect. 8.1). No doubt Lorenzo Valla, through his work uncovering the forgery of the Donation of Constantine (a work not included here), was keenly aware that words did not need to be used metaphysically or non-literally to be duplicitous. Although the selections from Valla included here (Chap. 19) concern the conceptual emptiness of scholastic technical terminology rather than its duplicitous character (admittedly there are overlaps between the two topics), there is no doubt that Valla profoundly influenced the early modern tendencies to fret about the potential for language to mislead and delude thinkers. This can be seen in the sixteenth century Michel de Montaigne, who complained that the extreme expressive power of language tended to obscure thought (Sect. 22.1). Francis Bacon warned of the “Idols of the Marketplace,” when conventional speech leads us astray and confounds thinking, which is a serious impediment to scientific progress: “Plainly words do violence to the understanding and confuse everything; and betray men into countless

empty disputes and fictions” (Sect. 23.2). Bacon’s concerns were echoed by John Locke (Chap. 27) and many others, leading (as we will see in Sect. 1.2.2.4 below) to a demand for a more precise, even a universal, language. Thomas Hobbes also took issue with systematically misleading conventional language, and his concerns had strong political motivation given the overwhelming importance of speech to political order (Sect. 24.1). No doubt this contributed to Mill’s (Chap. 40) insistence that reference was independent of what beliefs we may have about the object, since reference is not mediated by thought or experience.

And note that Augustine’s concerns about metaphorical language reappeared in the early modern period. Cardinal Cajetan (Chap. 20) felt compelled to develop and defend an extended account of analogical terms and their utility. Cajetan’s account proved as controversial as it was influential. Francisco Suárez, a fellow Catholic, presented a severe critique of it (not included here), but the issue was still lively in the eighteenth-century when the Anglican George Berkeley (Chap. 28) also severely critiqued analogical language only to have Peter Browne (Chap. 28), another Anglican, mount an aggressive defense of it against Berkeley’s criticisms.

Although there are countless other topics concerning the relation between linguistic expressions, cognition, and reality, there is one that deserves mention for its enduring importance in the history of philosophy of language. It is the question of priority: does expression precede cognition, or does cognition precede linguistic expression? For those working in the Aristotelian tradition, one cannot name what one does not know. Thus, cognition is alleged to precede linguistic expression, even though this presents serious problems, as we have mentioned, for our words for things that we neither experience nor completely understand. For the Cartesians, cognitions, i.e., ideas, are also held to be resolutely prior to linguistic expression (Chap. 25). Rationality for these thinkers is our chief characteristic, shared by no other creature but humans (and God). The Cartesian Geraud de Cordemoy, however, did try to argue for our uniqueness from the rest of the natural order on the grounds that we possess language, but reason nonetheless remained prior to speech (Chap. 26). But this order of priority was challenged on a number of fronts. Hobbes, for all his concern about language leading us astray, held that reason requires language, and thus language must, somehow, precede thought (Sect. 24.2). The Lockean philosopher Etienne Bonot de Condillac also held that language is prior to thought (Chap. 31), as did the eighteenth century’s J. G. Herder (Chap. 36), albeit for different reasons. Herder was engaged in a debate over whether language has its origins in nature or in convention (a topic we take up in the next section). Arguing against someone who held that language has divine, supernatural origins, Herder believed that some internal language, one somehow produced by associated sounds and repeated experiences, developed before reason could. This was also central to Johann Hamann’s (Chap. 37) criticisms of Herder’s naturalism, but in Hamann’s estimation it was the spoken language of a community that was prior to thought, not some sort of language of thought.

1.2.1.2 (A2) Definitions

Philosophers have been concerned with the important but complex relationship between words and definitions. In the history of philosophy, it was recognized that not only words but also *things* can be defined. But what, precisely, is a definition? This was a question that emerged very early with Plato (Sect. 3.3), whose method of division served as the basis for the discovery of definition. The method of division is a tool for dividing species from their genera by determination of the species' *differentia*, that is, the distinguishing feature differentiating a given species from another of its genus (i.e., of its kind). For example, humans and non-human animals are all members of the genus *animal*, while the species human is distinguished from non-human animals by the feature of their rationality: accordingly, 'human' can be defined as 'rational (= *differentia*) animal (= genus)'. The method of division served as the mechanism for ascertaining definitions, at least until John Locke (Chap. 27), who loosened the strictures on identifying the *differentia* + genus in order to arrive at definitions.

A question which was first put forward by Plato as a mechanism to arrive at definitions, which was also taken up by the Stoics (Chap. 6), Augustine (Sect. 8.1) and – much later – George Berkeley (Sect. 28.3), was whether the definition of a word involves its etymology. Plato recognized that individual names have histories: words were, at some time in history, assigned to things for some reason, and the question was whether by identifying that reason one could eventually arrive at the word's true definition. For instance, perhaps the sound of a word somehow imitates the thing being named and tells us something about what it is. Throughout these etymological discussions one can easily see that the connection between a word's definition and its meaning or signification is close, and the terminology confused.

Also confusing was whether it is the name or the thing that is named that is to be defined. This confusion was introduced by Aristotle in *Categories* (Sect. 4.3), in which the distinction between synonymous and homonymous terms was couched in terms of the *things named* being synonymous (i.e., univocal, and thus definable) or homonymous (i.e., equivocal, and thus indefinable). Philosophers in the Aristotelian tradition maintained that while individual things cannot be defined, words for general things (e.g., universals, natural kinds), as long as they were univocal, could be defined: for someone like Boethius, then, the definition and signification of "human" was the same, namely, "rational, mortal animal" (Sect. 9.3). But this led to extensive debate over the status of those definitions (closely bound up with the problem of universals and other generalities such as natural kinds). Peter Abelard (Sect. 11.2), William of Ockham (Chap. 16) and John Buridan (Chap. 17) were the forerunners of the view, typically (but perhaps imprecisely) associated with John Locke (Chap. 27), that names for general things have only nominal, not real, definitions. Determining or stipulating the correct definitions for words came to be a matter of intense focus in the work of Roger Bacon (Chap. 23), Thomas Hobbes (Sect. 24.1), and John Locke (Chap. 27). Locke's account of definition is of great interest, especially concerning his views on linguistic compositionality and the need for some type of simple term that is either undefined or indefinable. What is interesting in this