

Communication

Modern philosophy of language has focused on logical form, reference, and meaning, but the communal and communicative nature of language is also crucial. It may even be impossible to understand language if we ignore its shared role among speakers. Earliest discussions of the matter treated language as a transparent medium that could lead to wisdom, or as a self-conscious medium of **rhetoric**, that could be used for political advantage. Great speeches were admired and copied, but philosophers feared that truth was getting lost, and that the emotional devices available in language (notably in poetry) were not helpful when cool reasoning was needed. If truth was entirely relative then all that remained was different modes of persuasion. The best hope of philosophers was to show that truth is the greatest weapon of persuasion, but the debate was a stalemate.

When the focus moved to how individual sentences can express truth, language was seen as a private matter within the mind, built on our concepts, experiences and reasoning. The increased interest in language communities was triggered by a claim that such a **private language** is actually impossible. Language, it is said, relies on following syntactic rules, but successful rule-following can never be a private matter. A test case asks how you would 'go on' if faced with the sequence '2, 4, 6, 8'; we quickly assume that the answer is '10', but that is because we have guessed a rule without having it confirmed. The person who invented the sequence may have any number of quirky rules in mind. Language, it is said, is like that; we can only know we are speaking correctly, and expressing our thoughts, if it is confirmed by the community of speakers. We also make the assumption that we can tell people about private sensations like colours and pains, but words like 'red' or 'stinging' are mainly fixed by how they are used in conversation. The details of these arguments are often challenged, but the influence of this more communal view of language has been widespread in philosophy.

A simple resulting shift of interest is from whether a sentence is true or false, to whether it is asserted or denied. Logic is only interested in truth, but **assertion** matters more in practical life. If someone asserts a sentence, it is assumed that they think it is true, and acceptance of the assertion means the listeners think it is true. The subject-matter of a conversation is shifted when an assertion is accepted, which opens a new field of enquiry, alongside the interest in truth. **Denial** turns out to be more complex than assertion, as it may either be denying an assertion (in favour of ignorance, perhaps) or asserting its opposite. The denial may also be aimed at one part of the rival assertion, rather than the whole. It is not clear whether denial depends on a rival assertion, or whether it might be more positive. Assertions can be expressed negatively, and denials positively. Hence this is an area where the practicalities of denial throw interesting light on the logic of negation.

The use of indexicals (like 'we', 'here' and 'now') shows that **context** contributes to meaning, and we now see that context hugely influences what we mean. The reference in 'the car won't start' needs a context, and the scope of reference in 'people just don't understand' needs extensive knowledge of the situation. If compare 'go into the kitchen' with 'go into teaching', we even wonder whether almost every word we say is largely fixed by context (which endangers any attempt to express enduring or eternal truths).

An important step in understanding the community aspect of language was the discovery of implicit rules in normal conversation. (Such background assumptions of speech are referred to as **pragmatics**). We may be amazed by what someone says, even it is true and well expressed, because it is unexpected in conversation. The two main rules of this conversational **implicature** are the maxim of *quantity*, that you should give enough information, and the maxim of *quality*, that you should believe your assertions. We are also expected to be brief, clear and relevant. Communication can fail by breaching these maxims, as well as the more familiar requirements of good grammar, meaning and logic. There is great interest in how these rules of implicature affect literal meanings.

Conversation is impossible without many agreements about background and **presuppositions**. Rational assessment of a dubious assertion has often focused on what has been presupposed, and we can look for ways to test whether we have got this right. We overhear weird remarks in the street, and assume the presupposition that makes best sense of it. 'Projection' tests can clarify presuppositions: if an assertion has a presupposition, then the denial of the assertion, and its implications, and its conjunction with another assertion, and querying the assertion, will (to make sense) all require the same presupposition. If we find the presupposition to be false, then the ensuing assertion seems to be empty, rather than necessarily false.

The semantic theory of truth says (as one of its instances) that 'schnee ist weiss' is true if and only if snow is white. That is, the quoted German sentence is 'true' if you are willing to assert it in English. But this raises the question of whether the **translation** is accurate, and the difficulties of understanding other speakers is greatly illuminated by an examination of what is or is not lost in translation. A controversial claim is that perfect translation is impossible. If you hear only a single word of a new language, even in a specific context where an object is pointed out, the exact meaning is impossible to pin down. Familiarity reduces the options, but if we have a 'holistic' view of language (that meanings are part of the whole, not of the components) then only immersion in the new language can give the full story, and a different language will be 'incommensurable' with it (i.e. two languages can never be mapped onto one another). There may be many translations, no one better than another.

One response to this scepticism draws on the principle of **charity** – that we must assume either that speakers largely say what is true, or (if not) then at least almost all their utterances make sense. The sceptic is doubting whether we can ever grasp a new scheme of beliefs, but the reply assumes that people largely share basic beliefs, and if we expect truth and good sense from a new language, then accurate translations can emerge.

Another revealing challenge in interpreting what others say is their use of **metaphor**. Three views seem possible: that metaphors can be reduced to similes (by spelling out what resembles what), or that there is 'metaphorical meaning', or (as in the use of **irony**) that there is just literal meaning (with the significance added by the listener).