

# Class Thirteen: Hornsby's Critique of "Malestream" Philosophy of Language

Doing Things with Words - Ryan Simonelli

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## 1 "Malestream" Philosophy of Language

- **Some Historical/Contemporary Perspective:** It will be helpful, in considering Hornsby's critique to provide a bit of an overview of the development of philosophy of language from Wittgenstein to the present day:
  - **The Paths of Wittgenstein and Carnap:** Wittgenstein wrote the *Philosophical Investigations* (which was posthumously published in 1953) in the 40s. At the same time, Rudolph Carnap, strongly influenced by Wittgenstein's early work, put forward *Introduction to Semantics*, which developed the idea of a systematic semantic theory, and then in 1947 *Meaning and Necessity* which developed "possible worlds semantics" for the first time.
  - **The Waning Influence of Wittgenstein:** Though Wittgenstein was extremely influential in the 50s and 60s (for instance, with the boom of "ordinary language philosophy"), as the second half of the twentieth century progressed, the influence of Wittgenstein in analytic philosophy waned considerably. The Fregean picture that later Wittgenstein was reacting against retained its dominance and was developed in new ways.
  - **The Development of Formal Semantics and Gricean Pragmatics:** Formal *semantics*—the systematic assignment of meanings to words and sentences—was developed substantially in the 60s and 70s with work by people like Richard Montague and David Lewis, building on the work of Carnap.
    - \* **The Montogovian Principle:** Treat a natural language such as English in exactly the way that a formal language like first-order logic would be treated:
      - Montigue:** "I reject the contention that an important theoretical difference exists between formal and natural languages."
    - \* **The Basic Project:** Assign mathematical entities to sentences as their *semantic values* and specify construction rules corresponding to syntactic operations so as to explain how simple word meanings to compose to constitute complex sentence meanings. This was complimented by a conception of *pragmatics* developed by H.P. Grice in the 60s, which essentially involves the idea of the hearer making reasonable inferences to extract what the speaker intended (the "speaker meaning") from the bit of semantic content that was actually given to you in the speakers' utterance (the "sentence meaning").
- **The Mainstream Paradigm Today, Encapsulated In Two Pages:** Things have changed quite a bit in the 20 years since Hornsby wrote this paper, but her basic take on the mainstream paradigm is still quite accurate. See secondary handout with the Dever excerpt for the standard view summed up.
- **The Social Role Alternative:** The work that we've been reading, by authors like Langton, McGowan, and Kukla and Lance constitutes an alternative conception of the fundamental nature of language, where language is conceived of principally in terms of its *social role*. Thinking of language in this way, as we've seen, enables "the treatment of actual linguistic phenomena in the social world," (101). On the other hand "real-world linguistic phenomena are bound to be neglected while philosophy of language is pursued along malestream

lines," (101). It's primarily for this reason that Hornsby calls the mainstream conception the "malestream" conception.

- **A Qualification about the Label:** There are many women (and other non-men) philosophers and linguistics working in and who've been hugely influential in developing the mainstream paradigm for thinking about meaning (e.g. Barbara Partee, Angelika Kratzer, Irene Heim, and many others), and lots of feminist philosophy of language is actually done from this perspective on meaning.

## 2 Hornsby vs. the Mainstream on What It Is to Say Something

- **Hornsby's Basic Account:** *Successfully saying something to someone* is "a simple and fundamental concept," (95).
  - **The Austinian Idea:** A characterization of the illocutionary force of saying essentially involves a characterization of the speech act in terms of its *uptake*—its *reception*. Apart from thinking of this uptake, we have no conception of what it is to say something.
  - **The Abstractionist Rather than Extractionist Model:** "On any actual occasion of language use, there are many things that the speaker does, all of which would need to be specified in order to record her 'total speech act.' The abstraction which corresponds to 'what the speaker's words meant then' is an abstraction from such total speech acts," (100).
    - \* **A Relevant Quote from Gilbert Ryle:** "Word meanings or concepts are not proposition components but propositional [similarities and] differences. They are distinguishables, not detachables; abstractables, not extractables." Hornsby would say the same things about sentence-meanings, relative to speech-acts, as Ryle says about word-meanings relative to sentence-meanings.
  - **Question:** What about kinds of speech that aren't communicative such as writing in a private diary or speaking to oneself. How would these be accommodated on Hornsby's account?
- **Two Features of the Mainstream Account:**
  - **"Decompositionalism"** : Someone's *saying something* is one thing—it's their uttering a sentence that has a certain semantic content. Someone else's *hearing what was said* it is a completely different, conceptually separate, thing—it's their hearing and interpretation of what was uttered. These two acts, though they often go together in everyday life, are really conceptually separate.
    - \* **Example:** Consider the Dever excerpt.
  - **Individualism:** The decompositionalist tendency in contemporary philosophy of language is symptomatic of a kind of *individualism*, where one regards the individual as a kind of *self-sufficient subject*.
- **Hornsby's Feminist Explication:** Hornsby suggests that decompositionalism and individualism "might be regarded as a masculine way of thinking," (93).
  - These are familiar kinds of second wave feminist claims that we find in authors like MacKinnon, ultimately having their roots in feminist authors like Simone de Beauvoir.
- **Classical Philosophical Problems Stemming from These Features:** Moreover, Hornsby takes it that there are certain classic philosophical problems that have their origin in these tendencies.
  - **An Analogy to Perception:** There is a very quick nod in Hornsby to a theory of perception developed by John McDowell, reacting to what he calls the "highest common factor" view of perception.
    - \* **Decompositionalism:** Some experiences are veridical (we see what is so). Other qualitatively identical experiences are deceptive (what visually appears to be so

isn't so). We can decompose such experiences into what is common between them—the experience itself—and an extra factor that distinguishes them—the fact that one is related to external reality in a certain way and one isn't.

- \* **McDowell's View:** The experience of seeing that something is so is of a fundamentally different type than the experience of merely seeming to see that something is so, and, moreover, they're not conceptually on par. The latter is to be understood as a failed instance of former, and, as such, a derivative kind of case.
    - **Note:** Just as, on Hornsby's account "successfully saying something to someone [is] a simple and fundamental concept" (95), on McDowell's account successfully seeing that something is so is a simple and fundamental concept. (This is no accident; Hornsby is very influenced by McDowell here).
  - **The Problem of Other Minds:** On an individualist view of language, where it's at least *conceptually possible* that "that someone should no a language but be unable to communicate" (97), it seems like there's a possibility that we're *cut off* from other people, that there's a *gap* between our thoughts and theirs.
    - \* **Hornsby's Solution:** "When the assumption about the self-sufficiency of a speaker is renounced, philosophy of language can begin from the situation in which people are such as to get their thoughts across to one another," (97).
  - **Comparison to Wittgenstein:** Both McDowell and Hornsby are very influenced by Wittgenstein, and we can see this kind of critique in Wittgenstein's work as well (think, for instance, about the individualism and decompositionalism implicit in the conception of a "private language" that Wittgenstein attacks).
- **Some Upshots:**
    - **Hate Speech:**
      - \* **Liberaterian Model:** One "libertarian" argument against regulating speach is that "The effects of speech are supposed to be mediated by the thinking and beliefs of the person to whom it is direct," and so the receiptent of the speech bears partial responsibility for
      - \* **Hornsby's Model:** If speech is *directly communicative* the picture changes
    - **Meaning Change:** This is difficult to account for on the malestream approach, where meaning is understood as seperate from social role. On the social role acocunt, however, it is quite straightfoward.