

[Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the History and Philosophy of Psychology, Section of the British Psychological Society, University of Aberdeen, 5 April 1995]

## CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS AS THE EMPIRICAL STUDY OF LINGUISTIC

### CONVENTION

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#### ***Abstract***

Recent developments such as connectionism in the field of artificial intelligence and selectionism in the neurosciences point *away from* a conception of the rules of language as a set of formal principles genetically inscribed onto the brain's equivalent of a hard disk and *towards* the notion that they are *social conventions* acquired and maintained by the error-correcting practices of a linguistic community. These developments should lead to a revival, not only of an empiricist/behaviourist linguistics, but also of *conceptual analysis* conceived as the empirical investigation of linguistic convention, using as its research tool Garfinkel's *ethnomethodological experiment* in which the putative convention is deliberately flouted so that the social consequences of so doing can be observed or, in the case of a thought experiment, imagined. Some implications of such a revival for our conception of the role of the philosopher in relation to psychology are examined.

#### ***Connectionism and the resurrection of conceptual analysis***

Over the past decade the notion that the brain is a digital computer has been increasingly abandoned in favor of the models based on the assumption that it is what the histological evidence shows it to be, a network of synaptically connected neurons. As I have argued elsewhere (Place 1992a), in the light of these developments the view that linguistic communication depends on a set of formal rules innately inscribed on the equivalent of a hard disk in the brain of every competent interpreter and speaker of a human natural language, no longer appears as plausible as it has done since it was first argued for by Chomsky (1965) in *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*.

Instead, it becomes possible to revive the more traditional view that the rules of language to which speakers must conform, if they are to be understood, are social conventions acquired and maintained by the error-correcting practices of the linguistic community constituted by all competent interpreters and speakers of the natural language in current use. It is the contention of this paper that the revival of the conception of language as a form of learned social behavior also brings with it the possibility of resurrecting the philosophical methodology known as 'conceptual analysis.'

#### ***Conceptual analysis and ordinary language philosophy***

Conceptual analysis is a method of philosophical enquiry which originated from what Wittgenstein (1953) calls "a grammatical investigation." It is particularly associated with the so-called "ordinary language" school of philosophy which flourished at Oxford between the end of World War II and the mid-1960's, and whose principal exponents were Gilbert Ryle, John Austin, my own tutor in philosophy Paul Grice and the only important member of the group still alive, Sir Peter Strawson, as he now is.

In his paper 'The meaning of a word' (Austin 1961) which is the nearest thing we possess to an exposition of the methodology of conceptual analysis, Austin makes it clear that conceptual analysis is derived from Frege's (1884/1950) principle that the meaning of a word is its contribution to the meaning of the sentences of which it forms part. It is an implication of this principle that in order to find out what a word means you need to study the kinds of sentence in which it can and cannot intelligibly occur, focusing in particular on those sentences where the word in question is, in Ryle's phrase, "on duty"; i.e. sentences where the word is being used to talk about other things, rather than about the word itself and its meaning.

Conceptual analysis, so conceived, fell out of favor during the 1960's not because its principles or the conclusions based upon them had been shown it to be false. It fell out of favor

1. because it was committed to the view that all the traditional problems of philosophy are ~~on~~ conceptual confusions due to lack of attention to the way words are actually used; consequently, once these conceptual confusions had been cleared out of the way, there was, on this view of the nature of philosophical activity, nothing left for the philosopher to do other than engage in a purely lexicographic charting of word meanings, and
2. because, quite wrongly in my view, the impression was created that conceptual analysis rejects as conceptually confused any deviation from ordinary ways of talking and is thus inimical to the kind of conceptual innovation that is the life blood of science.

### ***Conceptual analysis as the empirical investigation of linguistic convention***

In this paper I argue

- (a) that conceptual analysis is an empirical sociolinguistic investigation of the conventions on conformity to which the intelligibility of the speaker's utterance depends, and

- (b) that conceptual analysis, so conceived, is the only research methodology available to the philosopher which gives him or her an expertise which is distinctively philosophical and can offer the prospect of making a positive and definitive contribution to the body of human knowledge.

This view of the nature of philosophical activity has implications for our conception of the philosopher's contribution to the development of a scientific psychology. According to the currently fashionable view represented by what I regard as the pseudo-discipline of cognitive science, the philosopher's role in relation to psychology is to be a kind of super top-down theorist who has no specific empirical data at his or her disposal, but who is in a position to act as a kind of policeman with respect to psychological theory construction. What is not advertised is that he or she has a hidden agenda to ensure that no mere empirical evidence should be allowed to settle traditional philosophical puzzles concerning such issues as the mind-body problem, intentionality and the freedom of the will. By contrast, *qua* conceptual analyst, the philosopher can lay claim to a body of empirically-based expert knowledge concerning what in recent years has become known as "folk psychology"; how it works both as an explanation and a description and what its ontological commitments, both are and are not. Armed with that expert knowledge the philosopher can hope to assist the psychologist both in advising as to what aspects of folk psychology should be discarded for the purposes of science, while preserving those insights which millennia of intimate contact with human behavior both from the inside and from the outside have impressed upon it.

But in order to lay claim to this expertise the philosopher must, at least as far as conceptual analysis is concerned, abandon the idea that philosophy is an *a priori* discipline akin to formal logic or mathematics. It should instead be viewed as an empirical sociological investigation of the universally applicable social conventions to which a speaker must conform if what she says is to be understood by any competent interpreter of the natural language she is speaking.

### ***The ethnomethodological experiment***

The empirical study of social convention is a field whose methodology appears to someone with an admittedly superficial acquaintance with the relevant literature to be poorly developed and inadequately discussed. What seems certain is that information about the social conventions operating within a social

group cannot be derived from statistical studies of the frequency of occurrence of a particular form of behavior. Such studies are unable to distinguish between a behavior with a high natural probability of occurrence where the probability is reduced by the aversive social consequences that ensue when it is emitted and a behavior whose low natural probability of occurrence is enhanced by positive social reinforcement, combined with negative social reinforcement of the failure to produce it. In either case the same frequency of occurrence can result.

In an article published in *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* (Place 1992b) I argued that the only way to demonstrate the existence of a social norm or convention is to flout what you take to be the convention and see what happens. If the effect is that all hell breaks loose and powerful social sanctions are mobilized so as to bring the offender's behavior into line, you have convincing evidence that an important social convention has been violated. That, I take it, is the rationale behind Garfinkel's (1964/1967) much reviled "ethnomethodological experiment." Garfinkel's example of such an experiment is that in which he asked his students

to spend from fifteen minutes to an hour in their [own] homes imagining that they were boarders and acting out this assumption. They were instructed to conduct themselves in a circumspect and polite fashion. They were to avoid getting personal, to use formal address, to speak only when spoken to. (Garfinkel 1967:47)

Typical reactions to this behavior on the part of the student are described as follows:

family members were stupefied. They vigorously sought to make the strange actions intelligible and to restore the situation to normal appearances. Reports were filled with accounts of astonishment, bewilderment, shock, anxiety, embarrassment, and anger, and with charges by various family members that the student was mean, inconsiderate, selfish, nasty or impolite. (Garfinkel 1967:47)

It is hardly surprising to find that this kind of *in vivo* ethnomethodological experiment has not become a widespread practice even among ethnomethodological sociologists, let alone among sociologists in general. What is much more common, though it is not identified as such, is what we may call "the ethnomethodological thought experiment." In this case the listener or reader is invited to imagine what would happen or to recollect from their own experience the consternation and social disapproval that is provoked when certain social conventions are contravened. In my *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* paper, I quote an example of such a thought experiment taken from a book by my sister, the Canadian feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith (1987). She writes:

When I take my dog for a walk in the morning, I observe a number of what we might call 'conventions.' I myself walk on the sidewalk; I do not walk on the neighbor's lawns. My dog, however, freely runs over the lawns. *My dog also, if I am not careful, may shit on a neighbor's lawn, and there are certainly some neighbors who do not like this.* (my italics) (Smith 1987: 154-5)

It is in the form of this kind of thought experiment that we find the ethnomethodological experiment in the writings of conceptual analysts. Ryle (1949:105-6) for example writes:

it would be absurd to speak of someone having a sensation, or a feeling, on purpose; or to ask someone what he had a twinge *for*.

Evidently what Ryle is doing here is inviting the reader to experience the consternation which is provoked in his or her own case by such deviant sentences, as a way of revealing the existence and nature of the linguistic conventions they flout.

### ***The Picture Theory of Meaning***

This kind of empirical investigation of the linguistic conventions governing the use of words in the construction of sentences in ordinary language is not, as you might suppose, a matter of interest only to students of language. It can also tell us something about the nature of the phenomena those sentences describe. Of particular interest from the standpoint of the psychologist is the information it can provide about the phenomena described by sentences in the language of folk psychology. But the only way to justify that claim, as I see it, is to appeal to a version of Wittgenstein's (1921/1961) "picture theory" of the meaning of sentences. According to this theory, the sentences of natural language which we use to talk about concrete situations in the real world either are or can be decomposed into particular atomic sentences of the kind illustrated by the proverbial *The cat is on the mat* which, as analysed by Frege (1891/1960), consists of a function, the predicate *is on*, which generates two argument places both of which are occupied by noun phrases, *the cat* and *the mat* referring to spatially and temporally extended concrete particulars or 'substances' as they are called within the Aristotelian tradition. In such atomic sentences, according to the picture theory, there is an isomorphic relation between the structure and content of the sentence and the structure and content of the situation it thereby depicts from which the listener is able to reconstruct its nature without having to have encountered a situation of that kind in her own past sensory experience.

We need a theory such as this in order to make sense of the use that Ryle (1949) makes of the grammatical phenomenon known to linguists as the 'aspect' of a verb to draw the distinction between verbs "which signify dispositions" (Ryle *op. cit.* p. 116), "process verbs" (*op. cit.* p. 139) and "achievement words" (*op. cit.* p. 149), the latter perhaps better described as "instantaneous event" or "stop and start verbs." This threefold distinction, based on what Wittgenstein calls "the grammar" and Ryle calls the "logical behaviour" of the verbs in question, yields, once the corresponding situation types are put in the order (1) process, (2) instantaneous event, (3) disposition, a pattern which pervades all our mental life as it is presented to us in the language of folk psychology. This is the pattern whereby an instantaneous mental event, such as deciding what to do, stands at the interface between an antecedent mental process or mental activity, such as deliberating, and a subsequent and consequent mental disposition, such as intending to do something when the time is ripe.

***Abstract objects do not exist***

But perhaps more far-reaching in its significance, not only for psychology, but for metaphysics in general is an argument which can be derived from the principles of conceptual analysis, as I have expounded them, which supports the conclusion of nominalists and conceptualists over the centuries that abstract objects do not exist. The argument takes as its starting point Frege's "function and argument" analysis of the sentence to which reference has already been made in considering the example of the sentence *The cat is on the mat*. For our present purpose it will be helpful to consider a slightly more complicated atomic sentence, the sentence *John gave Mary the book*. As analyzed by Frege, this sentence consists of a predicate in the form of the past tense of the verb *give* which generates three argument places, the giver, the receiver and the object given, all of which are occupied by noun phrases denoting what Aristotle calls "substances" in this case *John*, *Mary* and *the book*. From this analysis, it appears that there are two active-passive transformations of the sentence, namely:

- (a) *Mary was given the book by John*, and
- (b) *The book was given to Mary by John*

These transformations do not change the semantic content or the truth value of the sentence in any way. However, by putting each occupant of the three argument places in turn into the all important subject position, they have the effect of altering the point of view from which the event in question is viewed. Thus *John gave Mary the book* looks at the event as action on John's part and to that extent from his point of view. *Mary was given the book by John* looks at the event as something that happened to Mary and hence from her point of view, while *The book was given to Mary by John* looks at it as something that happened to the book and hence from the point of view of someone interested in its history.

But there is also another transformation in which it is the predicate that goes into the subject position, as in the phrase *John's gift of the book to Mary*. This differs from the other transformations in that it is a noun phrase rather than a complete sentence, one which not only focuses attention on the event rather than its participants, but has the function of permitting the construction of a sentence in which the event denoted by the predicate in the original sentence, occupies an argument place relative to a second order predicate, as in the sentence *John's gift of the book to Mary was extremely generous* or *John's gift of the book to Mary made Joe's gift of a pencil look mean*.

In order to achieve this transformation, the original predicate, the verb *gave*, has to be *nominalized*, that is to say converted into a noun, in this case the noun *gift*, and it is these nominalizations of predicates and other non-substance denoting parts of speech which, according to me, are the source of fictitious abstract objects. In the case of the noun *gift* the temptation to suppose that this denotes an abstract object over and above those concrete objects, the giver, the receiver and object given, is minimal. This is partly because what is referred to is a particular event rather than a type of event, and partly because the specification of the concrete objects occupying the original argument place makes its derivation from the original sentence very clear. But when we begin to talk in generalities about such things as memory, perception or language, we lose the connection with sentences about people remembering or recognizing things, seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and feeling things, saying something, speaking, talking, writing, listening, understanding and reading what is said or written.

If that is how abstract objects such as the faculties of the mind get generated in the first place, it is hardly surprising that they fail conspicuously to line up with anything that neurology tells about the way

psychological abilities break down when different parts of the brain are damaged. It is not just phrenology which illustrates this. The total failure of neurology to come up with anything resembling the long term memory store of cognitive psychology, is just as striking; though in this case the notion persists despite the evidence against it, because of the pervasive influence of the computational model with its information-storing disks and tapes.

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