

History of Philosophy

78 Ordinary Language Philosophy

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Abstract:

This text explores the transition from the rigid constraints of **logical positivism** to the more flexible framework of **ordinary language philosophy**. While positivists like A.J. Ayer initially dismissed religious and ethical talk as meaningless due to a lack of empirical verification, later thinkers argued that this criteria was far too **reductionist**. Philosophers such as **Wittgenstein** introduced the concept of **language games**, suggesting that words function as diverse tools shaped by social context rather than just scientific description. This shift is further illustrated through the work of **Gilbert Ryle**, who addressed "category mistakes" in the mind-body debate, and **J.L. Austin**, who analyzed the performative nature of speech. Ultimately, these developments moved philosophy beyond narrow empiricism, allowing for a **renewed academic validation** of metaphysics, ethics, and theology.

Briefing Document:

The Evolution and Impact of Ordinary Language Philosophy

Executive Summary

Ordinary Language Philosophy emerged as a decisive reaction against the reductionist constraints of Logical Positivism and "ideal language" philosophy. While early 20th-century empiricism, led by figures like Bertrand Russell and A.J. Ayer, insisted that knowledge claims must meet strict empirical verification standards, the ordinary language movement—spearheaded by Ludwig Wittgenstein, Gilbert Ryle, and J.L. Austin—argued that language performs a vast array of social and functional tasks beyond simple description. This shift moved philosophy away from constructing formal logical systems toward "mapping the logical geography" of everyday usage. By recognizing language as a social behavior rather than a purely

descriptive tool, this movement effectively revitalized the study of ethics, metaphysics, and theology, which had been previously dismissed as "meaningless" under the positivist criterion of verifiability.

The Reaction Against Logical Positivism

The development of 20th-century philosophy saw a transition from the "ideal language" of Russell and the positivists to the "ordinary language" of the mid-century.

- **Ideal Language Philosophy:** This approach sought to couch knowledge in language free from loose connotations. It utilized symbolic logic as an ideal, defining symbols with reference to explicit empirical points and formal logical inference.
 - **The Positivist Constraint:** Logical positivism insisted on the "verifiability criterion" for factual meaning. If a proposition could not be empirically verified, at least in principle, it was considered factually meaningless.
 - **The Reductionist Critique:** Critics like W.V.O. Quine and the later Wittgenstein argued that this was too narrow. Language in ordinary usage performs many different tasks—not just analytic and descriptive ones.
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The Debate over Religious Language

One of the primary battlegrounds for these competing views was theology. Under A.J. Ayer's criteria, theism, atheism, and agnosticism were all deemed equally meaningless because "God" is a metaphysical term with no empirical reference.

The "University Discussion" (Theology and Falsification)

Triggered by John Wisdom's 1944 article "Gods," a famous debate involving Antony Flew, R.M. Hare, and Basil Mitchell explored whether religious language could be meaningful without being empirically falsifiable.

Participant Parable/Concept Core Argument

Antony Flew	The Invisible Gardener	Believers talk of God's care in ways that cannot be falsified by empirical data (e.g., the gardener who cannot be detected).
R.M. Hare	The Oxford Don's "Blink"	Religious language is an expression of an irrational but deeply involved "blink" (an existential feeling) that governs behavior.
Basil Mitchell	The Stranger	Religious belief is based on personal trust and promises (like a resistance fighter trusting a stranger) that may be verified in the future ("eschatological verification").

Alternative Interpretations in the 1950s

- **R.B. Braithwaite:** Argued religious language represents "amoral commitments" to a way of life rather than factual claims.
- **Alasdair MacIntyre:** Proposed religious language is an "idiosyncratic platitude"—a distinctive "language game" that cannot be reduced to moral or metaphysical categories.
- **Paul Van Buren:** In *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*, he claimed "God-language" was a dead language in a secular age because it lacked empirical verification, leading to "death of God" theology.

Ludwig Wittgenstein: Language as Social Behavior

The publication of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) provided the primary impetus for the movement. He viewed language not as a fixed logical structure, but as a diverse set of "language games."

- **Forms of Life:** Wittgenstein insisted that speaking language is part of an activity or a "form of life." It is a social phenomenon and a tool used for specific functions.
- **The Toolbox Analogy:** He compared words to tools in a toolbox (hammers, saws, glue pots). Just as tools have different functions, words perform diverse tasks: giving orders, reporting events, making jokes, or praying.

- **Philosophical Therapy:** Wittgenstein argued that philosophy should not develop theories but should act as a "therapeutic" activity to dissolve logical puzzles arising from the abuse or confusion of language. He famously described his goal as showing "the fly out of the bottle."
- **Critique of Certainty:** In *On Certainty*, he challenged Enlightenment epistemology, arguing that "knowing" is often a guarantee given within a larger, coherent worldview or common-sense realism.

Gilbert Ryle: Logical Geography and Category Mistakes

Gilbert Ryle focused on the "logical geography" of the knowledge already possessed through language.

- **Category Mistakes:** Ryle's most famous concept involves using a word in the wrong logical category. He illustrated this with the example of a person watching a cricket match and asking, "Where is the team spirit?" as if "spirit" were an empirical object like a batsman.
- **Linguistic Behaviorism:** In *The Concept of Mind*, Ryle attacked Cartesian dualism, which he labeled "the myth of the ghost in the machine." He argued that "mind language" (emotions, motives) is actually language about private inclinations toward overt behaviors.
- **Complementarity:** Ryle suggested that seemingly conflicting accounts (e.g., science vs. religion or freedom vs. determinism) are often just different "language games" used for different purposes, similar to the wave-particle complementarity in physics.

J.L. Austin: Speech Acts and Realism

J.L. Austin further systematized the variety of language usage by focusing on "speech acts."

Classification of Language Acts

In *How to Do Things with Words* (1955), Austin distinguished between different types of utterances:

1. **Locutionary Act:** The act of saying something.
2. **Illocutionary Act:** An act performed *in* saying something (e.g., announcing a verdict, giving advice).
3. **Perlocutionary Act:** An act performed *by means of* saying something (e.g., persuading or annoying someone).

Sense and Sensibilia

In a direct attack on A.J. Ayer's "linguistic phenomenalism," Austin argued that philosophers had become obsessed with a few half-studied facts and oversimplified words like "appears" or "seems." He defended a "common-sense realism," asserting that the antithesis between "sense data" and "material things" is spurious and that ordinary language is subtler than philosophical reductionism allows.

Conclusion: The Reintroduction of Metaphysics

The "loosening up" of the positivist approach through ordinary language philosophy led to a significant shift in the philosophical landscape by the late 1950s and early 1960s. By rejecting the narrow verifiability theory, philosophers were able to return to:

- **Philosophical Theology:** Led by figures like William Alston and George Mavrodis, who utilized religious experience and argumentation.
- **Ethics and Philosophy of Mind:** Moving beyond emotive or behavioral reductions to explore psychological states and metaphysical realities.
- **Methodological Change:** Much like the shifts following the Sophists or Hume, the ordinary language movement represented a transition from skepticism toward new methodologies that account for the complexity of human behavior and discourse.

Study Guide:

Study Guide: The Evolution and Impact of Ordinary Language Philosophy

This study guide examines the transition from the reductionist constraints of logical positivism to the expansive methods of ordinary language philosophy. It focuses on the shift from "ideal language" models to a more nuanced understanding of how language functions in diverse social and religious contexts, as outlined in the lectures of Dr. Arthur Holmes.

Short-Answer Quiz

1. How did ordinary language philosophy react to the "ideal language" sought by Bertrand Russell and the logical positivists?
2. What was A.J. Ayer's primary argument regarding the meaningfulness of theological language?
3. In Antony Flew's parable of the "Invisible Gardener," what point is being made about religious assertions?
4. What does R.M. Hare mean by the term "blik," and how does it relate to his story of the Oxford don?
5. How does Basil Mitchell's parable of "The Stranger" differ from Flew's gardener parable regarding verification?
6. According to the later Wittgenstein, why is the "toolbox" an appropriate analogy for language?
7. What constitutes a "category mistake" according to Gilbert Ryle?
8. Explain Ryle's concept of "linguistic behaviorism."
9. What is the "myth of the ghost in the machine," and which philosopher did Ryle target with this phrase?
10. Define J.L. Austin's distinction between illocutionary and perlocutionary acts.

Answer Key

1. Ordinary language philosophy reacted against the reductionism of ideal language philosophy, which sought to strip language of loose connotations through formal symbolic logic. Proponents like Wittgenstein argued that language in its ordinary usage performs many different tasks beyond the purely analytic and descriptive tasks of empirical science.
2. Ayer argued that theological language is devoid of factual meaning because it fails the verifiability criterion. Since "God" is a metaphysical term with no empirical reference and is not a sense object, the proposition "God exists" is neither verifiable nor falsifiable, rendering theism, atheism, and agnosticism equally meaningless.
3. Flew uses the parable to show that religious believers often refuse to let any empirical data falsify their claims about God's love or providence. Just as the explorers cannot find a way to falsify the existence of an invisible gardener, religious talk becomes a series of assertions that are insulated from empirical testing, calling into question their factual status.
4. A "blik" is an irrational, deeply held conviction or feeling that governs an individual's behavior and interpretation of the world. In Hare's story, the Oxford don has a "blik" that someone is trying to murder him; though this is not empirically verifiable, it is meaningful because it explains and directs his entire way of life.
5. While Flew's gardener is entirely unfalsifiable, Mitchell's "Stranger" (representing Christ) makes promises and deeds that the believers trust will eventually be vindicated. This introduces the possibility of what John Hick calls "eschatological verification," meaning the story is amenable in principle to future verification when the stranger returns.
6. Wittgenstein suggests language is a box of tools—hammers, saws, glue, etc.—because words and sentences perform functions as diverse as those tools. He argues that speaking language is part of an activity or a "form of life," encompassing countless uses such as giving orders, making jokes, reporting events, or praying.
7. A category mistake occurs when a speaker treats a word from one logical category as if it belonged to another, often leading to pseudo-problems. Ryle

illustrates this with the example of a person seeing the players and the pitch in a cricket match and then asking where the "team spirit" is, mistakenly expecting "team spirit" to be a physical object like a batsman.

8. Linguistic behaviorism is the view that "mind language" (talk of mental states, motives, or emotions) is actually language about private inclinations toward public behaviors. Ryle argues that statements about mental activity can be translated into statements about actual or possible bodily behaviors without any metaphysical remainder.
9. Ryle coined the phrase to criticize Rene Descartes' dualism, which posits the mind as a separate entity residing within the body. Ryle argues this is a category mistake caused by the superficial grammatical similarity of the nouns "mind" and "body," leading people to wrongly assume they refer to two different entities in the same category of "thing."
10. An illocutionary act is an act performed *in* saying something, such as announcing a verdict or giving advice. A perlocutionary act is an act performed *by means of* saying something, where the language is a tool to achieve an effect, such as persuading, annoying, or stopping someone from an action.

Essay Questions

1. **The Demise of Logical Positivism:** Trace the shift from the "verifiability criterion" of the logical positivists to the "language games" of the ordinary language philosophers. How did this shift allow for the reintroduction of ethics, metaphysics, and theology into philosophical discourse?
2. **Parables of Faith:** Compare and contrast the parables of the Invisible Gardener (Flew), the Oxford Don (Hare), and the Stranger (Mitchell). How does each story attempt to resolve the tension between religious belief and the requirement for empirical evidence?
3. **Wittgenstein's Social Behavior Model:** Discuss Wittgenstein's view of language as a "social behavior" and a "form of life." How does this perspective

challenge the idea that the primary function of language is to describe empirical data?

4. **Ryle and the Logical Geography of the Mind:** Evaluate Gilbert Ryle's attempt to map the "logical geography" of the mind. Does his "linguistic behaviorism" successfully resolve the mind-body problem, or does it merely redefine it through "category mistakes"?
5. **Austin's Critique of Phenomenalism:** Examine J.L. Austin's attack on A.J. Ayer's sense datum theory in *Sense and Sensibilia*. How does Austin use the subtleties of ordinary language to defend a version of common-sense realism?

Glossary of Key Terms

- **Blik:** A term coined by R.M. Hare to describe a fundamental, non-verifiable framework of meaning or an "irrational hang-up" that determines how a person interprets their experiences.
- **Category Mistake:** A logical error identified by Gilbert Ryle where things belonging to one category are presented as if they belonged to another (e.g., treating "the mind" as a physical substance).
- **Death of God Theology:** A movement associated with Paul Van Buren that argues "God-language" is dead in a secular scientific age because it lacks empirical meaning, shifting the focus of the gospel to secular humanism.
- **Eschatological Verification:** A concept mentioned by John Hick (and implied by Basil Mitchell) suggesting that some religious claims may not be verifiable in the present but are verifiable in principle in the future (e.g., at the end of time).
- **Ghost in the Machine:** Gilbert Ryle's derisive description of Cartesian dualism, the idea that a non-physical mind exists "inside" a physical body.
- **Idiosyncratic Platitude:** Alasdair MacIntyre's description of religious language as a distinctive "language game" that is not reducible to moral or metaphysical language and is not subject to external empirical evidence.

- **Illocutionary Act:** A speech act in which the speaker performs an action *in* the very act of speaking (e.g., "I promise").
- **Language Game:** Wittgenstein's concept that language consists of various social activities or "games" (e.g., joking, praying, reporting) each with its own internal rules and functions.
- **Linguistic Behaviorism:** The theory held by Gilbert Ryle that talk about mental states is actually talk about behavioral dispositions or inclinations.
- **Linguistic Phenomenalism:** The view, criticized by J.L. Austin, that all talk about material objects can and should be reduced to talk about sense data (phenomena).
- **Locutionary Act:** The simple act of uttering a sentence or saying something.
- **Logical Geography:** Gilbert Ryle's term for the philosophical task of mapping the relationships and proper usages of the knowledge we already possess through language.
- **Ordinary Language Philosophy:** A philosophical movement that prioritizes the analysis of how language is used in everyday life over the creation of artificial, "ideal" logical languages.
- **Perlocutionary Act:** A speech act that produces an effect or consequence *by* the act of speaking (e.g., convincing someone of a point).
- **Verifiability Criterion:** The positivist standard stating that a proposition is only factually meaningful if it can be empirically verified through sense experience.