

“Empirical Semantics”

Phil 488/594

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Pelletier

Key figure: Arne Naess



- (name often spelled 'Ness')
- Student in Vienna at time of Vienna Circle (the Logical Positivists)
- Graduated 1936
- Published "Truth" book in 1938
- Became full professor in 1939 at U. Oslo.

Nowadays best known for “Deep Ecology”

- But before ~1965 he was best known as a philosopher of science
- His idea was to examine how certain philosophically important words were actually used
- The inventor(?) of the questionnaire method
- Also supervised “corpus linguistics” work

“Concept of ‘Truth’ as conceived...

- Written after 1936 PhD (in Phil. Sci.) and done pretty much on his own
 - Concerned with “inadequacy” of philosopher’s intuitive methods for capturing how lay people used the term ‘true’
 - Developed and tested various questionnaire and interview methods, using statistical methods
 - Found an amazing divergence of views amongst non-philosophers

Concept of 'Truth' as conceived...

- He published the work in 1938
 - It started with a summary of all the different types of views of 'truth' that philosophers had put forward over the centuries
 - He found that pretty much all of them were held by some group of people
 - The work elicited scorn from pretty much all philosophers, who viewed it as "undignified" to use questionnaires to investigate great philosophical issues [sound familiar?]

Concept of 'Truth' ...

- The book is long and full of attempts to define what a good questionnaire is like.
 - Seems that this had not yet been done by the social psychologists
 - Also needed to develop a decent statistical methodology
 - Also attempted VERY tedious and long interviews with some subjects

Concept of 'Truth' ...

- A shorter article “Common Sense and Truth” was published in *Theoria* 1938 (on class website)
- There were some symposia at conferences on the topic, and Tarski (1944: p. 360) says:
 - Some doubts have been expressed whether the semantic conception does reflect the notion of truth in its common-sense and everyday usage. I happen to believe that the semantic conception does conform to a very considerable extent with the common-sense usage although I readily admit I may be mistaken.

Concept of 'Truth' ...

- A footnote to that passage in Tarski continues:
 - I believe that the issue raised can be settled scientifically, though of course not by a deductive procedure, but with the help of the statistical questionnaire method. As a matter of fact, such research has been carried on, and some of the results have been reported at congresses and in part published.
- (Recall that Tarski 1944 had been delayed in publication by some 8 years due to WWII).
- Naess also published nothing between 1938-1948

Some quotes from “Concept of ‘Truth’ ...”

- He describes how a philosopher might “start by reviewing dictionary definitions, or operational definitions of truth from specific sciences, or by constructing a formal definition suited to logical purposes.” But “when this process leads to various types of theories which deal with the non-philosopher’s opinion on the notion of truth, i.e., with the opinion of the man in the street, we should ask...”

More quotes

- “How do philosophers *know* these things? What is the source of their knowledge? What have they done to arrive at it? Much work could have been saved if the philosophers had indicated how they investigated the opinions of the non-philosopher and how they arrived at the conclusion that there is a thorough-going difference between opinions (explicitly or implicitly) of philosophers and non-philosophers. But the fact remains: their writings contain almost nothing of this matter.”

More quotes

- “Why do philosophers have any interest in writing on a subject capable of empirical treatment without knowing anything about it? What could the possible interest be?”

A difference with modern X-Phi

- Naess did not use vignettes designed to elicit subjects' responses to specific questions. Instead, his project was descriptive, taxonomic.
 - “The diversity and consistency of amateur theories of truth point to the possibility of an ‘experimental philosophy’. By this expression we do not mean more than in other cases in which ‘experimental’ is used as a characteristic, for instance, ‘experimental biology’.”

More differences

- Instead of testing specific examples or constraining the possible forms that the concept of truth might take in advance, various conceptions of truth were allowed to emerge from the interviews

Some conclusions:

- The wide range of opinions expressed do not support the claim that there is a single explicit statement that captures ‘a criterion of truth,’ ‘the meaning of the word “true”,’ or ‘nature of truth’, etc, for the non-philosopher.
- There is no specific folk-theory of truth which distinguishes non-philosophers from philosophers. Every major type of theory proposed in the philosophical literature (by 1938) was expressed by some of the non-philosophers surveyed.

More conclusions:

- There is some meaningful correlation between age and educational level, and the frequency of certain views on truth (i.e. treating truth as involving a relation of 'agreement' becomes more common with age and educational attainment.)
- There is little evidence that an individual's concept of truth will change with age or education. (But the arguments used to support the view may change.)
- Absolutist views of truth become less common with increasing education. And, persons who hold absolutist theories tend to conceive of truth in ethical terms.

Finally

- “The question arises how far speculations other than those centering around the essence of ‘truth’ can be investigated on the same lines as those adopted in this paper. No problem of speculative philosophy seems to be as easily dealt with statistically as the truth-problem, but there are scarcely any of the traditional philosophical problems which are not suitable for this [questionnaire and free-response] procedure.”

Between '38 and '46, Naess in War

- Afterwards, gathered group of grad students around him in Oslo and got **BIG** grant from UNESCO to do 'empirical semantics' on politically interesting words...such as "democracy", "private enterprise", "freedom", "capitalism", etc.
- It also allowed him & students to study more philosophy words, like 'synonymy', 'knows', 'certain', 'or', 'freedom' and to challenge British Ordinary Language Philosophy more generally.

“Interpretation & Preciseness” (1949 article [in Linsky], 1953 book)

- any given utterance (word, phrase, or sentence) can be considered as having different potential interpretations depending
 - prevailing language norms
 - the characteristics of particular persons or groups of users
 - the language situation in which the utterance occurred

More “Interpretation & Precise...”

- These differing interpretations are to be formulated in more precise language represented as subsets of the original utterance.
- Each subset can, in its turn, have further subsets (theoretically, *ad infinitum*).
- The advantages of this conceptualization of interpretation are
 - It enables systematic demonstration of possible interpretations
 - Makes it possible to evaluate which are the more and less “reasonable interpretations”.
 - It is an instrument for demonstrating language vagueness, undue generalization, conflation, pseudo-agreement and effective communication
- Or at least, that’s what he convinced UNESCO of. But they didn’t like the result.

Ordinary Language Philosophy

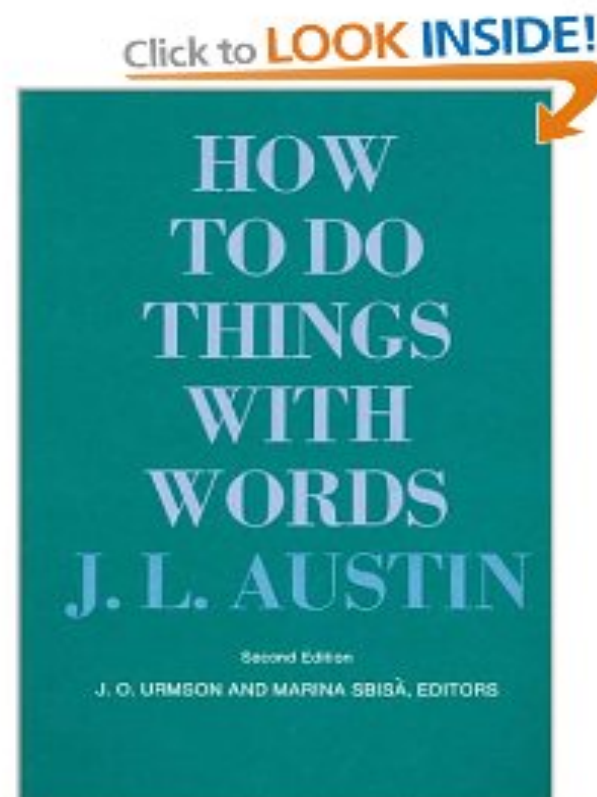
- Two schools: Cambridge & Oxford
 - Wittgenstein, Bouwsma, Wisdom, Rhees, Malcolm, Anscombe ...
 - Ryle, Austin, Strawson, Warnock, Hampshire, Wisdom, Hart ...
- Motivating idea: “ordinary language is just fine as it is”

The two schools...

■ Went about their investigations differently

- Cambridge: “philosophy is a disease”, so show how language *really* works by describing an ‘ordinary’ case where we use the troublesome words.
- Oxford: “we need to investigate how terms are actually used”, e.g., in law (for moral terms) or about use of mental terms, etc. One can generate a theory of how language works by paying particular attention to ‘what we would say if ...’
 - Austin: many philosophical theories derive their plausibility from overlooking very fine distinctions between different uses of expressions. (e.g., ‘illusion’ and ‘delusion’; ‘accidentally’ vs. ‘inadvertently’, ‘with deliberation’ vs. ‘after deliberation’, etc.)

J. L. Austin



A famous Austin intuition:

1. He clumsily trod on the snail
2. Clumsily, he trod on the snail
3. He trod clumsily on the snail
4. He trod on the snail clumsily

In the first two, the snail-squashing is accidental

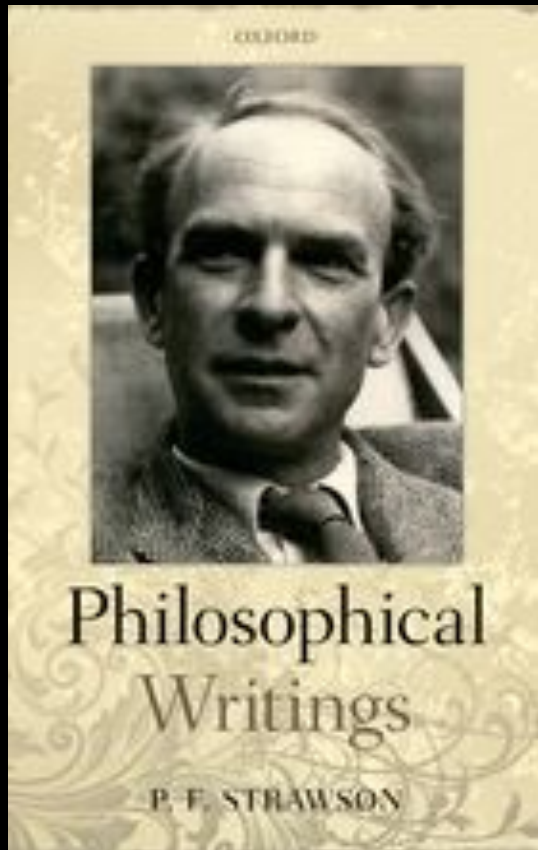
In the next two, it's intentional but poorly carried out

In the first one, the activity of trodding was clumsy

In the second, the trodding-on-the-snail is a clumsy action

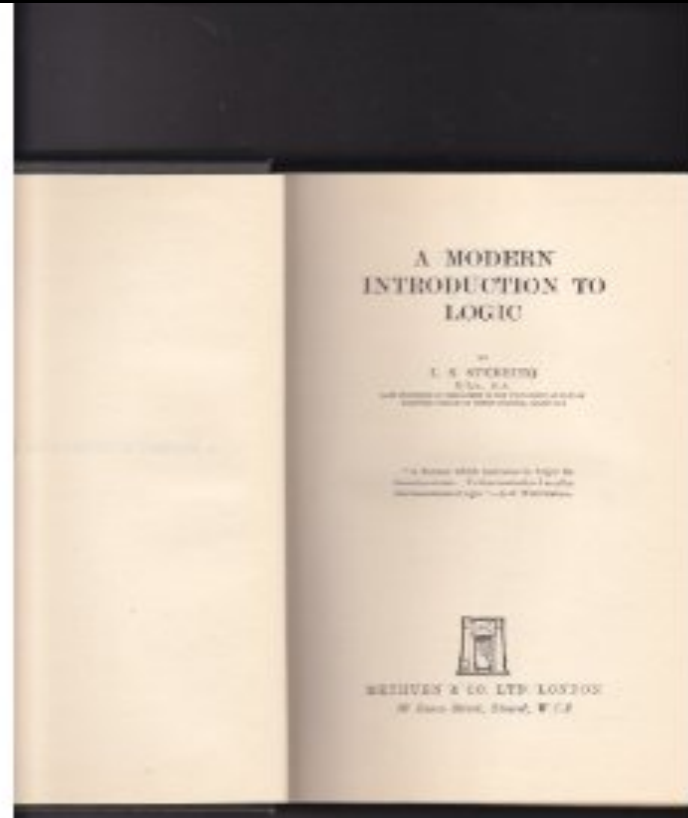
(e.g., his trodding was perfectly ok, but that it was on the snail was clumsy)

A famous Strawson intuition:



- If John has no children, then
 - “All John’s children are asleep”
 - “Not all John’s children are asleep”are neither true nor false.

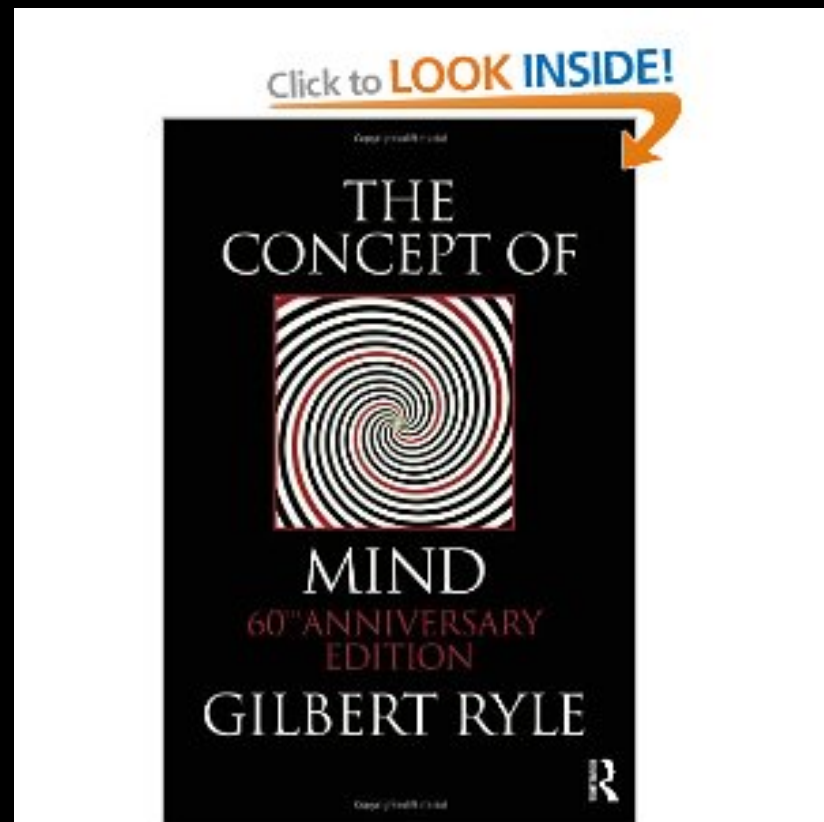
Susan Stebbing



A famous Urmson/Stebbing intuition

- “In his popular book *The Nature of the Physical World*...Eddington said in effect that desks were not really solid. Miss Stebbing ...showed that this way of putting things involved illegitimate mystification; this she did by simply pointing out that if one asked what we ordinarily mean by *solid* we immediately realize we mean something like ‘of the consistency of such things as desks’. Thus she showed conclusively that the novelty of scientific theory does not consist...in showing the inappropriateness of ordinary descriptive language.”

Gilbert Ryle



A famous Ryle intuition:

- A category mistake is a semantic-ontological error in which things of one kind are presented as if they belonged to another. (“This rock is thinking of Vienna”)
- “It is a mistake to treat the mind as an object made of an immaterial substance because predications of substance are not meaningful for a collection of dispositions and capacities.”

“The method of revelation” (Tennessen, 1950)

- “The investigator makes a single subject, namely himself, object of an investigation and records the ideas immediately.”
- “Sometimes this is backed up by quotations from friends, and sometimes others are asked what they mean by or *maintain* to mean by the linguistic expression in question.”

Contrasted with...

“We started collecting what we call occurrences, here quotations from the newspapers. We went through two annual series of all the newspapers in Oslo and quoted every passage where the word “private enterprise” was used. We read [them] pretending to know nothing about ... ‘private enterprise’ and just recording what we thought we learned from the different quotations... We constructed a questionnaire, using these different items we learned, and asked respondents questions about whether they thought ‘private enterprise’ had this or that feature. It was a rather complicated questionnaire...respondents had to spend six hours to answer it.”

“At last this work enabled us to set up hypotheses concerning the different ways of using the word “private enterprise” within a Norwegian society of language.”

Benson Mates and Stanley Cavell

- Background were the claims:

- (Ryle) “In their most ordinary employment ‘voluntary’ and ‘involuntary’ are used ... as adjectives applying to actions which ought not to be done. We discuss whether someone’s action was voluntary or not only when the action seems to have been his fault. ... In this ordinary use, then, it is absurd to discuss whether satisfactory, correct or admirable performances are voluntary or involuntary...”
- (Austin) “...for example, take ‘voluntarily’ and ‘involuntarily’: we may join the army or make a gift voluntarily, we may hiccough or make a small gesture involuntarily...”

Benson Mates



- BA U. Oregon 1937 (Phil & Math). Cornell U 1941-2 (Robinson, Wedberg, Rosser); US Navy cryptanalysis '42-'45. UC Berkeley PhD 1948 (Cherniss, Tarski) "The Logic of the Old Stoa". Professor UC Berkeley 1948-1989. 19 May 1919 -- 14 May 2009

Mates

- “If agreement about usage cannot be reached within so restricted a sample as the class of Oxford Professors of Philosophy, what are the prospects when the sample is enlarged?”

Mates

- Two basic approaches:

- “Extensional”:

- “One observes a reasonably large class of cases in which the subject applies the word, and then one ‘sees’ or ‘elicits’ the meaning by finding what is common to these cases.”
 - “For some reason or other this method, with all of its obvious difficulties, is thought by many people to be more scientific than the intensional approach”

Mates

- “Intensional approach”
 - “One asks the subject what he means by the given word or how he uses it; then one proceeds in Socratic fashion to test this first answer by confronting the subject with counterexamples and borderline cases, and so on until the subject settles down more or less permanently upon a definition or account.”
 - “The difficulties with this method are also very considerable...I only wish to say that it has just as legitimate a claim to be ‘right’ as the extensional method has.”

Mates

- “...ordinary language philosophers...tend towards an armchair version of the extensional method, though sometimes they read the dictionary for intensional guidance before surveying the cases in which they know or suppose the term would be applied”
- “The extensional approach appears in the <passage from Ryle> and in <the example from Urmson>”

Mates

- Although it may be true that by and large people apply 'solid' to items such as desks, it doesn't follow that by 'solid' they *mean* 'of the consistency of desks'.
- Perhaps they mean, or also mean, 'not hollow, having an interior entirely filled with matter'
- "Maybe the collision is *within* ordinary language and not between it and scientific theory"

Mates

- Mates concludes with a long set of problems for both types of investigation
 - Extensional
 - Which occurrences of the word to consider?
 - What are the relevant features of the object to which the word is applied?
 - How should the objects/situations be described?
 - Describe by properties objects *really* have, or just ones the subjects *think* they have?
 - What's common to the various objects the word applies to?
 - What to do when a word has >1 sense?

Mates makes a prescient claim:

- We should distinguish the semantic from the pragmatic, when we evaluate alleged facts of the form “we wouldn’t say X unless ...”
- “Not only do ordinary language philosophers tend towards an armchair version of the extensional method, but also they are inclined to overlook the semantic-pragmatic distinction when they find what is common to the situations in which a given word is used.” (compare with Grice)

Mates on “intensional method”

- Although it sounds to us like he is recommending that the people who are answering a “meaning question” should first take a philosophy course [and thereby become ‘experts’], he actually thought it could all be done just by more intricate questionnaires. [maybe first application of the expertise defense?]
- He envisions a back-and-forth until settling on a final decision. But he notes:

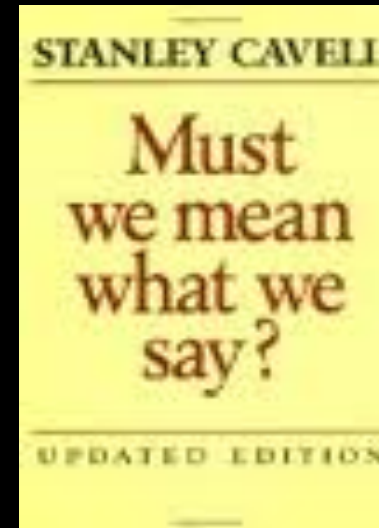
Mates, intensional method

- If the respondent changes answer:
 - Maybe s/he changed his/her mind
 - Maybe s/he learned something new
 - Maybe s/he found a better way of expressing what s/he really meant all along
- “It does not seem possible to differentiate in a practical way between *finding out* what someone means by a word, and *influencing* his linguistic behaviour relative to that word.”

Mates

- In the end Mates recommends that ordinary language philosophers (and everyone) should study Naess' works:
 - “It might turn out that it is desirable to distinguish different senses of the expression ‘ordinary use’, corresponding to different methods of verifying statements in which this expression occurs, and then one would wish to know in which, if any, of these senses it is true and important to say that in philosophic problems words do not have their ordinary use.”

Stanley Cavell



BA @ UC Berkeley 1947 (music); Julliard '47 but dropped. UCLA for Philosophy, then Harvard. Austin was visitor. Harvard junior fellow '53-'57. Prof at UC Berkeley '57-'63; then Harvard '63-'97. Retired.

Cavell “Must we Mean what we Say?”

■ Distinguish three types of claims

1. *Instances* of what is said in language: “we do say...but we don’t say--”, etc.
2. Accompanying *explications* -- statements making explicit what is implied when we utter claims of type 1: “when we say...we imply/say/suggest --”; “we don’t say...unless we mean--”
3. *Generalisations*: (tested by reference to type 1 and 2 statements. Cavell doesn’t talk more about them)

Cavell

- Note that Austin's statement is of type 1 but Ryle's statement is of type 2.
 - No contradiction, just an indication of an over-hasty type-2 generalization
 - No need to do a survey...we can all recognize it, once pointed out.
- “these statements--that something is said in English--are being made by native speakers of English. Such speakers do not need evidence for what is said in the language. They are the *source* of such evidence.”

Cavell

- “In general, to tell what is and isn’t English, and to tell whether what is said is properly used, the native speaker can rely on his own nose; if not, there would be nothing to count.”
- “The philosopher who proceeds from ordinary language, in his use of himself as subject in his collection of data may be informal; but there is nothing in that to make the data suspect.”

Cavell

- Denies that there is any difference between semantics and pragmatics--what they imply follows with “equal logicalness”:
 - “Either (1) we deny there is *any* rational (logical, grammatical) constraint over the ‘pragmatic implications’ of what we say;
 - “Or (2) we admit there is and say either (a) pragmatic implications are logical, or (b) since they are not deductive or inductive, there is a third type of logic, or (c) say some necessity is not logical.
- “Mates takes alternative (1); ordinary language philosophers take some form of (2).”

Cavell

- “The fact that a term is used in its usual way entitles you to make certain inferences and draw certain conclusions.
- “This is part of what you say when you say you are talking about the *logic* of ordinary language.
- “*Learning what these implications are is part of learning the language; no less a part than learning its syntax, or learning what it is to which terms apply: they are an essential part of what we communicate when we talk.*”

Cavell

- “For a native speaker to say what, in ordinary circumstances, is said when, no special information is needed or claimed. All that is needed is the truth of the proposition that a natural language is what native speakers of that language speak.”

Cavell

- Let S: 'When we ask whether an action is voluntary we imply that the action is fishy'
- Let T: ' "Is X voluntary?" implies that X is fishy'
- "S and T, though true together and false together, are not everywhere interchangeable; the identical state of affairs is described by both, but a person may be entitled to say T but not entitled to say S:
- "only a native speaker of English is entitled to S, whereas a linguist describing English may, though not a native speaker of English, be entitled to T."

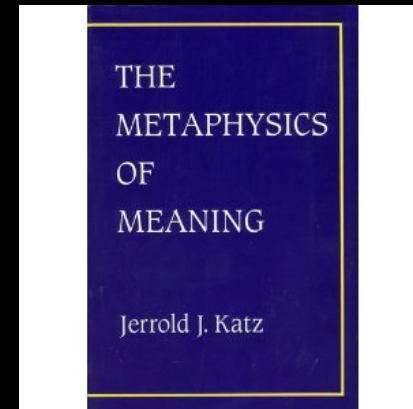
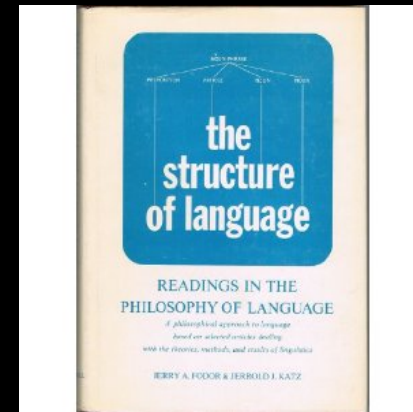
Cavell

- “What entitles him to T is having gathered a certain amount and kind of evidence.
- “A person entitled to S is not entitled to it for the same reason. He *needs* no evidence for it. ...He neither has nor does not have evidence for it. But there is nothing he needs, and there is no evidence he has: the question of evidence is irrelevant.”

Cavell

- ‘verifying an assertion that a given person uses a *word* in a given way or with a given sense’
- ‘verifying assertions “we say..” or that “When we say...we imply --”
- “are not the same. This means that I do not take the ‘two basic approaches’ which Mates offers. The questions are designed to elicit different types of information.”

Fodor/Katz



Fodor/Katz

- In response to “native speakers need no evidence...”
 - “What Cavell misses is the distinction between what a native speaker says...and what he says *about* what he and other native speakers say. Cavell has failed to show that the possibility of an empirical description of a natural language presupposes the truth of the metalinguistic claims of its speakers”

Fodor/Katz

- S: 'when we ask whether an action is voluntary we imply that the action is fishy'
- T: '“Is X voluntary?” implies that X is fishy'
- Cavell says they are true or false together.
- “if S and T are true/false together, and T is empirically verifiable, the S must be empirically verifiable, since any evidence that disconfirms T ipso fact disconfirms S, and any evidence which confirms T likewise confirms S.”

Fodor/Katz

- “Although (as Cavell says) we can’t be usually wrong about type 1 statements, we sometimes can be, so then it is always competent to request evidence to show this is not one of those cases.”
- “Although we are not often wrong about type 1 statements, type 2 statements are different, since they are a kind of theory ... an abstract representation of the features determining whether a word is appropriately used.”

The challenge to linguistic intuitions

- Is it conceivable that we *must* be right about our intuitions concerning our native language?
 - Is there maybe some subpart to be right about?
 - E.g., grammaticality? What about “semantics”?
“pragmatics”?
- When we disagree about meaning, we often go to a dictionary. Is that “empirical”?