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On Words

John Cook argues that there have been three different approaches to philosophical problems that might be thought of as ordinary language philosophy.¹ He shows that two of these approaches fail, while the approach he calls Investigative Ordinary Language Philosophy is worth serious continuing attention.

In some industries, companies are encouraged to "eat their own dog food" before they release their products. That is, they are encouraged to use their own products in their businesses before they try to sell them, so the products are less likely to have shortcomings. Here I want to give Investigative Ordinary Language Philosophy a dog food test by using it to investigate the word "word." I do this because I wonder whether one of its own central concerns, words, can survive the test--could Investigative Ordinary Language Philosophy be self-defeating?

But first, what is Investigative Ordinary Language Philosophy, and why suspect that "word" will provide it with a serious test case?

Investigative Ordinary Language Philosophy

Here is how Cook distinguishes between approaches to philosophical problems that might be thought of as ordinary language philosophy.

. . . It has become commonplace to speak of ordinary language philosophy as though this were a readily identifiable school of thought, but this betokens a failure to discern fundamental differences among the philosophers who are lumped together under this label, some of whom do and some of whom do not have affinities to Moore. There are, in fact, three very different approaches to philosophical problems that might be thought of as ordinary language philosophy.

These three philosophical methods could be called "Standard," "Metaphysical," and "Investigative." . . . Standard Ordinary Language Philosophy . . . turns out to mean different things to different philosophers, depending on their ideas about language. . .²

We can say . . . that Standard Ordinary Language Philosophy involves at least the following two elements. It involves the claim that (a) any philosophical statement that "violates ordinary language" is false, that is, it is false because it "violates ordinary language." It also involves the claim, implicit in the foregoing, that (b) we needn't begin by considering a philosopher's arguments to see whether they prove something remarkable, for if the conclusion he reaches "violates ordinary language," we can be sure that something is wrong with his argument. It is the idea, in other words, that by appealing to ordinary language we can make a direct assault on philosophers' conclusions.³
In addition to (a) and (b) there is a third feature of Standard Ordinary Language Philosophy, but just what this feature is is a matter of considerable controversy. . . .

. . . [It is very often assumed to include] the idea that our language embodies some philosophical view or other. . . . [This is] the idea that our language is a *conceptual scheme*, by which I mean . . . many of the things we commonly say have philosophical implications, implications held to be true by some philosophers and false by others. 4

Cook argues that the various versions of this method are not viable. Next is Metaphysical Ordinary Language Philosophy:

. . . [The] essential features [of Metaphysical Ordinary Language Philosophy] are these: philosophers of this school form philosophical theories while paying no heed to words or language and, having done so, then argue that their theories, although they appear to conflict, do not really conflict with what we all say in the common affairs of life. And to remove the appearance of conflict, they adopt a use theory of meaning, which says, "Don't look at the forms of words in the plain man's speech; look, instead, at his *use* of those words, at how they serve practical purposes." 5

Writings of Augustine, Leibniz, Berkeley, Reid, and Wittgenstein provide examples of Metaphysical Ordinary Language Philosophy. Metaphysical Ordinary Language Philosophers should actually look to see whether language is used as they claim. They do not do so, which allows metaphysicians of quite different views to all claim their views are consistent with ordinary language. This leaves the method of Investigative Ordinary Language Philosophy:

Some of the differences [between Investigative Ordinary Language Philosophy and the others] can be described quite easily. First, it differs from Standard Ordinary Language Philosophy in that it does not undertake to *refute* the views of other philosophers. (It attempts, rather, to understand a philosophical idea and gives up on it only when every attempt one can think of has fizzled. . . . Second, it differs from Metaphysical Ordinary Language Philosophy in that it does not initially settle on some tempting philosophical theory and then try to ratchet ordinary language into such a shape that it will no longer seem to clash with that theory. . . .

. . . [Third,] Investigative Ordinary Language Philosophy does not regard anything from past philosophy as being safely assumable, not even such hallowed notions as sense-impression, concept, proposition, and the like. . . . It takes an absolutely fresh start at thinking about philosophical problems, so that the most deeply ingrained philosophical ideas can be challenged. . . .

. . . [P]ractitioners of Investigative Ordinary Language Philosophy . . . work with detailed examples, examples consisting of stories or bits of dialogue in which it is clear who is speaking to whom, to what purpose, and with what awareness or knowledge. . . . We come to see that the details of the various examples, the minutaie of the situations in which we say things, determine not only what we would naturally and straightforwardly say but determine also the *sense* of what we say, determine what it comes to to say *this* in *this* situation. 6

Cook names Frank Ebersole as one of the significant practitioners of Investigative Ordinary Language Philosophy.
My Concerns

I have two concerns with Investigative Ordinary Language Philosophy. First, I find it difficult to think of a philosophical method as being theory free, as Cook seems to imply Investigative Ordinary Language Philosophy is. I’ll return to this.

Second, I think Cook has not fully characterized one of the most attractive aspects of Investigative Ordinary Language Philosophy: it provides philosophy with a new way to give accounts of philosophically important words. Its accounts stress speech context.

Some philosophers who might be regarded as among the early advocates and practitioners of Investigative Ordinary Language Philosophy discovered the philosophical value of word accounts in which features of speech context are prominent. For example, Gilbert Ryle’s and J. L. Austin’s accounts of "voluntary" (as a word used for actions that speakers think ought not to be done) stimulated new thought in discussions of free-will. And Austin provided an unprecedented context-focused philosophical account of "know": he pointed out that to say "I know," at least some of the time, amounts to the speaker giving a guarantee. An indication that such context-focused accounts are indeed thought to be characteristic of some kinds of ordinary language philosophy is the fact that several philosophers have attacked the accounts as though they are central to ordinary language philosophy.

Cook does describe practitioners of Investigative Ordinary Language Philosophy as people who are interested in such things as "who is speaking to whom, to what purpose, and with what awareness or knowledge." But he doesn’t really focus on the long-time philosophical interest in correct accounts of philosophically important words. We philosophers think that such accounts are needed so that we can proceed with care in philosophy. When we develop an account, we think the account gives the word’s meaning (to use a contentious philosophical term)--or, said in another way, we think the account gives what is central in bringing the word to life in philosophy and in our lives. And as I have said, I think of Investigative Ordinary Language Philosophy as having contributed the idea that unless we include matters of speech context in such accounts, they will be distorted.

Return now to Cook’s idea that Investigative Ordinary Language Philosophy is theory free: if it uses a philosophical method that requires its philosophical accounts of words to include speech context, this seems like a theory to me. And, if it is a theory, it needs testing. Since words and their use are central elements in Investigative Ordinary Language Philosophy, I think it is appropriate to use this method to try to fashion an account of the word "word." Will the Investigative Ordinary Language Philosophy account of the word "word" undermine or be consistent with the conception of words that underlies this philosophical method?--That is, will the account reveal words to be the kinds of things that are lifeless (meaningless) until speakers learn what brings them to life (i.e., learn what is specified in a correct philosophical account)?

Consider next whether Frank Ebersole’s thought supports such a test.

Ebersole’s Findings and Pictures of Language

Ebersole has investigated issues in a number of philosophical areas including the philosophy of language. There he has addressed many topics: meaning, propositions, concepts, sounds, common features, proper
names, common nouns, similarities, sameness, understanding, signals, rules, speech acts, family resemblances, and use.10 His investigations begin with his effort to try to understand a philosophical problem and often lead him to compare and contrast philosophical conceptions of relevant words and phrases with the uses of these words away from philosophy. His work often reveals significant differences between our philosophical conceptions and our nonphilosophical discourse, leading him sometimes to conclude that the philosophical conceptions derive mainly from philosophical pictures. (Each time he points out that our philosophical conception of a particular word is in conflict with what we actually say away from philosophy, I am surprised--I don’t expect there to be such differences. That is one attraction of his philosophical work; it often reveals the unexpected about our philosophical thinking.)

Now return to my concern with Investigative Ordinary Language Philosophy. If Ebersole is a central representative of Investigative Ordinary Language Philosophy, is it correct to think he gives philosophical accounts? He certainly characterizes the nonphilosophical use of many words that are used in the philosophy of language (e.g., "meaning," "understanding," "rules"). Does he focus on speech context in his accounts? Although I won’t provide examples here, I think it is evident that such a focus is characteristic of his philosophy. Cook’s description of Investigative Ordinary Language Philosophers certainly fits Ebersole: they are those interested in "who is speaking to whom, to what purpose, and with what awareness or knowledge."

So I think it is appropriate to ask Ebersole (and Cook) whether the use of the word "word," when it is involved in Investigative Ordinary Language Philosophers’ philosophical accounts, can be validated by its own method.11 Is the use of the word "word" legitimate in Investigative Ordinary Language Philosophy or does this word, as Ebersole has shown for many others in the philosophy of language, depend on a philosophical picture? And if using the method does show that "word," as used in Investigative Ordinary Language Philosophy accounts, derives from a philosophical picture, we have the paradoxical conclusion that if we trust and use the method, it is not to be trusted because it undermines itself.

Before I begin a philosophical investigation of "word," I should say something about philosophical pictures in Ebersole's thinking. As he describes them, they can control what we say and think philosophically. They usually include a relatively small number of elements. Ebersole concludes in some places that philosophical pictures that may be behind our thoughts in the philosophy of language typically include speakers, listeners, and the world. Speakers in these pictures are thought to express their thoughts and aims using some conventional signs (words). Speakers and listeners as children learn how the words are brought to life (i.e., how they are used, their meanings). This knowledge enables them to translate their thoughts into words and to understand what other speakers say. That is, according to the picture, at the same time speakers string words together, they also may say something, refer to things, make remarks, give orders, raise questions, warn people, describe, beg, promise and joke. I will introduce the term "talk" as a label for such things as saying something, making remarks, giving orders, etc., so that the picture becomes one in which our knowledge of words’ uses (i.e., our knowledge of their meanings) converts spoken and written words into talk.12

Variations of this picture are abundant in the writings of many philosophers of language. Here, for example, is how John Searle begins his book, Speech Acts:
How do words relate to the world? How is it possible that when a speaker stands before a hearer and emits an acoustic blast such remarkable things occur as: the speaker means something; the sounds he emits mean something; the hearer understands what is meant; the speaker makes a statement, asks a question, or gives an order? How is it possible, for example, that when I say "Jones went home", which after all is in one way just a string of noises, what I mean is: Jones went home. What is the difference between saying something and meaning it and saying it without meaning it? And what is involved in meaning just one particular thing and not some other thing? For example, how does it happen that when people say, "Jones went home" they almost always mean Jones went home and not, say, Brown went to the party or Green got drunk. And what is the relation between what I mean when I say something and what it means whether anybody says it or not? How do words stand for things? What is the difference between a meaningful string of words and a meaningless one?

Searle’s picture has extra elements (acoustic blasts, speakers meaning something, words standing for things), but he retains the basic concern about how speakers are able to bring sounds/blasts/noises/words to life.

The question for us is whether the word "word," when used in philosophical accounts of Investigative Ordinary Language Philosophers derives from such a picture or whether "word" in such accounts is thought of in the same way we think of words in ordinary discourse.

Words and Talk

My aim is to act the part of an Investigative Ordinary Language Philosopher and in that role to try to validate "word" as a proper tool for philosophers of language, a tool that is legitimately used when Investigative Ordinary Language Philosophers give philosophical accounts. If I discover that their philosophical conception of words is derived from a philosophical picture, I must then ask whether the kinds of accounts of words provided by Investigative Ordinary Language Philosophy itself thus are undercut, or whether the accounts somehow escape criticism.

So, I need to ask now whether words are ordinarily spoken of and thought of as lifeless things until speakers come to know what brings them to life. Is talk equal to words plus knowledge (of what brings the words to life)?

(1) Words, words, words: A union leader promoting a strike complains to management, "We’ve given you plenty of time and opportunity to respond to our grievances. There have been many meetings. All we get from you are words, words, words. We want action! Talking has gotten us nowhere."

Here, long discussions are thought of as words and as talk. My philosophic conception of speakers as those who produce both words and talk does find a parallel here. But for the parallel to be complete, words must contrast with talk. In the above situation words are talk. Words and talk are equivalent, and contrasted with action. Further, if people regarded all talk as words, words, words, they would have to think of everything ever said as failing to result in desired actions. This use of "word," then, is quite different from the one I seek to justify the philosophic use of "word" in accounts provided by Investigative Ordinary Language Philosophy.

(2) Not just words: Anne and Betty are camping out. They have brought with them a short-wave radio.
Anne is puzzled: "I can only get one station--a German one. It is an odd broadcast; the announcer is just giving strings of words. Maybe it’s a program for teaching German to foreigners, and this is a spelling test." Betty comes over to the radio and listens. "I don’t think that’s a spelling test. Isn’t it a news broadcast with the announcer speaking very slowly? Your German must be rusty." Anne listens carefully. "I guess you’re right. It isn’t just words. I think the slowness of the speaker’s delivery is what misled me. He must be speaking so slowly to help language learners."

Here Anne hears words and later hears part of a news broadcast--talk, in my terminology. But even though Anne hears words and talk, "words" is not used here in all respects parallel to the use given it in my philosophic conception. Anne heard words because she mistakenly regarded some talk as a spelling test, or something like one. For Anne to be able to hear words all of the time when people are talking, she would always have to, at first, think people were reading or reciting lists of words, and then in each case discover her mistake. I as a philosopher have not thought that, to hear words, people must be mistaken about the talk they hear.

If Anne had been right about the broadcast, her remark that the broadcast was a series of words would have been correct. Characterizing the broadcast as words is to rule it out as talk. My philosophical conception of "words" is such that, if I characterize a speaker as producing words, I do not intend for this to be a denial that the speaker is talking. Thus, for a second reason, this use of "words" is not parallel to my conception. In this use, if something is words, it cannot be talk.

(3) Again not just words: Anne remarks that she has found an English-language broadcast. "It is just a series of words, though--and this time I’m not mistaken." Betty: "Sorry to disagree, but if that is on the 49-meter band, you are not getting a series of words. It’s a coded message. At this time of day I believe some local ships use that band to transmit confidential shipping messages. Their rather crude code is to interchange every second word. Try it. Write down the words and interchange every second one." Anne listens and writes down the words; then: "Well, you’re right again, the words do seem to form a message."

Here words form talk. But again, as in (2), the parallel with my conception is not complete. For Anne to characterize the broadcast as words, it must seem like a spelling test, or someone practicing pronunciation. Speakers just do not so regard most of what they hear in their native tongue. Even if language, as I philosophically conceive it, has a parallel to someone decoding a message--hearing the words, applying knowledge, and obtaining talk--this discussion shows that an actual decoding situation differs from listening to a conversation. When I listen to a conversation, I do not regard what I hear as words (as "words" is used here in (3)), for what I hear does not appear to be merely a list of words.

(4) So many words to me: The discussion thus far of situations in which what is heard is characterized as "just words" brings to mind another kind of situation in which talk might be characterized as words--as "just so many words to me." When Carol returns home from a trip, David greets her with the news that their car broke down during her absence. It was costly to have it repaired. She asks what was wrong with the car. He replies, "I think they wrote it down on the receipt. The mechanic said something about not getting enough gas. But you know better than to ask me; when an auto mechanic starts talking, it is just so many words to me."

Here, to say, "It is just so many words to me" is not, as in the cases of "just words," to rule out that something heard was talk. Rather, it is a way of saying that one lacks the proper background to
understand some talk. If David learned about automobiles, mechanics’ talk would no longer be so many words to him. And knowledge would be what changed words into talk. The parallel with my philosophic conception of words is only superficial, however. First, what David needs to know to turn so many words into talk is how autos work, not philosophical accounts of automotive words. Second, David does not hear all talk as so many words. As a philosopher I have been thinking that a speaker *always* hears talk and words. If my philosophical use of "words" paralleled David’s use, then I would have to think of speakers as knowing nothing about anything--everything others said would be so many words to them. And if I were to think this, the speakers would no longer be speakers.

(5) **Spitting and falling words:** "He spat out the words." "Her words fell on deaf ears." An author might have replaced "He replied angrily" and "Her request was ignored" with these sentences. Thus, here talk--his reply and her request--*is* characterized as words. The initial sentences are thought by the author to be more dramatic. Without much change of dramatic force, he could as well have chosen, "He spat out his reply" or "Her request fell on deaf ears." As in (1), words and talk here are equivalent, or almost so. In my philosophic conception, words and talk are not to be interchangeable.

(6) **Words that live on:** A politician or novelist dies. It is remarked that her words will live after her—a kind of consolation. What she said will continue to affect others. Here again, words are talk (what she said). The words that will live after her do not, as in my philosophical conception, need a supplement (i.e., knowledge) to convert them to talk.

(7) **Hearing and words:** A spy, describing how he was able to get such precise information on the enemy’s plans, could, given the right speech setting, say any of the following without any significant change in meaning: "I was hiding in the closet, and feared I would be able to hear very little; but fortunately, the general is partly deaf and he speaks loudly. He spoke loudly enough so that I was able to hear his words clearly." "He spoke loudly enough for me to hear everything that he said." "He spoke loudly enough for me to hear every detail of his orders." Here there is no distinction between words and talk, but I need them to differ so that philosophical accounts must be added to words to produce talk.

(8) **What someone’s words mean:** When I introduced the term "talk," I used as examples of talk "saying something," as well as remarks, orders, and questions. Talk, I further indicated, was to be contrasted with words. In some ordinary speech situations, it now strikes me, there is no distinction between words and what was said. In some circumstances both the words a speaker spoke and what was said are contrasted with talk. The manager of a bank is being questioned about a bomb threat. She says, "The caller was brief. I heard what he said clearly. (I heard his words clearly.) He said only, ‘It will happen at 10:15.’ I wasn’t sure that it was a warning, though; it could have been someone who had gotten a wrong number and simply hung up when he realized it. I’m glad we cleared the building anyway, now that you’ve found a bomb!"

Here a speaker says that she heard what a person said or his words, but she also indicates that she was not sure what was meant. I suppose "what was meant" in such a case would belong under the heading of talk, while "what was said" belongs with words. Here, even though words and talk differ, philosophical accounts won’t convert the words to talk. The hearer needs to know more about the speaker’s intentions and not philosophical accounts of the speaker’s words.
What words mean again: Similarly, the words of a speaker or an author may be studied to determine what he or she meant. In such cases, the words the speaker spoke or wrote are known, and it is known that he or she was saying something. "We now know her exact words, [just what she said] but we aren’t yet sure what she meant," could be a report from political analysts to a government official with regard to a foreign leader’s recently intercepted and decoded message. Here it could be said that words heard (or read) plus something else will produce talk heard (or read). That is, knowledge about possible reasons for the message and other background information may convert the words into talk.

Often the writings of philosophers, or the speeches of political leaders, may require study because what is meant is not immediately clear. Until the ambiguities and obscurities are eliminated, what was meant will not be known. Even though it is thus sometimes possible in ordinary situations to contrast the words a person used or what he or she said (or wrote) with talk, it is only sometimes possible. We are not always baffled or puzzled by what is written or said; thus, often, there is no distinction between a person’s words (or what he or she said) and what he or she meant. As a philosopher, I do not want the gap between words and talk to be created by subtlety of expression or by ambiguity. It is to be a gap of a different sort.

Listening to a lecturer’s words: When might it be said that a person hearing some talk (a lecture, say) listened to the words or attended to them in some way? A bored student, to pass the time in a classroom, might listen to the words in the lecture of a non-native speaker to detect Germanisms or patterns of mispronunciation.

In such cases, listening to speakers’ words would be contrasted with listening to what they said. Such attention to speakers’ words would probably interfere with a person’s following what the speakers said. Furthermore, if I were to characterize myself as having listened to a lecturer’s words, wouldn’t I be indicating to others that I had some kind of special interest--in detecting Germanisms or noting how self-focused the speaker was (e.g., noticing how often he begins his sentences with the word "I"). My philosophic conception requires that listeners hear speakers’ words, but not because listeners have any such special interests. In these cases of listening to words, we regard the talk as words, but the words do not need something to convert them to talk; rather we must simply change our attention.

Attending to words: A court stenographer might be described, in the right circumstances, as one who must attend to the words of a speaker. He or she must produce a verbatim record. Attention to the words is needed, because if the stenographer becomes too interested in what is being said, he or she may incorrectly record what was said. What is recorded may be read again; a non-verbatim record, one with paraphrases, could result in mistakes in later readers’ interpretation of the speaker’s comments.

There must be a point to someone’s attention to a speaker’s exact words. On my philosophic conception, the listener hears the speaker’s exact words but without any special effort. Thus the words stenographers or students attend to are unlike the words of my philosophic conception.

Preliminary Conclusions about Words

Thus far I have found:

- When we characterize speakers as producing "words," we often use "words" as equivalent to talk ("words, words, words," and "her words live on," for example). See examples (1), (5), (6), and (7).
Sometimes, though, we say something is (just) words to rule out that the words are talk. ("That’s not a German news broadcast, those are just words that are part of a spelling test.") See examples (2) and (3).

In the case of "so many words to me," knowledge added to words allows a hearer to hear talk. But the knowledge that must be added in our example is automotive and not philosophical word accounts. See example (4).

In cases of trying to understand the words in an incomplete message or in the text of writer with obscure views, we can convert the words to talk, but not by using philosophical word accounts. Instead we need to know more about the speaker’s or writer’s intentions and background. See examples (8) and (9).

When a speaker’s words are attended to, there is a special point to attending to them, and listening to a speaker’s words may interfere with the ability to hear talk. See examples (10) and (11).

Such diversity among words was unexpected.

Have I examined all the relevant uses of "word" in which words are part of talk?

(12) The words he/she spoke: Another philosopher might be inclined to remark impatiently, "Ask me any time to tell you the words I heard someone speak while talking. I can do it easily." Such a remark would show a misunderstanding of my whole effort here. My opponent would be speaking within the still obscure context of a philosophic study of language. I am not interested in cases of philosophic uses of "words." I am interested in nonphilosophic uses. When, after all, would there be a proper context for saying, "These are the words I heard him speak"? We have already seen that such a remark could be found in a setting in which much importance was attached to a speaker’s remarks: The audience wishes to study carefully what was said, so the speaker’s (exact) words are requested. My hypothetical philosophic opponent, however, is ready to recite words he or she has heard spoken without being part of any such contexts. This shows only that my opponent shares with me a conception of words as readily heard when a speaker talks.

I am not done though.

Word Accounts

In my investigation of the use of "word" in the common affairs of life, I should concentrate some attention on those uses that in some respect seem to parallel my giving philosophical accounts of words.

When, ordinarily, is the word "word" used in such a way that a word is thought to be lifeless, needing something to bring it to life? It would seem that "word" is thus used when questions are raised about what a word stands for, refers to, or means, or about how a word is used. Such questions arise in speech situations in which some remark is vague or ambiguous, and also in language learning situations (that is, in situations in which someone is unfamiliar with a word).

(13) Learning a new word: Farley, while reading his philosophy assignment, comes upon the word "paradigm." He looks it up in the dictionary and returns to his reading. Later, he has occasion to comment on the reading assignment: "I didn’t understand much of what I read, but I did learn a new word."
As a philosopher, I think of a word as something that is easily heard or recognized, as something which
speakers can produce, and as something which speakers can know how to use. I am thus inclined to think
of Farley as having learned how to use a word. He says however that he learned a new word. Thus
Farley’s use of "word" in "learn a new word" is not parallel with my philosophical use.

(14) What a word means or refers to: When Farley came across "paradigm," he might have asked his
roommate, "What does this word mean?" And later, if asked the same question by another student, he
might reply: "I just learned what that word means. . . ." And he would go on to say what a paradigm is.

Here Farley speaks of what a word means and of learning what a word means. Doesn’t it seem that I may
at last have found a fairly good parallel with my own philosophical use? If Farley does learn what the
word means, in the future he should be able to use this knowledge to bring the word to life and to
understand talk in which it occurs.

At other times Farley might ask what a word refers to or stands for. As with "what a word means," in
these cases we focus on a word because of a breakdown in communication. The person who asks what a
word means or what it refers to needs help tailored to her or his specific puzzlement.

Of course most of the talk we hear does not present such puzzles. We do not regard others talk as filled
with words that prevent our grasping what they are saying. So these kinds of cases do not sanction our
thinking of all talk as collections of words.

I do not after all find the parallel that I thought I would between the philosophical word and an ordinary
word.

(15) Words and dictionaries: Lexicographers are those who compile entries in books devoted to language
usage. Their tasks are somewhat sophisticated. Lexicography is a relatively new profession. Lexicographers
were initially contrived with the idea of helping people with uncommon words and to
regularize spelling. Lexicography now involves standing apart from ordinary talk and assessing the
various roles of words in talk. It seems then that lexicographers’ concerns are in certain respects like
philosophical accounts. I would think that a philosophical method for creating accounts of words, when
fully developed and applied to all vocabulary items, might also serve lexicographers. Thus I am inclined
to think that their conception of "word" is akin to mine. It is not an ordinary use, unless we count the
technical world of lexicographers as everyday talk. A word, for lexicographers, is an entry in a
dictionary. For me, I now realize a word is what I can give a philosophical account of--not a word of our
everyday talk.

I have become convinced that the philosophical use of "word" by Investigative Ordinary Language
Philosophers is after all a special use--one to be understood entirely in terms of philosophical
conceptions. A philosophical picture of language does seem to have been at work in guiding my thinking
about the word "word" in philosophical accounts.

The Philosophical Role of Words

I have been willing from the start to say that speakers produce words when they talk and hear words
when others talk--that words are things involved in talk. Investigation has revealed what I hardly
suspected: such uses of "word" are special uses.
Essays in Philosophy

Must I now concede that not only the word "word" but the philosophical accounts given by Investigative Ordinary Language Philosophers are merely the products of a philosophical picture?

If I accept this conclusion, I will have left a mystery unexplained: Why, after all, do the Investigative Ordinary Language Philosophy accounts sometimes seem to be helpful when we try to understand a philosophical problem. For example, the accounts I provided here of the uses of "word" seemed to me to be helpful; I’ve let them lead me to some philosophical conclusions. Are they really not to be trusted?

It may be that it previously seemed to me that an account of the way we use a word was insightful only because the account I devised fit the picture I accepted. Detectives might feel rewarded when they actually uncover a particular clue that they inferred might exist; when they find what they suspected, their reasoning is vindicated. Similarly, is my impression that Investigative Ordinary Language Philosophy accounts can be important, insightful, or explanatory an impression derived solely from the fact that word accounts can be devised that accord with my picture of language?

In order to clarify why it was that such accounts can strike me as the right ones while I am trying to understand a philosophical problem, in the spirit of Investigative Ordinary Language Philosophy I should review circumstances in which my accounts are found.

In example (1) I concluded that if we characterize talk as "words, words, words," we must regard the talk as having not led to some desired action. Isn’t it true that at that point in my discussion, my account of this ordinary use of "words" was illuminating because it brought out that "words" as conceived of by me as a philosopher differed from the ordinary use of the term--something I didn’t expect? As a philosopher I had used this word ("words") without hesitation, and without any clear understanding that I had given it a special use. Perhaps it can be said, then, that all my accounts of "word" in my examples were illuminating, because they served to reveal to me both that my philosophical conception of words was quite special, and in what ways it was special.

And surely I have not found grounds in my investigations to think that all accounts of a word’s use, including those found outside philosophical investigations, are tied to a philosophical picture of language. Even if the accounts I have given here were encouraged by my philosophical convictions, not all accounts are so encouraged. In a discussion if a person equivocates in her use of a word that is crucial in the discussion, another person can point out the equivocation by describing the two uses so as to contrast them. The accounts devised in such a situation would serve to reveal to the speaker something both unsuspected and undesired in her thinking. Furthermore, we as philosophers would not think that people who gave such accounts were incidentally providing philosophical accounts of the two uses of the word equivocated on. The accounts would be formulated only for the situations that confronted them, specific incidences of equivocation.

Similarly, teachers can give accounts of words to help students in their reading. "Notice that when the philosopher we are reading speaks of ‘imagination,’ she is not using the word as we ordinarily do. She means the ability to visualize. Ordinarily, when we speak of people’s imagination, we refer to their ability to be inventive without necessarily giving any thought to their ability to visualize." Here again the account of ordinary use would serve to clarify for an audience what might not be noticed in another’s thinking. Further, the account of "imagination" is not intended as part of the philosophical account of the word, but as an account appropriate to the particular pedagogical setting.
Even though my accounts of the use of the word "word" were initially thought of by me as contributions to the philosophical account of the word, it strikes me now that the same accounts could have been given by someone carrying no such philosophical baggage. If I told someone of my desire to think about philosophical accounts, and indicated some of the details of what I wanted to do, couldn't the person be struck by the peculiar way in which I was using the word "word"? His subsequent attempts to point out in what way my use of "word" was very special would involve him in giving accounts tailored to the particular situation. His accounts might serve to expose to me something unsuspected in my way of thinking about words. Thus, my impression that the accounts that I devised in the course of this paper were illuminating was a correct impression. The accounts are illuminating because they serve to reveal an unsuspected, picture-bound use. The accounts do reveal this, if they themselves are not regarded in terms of a philosophic picture of language.

**Investigative Ordinary Language Philosophy Reevaluated**

Now that I realize that accounts of word use can serve to clarify thought and at the same time be free of philosophical baggage, it should be clear that there is another way to view the significance of word accounts in early efforts at Investigative Ordinary Language Philosophy. The accounts of word use, of "what we say when," found in the early literature of ordinary language philosophy often occur in the context of discussions of philosophical problems. I think now that the accounts might be understood best as ad hoc accounts devised to call attention to previously unnoticed aspects of philosophical thought about particular philosophical problems; that is, the accounts cannot be understood properly unless one knows the purposes they are intended to serve in the particular philosophical discussions where they occur.\(^{15}\)

On this interpretation, speech context is mentioned so often in the word accounts of Investigative Ordinary Language Philosophers because they recognize that in past philosophy, speech context was ignored to the detriment of the philosophical issues under discussion.

*Righting some wrongs*: I attributed to Investigative Ordinary Language Philosophy a method for creating philosophical word accounts. I now realize this was an error. The method is no more than the ordinary practice of characterizing word use as a means of pointing out confusions and errors in thought. As a result, I can now see that Investigative Ordinary Language Philosophy need not have as its goal to assemble the correct *philosophical* account of any words.

And we have seen that when we regard talk as something that needs to be brought to life from words, we may have things backwards. To hear words in talk, as in examples (10 and (11), may be to regard talk from some special point of view; we might say, it is to remove the life from talk.

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**Notes**

2. Ibid., p. 107.

3. Ibid., p. 108.

4. Ibid., p. 108-09.

5. Ibid., p. 143.


11. Ebersole himself does give some thought to words in "Knowing and Saying So" (*Meaning and Saying*, ibid., pp. 213-27) but his concern is not words as conceived of in philosophical accounts of words. Nevertheless his findings about words are suggestive for those thinking about words in philosophical accounts.

12. I apologize in advance for some of the barbaric phrasing in this paper that results from my introduction here of the term "talk."


15. John Cook makes a similar point in *Wittgenstein, Empiricism, and Language*, ibid., p. 155. Its relevance to my undertaking in this paper only dawned on me as I completed the paper.