

ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LINGUISTICS AND PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract. *The paper considers the relationship between linguistics and philosophy as a recurrent cycle in which a philosophical thesis about language is turned into a linguistic research programme, tested on empirical material and returned to philosophy in a corrected form. The cycle is traced along three lines, namely language and the view of the world from W. von Humboldt and B.L. Whorf to experiments with Russian colour terms, meaning as use from L. Wittgenstein through J.R. Firth and Z. Harris to distributional vector models, and the utterance as action from J.L. Austin to speech act theory. L.V. Shcherba's idea of linguistic experiment is interpreted as an early programme of the empirical stage, and Russian and Uzbek material is proposed for further tests.*

Keywords. *linguistics, philosophy of language, linguistic turn, linguistic relativity, meaning as use, distributional hypothesis, speech acts, linguistic experiment.*

Introduction. In 1967 R. Rorty described linguistic philosophy as «the view that philosophical problems are problems which may be solved (or dissolved) either by reforming language, or by understanding more about the language we presently use» [1, p. 3]. This formula of the linguistic turn is usually read as a statement about philosophy, which made language its central object. It is less often read in the opposite direction, as a statement about

linguistics, which received from philosophy not only problems but also obligations, since every claim about language that philosophy advanced sooner or later had to be checked on linguistic material. The aim of this paper is to show that the relationship between the two disciplines is best described as a recurrent cycle of three stages, namely a philosophical thesis about language, its linguistic operationalisation and an empirical test whose result returns to philosophy in a more precise and usually more modest form.

Materials and methods. The material consists of primary texts in which the key philosophical theses about language were formulated, texts of the linguists who turned them into research programmes and experimental and computational studies that tested these programmes. The study uses conceptual and historical analysis, comparison of formulations across the three stages and secondary analysis of published experimental data.

Results and discussion. The cycle can be traced along three lines, which are summarised in Table 1. The first line begins with W. von Humboldt, for whom language is not a finished product (*ergon*) but an activity (*energeia*) [2, p. 69-70]. B.L. Whorf radicalised this idea into the claim that «we dissect nature along lines laid down by our native language» [3, p. 213]. In this form the thesis could not be tested, and linguistics had to narrow it down to an observable domain. Colour terms became such a domain. Russian, unlike English, obligatorily distinguishes *синий* ‘dark blue’ and *голубой* ‘light blue’. J. Winawer and co-authors showed that Russian speakers discriminated two shades of blue faster when the shades belonged to different Russian categories, with an advantage of 124 ms in difficult near-colour trials, that this advantage disappeared under verbal interference and persisted under spatial interference, and that English speakers showed no such effect [4, p. 7782]. The result confirms the influence of language on perception but replaces Whorf’s strong formula by a weaker and testable one, since language affects the online processing of stimuli rather than determining the picture of the world. Uzbek

offers a natural continuation of this line, as *ko* 'k' names the colour of the sky but also appears in *ko* 'k choy' 'green tea' and *ko* 'kat' 'greens', so Russian and Uzbek bilinguals are a promising population for repeating such experiments.

The second line starts from L. Wittgenstein's definition, according to which for a large class of cases «the meaning of a word is its use in the language» [5, § 43]. In British linguistics J.R. Firth gave this idea a methodological form in the maxim «You shall know a word by the company it keeps» [6, p. 11], and Z. Harris formulated it as a distributional principle stating that «difference of meaning correlates with difference of distribution» [7, p. 156]. Half a century later the distributional hypothesis became the basis of vector models in which the meaning of a word is represented by its co-occurrence with other words in a large corpus [8]. A philosophical definition of meaning thus turned into a computational procedure. The success of these models supports the thesis of meaning as use, while their known difficulties with reference and with knowledge of the world return to philosophy the old question of whether use exhausts meaning.

Table 1. Three lines of interaction between philosophy and linguistics

Philosophical thesis	Linguistic programme	Empirical procedure	Result of the test
language as activity that shapes the view of the world (W. von Humboldt, B.L. Whorf)	linguistic relativity, linguistic picture of the world	colour discrimination with verbal and spatial interference	category advantage of 124 ms in Russian speakers, removed by verbal load
meaning as use (L. Wittgenstein)	contextual theory of meaning (J.R. Firth), distributional hypothesis (Z. Harris)	corpus statistics, vector models of words	semantic similarity computed from co-occurrence
utterance as action (J.L. Austin)	speech act theory, pragmatics	inventories of performative verbs, dialogue act annotation	typology of illocutionary acts across languages

The third line goes back to J.L. Austin, who distinguished statements from performative utterances, in which «the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action» [9, p. 6]. Linguistics turned this observation into speech act theory and pragmatics and gave it formal criteria, for instance the first person singular of the present tense in performative verbs, as in Russian *обещаю, поздравляю* and Uzbek *va'da beraman, tabriklayman*. Corpus annotation of dialogue acts has made these categories countable and comparable across languages.

The empirical stage of the cycle was anticipated in Russian linguistics. In 1931 L.V. Shcherba distinguished speech activity, the language system and language material and argued that the linguist should test hypotheses by experiment, including negative language material, that is, by checking which expressions native speakers reject [10]. From this point of view the colour experiments, the distributional models and the corpus study of performatives are realisations of Shcherba's programme, in which a philosophical claim about language becomes a hypothesis that can fail.

Conclusion. The relationship between linguistics and philosophy is neither the subordination of one discipline to the other nor their parallel development. It is a cycle in which philosophy formulates theses about language, linguistics operationalises and tests them, and the results return to philosophy in a corrected form, as happened with linguistic relativity, meaning as use and the performative. For courses of general linguistics this means that philosophical ideas should be taught together with the procedures that have tested them. For research in the bilingual Russian and Uzbek environment it opens the possibility of testing these theses on material that has not yet been involved in the discussion.

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