Situated Utterances

The "philosophy of language" is an attempt to analyse certain general features of language such as reference, meaning, truth, speech acts, and logical structure. The philosophy of language is, therefore, the name of a subject matter within philosophy. "Linguistic philosophy", on the other hand, consists in the attempt to solve philosophical problems by analysing the meanings of words, and by analysing logical relations between words in natural languages. "Linguistic philosophy" is the name of a philosophical method. However, the two (subject and method) are intimately connected. Most of the influential linguistic philosophers like Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Rudolf Carnap, Willard Van Orman Quine, Peter Strawson, John Austin, John Searle, and Donald Davidson, to name only but a few, have been in varying degrees philosophers of language.

It is the task of philosophers of language to say something about the relation between language and world, mind and reality, the productivity (or "generativity") and efficiency of language, the relativity of speaking this or that language, and the many functions of language (like passing information, maintaining relations, and trying to persuade other people to do certain things).

Accomplishing their task, philosophers of language are confronted with general philosophical problems they cannot avoid, problems that have been treated in the history of philosophy in such a way that wrong conceptions, opposing views, and confusions came about. Philosophers of language can (frequently) clarify certain questions by appeal to syntactical and semantic considerations. Examining the workings of language, they develop conclusive arguments and eliminate all sorts of distortions that tend to proliferate in philosophical matters.

Concerning language, linguists are the professional scientists who do the hard piecemeal work. Philosophers of language tend to put forward and defend general perspectives and programmatic statements. However, when linguists operate with unnecessary, idle and obscure ideas, the critical work philosophers accomplish becomes valuable. Do we really need "possible worlds" to explain modal terms? Is there really a "universal grammar" or an innate (genetically implemented) grammaticality competence? Is "rules fitting" behaviour "rules guided" behaviour, i.e. a behaviour that applies inborn necessary rules? Affirming less, and doing it hypothetically, even if it may be sometimes disappointing, could be the right way to arrive at well-founded explanations.

Then in linguistic matters, like in many other domains, less is frequently more.

1 Coordinated Reference

Infants learn language. Language is instrumental to doing something in the real world. Language is effective. Using language, infants get things done with words.

Learning language presupposes a series of general non-linguistic functions like predicting the environment, interacting, getting to goals with the aid of others, and the like. The acquisition of language facilitates and makes possible better accomplishments of those functions.

The acquisition of language is a highly interactive affair. "Language Acquisition Support Systems" (like relevant "others", routines, procedures, games, and rule-governed interactions) play an important role (Bruner, 39ff.).

Interacting with others, infants learn to refer to aspects, things, and events in the world. Referring is getting connected with what there is. At the same time, referring is directing others' attention by linguistic means, i.e. coordinating reference. "Deixis" may be the source of reference, as John Lyons and many others argue. But reference is