'Why does language matter to philosophy?' is the name of a minor classic by Ian Hacking published in 1975. It's a good question. Among the many charges laid against academic philosophy, one of the more familiar is that it concerns itself excessively with verbal or 'merely semantic' questions, at the expense of the real questions of philosophy. And yet those who have made a serious attempt to engage with philosophical problems quite soon finds themselves grappling with the very words they use to formulate the problems.

Hacking argued that in the early modern period, 'ideas' were the focus of philosophical investigation, and philosophical theories of knowledge, perception, mind and matter, cause and effect (etc.) were based around the examination of 'ideas'. For example, rather than discussing cause and effect directly, Hume took himself to be discussing our 'ideas' of cause and effect. The 20th century philosophers' obsession with language can be understood as a way of approaching the same topics, but in terms of 'meanings' rather than 'ideas'. Just as the 17th century was the 'heyday of ideas', the 20th was the 'heyday of meanings'. The common role shared by meanings and ideas was as 'the interface between the knowing subject and the world'. Language was 20th century Anglophone (or analytic) philosophy's version of this interface.

Some went further. Michael Dummett argued that the concern with language was *the* defining feature of analytic philosophy. In a famous discussion, Dummett

claimed that 'what distinguishes analytic philosophy, in its diverse manifestations, from other schools is the belief that a philosophical account of thought can only be attained through a philosophical account of language.' He argued that this approach is what separated the analytic 'school' from the phenomenological school founded by Edmund Husserl.

As a claim about the historical origins of analytic philosophy, Dummett is surely wrong. Although some of the paradigm analytic philosophers of the 20th century put their account of language at the centre of their philosophy (Ludwig Wittgenstein being the obvious example), Dummett's conjecture does not capture what was distinctive about the beginnings of the analytic tradition in late 19th century Cambridge. The dominant philosophers of that period, Bertrand Russell and G.E. Moore, began their famous 'revolt against idealism' with a defence of the idea of objective and absolute truth: invariable truths that did not depend for their correctness on anything subjective or mental. Truth was a property of judgements, and judgements were acts of mind; the study of objective truth became the study of the objects of judgement, which they called 'propositions'. This does not look like an account of thought in terms of an account of language.

However, as Russell developed his views, he realised that he had to incorporate some facts about language into his account of judgement and the mind-world relation. Having started off by viewing language as a transparent medium through which one could read off the contents of the judgements being made, Russell came to see that what is on the surface of language may deceive as to the real nature of these contents.

So, for example, it might seem as if the name 'Usain Bolt' and the description 'the fastest man in the world' belong to the same linguistic category – after all, they

are both what linguists call noun phrases and they both pick out the same man. But on a little reflection things become more complicated, since the expressions behave in different ways. For one thing, if Yohan Blake were to beat Bolt's world record, then the description 'the fastest man in the world' would then refer to Blake without changing its meaning. For another, it looks as if complete competence in the use of the name 'Bolt' seems to require that you have some idea of who Bolt is; but this is not so with the descriptive phrase. I can make perfectly knowledgeable claims about the fastest man in the world – for example, that he can run 100 metres in under 10 seconds – without knowing who he is.

Russell concluded that descriptions like 'the fastest man in the world' actually function in a very different way from names like 'Bolt'. According to his famous 'theory of descriptions' of 1905, a sentence containing a description merely asserts that there exists something of which the description is true. One can make such an assertion, and know that it is true, whether or not one knows what the thing is. And one can intelligibly make such an assertion even if there is no such thing of which the description is true, for the assertion merely says that such a thing exists; even if it is false, this does not stop it being meaningful or intelligible. Naming something that does not exist, by contrast, is fraught with problems. For Russell, then, naming and describing reflect two very different ways in which the knowing subject interacts with reality. In a well-known analogy, naming an object is like firing a harpoon at an object you have already seen, and hitting it; describing an object is more like casting a net out into the ocean, in the hope of finding something.

F.P. Ramsey called Russell's theory of descriptions 'that paradigm of philosophy'. Not everyone accepts it, and a debate still burns about its significance. But one of Russell's undeniable legacies is the idea that there is a special way in

which language interacts with the world: the way it does when we use a name or other genuine 'referring expression'. Russell's view is an example of the strategy described by Hacking: words and their meanings are the interface between the knowing subject and the world. For these referring expressions are supposed to convey a special kind of *thought* about the object they refer to, known as a 'singular thought'. A singular thought is a thought that is 'aimed' at a particular object, one that is supposed to put the thinker in a special kind of cognitive relationship to the object. 'The discovery of the twin categories of reference and singular thought' John Hawthorne and David Manley write in *The Reference Book* 'is widely felt to be one of the landmark achievements of twentieth-century analytic philosophy'. Hawthorne and Manley are surely right that these ideas have underpinned much of the most important work on language and the theory of knowledge in this period. The aim of their excellent book, however, is to undermine this supposed achievement.

Hawthorne and Manley do not attack the idea of singular thought as such. Their target is rather the popular view that in order to have a genuine singular thought about an object, a thinker must stand in some special knowledge-making relationship with it, the kind of relationship Russell called 'acquaintance'. Philosophers have adopted this view because it seems that not all uses of names are the expressions of genuinely singular thoughts. Suppose that on a whim I decide to give the name 'Bolton' to the first man to break Usain Bolt's world record. I might then speculate about where Bolton might come from – will Bolton come from Jamaica? Will Bolton perform in the next Olympics? I am using a name, but I am not expressing a singular thought. I don't have anyone specific in mind; my thought is just about whoever it is that will break Bolt's world record. (Some real names – e.g. 'Jack the Ripper' – are actually introduced like this.)

The upshot is that we cannot simply identify the singular thoughts as those expressed using a particular kind of word. Some other condition needs to be added to make a thought genuinely singular. This is where 'acquaintance' comes in. For Russell, acquaintance is a 'direct cognitive relation' of awareness between a subject and an object. Some philosophers have argued that for someone to have a genuine singular thought about an object they must be acquainted with it. The reason I cannot have a genuine singular thought about the man I call 'Bolton' is that I am not acquainted with him: I have not interacted with him, I don't know who he is, I couldn't recognise him, and so on.

One of the two main aims of Hawthorne and Manley's book is to undermine this appeal to acquaintance and similar ideas. Their strategy is to distinguish the two main versions of the acquaintance idea, and to show, with meticulous attention to real linguistic detail and razor-sharp argument, how neither version can be defended. The first version, which they despatch quite quickly, appeals to the idea that a genuine singular thought requires a causal relation between the thinker and the object thought about. The second appeals to the idea that for genuine singular thought, the thinker must know which object it is they are thinking about. An example of this second idea can be found in the influential work of Gareth Evans, who argued that in order to genuinely think about an object, the thinker must be able to distinguish that object from everything else in the world.

What does this mean? Surely I can think about one of a pair of identical twins when he is standing in front of me, even if I cannot distinguish him from his brother? Evans would acknowledge this of course, and adds a complicated theory of what it really is to distinguish an object from all others, based on the idea that one has to be able to locate the object. But, as Hawthorne and Manley show, this theory has

incredible consequences. Evans would not allow me to have a singular thought about a waiter seen in a mirror in a restaurant, unless I realised I was seeing him in a mirror, because I would not be able to locate where the waiter exactly was. I agree with Hawthorne and Manley that this kind of thing is hard to accept.

The second main aim of *The Reference Book* is to present a unified account of the different kinds of noun phrases – definite and indefinite descriptions, names, demonstrative pronouns – which we use to talk about particular individuals. They restrict themselves to English; languages without articles will presumably need a different investigation. This is not a criticism of their strategy – they are making empirical claims about an actual natural language, not about all possible languages – but their arguments will inevitably be of less interest to those interested in universal features of human thought.

Again, Russell's ideas have dominated the philosophical discussion. Russell claimed that an expression like '*the* woman in the garden' implies uniqueness – that there is exactly one woman in the garden – whereas '*a* woman in the garden' does not. Many linguists and philosophers in recent years have cast doubt on this claim. Drawing on a wide range of recent work in linguistics and the philosophy of language, Hawthorne and Manley make a convincing case that all these noun phrases, including names and descriptions, are of one semantic kind. But this kind is not 'reference' in the traditional sense; no noun phrases are genuine referring expressions in this sense. Another part of the Russellian edifice collapses.

The Reference Book is a sustained and convincing attack on several widespread dogmas of contemporary philosophy of language. But what has become of the idea of singular thought itself, the discovery of which was supposed to be a

'landmark achievement' of analytic philosophy? Has it survived Manley and Hawthorne's critique?

There are a number of different issues here. One is whether there is a real psychological distinction between one's thought aiming at a particular thing, as opposed to thinking of a thing merely as a thing of a certain kind. Suppose I am sitting in a café and notice someone run away in broad daylight with my wallet in their hand. I exclaim 'Hey! Someone stole my wallet'. Compare this to the case where I am about to pay, and I find my wallet missing, and say 'Hey! Someone stole my wallet'. It is very natural to say that in the first case, my thought is aimed at that particular person, but in the second I am merely specifying that someone (I don't know who) meets the condition of having stole my wallet. The first seems to be a 'singular' thought, the second not. This seems to be a real psychological distinction in the kinds of conscious thought we can have. It may not be a sharp distinction, it may be a matter of degree; but it does seem to be real, and psychologically significant.

The other issue is whether this distinction can be captured by a systematic examination of the way we talk about the objects of our thought: that is, whether this distinction lines up with a particular verbal or semantic distinction in the way Russell and his followers hoped. In the example just introduced, I expressed the two different kinds of thought by using the same sentence: 'someone stole my wallet'. To attempt to distinguish the singular from the non-singular thought by looking at the typical words used – even if we add some further condition like 'acquaintance' – looks like a hopeless task, for all the reasons Hawthorne and Manley give.

If there is such a thing as singular thought, then how should it be investigated? At the end of their book, Hawthorne and Manley offer some speculations about a 'thicker' conception of singular thought, which is characterised by its specific

'cognitive mechanisms' (some talk here about 'mental tags or files'). They are not unsympathetic to such an investigation, though they caution that 'the project of delineating the relevant cognitive mechanisms is still incipient'. They also warn against such psychological theorising relying on 'muddled ideas about acquaintance'; but this warning is hardly needed. Cognitive psychologists who study object representation do not take their lead from Russell and the 'acquaintance' tradition. If something like singular thought is a real psychological phenomenon, then we should expect that it will show up in psychological studies of mental representation. And so it does, although not necessarily under this label: the mental representation of particular objects in perception and thought has been an active area of investigation in recent cognitive psychology. Those philosophers wanting to salvage what might be left of the Russellian idea of singular thought would be advised to look at this work, then, rather than at the semantics or pragmatics of natural language. Hawthorne and Manley's book exemplifies today's philosophy of language at its best; but it seems to me that it also demonstrates the limitations of the whole project of investigating thought through the investigation of language. Language may well matter to philosophy; but not because it provides a transparent medium between the knowing subject and the world.

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