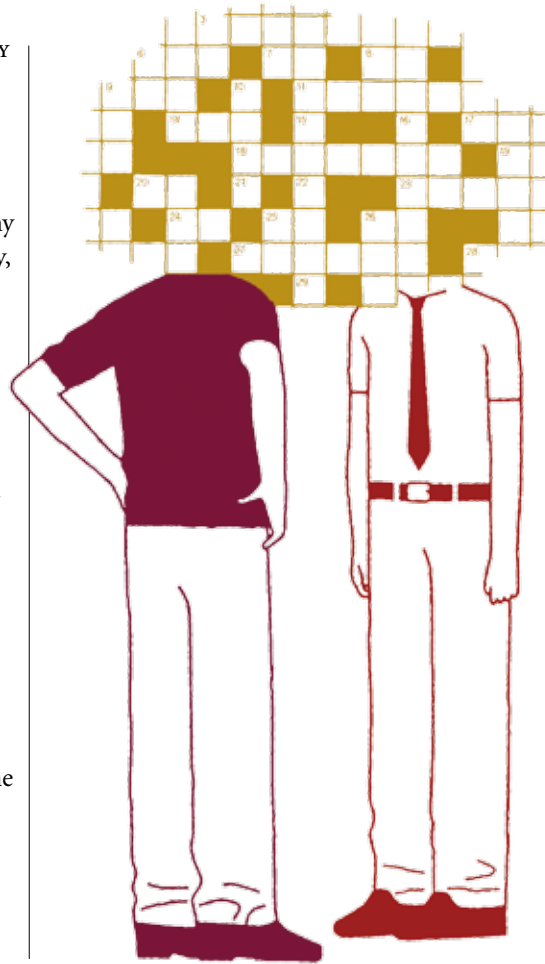


IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY, A GROUP OF MAINLY British and American philosophers launched the “linguistic turn.” They tried to ground long-running problems of epistemology and metaphysics in the logic of language and, in the process, to dissolve the discipline of philosophy as it had been known since Descartes. Inadvertently, these thinkers also laid the groundwork for the new – and more delightful – field of corporate communications.

Philosophy has a long tradition of transforming itself. Enlightenment thinkers tossed out natural philosophy in favor of physics; 20th century thinkers ditched philosophy of mind for psychology and cognitive linguistics. Less well understood is the subtler shift from philosophy of language to public relations.

Just as the Hellenics could not answer the questions raised by Newton, the theories of Frege, Popper and Russell seem ill-equipped to answer the timeless question, “How do I get my story in the paper?” Their work nonetheless set conditions for the eventual triumph of Parker, Ogilvy and Sard.

In this essay, we examine three ways in which philosophy of language has influenced modern communications, and, in turn, how public relations is, humbly speaking, the philosophy of our age.



LANGUAGE GAMES

Brunswick’s **ALI MUSA** and **SAM WILLIAMS** lampoon philosophy’s influence on PR

SEEKING CORRECTIONS ... AND THE USE-THEORY OF MEANING

The “linguistic turn” brought new rigor to a field preoccupied with invisible forces, different types of ghosts, and other occult residue from Hegel and Schopenhauer. Analytic philosophers applied the parsimony of symbolic logic to most philosophical problems and exposed them as either illusory, or as better addressed by science or art.

Take WVO Quine’s argument from, “The Two Dogmas of Empiricism”: There are no perfect synonyms; therefore, universal truths do not exist.

This is paraphrasing.

Quine argues that unconditional truths – as opposed to contingent truths verifiable by experience – depend on synonyms (e.g., all

bachelors are unmarried men). Philosophers since Aristotle had largely held that the meanings of words are immutable. However, Quine claimed synonyms are in fact indeterminate concepts, whose meanings change in different contexts. If philosophy since the Greeks was a building, unconditional truths were the bricks, and synonyms, the faulty mortar.

The implication is that the meanings of words should be understood by their use. This is important to remember when seeking corrections from journalists: Meaning does not exist beyond implicit social agreement on how to use words.

Ludwig Wittgenstein called these agreements “language games.” If a game, that game would be KerPlunk. An entire latticework of meaning can crumble if one pulls on the right straws. Consider this newspaper statement about your client:

“The company’s third-quarter earnings missed market expectations.”

A dilemma. Call the client, calmly explain the tenets of classical empiricism and the verification theory of meaning, and brace for a firing? Or seek a correction so absurd it may challenge our shared notion of reality? Grabbing the second horn of the dilemma could get you gored, but it could also land you a promotion.

You dial the news desk.

You: I read your piece with interest. I noticed that in the opening paragraph, you argue proposition (*P*)...

Journalist: Argue? It’s a statement of fact.

You: It is normal for you, in your ordinary language, to confuse a belief statement with a fact about the external world, but an appeal to formal logic will set you straight.

Journalist: ...

You: Your predicate “missed market expectations” refers to a social construct of questionable authority and fluid definition. These expectations are part of the observed set *e* and possess property *h* (for “high”). However, they do not exist in the world in the same way as “the brown dog” or “the green tree.” Rather, *e* exists more like Sherlock Holmes exists, as a fictitious character. In a sense, you’re benchmarking the company’s earnings to a fiction.

Journalist: These are the expert analysts we customarily reference.

You: So you agree that your argument is based on custom and habit?

Journalist: They use audited data.

You: Which brings me to my next point. Your subject, “The company’s third-quarter earnings” is based upon contemporary financial theory. However, Kuhn’s conception of paradigm shifts shows that even the most established scientific theories can change. Your talk of “earnings” might make sense now, but so did talk of “phlogiston” by 18th century chemists and, *mutatis mutandis*, “demons” by St. Augustine. Look, I know you don’t want your work to be ridiculed in a generation’s time. That’s why I’m here to help you. I propose, replacing (*P*) with:

(*P*) The company’s third-quarter measure of virtue did not, at the exact moment of this publication, coincide with the fiat-statements of a self-appointed committee of fortune-tellers.

Journalist: I – I can’t find any holes in your argument. I suppose I’ll make the correction.

You: You’re stepping out of the cave, sister.

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CONTAINING LEAKS ... AND PERFORMATIVITY

In his 1962 classic, *How to Do Things with Words*, JL Austin introduced the concept of the performative utterance. Austin argued that “truth” can only be attributed to descriptive phrases, like “the cat is white,” or “fourth-quarter earnings are up.” There are, however, certain phrases that correspond to reality, yet which cannot be properly described as true or false because they are not descriptions of the world but rather *events* that take place in it (e.g., “I now pronounce you man and wife”).

Austin’s concept is helpful when dealing with reporters seeking to confirm a sensitive leak. If the reporter has solid sources and traps you on the phone, you face the challenge of not confirming the story while still preserving credibility. You could, of course, fire off some tepid belief statements such as “I don’t think this is a story” or, more pathetically, “I believe the deal will go through.”

On the other hand, you can confidently evade a journalist by using performative phrases, such as “I claim that this not a story,” “I bet you the deal will close,” or, more desperately, “I hereby marry you.” These are not descriptions, but acts, and therefore cannot be judged for their truth or falsehood.

More importantly, they are uninteresting acts. Unless you’re a celebrity who happens to work in communications, chances are your proclamations, wagers and nuptials will not make the headlines; and, in this case, neither will the leak.

TREND-JACKING ... AND SENSE VS. NONSENSE

What constitutes a good business? The definition has changed over time. Gone are the days when the merit of a company consisted in the scale of its South Sea empire or the number of union organizers it arrested. Being a good company now involves a more prosaic range of factors: creating shareholder value, being sustainable, treating staff well and sticking to strategy.

But pointing to sound basics is increasingly not enough. To be truly liked, businesses must also make public declarations of value, above and beyond profits and margins. Almost every company now seeks to “save the environment,” “champion social justice,” or “make the world a better place.” Can they?

Despite its chilly demeanor, Wittgenstein’s 1921 *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* was a savage masterpiece. It targeted a calcified philosophical establishment which, Wittgenstein thought, was more concerned with grandiosity than meaningfulness. The *Tractatus* attacked the dominant philosophical traditions not by rebutting

their arguments (as less ambitious philosophers might), but by showing them to be essentially meaningless. “Most of the propositions and questions to be found in philosophical works are not false, but nonsensical.”

For Wittgenstein, reality consists in “facts,” facts consist in “states of affairs,” and states of affairs consist in configurations of “objects.” He also said that the best and most meaningful thoughts and propositions are pictures of reality (NB: The *Tractatus* exhorts clients to invest in compelling infographics). To be meaningful, statements must depict, through the frank logic of grammar and vocabulary, the sliver of the world being discussed.

The *Tractatus* showed assertions about value (and other metaphysical concepts) to be nonsense. Meaningful language depicts the world – which, in Wittgenstein’s view, is constructed austerely from objects and their logical relations. Where can values and concepts like “justice” fit into this sort of language? They do not, because justice isn’t an object, there is no configuration of objects which would amount to it, and there is therefore no proposition which could describe it.

Wittgenstein concluded that there are some things you can speak about, and others you can’t – indeed mustn’t – if you don’t want to be guilty of nonsense. “The CEO saved a brown cat” might be an acceptable statement in this view. However, even if the CEO saved one million cats, under no circumstances has “the company made the world more just,” or at least not in a describable way.

Take the weary communications adviser, listening to a client explaining once again why their recondite product makes the world a more just place – and asking for that to headline the next press release:

Client: Our paper clips make the world a more just place, and we want to build our communications strategy around that fact.

You: [Staring blankly out the conference room window] I could nod dutifully as I usually do, treasured client. But given it is Friday afternoon, I will refer you instead to the final line of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent.”

Client: I beg your ...

You: It means, “shut up.”

POSTSCRIPT: THE NEW DOGMA OF PR-ICISIM

Where ancient philosophy was concerned with objects and modern philosophy with minds, contemporary philosophy has dealt with words.

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But nowadays, “philosophy” does not deal with much of anything. Language philosophers largely succeeded in blowing up post-Cartesian thought – universities no longer hire many metaphysicians, or many philosophers for that matter.

Our world is very different to that of Socrates. But logical thinking and precise language still have a special power to explain problems and overcome them. Experts can clarify what we say, help us understand what we really mean – and thereby identify what, if anything, we need to do.

There is no doubt that corporations today are great engines of human advancement, generating wealth, funding research and encouraging policy. They are entirely appropriate subjects of cultural dialectic, in the press and elsewhere.

It necessarily follows, via *modus ponens*, that the most useful role of philosophy in our age is to advise corporations. To advise them at their most critical moments – financial situations, crises, and the like – particularly on how they use language to communicate, or “relate,” their news to the public.

A CALL TO DECENCY

LUDWIG WITGENSTEIN (1889-1951) is regarded as the philosopher of language and decency. The Austrian eccentric found journalists despicable purveyors of “dangerous phrases such people use for their own ends.” No doubt he would have a dim view of public relations.

It is easy to view PR as a corrupt and irrecoverable use of language. That negative view could be offset with some Wittgenstein decency. **FIRST**, words are only adequate if they are correctly used, clear, exact and simple. Present things as they are. Change nothing but the way we look at things, “which changes everything.”

SECOND, have usefulness (for your audience) in mind. Words must connect to life and everyday language, and must be truthful, rather than manipulating. No PR-isms, jargon, spinning ... stay away from the dark side.



THIRD, showing and doing are much more important than saying. Behavior is the unavoidable prime form of communication. For his second book, Wittgenstein intended the motto, “In the beginning was the deed” (from Goethe’s “Faust”). This should translate into responsible behavior toward all stakeholders. **FOURTH**, don’t run against the barriers of language: Ask yourself, is this necessary? Is it sensible to the audience? Cut out the “bosh” and “chatter.”

This last is important in our time, when the flood of reckless and unnecessary

language has become excessive – infinitely more than Wittgenstein could have imagined when he warned against technology’s negative effects on humanity.

His only complete work, *Tractatus*, has a cult following among students of philosophy. But in a letter to a publisher, Wittgenstein stressed that most didn’t understand that “the important part is what I don’t say.”

Wittgenstein wanted society to be populated by people “who think for themselves,” rather than follow social order or philosophical schools. He needed us to finish his thoughts, as relevant to our needs.

It’s a calling, really: aspiring to live responsibly and consciously, through words. As communication professionals, it’s our calling.

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