

Idealism in Language and Linguistics      Linguistics is correctly regarded as a science. However, in various circles, this thesis is regarded as dangerously wrongheaded. In this presentation I will sketch out several positions that several authors have discussed as reasons for subscribing to a view about the nature of language that would entail the above position. These accounts have a family of errors in common, hence why I am discussing them together in this presentation. I will respond to these accounts, showing where they err. The views I will look at are of Etienne Gilson, a french philosopher of language who is the author of *Philosophy and Linguistics*, that of George Grace, author of *The Linguistic Construction of Reality*, and I will finally also look at the strange kind of only a compound of itself and can only be decomposed into itself. attempts to justify this by suggesting that one can only analyze the word by making use of other words. The general tone in this section is very antireductionist. (Which is fine, but as we shall see, he swings too far the other way, and becomes a linguistic holist.) His next target is Descartes himself. An analogy between the Cartesian account of souls being tied somehow to bodies but being some sort of different stuff and the idea of a word having its meaning tied to it somehow is made. This is all the more relevant on the dualist account of things, as the use and understanding of meanings of words are the province of the soul, and producing and reception of sound is in the domain of the body. As a Cartesian, we would hence get another sort of problem like the ones with Cartesian dualism in the domain of language as well. Cordemoy, a follower of Descartes, basically answered the meaning/sound problem in the same way that the mind/body problem was solved - But it appears that man alone has something to say and that the power of pronouncing an intelligible word may be connected in him to the presence of what we call an intellect. This power is not a scientifically observable fact because if it exists, it is immaterial. Consequently physicists, biologists, and many a modern linguist try to explain human language as if the intellect did not exist, or simply speaking, without recourse to that hypothesis. This attitude entails, among other consequences, the desire to maintain that also, or at least certain among them, are endowed with language. If this conclusion were demonstrated - for example that apes or bees or dolphins could pronounce sounds or articulate gestures and intelligible attitudes - then, since we do not attribute any intellect to them, one ought to be able to conclude in the matter that language is explicable without that presupposition. At last, the cards are on the table. Most of the rest of this chapter contains discussions centered around the quotation I have just provided. He claims that this attitude is justified. Here is where he makes the analogy of physics taking the whole of nature of for granted - as needing no explanation, and his suggestion is that the intellect is presupposed in linguistic and hence the most interesting features of language are overlooked by it. What does a science oriented philosopher have to say about all of this. Well, for one thing, it does give the reason for this presentation. More practically, though, we can now see very clearly that there are two ways in which

Gilson finds that linguistics is not like other sciences. These are as follows: one is that it has a fundamental interaction with something supposedly nonmaterial (of which I will have a lot to say later) and two that semantics is alien to scientific linguistics. What of these claims? The first is simply age-old idealism, long since discredited (and rightly so!) in physics and biology. But our author wants to resurrect this old saw of many a philosophy. Why? Well, as far as I can tell, for several reasons. The most obvious, but perhaps the least over all important in terms of relevance, is that it provides some sort of account of semantics which he feels is overlooked by scientific linguistics. The account he feels must be given requires an irreducible creative element to it. To use Douglas Hofstadter's phrase, this is basically the *Le sens de cette phrase n pas evident si vous ne comprenez pas le fran aise*. Now that we have seen Gilson's views on the scientific status of linguistics, let me turn to a related view, that of Grace and the linguistic construction of reality. Grace adopts the general constructivist (and hence idealist) thesis that science constructs the objects it studies. Unlike some constructivists, however, he spells out fairly clearly what he exactly means by the meaning of the reality-construction view of language may be defined by the following assumptions: 1) That what is said cannot in any satisfactory way be separated from the way in which it is said. 2) That no clear boundary in terms of their functions can be drawn between the structure of a language and its vocabulary, and therefore that the grammars of different languages are no more functionally equivalent to one another than are the languages as wholes. 3) That a language is shaped by its culture, and a culture is given expression in its language, to such an extent that it is impossible to say where one ends and the other begins, i.e. what belongs to language and what belongs to culture. 4) That it is impossible to draw a clear line between thinking, i.e. bringing a thought into being, and encoding the thought, i.e. putting it into words. 5) That what can be said, and what can be talked about, may be quite different from one language-culture system to another. 6) That (this being so) it is likely that potentialities have not been exhausted yet, that new language-culture systems are theoretically possible which will have significantly different views of the world from any existing today - which will talk about things we cannot dream of now. 7) That it is misleading to talk without proper qualification of human beings as all living in a common objectively given world, that each language-culture system must to some extent have its own conceptual world that is the product of its own history - a world that has been created continuously by the speakers throughout that history. 8) That (in view of the last two points) the details of the adaptation of the human species are not as completely dictated by the nature of reality as some have been inclined to suppose. 9) That, therefore, there is no reason to believe that other worlds with natural environments similar to earth would, even given unlimited time, evolve intelligent beings whose languages are intertranslatable with ours. 10) That, since different languages are not functionally equivalent, the prospect of the

present linguistic diversity in the world being submerged by a single juggernaut of a language (say English) is at least as disturbing as the prospect of the extinction of biological species, and the suggestion that diverse languages might maintain what is essential to their true individuality while some artificial international language (such as Esperanto) insures effective intercultural communication totally misunderstand and misrepresents the nature of language. Grace contrasts this viewpoint with what he claims is the traditional viewpoint concerning language that is what linguists say they are using in their study. Unfortunately, while he gives some remarks on what this traditional view is to be, he is nearly so clear as he is when specifying his own viewpoint. This is actually important, because later it appears that he may be attacking a strawman. So, let us see what Grace claims this view entails. Firstly, he thinks that intertranslations become difficult. He calls the thesis that anything that can be represented in one language can be represented in another the intertranslatability postulate and that in general it is false. Note that he is not claiming that specific translations can be made. He claims that it requires a similar way of talking about the given subject matter, which in turn is said to require a common history or acculturation. I skip a few underdeveloped remarks concerning the foundations of mathematics on his part - Grace does not develop them enough to comment. Another consequence that he does develop extensively is that the concept of referential meaning seems to lose its force. He seems to welcome this development out of concern for poetry and other (putatively) nonfactual discourse. Finally, he also thinks the view entails that language extinction is bad (unlike, he claims, on the conventional account) because it robs us of one more way of construction of reality. It does not appear to mean them in their ontological sense, like some relativists have. His view might be called semantic reality construction, as it seems that he holds that how we compartmentalize the world - i.e., what categories we make things fall into is a function of our language and culture. The latter two, of course, for Grace are inexorably intertwined. How does Grace's conjectures hold up under scrutiny? For one thing, they are not novel. His 1987 book does refer to the originators of this view which some call linguistic idealism, namely Sapir and Whorf. But, of course, being old is not a sign of truth or of falsehood. Let us look at his idea of meaning gems to indicate that he has paid attention to the use of reference in semantics which has been common at least since Frege. Frege pointed out that the meaning of a concept has two parts, namely the reference and the sense. We must also be careful not to confuse reference with extension - as we can refer to nonexistent objects such as disembodied minds, magnetic monopoles, and free markets. So what of his worry concerning literature? OK has been my general experience that among people who speak both English and at least one other language tend to adopt the use of OK present in at least all of these languages. And it so happens that OK listening to someone else, and various other uses. Grace's construction of the intertranslatability postulate also fails for another, more interesting reason. As I said previously, he

attaches a rider to his destruction which allows translation when there is a common acculturation or history. There are of course at least two things of note that he seems to have overlooked. One is that the world is becoming increasingly global in character, and histories, cultures and so on of particular societies are becoming increasingly intertwined. Second, and this is perhaps something like a pseudoChompskian move, is that we all share a common history at some point. We are, after all, all human beings. It is simply false, as we know from anthropology, that human societies do not contain any cultural universals - hence it is not at all surprising that our languages are related in various ways. Grace seems to not understand this latter point. He, for instance, says, that while English, French and German are related, Hungarian is not related to those three. This is simply false. While of course it is true that English, French and German are in the Indo-European family of languages, and Hungarian is in the Uralic family, how does that entail that they are unrelated? The only way that could be true is if the two families of languages did not share a common ancestor, which would mean that they were the descendants of two different emergences of language. This conjecture has no support, and some evidence against it. For those of you who donnow, linguists often group languages in a classification scheme similar to biological classification, hence the term fact. claims that the word credence a statement and should be avoided. He is not making the absurd claim that there are no facts, but that we should avoid using the word to describe (or reinforce) our pronouncements. Further, he thinks overemphasis on facts about the world in our modern culture have lead to some sort of alienation, caused by the divide between the scientific conception of humanity and the more traditional, religious, literary, etc. viewpoint. His goal in this book is to reduce this tension by suggesting that religious and literary pronouncements arenalking in the same sort of way as science at all, and hence are not in any sort of conflict. Even without looking at his reasons for this thesis, there is already a problem. Religious thinkers do think their religious statements do make ontological claims. In other words, his thesis would impoverish the very religious writings and so on he wants to protect. Take for example the claim among Christians that Jesus rose from the dead. Now, whether or not that is to be interpreted literally, it is still a claim about the world. Most Christians would assert that this claim or some like it is central to their faith; if it is simply and nothing but poetry their faith is about nothing. One does not have faith in a poem. This problem comes out in another way in philosophy. If philosophyclaims were not about anything, and philosophy was nothing but literature, how does one make any sense of any philosophical theses? Finally, by making all of the humanities a form of literature, doesnhat impoverish literature by making it way too broad - it reduces its specialness. (Note, by the way, one can do good philosophy in literary form, as in Plato or Galilei - this is something entirely.) Let us look at the reasons Jones gives to support his account. He states his problem as follows: absolutistamework. (To put this a different way - he

claims elsewhere that one way of stating his conclusion is that we need more relativism, not less.) This axiom is that every citizen is said to hold a Free speech is a natural right of all men either false or is a tautology. He thinks this sort of conclusion would be necessary in any sort of empiricism in ethics. All of this, he says, has led to several solutions proposed, but all are unsatisfactory because they involve dropping either the humanistic way or the scientific way. The rest of the book argues that the only synthesis is a bifurcation at the linguistic level. Which, he claims, is supported by investigations of language across cultures. He says, we have to allow other cultures to say what they say, and not try and label true whathaveyou on their accounts. He then says once we see that this is what we should do with other cultures the humanisticallyyesnave him. (Two pieces of bad news conjoined does not produce good news, at least generally.) I will now examine the root causes of Jonesconceptions. After we have that information on the table, we can then make a diagnosis of what went wrong in all three of these thinkers generally, and produce some principles to avoid falling into the traps that these authors did. So, then, what are the causes of Jonesconceptions. As far as I can see, there are several main causes. Firstly, he assumes that radical reduction is correct. It is correct to say that we are composed of nonmoral particles and that we live in a nonmoral universe. However, the radical reduction is false, because morality is a emergent property of things which in turn are characterized by emergent properties of their own and so on. In other words, he is looking at the wrong place to find morality higher orderiences. Secondly, and perhaps relevant to linguistics and science generally, is that he claims either a scientific system is omniapplicable and hence consists of tautologies, or it is empirical in part and is hence false. This claim about science is very common, and contains several errors. For one, it claims that mathematics being potentially about everything entails it is nothing but a bunch of tautologies. In a fictionalist account of mathematics such as the one tacitly adopted by most scientists, the concept of absolutism is rallying against. He lumps absolutist claims in science and religion together, as if they were on the same footing. Now clearly, they arenScience, for one thing, wants to avoid absolutist claims, but it does want to produce universal claims. There is an important difference, which Jones seems to be unaware of. An example of a universal claim is Galileoaw of falling bodies. An absolutist claim is nothing of the sort - science does not claim instant, complete, and final truth, whereas traditionally many religious claims have been of this sort. Part of the confusion here is the difference between what is said and what it is about. I have now presented some plausible reasons for Jonesshap. Now let me explain the 3 (?) general reasons behind the linguistic idealism of all 3 of the thinkers I have explored today. First - an assumption that creativity is not something studiable by science. We find this Gilson as the basis for him claiming that linguistics overlooks the most important part of language. We find it also in Grace, when he tries to make

translation in general impossible by appeal to a putatively irreducible creativity brought on by different cultural circumstances. Finally, Jones' conception of language in science and the humanities also errs this way as he thinks that humanistic discourse is fundamentally different from scientific discourse precisely in this way. This overlooks the creativity present in all science. Linguistic idealism is also found to arise from the lack of what all 3 thinkers are rallying against - scientific language. All 3 make heavy use of ordinary language analysis of language. Is it no wonder, then, that they find themselves so much at odds with the conception of language in scientific linguistics? Thirdly, a general misconception concerning science pervades all three works. All three authors are of the misconception that science is radically empirical in character, and makes no room for any sort of rationalism. This is false, but does, as expected, lead to idealism. We have known for a long time, at least since Berkeley, that radical externalism leads to radical rationalism which leads to idealism. (This in turn leads to subjectivism, which is what these authors seem to want to produce as a consequence of their work. I note, however, that none of these thinkers are radical subjectivists of the sort sometimes one encounters, for instance, in Goodman or Latour, etc. But it seems that if pressed, these thinkers must fall into the radically subjectivist category. All the more reason to denounce and refute their theses. But what to do about it? How do we avoid falling into this mess that these three have done? I propose three solutions. Number one, it is vital to study language scientifically, and not to waste time on refuted conjectures like the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Number two is to make sure that science covers all of its relevant ground. The neglect of psychologists in having failed to study creativity is probably important in understanding these thinkers. To avoid the linguistic idealism and its pernicious consequences, it is necessary that psychologists thoroughly study creativity. I know they are doing so, but this research is still woefully underdeveloped. A third proposal is the development of an effective system of ethics. The story goes that Aristotle would be lost in our modern science courses, but would feel right at home in an ethics class in our departments of philosophy. Why is this? And what does it have to do with linguistics? It has to do with values. By failing to understand origins and roots of values (something that must be undertaken with the help of science, I think) we slip into relativism - we see the different religious rituals, different languages and superficial cultural differences and fail to see to any great degree the universals that cut across human societies the world over. This is one reason why philosophers generally should be concerned with the status of linguistics. As I said very early on in my presentation, linguistic idealism does entail a nasty form of relativism that would threaten all social sciences, and perhaps all natural sciences as well. I have now presented to you the three examples of linguistic idealism, their consequences, how they are wrong, and finally some general ways in which to avoid this pitfall. Thank you.