




# Reinventing Applications of Ordinary Language Philosophy

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## Abstract

It has been claimed that the application of ordinary language philosophy has almost entirely declined since the 1970s following the development of systematic semantic theory. This is due to the allegation that it had less interest among philosophers and moved to be a historical movement. This paper presents an overview of the application of ordinary language philosophy and offers a critical discussion of the different approaches available with the motive to reinvent this philosophy. The expository and dialectical approaches were used to examine the constructive and critical paradigms of contemporary ordinary language philosophy. The data was collected through desk research and documentation search techniques from archives, libraries and research databases. A qualitative data analysis was done of all the data to conclude that ordinary language philosophy contributes to the clarity of philosophical problems, concepts, and expressions used in ordinary language. It is yet not clear whether certain knowledge is intended to be employed in ordinary circumstances. The study recommends that an updated version of ordinary language is needed highlighting the importance of experimental examinations in probing knowledge about meanings.

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**Keywords:** *Philosophy, ordinary language, constructive approach, critical approach, analytic philosophy*

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## Introduction

Historically speaking, linguistic meaning has been targeted by philosophical analysts for the purpose of defining and understanding the ordinary use of language (Franco, 2021). It was clear among philosophers that symbolic language was employed for the purposes of clarification and solving philosophical problems (Carnap, 1963). Thus, linguistic philosophy incorporates ordinary language philosophy (hereafter OLP) and logical positivism. OLP was initially developed by philosophers belonging to the Vienna circle, such as Moritz Schlick, Rudolf Carnap, and Karl Popper. The work of Ludwig Wittgenstein was the topic of much discussion, especially his book “*Philosophical Investigations*,” which presented his views on logic and language. In addition to the Vienna circle, Oxford and Cambridge philosophers were among those promoting the views of OLP. It is worth noting, though, that OLP is mainly a methodology devoted to understanding philosophical problems, such as expressions of language.

There are some philosophical assumptions that are difficult to express in OLP. For example, ontological commitment can indicate the existence of certain entities even if they are not explicitly mentioned. This is hard to express in ordinary language due to the relationship between language and reality and how language can be used to make claims about the real world. Another assumption is epistemological skepticism, which argues that it is difficult to know things with certainty. This is also difficult to express in ordinary language

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because it goes against our general assumptions about knowledge and truth. Phenomenology is an approach that highlights the subjectivity of consciousness, which is difficult to express in ordinary language because the analysis of subjective experience tends to be difficult to explain. Existentialism emphasizes free individualism and uncertainty, again hard to explain in ordinary language as it involves complex ideas about identity and meaning. Therefore, multiple philosophical assumptions are difficult to express in ordinary language due to the complexity of ideas.

While this could be the case for the general public seeking to find the lexical semantic meaning of terminologies, it is not the case for philosophers and researchers studying the ordinary semantic meaning of lexis. Research in this regard is still ongoing from the perspective of the main divisions concerning constructive and critical approaches to contemporary ordinary language philosophy. Therefore, the study presented an understanding of the role of defeasible defaults in ordinary language and the importance of cross-linguistic research in philosophy and linguistics.

## Literature Review

- *The Genesis of Ordinary Language Philosophy*

Since the development of OLP in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century until recent times, several studies have questioned its validity, and it has been subject to constant debate, specifically in terms of its ability to respond to the abstraction and technicality of contemporary analytic philosophy (Cappelen & McKeever, 2022; Colonna Dahlman, 2022; Hansen, 2014; Hansen & Chemla, 2015; Sytsma & Fischer, 2023). In other words, it attempts to interrogate peoples' ability to communicate without any misunderstanding that may result from the complexity of ordinary language.

According to Parker-Ryan (2021), "Philosophical problems arise from the non-ordinary uses of certain propositions and are the source of metaphysical perplexity—which is self-inflicted". Although OLP played a pivotal role in the development of analytic philosophy, it has been subject to some criticism. For instance, some have argued that ordinary language is not appropriately consistent with philosophical investigation due to issues such as ambiguity, vagueness, and inaccuracy (De Mesel, 2022). Others have argued that OLP lacks the assumption that language is shaped by social and historical variables, which would limit its ability to present a holistic account of the nature of logic and knowledge (Deakin, 2023).

In another study Fischer et al. (2021), provided insights into how speakers of different languages employ default inferences in situations in which those inferences are possibly defeasible. The study employed an experimental approach to elicit judgments from speakers of English, German, and Japanese including defeasible defaults. The results revealed both cross-linguistic similarities and differences in the way speakers make use of defeasible defaults and showed that the differences are related to variances in the grammatical structures of the languages studied. Overall, the validity of OLP remains a matter of debate within the philosophical community since its inception.

- *Ideal Language Vs. Ordinary Language*

Both ideal and ordinary language philosophers have focused on language in their philosophy and have linked philosophical problems to the rise of language misuse. However, ideal language and OLP adherents differ in their views of linguistic meaning. Ideal language, on the one hand, considers meaning to be functional and representative (Gellner, 1957; Jolley, 2007), while ordinary language treats meaning based on its use (Cappelen & McKeever, 2022). Thus, ordinary language philosophers reject the notion of an "ideal language." Logical positivists tend to construct an ideal language that represents precise language rather than ordinary language. Their position criticizes ordinary language for its vagueness and opacity. Ideal language is based on the premise that language is meaningful in its syntactic and semantic structure. OLP, in contrast, tends to construct the ordinary use of language as leading to philosophical knowledge, as opposed to ideal language, which considers ordinary use of language to be a theory that leads to philosophical problems. The structure of OLP represents how we actually think about things. This way of thinking is the ordinary way of using language.

- *Wittgenstein and Ordinary Language Philosophy*

Wittgenstein is considered one of the reputable philosophers who contributed to the development of OLP (Huemer, 2004). In one of his early works, "Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus," he attempted to present a holistic theory of language and meaning. However, in his later book, "Philosophical Investigations," he was more skeptical about the theory, concentrating on the real use of language in ordinary communication. He also argued that language is not a rigid system, but rather a dynamic mean in a particular context. Moreover, more attention is needed towards the characteristics of language to understand its meaning and significance.

Furthermore, Wittgenstein believed that ordinary language was the discourse to carefully examine and analyze. Therefore, philosophy ought to concentrate on examining the spoken language by normal people. It is worth noting that the difference between scientific and ordinary language relies on the assumption that people may use words in a way that contrasts with their original meaning (Read, 2014). Thus, Wittgenstein's intention was to retain the meaning of words in their ordinary usage, based on the view that people do not need anything other than ordinary language.

According to Avramides (2016), OLP can be described according to the following classifications:

1. It is a philosophical movement that considers the significance of concepts is fixed by linguistic practice.
2. It is a philosophical method that belongs to analytical philosophy rather than a set of doctrines.
3. It is a label used by its enemies rather than by its alleged practitioners.

The first of the above categories indicates that linguistic practice is of major importance. The second identifies ordinary language philosophers as advocates of methods and attitudes in contrast to setting out a doctrine. The third category indicates that OLP thrived during the time of the "Oxford philosophy circle."

- *Language Use and Misuse*

People use language ordinarily for the sake of communication. However, non-ordinary use of language is thought to be generating philosophical problems due to its complexity. Words are not the core elements in generating meaning but how they are employed. For instance, the English word 'cause' is not the same as the German word 'Ursach' but their use would be for the same reason (Ryle, 1953). Thus, Malcolm argued that:

... non-ordinary uses of expressions occur in philosophy most particularly when the philosophical thesis propounded 'goes against ordinary language' – that is, when what the philosophical thesis proposes to be the case is radically different from what we would ordinarily say about some case. (Malcolm, 1942, p. 8)

In addition, the word 'know' can cause philosophical problems if it is used non-ordinarily. For example, the use of the word in a sentence that says 'I do not know if this is a desk before me' can be ordinary if it means that speaker can not tell what type of object before him\her due to bad light in the place. However, it can be used non-ordinarily if the speaker means that he\she is not sure about the material-object statement (Parker-Ryan, 2012). Therefore, the expressions in our speech may have different meanings depending on how we use them.

- *Semantic Theory*

Each language has its own semantics which is part of the linguistic description. According to Kempson (1977: 3), a semantic theory: ... has not only to capture the exact nature of the relation between word meaning and sentence meaning but it must be able to state in what ways this relation is dependent on word-order or other aspects of the grammatical structure of the sentence"

It seeks to provide answers towards the meaning of expressions and systematic symbols. It is very important to gain knowledge about semantics which goes beyond letters. Content and thoughts are key elements in semantics which adds to our understanding and communication (Cappelen & McKeever, 2022). Intellectual knowledge is in need for semantic tools to shape its arguments via theories. However, it is claimed that metaphysics can ignore formal semantics. Therefore, OLP is not in line with the emergence of systematic semantic theories.

## Methodology

- *Research Design*

Owing to the philosophical milieu his study belonged to, expository and dialectical approaches were used to examine the constructive and critical paradigms of contemporary ordinary language philosophy. These approaches suited this study as it had taken opposing positions and rooted their justification in accordance with the principles of qualitative research (Spencer et al., 2014). The study presented an understanding of the role of defeasible defaults in ordinary language and the importance of cross-linguistic research in philosophy and linguistics.

- *Data Collection*

The data was collected through desk research and documentation search techniques from archives, libraries and research databases. Relevant documents were retrieved from the original sources for their authenticity and credibility.

- *Data Analysis*

A qualitative data analysis was done to evaluate and present relevant research findings from the secondary data which were correlated with relevant concepts and theories. This enabled a deeper understanding of the paradigms and concepts and approaches used in the study.

## Results

It is worth noting though that OLP is not supporting theorizing metaphysics due to the assumption that it may hinder OLP from its ordinary use and goes beyond our philosophical needs (Parker-Ryan, 2021). This is in line with Wittgenstein’s opinion that metaphysical theory is not adding to the advancement of OLP. However, ordinary people can sometimes make metaphysical use of language (Parker-Ryan, 2021). Wittgenstein rightly argues that: “...We must do away with all explanation, and description alone must take its place. And this description gets its light, that is to say its purpose, from the philosophical problems. These are, of course, not empirical problems; they are solved rather by looking into the workings of our language, and that in such a way as to make us recognize these workings; in despite of an urge to misunderstand them. The problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known. Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language (Wittgenstein, 2019).

In other words, metaphysics theorizing is needed if language is to be used un-ordinarily. Philosophical problems, thus, are meant to be examining and analyzing the ordinary use of language for the sake of avoiding any misuse of the language.

- *Contemporary Ordinary Language Philosophy Approaches*

- *Constructive Approach*

Contemporary OLP encompasses two approaches: constructive and critical. According to Hansen (2014), the constructive approach refers to the “moves from observations about how certain words are used to facts about the meaning of those words and then draws conclusions about the ‘realities’ those words are used to talk about.” The constructive approach is based on the idea of moving from observing ordinary use of certain expressions to drawing conclusions about the realities of those expressions (Austin, 1962). Therefore, it moves from knowing the knowledge to examining the nature of the knowledge. More specifically, it focuses on the semantic level, the meaning of expressions, and how expressions are ordinarily employed.

Following the semantic level, the metaphysical level focuses on the nature of expressions related to the meaning of these expressions. Table 1, adopted from Hansen (2014), details the two levels in the constructive approach.

**Table 1:** *Levels in the constructive approach*

	<b>Semantic level</b>	<b>Metaphysical level</b>
1	Expression X is ordinarily used in way Y	Semantics constrains metaphysics
2	X as ordinarily used in way Y requires the semantic “linguistic meaning” of X to have feature(s) F	If the semantics of X has feature(s) F, then the nature of what X refers to – X – will have feature(s) G.

Each element of the constructive approach has been intensely disputed from the heyday of classic OLP up to the present day. Classic OLP has been criticized for its inability to understand that “conclusions about the meaning of an expression do not follow directly from observations about the ordinary use of that expression” (Hansen, 2014). Indeed, this issue long ago worried philosophers such as Grice and White (1961), who spoke against classic OLP; later, contemporary ordinary language philosophers responded to this criticism. According to Austin (1946), people usually attribute knowledge to someone who may be able to discard alternatives to what is claimed to be known. In addition, there is another argument advanced by contemporary ordinary language philosophers that there is no link between how expressions are ordinarily used and what these expressions mean. In other words, “facts about ordinary use should be explained by facts about the meaning of an expression rather than facts of some other type” (Hansen, 2014).

DeRose (2005) argues for contextualizing knowledge ascriptions, in that the semantic meaning of “s knows that p” can differ in various contexts, in terms of explaining truth-value and accepting judgments about the ordinary use of knowledge. There is some disagreement among classic and contemporary ordinary language philosophers regarding the features of meaning expressions that should be explained to constitute ordinary use. “Standard theories treat the meaning of linguistic expressions as a function from contextual parameters (like time, location, speaker, etc.) to content extensions” (Hansen, 2014). However Travis (2008), refutes the notion that ordinary use can explain systematic relations between the meaning of linguistic

expressions and specific contextual parameters. This view of the constructive approach can be considered a continuance of classic OLP.

Explaining how expressions are ordinarily used is still a matter of dispute. One of the criticisms of OLP, for example, is related to the unreliable data collection methods used to determine how expressions are ordinarily used (Buckwalter, 2010). Katz and Fodor (1963, p. 71) argued that ordinary use “should be subject to the same modes of confirmation and disconfirmation that linguists accept.” However, some recent experiments have found that there is a degree of consistency between expert and non-expert linguists regarding how philosophers should collect evidence and analyze how expressions are used (Sprouse et al., 2013). In addition, “conceptual ethics,” which is another method that examines how expressions are employed in ordinary use, focuses on how we can use words to avoid “ambiguity.” For instance, it is essential to avoid vague expressions and terms, such as the difference between “intentionally” and “deliberately,” to achieve precision.

#### - *Critical approach*

The critical approach to OLP focuses on why a particular question is being asked and how it might appropriately be answered. Baz (2012) argues that “questions posed by philosophers about the meaning of particular expressions are fundamentally different from any question to which we might need to consider as part of our everyday employment of these expressions.” He differentiates between “theorist’s questions” and “ordinary questions” about knowledge drawing on the following two arguments (2012, p. 105):

1. The capacity to understand and competently answer everyday questions is essentially the capacity to see and properly respond to what may be called “their point.”
2. The philosopher’s question has no point, in the relevant sense; it invites us to apply our words to some given case apart from any non-purely theoretical interest that anyone might have in that case.

Others, however, may argue that it is not necessary to understand the purpose of asking questions if we can answer them (Hansen, 2014). This argument is in line with the view that there is no difference between ordinary questions and theorist’s questions in terms of knowledge. However, there may be a difference between philosophers and ordinary use in treating the word “know,” for example. In an attempt to address issues concerning ordinary language Hansen (2020), argued that “it does not depend on any contentious conceptions of meaning and understanding in general—it is a challenge grounded in experimental data and some features of non-experimental conversation.”

The critical approach argues that “philosophers produce ‘nonsense’ or do not really understand what they are saying when they depart from or ignore the way language is ordinarily used.” There has long been debate about classical OLP, which has moved gradually from observing ordinary use to concluding the meaning of linguistic expressions.

Hence, these two approaches are independent of each other in that: one can engage in the constructive project without thinking that philosophers are prone to produce nonsense when they depart from ordinary language, and one can engage in the critical project and not draw any conclusions about extra-linguistic reality from the way people ordinarily speak (Hansen, 2014). Since their peak in the 1950s and 1960s, the constructive and critical approaches have been criticized for not changing from the version developed by classic ordinary language philosophers. Hansen (2014) refutes this criticism by arguing that contemporary ordinary language philosophers have dealt with these two approaches from different angles that are worth considering.

## Discussion

It is mistakenly claimed that OLP nowadays is outdated and derogatory (Cappelen & McKeever, 2022). Opponents have argued that natural scientists are not interested in identifying the lexical semantic meanings of terminologies held among the public. Rather, they care more about the technical meaning of these terminologies. However, this is not the case for philosophers and researchers, who study the ordinary notion of terminologies in terms of lexical semantics. They do not embrace complicated definitions that may lead to the use of language outside the ordinary stance. OLP is a theoretical notion that enhances clarity and simplicity among the public. It is neither dated nor useless but rather endeavors to achieve “mass” understanding.

Moreover, it is unclear to what extent linguistic meaning is determined by semantics and pragmatics. While one might agree that both semantics and pragmatics are very helpful in shaping our understanding of different aspects of language, a clear distinction between which meaning is determined by semantics and which part is affected by pragmatics is needed. A combination of the two would then result in providing a complete theory of language (Recanati, 2004). Thus, a systematic theory of meaning could be the most appropriate approach to language philosophy.



Another debate among ordinary language philosophers concerns methodology. It was common among philosophers and linguists to investigate meaning via formal and informal experimental methods (Hansen & Chemla, 2015). In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was call for a distinction between the methods used in OLP and those used in empirical linguistics. Some of these methods include corpus studies, observations, and recordings of language use. The issue raised concerning the data gathered through such methods is the impact of experiments on the data generated. This anticipated impact can be minimized by holding the experimenters to account, ensuring they take full responsibility for paying attention to the experimental design and assuring their neutral position with respect to the data collected.

OLP remains a pivotal approach to philosophy. Although some philosophers and linguists assume that OLP may enhance the clarity of philosophical problems and concepts and expressions used in ordinary language, others claim that OLP is overly employed in linguistic analysis, to the detriment of other philosophical methods. Nonetheless, it is still valid for some philosophers to keep drawing insights from ordinary language. Furthermore, OLP remains a crucial area of research in linguistics and has led to a better understanding of the nature of language and its relationship with thought and logic. Its importance clearly depends on the philosophical inquiries being pursued and the methodology appropriate to address them.

The big question here among researchers is “Do we still need OLP?” Those in favor of OLP argue that clarifying philosophical concepts is important to ensure that philosophical debates are grounded in the ordinary way language is used. Philosophical problems are the result of technical terminologies being employed differently from the way in which they are used in ordinary language. The theory of OLP attempts to ensure such problems are avoided. However, it is claimed that OLP is overly used in linguistic analysis compared to other philosophical problems and that it needs more than just analysis, namely the use of formal or philosophical methods. To conclude, the need for the theory of OLP depends solely on our philosophical perspective and the nature of the questions we address. It is possible that some of these questions could benefit from the use of ordinary language, while others may employ other methods.

## Conclusion

Naturally, philosophers of language are mainly concerned about change in theory, meaning, and reference features. Their interest encompasses a pragmatic understanding of scientific reasoning. Although it was claimed that OLP is losing interest among philosophers and moving to be a historical movement, it still attracts the attention of philosophers. The constructive approach, which attracts more attention than the critical approach, is interested in examining the ordinary use of certain linguistic expressions, such as “know,” and the appropriate ways of explaining linguistic data. The critical approach, in contrast, focuses on the data collection methods used to examine the ordinary use of expressions and terms. These approaches are challenged by some philosophers, who contend that expressions should not be removed from their ordinarily used context. Hansen (2014) recent revision of ordinary language has highlighted the importance of experiments, especially in probing meanings. Thus, OLP remains important in shaping our understanding of ordinary language use.

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