Introduction

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Around a century ago, philosophy in the English-speaking world took a 'linguistic turn', as it was retrospectively baptised by Richard Rorty in an edited volume of the same name in 1967 (Rorty, 1967). As Simon Blackburn later wrote, philosophy has always been interested in the relationship between language, mind, and world, but at different periods in history the emphasis has been on different corners of the triangle (Blackburn, 1984).

The linguistic turn led philosophers to focus on issues such as the meaning of 'meaning', the relationship between words and world, and the logical structure of propositions. A stock set of key problems in the philosophy of language emerged and most scholars stuck to ploughing these increasingly familiar and deeply-dug furrows.

In the last decade or so, however, the philosophy of language has been somewhat reinvigorated. The old problems have not been left behind but new issues have come to the fore, many of them concerning the political, ethical, and social aspects of language. Philosophers are increasingly interested in how language shapes social reality, and how it might be used to reshape it for the better.

Consider, for example, Wittgenstein's now well-worn adage that '*the limits of my language* mean the limits of my world' (Wittgenstein, 2023, §5.6). As with so many of his aphorisms, many people agree with it but few agree on what exactly it means. One of the least contentious ways to make the claim true is that our experience of the world is shaped by our concepts, and so language literally determines what we can and cannot experience. For example, without a concept of 'sexual harassment', a woman working in an office in 1950s America could not understand the way her male colleagues treated her in the way that women today readily can.

Luvell Anderson calls this the '*different worlds* thesis'. It entails that 'people come to radically different understandings of the world because they inhabit incompatible conceptual realities'. These different worlds are often inhabited by people with different ethnic origins, but Anderson argues that people do not inhabit 'different worlds' purely as a result of racial differences. Rather, borrowing a concept from Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet (Eckert and

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McConnell-Ginet, 1992), he argues that different worlds are rooted in 'communities of practice', defined as 'an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor'. This results not only in different concepts, but also 'ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations – in short, practices'.

If this is true, however, then misunderstandings between people who inhabit different communities of practice are inevitable. To go back to our office example, a 50s female secretary would be baffled by a claim that she was subject to sexual harassment, while a twenty-first century professional woman would be equally perplexed that her 50s counterpart did not interpret the way she was being treated as prejudicial.

However, Anderson cautions against reaching too extreme a conclusion from this. Yes, the distance of 'different worlds' makes mutual comprehension more difficult. But it does not make it impossible. That is why over time female workers did come to see their treatment by many male colleagues as unacceptable, and why it does not take too much effort for a woman today to understand why her predecessors complained so little. Humans have 'imaginative capacities' that enable us to understand worlds other than our own. 'The different worlds thesis encourages us to contemplate the differences between human beings,' writes Anderson, 'but we should not neglect those aspects that also tie us together.'

At the same time, we should not make the old Western mistake of universalisation, by which we understand our shared humanity by reducing our myriad worlds to a singular, universal one. Following the Martinican scholar Édouard Glissant, he argues that 'the true way to unity is the recognition of opacities, which he says can coexist and converge.' As Glissant wrote, 'There would be something great and noble about initiating such a movement, referring not to Humanity but to the exultant divergence of humanities' (Glissant, 1997, p. 190).

Misunderstanding is also the subject of Andrew Hines's contribution. His starting point is the phenomenon of meaning change, in particular in politics. Many people who have for decades thought that they believed in conservatism, socialism, or democracy have found the current referents of those terms unrecognisable. Somehow, the meanings of each have changed. This leads to misunderstandings between people who use the terms in the old or new senses.

Hines argues that this sheds light on the nature of misunderstanding. This, he argues, has been an under-analysed concept. It has been assumed that *misunderstanding* can be understood simply as a *failure of understanding*. This simple 'failure' model is sometimes adequate,

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but all too often it is not. Rather, misunderstanding very often occurs 'when human understanding is caught between two different meanings'. This is especially likely to happen when meanings change.

One reason why this is important is that misunderstanding often results in 'communication breakdown', when neither side can even comprehend the other. The failure model, argues Hines, encourages this, since it attributes misunderstanding to a failure of one party to understand what is perfectly intelligible to others. If, rather, we see misunderstanding as the product of meaning change, misunderstanding becomes both understandable and capable of being overcome. It is not that those who understand a meaning one way and those that understand it another are in entirely different semantic worlds. Nor must we embrace a relativism in which neither party is right or wrong but simply uses different meanings. Rather, we have the scope to make the different meanings clear to both sides and so allow them to overcome communication breakdown and understand each other better, even if that does not lead to agreement.

If language limits our world, do we sometimes have to change it in order to overcome certain restrictions it places on us? This question has become socially and politically hot due to the issue of transgender rights. While there are still many who stand opposed to equal rights for trans men and women, among those who support equality, there is a disagreement about whether the terms 'man' and 'woman' apply equally and without qualification to those born biologically male and female and those whose gender identity does not match their biological sex. (Even this characterisation of the debate will be seen by some as inaccurate, since some deny the legitimacy of the category of 'biological sex' and talk instead of 'gender assigned a birth'.)

Among those who argue that 'trans women are women, trans men are men, period', there are many who argue that accepting this requires us to engage in some 'conceptual engineering' since the concept of 'woman' that we have inherited is not fit for a trans-inclusive world. Sally Haslanger is one such philosopher, arguing that we have to ask what *purpose* a concept is meant to serve, and give up those that serve no good purpose or revise them so that they do.

In her contribution to his volume, Louise Antony argues that this strategy is mistaken. In a sense, she believes that the mistake is simple: 'WOMAN is a social concept, not a biological concept, meaning that our concept WOMAN picks out or is connected to individuals who are assigned or who come to play a certain social role, one that is generally and for the most part attached to the biological property of being female.' Whether this is the case or not is a matter of fact,

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determined by how language is actually used. What we believe or want to be the case is irrelevant.

As Antony argues:

> If WOMAN is in fact a social concept, and not a biological concept, that means that those who think the thought TRANSWOMEN ARE NOT WOMEN *are wrong, as a matter of fact*, and *in virtue of the reference of their own concept WOMAN*. Those of us who realize that this thought is false must then work to persuade those who think this that they are wrong.

Of course, many will disagree that 'woman' is a social concept, but that is a debate for another time. One interesting feature of Antony's argument is that she argues that while 'the reference of concepts is not under our control, but the reference of *words* is'. In other words, the concept 'woman' either does or does not refer to a trans woman as much as it does to any other kind of woman. But in law and social practice, people may not use the word 'woman' to refer in the same way. Antony sees the political goal to make sure that people use words so that they match the reference of their associated concepts.

Although Antony and Haslanger disagree, both their views assume that the power of language can be immense, for good and for ill. Slur words, for example, can get people fired, cancelled, or even killed. Why are such words taboo? The obvious answer is that their meaning is offensive. But Ernie Lepore argues that this cannot explain why they cannot be uttered. Using the fiction slur term 'muggleborns' from the Harry Potter universe as an example, it would be offensive to use the word even if one is denying any negative associations it may have. Saying 'Hermione is a mudblood, but I don't think muggleborn wizards are despicable on account of being muggleborn' does not nullify the offensiveness of the term. Replace the term with a genuine slur term and you'll get the point.

Another explanation Lepore calls 'prohibitionism'. On this view, slur terms are taboo words and so it is never acceptable to use them, even in ostensibly non-offensive contexts. The problem with this view is that many taboo words just aren't slur terms, such as names for God in Judaism. Taboos function differently from slur words so one cannot explain the prohibition of slur words in the same terms as one explains the prohibition of taboo words.

Lepore's conclusion is that there is no need to appeal to meaning 'in order to account for an offensive sting'. Merely articulating a slur word is enough to trigger its offensive, negative associations. That

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cannot be explained by the meaning of the word itself, since words with identical or very similar meanings just don't have the same power to offend. Also, slur words can lose their power and become acceptable, even though their meaning may not change at all. A final piece of evidence for Lepore's view is that non-standard articulations of a slur word can be acceptable, even though they are in effect the same word with the same meaning. In a context like this volume for example, it would be acceptable to refer the N-word or even to write n***er, whereas to use the word itself would not be.

Lepore sums up his surprising conclusion as 'it is not slur terms, but their standard articulations that carry offensive potential. This means that, however this potential is determined, it has little to do with semantics or pragmatics, or indeed even with language at all'. Think about it: the power of some language to offend cannot be explained by any explanation of what language standardly does.

A background assumption to the debates both Lepore and Antony engage with is that social norms can be changed by what people say. Mihaela Popa-Wyatt and Jeremy L. Wyatt set out to explain how this is possible. One conceptual tool they use is J.L. Austin's idea of a speech act. Austin argued that some utterances can actually change the world merely by their being said. Such 'performative' speech acts include proclaiming a couple husband and wife or banning a book. By declaring something to be forbidden or permitted, such speech acts can change social norms directly.

Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt also make use of David Lewis's concept of a 'conversational game'. Conversations are considered analogous with games, with each new contribution adding something to the 'score', changing what it acceptable or unacceptable to say later. For example, saying 'I drove to London last week' gives you the information that I can drive, a fact that is added to the conversational score. This means that later in the conversation, you are able to assume I can drive and it would be inappropriate to ask if I can.

Combine these two ideas, as Mary Kate McGowan (2004) did, and you have a kind of speech act she called a 'conversational exercitive', which Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt define as 'a particular utterance which updates the conversational score so that new norms apply'. To give an example: 'When addressing a target with a slur, the speaker's purpose is to grab power by changing the social norms governing the conversation.' The slur undermines the person slurred, in turn raising the status of the slurrer.

Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt take this further, using both game theory and Bayesian probability theory. At the risk of oversimplifying a rich argument, the key idea here is that our interactions with others

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depend upon us having certain expectations of how they will act and react; and that these expectations are constantly being revised in light of new information that comes to light. Concerning norms, these expectations can be both empirical – which norms we expect others to adhere to – and normative – which norms we think they *should* adhere to.

Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt's model is both philosophically rigorous and true to the dynamic, open-ended character of actual speech. It is a terrific example of how good theorising does not take us further away from the messy reality of the world, but helps us to makes sense of it better.

Although people may disagree about which slur words are worst and how far they should be removed from public discourse, there is general agreement on which are and are not acceptable. The same is not true of many forms of prejudicial speech. Terms and phrases that some judge to be beyond the pale others think of as little more than bawdy fun. Mari Mikkola begins her exploration of the problems of prejudicial speech by insisting that we cannot generalise about it. We have to consider it in its different forms. Mikkola notes the tendency to use the term 'hate speech' to cover all kinds of prejudicial discourse. She argues that if we need an umbrella term, 'prejudicial speech' serves the purpose better. And if we want to understand how this kind of speech works and how to deal with it, we are better off considering it in its different forms in turn, such as hate, discriminatory, and toxic speech. Note that 'this division isn't about the seriousness or harmfulness of speech, with hate speech being the most serious kind'.

Start with hate speech. This can be harmful when 'it limits its recipients' participation in deliberative exchanges and prevents recipients from getting a fair hearing when they try to participate'. In other words, hate speech can delegitimise certain groups, making it more difficult for their voices to be heard in public discourse. Importantly, this means that the harm is not primarily any offence a person may feel. It is rather the effect one has on their capacities to participate in civic and public life. A person may not even hear the hate speech in question, and so not be offended by it, yet be disadvantaged by it.

The same can be true of discriminatory speech, which also perpetuates negative stereotypes without actively vilifying the groups concerned, as is the case with hate speech. For example, speech which suggests women are not suited to professions may be couched in ways that praise so-called 'womanly virtues' but their effect is to limit female participation in work and political life. Mikkola also

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argues that it undermines self-trust: those to whom discriminatory speech refer may themselves question their competencies.

Toxic speech is even more insidious. It works by undermining trust, spreading suspicion, and kindling fear, all on the basis of false claims, such as that an election was stolen or that something bad happening in the world is a result of a plot by an (often racial) elite. This corrodes the very fabric of a democratic society, undermining our capacity to engage in sincere debate in which we take the views of others as genuine.

Given all this, classic liberal defences of free speech are insufficient as objections to measures to prevent or at least limit the uses of prejudicial speech. Allowing such unfettered speech is not to allow free competition in the marketplace of ideas, but to give the users of such speech the power to undermine the credibility and democratic agency of others. Speech of this kind is not just an expression of opinions: it has damaging, material effects.

Generally speaking, we hold people to account for prejudicial speech. This is an example of 'linguistic liability'. For instance, if you lie to me, you have 'linguistic liability' for any consequences that might follow from that. That much seems obvious. But as Emma Borg points out, once you start to ask just how absolute or limited this liability is, things quickly become difficult. If I tell you in a casual conversation what I think the weather will be and you set off up a mountain, it's not my fault if you get caught in a storm. If, however, a teacher misinforms their students and they answer an examination question incorrectly as a result, the teacher is blameworthy.

One way into solving the issue of linguistic liability is to think about precisely what is required in order for an utterance to be understood. Borg highlights three broad approaches. 'Semantic minimalism' is the view that a well-formed sentence can be understood and judged true or false in the absence of most, if not all, context. 'Contextualism', as the name implies, denies this, while a third approach, associated with Paul Grice, claims that we need to know 'what a speaker conversationally implies by what they say', as Borg puts it.

There seems to be some truth in all three approaches. Borg gives the example of a person being asked 'Do you want to have lunch?' and replying 'I've eaten.' Semantic minimalism highlights the fact that, irrespective of context, the sentence 'I have eaten' tells us something that can be understood and is true or false: that the speaker has eaten. Contextualism, however, highlights the fact that to understand properly what this means, you have to understand that the person has

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eaten *recently*, which in context would be clear. The Gricean would add that even this doesn't fully explicate the utterance, as in this situation it implies that the person is turning down the invitation.

What has this to do with linguistic liability? For a start, to attribute liability fairly we have to be sensitive to the different ways in which utterances can have meaning in themselves, in context, and in their implications. People are generally good at this: 'Ordinary speakers are adept at making different kinds of liability judgments, where these judgements are sensitive to different kinds of content.' Sometimes, we need to hold people liable for the non-literal content of their utterances. For example, one can make a promise without saying 'I promise' or similar. If it is clear from the context that a promise was made, a person is responsible for keeping it, even if the literal sentence they uttered (perhaps just 'ok') did not take the form of a promise.

However, Borg argues that sometimes, 'strict linguistic liability' is appropriate, by which we hold a speaker liable for the literal content of the sentences they utter. 'Semantic minimalism' may seem to be an overly literal and limited way to understand sentences, but, Borg argues, 'Some judgements of linguistic liability are strict and strict judgements require a grasp of minimal content.' Her example is Donald Trump saying that the crowd for his inauguration stretched 'all the way back to the Washington Monument'. So, although 'in the cut and thrust of communication it is often non-minimal content which is to the fore,' we cannot do away with the notion of minimal semantic content if we are to hold people liable for their utterances.

The contributions to this volume discussed so far all concern the political, social, and ethical dimensions of language. However, the philosophy of language has plenty of other questions to grapple with and many old problems have been taken in new directions. For example, Jane Heal uses considerations of language as a springboard into an inquiry into a somewhat puzzling phenomenon: 'plural intentionality'. Singular intentionality concerns the intentions and desires of individuals. For example, the question 'What should I do?' is one that concerns singular intentionality. Plural intentionality concerns the intentions or desires of more than one person, as raised by the question 'What should *we* do?' Until quite recently, plural intentionality was thought of as simply the sum of singular intentionalities, 'convenient (perhaps in practice unavoidable) shorthand for talking about what would be more accurately (if far more lengthily) reported as assemblages of instances of singular intentionality'.

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This assumption is a manifestation of a wider 'analytic' strategy of 'trying to understand some complex and interesting thing by looking for its separable parts'. Heal does not think that this strategy is always wrong, but it 'may get us into trouble if used inappropriately.'

Heal acknowledges that plural intentionality 'is apt to strike analytic philosophers as strange and paradoxical, as requiring telepathy or as needing the co-subjects to become somehow identical with each other'. But, she argues, it is 'not mysterious at all.' Human beings are social animals and 'making common knowledge usable is one key role of language'. Linguistic communication is a social, cooperative practice, and so we should not be surprised that we can use language to form and express collective intentions, as well as individual ones.

Intentionality has another philosophical meaning, which confusingly has nothing to do with intentions. Intentionality in this second sense concerns the 'aboutness' of mental states or language. It seems to be a key feature of language that it is about things, events, or states of affairs. But this is curious: how can anything in the natural world be *about* something else? Atoms, rocks, plants, animals, minerals and so on are not about anything, they just are. So how do things like words and thoughts get to be about other things?

David Sosa returns to this age-old problem in his inquiry into the aboutness of language. He conjectures that the reason why the problem has remained intractable is that it has been assumed that an explanation for the aboutness of language will also work as an explanation for the aboutness of thoughts, and vice-versa. 'The story of aboutness will be *uniform*, simplex, or so the presupposition has it.' A related assumption is what Sosa calls 'monosemanticism', that the meaningfulness of thoughts and linguistic expressions 'are fundamentally akin and correlated phenomena'. But what if we reject these assumptions?

Sosa's proposal takes as its starting point another old puzzle from Frege. Hesperus (the evening star) and Phosphorus (the morning star) are the same celestial body: Venus. So there is a sense in which 'Hesperus is the evening star' means that 'Hesperus is Phosphorus' as 'the evening star' is the same things as 'the morning star'. But someone may not know this. There is information they lack even though there is nothing lacking in the meaning of the words they use. Frege concluded from this that there is a difference between a word's *sense* and its *reference*, so sometimes we can fail to know that a word has a certain reference because we only understand one sense of it (Frege, 1952). Sosa takes a different approach. He

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argues that sentences can have the same meaning yet cause different beliefs. Simply knowing 'Hesperus is the evening star' does not cause you to believe that it is also the morning star, even though that is what it means.

Sosa advocates for 'polysemanticism', the idea that the content of a mental state and the semantic value of a sentence are 'fundamentally different – indeed independent – phenomena'. Our minds can be about one thing and our sentences about something else, in part because the 'aboutness' in each case is of a different kind. Take someone who thinks 'Gödel must have been a really smart guy', knowing him only as the man who discovered the incompleteness theorem. But what if we found out that he didn't discover the theorem after all, and that a woman called Schmidt did? 'Gödel' still refers to Gödel, but it turns out the person we thought was really smart was actually Schmidt. Hence 'our mind is about Schmidt and our sentence is about Gödel. Aboutness bifurcates'.

It follows from this that the truth of such sentences does not determine the contents of our minds. For example, we can truthfully say, in an important sense, that 'If Lois believes that Superman can fly then she believes that Clark Kent can fly' because Superman is Clark Kent. But Lois doesn't know this and so the truth of 'Superman can fly' does not determine the content of Lois's beliefs about Kent. It further follows that when we express our thoughts in ordinary sentences, such utterances may not make the contents of our thoughts explicit.

Sosa's paper is a good illustration of the traditional tendency of philosophers to use language precisely and formally. Words are the building blocks of propositions, used to construct arguments and truth claims. But for the rest of humanity one of language's main uses is very different: to tell stories. The question of why we tell each other so many tales has fascinated psychologists, anthropologists, and many other scholars for millennia. Elizabeth Camp, like many others, sees narratives as important tools for making sense of ourselves and the world. There are many ways in which stories can do this. One, suggested by Jerome Bruner, is that stories are 'part of our armamentarium for dealing with surprise' (2002, p. 29). They help prepare us for what might go wrong or for what we might not otherwise have foreseen, as well as reassuring us that surprise is to be expected and no matter how much we may be thrown by life, we can react. For Louis Mink, in contrast, narratives bring coherence to what would otherwise be a sequence of actions and events lacking in overall significance. Camp sums this up as the view that 'stories are a technology for making events tractable by knitting

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them together into coherent patterns'. These two views can be combined into the idea that 'We use stories to achieve a comprehensive understanding of a sequence of events, often partly in order to guide action'.

One aim such story-telling serves is the construction of a unified self. As biological animals we are born, live, and ultimately die. But what happens along the way does not necessarily add up to a coherent autobiography, unless we take on the role of author and help create that coherence ourselves. Something like this view has become very popular in philosophy and psychology, and although Camp is broadly supportive of it, she points our various ways in which this project of self-construction can be distorted by the norms of story-telling. For example, biographical narratives tend to be constructed as 'a lifelong quest in pursuit of an overarching goal'. Think of how many heroic stories and fables centre on the protagonist realising and then fulfilling their destiny. The problem is that many of us do not have any such ultimate goal. If we imagine that we must, we either end up telling a false story of our actual life trajectory or imposing some kind of inappropriate end goal on what perhaps should be a more rambling journey through life. Also, making the final destination the entire point of life 'holds the meaning and value of those selves hostage to the ends of their lives, in a way that leaves radically underdetermined not just who we might eventually become, but who we are right *now*'. The conviction of a singular, predetermined destiny highlights 'a particular path forward only by imposing blinders that conceal alternative paths'.

This is not the only way in which narratives can impose what Camp calls 'frames' on our lives, frames that may distort the true picture. For example, if we see our lives in the 'parenthood' framing we may neglect those aspects of ourselves that are not related to parenting. We may also prime ourselves to react as parents, rather than as the more rounded human beings we could be. Other identity labels can also lead to overly narrow self-understandings.

Camp does not dispute that narrative is a tool to be used in the art of self-making. But it is not the only one, and the risk is that when we focus too much on narratives, we occlude other important non-narrative resources. Self-making is an art which draws on more than narrative. For example, one way to grow is to be open, following our curiosities whether they fit neatly into existing narratives or not. We should not make the mistake of identifying selves with the lives that they live. We all contain more possibilities than can be told in any single, neat story.

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The papers in the volume all deliver on the promise of its subtitle: new directions in the philosophy of language. But this also invites the question: new for whom? Chinese philosophy of language is not just old, it's ancient. But for many anglophone philosophers, it is unknown territory. Chad Hansen's contribution is a useful and challenging reminder that many of the things some thinkers take most for granted are utterly alien to others, and *vice versa*.

Generalisations about Western and Chinese are always potentially problematic, if they are taken to indicate neat binaries and uniformity on both sides. However, some generalisations are both helpful and true: there are general currents in both traditions of thought that have tended to dominate and are contrastive. One difference identified by the philosophers David Hall and Roger Ames is that Western philosophy has traditionally been primarily 'truth-seeking' while Chinese philosophy has been 'way-seeking'. In other words, the ultimate goal of Western philosophy is to achieve a full and objective understanding of ultimate reality as it really is. In Chinese philosophy, the aim has generally been to find the best way to live and organise society. Living rightly has required following the 'way', or *dao*, which means following the path of nature. But the point is that Chinese thinkers are not concerned about whether we represent nature fully as it is, as long as we live in accordance with it.

The relationship of this to language is clear. Western philosophers have sought that their words and concepts map on to reality as accurately as possible. As Hansen puts it, this means ensuring that each individual mind stands in the correct relationship with the world. Chinese philosophers, in contrast, are less interested in the mind-world relation. 'The implicit goal of "knowledge" was not of picturing a material reality, but of competence, mastery, and know-how in behaving in real contexts,' says Hansen. Their concern is for 'a natural world in which humans cooperated via historically evolved social-political structures'.

Hansen has plenty of other things to say about how differences is the ways in which language is conceived affects philosophical theorising. One of the most intriguing is that the common-sense ontology (theory of being) in Western philosophy distinguishes between substance and attribute: substance being the 'stuff' the universe is made of and attribute being the properties of that stuff. But this is not at all common sense for Chinese, for linguistic reasons: 'Chinese grammar does not require a subject so can't require that there be an underlying substance with properties for something to exist.'

It is often says that philosophy questions everything. Anglophone philosophers of language should familiarise themselves with their

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Chinese counterparts, if only to enable them to question their own assumptions more robustly.

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