The Skeptic's Language Game:

Does Sextus Empiricus Violate Normal Language Use?

ABSTRACT: This paper seeks to critique Pyrrhonean skepticism by way of language analysis. Linguistic aspects of Pyrrhonism are first examined utilizing the later writing of Wittgenstein. Pyrrhonean language-use is then critiqued using H.P. Grice's concept of implicature to demonstrate shared knowledge between speakers. Finally, a teleological model of communication is sketched using ideas from Jerry Fodor. If the Pyrrhonist denies speaking to communicate mental states, we are justified in questioning why we should listen to what she says.

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Introduction and Preliminaries

Near the end of the introduction to his translation of Sextus Empiricus's *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Benson Mates considers two charges that are brought against the Pyrrhonean skeptic. The first concerns the plausibility of living as a Pyrrhonist.[1] The second concerns a popular tactic for refuting contemporary skepticism—the charge that skeptics unnecessarily abuse normal language-use and in so doing, make their position nearly unintelligible due to confusion over meaning.

That is, the philosophers of language might say, if we could simply get clear on proper word usage, we would be able to make progress on genuine philosophical problems and discard those pseudo-problems, such as skepticism, that arise as by-products of lazy communication. Mates regards the first charge as a sound way to critique Pyrrhonism, but dismisses the second as too strong a position to take against the skeptic.[2]

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1. It should be noted that hereafter "Pyrrhonist," "Pyrrhonean skeptic," and "skeptic" will be used interchangeably to designate individuals who hold the same philosophical position.
2. Benson Mates, trans. *The Skeptic Way: Sextus Empiricus's Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996): 85.

I believe this second critique is rejected too quickly and that language analysis provides fruitful critiques against the Pyrrhonist.

I will investigate the language-use charge against Pyrrhonism and suggest that while language analysis may not entirely refute Pyrrhonean skepticism, several tenets of the Pyrrhonean outlook are seriously undermined by this method of analysis. I will begin by employing concepts from the later writing of Wittgenstein as a way to elucidate the Pyrrhonist position concerning language-use. Next, I will attempt to critique the Pyrrhonist by implementing some of the pragmatic principles of conversation described by H.P. Grice. While the first two methods ultimately fall short of rebutting the skeptic, I will finally utilize Jerry Fodor's distinction between "saying" and "meaning" to argue for a teleological model of communication in which normal language users produce utterances for the sake of meaning and communicating the content of their mental states. Through my account, if the Pyrrhonist is unable to admit that his or her linguistic utterances correspond to pre-linguistic mental states, we can justifiably disregard the implications presented by the skeptic.

The Pyrrhonist outlook, or *agōgē*, is characterized by a refusal to commit to knowledge claims about the way things are. The Pyrrhonist is willing to consider several arguments, but opts for a kind of ontological agnosticism. The skeptic states, "what seems to him to be the case and is reporting his *pathos* without belief, not firmly maintaining anything concerning what exists externally."[3]

The assertions are phenomenological reports of what is happening in the mind of the Pyrrhonist, and result most often in a state of *aporia*, or being at a loss. This is the foundation of a central tenet for Pyrrhonism—that of "living by the appearances" and not concerning oneself with the distinction between appearance and reality. It further results in some very particular linguistic behavior on the part of the Pyrrhonist.

The skeptic makes no direct reference to objects, but rather must phrase assertions so as to avoid presupposing an objective reality.[4] Therefore, an assertion concerning the taste of honey cannot take the form of: (1) "The honey seems to me to be sweet," but rather must be worded as: (2) "It appears to me now that the honey is sweet."

Meaning as Use: A Wittgensteinian Approach to Pyrrhonism

The later writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein may serve to clarify some issues concerning language and the difficulties that arise in examining meaning.[5] By implementing some of his concepts, we can gain insight specifically into the linguistic commitments of the Pyrrhonist. In a series of published lectures known as *The Blue Book*, Wittgenstein departed from a camp of philosophers who sought to analyze and prescribe how language should work through the rules of logic. With his previous publication, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein thought he had successfully dissolved the perennial problems of philosophy by showing that they were only problems of our misuse of language, and that

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3. Ibid: 91.
4. Benson Mates, "On Refuting the Skeptic," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* Vol. 58 (1984): 23.
5. It should be noted that I, in no way, intend to equate the philosophical projects of Sextus and Wittgenstein, but rather intend to use concepts from the latter's writing to gain insight into the linguistic aspects of the former.

when our speech deviated too far from the rules of logic, we would end up uttering statements that were devoid of meaning.

This seemed like a promising way to clear up misunderstandings for many who worked within analytic philosophy. But Wittgenstein's project became frustrated by what Mates calls in his introduction, "the awkward fact that language users do say precisely the kinds of things they allegedly 'can't say,' and they do manage to communicate."[6] That is, communication does not seem to break down due to befuddlements over the logical structures of sentences or the correspondence between a statement and a "picture of reality." Complications like these led Wittgenstein to consider further the meanings of words and to posit a maxim that continued through his later writing—that a word's meaning *is* the way it is *used*.[7] This departure led him to focus more keenly on the social aspect of language, particularly on how meaning is established as a matter of convention.

Early in *The Blue Book*, Wittgenstein comments on the difficulty in explaining the significance of written language. He regards the physical markings that denote words as uninteresting, but notes that the *meaning* communicated by these markings gives them life.[8] This seems clear enough, but it also raises another question: what exactly is meaning? In this line of inquiry, we arrive at the conclusion that meaning must be derived from something extra-linguistic. It cannot be the case, for instance, that one word gets its meaning solely by association with other words. If this were the case, there would be some sort of "empty meaning" passed from word to word in an infinite regress that would get us no closer to its origin.

Wittgenstein's consideration of meaning helps to legitimate the Pyrrhonist's use of language. According to Wittgenstein's account, when we have described how a word is used, we have said all there is to say about its meaning. The whole problem of trying to account for the "essence" of meaning was a false one for Wittgenstein. On philosophers searching for the meaning of words, Wittgenstein wrote, "we are looking for the use of a sign, but we look for it as though it were an object *co-existing* with the sign."[9] The meaning is not another *thing* that somehow exists alongside the word itself, but rather is socially defined by the way in which the word is used.

This functional definition can help us draw a parallel between Wittgenstein's position and the Pyrrhonean tenet of acting by appearances to successfully participate in a linguistic community. Sextus would likely claim that language-use is a cultural norm that he abides by, and that he can successfully engage in language-use by learning the relevant cultural practices. There is no consideration for the Pyrrhonist about what meaning really is; there is only the appearance. All other questions pertaining to a word's meaning result in *epochē*, or suspense of judgment, and the whole question of whether the meaning of the word is identical with its appearance is abandoned.

Perhaps the problem of examining meaning is not a productive endeavor when questioning

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6. Mates. *The Skeptic Way*: 84.
7. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958): 5.
8. Ibid., 4.
9. Ibid., 5.

Sextus, or perhaps it really is a category mistake that has masqueraded as a genuine philosophical complication, as Wittgenstein thought. In either case, the consideration of meaning serves to bolster the skeptic's position and Mates' defense. A Pyrrhonean skeptic would likely point out that the acquisition of meaning in any environment is simply a matter of convention. Even in modern studies of language acquisition, there is little evidence that people have trouble correctly using language because of a misconception about meaning.

Furthermore, word meanings do not become problematic unless we make a concerted effort to examine them. We do not necessarily *need* a way to talk about meaning to participate in normal discourse. But, if semantics cannot offer us a way to raise issue with the Pyrrhonist, perhaps concepts borrowed from another linguistic subfield can.

The Pyrrhonist in Conversation: Gricean Pragmatics

Philosopher of language, H.P. Grice, laid out in his essay, "Logic and Conversation," some basic principles for the way conversation must work to be productive. These principles demonstrate shared knowledge between speakers, and this seemingly contradicts the Pyrrhonean tenet of living by the appearances. Grice takes as a pivotal point the idea that conversation happens between two people, presupposing that each is capable of understanding and conveying their thoughts through language.[10] Communication depends on a special kind of cooperation between speakers, and without this mutual effort, the conversation can never get started. Grice states that conversations are "cooperative efforts; and each participant recognizes in them, to some extent, a common purpose or set of purposes."[11] This requires speakers to meet half-way in order to move conversation along. Thus, our question becomes: can the Pyrrhonist live by appearances and successfully participate in conversation?

Grice notes that speakers are regularly able to engage in complex linguistic behaviors that do not always involve making simple propositions. Most notable is his concept of implicature.[12] This describes what often happens in conversation when a speaker implies a meaning that goes beyond the literal reading of her utterance. But, what happens within a conversation for the implicature to work? In short, exchanges like these necessitate an assumption of shared knowledge between the two speakers. Grice established the Cooperative Principle, and further denoted four general maxims for successful communication.[13] I will restrict myself to dealing with the maxim of Relevance to show how both following and violating this maxim demonstrates shared knowledge between two speakers. If conversation presupposes shared knowledge, then the Pyrrhonist is forced to admit that either he or she *does* have knowledge beyond appearances, or that he or she cannot adequately use language in order to converse.

The maxim of Relevance concerns the kind of information that is appropriate to

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10. H.P. Grice, "Logic and Conversation," *Syntax and Semantics* Vol. 3 (1975): 167.
11. Ibid., 167.
12. Ibid., 166.
13. Ibid., 167.

give in conversation, and Grice notes that this may encompass many different aspects of conversation, such as changes in subject matter.[14] This seems logical enough and we could imagine a naïve speaker assuming that all conversation must necessarily obey this maxim in order to be successful. But any speaker knows that in everyday conversation this maxim is not always followed. In fact, when this maxim is violated, some interesting insight is given into the complex nature of ordinary language-use.

Let us consider an instance in which this maxim is violated for the purpose of drawing an implicature to see what this can show us about knowledge shared by the participants of the conversation. Consider the following brief conversation:

(1) Sally: What is your opinion on the current healthcare controversy?
(2) John: It certainly is eating up airtime on television.

Here, we have an instance of an apparent violation of the maxim of Relevance by John. He does not provide information concerning his opinion to adequately answer Sally's question, and instead of directly stating his opinion, John notes another aspect related to Sally's query. This alone is not all that interesting, but what is interesting is what John may be implying by giving such a short answer and violating this maxim.

We may be able to infer from such a short answer that John would rather not talk about heated topics such as the healthcare controversy. Or, John may not be that knowledgeable about the topic, and instead of embarrassing himself in front of Sally, he tries to divert the focus of the conversation elsewhere. This is intriguing, but even more interesting is how John goes about establishing these implications.

For Sally to pick up on John's implication that he does not want to talk about the healthcare controversy, it is necessary for both speakers to share quite a bit of knowledge. First, John must know that Sally will be able to understand that his brief answer is implying that he would like to drop further conversation on the topic. He must assume that Sally is well accustomed to the linguistic practices that are typical of their environment and that she has the cognitive capacity to step beyond the literal meaning of his answer.

At first glance, one might question what television airtime has to do with John's opinion of the controversy over healthcare. The fact that the controversy frequently appears on television says nothing about John's view, but, it is likely that Sally will be able to interpret the implication made by John via his violation of the maxim of Relevance. Even if she is not able to pick up on his motive immediately, further questioning may yield his explicit response that he would rather not talk about it anymore.

This kind of extensive, shared knowledge between speakers poses a serious problem for the Pyrrhonean skeptic. The kinds of normal language practices, such as Grice's implications, which are carried out on a day-to-day basis, invoke a series of presuppositions that are as simple as assuming both speakers know the same language and as complex as assuming that another participant will pick up on what is

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14. Ibid., 168.

implied by a statement.

Grice's maxims and speakers' violations of them highlight the complex interplay between two speakers that often happens in normal discourse. Considering Sextus has maxims such as living by the ordinary regimen of life, it is not out of the question to assume that any Pyrrhonist would likewise engage in such linguistic behaviors as violations of the maxims described by Grice, and that even a Pyrrhonist would need to presuppose certain things to successfully participate in conversation.[15]

How conversation could happen for a Pyrrhonist may be difficult to see. It is tempting to claim that if the Pyrrhonist regards another person in the conversation as an appearance, then the possibility of communication seems halted. Any kind of Gricean cooperation seems impossible, for the Pyrrhonist would need to grant not only that there is another person present, but also that this person has a mind, can speak the language, and is capable of conveying their thoughts in an intelligible way. Sextus clearly states that to get caught up in the distinction between appearance and reality is precisely what diverts people from achieving happiness.[16] But, for conversation to work, even the Pyrrhonist must make commitments to cooperate in communicating. That is, communication depends at least partially on social contexts and this very idea presupposes other speakers, other minds, and inter-subjectivity.

However tempting this conclusion may be, Sextus has ways to respond. The Pyrrhonean retort will ultimately claim that all aspects of language, like everything under examination by the Pyrrhonist, are simply appearances. How language or conversation works may not even be an interesting question to the Pyrrhonist, and if pursued, would likely lead to the Pyrrhonist's *aporia*, or being at a loss.

We can charge the Pyrrhonist with speaking strangely or even frustrating the normal principles of conversation, but to claim the Pyrrhonist does not know how to use language is simply too strong. Sextus clearly knows how to use language but is unwilling to theorize about what meaning might be, what language communicates about another person's mind, or how conversation is possible. It may be possible to attempt to critique Pyrrhonism by postulating logical consequences of the Pyrrhonist's mental behavior, but so long as he or she adheres to the split between mental and physical life, the Pyrrhonist will always have a response to such criticisms.

Fodor: Saying and Meaning

In the cases described, the Pyrrhonist has demonstrated that he or she has a way of talking his or her way out of trouble, but I am unsatisfied with these answers. These answers exhibit somewhat sound reasoning, but the Pyrrhonist still presents complications for the philosopher and the layperson. My final attempt at a cogent critique of the skeptic will employ a model of communication that draws a connection between mental states and linguistic utterances. Let us call this the teleological model.

This model demonstrates the elusive connection between thought and speech that the Pyrrhonist seeks to avoid in order to justifiably

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15. Mates, *The Skeptic Way:* 92.
16. Ibid., 93

divorce her mental life from her actions. Finally, if this model proves convincing, we can justifiably ask, "why does the skeptic talk the way she does and why would we want to talk that way or even listen?"

There are two options for the skeptic under this criticism. Either he or she admits to using language as everyone does—as a tool to produce utterances that correspond to pre-linguistic mental states—or rejects this and leaves his or her interlocutor puzzled about the significance of anything the skeptic has said. That is, if the Pyrrhonist openly admits to producing utterances that have no correspondence to his or her mental states, are we not forced to categorize his or her speech as nonsense?

The teleological model of communication relies on mental representations that are made public by language. Two conceptions of meaning arise from this model discussed by philosopher of mind, Jerry Fodor. One version allows us to ask the question, "what does sentence *S* mean?" while the other allows us to ask the parallel question, "what do you mean *by* sentence *S*?"[17] In conversation, we often request disambiguation of how a speaker intends to *use* a sentence, not what the sentence itself means. The difference is that one question pertains to the meaning of a piece of linguistic information, while the other is concerned with how accurately a speaker employs a sentence to convey their mental state. The notion that "the act of meaning a thing is distinct from the act of uttering a sentence" allows the skeptic to legitimize his or her claim that Pyrrhonism calls for conformity with social actions, while effecting a great change in one's

mental life.[18] But, it is precisely this distinction that lands the Pyrrhonist in antinomy.

'Meaning' seems to be a different act from 'saying.' We can mean something different from a literal interpretation of a sentence, as evidenced by Grice, and we can ask what you mean *by* a given sentence, thereby presupposing a mental state that is the starting place of meaning, as in the case of Fodor. This model implies a kind of teleology in the act of saying, having some intuitive explanatory power. We utter sentences for the sake of meaning something, and when the meaning is unclear, we ask the speaker to provide more information until we understand the correspondence between the sentence and the mental state.[19]

Even the Pyrrhonist implicitly uses language to express her *agōgē*, thereby following the above model when speaking. The act of saying a state of affairs appears to be a certain way implies a special purpose in talking this way. Speaking in a way so different from normal language-use, the Pyrrhonist likely wishes to create distance between *his or her* meaning and the meaning of common speech. If the Pyrrhonist rejects the above model as positing unnecessary theoretical entities such as 'meaning,' 'mind,' and 'language,' then we are justified in asking what the *purpose* of the skeptic's speech is.

"But," the skeptic's sympathizer might interject, "the Pyrrhonist has a response ready for even *that*!" Of course he or she does. I have shown that the skeptic will always have an answer to these objections. In a way, these responses make sense. However, they are coherent only insofar as they employ a model

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17. Jerry Fodor, "What Do You Mean?" *The Journal of Philosophy* (1960): 499-501.
18. Fodor, 500.
19. Fodor, 501.

of 'meaning' and 'saying' that demonstrates a connection between language and thought. The Pyrrhonist is able to eek his or her way out of the philosophical corners he or she is backed into by appealing to a large set of shared knowledge and by attempting to make clear her state of mind through language.

We are only able to understand the Pyrrhonist's points by invoking the teleological model of 'meaning' and 'saying.' We keep the *purpose* of a conversation and the function of certain sentences in mind when speaking with someone, and these principles make communication possible.

So, in asking the Pyrrhonist *why* he or she talks as he or she does, we can anticipate a response involving 'social norms' and 'living by the appearances,' but, if the Pyrrhonean skeptic refuses to admit to using language to communicate pre-linguistic content represented in the mind, we do not necessarily need to stay to listen to it. ✦