

Eliminativism about Words

Traditional approaches to the metaphysics of words have focused on the ontology of such entities, i. e. on the question “What kind of things are words?”. Answers to this question include four-dimensional objects (Kaplan 1990), abstract types (Wetzel 2008), abstract artifacts (Irmak forthcoming), and so on. In this presentation, I explore the prospects for an eliminativist approach to the ontology of words, i. e. a view according to which there are no such things as words. The presentation is structured as follows.

In the first section, I provide some motivation for eliminativism about words. After introducing some standard assumptions about the metaphysics of words, I motivate eliminativism by discussing two well-known problems for any ontological view about words: the problem of creation and the problem of multiple occurrences. Taken at face value, both show that accepting the existence of words has implausible metaphysical consequences.

In the second section, I provide the basics of an eliminativist ontology of language and present a more elaborate argument for eliminativism. A defender of eliminativism about words should be in a position to explain (i) what kinds of entities there actually are and (ii) how those entities are supposed to account for the truth or apparent truth of our claims about words. The ontology I propose contains only agents, act-types and non-linguistic objects (sounds, shapes, etc.). The (apparent) truth of our claims about words is then explained in terms of relations that agents of a certain community bear to act-types involving such objects. At the end of the section, I argue that this analysis shows that words are explanatorily redundant, which constitutes another reason for its elimination.

In the final section, I confront the main objection against eliminativism about words, namely that it contradicts common sense and scientific discourse about language. To that end, I develop two versions of eliminativism, which correspond to two different ways of responding to the objection: compatibilist eliminativism (CE) and incompatibilist eliminativism (IE). CE holds that the truth of claims about words doesn't require the existence of such things. So, it is compatible with common sense and scientific discourse about language. On the other hand, according to IE, the truth of claims about words does require that such things exist. So, IE does conflict with common sense and scientific discourse about language. In defense of IE, I sketch a picture about the relation between linguistic theory and the metaphysics of language that renders IE unproblematic.