It seems to me that there is a persistent divide in the history of the philosophy of language and in *Linguistic Turns In Modern Philosophy* I attempted to track this divide. There are various ways in which this divide can be described or characterized. This divide is already suggested by the difference between paradigmatic Renaissance and Scholastic approaches to logic and language. On one side of the divide philosophers of language emphasize the systematic features of language, particularly its grammatical, syntactical, logical, or semantic structures. On the other side of this divide philosophers of language emphasize the actual practice or use of language, that is, language as it is actually performed at a particular time in a particular place by a particular person.

Robert Stainton in his excellent textbook *Philosophical Perspectives on Language* distinguishes between “the system perspective” and “the use perspective” and I found this terminology to be particularly helpful. The system perspective highlights “language as a system of symbols” while the use perspective focuses on “language as something we use.” Stainton also identifies a third perspective, namely the knowledge perspective, which considers “language as something we know.” In *Linguistic Turns* I ignored this perspective. I believe that this perspective is a subordinate issue that divides along lines that divide the system and use perspectives. On the one side is systematic knowledge of language and on the other side is practical knowledge, or know-how, that is used in coming to know what
particular speakers say on a given occasion.

Another way to track this divide is to follow Noam Chomsky’s division between linguistic competence and performance. Linguistic competence is characterized by a finite system of rules and principles that defines a formal system. This formal system generates an infinite set of well-formed sentences, and the finite rules plus the infinite set is a language. This systematic language must not be identified with fragmented and unsystematic individual linguistic performances that speakers make when speaking (1965, 4). According to Chomsky, “it is obvious that the set of grammatical sentences” of a language “cannot be identified with any particular corpus of [observable] utterances obtained by the linguist in his field work” (1957, 15). In fact, linguistic performances are voluntary actions that are not the subject of scientific study of language – the subject of the science of language is linguistic competence. This view is echoed by Jerry Fodor, who writes that a linguistic performance, e.g. “giving voice to an utterance” does not have nomological relations because it is a voluntary act (Psychosemantics, 99-100). What does have nomological properties, according to Fodor, is “entertaining a thought” and this is what Fodor calls “the language of thought.”.

Chomsky’s distinction between linguistic performance and competence can be seen as a successor to Wilhelm von Humboldt’s distinction between language as a completed and systematic product or Ergon and language as a free and creative mental activity. While the systematic product is subject to scientific study, the creative act “escapes [scientific] treatment” (Humboldt introduction xii). The locus of Humboldt’s
voluntary activity is different from Chomsky's – Humboldt is concerned with the creation of new words and languages while Chomsky is concerned with the production of sentences – they overlap insofar as both escape scientific study because they are irregular human actions not wholly determined by prior causes or principles.

The philosophies of language of the early Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* and the late Wittgenstein in the *Philosophical Investigations* seem to trace a similar divide. Wittgenstein himself characterizes this as a distinction between, on the one hand, language as an entity with a “general form” (65), “formal unity” (108) or “[logical] structure” (23), which is “hidden” and which “an analysis digs out” (92), and on the other hand, language as a “spatial and temporal phenomenon” (108) that “lies open to view” (92), something that is “actually used” (116), an “actual use” (124), and so on. Wittgenstein's central concept in the *Investigations*, language games, is intended to capture that “the speaking of language is part of an activity” (23).

Insofar as post-modern or post-structuralist thinking about language finds some affinities to the late Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, it is not surprising to find here a similar commitment to the idea that language is not a system with an underlying structure, but an assembly of perhaps inchoate performances or uses in time. This seems particularly clear in Derrida's early work. It seems that one of Derrida's main points is that actual language – language that is “visible” -- has duration, but a structural conception of language requires “simultaneity,” that is, a structure that holds at a time. This non-dynamic structure, Derrida argues, will always abstract from language with
duration, which will always be an incomplete manifestation of structure.

Since the unfolding of language in time is a locus of what Derrida calls “force”, structuralist conceptions of language 'stifle force under form.' With this in mind, we could characterize the divide as one between language as force and language as form.

The philosophies of language of Locke and Leibniz can also be seen to divide along the lines I have been trying to characterize. Locke believed that traditional logic was “a very useless skill,” “a curious and unexplicable Web of perplexed Words” used to “cover . . . ignorance,” an “endless Labyrinth,” and a “learned Ignorance.” Worst of all, it destroys “the Instrument and Means of Discourse, Conversation, Instruction, and Society” (E III.x.8-10). Locke’s animus is not just directed at syllogistic logic, but at the twin ideas that symbols and formal principles or rules guide human reasoning (E IV.vii.11). Locke believes instead that natural language is “the Instrument and Means of Discourse, Conversation, Instruction, and Society.” Language gets a starring role in the Essay Concerning Human Understanding and Locke concludes the Essay with the suggestion that “another sort of Logick” should replace formal logic, namely one that studies natural language (E IV.xxi.4). What Locke has in mind when he focuses on language is the “voluntary Imposition” of words to ideas and the “use Men have of these Marks” (E III.2.1-2). That is, what deserves attention is language as a voluntary activity, and characterizing this activity as a product of a set of formal rules and principles is misguided.

Leibniz, on the other hand, found traditional logic to be “one of the finest”
achievements of the human mind, and saw a close tie between language and logic.

Natural languages, when properly analyzed, express a “natural order of ideas” that is
“common to angels and men and to intelligences in general” (NE III.i.5). This natural
order of ideas is a combinatorial structure in which complex ideas are built out of a set
of simple ideas that Leibniz calls “a kind of alphabet of human thought” (1960, VII: p.186;
1970, p.222). Moreover, this order is not "instituted or voluntary" and it is not subject to
human control: "it is not within our discretion to put our ideas together as we see fit"
(NE II.xxviii.3 and III.iii.15). Natural language mirrors the deductive structure of the
mind's ideas, and even the argumentation of an orator with all its ornamentation has a
“logical form [forme logique],” namely content that is relevant to validity and that can be
exhibited with the principles of logic (NE IV.xvii.4).

One conclusion to draw from this apparent impasse is that we are just faced with
many bad arguments and, as Michael Ayers has argued, “the existence -- or persistence
-- of bad arguments proves nothing.” In other words, this ongoing opposition on the
themes of Locke and Leibniz, or if one wishes to push it back further, on the themes of
Scholastic and Renaissance approaches to language, are due to errors and
misconceptions that we can correct. For example, not only was Wittgenstein of the
Tractatus driven by errors, as the later Wittgenstein argued, but the later Wittgenstein of
the Investigations was also driven by errors, and we are now able to extirpate these
errors and consequently avoid this apparent duality. On this view, better arguments and
theories will allow us to develop a unified theory for both performance and competence.
Ayers suggests that “the solution to Losonsky’s problem . . . will lie in a bottom-up understanding of how speech can, of its very nature, generate logical generality, beginning with the primitive relationship between the content of our animal perception of our environment and the logical form of basic subject-predicate sentences.” He adds that a “main obstacle to a solution,” (that is, the bottom-up solution Ayers is proposing) “lies with top-down approaches that are either Platonically rationalist, or treat natural language as basically just one formal system among indefinitely many, as if we were free to choose another, or only prevented from doing so by innate hard-wiring. But to achieve such a [bottom-up] solution,” he says, “would need long, hard argument, ranging across much of philosophy.”

I think it should be obvious that this proposal is a non-starter as a solution to my problem. First, his suggestion only duplicates the duality that I see. A “main obstacle” to Ayers’ solution is the presence of the Platonist, that is the other side, which is precisely the duality at issue. Moreover, it seems quaint to suppose that “long, hard argument” will overcome this obstacle by eliminating the Platonist with what would have to be a ground-breaking, consensus making argument that will withstand the test of time. The history of the philosophy of language, and the history of philosophy more generally, does not support the hope that such an argument is forthcoming.

Second, the suggestion that we begin “bottom-up” and try to determine how speech “can ... generate logical generality,” assuming that the bottom where we are supposed to begin is the “logical form of basic subject-predicate sentences” begs its
own question. If we begin at the bottom, with actual linguistic performance or action, we need an argument that will take us at least to “the form of basic subject-predicate sentences.” Ayers takes this to be the bottom, but it is not obvious that this is the bottom. Moreover, even if we try to start here, we face right away a choice between the grammatical or logical subject of a sentence, and how to characterize the subject of such a sentence. We face the problem that many sentences -- “It's raining” -- lack subjects, and that linguistic performances, particularly informal speech, deviate constantly from structures and conventions. (By the way, I can't resist pointing out that there are over 200 definitions of a sentence available and it is unlikely that long hard argument will settle this situation.)

I am not denying that it is logically possible that these obstacles are overcome. I think it is unreasonable to suppose that I or anyone can demonstrate “that there are unanswerable arguments on both sides of a philosophical divide.” But this is not the only way to show that it is reasonable to suppose that we are faced with “some kind of irresoluble antinomy.” The persistence of the arguments on both sides without the prospect of a conclusive, consensus building refutation can also count as evidence. An argument based on this sort of historical evidence is not an a priori argument, but as I pointed out in Linguistic Turns, the conclusion I reached “is contingent, based on the persistent diversity of competing views and historical development, but I believe it is the one best supported by the evidence so far” (xv). Ayers' promise of an argument is not an argument, and the promise of an argument does not dispel the appearance of
persistent divergence. What Ayers would have to argue is that there is no such persistent diversity, and that he has not shown. In fact, as indicated above, the argument he promises to give us can only feed the apparent antinomy, not dispel it.

While it is certainly possible that we are simply faced with the persistence of bad arguments that we can overcome, it should not be assumed that this is the only possible hypothesis. It is also possible that there are differences that cannot be reconciled, even in cases where we are not able to demonstrate that the arguments on both sides are conclusively unanswerable. It might even be the case that some of those persistent differences indicate a basic feature of the human condition.

I take it that this is Hume's point when he refers to “the whimsical condition of mankind” in the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. According to Hume, the whimsical condition of mankind is that human beings “must act and reason and believe; though they are not able, by their most diligent enquiry, to satisfy themselves concerning the foundations of these operations, or to remove the objections, which may be raised against them (Hume, EHU, 207, 12.23). Of course, the search for foundations and the objections are the work of reason, and so at the root of this condition is that we must reason on the one hand, and we must also believe and act on the other, but these two domains strain against each other. Hume opens the *Enquiry* with an example of this tension, namely the “different species of philosophy,” one where the philosopher “considers man chiefly as born for action” and the “other species of philosophers consider man in the light of a reasonable rather than active being” (ECHU, 1-2).
former leads to “easy and obvious philosophy” while the latter species of philosophy is “accurate and abstruse”. But human beings are both: “Man is a reasonable being,” but “Man is also an active being.” Unfortunately, neither reason nor action can be fully satisfied. For human reason to be satisfied the “bounds of the human understanding” are too narrow, and when it comes to action, the “mind ... cannot always support its bent to care and industry,” that is, a life of action, business and occupation.

In the last chapter of Book I of the *Treatise*, Hume describes the dangers of a one-sided diet of either reason or action. The demands of reason, unchecked, lead to melancholy and delirium, while a life committed only to action and society leads to indolence and spleen. Both need to be kept in check in order to avoid these extremes, but even when in check, we are constantly balancing between the pull of reason and the pull of action.

My contention is that this whimsical condition has an expression in the philosophy of language, where the focus on action emphasizes the role of performance and the focus on reason takes us to competence. Moreover, linguistic performances and competences pull in opposite directions. Performances, which include mispronunciations, misspeakings, malapropisms, incomplete sentences, fluency disorders such as stuttering or cluttering, and much more, violate conventions and rules, while linguistic competencies can be captured systematically and recursively.

I think the whimsical condition of language is at least two-fold. Language itself is
whimsical in that it is, to use Hume's terminology, a mixed phenomenon that answers to the needs of reason as well as action. However, the study of language, particularly the philosophy of language, is also subject to the whimsical condition. On the one hand, some philosophers are drawn to the inchoate, improvisational, and unsystematic aspects of performance – how linguistic performances flout conventions and rules and nevertheless express and communicate content. On the other hand, others are drawn to the systematic features of language and the challenge to find systematicity and order even in the apparent chaos of performance. Given the evidence we have at hand so far, I don't think it is reasonable to expect that this duality in the philosophy of language will disappear. This is not just a function of the duality of language, but opposing tendencies in philosophic temperaments. While we may temper the extremes, the opposing pulls remain.

A second objection to my claim that language and the philosophy of language is marked by the whimsical condition of mankind is that it is primarily supported by the turns in Wittgenstein's philosophy of language. The tension that I am highlighting, according to this criticism, is generated by Wittgenstein's "relativism . . . rather than anything inherent in language itself" (Hill, 832). Hill argues that Carnap's conception of language as freely chosen syntactic systems and the late Wittgenstein's incommensurable language games do "frustrate attempts to unify the empirical study of language with a formalistic understanding of it" (Hill, 832-3). However, "there is no reason for thinking that Humboldt's or Mill's or Chomsky's syntheses are fundamentally
unstable” (Hill 833).

I disagree. Humboldt's view is fundamentally unstable by design. Language is both a rule-governed system that is subject to scientific understanding as well as a work of art that “cannot be measured out by the understanding.” What science understands is the finished product – the completed work – but language, in Humboldt's famous words, “is no product [ergon], but an activity [energeia]” (GS 7:15, 1999, 23). As an activity, it is a product of human freedom, and here “all possibility of explanation ceases” (GS 7:26, 1999, 31). The appearance of language and linguistic changes are “the unpredictable, immediately creative advance of human power” and constitute a rupture in the steady and predictable causal pattern of physical events. Human language, for Humboldt, is always a “mental exhalation,” and so no matter how much “we may fix and embody, dismember and dissect, there always remains something unknown left over in it, and precisely this which escapes [scientific] treatment is that wherein the unity and breath of” of language resides (GS 7:48, 1999, 51). Language is a product of mental power [Geisteskraft] and any attempt to explain it will “run from time to time . . . into knots, so to speak, which resist further resolution.” These “untiable knots . . . can neither be wholly penetrated in their nature, nor calculated.”

Humboldt, then, does not offer a synthesis, but a dualism about language that preserves in its entirety the whimsical condition. I believe that Chomsky intentionally and explicitly preserves Humboldt’s duality by sharply distinguishing linguistic competence, which is subject to recursive and explicit characterization by linguistic
theory from linguistic performance, which is intentional activity not subject to theory. Chomsky’s distinction between the “internalized language” or “I-language” and an “externalized language” or “E-language” also preserves this duality (1986, 19-24). E-languages are “obscure,” the bounds of an E-language are determined by “arbitrary decisions,” and there is no objectivity to what set of rules generates an E-language (1986, 20). According to Chomsky, “We can define 'E-language' in one way or another or not at all, since the concept appears to play no role in the theory of language” (1986, 26). I believe that a related duality is preserved in Chomsky’s view that while a theory of syntax is possible, the pursuit of a semantic theory is ill-conceived.

For this reason, I assimilate Chomsky to one side of the divide, namely the tradition of Frege. Chomsky extends Frege’s function-argument analysis to syntax, where syntax is conceived as a set of competencies characterized by a formal system of recursive rules. These are very important developments in linguistics, but they certainly do not present a synthesis [of competence and performance].

The case of Mill is more difficult to evaluate. However, one thing is clear, namely that his primary interest is in the “import of propositions,” and the focus of his analysis of import is what is relevant to understanding “inferences from truths previously known.” Thus his primary focus is not on linguistic performances, but logical form. Mill turns to linguistic action when he discusses the diversity and individuality of language. Individual connotations are guided by perceived resemblances, and resemblance is a basic, unanalyzable and felt relation that varies from person to person and moment to
moment. “The feeling which I had yesterday is gone, never to return; what I have today is another feeling exactly like the former perhaps, but distinct from it; and it is evident that two different persons cannot be experiencing the same feeling, in the sense in which we say that they are both sitting at the same table” (1974, 7:71-72). Additionally, people have different tendencies to associate ideas. Some people are more inclined to associate ideas that occur together at the same time, while others favor the association of successive ideas (1874, 8:857-858). Mill suggests that these diverse tendencies account for distinct sensibilities, the latter are inclined to intellectual and scientific pursuits while the former incline to art and moral enthusiasm. Whatever the merits of this speculation may be, Mill recognizes that there are mental peculiarities that account for individuality and diversity, but that also play havoc with the idea that distinct individuals performing concrete speech acts can literally connote the same thing.

It has also been suggested that Gricean approaches to linguistic meaning and Speech Act Theory more broadly are promising attempts to unify the formal features of language with speech performances. Grice’s own proposal, of course, ran into several obstacles that are all due, I suggest, to the whimsical condition of language and language study. First, it became increasingly clear that it was difficult to formulate individual speaker’s intentions that would capture literal meaning that were psychologically realistic. Grice’s formulations of the embedded intentions became more and more complex in response to a steady stream of counterexamples. For example, Grice (1969, 156) proposes the following embedded intention:
'U meant something by \( x \)' is true iff U uttered \( x \) intending thereby: (1) that A should produce response \( r \), (2) that A should, at least partly on the basis of \( x \) think that \( U \) intended (1), (3) that A should think that \( U \) intended (2), (4) that A's production of \( r \) should be based (at least in part) on A;s thought that \( U \) intended (1), (5) that A should think \( U \) intended (4).

The formal demands were outstripped by the range of possible counterexamples.

Second, Grice's intentions could explain neither semantic content nor syntactic structures without already relying on mental content and the syntactic structures of thought. The burden of explanation then fell on mental content and structure, and this is one reason the primacy of the philosophy of language in the middle of the 20th-century yielded to the philosophy of mind and cognition. Third, as Searle noticed, Gricean approaches need to incorporate linguistic conventions, but the conventionality of language is subject to the whimsical condition. I take this to be a lesson of Davidson's discussion of conventions. Literal meaning is autonomous and cannot be defined in terms of conventions and non-linguistic intentions. Moreover, conventions require a "rule-governed repetition," but interpretation does not require this. Speakers can interpret each other successfully without conventions, and successful interpretation depends on "intuition, luck, . . . skill, . . . taste and sympathy," which cannot be formalized or reduced to rules (1984, 278-9).

What emerges on Davidson's account is a dichotomy between what he calls the "prior theory" and the "passing theory." The prior theory captures linguistic competence:
it determines a language as a rule-governed structure that speakers and hearers share and that is in place in advance of an interpretation of linguistic performances. The passing theory is actually used in interpretation and it is neither shared nor in place in advance, but constructed on the spot to deal with the actual speech situation. According to Davidson, a “passing theory is not a theory of what anyone (except perhaps a philosopher) would call an actual natural language. 'Mastery' of such a language would be useless, since knowing a passing theory is only knowing how to interpret a particular utterance on a particular occasion. Nor could such a language, if we want to call it that, be said to have been learned, or to be governed by conventions” (102). Elsewhere Davidson maintains that “there are no rules for arriving at passing theories” and that “there is no more chance of regularising, or teaching, this process than there is of regularising or teaching the process of creating new theories to cope with new data in any field – for that is what this process involves” (107).

So this is how Davidson captures the whimsical condition of mankind in language. My contention is that the history of philosophy of language is marked by this whimsy and while one may hope for a unified account, there is little evidence that it is reasonable to expect that this hope will be fulfilled. I think it is useful to keep this in mind when teaching the philosophy of language and its history because it allows the instructor to deal with a persistent [feature] of such classes, at least from my experience. Students persistently and repeatedly divide along these lines, and this division makes it very difficult to convince students that there really is an overarching unity or
convergence to this field. The suggestion that we are dealing with a persistent dialectic explains the competing intuitions in the classroom, validates both sides, and it makes it easier for students to appreciate opposing intuitions, develop an interest in competing approaches, and not see the other side simply as a patchwork of bad arguments. What holds in the classroom holds for the discipline itself, in my view.