

GEORGE H. MEAD ON THE ORIGIN AND FUNCTION OF LANGUAGE

Chia-ming Chang

Abstract

This paper investigates George H. Mead's theories of act and language by studying the origin and function of language in the context of his social philosophy. An attempt has also been made to do justice to the richness of Mead's philosophy by comparing him with Oxford School philosophers.

Instead of probing into the historical origin of language and its possible formal conditions, Mead endeavors to find its empirical origin in the sphere of everyday life. This empirical origin is of three dimensions—physical, biological, and social. Given its origin, language must be operated in everyday life world. According to Mead, language serves the following functions: to facilitate the adjustment and completion of the act, to promote the social process of interaction and communication, to enhance the emergence and operation of mind and self, and to enable socialization and cultural succession.

Under the influence of Ludwig Wittgenstein, the Oxford School philosophers have devoted themselves to solving the problems of meaning, objectivity, private language, mind, and self. All these problems, however, have already been discussed in depth by Mead. It is frequently observed that convergencies exist among Mead, Wittgenstein, and Gilbert Ryle, for they all try to transcend the paradox of Cartesian dualism and to use language as the analytic strategy. But unlike Wittgenstein and Ryle, Mead has social behaviorism as his point of departure.