

What sorts of languages can there be? If empirical linguistics is as successful as it could possibly be, it could arrive at an inventory of all actual languages there are – and arriving at such an inventory would be no mean feat. But not even such an inventory would suffice for an answer to the question of what possible languages there can be. What sorts of languages can in principle be used to describe the world?

The present project will ask: can there be alien languages, languages that represent the world radically differently from how familiar languages represent the world? “Radically differently” can mean different things depending on what sorts of differences are at issue. What the project will consider, more specifically, is whether there are languages that are structurally different from familiar kinds of languages. The issue considered is not, for example, simply whether there could be languages with words for different objects and properties, but whether there can be languages which do not conceptualize the world as having familiar object-property structure at all. Central to familiar languages are expressions referring to objects, and expressions serving to predicate properties of these entities. In an ordinary sentence like “Rover is barking”, the name “Rover” is used to refer to the object Rover, and “is barking” ascribes a property to him. But might some possible languages carve up reality differently?

Assuming that there indeed can be alien languages, we can ask corresponding questions in metaphysics. Might some alien languages better represent reality than familiar languages do? For that matter, might some aspects of reality fail to be representable either by familiar or by alien languages? As we will put it, might there be alien metaphysical structure—metaphysical structure that cannot be faithfully represented using familiar languages? It is a well-known assumption in contemporary metaphysics that languages can differ in how well they represent reality. Metaphysicians debate what the language of the book of the world is. But while there are different views on the language of the book of the world, the debate proceeds against the background assumption that the language of the book of the world uses resources found in familiar kinds of languages. The question is just: which of these resources? But if languages can be alien, a vast array of other possibilities open up.

Underlying the project is the following idea. Even if philosophers and other theorists have presented very different theories of what the world is ultimately like, all theories tend to presuppose that at an abstract level, the world’s structure mirrors that of familiar languages. For example, there are objects (referents of names), and these have different features (various things can be truly predicated of them). Those philosophers who believe in such entities as facts routinely take facts to have a structure mirroring that of familiar kinds of sentences. But maybe there can be alien languages, and entities corresponding to the expressions of such languages, and facts whose structures correspond to the structures of sentences of those languages.

The present project seeks to address the above-mentioned questions in philosophy of language and in metaphysics. Perhaps surprisingly, they are not systematically studied in the literature. One might have thought that metaphysical investigation in philosophy pretty routinely involves considering these conceptual possibilities, but these questions are only very rarely addressed. It is a contention of the project that

significant progress can be made on these questions. Tools from contemporary philosophy of language, linguistics and metaphysics can be brought to bear in fruitful ways. The working hypothesis is that there are possible alien languages, and that alien metaphysical structure is a live possibility. The strategy for establishing the working hypothesis is by constructively describing what alien languages could be, critically examining arguments to the effect that there could not be alien languages. If the working hypothesis is correct, this has interesting implications for branches of philosophy such as philosophy of language and metaphysics. What are these alien languages like? Might some actual natural languages be, in the relevant sense, alien? Might the hypothesis that reality has alien structure shed light on some metaphysical puzzles?

The project is mainly a project in philosophy of language and metaphysics. But there are clear connections to other parts of philosophy and nearby fields. Here are some examples. Philosophy of mind: might some minds represent the world in alien ways? For example, might AI systems represent the world in alien ways? Philosophy of science: might some views in philosophy of science, like radical ontic structuralism, be committed to the view that there is alien metaphysical structure? Logic: might the formal tools of logic be of use when investigating the possibility of alien languages? Linguistics: might already some existing natural languages display what from a Western perspective is alien structure?

Activities within the project will include a number of seminars and workshops.