

Language, Attention, and the Geometry of Cognition: Epistemic Cones - ADDENDUM

I am not a professional philosopher; I am a chemist. So, when I started publishing my essays on Phil Papers, I explored the platform in more detail. One issue quickly caught my eye. Looking at the pre-set list of Categories, one outlier stands out: 'Continental Philosophy'. All other categories are either topical or methodological - why suddenly this 'geographical' box? Of course, this is a well-established, rooted in deep tradition, class representing a group of fields which were developed mainly in continental Europe. The 'non-continental' philosophy is conventionally labelled the 'Analytic Philosophy'. But here lies another contrast: now we have the 'geographical' label versus the 'methodological' one; apples and oranges.

One obvious explanation is the geographical proximity - Europe is not very large and in the pre-mass travel times that was bound to help the exchange of ideas. However, there might be another (at least partial) explanation of this 'anomaly'. As a rough illustration, I compiled two representative lists of philosophers commonly associated with the Continental and the 'non-Continental' (Analytic) traditions. The following lists are not rigorous data and inevitably involve boundary choices. They are intended only as illustrative snapshots of the standard historical and bibliographic consensus. Here they are:

Continental Philosophy:

- G. W. F. Hegel — German
- Arthur Schopenhauer — German
- Søren Kierkegaard — Danish
- Karl Marx — German
- Friedrich Nietzsche — German
- Edmund Husserl — German
- Martin Heidegger — German
- Jean-Paul Sartre — French
- Simone de Beauvoir — French
- Albert Camus — French
- Maurice Merleau-Ponty — French
- Jacques Lacan — French
- Michel Foucault — French
- Jacques Derrida — French
- Gilles Deleuze — French
- Theodor Adorno — German
- Max Horkheimer — German
- Jürgen Habermas — German
- Slavoj Žižek — English / Slovenian
- Giorgio Agamben — Italian

and the 'non-Continental Philosophy' (Analytic):

- Gottlob Frege — German
- Bertrand Russell — English
- Ludwig Wittgenstein — German / English
- G. E. Moore — English
- Rudolf Carnap — German / English
- Willard Van Orman Quine — English

- Karl Popper — German / English
- Gilbert Ryle — English
- Alfred Jules Ayer — English
- J. L. Austin — English
- Donald Davidson — English
- Saul Kripke — English
- Thomas Nagel — English
- David Lewis — English
- John Searle — English
- Hilary Putnam — English
- Michael Dummett — English
- Richard Rorty — English
- G. E. M. Anscombe — English
- P. F. Strawson — English

Let's have a look at these lists. The 'non-Continental Philosophy' converges nicely with the broadly agreed, well-recognised representatives of the Analytical Philosophy. Both lists have a large time span, covering different epochs with the widening communication range. The Continental Philosophy shows the expected mix of nationalities and languages. However, the methodological one, the Analytic Philosophy, covers various nationalities while English is suspiciously present for the majority of the group as at least one of their working languages.

Adding to this, let me quote the Wikipedia: "*Analytic philosophy is a broad school of thought or style in contemporary Western philosophy, especially anglophone philosophy [KM emphasis], with an emphasis on analysis, clear prose, rigorous arguments, formal logic, mathematics, and the natural sciences (with less emphasis on the humanities). It is further characterized by the linguistic turn, or a concern with language and meaning.*"

However, correlation is not causation. The emergence of analytic philosophy undoubtedly had many causes: institutional networks, scientific developments, logic, political history, and the growing role of English as an international language. Yet the linguistic factor still remains intriguing. The point is not that English created Analytic Philosophy. Frege and the Vienna Circle alone would make such a claim untenable. The point is that the language in which one routinely thinks and writes may act as a cognitive lens (<https://philpapers.org/archive/MARWHW-3.pdf>), making some paths through the epistemic landscape easier to follow than others. And the later dominance of English might have amplified and stabilised the particular thinking style already present in the Vienna movement.

An additional observation: the Analytical Philosophy considers itself "normal science" (<https://philpapers.org/rec/LEVAAC>). The language of all recognised contemporary sciences is English. Another coincidence?

It seems to fit quite well the argument I have made in one of my previous essays: "Language, Attention, and the Geometry of Cognition: Epistemic Cones" (<https://philpapers.org/rec/MARLAA-21>). Allow me the auto-quote: "[...] *language, attention, and compression together define the geometry of accessible cognition itself. Different cognitive architectures - biological, cultural, linguistic, or artificial - do not inhabit different realities, but they might traverse different regions of the same reality through differently shaped epistemic cones.*"

This correlation amplifies the question: was the rise of English merely a historical accident that served as a passive vehicle for Analytic Philosophy, or did the language itself help codify some of its characteristic methodological preferences? If language functions as a cognitive lens, different linguistic architectures may make certain routes through the epistemic space easier to access than others. This possibility fits well within the framework of epistemic cones.

What do you think?

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