Franz von KUTSCHERA: Philosophy of Language. (Translated from the German by Burnham Terrell), Dordrecht: Reidel 1975 (Synthese Library 71), VIII + 305 pages.

In Kutschera’s words, ‘This book has arisen out of lectures I gave in recent years at The Universities of Munich and Regensburg.’ (preface, vii). My guess is that the lectures were an enlightening introduction to the subject for any serious student who attended them. They make a book, I think, which is much less enlightening either for a beginner or for a professional. So Kutschera’s book illustrates one way in which lectures and books perform different and generally non-interchangeable functions.

Good lectures often come in one of two varieties. The aim of the more self-effacing (and with rare exceptions, I suspect, more valuable) sort is to inform auditors of, so to speak, the state of the art at the time they are given. Their not inconsiderable creative aspect consists primarily in saying what has been said more clearly than it has been said before, and in casting new light on old positions, illuminating their relations, both to each other and to the truth. The other sort of lecture sets out to break new ground, with the aim of letting its auditors be the first to hear the news. Kutschera’s lectures fall squarely in the first category. As such, they yield a book with a very wide scope — ranging from theories of meaning from Fregean, Tractarian, Quinean, later Wittgensteinian, Austinian and Carnapian sorts, among others, to extended discussions of theories of grammar, notably Montaguean and transformationalist, to a long concluding section on linguistic relativity theses, with discussion ranging, again, from von Humboldt to Whorf to Wittgenstein to Eric Lenneberg. Although these topics are generally treated in a quite responsible way, the price of such scope is exposition which is often sketchy, and at some key points, just unclear. Where Kutschera sets out to be original, or cast positions in new lights, these unclarities often seem to lead him down all-too-familiar garden paths — though it must be said in his defence that they are very well trodden garden paths — ones it is easy to be led down, given, as Kutschera evinces, a certain
pennant for premature formalization, or, as it might be put, given that one is a bit free and loose with the rallying cry, "Let's have a theory!" But these allegations need demonstration, and for that purpose I will now get specific, discussing discussions of Austin, Wittgenstein, Montague and Chomsky.

1. Austin and Speech Acts

Kutschera applauds Austinian speech-act theories as "a distinct advance over the representation or picture theory and over the use theory of meaning in the Philosophical Investigations". (p. 142) One reason one might regard such a theory as an advance is that it says something specific about what it is about the use of expressions that may be related to questions of meaning, or, in Wittgensteinian terms, which questions about use might replace some questions about meaning. Kutschera, however, sees speech act theory as a possible solution to another problem as well. In his words, "expressions as (classes of) phonetic or graphic objects . . . taken by themselves . . . do not mean anything more than stones or classes of numbers do." (loc. cit.) Taken as, e.g., English or German expressions, however, they do. What is it about their being specimens of English or German in virtue of which they mean something? How is it that meanings are, so to speak, conferred on them? Kutschera thinks he sees an answer in some current doctrines about speech acts, viz., that among speakers of a language there are conventions about what its expressions can be used to do, specifically, what speech acts they can be used to perform. Perhaps what expressions mean can be elucidated in terms of these conventions, that is, in terms of what, according to the conventions, can be accomplished with them. In Kutschera's words, "Performative meaning recommends itself as a more natural basic concept of semantics, with the help of which descriptive meanings can then be introduced as theoretical constructs." (loc. cit.) In sketching this construction, however, Kutschera finds it necessary to replace Austinian terminology by some of his own. Let us look at some of the details of how this construction is, or is to be accomplished.

First a word about conventions. The term 'convention' is customarily thrown around quite loosely in philosophy. One reason for distrusting it is that 'conventional' is sometimes used to contrast with 'natural', as if, in the present case, we produce the range of