

**MIND, MEANING  
AND  
MISCOMMUNICATION**

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

I examine various instances of miscommunication to look for factors that might provide a clearer understanding of the nature of meaning. My focus is on how meaning relates to mind. I am therefore concerned primarily with utterances as linguistic units in themselves, and only secondarily with propositions and speech acts formed from utterances.

I approach the task on the basis of the modularity of mind, and consider cases of miscommunication under three headings:

- (a) the acquisition of meaning (how children acquire language and thereby meaning);
- (b) the expression of meaning (factors that determine how we express meaning in our utterances); and
- (c) the extraction of meaning (how we determine the meaning of utterances).

I review various philosophical approaches to meaning, including those of Davidson, Frege, Grice, Putnam, Searle and Tarski. I assess their strengths and weaknesses in the light of the cases of miscommunication that have some bearing upon them.

In the final part of the thesis I attempt to provide a coherent account of what meaning is, and how meaning and language are related, before suggesting in conclusion that my proposed account of meaning fits well with the modular theory of mind.

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## **PART ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

I begin by explaining the purpose of, and motivation for, this study. I then summarise the underlying philosophical assumptions, set out some limitations, and describe some usages. After outlining my position on perception and perceptual representation, I end by outlining the approach to be adopted and the organisation of the thesis.

### **1.1 The purpose and motivation of the study**

My purpose is to examine instances of miscommunication for what they reveal about the normal operation of the language faculty of the human mind, and in particular the way in which meaning is acquired, expressed and extracted. No specific philosophical theory of meaning is adopted, rather the cases of miscommunication are used to assess the usefulness of different approaches to explaining meaning.

The motivation for this approach arises from two sources. One is the fact that for ten years I was responsible for the computer software controlling a proprietary complex telephone system, including the tracing and correcting of faults. Reflecting on my experience, it became clear that I had learned more about the normal operation of the system by studying its faults than I could possibly have learnt from observing it in error-free operation.

The other motivation is the parallel to this experience that I found in the field of neurology. It is clear from books on this subject (eg Sachs 1986, Goldberg 2001) that one of the major factors in the development of that discipline has been the study of people with brain injury or brain defects. A leading cognitive neuroscientist has explained the role of error as follows:

[A]ny system makes certain characteristic types of error when it fails. Luckily, these errors are very informative. Not only are the errors important for the system to learn, they are also important for us when we observe the system for discovering how the system works. (Frith 2007 p 132)

### **1.2 Some underlying assumptions**

It is not practical in the space allowed to outline the reasons for all the philosophical ideas that inform my approach to this thesis. The following points should be noted.

- The study is based on a broadly monist view of mind. It is assumed that everything that exists is either physical in essence or relates to the physical. No view is taken about how the latter relates to the former (whether property dualism, supervenience, etc).
- The approach adopted is essentially empiricist, although some limited concepts are assumed to be innate.



- It is assumed that there is a close relationship between the human mind and the human brain, and that any theory about the operation of the human mind must be compatible with empirical knowledge about the operation of the human brain. However, no specific relationship is assumed. In particular, when I discuss perceptual representations, I am referring to both mental representations and neuronal patterns in the brain, without commitment as to how they are related.
- The theory of the Massive Modularity of the Mind (Carruthers 2006, Bermudez 2005 pp 228ff) is assumed, including a language faculty comprised of various modules.

### **1.3 Limitations and usages**

The study is limited to a consideration of the human mind. No attempt is made to investigate whether the conclusions reached are valid for mind in general, for example alien minds or minded computers.

Many of the terms used in philosophy have a meaning that differs from their use in normal conversation, and not infrequently that also differs from their use by other philosophers. In order to avoid confusion I will make use of modifiers to differentiate possibly confusing terms, or in some cases create a neologism to convey a sense for which I could find no existing term.

I take communication to be in essence the transmission of information from one person to another, either directly or through a medium such as writing. Clearly, not all communication involves language: I can, for example, communicate my agreement to a proposal by a nod of the head. In this thesis I will focus on the use of language to communicate; miscommunication is therefore a failure in the transmission of information by linguistic means.

This study will focus primarily on spoken language, although some reference will be made to both signed and written language. Because I will also discuss the concept of a “language of thought” I will use **LOS** to refer to spoken (or signed) language and **LOT** to refer to the language of thought. References to the speech community include all modes of contact: direct speech, signing, writing and media such as film and television. In discussing language acquisition and speech communities I will ignore bilingualism: for simplicity I will assume that all speech communities are monolingual.

The term **utterance** will be used for any linguistic communication whether spoken, signed or written with its immediate context; I will not include purely non-linguistic communication. The term **utterer** will refer to the originator of an utterance, without distinction between speaker, signer or writer; the term **uttee** will be coined to refer without distinction to listener or reader.

The terms ‘sense’ and ‘reference’ are widely used in philosophy as translations of the terms ‘Sinn’ and ‘Bedeutung’ coined by Frege (2001 pp 199ff). The former term is a particular problem, since it is used in many phrases such as “common sense” or “make sense”, as well as to describe the differing meanings of words listed in a dictionary. I will

use **sense<sub>F</sub>** in the Fregean use of the term, **sense<sub>D</sub>** to denote the different senses of terms as found in a dictionary, and **sense** (without subscript) for all other uses of the term. I will similarly use **reference<sub>F</sub>** when used in its technical philosophical sense.

This thesis is concerned with the philosophy of mind and the philosophy of language, not with linguistics. Wherever possible, technical linguistic terms will be avoided. The concept of ‘word’ poses a problem for linguists, but the use of terms such as ‘morpheme’ or ‘lexeme’ in this study would introduce the sort of technical concepts that I wish to avoid. I will therefore use the neutral term ‘term’ throughout the thesis to refer to any word or combination of words that have a distinct meaning. For example, ‘black’ and ‘bird’ are terms: “black bird” comprises two terms; but ‘blackbird’ is a separate term.

During the main part of the thesis the term ‘mean’ and its cognates will be used (other than in quotations) in a non-technical general sense. Differentiation of differing usages of the term, as well as the introduction of other special terms, will be left until the concluding part.

#### **1.4 Perceptions and perceptual representations**

It will be necessary in the course of this thesis to make reference to perceptions. I will not be able in the space available to defend the view that I take on this matter, so it should be noted that I am making the following assumptions, whilst recognising that there are opposing views. I use the term ‘object’ in this section in its broadest possible sense to include all features of reality identifiable through our senses including, for example, properties and events.

I assume that every impact upon our sense organs causes distinctive patterns of neuronal firings within the brain, and that these patterns can be stored within memory and retrieved. As one neurologist has explained, “when you imagine an object there is partial activation of the same sensory pathways in the brain as when that object is actually seen” (Ramachandran 2003 p156).

I assume that there are (at least) two levels of pattern formation accompanying our perceptual experiences. The first is the immediate pattern arising from whatever is present to the senses. I will term this **image**, echoing Frege’s use of the term (Frege 2001 p 201), without any implication that this representation is pictorial, or limited to visual perceptions. We have a different image of an object (or a number of distinct images: one for each sense involved) each time it is present to our senses.

I assume that our mind/brain also creates and stores a higher level representation of each new object that is presented to our senses, that is a pattern of neuronal firings that identifies what are perceived as the essential elements of the image. Thus each time I read the preceding sentence I have four separate images of the letter ‘p’, but I also have a higher level representation that might be expressed linguistically as “an ellipse with a tangential line on the left hand side when viewed from below extending from a point level with the top of the ellipse to a point a least one half of the height of the ellipse below the bottom

thereof'. This means that I can recognise a 'p' when I am reading something written upside down, even though the image appears more like a 'd'.

Perceptual representations are therefore not images, but, in some way that I do not define, represent what is common to all perceptual experiences to date of the same object or of different tokens of the same type of object. I also assume that, at least in the initial stages of coming to identify a new sensory experience, this perceptual representation is modified as new views of the object perceived are experienced. So, for example, a child will come to have a core perceptual representation of its mother which is triggered whether or not she is wearing make-up, whatever clothes she may have on, etc.

I assume that when two perceptual experiences occur simultaneously on a number of occasions a link is created between the two perceptions (Hebbian learning, see Robertson 1999 p 13). Specifically for the purposes of this thesis, I assume that a link is created between the representation of the sound of a term and the perceptual representation that is triggered at the same time. This is discussed more fully in section 4.1.

### **1.5 The approach to be adopted**

This chapter and the following one form the introduction to the thesis. The next three parts form the main body of the work in which cases of miscommunication are considered, and related philosophical issues are examined. The cases of miscommunication comprise:

- Actual examples from my own experience
- Thought experiments which draw on my own experience
- Examples heard about or read about.

Each case will be analysed using some or all of the following questions:

- What caused the failure in communication?
- What does this failure indicate about how meaning should work?
- Does this support or contradict existing theories of meaning?
- What other lessons about meaning can be learned from this case?

Part Two is concerned with how we acquire language and therefore meaning. It will examine our innate language faculty and three methods by which we acquire the meaning of terms. Part Three examines how we express meaning in our utterances, and Part Four how we extract meaning from utterances.

The final part of the thesis will draw together everything that has been learnt from examining the cases of miscommunication. It will analyse the concept of meaning, suggest how meaning and language are related, and examine how meaning fits into a modular structure of the human mind.

## **CHAPTER 2: MEANING AND TRUTH**

### Case 1

*My wife and I went one evening to our elder son's house, in order to babysit our two-year old twin grandsons. In their house the lounge forms the ground floor and the kitchen is in the semi-basement. My wife went down to the kitchen with T, the younger twin, to prepare their tea, leaving the elder twin, H, in the lounge with me. He decided to help as well and started to go down the stairs to join them. Unfortunately he slipped and fell all the way down, but was caught by his grandmother before he hit the floor. He was frightened, though unhurt, and screamed loudly. His brother, T, immediately started to cry as well, and I rushed downstairs to see what had happened.*

*We were able to settle them both down and the evening continued until Mum and Dad arrived home. We were telling them what had happened when T joined in the conversation. "Grandpa pushed him!" he said.*

This true story raises two issues about meaning. In this chapter I consider the first of these – the relationship between meaning and truth. I consider briefly whether failure to tell the truth constitutes miscommunication. Following this, I summarise the views of three philosophers who share a common view about the relationship of meaning to truth. I draw a distinction between a sentence and what the sentence is used for, and demonstrate how this impacts on the claim that truth conditions can be used to determine the meaning of all sentences. Finally I make clear the concept of meaning that I will adopt for this study.

### **2.1 Communicative failure and truth**

In this section I argue that the fact that an utterance is untrue does not, of itself, constitute grounds for classifying it as a case of miscommunication.

I do not know whether my grandson told a deliberate lie (I was still sitting on the couch when his brother fell) or whether he was simply trying to come to the best explanation of what had happened. Whatever his motive, he failed to communicate to his parents what had actually happened. If failures of this type are to be classified as miscommunications, then a significant proportion of utterances must be considered to be miscommunications.

It is a fact of life that many people lie deliberately, that many people fail to tell the truth inadvertently by asserting as truths matters for which they have insufficient evidence, and that people make mistakes. I will return to the issue of error in section 4.3.

Leaving aside the issue of lying, it would, I suggest, be wholly inappropriate to argue, for example, that:

- (a) The claims of astrology are false;
- (b) Predictions based on astrology are likely to be untrue;
- (c) Therefore every utterance involving an astrological prediction should be classified as a miscommunication.

I will therefore reject the untruthfulness of an utterance as a reason for classifying it as a miscommunication. In the course of the following chapters I will select cases of miscommunication on purely pragmatic grounds. But for the remainder of this chapter I will concentrate on the alleged relationship between truth and meaning.

## **2.2 Some philosophical views on meaning and truth**

In this section I will briefly outline a common thread in the views of some major philosophers who have written about meaning and truth. I will trace the development of this common thread before moving on in the following sections to criticise some aspects of this approach.

### 2.2.1 Frege

Frege wrote extensively towards the end of the nineteenth century about logic and language. He distinguished between logical form and grammatical form, and set out proposals for analysing propositions, applying the mathematical concept of functions to language.

Using Frege's approach, a proposition such as "Mary sang" would be expressed as a function plus a variable: "Sang(a)" where 'Sang' is the function of singing and 'a' represents the person doing the singing. A proposition such as "Mary loves John" would take the form "Loves(a,b)" where 'Loves' is the function of loving, 'a' is the person doing the loving and 'b' is the person loved.

Using this method it follows that "Sang(a) = True" if the person represented by 'a' did in fact sing and "Sang(a) = False" if they did not. Similarly, "Loves(a,b) = True" if both the person represented by 'a' does love, and the person represented by 'b' is the person they love. By this means a relationship is marked between the meaning of propositions and their truth conditions (see Pietroski 2007 p 11).

This statement of the relationship between meaning and truth appears straightforward and eminently reasonable. It should be noted, however, that Frege is here dealing specifically with the meaning of propositions, and not with meaning in general. I will return to this point in section 2.4

### 2.2.2 Tarski

It was nearly half a century later that Tarski set out his thoughts on truth and meaning in a paper entitled *The Semantic Conception of Truth and the Foundation of Semantics* (Tarski 2001 pp 69ff). In an attempt to define the concept of truth by the use of meaning, he started from the claim that

The sentence “snow is white” is true if, and only if, snow is white

and from this generated a general statement in which X replaces the name of a sentence and p replaces the sentence itself. This general statement, which came to be known as a ‘T-sentence’ takes the form

(T) X is true if, and only if, p

provided that the sentence represented by ‘p’ is an accurate translation of the sentence whose name is represented by ‘X’.

Although Tarski is dealing with sentences, whereas Frege was concerned with propositions, there is an underlying similarity between their respective formulations. The truth of the propositional sentence “Mary sang” would be expressed by Frege’s method as

Sang(Mary) = True if Mary had sung

and by Tarski’s method as

(T) ‘Mary Sang’ is True if, and only if, Mary sang.

I will return to the relationship between the two approaches in section 2.4 after looking at the approach favoured by Davidson.

### 2.2.3 Davidson

Davidson’s approach to meaning and truth is the opposite of Tarski’s. Whereas Tarski sought to define truth by using meaning, Davidson set out to explain meaning using truth as a primitive. In his article *Truth and Meaning*, a quarter of a century after Tarski’s article, Davidson made the following statement.

There is no need to suppress, of course, the obvious connection between a definition of truth of the kind Tarski has shown how to construct, and the concept of meaning. It is this: the definition works by giving necessary and sufficient conditions for the truth of every sentence, and to give truth conditions is a way of giving the meaning of a sentence. (2001a p 102)

In a later article returning to the theme of meaning and truth, Davidson qualified the conditions under which a sentence can be considered to be true. He added two factors that must be included: the location and time at which the sentence is uttered. He therefore gave the following example of a T-sentence.

“Es schneit” is true (in German) for a speaker  $x$  at time  $t$  if and only if it is

snowing at  $t$  (and near  $x$ ). (Davidson 2001b p 470)

Despite the addition of two factors, Davidson's statement of the relationship between meaning and truth has an underlying similarity to those by Frege and Tarski. I will discuss this similarity in section 2.4 but in the meantime I will consider the views of a philosopher who suggested how this approach might be extended to other sentence types.

#### 2.2.4 Strawson

In his inaugural lecture at Oxford, subsequently published as *Meaning and Truth*, Strawson discussed the "Homeric" struggle between what he termed "the theorists of communication-intention and the theorists of formal semantics" (Strawson 2001 p 110-1). He discussed Davidson's views on truth conditions as one example of the latter, and suggested how one class of objection to those views might be answered.

To deal with the claims that "there are some kinds of sentences . . . to which the notion of truth-conditions seems inappropriate" (ibid p 113), Strawson suggested that non-declarative sentences, such as imperative and optative sentences (i.e. commands and wishes), can have fulfilment conditions that derive from the truth-condition of the related declarative sentence (ibid p 114). However, having conceded this possible modification to the truth conditional approach, Strawson rejected it and came down firmly on the side of the communication intention theorists.

#### 2.2.5 Conclusion

I have summarised how three philosophers have related meaning and truth in propositions or declarative sentences, and have noted a suggestion by Strawson as to how to extend this approach to other sentence types. Other philosophers have rejected this proposal. Miller, for example, talks about "the countless sentences of language that do not have truth conditions, but which are nevertheless meaningful" (Miller 1998 p 56).

I discuss below some claims that truth conditions even in declarative sentences are insufficient to provide the basis for a general theory of meaning, but before that I look briefly at what sentences are and their relationship to propositions.

### **2.3 Sentences and propositions**

In this section I clarify how I understand the term 'sentence', what types of sentence exist and how sentences are related to other entities such as propositions.

A sentence is a string of symbols. Those symbols may be auditory, in the case of speech, marks on a surface, in the case of writing, or movements of hands and arms in the case of sign language. If we take spoken language as an example, the string of symbols forming an utterance can be analysed at three levels:

- individual sounds (technically phonemes)

- groups of sounds forming a semantic unit (commonly words but sometimes segments of words)
- groups of semantic units forming a communally recognised unit (ie phrase or sentence: I will return to the difference between phrase and sentence in Part 5).

I am not concerned with the question of how sentence boundaries are determined, but simply with the fact that the sentence is a string of symbols. Those symbols can be used for a variety of purposes including to express a wish, to give an order, or to make an assertion. It is common to speak of declarative sentences, or interrogative sentences, or optative sentences and so on. But these are not attributes of the sentence as a string of symbols but rather of the purpose to which that string has been put.

So when I speak of “a declarative sentence” I am speaking of a string of symbols being used to make an assertion; when I speak of “an interrogative sentence” I am speaking of a string of symbols being used to ask a question. In many cases the string of symbols will have a specific form that indicates the purposes for which it is being used, but this is complicated by the fact (to which I will return in a later chapter) that sentences in one form may be used for a different purpose. To give one simple example at this point, ‘can you reach the salt?’ has the form of a question but will often be used as a request.

I have claimed that there is an important distinction between the sentence as a string of symbols and the purpose to which that string is put. However, the term ‘sentence’ is often used in the latter sense, which is why terms such as ‘declarative sentence’ are common. It is important to recognise these two differing uses of the term ‘sentence’.

One important use of sentences is to express propositions. This term is used to refer to a mental state that can be expressed by a sentence. So, for example, if I say “snow is white” I am expressing the same proposition as my German friend who says that “Schnee ist weiss”. I am not concerned here with the question of whether propositions are linguistic or non-linguistic entities, nor the relationship between propositions and Mentalese (see chapter 3). My point is that there is a difference between a proposition and the sentence formed in a communal language to express it

In this section I have drawn a distinction between the sentence as a string of symbols and the use to which that string is put. Confusion arises when the term ‘sentence’ is used in relation to the latter, as when philosophers refer to ‘declarative sentences’. I have also stressed that although propositions can only be expressed and understood by means of sentences, the distinction between the two entities must be kept clear.

This point is well made by Jeffrey King.

[W]hen speakers say the same thing by means of different declarative sentences, there is some (non-linguistic) thing, a *proposition*, that each has said. This proposition is said to be *expressed* by . . . the sentences uttered . . . [and] the proposition is taken to be the thing that is in the first instance



true or false. A declarative sentence is true or false derivatively, in virtue of expressing . . . a true or false proposition. (King 2001 p 1 italics in original)

## **2.4 Truth, meaning and sentences**

In this penultimate section I question Davidson's claim that truth conditions define the meaning of a sentence, even in the limited case of declarative sentences. In so doing, I make the distinction discussed above between the sentence and the purpose to which it is put.

The traditional view about truth and meaning is illustrated by the claim by Davidson that " 'Es schneit' is true (in German) for a speaker  $x$  at time  $t$  if and only if it is snowing at  $t$  (and near  $x$ )" (Davidson 2001b p 470). But consider the following conversation.

CHILD	Dad, say something to me in German.
FATHER	Es schneit heute
CHILD	That means 'it is snowing today'

In this situation truth conditions play no role in enabling both the utterer and utterer to understand that "es schneit" means "it is snowing".

Furthermore, verbal paradoxes also fail to meet Davidson's criteria for truth conditions. Kripke has made a telling criticism of truth conditions (cited in Taylor 1998 pp 133-134). His scenario can be summed up as follows:

- (1) A says of B "The majority of B's statements about X are false"
- (2) B says of A "Everything A says about X is true"

If apart from (1) B's statements about X are equally balanced between true and false, and (1) is A's only statement about X, then it is impossible to assign coherent truth conditions to either statement. There is an unresolvable paradox.

Platts has also claimed that some declarative sentences have no definite truth conditions (Platts 1979 pp 167ff). He cites the example of "Theo is large" for which truth conditions cannot be obtained until it is known what 'Theo' refers to. If Theo is a flea, for example, the range of the term 'large' will be very different from the situation if Theo is an elephant.

There is one further possible objection to explaining meaning by the use of truth conditions: that it depends upon the meaning of the metalanguage used on the right hand side of a Tarskian sentence, but fails to account for meaning in the metalanguage. It is outside the scope of this thesis to explore this argument in depth, but it is one that I find persuasive.

In this section I have claimed that the meaning of sentences, even in the limited case of declarative sentences, cannot be consistently explained by truth conditions in the way advocated by Davidson and others. If it does indeed fail in this limited case, then it fails as an explanation of meaning in general. In the final part of this chapter I consider the two different sense<sub>DS</sub> of the term “meaning” as used by Davidson.

### **2.5 Two senses of meaning**

In this section I provide a simple illustration of the difference between two sense<sub>DS</sub> of “meaning”, and then make clear which sense<sub>D</sub> of the term is considered in this paper.

Davidson says that “what I call a theory of meaning has after all turned out to make no use of meanings, whether of sentences or words” (Davidson 2001a p 102). In order to understand the distinction that Davidson makes between ‘meaning’ and ‘meanings’, we must keep clear the distinction between the words that form a proposition or an assertion, and the proposition and assertion itself.

If I say “I am twenty five years old” or “I will be twenty six next birthday” I use different words to make the same assertion. The two sentences differ in their vocabulary so that, for example, the second statement uses the meaning of the term ‘birthday’. The meaning of the two sentences is therefore different, but as an assertion they mean the same thing. It is therefore necessary to distinguish linguistic meaning of sentences from the logical meaning of their use (as proposition, assertion, etc).

In this thesis my focus is on meaning in the first sense<sub>D</sub> (in which the two sentences quoted in the previous paragraph have different meanings) and not the second (in which they mean the same thing). I will begin the process of using miscommunication to understand the normal operation of meaning by considering in the next chapter what the story that began this chapter has to reveal about the innate ability of humans to acquire meaning.

**PART TWO**

**THE ACQUISITION  
OF  
MEANING**

### **CHAPTER 3: THE LANGUAGE INSTINCT**

In the previous chapter I concluded that my grandson's utterance "grandpa pushed him" is not an example of miscommunication. Nevertheless, before going on to look at relevant examples of miscommunication, there is another important issue raised by his utterance. My grandson, at less than two years of age, (a) formed a sentence with subject, verb and object in the correct order; (b) added the past tense sign '-ed' to the verb, and (c) selected the proper form of the personal pronoun to make it the object rather than the subject of the verb. And he did all this without any specific teaching of these rules by his parents.

In this chapter, therefore, I turn my attention to what has been called by Pinker 'the language instinct' (Pinker 1994), which I will equate with what Fodor calls 'the language of thought' (Fodor 1975). For the purposes of this thesis I am going to accept without question that these are one and the same thing and that this "thing" exists, whilst acknowledging that there are contrary views. The focus will be primarily on empirical data and on implications that are more psychological than philosophical. This is necessary to provide a solid foundation for the philosophical views that will be discussed in later chapters.

I begin by noting a significant difference between the language of thought and other natural languages. I then examine the relationship between language and thinking, before summarising some empirical data about children's innate language ability. I conclude the chapter by drawing attention to some aspects of this innate ability that are relevant to the study of meaning.

#### **3.1 Two types of language distinguished**

In this section I outline the features of most natural languages, which I designate as "languages of speech or signs" (LOS) and contrast these with what has been termed the "language of thought" (LOT). In particular, I note a difference in the form of the vocabulary of the two categories of language.

Philosophers traditionally distinguish between natural languages, which evolved and continue to evolve among human communities (such as English, French or Mongolian), and artificial languages constructed by individuals. However, I suggest that a further distinction must be made within the category of natural languages.

In the great majority of natural languages a system of sounds is used to represent aspects of reality. So, for example, in French the sound that in English forms the name of the letter 'O' (written in French as "eau") represents the chemical substance with the formula H<sub>2</sub>O that is found in rivers, lakes and oceans. Sign languages used by the deaf do not make use of sounds to represent reality, but the position and movement of the hands and arms. Apart from this one difference, spoken and signed languages are essentially alike, and I will subsume both under the term LOS. Since I am focussing primarily on spoken language, as stated in the introduction, I will ignore the issue of written symbols in natural languages.

Languages require more than a vocabulary: there must also be rules about how that vocabulary can be used – the grammar of the language. Traditionally grammar is divided into two. Morphology provides rules about how terms can be modified (for example, add ‘-ed’ to ‘bang’ to indicate that the action designated by ‘bang’ took place in the past). Syntax provides rules about how terms can be strung together, so that, for example, in the utterance ‘the dog bit the man’ I can tell that it was the dog that did the biting and the man who was bitten and not vice versa. For the present purpose it is the distinction between vocabulary and grammar that is significant.

In his book *The Language of Thought*, Jerry Fodor argues strongly that in order to learn a language (ie a LOS) we need to already know a language. To avoid an infinite regression, he proposes therefore the existence of an innate language of thought (LOT), often referred to as “Mentalese”. This language is clearly a natural language but, equally clearly, it cannot use sounds or bodily movements to represent reality. It must therefore use some other means to form its vocabulary.

This makes Mentalese significantly different from other natural languages (which I will term communal languages). I discuss some issues about Mentalese in the following sections.

### **3.2 Thinking without words**

I look briefly now at some empirical evidence of thought without the use of a communal language, and go on to consider what this implies about the language of thought. This will prepare the way in the following section to consider the question of what forms the vocabulary of the language of thought, as well as what syntactical concepts it might include.

As I think about this thesis, I do so using my natural language of English, going through the process of “inner speech” (see, for example, Carruthers 2006 pp 232-236). It is tempting to think, on the basis of this and similar experiences, that I do all my thinking in English, and that everyone thinks in their communal language. There is, however, clear evidence that this is not so.

In the chapter of his book *The Language Instinct* that he entitles ‘Mentalese’, Pinker refers to “deaf adults occasionally discovered who lack any form of language [ie LOS] whatsoever – no sign language, no writing, no lip reading, no speech” (Pinker 1994 p 67). He goes on to recount the case, reported by Susan Schaller, of a deaf Mexican immigrant in Los Angeles who had no language but “conveyed an unmistakable intelligence and curiosity” (ibid). After he was introduced to sign language he led his teacher to other languageless adults. “Despite their isolation from the verbal world,” says Pinker, “they displayed many abstract forms of thinking like rebuilding broken locks, handling money, playing card games and entertaining each other with long pantomimed narratives” (ibid p 68).

If the thought processes of these and similar adults involve LOT then the question of the vocabulary of this language arises. Although Fodor discusses the vocabulary for his concept of the Language of Thought (Fodor 1975 pp 124ff), he does so in the context of

mapping the vocabulary of a natural language to the internal vocabulary of LOT. He does not discuss what is the intrinsic vocabulary of this language, although he does suggest that its scope may be less than the vocabulary of a LOS (ibid).

It makes little sense to suppose that we are all born with an innate vocabulary sufficient to represent the whole of reality. For pre-linguistic children and LOS-less adults I suggest that the only realistic contenders for the representations that form the semantic vocabulary of their thinking are (a) perceptual representations, most commonly visual representations and (b) conceptual representations. By the latter I am referring to concepts that derive from perceptual representations. Thus, for example, a LOS-less adult who has perceptual representations of cats and dogs and horses, etc, may come to have a concept equivalent to the English term ‘animal’ by generalising from these separate perceptions (see my earlier comments in section 1.4).

### **3.3 Some basic concepts in the language of thought**

If I am correct that it is perceptual and conceptual representations that form the main semantic vocabulary of LOT for LOS-less persons, there still remains the question of syntactic terms (ie terms such as ‘and’, or ‘so’ or ‘who’ that provide the structure of language). I turn now, therefore, to consider briefly what basic concepts *must* exist and be represented within LOT in order (a) to enable non-verbal thought and (b) to recognise and acquire natural language. It is not my intention to provide an exhaustive list of such terms, nor to justify my selection, but simply to suggest some of the more obvious contenders. These include:

- Linguistic concepts such as subject and object, noun and verb, statement and question (that is, the concepts that form the Universal Grammar proposed by Chomsky (Cook and Newsom 1996 )
- Ontological concepts such as objects, properties, actions and events
- Logical operators Not ( $\sim$ ), And ( $\&$ ), Or ( $\vee$ ), Material implication ( $\rightarrow$ ), Iff ( $\leftrightarrow$ )
- Comparison relationships: Equal, More and Less (for physical properties including length, area and volume)
- Spatial relationships such as in, out, on, under, to and from
- Temporal relationships such as before and after
- Some quantitative concepts such as all and some.
- Numbers up to three or four (Joyce 2002)

It is my contention that the existence of these basic concepts plus the perceptions and conceptions that accrue through normal experience are sufficient to explain the thinking abilities of pre-linguistic children and LOS-less adults such as those described by Pinker.

In this and the preceding section I referred to empirical evidence that there exists an innate linguistic ability that can be considered as a “language of thought”. I suggested that the vocabulary of this language comprises perceptual and conceptual representations which combine with innate representations of ontological, grammatical and relational concepts to

make it possible for humans to think without the acquisition of a communal language. In the next section I turn to the issue of how this innate language may be used in the acquisition of a communal language.

### **3.4 Innate language skills in children**

I summarise in the following paragraphs the empirical evidence for the existence of an innate language ability in children. I list some of the elements that comprise this ability, and note that some of these are lost if children are not exposed to language before puberty. I end with certain conclusions that are relevant to the study of meaning.

Pinker sums up the situation demonstrated by various empirical studies as “all infants come into the world with linguistic skills” (Pinker 1994 p 263). To make the point clear, he says “Infants come equipped with these skills; they do not learn them by listening to their parents’ speech” (ibid p 264). He is not denying that children acquire language by listening to their parents: he *is* denying that they acquire the ability to learn language in that way. This is clearly shown by the fact that children actually compensate for their parents’ linguistic errors, for example in the case of a deaf boy who acquired American Sign Language from parents who spoke it badly, and spoke it better than they did (ibid pp 38-39).

The innate linguistic skills of a normal child include:

- Recognising language (as opposed to other sounds made by people around them)
- Distinguishing their communal language from other languages as young as five days old (Pinker 1994 p 264)
- Analysing the distinct sounds (phonemes) of their communal language long before they are capable of reproducing them (ibid pp 264-265)
- Extracting grammatical structures from sentences long before they are capable of speaking in sentences (ibid p 268)
- Discovering regularities in language and grasping their meaning and use (clearly demonstrated by common errors such as using ‘mouses’ as the plural of mouse)
- Matching syntactic terms with their innate counterparts in LOT (which may explain how children learn to use words such as “and”, “who” and “why”).

Having identified these several components of the innate language ability of children, I focus in the following section on the last three of these, to which I give the term ‘systematic language acquisition’, since it involves the child identifying a system within the discourse of their speech community.

### **3.5 Systematic language acquisition**

In this section I comment briefly on the nature of systematic language acquisition and its essential difference from the other forms of language acquisition which I discuss in chapters 4 and 5.

As a general rule children are not specifically taught the meaning of words such as ‘and’ or ‘or’, nor the meaning of suffixes such as ‘-s’ or ‘-ed’ (in the case of English: similar examples can be found for other languages). I am not concerned here with explaining the process by which children come to understand such matters, except to comment that it does not appear to be conscious. The significant fact is that children learn the meaning of certain terms by a specific mechanism that is different to those to be discussed in the following chapters.

I suggest that the mechanism, to which I give the title “systematic language acquisition”, involves the recognition of a match between the use of a term in the communal language and an innate concept forming part of the language of thought. I am not claiming that Fodor is right in his assertion that children form and test hypotheses (Fodor 1975 pp 27ff); I am not concerned with the precise details of the mechanism, but simply with the fact that there is a mechanism which explains my grandson’s acquisition of the use of “-ed” to mark the past tense and the use of “him” in the object position.

It is of note that this ability is temporary, and disappears at around the time that children reach puberty. This point is clearly demonstrated by the case of a girl named Genie Wiley, whose experience was reported in a Channel 5 documentary about the brain (Channel 5 2007; Pinker 1994 pp 291-292). She had been kept locked up in one room of her parents’ house until the age of thirteen, with no exposure to language. When finally exposed to language her vocabulary blossomed, but she could not cope with grammar. An internet article about her experience reveals the problem.

Susan Curtiss, professor of linguistics, tempers this apparent success “She has learned a lot of words, she has an enormous vocabulary, but language is not words, language is grammar, language is sentences. So it wasn’t that she was mentally deficient, she was deficient in the mental faculty we call grammar”. (<http://www.mymultiplesclerosis.co.uk/misc/wild-child.html> downloaded 17/07/2007)

A significant point about the abilities that children demonstrate is that they are subconscious (that is, we are not conscious of these thought processes and cannot be conscious of them). Children are not aware that they are analysing the sounds of their communal language, or identifying whether it is a Subject-Verb-Object language or a Verb-Subject-Object language (Cook and Newsom, 1996, pp 215-216). My grandson did not consciously decide “I must start my utterance with the subject, I must add the past tense



marker to the verb, and I must select the object form of the personal pronoun”: he simply did these things.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

In this chapter I looked briefly at the evidence for an innate linguistic ability. This enables pre-literate or a-literate people to think and has been termed ‘the language of thought’. It also enables children to acquire language and in particular to recognise, learn and utilise those features of language that cannot be learned by parents pointing to an object and giving it a name. I have termed this process ‘systematic language acquisition’ and it is the first stage in explaining the acquisition of meaning.

I suggested that this process is subconscious, which raises the possibility, to be kept in mind as I examine how adults express and extract meaning, that there are similar subconscious processes involved in the linguistic behaviour of adults. It also appears likely that these processes are modular. Carruthers argues for three basic elements in the language faculty: comprehension, production and a common database (Carruthers 2006 pp 186ff). But within each of these areas there may well be distinct modules. I will return to this issue in a later chapter.

In the meantime, I emphasise that systematic language acquisition appears to provide an explanation for the acquisition of the meaning of grammatical terms by children. In the next two chapters I consider how children acquire the semantic elements of their vocabulary.

## **CHAPTER 4: OSTENSIVE LANGUAGE ACQUISITION**

### Case 2

*Johnny is a 4-year old boy who attends a nursery class. One day he goes with a teacher and a small group of pupils on a nature walk. During the walk Johnny hears the teacher say "Look! There's a red poppy". When Johnny looks in the direction that the teacher was pointing, the red thing that catches his eye is a red admiral butterfly. He therefore associates the word 'poppy' with this object.*

*When Johnny gets home he discusses his day with his mother. "I saw a red poppy", he says. His mother is distracted and just says "That was nice, dear", having misunderstood what he was trying to tell her.*

In the previous chapter I began to discuss the ways in which children acquire language and thereby meaning. I cited evidence that children acquire a portion of their vocabulary by associating terms heard in various utterances with innate concepts.

In this chapter I look at the way in which children begin to acquire and use terms that relate to their environment. I point out that this process of language acquisition is not the same in all cultures, although there are underlying similarities. I draw a distinction between the processes for learning terms for physical objects and terms for properties, actions and events. I discuss Quine's view on these processes and suggest that in the latter case he is wrong.

After a discussion about the problem of error, I outline a very influential view about meaning – that of Paul Grice. I review criticisms to this view of meaning made by Putnam and Searle, before suggesting another criticism that could be made based on Johnny's experience. I end by concluding that, despite these criticisms, Grice's approach is correct – but only within a narrowly defined scope.

### **4.1 Learning the names of objects**

In this section I consider what Johnny's experience reveals about the process by which young children begin to acquire and use vocabulary relating to their physical environment. I have already shown in the previous chapter that they have an innate awareness of, and the ability to acquire, language. My concern here, and in the following section, is how that ability actually operates in developing an initial semantic vocabulary, that is, in learning the meaning of terms relating to the environment.

When Johnny heard his teacher say "Look! There's a red poppy", he knew that she was giving a name to some feature in the immediate environment. It was a natural process, part of his innate language faculty, for him to associate the sounds of the name "poppy" with such an object. The only problem was that he associated it with the wrong object.

It is tempting to think that the way that young children begin acquiring a vocabulary is not simply ostensive, but is deliberately ostensive. We think of Mum and Dad pointing out people and objects to the child and at the same time making a sound. As a result, a representation of the sounds forming the term becomes linked in the child's mind with a perceptual representation (either via a single modality such as vision, or combining several modalities). This link is strengthened by repetition until the child automatically associates terms such as 'mummy', 'daddy' or 'spoon' with what they represent and thereby acquires their meaning.

The process of creating a link between the representation of a term and the representation of an object when both are perceived simultaneously is an example of the procedure known as "Hebbian learning". This has been described as "cells that fire together, wire together" (Robertson 1999 p 13). It is not essentially different from the mechanism whereby Pavlov's dogs learned to salivate at the sound of a bell. The significant fact in the case of children and language is the innate recognition of the role of language (see the previous chapter).

However, linguistic studies have shown that this pattern of parental involvement is not universal. Shirley Brice Heath studied the upbringing of children in three neighbourhoods of a city in the south east of the United States of America. She found that in one of these communities children were left to pick up language by their own efforts, simply by being exposed to the language of adults. There was no parent to child language teaching, and the child's attempts to replicate language were ignored until the child reached the stage of being able to intervene in adult conversations. (Heath 1994 pp 84-87)

Although in this situation there is no deliberate ostensive learning of new terms, the process still requires simultaneity in the perception of the sounds that constitute the name of an object and the perception of the object. The process would seem to involve remembering this pattern of coincidence until over a period of time the consistent link between sound and object is recognised. There appear to be good reasons for assuming that this is a modular process and that it is subconscious, but a defence of this view is beyond the scope of this study. I will term this style of language acquisition 'quasi-ostensive', and unless the context dictates otherwise, future references to ostensive language acquisition should be taken to include quasi-ostensive acquisition.

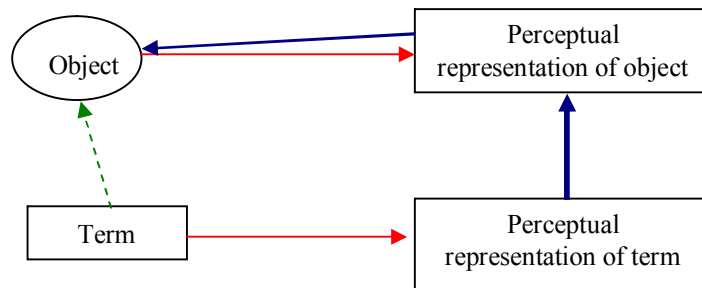
The process of ostensive language acquisition has been described by Quine in the following terms.

We can account in this way for the power that the sound of the word 'dog' has to draw our attention to a dog that we would have otherwise overlooked. The account is as follows: a trace survives of a past episode of impingement from which we learned the word; an episode, that, in which the creature was vividly seen and the word heard. The present episode of impingements resembles that one in part, namely in the sound of the word. Consequently the trace of the past episode enhances the salience of other points of resemblance, and lo the dog. (Quine 1974 pp 26-27)

In Johnny’s case the sound was associated with the wrong object, that is the link from the representation of the term “poppy” was made to a visual representation of a butterfly in contrast with the link intended by the teacher to (Johnny’s visual representation of) a poppy.

This link between the representation of a term and a perceptual representation of an object applies to all modalities. It is not important for our current purposes whether there is a single combined representation of all the relevant perceptions (visual, auditory, tactile, etc) or whether there are separate perceptual representations that are linked in some way. The point at issue is that the representation of the term is linked to one or more perceptual representations.

It perhaps needs to be emphasised that there is no direct link created between the representation of the word and the actual object in the real world to which the word relates. The link between term and meaning is purely conventional – it cannot be passed to the child as some sort of attachment to the word. When children learn new terms, the link from term to object is via the perceptual representation of that object, as shown in the following diagram (where red indicates sensory perceptions, blue the link from representation of term to object via the perceptual representation of that object, and green the conventional link between word and object).



*Figure 4.1 Links between term and object*

In this section I discussed how children begin to learn the meaning of terms related to objects within their environment. In many communities parents and others point to objects and simultaneously speak their name, so that children learn the terms ostensively. In other communities the children are left to acquire such terms by repeated association of term and object in the speech of their elders. In either case the process is one aspect of the child’s innate language ability and results in a link being created between the representation of the term and the representation of the object, and thereby the object itself.

#### **4.2 Learning about properties, actions and events**

Children do not only learn the meaning of terms for objects: they also at an early stage acquire terms of properties, actions and events. In this section I limit my discussion to learning the names of properties; I assume that a similar case can be made for other entities

such as actions and events. I am also assuming that properties exist, without any commitment to a particular ontological theory. I claim that Quine's explanation for how property terms are acquired is wrong, and that the process is in essence the same as that for objects.

The process of learning terms described in the previous section does not only apply to objects. As a parent I have observed the same process at work for events, for actions and for properties. One of the earliest games I played with my elder son used his coloured bricks. "Bring me a red brick", I would say, or "Bring me a yellow brick", and he was soon getting it right every time.

Quine suggests a quite different process for learning the term for a property such as 'red'. He suggests that in the natural course of babbling (see Pinker 1994 pp 265-266) a child may produce the sounds making up 'red' and that this might coincide with the presence of something red in their vicinity. The parent rewards the child in some way for this match between their babbling and their surroundings and the pleasure of this experience prompts the child to try and repeat it. Further utterances of the sound 'red' when red objects are present also bring approval and reinforce the link, until the child acquires the term 'red'. (Quine 1974 p 29).

This claim appears to fly in the face of both common sense and empirical evidence. The chances of a child's babble forming the word 'red' simultaneously with the presence of a red object in the vicinity and simultaneously with the attention of a parent to applaud the coincidence seem extremely remote. Furthermore, as the study by Shirley Brice Heath revealed (see above), in some communities children's attempts at language are ignored until they are speaking properly.

There seems to be no obvious reason to suggest a substantially different mechanism for acquiring the meaning of property terms to that used to acquire the names of objects. In the latter case the child recognises a repeated match between the perception of an object and the perception of a sound, either in the course of deliberate adult to child conversation or by listening to adult to adult conversation. In the case of properties the child perceives a repeated match between the perception of a sound and several different objects and recognises some property that the objects have in common. In both cases the repeated matching results in the acquisition of meaning for the term involved.

In the case of objects the representation of a term for an object is, I have claimed, linked to a perceptual representation of that object. Since properties are features that are common to many objects, there is no common perceptual representation. Whilst a detailed defence of my view is not possible within the scope of this thesis, it is my assumption that the process discussed above of recognising a property involves the formation of a concept and thus a conceptual representation. Since I have already suggested, in the previous chapter, that the representations of syntactical terms are linked to innate concepts, ie conceptual representations, I will use the term 'perceptual concepts' for concepts derived from perceptions.

In this and the preceding section, I have outlined the process by which children acquire that part of their vocabulary that relates to their immediate environment: a process that went awry in the case of Johnny and the ‘poppy’. Because Johnny associated his perceptual representation of a red admiral butterfly with a term having a different meaning in his communal language, he failed to transmit successfully the information that he intended to convey. Even though his mother understood the meaning of the utterance, she failed to grasp Johnny's intention.

One philosophical approach to meaning – that of Paul Grice – derives meaning from intention. It is therefore appropriate at this point to review this approach and to consider what this case of miscommunication tells us about it, but before doing so I need to face up to the problem of error.

#### **4.3 The Causal Theory of Representation and the problem of error**

Although I have not accepted Fodor’s concept of Mentalese in full, I have assumed a causal relationship between an object that is perceived and its perceptual representation (see section 1.4), and have also suggested that this perceptual representation might equate to what Fodor terms a “Mentalese symbol”. In broad terms therefore my approach matches what Fodor has termed the “Crude Causal Theory” of representation (Fodor 2005 p 225). The charge most commonly made against any causal theory is that it cannot accommodate error.

It is not my intention to provide a definitive answer to this charge, but simply to note that I am assuming that an answer can be made in line with Fodor’s own attempt at an answer. The problem to be addressed is not that of Johnny’s experience, which involved error at the stage of learning the name of an object. Rather, the “problem of error” is the problem that occurs after a term has been used correctly and is then misused.

To illustrate the problem, let us assume that Johnny in due course learns the term ‘horse’ and can correctly respond with it whenever he encounters a horse. However, one evening he sees a cow in the distance and responds with the word “horse”. How are we to show that this is an error, and that the term ‘horse’ (at least in Johnny’s idiolect) does not mean “horse or cow”? Fodor argues that the answer is to be found in the semantic relationship between the object (horse) and its representation in the mind (ibid pp 230-232). Johnny’s use of the term ‘horse’ when seeing a cow can be explained as a mistake because that term is regularly used by the speech community for a particular type of quadruped. By contrast, it cannot be explained by the use by the speech community of the term ‘cow’ applied to cows. It is this asymmetry of semantic relationship that explains why error does not negate the causal theory of representation.

Whilst not claiming that this is a full answer to the problem of error (see for example Miller 1998 pp 190-196), it is my assumption for the purposes of this thesis that the problem does not invalidate the broadly causal approach to meaning that I am adopting.

#### **4.4 Grice on meaning**

In this section I look at some of the issues raised by Grice's 1957 article entitled *Meaning*. I begin by summarising Grice's argument for the distinction between natural and non-natural meaning. I then outline his claim for the priority of explanation of meaning falling on individual utterances, before rehearsing his threefold exegesis of meaning. In the immediately following section I discuss several criticisms of Grice's approach.

##### *4.4.1 Natural and Non-Natural Meaning*

In his article Grice draws a distinction between "natural meaning" (which he refers to as meaning<sub>N</sub>) and "non-natural meaning" (meaning<sub>NN</sub>). An example of natural meaning provided by Grice is the presence of spots on a measles sufferer (Grice 2001a p 92). The spots mean<sub>N</sub> that the person has measles: one cannot say, points out Grice, "Those spots mean measles, but he has not got measles" (although one could say "I thought those spots meant measles but I was wrong") (ibid).

An example of non-natural meaning would be a blue flashing light. I might say: "There is a blue flashing light ahead; that means an emergency vehicle". I could say this because there is a convention in this country that a blue flashing light on a vehicle indicates an emergency vehicle. I could however be placed in the position of having to say "A blue flashing light means an emergency vehicle, but there is no emergency vehicle, it is a boy with a blue torch, which he is turning on and off".

Grice's first claim, then, is that communication involves non-natural meaning. His second claim concerns where the priority lies in explaining meaning, and that is the subject of the following section.

##### *4.4.2 Explanatory priority*

Grice makes reference to what he terms "causal theories" of meaning, which locate meaning in what Stevenson had called "an elaborate process of conditioning attending the use of the sign in communication" (ibid p 93). In essence, this means that a speaker selects the terms forming his or her utterance based on the general use of those terms by the language community. Grice rejects this view, and argues that it is the intention of the speaker in individual utterances that must be explained first and that communal meaning derives from individual meaning.

This is how Grice sums up his argument:

No provision is made [in the causal theory] for dealing with statements about what a particular speaker or writer means by a sign on a particular occasion (which may well diverge from the standard meaning of the sign); nor is it obvious how the theory could be adapted to make such provision. One might even go further in criticism and maintain that the causal theory

ignores the fact that the meaning (in general) of a sign needs to be explained in terms of what users of the sign do (or should) mean by it on particular occasions; and so the latter notion, which is unexplained by the causal theory, is in fact the fundamental one. (ibid p 94)

So for Grice a theory of meaning must explain meaning in individual utterances first, and use that to explain meaning in the general communications of the speech community. I return to this point in section 4.4 below, after I review how Grice summarised his theory of meaning.

#### 4.4.3 Grice's theory of meaning

Grice does not limit his analysis of meaningful utterances to language but includes other behaviour that is intended to communicate. Many of the examples of utterances that he uses to defend his view of meaning are in fact non-verbal, and I will not review them here. I will apply, and criticise, his theory of meaning solely in relation to verbal utterances.

Grice begins with the idea that “ ‘x meant<sub>NN</sub> something’ would be true if x was intended by its utterer to induce a belief in some ‘audience’ ” (ibid p 94). But after finding several faults with this simple explanation he extends it to include a requirement that the audience recognise that this is the speaker's intention. He therefore ends up by asserting that “ ‘A meant<sub>NN</sub> something by x’ is roughly equivalent to ‘A uttered x with the intention of producing a belief by means of the recognition of this intention’ ” (ibid p 95).

In the preceding paragraphs I have summarised the main points of Grice's article on *Meaning*, noting (i) his distinction between natural and non-natural meaning, (ii) his claim that individual utterances have explanatory priority over general community usage and (iii) his summing up of non-natural meaning in utterances. The first of these points is non-controversial, but the latter two will be discussed in the following section.

### **4.5 Some alleged flaws in Grice's analysis**

In this section I outline some alleged flaws in Grice's analysis. After a brief reference to objections by Putnam and Searle, I make a further objection based on Johnny's experience.

#### 4.5.1 Putnam's objection

In a famous article in 1973 Putnam attacked Grice's claim that meaning is to be located in the intentions of the utterer. He produced a thought experiment in which the term 'water' is used on this earth to refer to one substance (ie H<sub>2</sub>O), but on an otherwise identical planet called 'Twin Earth' is used to refer to a different substance (to which he gives the formula XYZ) (Putnam 2001 p 289).

It was Putnam's aim to demonstrate that two people (one on Earth and one on Twin Earth but otherwise indistinguishable) could utter the same term with the same intention,



yet the meaning of that term differ between the two cases. Both speakers intended to refer to the substance that fills rivers and lakes, and the drinking of which is essential to life: but they are two distinct substances. Putnam sums up his claim by saying “Cut the pie any way you like, ‘meanings’ just ain’t in the head!” (ibid p 291).

Putnam goes on to claim that the meaning of terms is determined by the linguistic community, and that the community often delegate the tasks to specialists (ibid p 292). He points out that individuals may learn a term such as “gold” and recognise items that are made of gold; nevertheless, individuals may be wrong. It is the expert who determines what is, and is not, gold.

So Putnam’s objection to Grice is that the latter is wrong to locate meaning in the intentions of the utterer; meaning, says Putnam, is determined by the environment and the linguistic community.

#### 4.5.2 Searle’s objection

Searle also attacks Grice’s link between meaning and intention, but from a different angle. He claims in a 1965 article that Grice fails to “show the connection between one’s meaning something by what one says and what that which one says actually means in the language” (Searle 2005 p 189). He illustrates this point with a simple thought experiment.

An American soldier in World War II is captured by Italians. He speaks the only words of German that he knows, hoping that his captors will identify his words as German and draw the conclusion that he is a German officer. The words he speaks, taken from a German song, actually mean “Do you know the land where the lemon trees bloom?”, but the intentional meaning in the mind of the speaker is “I am a German officer” (ibid pp 189-190). In this situation, argues Searle, there is a clear difference between what the speaker intended the hearers to understand, and what the utterance actually means.

Searle returned to this distinction in a later article discussing indirect speech acts. These are speech acts which are expressed in one form whilst meaning something else. For example, a question “Can you reach the salt?” may in fact be meant as a request to pass the salt. Searle says that “in hints, insinuations, irony and metaphor – to mention a few examples – the speaker’s utterance meaning and the sentence meaning come apart” (Searle 2001 p 176).

Searle’s objection to Grice is, at least in part, that Grice is wrong to locate meaning *solely* within the intentions of the utterer. Instead, a distinction is to be made between two different types of meaning: “utterer’s meaning” and “utterance meaning”. I will return to this point in a later chapter. In the meantime I will examine what might be considered a further flaw in Grice’s approach.

### 4.5.3 A further objection

The reason that Johnny failed to express to his mother the meaning that he intended to express is that he had failed to use the correct term, recognised by the speech community, for the object about which he was speaking. This could be seen as a further flaw in Grice's approach: he fails to explain how the utterer acquired the term(s) that he uses to express his meaning. As a general rule we must acquire terms and their meanings, in the ways already discussed (and the further way to be considered in the following chapter) before we can use them to communicate our intentions to others.

It appears therefore that there are three criticisms of Grice's attempt to explain meaning:

- Meaning is determined by the external environment and the linguistic community, not the intentions of the individual
- In some types of utterance, there is a difference between the intended meaning of the utterer and the meaning of the utterance
- Grice fails to explain how the utterer acquired the meaning of the terms used to express his intentions.

However, I shall now argue that if we carefully define the context in which to apply Grice's approach to meaning we find it answers the serious question of how terms come to mean what they mean in the first place.

### 4.6 The creation of new terms

The issue that has been overlooked in the discussion so far is how terms come into existence. Why do we call a chair a 'chair', and why is a dog a 'dog'? This is not the place for a discussion of how language began, but it is appropriate to review briefly the way in which new terms (or new uses of existing terms) enter a language. The following explanation is, I believe, non-controversial.

Someone discovers a new object or property, or intuits a new class of objects or properties, or perceives a distinction that has not previously been made. In order to express this new meaning the person concerned must either create a new term, or add a new sense<sub>D</sub> to an existing term. They must then use that term in an utterance in such a way that the utterer(s) can allocate meaning to the term concerned.

Until recent decades it would have been necessary for a new term to have been used in utterances on repeated occasions until the term became a recognised part of the language. With the explosion of communication in the recent past in all forms of media it may well be sufficient for the term to be uttered once if (a) the utterer has sufficient influence and (b) the utterance has a sufficiently large audience (such as items in tabloid newspapers).

This process of introducing new terms to the language is precisely what is described by Grice. His insistence on locating meaning in the intentions of the utterer, and making individual utterances the explanatory priority, is fully justified in the case of neologisms. Grice suggests that three steps are needed to explain meaning (using *x* to represent the utterance and *A* the utterer) (Grice 2001a p 95). These are elucidating the meaning of:

- (i) *x* meant something (on one particular occasion)
- (ii) *A* meant something by *x* (on some particular occasion)
- (iii) *x* means something (generally) or *A* means something by *x* (generally)

If we understand the first of these three steps as relating to the very first time that a neologism is coined, then we have a very clear explanation in Grice's approach of how terms acquire their meaning. What it does not explain, nor set out to explain, is how we acquire the meaning of terms that someone else created.

#### **4.7 Conclusion**

In this chapter I used a simple thought experiment (which draws heavily on my own experience of teaching and working with young children) to examine how children begin to acquire meaning. I showed how the process is ostensive and relates not only to objects in the child's environment but also to other features such as properties. In doing so, I rejected Quine's analysis regarding the learning of the name of properties, whilst concurring with his explanation for the learning of the names of objects.

I outlined Grice's account of meaning and raised three objections to it as a general explanation of meaning. I accepted, however, that Grice's approach is relevant to the process of introducing new terms into the language. I now turn, in the following chapter, to the issue of how we learn the meaning of terms that deal with matters outside our environment (eg abstract terms such 'freedom' or 'philosophy', and terms for objects and properties of which we have no personal experience).

## **CHAPTER 5: INDIRECT LANGUAGE ACQUISITION**

### Case 3

*A Sunday School teacher was telling her young pupils the story of Adam and Eve. She explained how Eve was tempted by a snake to eat the forbidden fruit, and how as a result God drove both Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden. When she finished the story she gave out paper and crayons and told the children to draw the story. At the end of the lesson she looked at all the pictures and was very disappointed with one of them. Most of the children had drawn Adam and Eve, some included a tree, some included fruit and others a serpent. But Mary had drawn a large motor car.*

*The teacher said to Mary “I asked you to draw the story of Adam and Eve”. “I know, Miss,” replied Mary. “You said that God drove Adam and Eve out of the garden. Look! There they are in the back seat of the car, and that is God in the front seat, driving them.”*

In this chapter I complete the analysis of how children acquire their vocabulary and thereby the meaning of terms. I begin with a distinction made by Russell between knowledge “by acquaintance” and knowledge “by description”. Using an alternative definition of Russell’s terms, I then discuss how children learn terms by description and how this relates to the other processes described in the preceding chapters. After a discussion of the relationship between the vocabulary of Mentalese and the vocabulary of our communal language, I turn to the problem of terms with more than one meaning.

### **5.1 Russell on knowledge**

In this section I summarise what Russell says about knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description and about the relationship between them. I suggest that this is critical to an understanding of how we acquire the major part of our vocabulary, although I propose a modification to Russell’s definition of the two terms.

It is a central question in the philosophy of mind as to whether, and how, we can be aware of the real world. In his *The Problems of Philosophy* Bertrand Russell draws a distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description (Russell 1999 pp 31ff). He claims that we cannot know by acquaintance objects in the outside world, but only the sense data that derive from them. He therefore places our knowledge of the world around us into the category of knowledge by description.

Russell’s distinction is between two routes by which we acquire knowledge, and a similar distinction can be made about the way that we acquire terms and their meanings. Language acquisition “by acquaintance” is what I have discussed in the previous chapter; the focus is now on language acquisition “by description”. I part from Russell, however, in where I draw the boundary between these two routes to knowledge.

It seems unnecessary, and indeed questionable, to regard our knowledge of objects and other entities perceived via our sense data as knowledge by description. In order to make the distinction with knowledge by acquaintance it might perhaps be appropriate to coin the phrase “knowledge by assumption” to cover the existence of objects in the real world that we assume because of the sense data they are thought to cause. However, for the purpose of understanding how we acquire meaning, it is more appropriate to use a single term to cover our knowledge both of the sense data and of their causes.

I therefore take Russell’s term “knowledge by acquaintance” and apply it to all terms whose meaning is acquired ostensively, that is where terms relate either to perceptual representations of objects or perceptual concepts of other entities such as properties. In this chapter I am concerned with how we acquire knowledge of, and the language about, entities for which we have no perceptual representations; that is, what I encompass within the term “knowledge by description”. I do not refer just to terms whose meaning we acquire by a formal description, but to all terms whose meaning is learned via language and not by personal experience.

Russell emphasises that knowledge by description does not require any personal experience of the object concerned. I know, for example, that “the Member of Parliament for my constituency” exists even though I do not know whether the person concerned is male or female, their name, their age, or anything else about them. When children begin the formal process of education (whether at home, at nursery, or at school) they begin to learn by description. It is perhaps one of the main features that differentiates humans from other animals that the greatest part of our knowledge is acquired through education, that is by description.

Russell ends the chapter in which he sets out this important distinction with a claim that I believe is just as strong in the case of my wider definition of “knowledge by acquaintance” as it is for Russell’s narrower definition. He says:

The chief importance of knowledge by description is that it enables us to pass beyond the limits of our private experience. In spite of the fact that we can only know truths which are wholly composed of terms which we have experienced in acquaintance, we can yet have knowledge by description of things which we have never experienced. (ibid p 40)

This statement by Russell is, I will suggest in the following section, the clue to understanding how we acquire the meaning of terms for objects, or other matters of which we have no direct experience.

## **5.2 Indirect language acquisition**

With my modification to Russell’s distinction in mind, I now turn to the misunderstanding between Mary and her Sunday School teacher. I will suggest one cause

of the misunderstanding (another will be looked at in section 5.4), and from that suggest how the meaning of terms acquired by description be understood.

Had Mary lived two centuries earlier, she would have been directly acquainted with the common practice of driving animals to market. Instead, Mary acquired the term “drive” by direct acquisition, by being driven by her parents. Although “drive” does not name an object, it does describe a recognisable action, similar to terms such as “jump” or “walk”, and its meaning could therefore be acquired ostensively. Mary could have acquired the earlier sense<sub>D</sub> of ‘drive’ by description, if her parents had told her about the former practice or if she had learned about it in school or had looked up the term ‘drive’ in a dictionary.

As we grow older, an increasing percentage of our total vocabulary relates to matters about which we have learned by description. The question that this raises is how such terms are linked to the subjects to which they relate, and Russell’s statement at the end of the preceding section provides us with the clue.

For every term used to describe the meaning of a word to us, there must be a chain of meaning that ends with a word we learned either by systematic language acquisition (see section 3.4) or by direct acquaintance (see chapter 4) That is, there must exist a link from the representation in our mind for each term used in the description to either a perceptual representation or a conceptual representation.

This order of acquisition, ostensive followed by description, accords both with common sense and with empirical evidence. Brown tells us that “the vocabulary of young children typically exhibits a preponderance of words for concrete objects over words for abstractions and relations” (cited in Fodor, 1975, p 177). The diagram below illustrates this mechanism in a very simplified form (ignoring the presence of both grammatical terms and related innate concepts within the chain of meaning linkages).

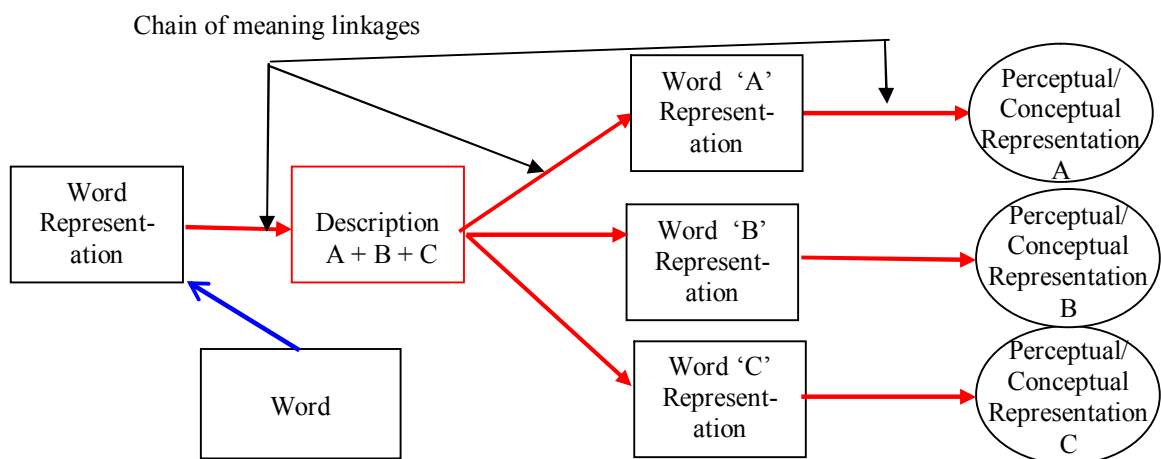


Figure 5.1 Linkage from word representation to perceptual representation in the case of language acquisition by description

To illustrate this process consider the following conversation:

CHILD       Daddy, what is a mountain?

FATHER       A mountain is a very, very big hill.

It might be said that understanding the meaning of terms learned by description seems easy in the case of concepts that match our previous experience but does not explain how we grasp either the immense (such as galaxies and universes) or the minute (atoms and quarks). Quine discusses this problem in his *Word and Object* where he suggests that we do so by analogy (Quine 1960 pp 13-17).

Within our experience we have perceived large round objects such as beach balls and small round objects such as tennis balls and smaller round objects such as marbles. I proposed in section 3.3 that comparison is part of the innate language of thought and we therefore perceive the comparison in size between these three items even before we acquire the terms large and small and their cognates. By extending the comparison in size we can understand that the moon is many times bigger than a beach ball, and that an atom is many times smaller than a pea.

It might be claimed that technical and scientific terms are not learned by description in the manner I have described, but rather as part of a theory. For example, I come to grasp the meaning of ‘boson’, ‘hadron’, ‘lepton’ and similar terms only by grasping, at least to some extent, quantum theory. It may well be true that I cannot grasp the meaning of ‘hadron’ by description in isolation, since any description is likely to use other technical terms such as ‘lepton’. Nevertheless, it remains true that new terms can only be acquired, whether in isolation or as a ‘package deal’, building on the foundation of terms that are already understood.

With this analysis of how we acquire the meaning of terms for matters of which we have no direct experience I complete the study of the various ways in which we acquire meaning. These can be summarised as:

- (i)       by matching terms to already existing innate concepts (for example, grammatical terms);
- (ii)      by matching terms to perceptual representations or to concepts formed from perceptions (that is, ostensive learning: knowledge “by acquaintance”);
- (iii)     by matching terms to descriptions couched in terms acquired via either route (i) or (ii) (that is, knowledge “by description”).

Before considering another reason for the misunderstanding between Mary and her teacher, I will return to the subject of Mentalese and to the elements that constitute its vocabulary.

### **5.3 The vocabulary of Mentalese**

In this section I will discuss the possibility that language acquired by description forms a major part of the vocabulary, not just of our native tongue, but also of the inner language of Mentalese. I will suggest that if it does so, this explains both the widespread idea that we think in our communal language, and the problem of explaining how Mentalese terms relate to matters of which we have no experience.

In Chapter 3 I put forward the view that Mentalese requires a very small initial vocabulary, limited to a few basic concepts and some relational terms (see section 3.3 above). I discussed the case of languageless (that is LOS-less) adults who nevertheless demonstrated their ability to think, and I argued that for them it was their perceptual and conceptual representations which, together with the previously outlined basic innate concepts, formed the vocabulary of their internal language. Since it is clear that children are able to think long before they acquire spoken (or signed) language, the same must be true of them, unless we accept Fodor's view (Fodor 1975 pp 124ff) that we are born with a fully-formed innate vocabulary adequate to represent all human experience.

Although I reject Fodor's extensive innate vocabulary for the language of thought, I do agree with his dismissal of the idea that all our thinking is carried out using our communal language (Fodor 1975 p 56). It is, I suggest, possible for us to think "where did I leave my keys? Ah there they are on the sideboard" without actually expressing these thoughts in our communal language. This is because all the ingredients of that thought are either innate concepts (see section 3.3) or perceptual representations (section 1.4).

However, this is clearly not possible when we come to terms that have been learned "by description". When I want to think about 'philosophy' and the problem of 'intentionality' I have no perceptual representations available to me, but some form of description (see figure 5.1 above). It might be that in these circumstances it is more economical for the representation of the term rather than the representation of the description to form part of the internal vocabulary of thought. This would explain our experience of thinking in our communal language.

If my analysis is correct, then the majority of the vocabulary of our Language of Thought when we are adults is, in fact, also the vocabulary of our native language. There is therefore no conflict between the arguments evinced by Fodor for the existence of a language of thought and the experience of myself, and many others, of thinking in our natural language. Both languages, I suggest, share the major part of their vocabulary.

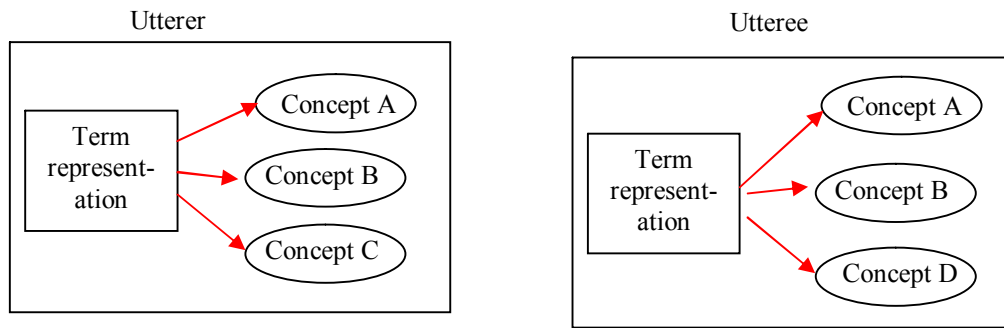
### **5.4 Words with multiple senses**

The communicative failure between Mary and her Sunday School teacher was not simply caused by her failure to acquire a term by description. It was compounded by the fact that the term concerned, in common with a significant proportion of her language's vocabulary, has more than one sense<sub>D</sub>. I now turn, therefore, to consider the implications of this fact for our understanding of meaning.



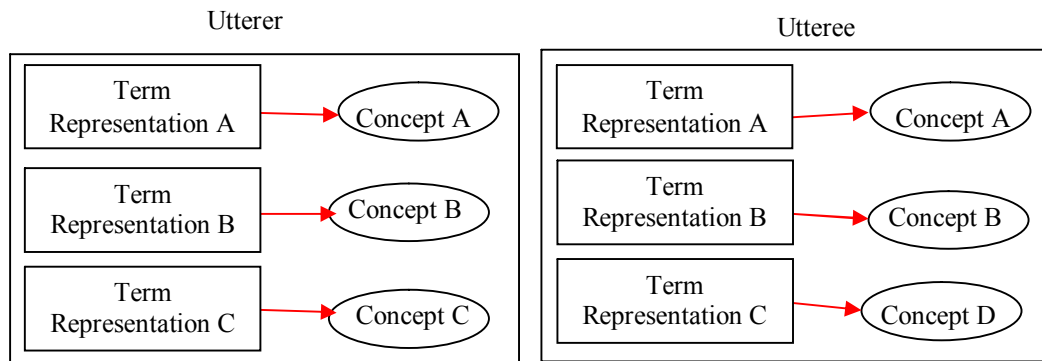
In Chapter 3 I referred to Carruther's view that the language faculty in the human mind comprises three elements: comprehension, production and a common database (Carruthers 2006 pp 186ff). Whether there is a specific area of the brain in which the words that we know are stored is not relevant: the fact is that they do exist in our memory and it is convenient to consider the totality of that part of our memory as a database. What is not known is whether, in the case of terms with more than one meaning (or in the case of homonyms), there is a single entry with multiple links (one to each meaning) or multiple entries.

There is an obvious potential for misunderstanding between utterer and utteree whichever of these arrangements is, in fact, correct. One arrangement would be



*Figure 5.2: Terms with single representation and multiple meanings*

The alternative arrangement would be as follows:



*Figure 5.3: Terms with multiple representation and multiple meanings*

Whichever of these is the correct description of how the mind is organised, utterer and utteree, in order for successful communication to take place, must not only both possess the same concept, they must also both select the same concept. If the utterer in the case above meant Concept C by the term used, then since the utteree lacks this concept there is bound to be an instance of miscommunication.

If he meant Concept A, there remains a risk of miscommunication: the extent of that risk will depend upon the contextual evidence available to the utterer to make their selection between the available links

It will be seen that regardless of how the brain actually organises the storage in memory of terms and the links from terms to meanings, there is a serious risk of misunderstanding when terms have multiple meanings. This issue will be returned to in a later chapter (section 11.3).

### **5.5 Conclusion**

In this chapter I brought to a conclusion the subject of how we learn new terms, and thus acquire their meaning, by looking at what can be termed “knowledge by description”. Following Russell I argued that we acquire the meaning of terms learned in this way (which accounts for the largest part of our vocabulary) by linking the description of these terms to terms that we have previously acquired either through a small innate vocabulary or by ostensive learning.

I suggested that the internal language of thought and the spoken or signed language that we acquire from our speech community share a significant proportion of their vocabulary: that is, the vocabulary acquired by description. This explains how thought is possible without language, whilst recognising that for many, if not most, of us our conscious thinking often uses the vocabulary of our native language.

## **CHAPTER 6: SENSE, REFERENCE AND CONNOTATION**

### Case 4

*A young couple are out for a stroll one summer evening. The young man, an astronomy student, says to his girlfriend, "Look, darling, do you see the planet Venus there?" "No," she replies, "but I can see the Evening Star".*

### Case 5

*The young Christian minister finished his training and went to work in the East End of the city among the homeless, the drug addicts and the alcoholics. He was conscious of his good fortune in having a happy childhood with loving parents and longed to bring help and comfort to those less fortunate than himself. Week after week he preached about the Father God to whom they could turn in their desperation and need. And week after week he got no response. Until one day he was talking to one of the men after his sermon, who said to him "If your Father God is anything like my father, then I want nothing to do with him!".*

In the previous four chapters I have looked at the way in which we acquire the meaning of terms and have identified three different mechanisms that are involved in that process. In so doing I have focussed on that one aspect of meaning that is generally denoted by philosophers as reference<sub>F</sub>: the terms learned have referred to some entity in the world (via the perceptual or conceptual representation of that entity).

There remain, however, two other aspects of the meaning we attach to terms that we learn that need to be considered. In this chapter I look first, therefore, at the distinction drawn by Frege between reference<sub>F</sub> and sense<sub>F</sub>. Then, after noting objections to Frege's distinction made by Putnam, I turn to the issue of connotation, using this term in its regular non-philosophical sense<sub>D</sub>. This completes Part Two on the acquisition of meaning.

### **6.1 Frege on sense and reference**

In an 1892 article Frege sets out an important distinction. Since he wrote in German, the terms he uses are "Sinn" and "Bedeutung" which are most commonly translated into English by contemporary philosophers as "sense" and "reference". Two points should be noted. First, the German word "Bedeutung" is most commonly rendered in English as "meaning", and we perhaps lose some of the force of Frege's views by talking of "reference" rather than "meaning". Second, in the translation from which I have taken my quotations, the word "Bedeutung" is translated as "nominatum", perhaps to avoid confusion with the other uses of the terms "meaning" and "reference" both in general English and in the philosophy of language.

Frege begins the explanation of this distinction with a mathematical example. Draw three lines (a, b and c) from the apices of a triangle to the midpoints of the opposite sides,

he tells us. We then have a point where a intersects with b, and a point where a intersects with c. However, these are in fact the same point, even though described differently, that is “the intersection of a and b” and “the intersection of a and c” have a common reference<sub>F</sub>. Frege then relates this to language by saying that the “nominata of ‘evening star’ and ‘morning star’ are the same but not their senses”. (Frege 2001 p 200)

The phrases ‘the morning star’ and ‘the evening star’ refer to a celestial body whose reflected light appears in the early morning and late evening respectively, close to the sun. In fact what is seen on both occasions is the planet Venus. Using Frege’s terminology, “morning star” and “evening star” have distinct sense<sub>FS</sub> but both refer to the planet Venus. In the example given at the beginning of this chapter, the young lady is aware of the sense<sub>F</sub> ‘evening star’ and can identify it in the sky, but is ignorant of its reference<sub>F</sub>, that is that the evening star is the planet Venus. For her, the term ‘the evening star’ does not mean (that is, refer to) Venus, even though she is aware that there exists a planet called Venus.

Frege goes further, and points out that there can be sense<sub>FS</sub> that have no reference<sub>F</sub>. He gives two examples. He says that the words ‘the heavenly body which has the greatest distance from the earth’ have a sense<sub>F</sub> but it is very doubtful whether they have a reference<sub>F</sub>. Then returning to mathematics, he says that the expression ‘the series with the least convergence’ has a sense<sub>F</sub>, but it can be proved that it has no reference<sub>F</sub>. (ibid)

There is clear potential for miscommunication in this situation. Person A may know the terms “the morning star” and “the evening star” and be able to point to the objects concerned in the sky at the appropriate time, without being aware that they are in fact the same celestial body. Person B may be aware that the terms refer to the same body, appearing at two different times, but not be aware that the body concerned is the planet Venus. Person C knows both terms but also knows that they both designate Venus. In this situation A, B and C have three different sense<sub>FS</sub> for the one term “the morning star” and thus it is not unreasonable to say that they each mean something different by this term.

However, Putnam challenges the use of the term ‘meaning’ in this situation. I consider his views in the following section.

## **6.2 Putnam on meaning**

In a 1974 article (expanding on an earlier paper) Putnam discusses the dichotomy in traditional views on meaning expressed by pairs of terms such as ‘extension’ and ‘intension’, or ‘Sinn’ and ‘Bedeutung’. It should be noted, however, that there is no complete match between these pairs of terms, so that for example Frege’s use of ‘Bedeutung’ does not equate to Putnam’s use of ‘extension’, since, for example, for the former predicates are incomplete expressions.

Putnam begins by reviewing the traditional view. He refers to the two terms “creature with a heart” and “creature with a kidney” and points out that, since every creature with a heart has a kidney, these two phrases have the same extension. In one sense therefore, it is claimed, they have the same meaning. However, having a heart is clearly

different to having a kidney, so in another sense these two phrases have different meanings, that is different intensions. (Putnam 2005 p 191).

Putnam then goes on to question the implications of this approach, saying:

So theory of meaning came to rest on two unchallenged assumptions:

1. That knowing the meaning of a term [in the sense of ‘intension’] is just a matter of being in a certain psychological state (in the sense of ‘psychological state’ in which states of memory and psychological dispositions are ‘psychological states’; no one thought that knowing the meaning of a word was a continuous state of consciousness, of course).
2. That the meaning of a term (in the senses of ‘intension’) determines its extension (in the sense that sameness of intension entails sameness of extension).

I shall argue that these two assumptions are not jointly satisfied by any notion, let alone any notion of meaning. The traditional concept of meaning is a concept which rests on a false theory. (ibid p 192)

To prove his point Putnam uses the thought experiment already discussed in section 4.4.1 above. He claims that two people (one on Earth and one on Twin Earth) can be in the same psychological state (that is, have the same intension) yet be referring to two different things. In an earlier version of his paper, Putnam brings the argument nearer home by discussing his inability to distinguish between an elm tree and a beech tree. He claims that in his idiolect ‘beech tree’ and ‘elm tree’ have different extensions (the set of all beech trees and the set of all elm trees respectively), but no difference in intension can be used to explain the distinction. (Putnam 2001 pp 290-291)

Putnam’s claim is therefore that “‘meanings’ just ain’t in the head” (ibid p 291), that is that ‘meaning’ must be restricted to extension, ie reference<sub>F</sub>. This claim is discussed in the following sections.

### **6.3 Putnam’s view challenged**

In this section I raise the first of two objections to Putnam’s claim about the meaning of the term ‘meaning’.

My first objection is that Putnam fails to deal adequately with the distinction that he uses to illustrate the classical view of meaning comprising both sense<sub>F</sub> and reference<sub>F</sub> (intension and extension). He conceded that there is a difference between having a heart and having a kidney and that therefore there is a difference in meaning between “a creature with a heart” and “a creature with a kidney”. If we accept that this difference exists, and the fact that every creature with a heart is a creature with a kidney and vice versa, we cannot use the term extension to mark this difference. That term is already required for what these two terms have in common, that is a person with both heart and kidney.

Another term is needed to mark a distinction that clearly does exist. Since Putnam does not introduce another term to make this distinction in meaning, I will retain the term  $\text{sense}_F$  for this purpose, leaving open for now the question of a precise philosophical explication of the term. I will return to this issue in a later chapter, but for the moment it is only necessary to emphasise that the existence of this dichotomy (whatever its precise nature) offers the potential for miscommunication.

There is, however, another issue that Putnam fails to take into account in his analysis of meaning. This is, in fact, a third  $\text{sense}_D$  of ‘meaning’ that needs to be distinguished, and that is “connotation”. The problem is illustrated by my example of the pastor working among the down-and-outs, and will be examined in the following section.

#### **6.4 Connotation**

In chapters 3 to 5 I have discussed three different methods by which we acquire terms and their meanings. In so doing, I have discussed the links that are formed from the representation of the term to whatever the term denotes. These links may be to perceptual representations, to conceptual representations, or to definitions that in their turn link to perceptual or conceptual representations (see figure 5.1).

What is omitted in this analysis are the other links that can be created, and specifically the question of connotation, or tone. In addition to his division of the meaning of terms between  $\text{sense}_F$  and  $\text{reference}_F$ , Frege also proposed two other aspects of meaning: force and tone. Force is the difference in an utterance that distinguishes between, for example, question and assertion. Tone (ie connotation) is illustrated by Case 5 above.

When a child acquires the term “father” a link is formed to the perceptual representation of their father. But as they have various experiences of their father, further links will be formed. If their father is a drunkard and a bully, then ‘father’ will become associated with these characteristics. In one sense, therefore, ‘father’ will come to mean drunkard and bully to them.

The minister in our story had a very different experience, so that ‘father’ has the tone of love and support and encouragement. It should be noted that when he spoke to the young men in his care of God wanting to be a father to them, he was deliberately not using the term ‘Father’ in any theological sense, but trying to convey his own experience of fatherhood.

In this situation the term ‘father’ had very different connotations for the two participants in the conversation. Miscommunication occurred because the minister failed to understand the bad connotation of ‘father’ for those to whom he was speaking. By his insistence that meaning is only to be located in the linguistic community, and not within the head, Putnam fails to make provision for this aspect of meaning.

## **6.5 Conclusion**

In this chapter I brought to a conclusion my analysis of how we acquire the meaning of terms by looking firstly at the distinction between sense<sub>F</sub> and reference<sub>F</sub> described by Frege. Putnam claimed that this distinction is wrong, that meaning must be restricted to the latter, and that therefore meaning is not to be found “in the head”. However, Putnam fails to account for the difference that he himself uses to illustrate the view that he seeks to disprove. There is, therefore, good reason to see ‘meaning’ as including both sense<sub>F</sub> and reference<sub>F</sub>.

In addition, I pointed to the factor of connotation, which involves us associating our experiences and emotions with a term in addition to its sense<sub>F</sub> and reference<sub>F</sub>. It is not uncommon for someone to ask ‘what does x mean to you?’ in order to draw out this very aspect. It is necessary, therefore, to take account of all three aspects of meaning (sense<sub>F</sub>, reference<sub>F</sub> and connotation) in explaining the meaning that each individual acquires as they acquire language.

Differences in these three aspects of meaning between utterer and utteree have been seen from our examples to be a cause of miscommunication. They will be of particular concern when I turn to the way in which the utteree extracts meaning from an utterance, but before that the next three chapters will look at how we express meaning in our utterances.

**PART THREE**

**THE EXPRESSION  
OF  
MEANING**



## **CHAPTER 7: LOST FOR WORDS**

### Case 6

*It was Sunday morning and as usual I was working on the general knowledge crossword in the Sunday paper. I came to a clue about New York, and I knew that I knew the word that was required. I could recall some of the features of the part of the New York indicated by the clue, but the name escaped me. Eventually I abandoned the crossword with that clue, and several others, uncompleted. Half an hour later, as my wife was reading the paper it suddenly came to me: the answer was “Harlem”.*

### Case 7

*The Reverend Spooner is famous for his verbal mishaps. On one occasion he accused a student of “hissing my mystery lecture” (instead of “missing my history lecture”). On another occasion he went into the dean’s office and asked his secretary “Is the bean dizzy?” (Larsen 2007)*

### Case 8

*In an episode of East Enders on BBC 1 Television one of the characters asks her friend “Do you shop orgasmically?”*

In this chapter I begin to examine the process by which we select words and put them together in order to form an utterance. Although the emphasis might be thought to be more psychological than philosophical, the points made will underpin the philosophical views on meaning in later chapters. I question why there are occasions when we are unable to find the word that we need to express our meaning, why we sometimes get our words confused, and what this indicates about our language faculty.

### **7.1 Introduction**

Although the cases of miscommunication that have been considered so far have inevitably involved utterer, utterance and utteree, the focus has been on the process by which utterer and utteree acquire language. In this chapter the attention moves on to examine problems at the stage where the utterer attempts to express meaning by means of an utterance.

It is clearly important when conveying meaning through an utterance both to select the correct terms and to combine them in the appropriate way, in order to express that meaning. By “correct term” I mean a term that conveys the meaning that you intend to convey. Miscommunication can occur when the utterer is unable to select a term to convey the intended meaning, or when the utterer selects an incorrect term.

I discussed in Chapter 4 how it is possible to acquire a term with an incorrect meaning attached to it. There are, however, many other problems that can arise in the

communication of meaning, and in the following section I will examine the implications of Case 6 above.

## **7.2 Failure to retrieve**

Sometimes when working on a crossword I fail to solve a clue, and when I am able to check the answer I discover that it is a word that I have never learned. In the situation described in Case 6, however, I was aware that I knew the word – I was simply unable to retrieve it. I was not consciously thinking about the clue when my wife was reading the magazine that contained the crossword, yet the answer suddenly “popped into my head”. I am also conscious of the fact that if I had not been doing the crossword but had instead been reading an article in which I came across ‘Harlem’ I would have known its meaning immediately.

These two facts indicate that there is a different process for retrieving terms from meanings to that which we use to retrieve meanings from terms. This supports the view already discussed that the language faculty comprises separate parts for comprehension and language production (Carruthers 2006 pp 186ff). It is also borne out by sufferer’s of Broca’s aphasia who lose the ability to express themselves verbally although still able to understand what is said to them (<http://www.sci.uidaho.edu/med532/Broca.htm> accessed on 18<sup>th</sup> June 2007).

Furthermore, my experience strongly suggests that the process of retrieving a term is a separate module within the language production section of the language faculty, and that under normal circumstances it is subconscious. Generally speaking I am not conscious of searching for each of the words that I use in an utterance: I simply utter them. One of the criticisms of Grice’s approach to meaning (see section 4.3) stresses this very point.

Th[e] structural complexity [of Grice’s approach] seems to be at odds with the ease with which we speak. If Grice is right, every time we open our mouths or pick up our pens to communicate, we form a complex triple-parted intention. Is this plausible as a description of our psychology as speakers? Ordinary speakers would be hard pressed to give a verbal statement of the content of the intentions that Grice is saying they form at high speed in everyday conversation. (Barber 2005 p 30)

It is true that when making a formal presentation at a seminar, or when drafting a thesis, I might pause and search for the appropriate term to convey my meaning, but this is the exception. I do not normally search for words to speak unless, in my own case, they are personal names of friends and colleagues that I frequently forget.

I have suggested on the basis of my own experience as well as documented cases of aphasia that the process of selecting terms to express meaning is modular. This means that we are generally unaware of the process going on, and only become aware when it fails to

produce the required output. In the following section I consider what can happen to the output when it has been successfully retrieved.

### **7.3 Confusion and misconstruction**

The occurrence of malapropisms was highlighted by the character of Mrs Malaprop in Sheridan's play *The Rivals*. They involve the selection of a word that sounds very like the word intended but that has a different meaning.

A discussion of the exact place in the chain of language production where the error occurs, and the neurological structures that might account for its occurrence, are outside the scope of this thesis. It is possible that the fault lies in the module that retrieves terms to match given meanings (which has implications for how terms are stored within the brain). It is also possible that the problem arises when the speaker actually begins the process of speaking the term that has been correctly retrieved.

It is true that confusion between 'organic', 'organism' and 'orgasm' can often create hilarity but, in common with many other malapropisms, it does not necessarily lead to miscommunication. I will return to this subject in a later chapter when I discuss how the utterer may recognise a malapropism and replace it with the supposed originally intended term. It remains the case, however, that this particular error results in a mismatch between the meaning intended by the utterer and the literal meaning of the utterance.

After this brief look at malapropisms and their limited potential for miscommunication I turn now to the case of spoonerisms. Although in the case of malapropisms I was unable to choose between the term retrieval module and the language production module for the source of the error, in the case of spoonerisms the latter appears to be the culprit. It appears intuitively unlikely that Rev. Spooner retrieved the term 'hissed' for the meaning of 'missed' and 'mystery' for the meaning of 'history'. But it does appear eminently possible that in the process of producing the sequence of sounds that form the terms 'missed' and 'history', the initial sounds of each group become transposed. This is borne out by the further error discussed in the following section.

In this section I have briefly surveyed two types of error in the production of utterances, and have suggested that they lend support to the modular theory of language. Whilst in many situations these errors lead to merriment rather than serious miscommunication, their potential for the latter must not be overlooked. Before I conclude this chapter on the problems that can arise in selecting and using terms to express meaning, I will refer to one more example.

### **7.4 Transposition**

I was listening to a news report some time ago about a new initiative that had been set up to assist the police. The reporter explained that its purpose was "to protect crime and prevent property". Unlike the case of spoonerism where two letters were transposed (see above) in this case two terms have been transposed. There is an underlying similarity

between the two terms ‘protect’ and ‘prevent’ and somehow in the process of language production the reporter has mixed them up.

In this particular case the result was not serious, and I imagine that I was not alone in recognising the error and mentally correcting it. It is also possible that some listeners failed to spot the transposition but nevertheless correctly understood the reporter’s meaning.

### **7.5 Conclusion**

In this chapter I looked at four situations in which an utterer fails to express his meaning correctly. The most serious case is when he or she is unable to retrieve the term that they need to express their meaning. In this situation it is usually only possible to use circumlocutions to express the intended meaning. It is also possible that the process for retrieving a term may go awry and return the wrong term: this is a possible explanation for malapropisms.

Alternatively this particular form of word confusion may occur at the stage at which the mind performs the process of producing the sounds comprising the utterance. It is almost certainly at this stage that spoonerisms can occur, and also cases of word transposition. There is potential for miscommunication in all of these situations, although in practice the utterer may recognise what has happened and make appropriate adjustments to the utterance. I return to this issue in a later chapter.

These errors in expressing meaning lend weight to the view previously mentioned that the language faculty comprises a number of distinct modules, perhaps organised (as previously mentioned) into three broad areas: comprehension, language production, and a common database. I discuss this further in the final chapter.

## **CHAPTER 8: UNINTENDED AMBIGUITY**

### Case 9

*Mrs Jones checked in her notebook before setting off for the primary school where she taught seven-year-olds. Today, she saw, her maths subject was weight. She quickly grabbed two carrier bags and placed various articles in them before rushing out of the door. Two hours later it was time for her maths lesson. Calling Tommy to the front of the class, she handed him one of the bags. "Now, Tommy," she said, "can you tell me something in this room that is lighter than that bag?" He looked at the bag in his hand and then around the room. "That is, Miss!" he said with a big smile, pointing to her desk. Her desk was a large one with silver metal legs and a heavy top covered with a white veneer. Whereas the bag he was holding, which of course weighed far less, was dark blue. How was Tommy to know that she meant lighter in weight?*

### Case 10

*Amelie is a French student on an exchange visit to Scotland, staying with Mr and Mrs Smith. She says to Mrs Smith one evening, "I have cold". "No, dear," responds Mrs Smith, "you must say 'I have a cold'. I will make you a hot lemon drink when it is time for bed." "But I have a cold now," says Amelie, and shivers theatrically. "Oh," says Mrs Smith, "you mean you are cold!"*

### Case 11

*On other occasions, my wife would be relaxing in the living room. When she saw me enter the kitchen to get a snack, she would ask, "Would you like some tea?" Knowing that she knew that I did not drink tea, I found the question odd, but answered directly: "No, thank you." I would complete my task and leave the kitchen. I could smell an emotional smouldering emanating from my wife, but could not figure out the cause. My wife indirectly had been asking me to get her some tea. (Martinich 2001 pp 25-26)*

In the previous chapter I considered how we sometimes fail to express our meaning by either failing to find the term we want, or by finding the wrong term. In this chapter I examine several instances of miscommunication that have unintended ambiguity as a common factor. I begin with the problem of terms that have multiple meanings, followed by what Quine terms "ambiguity of syntax" (Quine 1960 p 134). I then look at the problem caused by using the grammar of one language when speaking another language, before concluding this chapter with the confusion that can be caused by indirect speech acts.

### **8.1 A definition of ambiguity**

The word ‘ambiguous’ can be understood in two different sense<sub>D</sub>s. The electronic version of the Oxford Concise Dictionary (OCD) gives the first sense as “having more than one meaning”. If this is understood to mean having more than one sense<sub>D</sub>, then many English words are ambiguous, since many words have multiple meanings, one extreme example being ‘set’.

The second sense<sub>D</sub> given by the OCD is “open to different interpretations” which is narrower than the first sense<sub>D</sub>, and is the sense<sub>D</sub> that I am using in this thesis. In other words, it is not simply the existence of multiple sense<sub>D</sub>s of a term that makes it ambiguous, but the possibility of confusion between those sense<sub>D</sub>s in a particular context. In the following section I will look at one such case of ambiguity.

### **8.2 Ambiguity of terms**

The misunderstanding between Mrs Jones and Tommy (the names have been changed) actually did occur at the Infant School where my wife was the Mathematics Co-ordinator. The term ‘light’ can be applied to both weight and colour, and without any clue in the context (an issue I will return to in a later chapter) it should have been foreseen that the children could be confused.

In the previous chapter I made the point that in the normal course of conversation we do not consciously think about every word before we use it: we simply talk. I did, however, suggest two exceptions in my own experience: “making a formal presentation at a seminar, or when drafting a thesis”. Choice of words is also clearly important in many other situations, such as teaching, writing a book, or giving evidence in court.

Mrs Jones was guilty of inadequate preparation for her maths lesson. She should have recognised the ambiguity in the term ‘lighter’ and therefore either found an alternative term or, if that was not possible, provided clear evidence as to which sense<sub>D</sub> of the term she meant. If she had started her lesson by saying “Today we are going to be thinking about weight”, the chances of miscommunication would have been substantially reduced.

This case clearly reveals the problem of ambiguity in the meaning of terms (see Quine 1960 p 129), but there is also the possibility of ambiguity of syntax.

### **8.3 Ambiguity of syntax**

Quine (ibid p 134) illustrates this problem with a couplet by William Cowper:

And Satan trembles when he sees  
The weakest saint upon his knees.

In this sentence it is not clear whether “his” refers back to “Satan” or to “the weakest saint”. In the first case Satan trembles (with pleasure?) when a saint is seated upon his (ie Satan’s) knees; in the second case Satan trembles (with fear?) when the weakest saint is on his (ie the saint’s) knees, that is when the saint is praying. It might be claimed that it is clearly the second case that was in Cowper’s mind when penning the words, but it is clear that ambiguities such as this can result in miscommunication.

This case of ambiguity arises because of confusion about the antecedent of the pronoun “his”; ambiguity can also arise when the whole syntactic structure of an utterance has two possible interpretations. An example of this will be found in the following chapter, where I examine cases of deliberate ambiguity.

As with ambiguity of terms, it is the responsibility of the utterer to ensure, in cases of formal utterances, that their meaning is not obscured or completely lost to sight by ambiguity of syntax. Problems can also arise through wrong grammar, rather than through careless grammar.

#### **8.4 Linguistic confusion**

In a previous chapter I discussed the concept of “universal grammar” – which I equated with the innate ability that enables each of us to acquire both the syntax and the morphology of our communal language. It is claimed that within universal grammar there exist a number of parameters that are set for a particular language: one example is the order in which subject, verb and object appear (Cook and Newson 1996 pp 215ff). Miscommunication can arise when an utterer mistakenly applies the linguistic rules (the parameters) of one language to another, as shown by Case 10 at the start of this chapter.

This particular case of miscommunication occurred because in French “je suis froid” (which translates into English as “I am cold”) means “I have a cold character” whereas “j’ai froid” (“I have cold”) means “I feel physically cold”. By applying French linguistic rules to an English utterance, the speaker failed to produce an utterance that the utterer could understand, even though both utterer and utterer had the same correct meaning of the individual words used.

Ambiguity can also occur in both spoken and written English through ambiguity of phrasing. Reading a novel recently my wife struggled with a sentence that began with the words “Hoyt the sorcerer’s brother” which she read (using braces to show word groupings) as being about Hoyt, who was the {brother of the sorcerer}. In fact, the sentence was about the brother of {Hoyt the sorcerer}.

Punctuation can be used to avoid this type of confusion. The first – incorrect – meaning of the words quoted above could have been written as “Hoyt, the sorcerer’s brother,”; it might be argued that the absence of commas clearly marked the second meaning. However, punctuation is notoriously unreliable, to the extent that English law requires that punctuation be ignored when interpreting legal documents.

In this section I have shown how ambiguity can arise from the misuse of linguistic rules, whether from a failure of knowledge or sheer carelessness. Whether it is poor syntax or poor punctuation, ambiguity runs the risk of miscommunication. In the following section I consider a particular type of ambiguity which is caused neither by lack of knowledge nor by carelessness.

### **8.5 Indirect speech acts**

In this section I turn to another, not uncommon, cause of ambiguity. This is the use of what have been termed “indirect speech acts”, that is when an utterance in the form of one type of speech act is used to convey a different speech act. A simple case would be the utterance “Can you pass the salt?” by your dinner companion. This is in the form of a question but will probably, in fact, be a request.

The story that Martinich tells against himself (Case 11) vividly illustrates the communicative problems that can arise in the case of indirect speech acts. Martinich recognised that his wife’s utterance was in the form of a question and responded accordingly. His wife intended it to be a request, and when he failed to fulfil it, she responded accordingly. There are, linguists tell us, differences in the speech patterns of men and women in all speech communities (Holmes, 2001, p 150). When a wife says to her husband “Do *you* feel the draught from that window, dear?” she may not be expecting an answer of either “yes” or “no”. She may not really be interested in whether her husband can feel the draught. The intended meaning might be – and woe betide the husband who fails to recognise it, if it is – “please shut that window; I’m getting a draught from it”.

Lest I be accused of blaming women for causing the problem, let me give another example. A man’s wife comes downstairs having got ready for a night out at the theatre with her husband. “You are an ugly old bird, aren’t you?”, are the words he greets her with. He would be mortally offended if she took him to mean literally what the utterance means: in his rather crass way he is clearly paying her a compliment!

I will return to this issue in a later chapter when I consider how the utterer can extract the meaning intended by the utterer as opposed to the actual meaning of the words used by the utterer. For the moment it is sufficient to note that the use of indirect speech acts by the utterer poses a risk of miscommunication: a risk that can trip up even philosophers of language!

### **8.6 Conclusion**

In this chapter I looked at the ways in which various forms of ambiguity and poor grammar can bring about failure in the expression of meaning. In situations where the conveyance of meaning is important, such as teaching or writing for publication, the utterer has a responsibility (a) to avoid ambiguous terms, or to provide additional information (either linguistic or non-linguistic) that will obviate any ambiguity, and (b) to order the terms selected with the correct syntax. In the final chapter of this section on the expression of meaning, I examine instances of deliberate ambiguity.



## **CHAPTER 9: DELIBERATE AMBIGUITY**

### Case 12

*A television sketch show some years ago included a fake advertisement. “Nothing acts faster than Anadin,” it began (quoting a then popular advert). “So take Nothing” it ended, to fanfare of trumpets.*

### Case 13

*Extract from promotional literature received by post (with personal names omitted).*

*On receipt of your Personal Validation Sheet within the regulatory deadline and if it conforms in all points to the Report of the Independent Supervisor*

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*Mrs \*\*\*\*\* It’s official, the sum of £11,500.00 will mandatorily be sent to you by BANK CHEQUE in your name by recorded delivery registered mail. **CONFIRMED.***

---

*Mrs \*\*\*\*\* you are the sole addressee of this dossier in your name. Your unique draw no. is: 3022153130*

*The sum to be awarded to our winner, Mrs \*\*\*\*\* , is indeed £11,500.00 paid in a single instalment.*

In the previous chapter I considered various examples of ambiguity and how these might cause miscommunication. The common factor in these cases is accident: the utterers were either careless, had insufficient command of the language, or used an indirect speech act in an unclear way. In this chapter by contrast I look at examples of deliberate ambiguity.

After an introductory survey of how cases of deliberate ambiguity fit into the philosophical views on meaning discussed previously, I comment briefly on the type of deliberate ambiguity commonly called “double entendre”. Following this I review the use of ambiguity in advertising, before ending with ambiguity in fraud.

### **9.1 Introduction**

Grice put forward the view that meaning is to be located in the intentions of the utterer. He did acknowledge that utterances could be ambiguous, and gave as an example the sentence “He is in the grip of a vice”. He pointed out that the utterer could not tell, from these words alone, whether the person concerned is being physically restrained by a gripping tool or being mentally bound by a bad habit (Grice 2001b p 167). From this and similar cases, Grice points to the need for other clues in the context in order to determine which of these two possible meanings is, in fact, the meaning that was intended.

I will return to this issue in more detail when I discuss the extraction of meaning. What is important to note at this point is that Grice sees the ambiguity as a problem with the utterance, not with the intention. In his attack on Grice's position, Putnam claimed that meaning is not to be located in the head of the utterer but in the outside world (see 4.4.1 above). He concedes that there may be ambiguity in the mind, as in the case of his inability to distinguish between beech and elm trees, but claims, in effect, that there is no ambiguity of reference<sub>F</sub>. Society defers to experts to determine the precise meaning of terms such as 'beech' and 'elm'.

When Searle discusses indirect speech acts he makes clear that there is a problem of ambiguity. He begins his article on the subject with what is, in effect, a restatement of Grice's position, but he goes on to show that things are not as simple as Grice envisages.

The simplest cases of meaning are those in which the speaker utters a sentence and means exactly and literally what he says. In such cases the speaker intends to produce a certain illocutionary effect in the hearer [ie wants the hearer to respond to his utterance in a particular way], and he intends to produce this effect by getting the hearer to recognise this intention to produce it, and he intends to get the hearer to recognise this intention in virtue of the hearer's knowledge of the rules that govern the utterance of the sentence. But notoriously, not all cases of meaning are this simple: In hints, insinuations, irony and metaphor – to mention a few examples – the speaker's utterance meaning and the sentence meaning coming apart in various ways. (Searle 2001 p 176)

However, Searle does not simply differentiate two types of meaning: the utterer's meaning and the utterance meaning. He goes on to suggest that in cases such as indirect speech acts there are two distinct utterer's meanings. He speaks of "the problem of how it is possible for the speaker to say one thing and mean that but also to mean something else" (ibid p 177). It is debatable whether in such cases the utterer intends the utterer to understand the literal meaning *as the intended meaning*; it is equally possible to view the literal meaning as a step in the process of discovering the intended meaning.

If my dinner companion asks "Can you reach the salt?" does she really intend me to understand that as a question about the extent of my reach? That seems doubtful: the intended meaning is "pass me the salt, please". By contrast, however, the examples of miscommunication that I will discuss in this chapter lead me to the view that on some occasions there are two distinct meanings in the intentions of the utterer, and two distinct meanings in the utterance itself. I will look very briefly at one widespread example of this phenomenon, before looking in more depth at two more serious scenarios.

## **9.2 The Double Entendre**

This particular linguistic form has been made famous by saucy seaside postcards and films such as the "Carry On" series. Imagine a postcard showing a large lady with her

undergarments clearly visible and two flowers in her hand. “What a fine pair of bloomers!” says the text below the picture. In these, and less saucy forms of pun, the utterer is intended to recognise both possible meanings of the utterance. It is the realisation that there is both an innocent and a saucy reading of the utterance that creates the humour.

Most double entendres, like the one above, depend upon semantic ambiguity (discussed in the previous chapter). It is also possible to create a form of double entendre by deliberate use of syntactic ambiguity. Driving home from university one day, I found myself behind a security company vehicle displaying the slogan “We have a reputation to protect”. This is clearly intended to be understood in two distinct ways: “we have a reputation for providing protection” and “we have a (good) reputation that we will protect by continuing good service”. The ambiguity is intended.

The use of double entendres is one case of there being two meanings, both in the intentions of the utterer and in the utterance itself. Whilst such cases of deliberate ambiguity may, of themselves, be sufficient to challenge the traditional philosophical views about meaning, it is the use of double meanings in other situations which is more serious, and perhaps of more philosophical and psychological significance.

### **9.3 Advertising speak**

If the case quote above from the sketch show is an example of miscommunication, then that miscommunication turns on the issue of quantification and the misuse of the term “nothing”. That is not the issue, however, that I plan to discuss. Of more significance for this study is the form of the advertisement being parodied.

There are countless advertisements to be seen or heard that are similar in their structure to “Nothing acts faster than Anadin”. I suggest that the reason for this style of advertising is that the advertisement is aimed at two different audiences and is therefore designed to express two different meanings.

Advertisements are required to obey the law and to comply with the standards set by the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA). That Authority and the law courts are one of the audiences being addressed. Any claims made about a product must be legal and justifiable. A claim that Anadin is the fastest acting painkiller would have to be legally defensible for it to pass the scrutiny of the ASA. When there are many similar drugs on the market that might be difficult, if not impossible, to prove. But the wording adopted is open to the meaning that Anadin is one of many drugs that act with a similar speed.

However, the purpose of advertising is not, in essence, to satisfy the ASA – it is to promote and sell a product. If no-one is ahead of you in a race, then you are leading (even if you are sharing the lead). The man in the street – the other audience for whom the advertiser is writing – might overlook the fact that the lead can be shared and think that if no other drug is faster than Anadin, then Anadin must be the fastest. This reasoning is, of course, faulty but widespread and allows the advertiser to suggest to its main audience that it is the best, whilst at the same time being able to prove legally that it has not actually made that claim.

This is not the place to discuss the morality of utterances such as this that are open to two distinct interpretations, and where both interpretations are intended. It might be argued that there is only one meaning, ie the correct understanding of the words used, and that the words do not actually mean that the product is the best. But my point is that it is this false meaning that the writer intends to be understood. If in any sense meaning is intentional (in Grice's sense) then this meaning, albeit logically fallacious, is an intended meaning.

There is also scope for a debate as to whether such cases should be classed as miscommunications. It is enough to note that this is a widespread practice, and that any theory of meaning must be able to cope with them. In the following section I examine an example of double meaning that has more serious implications – for the utterer if not for the philosopher.

#### **9.4 The scam**

In this section I discuss a third type of communication in which there exist two distinct intentions in the mind of the utterer, and as a result two distinct meanings in the utterance. It is not my purpose to consider the ethical issues raised by this style of writing, but it would, I think, be widely held to be of very questionable morality.

The documentation, of which extracts are set out as Case 13 at the beginning of this chapter, was sent out by a company soliciting for orders from their catalogue. I have selected a few extracts for discussion but they are typical of the rest of this, and of many other similar, documents.

The first point to make is that although I have shown some words in small print, I have not enlarged the words that follow, located between the two red lines. These are a larger point size on the original document and their position between two red lines marks them out to be read as an utterance in their own right. In fact the words in small print and the words in large print form a single sentence, so that the promise “will mandatorily be sent to you” is conditional on receipt of the “Personal Validation Sheet” and conformity “in all points to the Report of the Supervisor”.

The statement that Mrs \*\*\*\*\* is the sole addressee of the dossier means little; a quick glance at the address panel confirms that. The reference to a unique draw number (omitting the name of the addressee, which when it appears is always in capital letters) might divert thought away from the idea that you are the winner. But this possibility is immediately offset by the following statement: “The sum to be awarded to our winner, Mrs \*\*\*\*\* , is indeed £11,500.00”.

This is the most blatant case of two meanings being intended. The first intended meaning, to be understood by the person receiving the documentation, is that Mrs \*\*\*\*\* is the winner. The sentence is intended to be read by the recipient in the same way as a sentence such as “the person opening the fete is the Prime Minister, Mr Brown”. But, of course, Mrs \*\*\*\*\* is only the winner if she has the unique number already drawn and if she complies with all the complex requirements for responding.

However, if challenged about this apparent lie, the author of the document will point out that it was intended to be read in the same way as “the reason we wrote to you, Mrs \*\*\*\*\*, is that you purchased something from our sister company”. The ambiguity in this particular utterance is not accidental; it is a deliberate attempt to persuade the utterer to extract a particular – albeit false – meaning whilst at the same time expressing an alternative – legally acceptable – meaning.

### **9.5 Conclusion**

In this chapter I looked at cases, ranging from the light-hearted to the very serious, in which there are two distinct meanings intended by the utterer and therefore two distinct meanings in the utterance. I will return to the issue of the meaning of ‘meaning’ in the final part of the thesis, but before that I turn in the next part to the question of how we extract meaning from utterances.

**PART FOUR**

**THE EXTRACTION**

**OF**

**MEANING**

## **CHAPTER 10: PAYING ATTENTION**

### Case 14

*In a television advertisement a young couple are seated in a fast food restaurant. The young man is holding a hamburger with all the trimmings in both hands, and is regarding it closely. The young woman is speaking, telling him that she realises that it will not be easy, but she really wants to go to college and get her qualification. She stops speaking and it is several seconds before he realises that she was speaking to him. He drags his gaze away from the hamburger, and ventures a response. "Terracotta?" he says.*

### Case 15

*My wife and I were sitting across from each other, both engrossed in our shared hobby of cross-stitch embroidery. Suddenly I realised she was speaking and caught the words "finished the backstitching". I thought she was asking me whether I had finished the backstitching, so I said "No". "What do you mean 'no'?" she said. "I said 'That's me finished the backstitching'. What did you think I said?"*

### Case 16

*Jimmy was on a school trip to Germany. One evening he saw a good-looking girl coming down the hostel stairs and decided to chat her up. He was disappointed that he could not make head or tail of her responses. Then suddenly he realised that he was speaking to her in German, but she was speaking to him in English – albeit in a broad Geordie accent.*

In Part Two I looked at the acquisition of meaning as part of the process of language learning, and in Part Three I discussed the expression of meaning in utterances. On several occasions I made reference, albeit in passing, to the role of the utterer. In this part of the thesis it is that role that comes to the fore, as I look at how we extract meaning from utterances.

I begin the process in this chapter by examining the very basic issues: recognising that there is an utterance, paying attention to the utterance, and extracting the words forming the utterance. All of these processes must occur before we can begin to extract meaning.

### **10.1 Recognising an utterance**

In section 3.4 I listed some of the skills that make up the innate language ability demonstrated by even the youngest children. I pointed out that children only four or five days old respond positively to the sound of their communal language, distinguishing it from other languages. But underlying this ability is the ability to identify language itself.

Neurologists have identified several specific areas of the brain that are used for language processing. But for those areas that process incoming speech to function, there must be a mechanism that detects that the sounds being heard are speech and directs the input to the language processing area. This mechanism is subconscious: I do not have to spend all my time consciously analysing the sounds picked up by my ears in order to determine whether they constitute speech. I simply recognise speech, whether in my own language or another.

Furthermore, I also commented in section 3.4 on the innate ability to distinguish the distinct sounds that form the phonetic structure of one's communal language, which is also subconscious. This means that when a stream of sounds has been identified as language, it is then broken down into its component sounds (phonemes), the stream of phonemes is segmented into words, and the syntax identified. These innate abilities are honed during childhood and the last-named fails to develop if the child is not exposed to language before puberty (see the case of Genie Wiley discussed in section 3.4).

It is possible to acquire fluency in a language that is learned after puberty, but the skill involved has to be learned in the same way that we learn a physical skill such as golf or playing the piano. With constant practice such skills can become unconscious and work best when they are unconscious. A concert pianist cannot consciously think about which finger to place in which position for every note to be played. The same is true for the skill of understanding language.

In most cases, therefore, when an utterance is made in the presence of an utterer, the utterer will detect the occurrence of the utterance, and by a chain of processes will extract a sequence of meaningful units (words). This chain is illustrated in Figure 10.1.

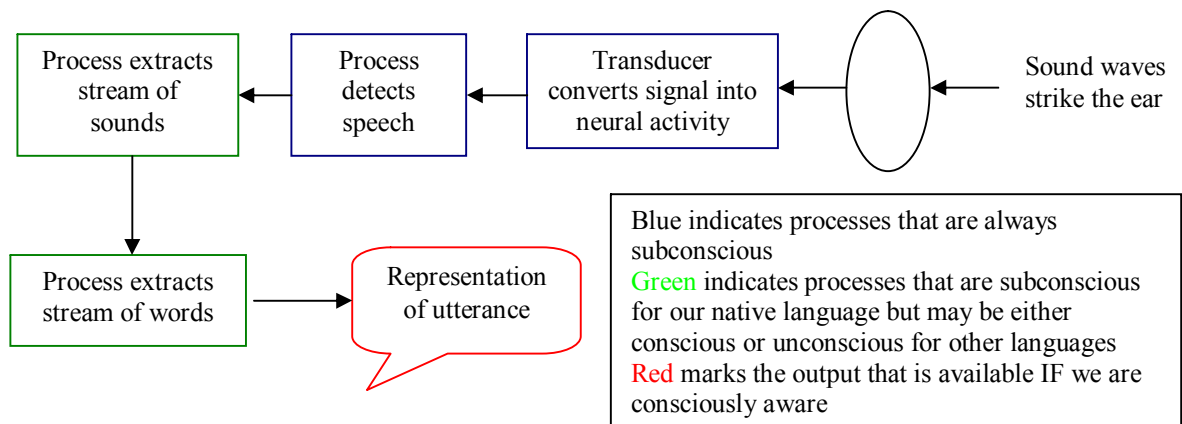


Figure 10.1 – Processing speech

As shown in the diagram, these processes will occur automatically, generally without the conscious action of the utterer. The question to be considered, therefore, in the rest of this chapter is how this process can go wrong, even before the stage of extracting meaning. (I return to the issue of the precise form of the representation of the utterance in a later chapter.)



## **10.2. Attention**

I have claimed both in chapter 3 and in the previous section that the processes involved in recognising and handling an utterance are either subconscious or unconscious. The distinction between the two types of process is as follows. Subconscious processes were acquired without the involvement of consciousness (for example, the child's ability to distinguish the specific speech sounds of his or her native language) and take place without the possibility of conscious awareness. Unconscious processes are acquired consciously (like many manual skills such as sport) but when acquired work best, and under normal circumstances, without the involvement of consciousness. It remains possible, however, to perform such processes consciously, but at the cost of loss of speed.

There is ample evidence that thought processes can operate without us being aware of them. I am not alone, I am sure, in having on occasion realised that I have driven several miles – coping with traffic and road conditions – whilst my conscious mind has been taken up with a problem to do with work or family. There is no reason, therefore, that the processes involved in detecting and analysing an utterance cannot take place without my being aware of it if my mind is focussed on something else.

This is the situation demonstrated by Case 14. The miscommunication occurred because the man's awareness was focussed on the hamburger and he failed therefore to be aware that he was being addressed. In the following case, the utteree became aware of the utterance after it had begun. The result was that the utteree had only a partial utterance available from which to extract meaning. Again there was miscommunication, but this was not caused solely by the inattention, but also by the wrong assignment of meaning that resulted. I will return to this issue in the next chapter.

In this section I showed how inattention can result in failure to retrieve all or part of an utterance, even though the processes that create the representation of the utterance out of the stream of sounds work perfectly. In the final section of this chapter, I examine a case where these processes themselves fail.

## **10.3 Making assumptions**

In this section I consider what assumptions underlie the operation of the processes that extract the utterance from the stream of sounds that the utterer forms in order to express it. I suggest that the existence of these assumptions explain the problem encountered by the English schoolboy on a trip to Germany (Case 16).

I discussed in section 3.4 the fact that even the youngest children can distinguish between their communal language and other languages. This clearly presupposes the existence of the first process outlined above, by which speech is differentiated from other sounds. I also discussed in that section the fact that children learn at a very early stage to differentiate the specific sounds (phonemes) of their communal language. Apart from interference (such as noise) there is little reason to expect problems with this process.

However, when a second (or subsequent) language is learned after puberty, the sounds of that language have to be consciously acquired. It is probable that some sounds will be common to both the communal and the learned language, but the proportion of common sounds will vary widely depending on the languages involved. It appears not unreasonable to assume that the consciously acquired process that differentiates the sounds of a foreign language may be triggered, on at least some occasions, by the fact that we expect to hear that language.

Since the schoolboy in Case 16 was in Germany, he was expecting to hear German being spoken. When faced with the stream of sounds from the girl to whom he was talking, it seems likely that it was the learned German-sound-differentiating process that was in play rather than his innate English-sound-differentiating process. Had the girl spoken in his own regional dialect (which was broadly what is now known as “Estuary English”) he might very quickly have realised that he was employing the wrong module, and correctly extracted what she was saying.

Since the girl was from the North East and spoke with a Geordie accent, the system of sounds forming her dialect of English was very different from his own. If the sound differentiating module was producing a stream of sounds based on the assumption that the language was German, it is clear that the subsequent process (that breaks the stream of sounds into meaningful pieces, ie words) would fail.

It appears inevitable that there are separate sound- and word-differentiating modules for each language that an individual speaks. When faced with someone speaking when we do not know in advance what language to expect, it seems likely that we try different modules in turn until we either successfully extract an utterance or exhaust the supply of modules.

What I draw from this particular case is (a) that we have a choice of modules that extract the utterance from the stream of sounds that form it, (b) that the choice of modules to be used may be subconsciously selected by our expectations, and (c) that when faced with a language that we were not expecting, we go through an iterative process of trying each differentiating process in turn until we either find a match or run out of options.

Only when this whole series of process is complete are we in a position to begin to extract meaning from the utterance. How we do that is the subject of the next two chapters.

## **CHAPTER 11: THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT**

### *Case 17*

*My aunt was 95 years old and very deaf and almost blind, although her mind was still as active as ever. On one of my weekly visits I was telling her about the heavy snow that had fallen and commented that the road from Largs to Kilbirnie was closed. She had no difficulty picking up 'Kilbirnie' but was stumped by 'Largs'. After several abortive attempts to repeat the word I said "It is a very steep hill". "Oh, she said, "Largs!"*

In the previous chapter I discussed the several processes that take place before we are in a position to extract the meaning from an utterance. In this chapter I look at several closely related factors that play a role in enabling us to extract meaning. I begin with some evidence that appears, on the surface, to run contrary to the case of inattention in the previous chapter. I then consider the problem of ambiguity, before discussing how we select between alternative meanings of terms with multiple meanings. In conclusion, I review the type of contextual clue that Grice calls 'implicature'.

### **11.1 Subconscious attention**

I begin by considering the implications of an experiment carried out in the 1970s to elucidate the resolution of ambiguity. This has implications for our understanding both of attention, and of the process of extracting meaning.

The case of the young couple in the fast food restaurant, which I discussed in the previous chapter, demonstrates clearly that, when our attention is focussed on something else, we can fail entirely to realise that an utterance has occurred. On other occasions we may become aware that someone is speaking to us after they have begun, and thus miss part of the utterance. But there is evidence that on some occasions we hear and understand an utterance without being aware that we have done so.

In an article published in 1972 Lackner and Garrett discuss experiments that they had performed to investigate how we resolve ambiguity. Their method was to connect separate sound sources to each ear of the participants. Into one ear they played a sentence that was ambiguous such as "The spy put out the torch as our signal to attack". Into the other ear they provided information that could clarify the ambiguity, but at such a low volume that many participants did not even report hearing it. Some participants were played "The spy extinguished the torch in the window" and others were played "The spy showed the torch from the window".

The results of their experiment showed that when asked to paraphrase the original sentence on the attended channel, the participants were influenced by the information provided on the unattended channel. This was true even when the participant was not aware that anything had been played on that channel.

The difference between the previously discussed cases of inattention and this experimental result is that in the former case the individuals had their attention focussed on something other than the utterance. In the latter case the participants were paying attention to an utterance, but were not consciously aware that they were also hearing a second parallel utterance. Despite this unawareness, the participants drew on the meaning of the secondary utterance in extracting the meaning of the main utterance, and thus resolving the deliberate ambiguity included therein.

I return to this issue in a later chapter when I focus on the modularity of the process of extracting meaning. At this point it is only necessary to note that the participants used the knowledge gained – subconsciously – from another source in order to extract the meaning from an utterance. In the following sections I look at other examples of this process.

### **11.2 Additional information**

In the introduction to chapter 9 I quoted an utterance used by Grice to illustrate ambiguity – “He is in the grip of a vice”. Grice points out that the utterer could not tell, from these words alone, whether the person spoken about is being physically restrained by a gripping tool or being mentally bound by a bad habit (Grice 2001b p 167). Unless the utterance is made in the physical presence of the subject of the sentence, the utterer has no clues from the context to resolve the ambiguity. The situation is therefore similar to that where due to deafness or other impediment, some of the utterance was missed, in that there are also no clues available in the latter case to enable the meaning to be extracted.

Because of her deafness, my aunt had imperfectly grasped the sounds that I made to indicate the town of Largs, and was unable to match the sound pattern to a known term. However, as soon as she was given a clue (there is a very steep hill into Largs coming from Glasgow) she was able to make the match.

This is very similar to my experience (and I have no doubt that of many other crossword fans) when doing a crossword. I come to a clue, and I cannot solve it. I therefore move on to other clue whose answers include letters of the original unsolved answer. When I solve one of the latter clues, and gain a letter to help solve the unsolved clue, the answer becomes immediately obvious. I am not here considering those cases where I work my way through the alphabet trying to form the answer.

Since one case concerns the sounds of words and the other the spelling of words, it is probable that there are two different processes involved. The common feature is that external clues have an impact on the search for a word.

### **11.3 The clue is in the words**

At the start of this chapter I quoted experimental data showing that we can use data acquired subconsciously from one utterance to understand another utterance. I turn now to consider how we use clues from within an utterance to help extract the meaning. I am not

concerned so much with ambiguity as with the fact that many terms have multiple meanings, from which we need to select the appropriate one on each occasion.

Consider the following utterance:

I watched Henman's last set while I was waiting for the jelly to set.

In this short utterance there are two separate tokens of the word 'set', which has a multiplicity of meanings. Collins English Dictionary has 49 sub-entries for 'set' as a verb, plus 9 for 'set' as a noun and 16 separate entries for phrases beginning with 'set'. In order for the utterer to understand the utterance they must extract the correct meaning of 'set' each time it occurs.

In the case of the first occurrence there is a clue in the nearby word 'Henman'. This name denotes a well-known British tennis player, and the game of tennis is divided into sets. For the second occurrence the clue is provided by the word 'jelly'. This is formed by mixing gelatine with boiling water and then waiting for the resulting mixture to set as it cools down.

In this instance the clues to extracting the meaning of some terms within the utterance are found within the meaning of other terms therein. More commonly, clues to the meaning of an utterance are to be found within the wider context, using the process which Grice calls 'conversational implicature'.

### **11.4 Implicature**

In his article *Logic and Conversation*, Grice introduces the concept of implicature and then outlines several aspects of conversational implicature (Grice 2001b pp 169ff). In the following paragraphs I summarise some of the main points that he makes, and the examples that he gives. I also expand the analysis to include the problem of indirect speech acts.

#### **11.4.1 Relevance**

We are entitled to assume that an utterance has relevance. Take the following conversation.

- A     I am out of petrol  
B     There is a garage round the corner

The utterance by B would only be relevant if the garage referred to sold petrol. The utterer can therefore extract the meaning 'There is a garage *where you can buy petrol* round the corner'.

### 11.4.2 Quantity of Information

We are entitled to assume that an utterance provides sufficient information to fulfil its intended purpose. Take the following conversation.

- A. I'm going to France for my holiday. Where does C live?
- B. Somewhere in the South.

It is clear that A is asking for an address for C. He is therefore entitled to assume that B does not know it. The meaning he can therefore extract is 'I do not know his exact address, but it is somewhere in the south of France'

The other side of the coin would be the inclusion of too much information. If the boss asks A, one of his employees, "where is B today" and A gives a long and complicated answer the boss may take the view once expressed as "Methinks the lady doth protest too much". The meaning therefore he might draw from the answer "he claims that B is . . . but I believe that that is a lie".

### 11.4.3 Perspicuity

We are entitled to assume that an utterance is meant to be as clear in meaning as possible. An obvious lack of clarity conveys meaning. One example, based on Grice, is when A and B are holding a conversation in the presence of C. A asks a simple question, but B's answer is not as clear as would be expected. A can extract as part of the meaning of B's utterance that he does not wish C to know the answer that he assumes A is capable of extracting. This scenario is perhaps most common when adults do not wish children to understand their conversation.

### 11.4.4 Implicature in written material

Very similar principles to those for conversation can be assumed to apply in the case of writing. For example, a reference should say something about the work abilities of the person concerned. A reference that said

To whom it may concern  
A is well-liked by her colleagues, has an excellent attendance record and is always very punctual.

would clearly carry the implication that she is not very good at work-related activities.

## **11.5 Conclusion**

In this chapter I looked at various clues that enable us to extract meaning from an utterance. In some cases those clues may be provided by the utterer in the form of additional utterances, as when I sought to help my aunt understand my utterance about

Largs. It has also been shown that, in an experimental situation, we may obtain a clue to understanding an utterance from another utterance of which we were not even aware.

In many cases the clues are to be found within the utterance itself. In some cases these are direct linguistic clues, in others they are implications. In the latter situation, we draw on certain expectations about utterances – such as relevance and clarity – in order to extract their full meaning. These expectations apply both the spoken and written utterances, but are perhaps more commonly applied in conversation.

In the next chapter I examine situations in which we are led to reject the obvious meaning of an utterance and substitute another. The clues that lead us to do so may be in the utterance itself, in the context in which the utterance occurs, or in our own assessment of utterer's intentions.

## **CHAPTER 12: HIDDEN MEANINGS**

### *Case 18*

*I was watching a television program entitled “Test The Nation” in which the studio audience and viewers at home were asked to answer a series of questions. In one particular question we were asked to count a number of occurrences of some feature. When it came time to mark our answers, the compere told us “If you found 1 to 3, award yourself 1 point; if you found 4 to 6, award yourself 2 points; for more than 7 it is 3 points.” I realised immediately that he had made no provision for exactly 7 items found. I assumed that this was unintentional, and that the meaning intended was that 3 points should be awarded for 7 or more items found.*

In my discussion on the expression of meaning in chapter 9, I drew attention to various circumstances in which an utterance might have more than one meaning from the point of view of the utterer. In this chapter I turn to the opposite side of the coin, and consider how the utteree can decide which of several possible meanings is the one actually intended.

I begin with a discussion of the concept of literal meaning, before considering reasons why there are occasions on which this meaning should be rejected. In doing so I refer back to several cases first discussed in previous chapters.

### **12.1 Literal meaning**

Linguists and philosophers of language frequently refer to the “literal meaning” of a sentence or an utterance. This can be defined as the meaning that a competent member of the speech community would extract from the sentence/utterance in the absence of external clues. It is the meaning that a non-native speaker with a sound knowledge of the grammar of the language would extract with the help of a good dictionary.

The importance of this version of meaning as the starting point to understanding the utterer’s intention is emphasised by Mark Platts.

Utterers' intentions are not recognised by unfailing intuition, nor do Acts of God figure large. It is perhaps possible that that very simple intentions be detected quasi-behaviouristically; but for intentions of any fair degree of complexity, this is simply implausible, the behavioural guide being too inexact. Any explanation of how such intentions are recognised will inevitably rely upon the audience's recognition of the literal meaning of the sentence; that meaning is the route to the speaker's intentions, the reverse journey usually being impossible. (Platts 1979 p 91)



My purpose throughout the remainder of this chapter is to uncover why and how an utterer comes to reject the literal meaning and substitute another.

## **12.2 Words out of place**

In chapter 7 I discussed a number of ways in which an utterer may make a mistake in expressing their meaning. These included well-known foibles such as spoonerisms and malapropisms, and errors such as the transposition of similar sounding words. How does the utterer extract the intended meaning in such cases? There appear to be three steps in the process.

### *Step One*

The utterer recognises that the utterance has no meaning as it stands or that the literal meaning is clearly not the intended meaning. The route to this recognition may involve one of the following:

- Identifying the use of a non-existent term, as in “the sip is shinking”;
- Recognising that the utterance makes no sense as it stands even though all the individual terms are meaningful, as in “the Soil Association supports orgasmic farming”.

### *Step Two*

The utterer looks for words that have some similarity with those identified in Step One and which would form a meaningful utterance if replacing them.

### *Step Three*

The utterer replaces the suspect terms with possible alternatives until a meaning emerges that is coherent and relevant to the circumstances of the utterance.

This process can be illustrated by one of the spoonerisms in Case 7. The dean’s secretary is in her office when Dr Spooner comes in and asks “Is the bean dizzy?” It is clearly foolish to speak of beans being dizzy and there is no reason why Dr Spooner should ask her about beans. She recognises that ‘bean’ sounds very like ‘dean’ and that ‘dizzy’ sounds very like ‘busy’. Since she knows Dr Spooner of old, she also knows of his tendency to transpose the initial sounds of words. She therefore extracts the meaning “Is the dean busy?” which makes perfect sense in the context.

Introspection suggests that I followed a very similar process when I recognised the transposition inadvertently made by a television news reporter (see chapter 7). I realised that “protecting crime and preventing property” did not make sense, but “preventing crime and protecting property” did. I therefore extracted the latter as the intentional meaning.

In this section I considered how we can make sense of utterances that clearly do not make sense (either because they are meaningless or because we reject the literal meaning as unintended). I suggested a three-stage process by which we extract the intended meaning

from such utterances. In the following section I turn to a more difficult category: indirect speech acts.

### **12.3 Indirect Speech Acts**

In Section 8.4 I discussed indirect speech acts from the perspective of the utterer. In this section the focus turns to the utterer. How is the utterer to recognise an indirect speech act and thereby extract the intended meaning rather than the literal meaning?

Frege introduced the concept of ‘force’ which is that aspect of a sentence that marks the difference between assertion, question, command and wish and the like (see Miller 1998 pp 55-59). Indirect speech acts are those where the force of the utterance differs from the intention, as in the example I quoted previously. “Can you reach the salt?” has the force of a question, but is more commonly meant as a request.

On occasion a sentence may be formed in which the force is confused as in the utterance “Can you reach the salt, please?”. The reversal of the normal subject-verb order suggests the force of a question, but the inclusion of the interjection “please” suggests the force of a request. In this case the utterer has a clue in the utterance itself of the utterer’s intentions, and the utterer would be justifiably upset if the person addressed replied “Yes, I can” and did not in fact pass the salt!

Not all indirect speech acts are this obvious. In Case 11 (chapter 8) a philosopher of language fails to recognise one. By treating his wife’s words as a question, and not as a request, he experienced her wrath. But there was a clue that he should have recognised. Martinich admits that he knew that his wife knew that he did not drink tea (Martinich 2001 p 26). This should have caused him to ask himself why she asked a question to which she already knew the answer. Had he done so, he might have extracted the correct meaning from his wife’s utterance.

In order to cope with this type of utterance there is again a three-step process.

#### Step One

Extract the literal meaning of the utterance.

#### Step Two

Ask yourself whether in all the circumstances it is reasonable to take this as the intended meaning. The tests of reasonableness might include:

- Does the force implied by the literal meaning fit naturally into the circumstances? For example, why in the middle of a meal would my dinner companion ask a question about the extent of my reach; or why after I have spilled my coffee all over her dress would she make a complement such as “you are clever!”?
- Does the force implied by the literal meaning fit my previous knowledge of the utterer? In the case of Martinich (Case 11 p 51 above) he admits that he knew that his wife

knew that he did not drink tea, which might have led him to reject the literal meaning of his wife's question.

Step Three

If Step Two yields the answer No, then try to construct the meaning that was intended.

In many cases this process can draw on the meaning of at least some part of the utterance. This is shown by the case of the dinner companion and the question about reaching the salt: the key is the term "salt". But sometimes the utterer must look outside the utterance itself for the answer. If your wife asks you "Are *you* feeling that draught?" you must ask yourself whether she is simply asking you whether you are feeling the draught that she is feeling, or whether she is in fact asking you to do something about it by closing the offending door or window. An utterance with the form of a question might in this case have the force of a request (or should that be order!).

In this section I considered how we can extract the intended meaning from utterances that comprise indirect speech acts. I suggested that having determined the literal meaning of the utterance concerned, we need to question whether in all the circumstances that was the intended meaning. If we decide that it was not, we use the literal meaning and any other available clues, including our experience of previous utterances by the utterer, to decide on the intended meaning. In the following section I briefly discuss how this same approach should be used when faced with propaganda.

**12.4 Spotting the flaws in sales talk**

In chapter 9 I discussed situations in which the utterer has two different meanings in mind when forming the utterance. This is particularly significant when the utterance is designed to persuade the utterer to a particular course of action or point of view, such as party political utterances and sales literature.

The process to be followed in this case is similar to that outlined for indirect speech acts. In this case the steps to be taken are:

Step One

Extract the obvious meaning from the utterance.

Step Two

Ask yourself whether this meaning is designed to persuade you to a particular point of view or a particular course of action that you would not otherwise take.

Step Three

Consider whether the wording of the utterance could be understood with a different meaning that would fail to persuade you. If there is such a meaning, consider whether to act on the obvious one or the hidden one.

This process can be illustrated from Case 13. The obvious meaning of the first utterance (ignoring the small print) is that you have won a lot of money. Since the utterance has come from a sales company, it seems highly likely that this is intended to persuade you to do something. Look at the utterance again and notice the small print. The utterance meaning is now that you have won some money ONLY IF you meet certain criteria – some of which are outside your control. It is wise therefore to extract the second less obvious meaning.

### **12.5 Conclusion**

In this chapter I examined a number of situations in which the utterer should reject the literal (and usually obvious) meaning of an utterance and look for a less obvious (or hidden) meaning. This includes cases where the utterer has clearly confused terms within the utterance, cases where it appears that the utterance is an indirect speech act, and cases of utterances designed to be persuasive.

This brings to an end my examination of the process of extracting meaning from utterances. It also completes my examination of cases of miscommunication in order to learn lessons about meaning. In the final part of the thesis I bring together the lessons learned by first discussing the meaning of ‘meaning’, and then by reviewing how meaning is handled by the mind.

## **PART FIVE**

## **CONCLUSIONS**

## **CHAPTER 13: MEANING AND TERMS**

In this chapter I begin to draw together the various ideas about meaning gleaned from the cases of miscommunication discussed in the preceding chapters, and attempt from them to construct a coherent account of meaning as it relates to terms. This will form the necessary groundwork for the following chapter where I consider the meaning of expressions and sentences. To avoid repetition of detailed arguments I refer to previous sections of the thesis by the use of square brackets.

After a discussion of the number of logical levels within a theory of meaning, I discuss the role of mind in meaning. Following this, I examine in some detail the role of sense<sub>F</sub>. I suggest some modification to Frege's definition of sense<sub>F</sub>, passing on the way the issue of speech communities. I end with a summary of how meanings and terms are related.

### **13.1 Dichotomy or trichotomy?**

Philosophers of language have long argued about the number of levels of explanation for a theory of meaning. Various terms have been used for a dichotomous approach, such as 'atomistic' and 'molecular' (Dummett 1976 p 72), 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' (Blackburn 1984 pp 273ff), or simply "word meaning" and "sentence meaning".

I suggest that these attempts to define a dichotomy are misleading, if not actually wrong, and that for two reasons. In the first place a strong case can be made for three, rather than two, levels of analysis. Frege uses the terms 'words', 'expressions' and 'complete sentences' to mark this trichotomy (Frege 2001 p 201), although others use 'phrase' rather than 'expression'. As previously discussed [1.3] the term 'word' is difficult to pin down, and I have preferred to use 'term' instead. The terminology I will adopt is therefore 'term', 'expression' and 'sentence', although, as discussed below, I subdivide 'term' into 'simple term' and 'compound term'.

Most modern approaches to grammar such as Halliday's (Bloor and Bloor 1995) and Chomsky's (Cook and Newsom 1996) allow for the unrestricted interchange of noun and noun phrase or verb and verb phrase. This is because a noun phrase performs the same syntactic function as a noun, as also verb phrase and verb. But when we consider meaning, there is a clear distinction between terms and expressions. The simple terms "wife", "prime" and "minister" all have their individual meanings, and the meaning of the expression "wife of the prime minister" is built up from those meanings (see chapter 14). The simple terms "slow" and "worm" have their individual meanings, but the compound term "slow worm" is not built up from those meanings, and does not refer to a worm, but to a lizard. For these reasons I suggest that any theory of meaning must include separate meaning explanations for terms and expressions.

My second reason for objecting to a dichotomous top/down distinction is that meaning is neither one nor the other, but both. I will return to this point in chapter 15. For the moment it is sufficient to emphasise the three-fold level of analysis that I propose to adopt.

### **13.2 In three minds**

Throughout this thesis I have talked about the utterer, the utterance and the utterer. It is perfectly clear that in the first and last of these we are concerned with the mind of the person: meaning is expressed or extracted by the mind. But there is a danger of forgetting the role of mind when we come to the literal meaning of an utterance. Each token of an utterance is a physical entity – a sequence of sounds, a series of signs, or a row of marks on a surface. But the meaning of the utterance is not physical, nor is it some non-physical property of the utterance to be uncovered by a mind.

It is generally held that the literal meaning of an utterance is the key to finding the intended meaning and that these are frequently different (see, for example, Miller 1998 pp 56-59). This is often expressed as though this literal meaning exists “out there” in the world. Putnam famously expressed his opposition to internalist approaches to meaning [4.5] as “meaning’s ain’t in the head” (Putnam 2001 p 291). Although at first glance this may appear to claim that meanings are outside the mind, applying the rule of charity suggests that his objection should be taken to be to locating meaning in the mind of the utterer, rather than in the minds of the speech community as a whole. I return to this issue in chapter 15.

An extreme example of the difference between intentional meaning and literal meaning is provided by statutes that have been determined in a court of law to mean something other than the intention of Parliament (Blackburn 1984 p 132). It may be tempting in such cases to take the Fregean view and to see literal meaning as some non-physical entity outside of the mind that the mind can in some way perceive, or, perhaps better, become directly acquainted with by a cognitive process analogous to perception.

Despite my adoption of many features of Frege’s analysis, I take him to be wrong in this case. The view I take in this thesis is that *meaning is a mental phenomenon: there can be no meaning without mind; meaning is created by mind*. I will treat literal meaning as the meaning in the mind of a competent language user, who lacks the contextual clues available to a specific utterer.

### **13.3 Fregean sense and perception**

Since Frege’s famous distinction between sense<sub>F</sub> and reference<sub>F</sub> [6.1], the latter concept has been widely accepted and developed by philosophers of language. Reference<sub>F</sub> however provides an inadequate basis for a general theory of meaning, since many terms and expressions lack a reference<sub>F</sub>. In this section I begin to consider whether sense<sub>F</sub> can offer a sound basis for a theory of meaning in relation to terms, by reviewing how Frege explains the concept. I follow this in succeeding sections with some proposed modifications to the concept.

The first obvious advantage of sense<sub>F</sub> is that it can apply to terms that do not have a reference<sub>F</sub>, as that term is generally understood. The second advantage is that sense<sub>F</sub> can explain differences of meaning when there is common reference<sub>F</sub>, as in the Frege’s discussion of the terms ‘morning star’ and ‘evening star’ (Frege 2001 p 202).

It is hardly surprising, giving the date at which Frege was writing, that his attempts to explain exactly what  $\text{sense}_F$  is are confused and confusing. He distinguishes the  $\text{sense}_F$  from the image [1.4] but claims that  $\text{sense}_F$  is neither objective (ie not the object perceived) nor subjective (not the image of the object) but somewhere in between. His claim is that two people seeing the same object have an individual image of that object but a common  $\text{sense}_F$  of it (Frege 2001 p 201). This is shown diagrammatically in the figure below.

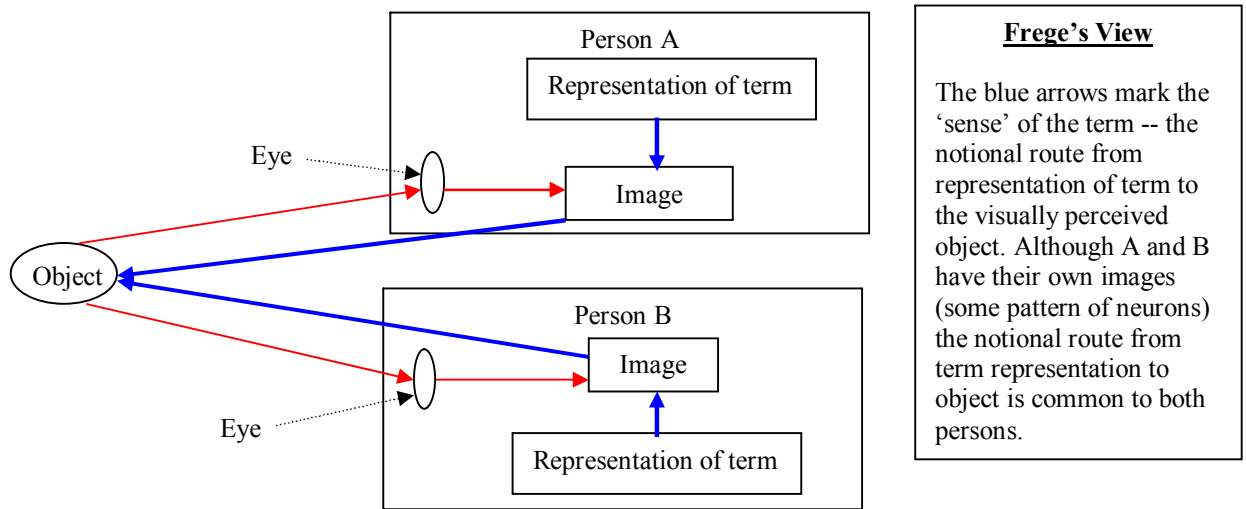


Figure 13.1 Frege's explanation of sense

For Frege,  $\text{sense}_F$  is the common link, notional rather than physical, that determines that, when I first learn the term 'table' and you first learn the term 'table,' we associate the term with tokens of the same type. This, of course, assumes that we are part of the same speech community (see below) and that no error occurs in the process of acquiring the term [4.1].

Having summarised in this section what Frege says about  $\text{sense}_F$ , I go on in the following sections to suggest some amendments to the meaning of the term. I begin by considering the application of  $\text{sense}_F$  to non-real entities.

### 13.4 Sense and the imaginary

Frege focussed his discussion of  $\text{sense}_F$  on real entities, both mathematical and perceptual. In this section I want to extend the use of the term to incorporate the target of all terms, whether real or imaginary. Before doing so, it may help if I restate my categorisation of learning processes and their accompanying representations.

I suggested, firstly, on the basis of empirical evidence of how children acquire language that we are born with a limited number of innate concepts, which I will refer to hereafter as "i-cepts", and that children match some terms from their communal language with those i-cepts [3.2]. It may be misleading to view these i-cepts as representing something. If, for example, there exists a particular pattern of neurons in the brain that



perform the same function as an “AND” gate does within a computer, it might be argued whether this represents the concept “and” or is that concept? I will nevertheless refer to them as representations for simplicity.

In the case of things that we learn about through experience and through education, we acquire, I have suggested, three types of representation. The first to be acquired are perceptual representations, which I will term “p-cepts” and these relate to objects, to actions, to events and to properties [4.1 and 4.2].

The second type of representations are concepts that derive from perceptions, which I will call “c-cepts”. Children can develop concepts from terms that they have learned ostensively [item (ii) on page 37]. For example, having learnt ‘dog’ and ‘cat’ and ‘cow’ they might recognise they have something in common and gain the concept ‘animal’ before they actually learn the term. Such concepts are to be distinguished from those that arise through the process of learning “by description” [5.1 and 5.2], and I will use the term “d-cepts” for the representations of such concepts.

I have therefore described four different forms of representation to which the representations of terms may be linked: i-cepts, p-cepts, c-cepts and d-cepts, which I will jointly refer to simply as representations. There is an obvious distinction between the first category and the other three. In the former case there is no external feature, whether real or imaginary: these terms relate to innate concepts. I shall refer to the other three jointly as ‘pcd-cepts’.

All terms (and I specifically exclude expressions from this statement – I will return to them in the next chapter) are linked to a representation. If the Russellian approach to meaning is adopted, then  $\text{reference}_F$  is denied to all non-existent entities and ways have to be found to reformulate sentences with non-referring terms into sentences that only contain referring terms. The opposite approach is Meinongianism: the concept that some entities exist (that is, meet Russell’s standard for  $\text{reference}_F$ ) and others subsist (that is, fail Russell’s test but still ‘are’ in some sense). Whilst the latter is a controversial and difficult concept, it is to my mind no more difficult than the concept of possible worlds.

It is possible, however, to overcome the problem of non-referring terms if we modify the meaning of  $\text{sense}_F$ . Instead of adopting Frege’s explanation of a weird concept that is neither objective nor subjective, I propose to equate  $\text{sense}_F$  with representations. The  $\text{sense}_F$  of a term is thus the representation in the mind that is linked to the representation of the term, as shown in the following diagram, using sight as an example.

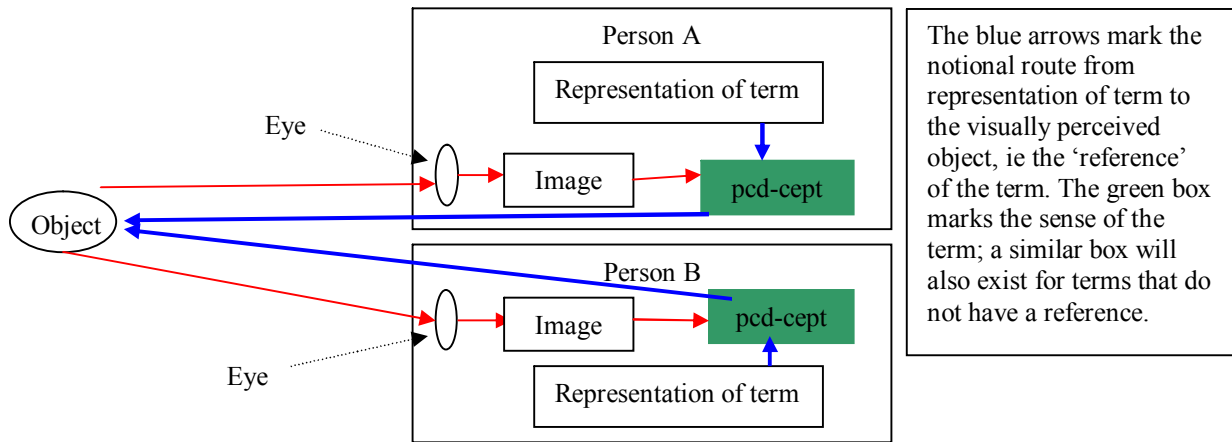


Figure 13.2 Locating sense in the mind

Understanding sense<sub>F</sub> in this way provides a consistent explanation for meaning in the case of terms. The meaning of a term is the sense<sub>F</sub> of that term, that is the perceptual, conceptual or descriptive representation in the mind of whatever the terms relates to. Two points should be noted. First, what a term “relates” to is whatever it was that triggered the formation of the relevant representation. I avoid use of the term “refers” because the representation may have been triggered by something for which no reference exists, such as the name Santa Claus in a story.

Secondly, this meaning of a term in the mind arises, ignoring the issue of error, because of the way in which that term is used by the speech community (see 13.7 below). The relationship between meaning in the mind and meaning in the language is a case of “chicken and egg”: each gives rise to the other, and which comes first is of no practical relevance to the day to day operation of language.

I have now outlined what I call “term meaning”, and in the next chapter I discuss how term meaning relates to expression meaning and sentence meaning. Before doing so, I must consider some other issues relating to sense<sub>F</sub>.

### **13.5 Sense and modes of presentation**

In his explanation of how different sense<sub>F</sub>s can have the same reference<sub>F</sub>, Frege introduces a concept that is now usually termed “mode of presentation”. By this he means that the sense<sub>F</sub> of a term may be acquired by a different route. Using the example of Snowdon and Yr Wyddfa as an example (see Blackburn 1984 pp 328ff), I may come to know Snowdon by climbing it via the mountain railway and therefore think of it as a relatively easy ascent. Later looking at a map of the area I may see the name Yr Wyddfa and from the contour lines identify a very steep slope. There have been different modes of presentation of the same object and therefore different sense<sub>F</sub>s of that object, and unless I am told that Yr Wyddfa is Snowdon I may think that the two sense<sub>F</sub>s relate to two different mountains.

Modes of presentation can also differ as between individuals. Consider the case where A grows up in the country and learns the term ‘fox’ ostensively whereas B grows up in the town and learns the term by description. This is different to the situation pictured in Figure 13.1 above, where A and B have the same perceptual experience when they acquire a term. I suggest that in this situation it is both logical and helpful to consider A and B to have different sense<sub>F</sub>s of ‘fox’, and therefore different meanings, even though there is a common reference<sub>F</sub> and there will be a large overlap between the two sense<sub>F</sub>s.

At this point it may be useful to summarise the picture so far. If A and B learn the name of the same object at the same time, they have their own individual image of the object, but (as tokens of the same type) they have the same sense<sub>F</sub>. If A and B learn the name of the same object via the same mode of presentation at different times, they also have their own individual image, but the same sense<sub>F</sub>. If A and B learn the name of the same object by different modes of presentation, they have different perceptual representations (p-cepts, c-cepts or d-cepts depending on the specific mode of presentation) and thus different sense<sub>F</sub>s, ie different meanings.

In the following section I explore further the implications of this approach for meaning as regards terms.

### **13.6 How senses can differ**

If I am right about innate concepts and how the terms for them are acquired, then all the members of a speech community should, generally speaking, associate the same relational terms with the same innate relational concepts. The situation with non-innate terms is more problematic, since we can learn such terms in different ways and thus may have different sense<sub>F</sub>s. Let us take one simple term as an example.

A learns the term ‘animal’ ostensively as her parents point to various animals over a period of time and accompany each occasion by saying “animal”. Her sense<sub>F</sub> of the term therefore comprises a p-cept. B acquires the concept through her own thought processes, recognising the common characteristics of cats, dogs and cows and then recognises the match between that concept and the use in her speech community of the term ‘animal’. Her sense<sub>F</sub> of the term ‘animal’ therefore comprises a c-cept. C acquires the term by being taught it, that is by description, so that her sense<sub>F</sub> comprises a d-cept. (That d-cept is, of course, linked to p-cepts, c-cepts and i-cepts that have been previously acquired [5.1 & 5.2 and figure 5.1]).

Although A, B and C have different sense<sub>F</sub>s for the term ‘animal’ it will be clear that there is significant overlap. It is possible that B’s concept of animal does not include birds, for example, whereas A’s and C’s sense<sub>F</sub>s of the term both include birds. Nevertheless, there is sufficient overlap for them to communicate and it is probable that at some stage A and B will modify their sense<sub>F</sub> of the term through reading or schooling.

It is a fact of life (and of philosophy!) that we do not always mean the same thing by the terms that we use. Nevertheless there is sufficient commonality of meaning for reasonably successful communication. I shall return to this point in the next chapter.

One final point about sense<sub>F</sub> needs to be made. This is that the link between term and sense<sub>F</sub> for each individual is, under normal circumstances, determined by their speech community. Unless I intend to introduce a neologism, I use a term to express my meaning because, setting aside the possibility of error [4.1 & 4.3], I have associated that meaning with that term because of how that term is used by the speech community. It is therefore important at this point to clarify the concept of speech community.

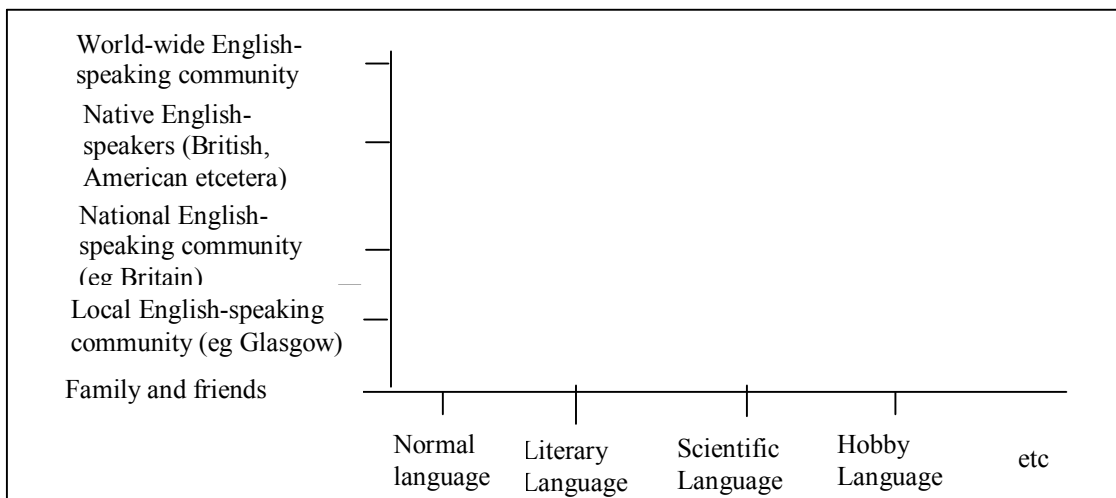
### **13.7 Speech communities**

I have referred to the term ‘speech community’ or its synonyms throughout this thesis without any discussion of the meaning of the term. In this section I set out how I understand and use the term.

There is no precise definition of what constitutes a language. Is Serbo-Croat a single language, or are Serbian and Croatian different languages because they use a different script (slavonic and roman respectively) and are spoken in what are today separate countries? Are Dutch and Flemish separate languages or the same language with two names based on nationality? There can be no definitive answer to these questions, they depend upon one’s point of view.

There is a similar problem with speech communities. If we take English as our starting point, is Glasgow a different speech community from Newcastle? Case 16 (p 61) illustrates the communication problems faced when a boy from Kent speaks to a girl from Newcastle, and fails to recognise that she is not speaking German. How many English-speakers born outside Scotland can understand the language of Burns? In this thesis I take a flexible concept of speech community that varies for each individual from time to time.

Speech communities form a grid, as illustrated in the following diagram, and for each of us the relevant speech community will depend upon the circumstances (a) in which we acquire meaning and (b) in which we are expressing meaning or extracting meaning.



*Figure 13.3 Interrelationship of speech communities*

It will be clear from this diagram that our speech community varies according to circumstances, and that failure to recognise this fact can lead to miscommunication. If I learned the sense<sub>F</sub> of ‘vest’ in an American English speech community and then used the term within a British English speech community, my utterers would have a different sense<sub>F</sub>, since in American English ‘vest’ relates to the article of clothing that in British English is called ‘waistcoat’. In the same way, the term ‘reference’ has a different sense<sub>F</sub> in the normal and literary speech communities than it has in the philosophical language community.

### **13.8 Conclusions**

At this point I can summarise my conclusions about meaning and terms.

1. The concept of sense<sub>F</sub>, as outlined by Frege, offers a possible basis for a theory of the meaning of terms, subject to modification.
2. When terms are acquired there are four different types of representation to one of which the representation of the term is linked: these are innate concepts (i-cepts), perceptual (p-cepts), conceptual – derived from perceptions (c-cepts), and conceptual – acquired by description (d-cepts), the latter three jointly referred to as pcd-cepts.
3. I consider the sense<sub>F</sub> of a term to be this mental representation of whatever the term relates to, and equate this sense with the meaning of the term.

I use the term “relational meaning” for representations that relate to innate concepts (i-cepts) and “non-innate meaning” for all other representations (pcd-cepts). For brevity I also speak of innate terms and non-innate terms, meaning the terms related to innate and non-innate representations. The reasons behind this differentiation will appear later.

I return to the practical issue of how sense<sub>F</sub> fits into a general theory of meaning in chapter 15, after I focus in the next chapter on the meaning of expressions and sentences.

## **CHAPTER 14: MEANING, EXPRESSIONS AND SENTENCES**

In this chapter I continue to examine the lessons learned about meaning from instances of miscommunication, applying them to the issue of expressions and sentences. This provides the basis, together with the previous chapter, for the concluding chapter where I outline an overall concept of meaning.

After restating my objection to truth conditions as an explanation of meaning, I review the conclusion that I came to about Mentalese and about the various ways by which children acquire meaning. From these conclusions I suggest an explanation for the literal meaning of expressions and sentences, and go on to discuss how intended meaning relates to literal meaning.

### **14.1 Meaning and truth conditions**

I have previously set out several reasons why it is wrong to explain the meaning of sentences by reference to truth conditions [2.4 and 2.5]. I am not denying that truth conditions can be set for entities such as assertions and propositions, and acknowledge that many philosophers have used the term ‘meaning’ to describe the relationship between truth conditions and such entities.

What I am asserting is that meaning in that sense<sub>D</sub> cannot be applied to language in general, nor provide the basis for a general theory of meaning. In the remainder of this chapter I will outline an alternative understanding of meaning in relation to expressions and sentences.

### **14.2 Mentalese and relational terms**

In this section I review the relationship between Mentalese and innate terms. In section 3.3 I suggested that, contrary to Fodor’s claims, our innate language of thought is limited to relatively few concepts (ie relational meanings [13.8]). I suggested a possible list of innate concepts, and apart from some ontological categories, the concepts I included were essentially relational in character. The relationships involved were grammatical, logical, spatial, temporal and quantitative. The terms for these innate concepts were acquired, I suggested, by the process of matching their use in our communal language with these concepts (which I have termed i-cepts).

I suggested in chapter 3 that these innate concepts plus perceptions (p-cepts) from everyday experience (unrelated to language) are sufficient to explain the ability of languageless people (prelanguage children and languageless adults) to think. Such thinking would involve the recognition of relationships between different perceptions and could result, for example, in the acquisition of c-cepts (see 13.5) as well as the learning of simple skills [3.2]. The three elements (i-cepts, p-cepts and c-cepts) would provide such individuals with the vocabulary of their language of thought, even though they have no communal language.

The essential difference that the possession of a communal language brings is the ability to acquire knowledge by description [5.1], which provides a vast increase in the number of concepts of which we have knowledge (ie d-cepts) as well as the ability to communicate far more fluently. The representation of a term learned by description (a string of relatively few symbols) will inevitably be more compact than the representation of the description for that term (see figure 5.1 p 37). It would therefore be more efficient when thinking to use the representation of the term rather than the description representation (the d-cept) as the Mentalese word.

If this is correct, then our use of language would in essence be no more than the outward expression of inward thinking. Before I explore the implications of this, I need first to expand the list of relational concepts that I am assuming are innate.

### **14.3 Further innate concepts**

In chapter 3 I gave the following examples of innate concepts.

- Grammatical relationships, such as subject, direct object, indirect object
- Logical operators Not ( $\sim$ ), And ( $\&$ ), Or ( $\vee$ ), Material implication ( $\rightarrow$ ), Iff ( $\leftrightarrow$ )
- Comparison relationships: Equal, More and Less (for physical properties such as length, area and volume)
- Spatial relationships such as in, out, on, under, to and from
- Temporal relationships such as when, before and after
- Quantitative concepts such as all, most, many and some.

I now want to suggest a few more innate relational concepts, beginning with the several relationships expressed in English by the verb ‘to be’. These are:

- The predicate relationship (“John is bald”)
- The descriptive relationship (“a mountain is a very big hill”)
- The representational relationship (pointing to a map “this is our street”)

In addition, there is a relationship (or perhaps a group of related relationships – it does not matter which for present purposes) that is expressed by the English word “of”. There is also the relationship that I can best describe as the “under discussion” relationship, expressed in English by some uses of relative pronouns.

This last case brings me to a crucial point. I am not proposing that there is a one-to-one relationship between relational terms and relational meanings. Some relational meanings can be expressed by different relational terms (“the man is *in* the house”, or “the man is *inside* the house”, or “the man is *within* the house”). Some relational meanings can be expressed by syntactic structure, rather than by a specific relational term. Compare “the cat on the mat is fat” with “the cat that is on the mat is fat”; or take the sentence “More haste, less speed” where the  $\rightarrow$  relationship is not matched by an actual term.

Before I discuss how these i-cepts contribute to expression and sentence meaning, I must comment briefly on term meanings that also involve relationships.

#### **14.4 Relational non-innate terms**

Many of the terms that we acquire, other than those relating to i-cepts, have a relational aspect. Some non-innate terms imply a relationship, but do not require that it be specified. Examples of this are “mother” that implies a relationship with children, “lid” that implies a relationship with a container, or “roof” that implies a building. I can form a correct sentence such as “the roof is leaking” without making specific reference to the related building, or I can be more specific and say “the roof of the shed is leaking”.

Other terms, in particular transitive verbs, require that an additional term be expressed to create a well-formed sentence (such as “he hit the ball” or “she dropped her book”). Some verbs require an indirect object as well as a direct object (“he gave his tutor the essay”).

There is, as will become clear below, an essential difference between the relational aspect of innate terms (related to i-cepts) and those of non-innate terms (related to pcd-cepts). I will use ‘relational term’ and ‘relational meanings’ without further qualification to refer only to innate sense<sub>FS</sub>. The relational aspects of non-innate terms I will disregard as an element of meaning.

#### **14.5 Expression meaning**

I am now in a position to explain meaning in relation to expressions, based on the division of terms between innate relational terms, whose meanings are i-cepts, and non-innate terms, whose meaning are pcd-cepts. The meaning of an expression, I shall claim, consists in the combination of pcd-cepts with i-cepts.

The expression “the lid of the pan” relates the non-innate terms “lid” and “pan” with the innate term “of”, and the meaning of the expression is the combination of the non-innate meaning with the relational meaning. From the sentence “the cat on the mat is fat” we can extract the expression “the cat on the mat”. Here again there are two non-innate meanings (of “cat” and “mat”) combined with the relational meaning of “on”.

It is the essential difference between the two types of meaning (innate and non-innate) that make these combinations possible. One way of explaining this is to think of non-innate meanings as bricks, relational meanings as mortar. You do not form an expression by simply laying meanings in a row (“glasses”, “on”, “table”). You join the non-innate meanings with the mortar of a relational meaning. It is this dichotomy that avoids falling foul of Aristotle’s “third man” charge.

What I have discussed so far in this section is the literal meaning of expressions. Any satisfactory theory of meaning must also cope with expressions that have a metaphorical meaning. An expression such as “spend a penny” has both a literal meaning constructed, as I have claimed, from the combination of its non-innate and innate meanings,



and a metaphorical meaning that attaches to the expression as a whole. I will return to this issue in chapter 15.

It should be clear that this approach avoids the problem of non-referring expressions. Since I have claimed that all terms have meaning (whether innate or non-innate) it follows that all expressions (which are formed by combining non-innate and innate meanings) have meaning: that is the literal meaning of the expression. An expression such as “the series with the least convergence” does have a meaning that we can comprehend, even though it has no reference<sub>F</sub> (Frege 2001 p 200).

Before I can extend this concept of meaning from expressions to complete sentences, there is one category of innate concept that I have so far ignored. In the following section therefore I discuss the concept of force, and relate it to the meaning of sentences.

#### **14.6 Force and sentence meaning**

I have made reference previously [6.5] to Frege’s concept of force, that which separates, for example, a statement from a question. Four common types of speech act that are differentiated by force are:

- Statements (“You are tall”)
- Questions (“Are you tall?”)
- Commands (“Stand tall!”)
- Wishes (“If only you were tall”)

The force of a sentence may be marked in various ways. In English, statements and questions can be differentiated by word order, by intonation or punctuation. In other languages, wishes and commands may be indicated by different forms of the verb. In some cases the force of a sentence may be marked by lexical choice.

In the previous section I used the sentence “the cat on the mat is fat” and extracted the expression “the cat on the mat”. What marks the latter as an expression and not a sentence? I suggest that the distinctive indication of a sentence, as opposed to an expression, is the presence of a force marker. The complete sentence “the cat on the mat is fat” can, I suggest, be analysed as an expression (“the cat on the mat”), a non-innate term (“fat”), a relational term (“is”) and a force marker (hidden in the syntax).

Philosophers of language from Russell onwards have explored the idea of logical form underlying natural language sentences. Use is made of tools such as quantification and predicate calculus to explore and explain the underlying structure of sentences. The proposal outlined in the preceding two sections is not intended as a replacement for such tools, but simply as a means to explain how meaning can be understood.

The meaning of a well-formed sentence is, I suggest, formed by the combination of two or more non-innate term meanings and/or expression meanings with relational meanings and a force marker. This combination provides the literal meaning of utterances.

The approach will become clearer when I discuss below firstly how we express intended meaning and then how we extract it.

### **14.7 The expression of intended meaning**

I begin with the process of expressing meaning. I have previously dismissed Grice's approach to explaining meaning [4.5], in part on the grounds that he fails to account for the acquisition of the terms used by the utterer to construct an utterance. (My one exception was the introduction of a new term by an utterer; a rare event that probably never occurs for the majority of language users). Nevertheless I am in this section following Grice to the extent that I will relate the literal meaning of an utterance to the intended meaning of the utterer.

In the previous chapter I gave a brief explanation of why each of us may have different sense<sub>F</sub>s (ie meanings) for terms that we have learnt. It is also a fact of life that we do not only communicate to share our thoughts but also to lie, to amuse, to persuade and so on. But for the moment I will focus on the simple case in which we wish to make a statement.

The situation is that my wife cannot find her glasses. I can see them on the table and I wish to convey this fact to her. I could do so by simply linking two non-innate terms with one relational term: "glasses on table". However, the particular grammatical rules of English require that this simple structure be expanded to "the glasses are on the table".

The process I am outlining begins with the meaning in the mind of the utterer. This meaning is formed of two types of representation: innate and non-innate and is constructed in the language of thought. This meaning could still be present in the mind of an individual without any communal language. By tracing the links from these representations to the representations of the related terms in the communal language, and then applying the grammatical rules of that communal language to order and modify the terms, the utterer constructs an utterance that expresses the internal meaning.

In this section I have looked briefly at how we construct a sentence to express our intended meaning, using a combination of non-innate terms, expressions, relational terms and a force marker. In the following section I will consider the reasons why the literal meaning of an utterance may differ from the intended meaning.

### **14.8 Differences between intended meaning and literal meaning**

The twin questions to be addressed in this section are (a) why does intended meaning rarely equate exactly to literal meaning and (b) how do they differ? I begin with the first of these.

The complaint is sometimes made that natural languages lack logical rigidity. The language faculty has evolved over many millennia and like all other aspects of evolution its present form arises from random changes that proved to have some advantage. Our bodies would be different if they had been designed initially to be bipedal; our language would be

different if it had been designed *ab initio* as a logical structure. For these reasons language involves the best compromise between competing pressures and is inevitably less than perfect.

There are two other factors to take into account. We are human and therefore prone to error, so we do not always learn language correctly. There have been several recent complaints, for example, about politicians and BBC presenters using the term ‘refute’ when they mean ‘deny’. It may be that the term ‘refute’ is changing its meaning. If most of the speech community use the term ‘refute’ as a synonym for ‘deny’, then it may be the complainers who are wrong! Nevertheless, it remains true that we do make mistakes in our use of language. It is also a fact, or at least a claim based on empirical psychological experiments, that we are not always rational in our thinking (see for example Bermudez 2005 p 145).

There are therefore three general reasons why the literal meaning of our utterance may not match the meaning that we intended. I now look at some more specific reasons for these differences and how they occur.

- We wish to be polite, and therefore adopt a circumlocution. It is a matter of subjective judgement when a euphemism becomes so commonplace that it can be treated as a complex term. How should we regard a sentence such as “I wish to spend a penny”: does it literally mean that I wish to spend a small coin, but have a different intended meaning; or should we treat “to spend a penny” as a complex term forming a synonym with “to urinate”?
- We wish to be poetic and convey emotion as well as fact. We therefore use a metaphor and expect the utterer to recognise the emotive reasons for our choice of terms. One common ploy is to use anthropomorphisms such as “the trees wept multicoloured tears as they were buffeted by autumn winds”.
- We wish to convey a concept for which no literal word exists and make use of a metaphor, as in “the news trickled into the office”.
- We wish to persuade or mislead and we choose a term where we want the utterer to extract the wrong intended meaning. I have illustrated this previously [9.3] with sentences such as “Nothing is faster than A” where the intended meaning to be conveyed is “A is the fastest *and nothing else is as fast*”.
- We wish to make our personal attitude clear by selecting terms that have a clear connotation of, for example, praise or blame. “She was a bitch” or “her cooking is heavenly”.

Having outlined in this section the processes by which the utterer expresses the intended meaning in an utterance, I now turn to the converse – how the utterer can extract that meaning.

### **14.9 Extracting the intended meaning**

In this section I turn to the question of how the utterer is to extract the intended meaning from an utterance. I have already made some comments on this process in chapter 12, but I want to pull the various points made there into a more coherent strategy.

Finding the intended meaning begins with recognising the literal meaning (see the quotation from Platts on page 71). We do that by applying the rules of grammar to identify the term meanings and expression meanings involved, and linking them with the relational terms used and a force marker. I will return to this process in more detail in the following chapter. In some cases there may be more than one possible literal meaning, and I will therefore begin the process of extracting the intended meaning with the issue of ambiguity

If the literal meaning is ambiguous, the utterer must look for a clue in the utterance itself or in the immediate context to disambiguate it. Take the sentence “Always drive on the right side of the road”. This is ambiguous because right can mean either ‘correct’ or ‘the opposite side to where the majority of people have their heart’. If the context is “take care whichever country you are driving in” then the former sense<sub>F</sub> appears correct. If the context is “In Britain we drive on the left but when you holiday in France” then the latter sense<sub>F</sub> fits. If no clue can be found, consider whether the ambiguity is intended and forms part of the intended meaning. I gave the example previously of the slogan for a security company: “we have a reputation to protect” is deliberately ambiguous.

Assuming that any unintended ambiguity has been resolved, how is the utterer then to derive the intended meaning from the literal meaning? I suggest that some of the following questions are relevant.

- Is it charitable to assume that the speaker intends the literal meaning? If a man’s wife appears looking extremely beautiful as they prepare to go out on a special occasion and he says “why ever did I marry you?”, is it charitable to assume he genuinely means that he wonders why he got married? Charity suggests that he intends to pay his wife a compliment.
- Is it logical to assume that the speaker intends the literal meaning? If a politician says “I refute that claim” but puts forward no arguments against the claim, is it logical to assume he means that he refutes it? Common sense says that he does not, and that the intended meaning is that he denies the claim.
- Does the literal meaning imply something more than it actually states? This is the issue of implicature, which I discussed in section 11.4. There are various types of implicature which have been listed by Grice (2001b pp 169ff). A simple example is:

- |   |                                |
|---|--------------------------------|
| A | I need to buy some bread.      |
| B | Jones is just round the corner |

In this situation A is entitled to extract from the literal meaning of B's utterance that Jones is a shop that sells bread.

- Is the literal meaning nonsensical and if so, can it be understood metaphorically? My friend who is paraplegic tells me on the phone that when he heard the news "he jumped for joy". I know that he could not literally jump, so I interpret his intended meaning as "I was extremely happy".
- Does the choice of term or pragmatic evidence suggest that connotation [6.4] has an impact upon the meaning?

By following these steps, in most cases without conscious effort, the utterer is able to move from the literal meaning of an utterance to the intended meaning.

### **14.10 Conclusion**

In this chapter I examined how the meaning of expressions relates to the meaning of terms, and the meaning of sentences relates to the meanings of both terms and expressions. I have identified some non-innate meanings of term that imply relationships with other such terms (as 'roof' implies 'building'), but have distinguished these from innate relational meanings. I have restricted the terms 'relational terms' and 'relational meanings' to the latter, and have proposed that the difference between non-innate meanings and innate (relational) meanings is analogous to the difference between bricks and mortar.

The literal meaning of an expression, I claimed, is formed by the combination of two or more non-innate meanings with one or more relational meanings. Relational meanings in an expression can be marked by individual terms or by the rules of grammar. The combination of the meaning of expressions with the meaning of other non-innate terms and relational terms plus a force marker creates sentence meaning.

I outlined a number of reasons why literal meaning may not align with intended meaning, and listed some of the ways in which intended meaning can be extracted from literal meaning. In the final chapter I outline a theory of meaning and consider how that theory fits with the modular concept of mind.

## **CHAPTER 15: MEANING, MIND AND MODULARITY**

In this concluding chapter I summarise the various facets of meaning that have been discussed in previous chapters, before outlining a theory of meaning and then exploring the implications of that theory for understanding how our minds handle meaning. I suggest a number of discrete processes that are involved in meaning, and relate these to the concept of the modularity of mind.

### **15.1 The many facets of meaning**

It is clear, from the previous discussions of both the cases of miscommunication and the differing philosophical views about meaning, that there is no simple meaning of ‘meaning’. Grice has pointed out the difference between natural and non-natural meaning [4.4] and philosophy of mind is concerned only with the latter. That non-natural meaning is a complex issue has been emphasised, among others, by Strawson, who said that

given that we know . . . the [literal] meaning of an utterance, there may still be a further question as to *how what was said was meant* by the speaker, or as to *how the words spoken were used*, or as to *how the utterance was to be taken or ought to have been taken*. (cited by Rainey 2007 p7 – italics in original)

The various facets of meaning that have been explored so far can be grouped into five as follows. Each group will be discussed in the succeeding sections.

- A. Acquired meaning, expressed meaning, extracted meaning
- B. Utterer’s meaning, utterance meaning, utterer’s meaning (each of which may comprise two different meanings, either aimed at one audience – as in a double entendre -- or at different audiences)
- C. Reference<sub>F</sub>, sense<sub>F</sub> and connotation
- D. Term meaning, expression meaning, sentence meaning
- E. Literal meaning, metaphorical meaning, implied meaning

### **15.2 Meaning in the mind of the individual**

In the case of Group A above, a theory of meaning must account for

- (a) how any individual acquires the meaning of terms and the ability to combine those terms into expressions and sentences;
- (b) how that individual expresses meaning in their utterances; and
- (c) how they extract meaning from other people’s utterances.

I discussed these abilities as part of an innate capacity for language (chapter 3). The evidence from the study of language learning by children is that these abilities are realised in processes that are in large part either subconscious (that is we are always unaware of them) or unconscious (we consciously learn them but then perform them without conscious control). This has important consequences for the philosophy of mind.

I described four distinct ways in which we acquire meaning, linking the representation of terms to four different types of representation: innate concepts, and three types of learned representations – perceptions and perceptual concepts (together comprising knowledge by acquaintance), and taught concepts (knowledge by description). Because we are human and prone to error we may incorrectly link term and representation: indeed, making errors and subsequently correcting them is an essential aspect of the brain's operation (Frith 2007 pp 95ff).

The result is that my meaning of a term may differ in some respects from your meaning of that term and both may differ from the dictionary definition. In part these differences arise because individuals may learn about the same thing in different ways, that is have different sense<sub>F</sub>s of it. For example, A may know that Snowdon and Yr Wyddfa are one and the same mountain, whereas B may think that the two terms relate to different mountains.

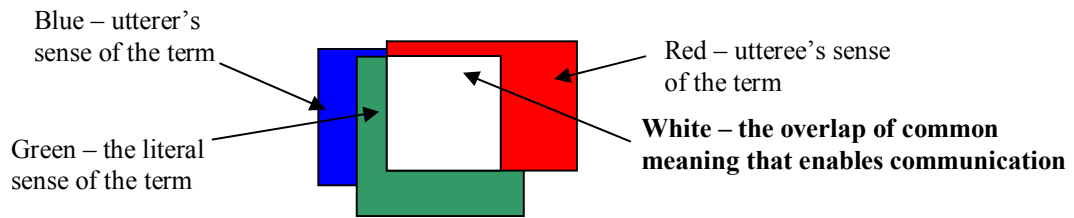
### **15.3 Meaning in communication**

In any act of communication we have three aspects of meaning, which I have termed “utterer's meaning”, “utterance meaning” and “utteree's meaning” (Group B in 15.1). Horst expresses the distinction as follows:

The verb ‘means’ does not express simply a two-place relationship between inscription and its semantic value; rather it must covertly report either (a) speaker meaning, (b) hearer interpretation or (c) interpretation licensed by a particular linguistic convention. (Horst 2005 p6)

In the previous section I discussed two reasons why the utterer and utteree may have a different sense<sub>F</sub>, that is a different meaning, for the same term. They may equally have a different grasp of the grammatical rules of their language. I discussed previously how literal meaning can be viewed as the meaning of a third notional mind, or the common meaning in a group of minds, assuming competent disinterested language ability and access to a dictionary. Nevertheless, whether because of their competence or despite it, there may be differences in some aspects of linguistic ability as between the minds of the utterer and utteree and the third mind – the impartial arbiter of utterance meaning.

The result of these differences is that the meaning of a term used in an utterance will often vary between the different parties. We are able to communicate because the various meanings overlap, as the following diagram illustrates.



*Figure 15.1 How overlap of meaning makes communication possible*

I also pointed out [chapter 9] that on some occasions the utterer may have two different meanings that they wish to express. On some occasions, such as in advertising blurb or in deliberate fraud, there may be one meaning directed at the authorities and a different meaning directed at the man in the street [9.3 & 9.4]. On other occasions, such as puns and advertising slogans, the addressee is intended to recognise both meanings: indeed the intended meaning is the combination of both individual meanings [9.2].

### **15.4 Reference, sense and connotation**

These three aspects of meaning (Group C above) were discussed in chapter 6. Although I have rejected reference<sub>F</sub> as the basis for a general theory of meaning [13.3], this is not to deny that reference<sub>F</sub> is relevant to meaning in those cases where there is both sense<sub>F</sub> and reference<sub>F</sub>. I will discuss the role of sense<sub>F</sub> in a theory of meaning in 15.7 below. Connotation subsists, I suggest, in linkages formed between non-innate representations [13.8] and emotional memories, adding colour to the basic structure of meaning (see 15.7).

### **15.5 Terms, expressions and sentences**

In the previous two chapters I have discussed in some detail the difference in the concept of meaning between terms, expressions and sentences (Group D above). The meaning of terms is acquired as discussed in chapters 3 to 5 and in 15.2 above. They are of two types. Relational terms refer to innate relational concepts that are the basis of all thinking, both linguistic and non-linguistic. These innate relational concepts, I have suggested, form the basic vocabulary of Mentalese. All other terms are related to perceptual, conceptual and descriptive representations (pcd-cepts) that are the meaning of these terms. These representations, I suggest, form the remaining vocabulary of Mentalese.

The meaning of expressions, I proposed, should be understood as the combination of non-innate meanings and innate relational meanings. But there is a difference in kind as between the two terms: if non-innate terms are the bricks of an expression, the relational terms are the mortar. An expression such as “house of cards” is brick, mortar, brick; not brick, brick, brick.

The meaning of sentences is formed, I proposed, from the combination of non-innate meanings and/or expression meanings with relational meanings and force markers [14.6 and 14.7]. This is not, however, to endorse the atomic or bottom-up theory of meaning [13.1], as I will explain in section 15.7, after discussing the last group of meaning facets and outlining a theory of meaning.



### **15.6 Literal, metaphorical and implied meanings**

Whether we are discussing an utterance from the viewpoint of the utterer, the utterance or the utteree, when we are dealing with expression and sentence meaning there are three forms of meaning to be considered (Group E in 15.1).

The first of these is literal meaning, that is the meaning that a competent language user with access to a good dictionary would derive without the additional clues available to the utteree. A simple example would be the utterance “he kicked the bucket”. This has the literal meaning that the person referred to struck a particular type of container with his or her foot.

This contrasts with the metaphorical meaning, where the phrase “to kick the bucket” is used as a synonym for “to die”. But now consider the utterance in a slightly wider context.

- A     Why is Jim hopping about like that?
- B     He kicked the bucket.

In this context there is the literal meaning but also implied meaning: the implication is that in kicking the bucket he hurt himself and the hopping is due to a painful foot.

### **15.7 A theory of meaning**

Having set out in the previous five sections different aspects of meaning, and before going on to consider some implications for how meaning is actually handled in the mind, I need to make one final point, which is the most difficult to put into words. I have spoken throughout this thesis of terms, or expressions, or sentences or utterances having meaning. I have divided meaning in the previous five sections into various facets.

I could not have found any other term than ‘meaning’ to express what I meant by these terms. Nevertheless, I believe that my use of the term is misleading. In section 2.3 (p 15) I included a quotation by Jeffrey King about truth and sentences. That quotation ended with “a declarative sentence is true or false derivatively, in virtue of expressing . . . a true or false proposition” (King 2001 p 1). I suggest that a parallel statement must be made about meaning.

**An utterance has meaning derivatively, by virtue of expressing mental meaning.**

That is, meaning is not at root a feature of communal languages: rather it is a mental feature, an aspect of the language of thought, which is expressed by a communal language. Meaning (as I have already recapped in 15.5) consists of (a) representations in the mind/brain of things (both real and imaginary) of which I have learned, (b) representations of innate concepts that express relationships and force, and (c) the combination of these two types of representation plus connotation (15.4). Language fulfils the task of sharing that meaning, that is language expresses meaning; it does not create meaning.

Having made that point, in the concluding sections of the thesis I wish to consider briefly how this concept of meaning not only fits into the modular concept of mind, but indeed demands that concept. To explain this point, I focus on the process of extracting meaning from utterances.

### **15.8 Mental modules and an iterative process**

An utterance is a linear sequence of symbols, whether signed, written or spoken. Within that sequence are individual sounds, words and expressions. It is not significant whether we start to extract meaning before the utterance or sentence is complete, or wait until we identify the closing signal (a full stop in writing; some change in intonation or breathing in the case of speaking). Whichever is the case, it is very tempting to assume that the process of extraction is also linear, but this is clearly not so.

In a famous edition of *The Two Ronnies* on BBC television (cited in Frith 2007 p 174) confusion arises when Ronnie Barker, as assistant in a hardware store, cannot decode what Ronnie Corbett is saying. He starts by thinking that the latter is saying “four candles” but it turns out that he is saying “fork ’andles”. Ronnie Corbett then asks for “bathroom plugs; rubber” but when Ronnie Barker brings him a bath plug it turns out he meant a rubberised 13amp plug.

In order to correctly determine the phonetic sounds comprising an utterance [10.1], we sometimes need information about the possible words of the utterance. To correctly determine the individual words within an utterance we require clues, either from the remainder of the utterance or the context of the utterance, about the meaning of the utterance. The process of extracting meaning is both bottom to top and top to bottom, with a constant move between the two.

We do not move in steady progression from word meaning to expression meaning to sentence meaning; nor do we start from sentence meaning and deduce the meaning of terms and expressions from that. We constantly move between the different levels of meaning, back and forth, back and forth, until we have extracted our best understanding of the utterance meaning. We are not conscious of the different processes involved in doing so, nor of the repeated moves between them, until something goes wrong.

If Ronnie Corbett had been in the kitchen looking at the cake that Ronnie Barker had baked for his young son’s birthday, there would have been no problem distinguishing “four candles” from “fork ’andles”. On the other hand, if Ronnie C. had said in the hardware shop “fork ’andles. I broke mine digging the garden” the confusion would not have arisen.

If a mother hands over her young child to the nanny to take to the swimming pool, the nanny will extract the words “guard Dennis well” from what the mother says without even considering that she could have been commenting about the garden (“garden is swell”). She extracts those words partly because of clues in the intonation of the speaker, and partly because of clues in the context.

It is clear from these examples that extracting words from an utterance has regard not just to the actual symbols, but also to meanings. Carruthers proposes that the language faculty divides into three basic elements: processes for what I have termed expressing meaning, processes for extracting meaning, and a common database (Carruthers 2006 pp 186ff). Generally speaking (the most obvious exceptions are words learnt by Scrabble players to include rarely-used letters) the representations of terms in our database are linked to their meaning, ie their sense<sub>F</sub> [5.4 and figures 5.2 and 5.3].

It is also essential in many cases to relate the terms of an utterance directly to the circumstances. If I am walking down the street with my friend and she says “He is tall, isn’t he?”, I need to identify the target of her comment, for example by tracking where her eyes are directed. There must be interaction between the linguistic modules and other modules, for example the module controlling the focus of one’s vision. Again, this is subconscious. When I hear the utterance, the extraction of the meaning of her use of “he” is immediate and subconscious.

If the meaning generated by the terms extracted by the word recognition module turn out to be wrong, then the module is re-entered to try again. The clue that the wrong result was returned may be the response of the audience (as in the case of the two Ronnies) or our own assessment of the situation.

In section 11.3 I discussed how we select a particular sense<sub>F</sub> of a term that has multiple sense<sub>F</sub>s. If I hear an utterance with the terms “the houses of” I will recognise the term “house” and its plural marker and have a provisional idea of the meaning. If the following words are “the middle classes” there will be no need to change the meaning already extracted for “house”; but if the utterance continues with “parliament”, then I must change my sense<sub>F</sub> of “house”.

At this point in the process of extracting meaning from a stream of sounds there appear to be at least four modules at work, each of which feeds into the following module and each of which may need to be re-entered when output from a subsequent module requires. In the case of a spoken utterance, these modules perform the following tasks:

- Extract a sequence of phonetic symbols
- Extract a sequence of words from the stream of phonetic symbols
- Extract a sequence of term meanings (sense<sub>F</sub>s) from the stream of words
- Extract meanings for expressions from combinations of non-innate terms and relational terms.

My intention in listing these modules is two-fold. Firstly, I wish to put forward a possible explanation for the various communicative processes and cases of miscommunication that I have discussed in this thesis. It may be said that this is a matter of psychology or the philosophy of psychology, rather than philosophy of mind, although the border between the branches of philosophy and the related empirical sciences is not always that clear (see Bermudez 2005 p ix). But my second intention is to show that the theory of

meaning that I have put forward fits well with the philosophical theory of the modularity of mind.

With the various modules that I have proposed so far, the utterer is able to extract the literal meaning of the utterance. That is, he or she can perceive an initial pattern of relationships between non-innate representations in his or her mind. The process of determining the intended meaning of an utterance from the literal meaning, in a number of different circumstances, was outlined in section 14.8. In normal conversation it is probable that the steps involved will be carried out subconsciously with further dedicated modules. These modules would be involved in comparing the meaning of the utterance as determined by the modules already listed in this section with other factors. These might include our preconceptions (for example, about implicature [11.4]) and our expectations (for example, about how our partner thinks about us – see section 8.5).

When studying serious texts it is likely that some of these processes will be carried out consciously. Why, I might ask myself, does the poet choose to make this particular statement? Alternatively, I might question the output of a subconscious process, for example by asking why do I sense that a reference is not as glowing as would be expected?

At the end of this process of interaction and reaction between a number of discrete modules there emerges a pattern of representations that is the best approximation possible in the mind of the utterer to the pattern in the mind of the utterer, the meaning which they intended to communicate. Meaning has been transferred from utterer to utterer.

### **15.9 Conclusion**

Meaning is a mental phenomenon. It subsists in two essentially different types of representation in the mind/brain and the pattern of relationships between them. These representations are linked to representations of terms which form the vocabulary of our communal language. This language is a gateway to meaning, not a repository of meaning. We use it in three distinct though inter-related ways:

1. To acquire the terms for, and ideas of, matters of which we have no direct experience;
2. To express our meanings to others;
3. To extract the meaning expressed by others.

These three processes involving meaning are carried out by a combination of modules within the mind in an iterative manner. There is no linear progression from, for example, hearing an utterance to extracting its meaning. Instead, the various modules are used again and again, as fresh information becomes available from the output of other modules.

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