

Phil/Ling 375: *Meaning and Mind*
[Handout #2]

David Lewis: Languages and Language

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§ Main Idea

Languages are connected to populations of speakers, primarily by conventions of truthfulness and trust for the sake of communication. A string of sounds or symbols bear meaning or truth-value relative to a language or relative to a population.

§ Three Positions on Language

* Let us call '£' a sentence, and 'σ' a sentence of £. Let £(σ) stand for the meaning of σ in £.

I. [Thesis]:

___ Language is about meanings and truth-values. The meaning and the truth-value of a single sentence are determined by rules of the whole language in conjunction with the factual information about the world.

1. Language is a relation between the language and the world.
2. Language is about truth, and truth is related to states of the world.
3. Each sentence has a truth value (is either true or false) in the domain of a whole language, in relation to the world.

£(σ) [W₁] = T (George W. Bush is the current President of the U.S.) in our world.)

£(σ) [W₂] = T (George W. Bush is the current President of the U.S.) in another world.)

£(σ) [W₃] = F (George W. Bush is the current President of the U.S.) in a world where John Kerry won the election.)

➔ Language Realism: Languages truthfully depict the world.

II. [Antithesis]:

___ Language is a social phenomenon. It is used among rational people who wish to communicate their beliefs and desires, and sometimes, to achieve some intended goals (such as getting the listener to comply). Hence, language is a form of rational, convention-governed human social activity. These conventions could be quite arbitrary, but they are perpetuated by the implicit agreement of everyone in the language community.

1. Language is a social phenomenon which is part of the natural history of human beings; a sphere of human action, wherein people utter strings of vocal sounds, or inscribe strings of marks, and wherein people respond by thought or action to the sounds or marks which they observe to have been so produced.
2. Language is primarily not about truth, but about human rationality and human communication.
3. Language is generated by humans' desires and beliefs. The speaker wishes to accomplish some goals by uttering the sentence. The hearer knows how the

- production of sounds or marks depends upon the producer's state of mind. (e.g. telling a joke, saying things sarcastically, asking a rhetorical question, etc.)
4. Hence, language is a communication tool between two (or more) rational agents.
 5. Linguistic rules and conventions are established on the basis of human rationality and mutual expectation of rule-following (conventions).
 6. Conventions are regularities in action, or in action and belief, which are arbitrary but perpetuate themselves because they serve some sort of common interest. Past conformity breeds future conformity because it gives one a reason to go on conforming.
 7. Language does not guarantee truth or correspondence to the world.

➔ **Language Anti-realism: Language is a human construction sustained by sociolinguistic conventions.**

* **[Convention]:**

___ A regularity *R*, in action or in action and belief, is a *convention* in a population *P* iff, within *P*, the following six conditions hold. (A few exceptions to the "everyone" can be tolerated.)

- (1) [**conformity**]: Everyone conforms to *R*.
- (2) [**expectation of cooperation**]: Everyone believes that the others conform to *R*.
- (3) [**compliance**]: This belief that others conform to *R* gives everyone a good and decisive reason to conform to *R* himself.
- (4) [**preference**]: There is a general preference for general conformity to *R* rather than slightly-less-than-general conformity—in particular, rather than conformity by all but any one.
- (5) [**arbitrariness of the adopted convention**]: *R* is not the only possible regularity. There is at least one alternative *R'* such that the belief that the others conformed to *R'* would give everyone a good and decisive practical or epistemic reason to conform to *R'* likewise; and such that there is normally no way of conforming to *R* and *R'* both. Thus the alternative *R'* could have perpetuated itself as a convention instead of *R*.
- (6) [**open knowledge of the convention**]: The various facts listed in conditions (1) to (5) are matters of *common* (or *mutual*) knowledge: they are known to everyone. This condition ensures stability.

e.g. It is a convention to drive on the right. It is a convention to mark poisons with skull and crossbones. It is a convention to dress as we do. It is a convention to give goods and services in return for certain pieces of paper or metal.

(e.g. why 'nod' for yes and 'shake left and right' for no?)

***Summary**

[*languages*] — functions from strings of sounds or of marks to sets of possible worlds, semantic systems discussed in complete abstraction from human affairs. ➔ Thesis

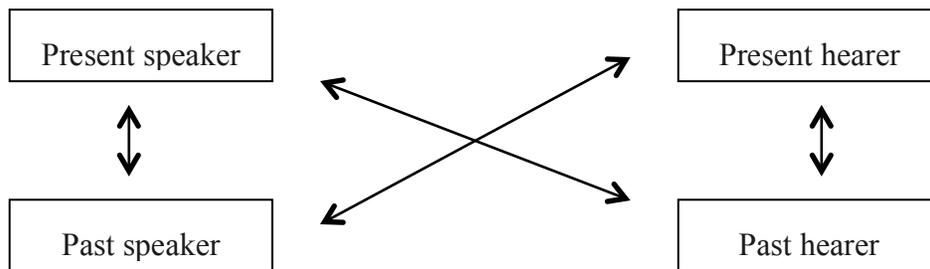
[*language*] — a form of rational, convention-governed human social activity. ➔ Antithesis

Objections: The thesis and the antithesis pertain to different subjects. The thesis, in which languages are regarded as semantic systems, belongs to the philosophy of artificial languages. The antithesis, in which language is regarded as part of human natural history, belongs to the philosophy of natural language.

Reply: Not so. Both accounts can most easily be applied to simple, artificial, imaginary examples. Language-games are just as artificial as formalized calculi.

[Lewis' proposal]: The convention whereby a population P uses a language \mathcal{L} is a convention of *truthfulness* and *trust* in \mathcal{L} .

1. To be truthful in \mathcal{L} is to try never to utter any sentence of \mathcal{L} that are not true in \mathcal{L} . Thus it is to avoid uttering any sentence of \mathcal{L} unless one believes it to be true in \mathcal{L} .
2. To be trusting in \mathcal{L} is to form beliefs in a certain way: to impute truthfulness in \mathcal{L} to others, and thus to tend to respond to another's utterance of any sentence of \mathcal{L} by coming to believe that the uttered sentence is true in \mathcal{L} .
3. At times there is a more diffuse and indirect sort of coordination. This indirect coordination is a four-way affair: between present speakers and past speakers, present speakers and past hearers, present hearers and past speakers, and present hearers and past hearers.



4. There is in P a general preference for general conformity to the regularity of truthfulness and trust in \mathcal{L} . Given that most conform, the members of P want all to conform. This general preference is sustained by a common interest in communication.
5. The regularity of truthfulness and trust in \mathcal{L} has alternatives.
6. Finally, all these facts are common knowledge in P .

III. [Synthesis]: (Lewis' proposal)

___ Language is a rational, convention-governed social activity. Such conventions are built upon truthfulness and trust in the language itself by its users. We have coordination between truthful speaker and trusting hearers. Each conforms as he does to the prevailing regularity of truthfulness and trust in \mathcal{L} because he expects complementary conformity on the part of the other.

___ Under this view, a string of types of sounds or marks can bear a meaning and truth-value *only* relative to a language, or relative to a population P .

Q1: What happens when half of the population routinely lie? What happens when people exaggerate, use hidden meanings, use puffery, use flattery, etc.?

Q2: How do we communicate our implication or hidden meaning?

Q3: What is the foundation for the truthfulness in our communication if we are most often wrong in our beliefs even though we meant to be truthful? How can trust be established on such a basis?

*** [Summary]: What is a convention?**

1. Conventions are regularities in action, or in action and belief, which are arbitrary but perpetuate themselves because they serve some sort of common interest.
2. A convention is not promulgated by any authority. It is not enforced by means of sanctions except to the extent that, because one has some sort of reason to conform, something bad may happen if one does not. In other words, a convention is sustained by a special kind of system of belief and desires.
3. A convention is nowhere codified, nor laid down as a set of rules.
4. A convention governs social behavior through each member's tacit consent and underlying expectation that others will all conform.
5. A convention persists because everyone has reason to conform if others do.
6. Past conformity breeds future conformity because it gives one a reason to go on conforming; but there is some alternative regularity which could have served instead, and would have perpetuated itself in the same way if only it had got started.
7. A convention is so-called because of the way it persists, not because of the way it originated. A convention *need not* originate by convention – that is, by agreement – though many conventions do originate by agreement.

§ Conclusion: The Role of Conventions in Language

1. If we look for the fundamental difference in verbal behavior between members of two linguistic communities, we can be sure of finding something which is arbitrary but perpetuates itself because of a common interest in coordination.
2. Languages are relative to a population, governed by the conventions of truthfulness and trust among its members.