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## MEANINGS, ACTIONS AND AGREEMENTS

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**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to show that the plasticity of sense, the fact that tokens of the same type frequently express different *Sinne*, does not constitute a threat to human linguistic communication. The first part presents the phenomenon. I try to make clear that the appropriate notion of meaning for natural languages is not the one developed in logical semantics; meanings in natural languages are not fixed once and for all, stable. Consequently, What Is Said by an utterance is not something determined exclusively by literal meaning. The second part shows that the plasticity of sense was known in the ideational theories of language, especially that of Arnauld & Nicole. The third part introduces the notions of Plan and Mindreading and show how they contribute to the success of communication.

**Keywords:** Plasticity of sense. Contextualism. Ideational theory of language. What is said. Pragmatics.

## SIGNIFICADOS, AÇÕES E ACORDOS

**Resumo:** O objetivo deste artigo é mostrar que a plasticidade do sentido, o fato de que os exemplares de um tipo, frequentemente, não expressam o mesmo *Sinn*, não constitui uma ameaça para a comunicação lingüística humana. A primeira parte apresenta o fenômeno da plasticidade do sentido. Tentarei mostrar que a noção de significado apropriada para as línguas naturais não é aquela desenvolvida na semântica lógica; o significado, nas línguas naturais, não é estável, fixado de uma vez por todas. Conseqüentemente, o que é dito em uma enunciação não é algo determinado exclusivamente pelo significado literal. A segunda parte mostra que a plasticidade do sentido era conhecida nas teorias ideacionais da linguagem,

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particularmente a de Arnauld & Nicole. A terceira parte introduz as noções de Plano e Leitura de mente e mostra como elas contribuem a explicar o sucesso da comunicação.

**Palavras chave:** Plasticidade do sentido. Contextualismo. Teoria ideacional da linguagem. O que é dito. Pragmática.

Chaque pensée, considérée en elle-même, peut avoir autant de caractères, qu'elle est susceptible de modifications différentes: il n'en est pas de même, lorsqu'on la considère comme faisant partie d'un discours. C'est à ce qui précède, à ce qui suit, à l'objet qu'on a en vue, à l'intérêt qu'on y prend, et en général aux circonstances où l'on parle, à indiquer les modifications auxquelles on doit la préférence; c'est au choix des termes, à des tours, et même à l'arrangement des mots, à exprimer ces modifications: car il n'est rien qui puisse y contribuer.<sup>1</sup> (Condillac)

For centuries, sailors navigated by the stars. They were under the illusion that they needed “fixed” stars to get to their destination. We know today that there are no such stars and that we always found our way mainly thanks to our own abilities.

The logical semantics developed in the first half of XX<sup>th</sup> century conceived of meanings as something fixed, stable, insensitive to contextual factors, well-determined, given once and for all, and many people still think that this must be the correct way to conceive of meanings; otherwise communication, they say, would be impossible, a kind of miracle.<sup>2</sup> Meanings, in that conception, are rules (or functions if you prefer) the mastering of which enables

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<sup>1</sup> Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, *De l'Art d'écrire* (1775), in Tome 1 of *Oeuvres philosophiques*, tome XXXIII of the Corpus général des philosophes français, in three volumes, text established and presented by G. Le Roy, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1947, p. 517.

<sup>2</sup> See Lepore & Cappelen, *Insensitive Semantics*, 2005.

speakers-hearers to apply a term correctly in any new circumstances. Indexes with different coordinates have been added to the semantic apparatus of model-theoretical semantics to deal with some limited cases of context-dependency (mainly indexicals and demonstratives), where part of the meaning is stable (character) even if the content changes from one context to another. Ignorance, the incomplete grasping of the sense of an expression (or the grasping of another sense wrongly associated to a term), that is, semantic incompetence, plus many factors responsible for serious discrepancies in the idiolects of the speakers-hearers of a community, could then explain failures of communication.

Things could get worse. Suppose that we have plenty of evidence that the sense of our linguistic expressions is not that stable; that context-sensitivity does not affect only indexicals and demonstratives, but possibly any class of expressions. Let us call this phenomenon the *plasticity of sense*<sup>3</sup> — the fact that tokens of the same expression-type in a natural language do not always express the same *Sinn* in different contexts of utterance. If you believe that the correct perspective is that of logical semantics and that communication, most of the time, is successful, you will probably try to explain away the plasticity of sense or to deny its very existence by appealing to ambiguity, polysemy, incompleteness, ellipsis, etc. This is what the Minimalists are trying to do. But if you believe, as Contextualists do, that the phenomenon is not illusory, that it is a solid, hard datum that our best theories of meaning for natural languages must accommodate, then the following questions are pressing and unavoidable: How do we agree about the meanings of words used in an utterance? How do we “guess” what a speaker

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<sup>3</sup> This phenomenon has been presented recurrently by contextualists in recent philosophy of language. See Charles Travis (1989, 2000, 2006), François Recanati (2004), Anne Bezuidenhout (2002), Julius M. Moravcsik (1998), and Montminy (2006).

has in mind in order to interpret correctly what she says? If meanings are unstable from one context of use to the next, how do we construct a convergence to secure the success of communication? How can we know that we are referring to the same things, or describing and characterizing them in the same way by the use of the same words? Finally, how is communication possible at all?

My aim is to show that the plasticity of sense is no threat to the success of communication. It would be a threat for those who conceive of meaning in a robust way, as something that determine strongly what is said by an utterance in a specific context of use, or for those who think that what comes out from the “conceptual-intentional interface”<sup>4</sup> is a sentence with a complete semantic interpretation, with nothing left to be done by the context. The meaning actually communicated and understood is never totally independent from our encyclopedic knowledge, background knowledge of natural and social regularities, and other abilities on which we rely in order to realize intentional adaptation in infinitely many possible contexts of use.

I shall first present the phenomenon of plasticity of sense and the notion of What Is Said. The aim of this first section is to show that the adequate notion of meaning that we need to explain communication in natural language is not that of classical logical semantics. What is said by an utterance cannot be construed as something determined exclusively by literal meaning, and truth, as a simple relation between the meaning of a sentence and the way things are. Then in the second section I show that the plasticity of sense and the idea of modulation of sense were recognized and taken into account a few centuries ago, especially in the ideational theory

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<sup>4</sup> For that notion, see Noam Chomsky, *New Horizons in the Study of Language and Mind*, Cambridge, C.U.P., 2000; especially, page and 61 and following. The “output,” a logical form, is seen differently by different authors: as something “gappy,” or already fully interpretable, etc.

of language developed by Arnauld & Nicole at Port-Royal. This is not a historical interlude designed to please philosophers with exotic tastes. The plasticity of sense is a phenomenon present in any public languages, not at subatomic levels. If the plasticity of sense — and the modulation of sense — is so striking a phenomenon, wouldn't it be strange in the extreme if no one ever took note of it before us? Finally, I shall present, in a very sketchy way, a pragmatic perspective based on what I call the Principle of the Determination of Sense, and show how the notions of Plan and Mindreading could serve to explain why, most of the time, linguistic communication is successful.

### PLASTICITY OF SENSE AND WHAT IS SAID

Scientific communication in a regimented language is successful when the sentences used are understood in the same way by everyone in the scientific community. Successful communication in a natural language requires abilities which enable us to interpret differently tokens of the same sentence-type. Better: to understand correctly a sentence in a natural language we must frequently understand it differently or to construe it as expressing different propositions on different occasions. Here are a few examples of the phenomenon:

- 1) Jones has got the virus (Recanati);
- 2) There is a lot of coffee on the table (Putnam);
- 3) There is milk in the refrigerator (Travis);
- 4) I played baseball this afternoon (Bezuidenhout);
- 5) I have two children (Recanati);
- 6) I already had breakfast (Recanati);
- 7) I want some water, please!<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> These examples, minus the last one, are adapted from examples given in the current literature on the subject.

1) could be understood as determining the following truth-conditions: the sentence is true if and only if Jones is in bed with fever, or having medicine, seeing a physician, etc. But if Jones is a specialist in Epidemiology sent by the Government to a contaminated area so as to get a sample of a dangerous virus, we will understand that he was successful in his mission. 2) can be understood in at least three different ways: There is a pot of coffee on the table and coffee cups around it – here an utterance of 2) could be a literal description of the situation and an indirect invitation for one to serve oneself. In a very different situation, there are bags full of coffee beans on the table – here an utterance of 2) could be a literal description of the situation and an indirect order to load a truck with those bags; and, finally, in a situation in which someone spilled coffee on the table, an utterance of 2) could count as a literal description of the situation and as an indirect request to clean the table. Again, in the three cases, the truth-conditional content of each utterance is distinct and adapts each time to a particular situation. “There is milk in the refrigerator” has a simple and direct interpretation (there is a liter of milk in the refrigerator); but if there is milk spilled in the refrigerator, an utterance of 3) could count as a literal description of the situation and as an indirect critique directed toward someone who, supposedly, has just cleaned the refrigerator, in a context in which it should be empty and clean. 4) will be understood differently if pronounced by a professional player of the *Major League Baseball* or by a child who played in the yard with his father and his dog without following all the standard rules of the major league. Normally 5) expresses the proposition that I have *exactly* two kids, while, in classical Semantics, it should express the proposition that I have *at least* two kids. Normally 6) expresses the proposition that I had breakfast *today*, while, in classical Semantics, it would express the proposition that (or a proposition which is compatible with a situation in which) I had breakfast *at least once in*

*my life*. 7) pronounced by me in a restaurant means the same as “I want *drinkable* water”; but that does not matter when I ask my neighbor for a bucket of water to wash some clothes.

These are only a few of countless examples discussed in the literature. In these examples, the truth-conditional content of a sentence (or the conditions of satisfaction) is not invariant from one context of use to the next. If the sense of a term is what determines its conditions of application, then what precedes could be generalized: There is no finite set of senses or understandings, no closed list given in advance, once and for all, that could be presented as THE meaning of a sentence. Wittgenstein observed (*Zettel*, § 118) that we cannot list all the conditions under which the word “thinking” could be used, but if the circumstances turn the use of it dubious, we can say why and how the new situation diverges from the previous and more common uses. Sometimes a new use appears and is easily assimilated. Take the word “here”. “Wait for me here!” usually means “around here”, not too far from the spot where you are right now, that is, where the utterance took place. But nowadays, in many web pages, you find instructions saying: “Click here!”, and to follow the command, you have to click on the very token of the word “here”. This is a new (funny) use of the word, but no one ever had any problem in understanding it. Words in natural languages don’t have by convention a limited number of uses or possible understandings or senses, and our linguistic policy does not determine in advance all correct understandings of a term.<sup>6</sup> We can go farther. As Moravcsik points out: “The key point is not that we never know what contexts will emerge in the future that will require multiplying senses, but that we do not know *in the present* which

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<sup>6</sup> See Anne Bezuidenhout, “Truth-Conditional Pragmatics”. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 16, pp. 105-134, 2002.

senses are required to explicate our use of most terms in English.”<sup>7</sup> We never know in advance which (slightly different) new sense or new understanding is necessary to interpret correctly a term or a sentence. The prospects to “explain away” the plasticity of sense by invoking ambiguity or polysemy are not very promising; they all violate the Gricean recommendation of not multiplying senses beyond necessity. And they are not better when we consider other strategies to account for it, like non-literality, indexicality, incompleteness and ellipsis, vagueness, etc.<sup>8</sup>

Ordinary language richness, so to speak, has a price to pay. The predicate “is true-in-L” cannot be defined by using Tarski’s method when the variable “L” ranges over natural languages. The resulting semantics for L is an inconsistent theory, and the plasticity of sense is so pervasive that it precludes an application of Tarski’s schema T for sentences of natural languages. Take a simple sentence like “Jones had a walk”.<sup>9</sup> Then, consider the corresponding T-sentence: “‘Jones had a walk’ is true if and only if Jones had a walk.” How can we be sure that “walk” has always the same interpretation on the right side of the bi-conditional? If Jones is a healthy adult, the correct understanding of the sentence is that he walked a few kilometers to stay in shape. But what if Jones is an eleven-months-old baby? In that case, the sentence expresses the proposition that Jones just gave his first steps in his whole life. What about an elderly

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<sup>7</sup> J. Moravcsik, *Meaning, Creativity and the Partial Inscrutability of the Human Mind*, Stanford, CSLI Publications, 1998, p. 36-37.

<sup>8</sup> Again, see Bezuidenhout, 2002, where she refutes convincingly these strategies to explain away the foregoing phenomenon. See also C. Travis, *Unshadowed Thought* (2000), chap. 2; also on p. 26: If understanding is occasion-sensitive, then that phenomenon “cannot be reduced to a choice from some fixed, or specifiable, set of options. Such a phenomenon would be misdescribed as ambiguity.”

<sup>9</sup> For the example, see J. M. Moravcsik, *op. cit.*, p. 30.



person in the hospital recovering from a serious disease? Jones walked painfully from his bed to the bathroom and back.... The correct understanding of “Jones had a walk” is clearly different in these three cases. So are the truth-conditions. In the case of a famous athlete who has undergone recently a surgery in his knee, it would be still understood differently. We shall see soon that there must be something common in all these cases, a “core meaning” that allows (and can justify) the use of the same sentence in different contexts. So many other examples could be given! Tarski’s T-sentences for sentences of a natural language are, most of the time, completely uninformative. They cannot display THE meaning of a sentence — or the knowledge a competent speaker should possess of that meaning — because, in a natural language, there is no such thing as THE (determined, fixed, stable, etc.) meaning of a sentence-*type*. An isolated sentence-type has, at best, a “semantic potential” (Recanati’s words) or a core meaning that could be applied in a specific context where it is modulated to derive a more determined semantic value. In a natural language, a sentence has a *determined* meaning only when it is *used* in a *specific* situation. Here we have to consider levels of interpretation. If I see a message written on a piece of paper, “I’ll be back in five minutes”, I do understand something, even if I do not know who the author is and when the message has been written. By substituting definite descriptions to the singular terms, I understand that the sentence is true if and only if the author of the message is back five minutes after the time of the utterance. The final stage of the semantic evaluation is not a singular proposition, but a general one with quantified general terms (definite descriptions). As soon as I discover who the author is and when the message has been written, my understanding gives me a more specific knowledge of the situation. The correct (full) understanding of a sentence requires usually the knowledge of different parameters of the context of utterance, but the knowledge of these parameters, most of the time,

has nothing to do with semantic knowledge as such (it is the knowledge of the specific situation of utterance, or encyclopedic knowledge, that determines if we are talking of a pot of coffee, or bags of coffee beans, or drinkable coffee, or old bitter coffee, etc., by using the word “coffee.”)

Austin’s Theory of Truth, one of the most important conceptions of truth elaborated in the XX<sup>th</sup> century, is the only one which takes into account the plasticity of sense.<sup>10</sup> It is, therefore, the most appropriate one for the semantics of natural languages and should be preferred to Tarski’s (*pace* Davidson). Austin highlights two kinds of conventions: *descriptive* conventions, which establish correlations between words and *sentences* (considered as *types*), on the one hand, and *generic situations* or *kinds* of situation, object, event, fact, etc. which can be found in the world, on the other hand; and *demonstrative* conventions, which establish correlations between words used in a *statement* and a historical, actual and *specific* situation, or event, fact, object, etc. determined by the context of utterance. The sentence “John and Mary are going to school by bus” taken from a text book of basic English grammar where it appears as a mere example does not speak about a specific school, a specific bus, a real boy called John, etc. It is just an example of a correct, grammatical English sentence. I understand something; I know it means something different from, say, “John Doe and Richard Roe are both unemployed”. But the understanding I have relies exclusively on my knowledge of the descriptive conventions, which determine a *generic* situation. Thus, in the same way, the sentence-type “there is a lot of coffee on the table” describes generically a kind of situation involving coffee, without specifying the state in which the coffee is (liquid, beans or powder) or a concrete table in a

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<sup>10</sup> See his famous paper “Truth”, in John L. Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, Oxford, Clarendon, third edition, 1979.

determined location. The *statement* made by the use of this sentence always involves coffee in a specific state and a specific table in a specific location. The statement (an illocutionary act always performed in a specific context of utterance) will be true if the specific situation determined by the demonstrative conventions belongs to the kind of situations determined by the descriptive conventions of the sentence in question. Thus, “There is a lot of coffee on the table” can be true in various situations, even when it expresses a different proposition in each case (or different truth-conditions). Of course, the same holds in general for sentences involving vagueness. There is nothing wrong in saying for a class of children “The Earth is round”; but the same sentence uttered in an international conference on geology or geography would be considered as highly questionable. Here is what Austin says on that topic:

Is it true or false that Belfast is north of London? That the galaxy is the shape of a fried egg? That Beethoven was a drunkard? That Wellington won the battle of Waterloo? There are various *degrees and dimensions* of success in making statements: the statements fit the facts always more or less loosely, in different ways on different occasions for different intents and purposes.<sup>11</sup>

We saw that what *counts as* a walk is different in the case of an adult, or a toddler, etc. Putnam (1975) and Moravcsik (1998) suggested the idea that the meaning of a word is usually composed of a “core sense” or a “core meaning” that can be enriched in context. Putnam made it clear: “Even senses that are so far out that they have to be regarded as a bit “deviant” may bear a definite relation to the core sense.”<sup>12</sup> This is the case of “plastic lemon” (Putnam) or “decoy duck” (Austin). Thus, the word “walk” could have a core sense

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<sup>11</sup> See “Truth”, op. cit., p. 130.

<sup>12</sup> See “The Meaning of ‘Meaning’” (1975), in A. Pessin & S. Goldberg (ed.) *The Twin Earth Chronicles*, Armonk, N.Y., 1996, p. 23.

corresponding to something like “locomotion with the legs in the appropriated position” (Moravcsik)<sup>13</sup>, but the meaning is enriched according to the context to mean something different in the case of a healthy adult, or a toddler, etc. The same could be said of the word “coffee”. Considered *in abstracto*, the sentence “There is a lot of coffee on the table” does not specified the state of the coffee (coffee beans or coffee in a liquid state), or if the coffee is really drinkable instead of yesterday’s old bitter coffee, etc.<sup>14</sup>

In the philosophy of model-theoretical semantics, tokens always inherit the semantic properties of their corresponding type. In the philosophy of ordinary language, at the time of semantic evaluation, the bearers of semantic properties are *tokens* produced by speakers in context; they are speech acts of the illocutionary type, and the type-token principle of inheritance clearly needs qualifications.<sup>15</sup> The truth-conditional content (the expressed proposition) or the understanding we have of a sentence depends on various contextual factors and may vary from one context of use to the other, *even when the sentence in question does not contain indexicals or demonstratives*. Thus, the *tokens* of the same sentence-type can, according to the context, express different truth-conditions.<sup>16</sup>

The best strategy to deal with the plasticity of sense is, naturally, to adopt a much less robust notion of sense, one that does not strongly determine what is said by an utterance in a context. Instead of a robust notion of sense that obliges us to multiply senses, something that goes against Grice’s razor, it is much more reasonable

<sup>13</sup> This is not, of course, an analysis of the sense of “walk,” but only a useful approximate description.

<sup>14</sup> On enrichment as a primary pragmatic process, see F. Recanati, *Literal Meaning*, Cambridge, C.U.P., 2004, chap. 2.

<sup>15</sup> I shall not discuss that important question here.

<sup>16</sup> The first to see this clearly was John Searle; see “Literal Meaning”, in *Expression and Meaning*, Cambridge, C.U.P., 1979, chap. 5.

to conceive of the whole picture in the following way: We learn to use words with a “core meaning” or “semantic potential” and then learn to apply them in different contexts to express related but different *Sinne*.<sup>17</sup> We saw that the core meaning associated to “walk” is something like “locomotion with the legs in the appropriated position.” And Moravcsik continues:

But one has to add: “appropriate distance, covered in an appropriate time.” For what counts as a walk for a toddler’s first attempts does not count as a walk for a normal, healthy adult, and the walk of a recovering patient in a hospital is still a different matter. What counts as a walk depends on different *senses* of the word. There is a common conceptual core, and yet an indefinite variety of ranges of application, with different criteria of what counts as a walk, and thus different entailments.<sup>18</sup>

In certain circumstances, a door laid on two boxes might count as a desk, but certainly not in a furniture store.<sup>19</sup> The meanings in natural languages are “semantic potentials” we apply in new situations when they are sufficiently *similar to the previous situations of usage of the same word or phrase*.<sup>20</sup> In each context of use, the word expresses a specific meaning (*Sinn*) which results from a *modulation* by specific contextual factors. The use of words, therefore, presupposes always *judgments of similarity*, as Travis, Putnam and Recanati have observed in many occasions. Interestingly, the capacity to make judgments of similarity is not algorithmic. *But it is essential as*

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<sup>17</sup> On that point, see J. Moravcsik, p. 36. The exact process of learning will not be described here. But it involves very likely a process of abstraction from the contextualized senses of the previous uses of the word.

<sup>18</sup> See Moravcsik, *op. cit.*, 35-36.

<sup>19</sup> For the example, see Charles Travis, *Unshadowed Thought*, *op. cit.*

<sup>20</sup> On judgments of similarity, see François Recanati, *Literal Meaning*, Cambridge, C.U.P., chap. 9, 2004, and Putnam, *The Threefold Cord*, p. 125.

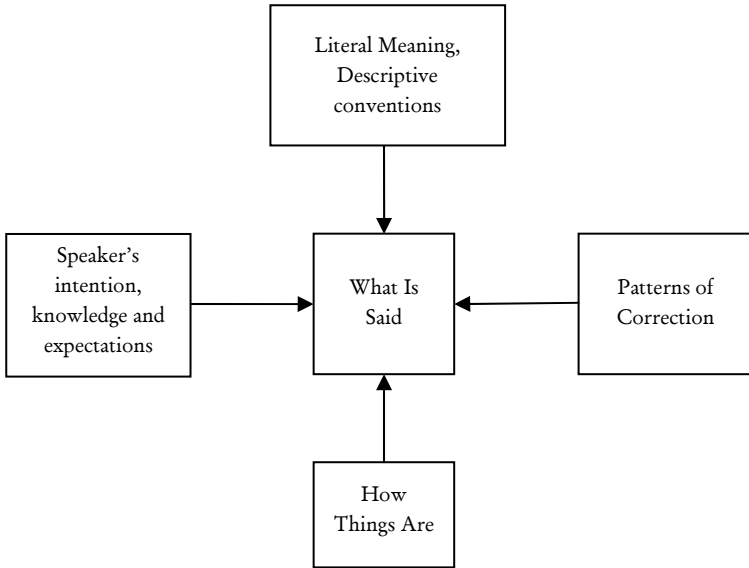
*part of the process of associating a specific situation with a generic situation, as in Austin's Theory of Truth.*

Sometimes, the truth or satisfaction of an utterance depends also on some patterns of correction. If I tell to my daughter "Cut the cake!" (Searle's example), and she uses an axe instead of a knife, I don't think anyone would consider that the order has been obeyed. There are standard ways of doing things that determine patterns of correction. If the oven is hot enough to bake a pie but not a piece of lamb, by saying "the oven is hot," I would be saying something false to someone that had just finished preparing the lamb with the potatoes, tomatoes and rosemary.<sup>21</sup> According to his/her expectations, I said something false.

What is said in a specific situation by an utterance is a mixture of different ingredients. Literal meaning, understood in terms of Austin's descriptive conventions determining generic situations, is only one component. How things are in the specific situation, if there is a pot of coffee on the table, or bags of coffee beans, etc., is another component. Patterns of correction prevailing in a community are important to assess semantically what has been said; we cut cakes with knives, not axes, and restaurants serve drinkable water. Finally, speaker's intention, his/her interests, knowledge, plans and expectations are decisive. When I ask for water in a restaurant, I should be understood as asking for drinkable water, not polluted water, not tap water, not heavy water, etc.

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<sup>21</sup> For that example, see C. Travis, "Meaning's Role in Truth", *Mind*, Vol. 105, 419, July 1996, 451-466; see especially 461-2.



(How what is said is determined)

But, one may ask, how compositionality is possible in such perspective, with that “weak” conception of literal meaning? The meaning of “coffee” or “walk” in statements made to describe specific situations is something richer than the conceptual core or core sense determined by the descriptive conventions of language. It is the “derived” or enriched semantic value that is available for the rules of composition. On this issue, Recanati has some interesting answers:

I reject the claim that the process of semantic composition begins by paying attention only to literal semantic values, and turns to derived values only after the literal semantic value of *the whole* (the

proposition literally expressed) has been computed. It is this picture which I think is unwarranted.

[...]

The literal meaning has no compositional privilege over derived meanings; they compete and it is possible for some derived meaning to be retained (if it fits the broader context of discourse) while the literal interpretation is suppressed.<sup>22</sup>

What Recanati calls “Primary Pragmatic Processes” (enrichment, transfer and loosening) are pre-propositional and they occur *before* the application of the rules of composition.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, “What is Said” (the content of an utterance) should be analyzed in conformity with the intuitions shared by the speaker-hearer of the context, those who understand completely the utterance. This is Recanati’s Principle of Availability, constantly violated in classical Semantics. As we saw in the examples given above, the proposition that classical Semantics identifies as the content of an utterance is rarely the proposition directly understood by speakers-hearers in context. “I have two children” rarely expresses the proposition that the speaker has *at least* two children. I say early in the evening: “All the beers are cold,” but no one understands the proposition that all the beers in the universe are cold. What is actually and directly understood is a proposition with a contextually restricted domain of quantification: that all the beers {in my refrigerator; that we just bought; that we are about to drink this night} are cold.<sup>24</sup> Classical logical semantics obliges us to rely heavily on unconscious cognitive processes in order to derive what is communicated from “what is said literally” (frequently an irrelevant proposition) plus the knowledge of salient facts of the background,

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<sup>22</sup> See Recanati, *op. cit.*, 2004, p. 28.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, chapter 2.

<sup>24</sup> I owe that example to Prof. Marco Ruffino.



and the respect of conversational maxims. Contextualism offers an alternative that does not use so much the “unconscious waste basket.”

### OLD-FASHIONED CONTEXTUALISM

Before Frege and the beginnings of the logical trend in contemporary philosophy of language, with very few exceptions, *ordinary language philosophy was all the philosophy of language there was*. Is it possible that a phenomenon so striking as the plasticity of sense could have been completely ignored by the best philosophers during centuries? In this section I shall present evidence showing that the phenomenon in question was known and that the ideational theory of communication, especially the one elaborated by Arnauld & Nicole, constituted an elegant way to deal with it.

Philosophers of the XVII<sup>th</sup> and XVIII<sup>th</sup> centuries explained the non-literal uses of language and the very existence of metaphors, metonymies and ironies in a simple way. The world divides into things, the thought into ideas and the language into words: Words signify ideas which represent things. There are many more things in the world than ideas in the mind, and many more ideas in the mind than words in use to express them. We can learn and memorize only a few thousand words. Contexts of utterance are always new, sometimes widely, sometimes slightly different from the previous contexts. Therefore, we have no choice but to use the same (few) words we learned to signify different ideas in different circumstances. Otherwise, we would have to learn a huge quantity of words (hundreds of thousand or more), and this clearly cannot be done. Our languages suffer from a double limitation: The first is inherited from a cognitive limitation of the mind that cannot represent all the richness of the things around us; there are always

some aspects of the things our mind cannot (fully) represent.<sup>25</sup> The second limitation affects language itself: It cannot capture all the richness of our thoughts.<sup>26</sup> We never say exactly and in all details and nuances what we want to say; if we could, hermeneutics would be useless. The natural response to these economic pressures is to use the same words in (slightly or widely) different senses to realize an intentional adjustment in any new context.

The very same explanation could serve to explain the plasticity of sense in contexts where someone is talking literally. We saw that what *counts as* a walk is different in the case of an adult, or a toddler, etc. We also saw that Putnam and Moravcsik suggested the idea that the meaning of a word is usually composed of a “conceptual core” or a “core meaning” that can be enriched in context. The traditional ideational theory of meaning allows for such contextual adjustments. The whole meaning of a categorematic term is something structured. It has an objective meaning (the idea of the thing or attribute represented) and a formal meaning which can be divided in specific meaning (the idea of the noun *qua* noun, the idea of the verb *qua* verb, etc.) and accidental meanings (accessory ideas expressed by morphemes for time, mood, person, number, case, etc.). Specific and accidental meanings belong to morpho-syntax. Accessory ideas expressed by morphemes modify

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<sup>25</sup> It seems to me that Frege was saying something very similar in “On Sense and Reference” (in A.W. Moore (ed.) *Meaning and Reference*, Oxford, O.U.P., 1993, pp.24-25): “Comprehensive knowledge of the reference would require us to be able to say immediately whether any given sense belongs to it. To such knowledge we never attain.”

<sup>26</sup> For that explanation, see Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole, in different works, especially Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole, [1669-1672], *La Grande Perpétuité de la foi de l'Eglise catholique sur l'Eucharistie*, [G.P.], published by the Abbé M\*\*\*, Paris, Imprimerie de Migne, chez l'éditeur rue d'Ambroise, Hors la barrière d'Enfer, 1841. See also César Chesneau Du Marsais, [1730], *Traité des Tropes*, Paris, ed. Nouveau Commerce, 1977.

the specific meaning. Accessory ideas can also modify the objective meaning. These are what we call today “connotations”, and they belong to semantics when they are attached regularly or by convention to the objective meaning. But there is another kind of accessory ideas added to the objective meaning only at the time of the utterance, and these ideas belong to pragmatics.

There is still a last type of accessory ideas added by the speaker to the principal meaning coded in the discourse, but only at the time of the utterance, by the tone of voice, facial expression or gestures, & by other natural signs that attach to our words infinitely many ideas, which diversify, change, decrease, increase the meaning, adding to it the image of the emotions, judgments, opinions of the speaker.<sup>27</sup>

I think that this can be honestly decribed as a kind of “modulation” of meaning.

There is a common distinction in the literature about two ways of representing human communication: Firstly, there was the Code Model, sometimes called “the Expressive View”, associated with Aristotle’s *De interpretatione* and also to Port-Royal’s *Grammaire générale et raisonnée*. This is by far the most enduring and influential conception of human communication in the whole history of philosophy. Strangely enough, today, this tradition is regularly misconstrued. (Indeed, it is ridiculous to say that by the use of a code — a natural language, say — the content of an utterance mysteriously “passes” from the mind of the speaker to the mind of the hearer. This is, indeed, a very weird manner to represent communication). The aim of any act of communication according to the Code Model is to share the same meanings. Secondly, there is the Inferential Model, sometimes called the “Convergence View,” initiated half a century ago by Grice and developed also by Sperber

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<sup>27</sup> Arnauld & Nicole, *La Logique ou l’Art de penser*, I, xiv, p. 95. My translation.

& Wilson. Davidson (1986) can also be seen as a proponent of this view. Here, the measure of success in human communication is the correct identification of speaker's meaning or intention through inferential processes, or to converge on the same meanings and to make the same inferences.

That sharing-converging opposition in the theory of communication never seems to me very convincing. Both models, arguably, are incomplete. The incompleteness of the code model has been recognized by Arnauld & Nicole a long time ago. In a verbal interaction, typically, ideas are communicated by the code, some are inferred, and others are neither coded nor inferred (facial expression, tone of voice, etc.).<sup>28</sup> To communicate, for Arnauld & Nicole, is to *excite* ideas in the mind of the hearer, and this can be done in different ways. The speaker intentionally *expresses* ideas, some associated by convention to a code, some by giving cues that a hearer might use as the starting point of inferential processes, some by presenting the signs of internal states (tone of voice for wrath or compassion, facial expression, etc.). All these ideas compose a *total impression* in the mind of the hearer. Of course, in a verbal interaction, the focus is on the coded message. But the mind receives obliquely the impression of other accessory ideas; it also undergoes fast and short inferences, as required, for example, in the case of malapropisms.<sup>29</sup> The complete theory of communication developed at Port-Royal goes much beyond the usual description of the code model. But sometimes, in the code model, it is hard to say exactly to

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<sup>28</sup> See my paper, "Communication, Linguistic Understanding and Minimal Rationality in the Tradition of Universal Grammar", in D. Vanderveken (ed.) *Logic, Thought and Action*, Dordrecht, Springer, 2005, 133-150.

<sup>29</sup> Arnauld gave the following example. A deputy of Paris Parliament once said: "Le Cardinal Mazarin a ici ses hémisphères"; of course, everybody understood immediately: "Le Cardinal Mazarin a ici ses émissaires".

what extent we share the same meanings; how could we know that? Behavioral evidence is not always at hand. So, it seems there is a similar problem of convergence in the code model. The inferential model seems to have a greater scope, but the problem, from the start, has been to accommodate the conventional aspects of human communication.<sup>30</sup> The Gricean model insists, correctly, on the central character of intention (and identification of intention), but the intention that matters for meaning cannot be the intention to cause a perlocutionary effect. However, the perlocutionary, we shall see, should not be downplayed in the theory of communication. On the contrary: Perlocutionary intention is the motor of communication and an indispensable guide for linguistic understanding.

Let me introduce one more observation about intention and recognition of intention in linguistic communication. Arnauld & Nicole showed, more than three centuries ago, the importance of mindreading for linguistic understanding. Mindreading, the capacity to read (imperfectly) what happens in the mind of the interlocutor and to attribute propositional attitudes<sup>31</sup>, is the corner-stone of the ordinary use of language, as Arnauld of Port-Royal observed explicitly, and also Grice and may be Donald Davidson, more than

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<sup>30</sup> See John Searle for an interesting counterexample to the inferential model in *Speech Acts*, Cambridge, C.U.P., 1969, p. 44. This is the famous example of the American soldier during the Italian campaign captured by Italian fascists, and trying to make believe that he is German. By saying “Kennts Du das Land wo die Zitronen blühn?”, a German sentence he does not even understand, he hopes the Italian fascists will understand that he is saying something equivalent to “I am a German soldier”.

<sup>31</sup> The best reference on the subject I know today is Alvin I. Goldman, *Simulating Minds. The Philosophy, Psychology and Neuroscience of Mindreading*, Oxford, O.U.P., 2006. The recognition of intention (Grice) presupposes mindreading, and Davidson, less clearly, says that to know your language I have to know your beliefs, and vice-versa.

three centuries later, but in a less explicit manner. I quote the great Arnauld of Port-Royal:

One cannot reflect, however little, on the nature of human language without recognizing that it is entirely grounded on that imperfect penetration of the mind of the others. That is why, when speaking, there are many things we do not need to express.<sup>32</sup>

We do not need to express many things in conversation because we already know that the hearer has understood; we may “read it” in her face, so to speak. If our minds were completely opaque, we would not speak as we do. The correct identification of intentions and expectations, in my view, is decisive for the agreement on meanings.

#### PLANS, EXPECTATIONS AND AGREEMENTS

If the meanings are that unstable, how can we communicate at all? After all, the Philosophy of Language has, among other central missions, that of explaining the success of communication. Moravcsik mentions “local agreements” on meanings.<sup>33</sup> For instance, an executive and his secretary agree on what will count as an “emergency” during the two weeks of vacation the executive is about to take. “If John Doe phones please transfer the call, it’s an emergency. But if Richard Roe calls, just tell him I’ll be back in two

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<sup>32</sup> Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole, [1669-1672], *La Grande Perpétuité de la foi de l’Eglise catholique sur l’Eucharistie*, [G.P.], publiée par l’Abbé M\*\*\*, Paris, Imprimerie de Migne, chez l’éditeur rue d’Ambroise, Hors la barrière d’Enfer, 1841 : “On ne saurait faire tant soit peu réflexion sur la nature du langage humain, qu’on ne reconnaisse qu’il est tout fondé sur cette pénétration imparfaite de l’esprit des autres. Et c’est ce qui fait qu’en parlant, il y a des choses que nous n’exprimons point.” (GP, Vol. 2, Livre I, p. 81).

<sup>33</sup> Moravcsik, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

weeks.” But this kind of local, explicit agreements is too rare to be interesting as a general explanation.

The basic ideas I want to put now in the forefront are not new and can be found in the works of Arnauld, Peirce, Wittgenstein, and more recently Travis and Recanati. To put it in a nutshell: Actions and practices are the roots of linguistic understanding. In a pragmatic approach, we start with actions, of which speech acts are an important sub-species, and actions are what we interpret. Words and sentences are seen and understood as instruments used in the performance of actions. *My suggestion is that we should consider plans and not only actions, as the unit of investigation.* I also suggest that the expectations of agents (speakers-hearers), and the correct identification and understanding of these expectations, are especially important for the determination of the sense of the words used in an occasion. In other words: *The root of any distinction in thought and in the sense of linguistic expressions is found in its sensible effects, in our practices, plans and activities.* This principle I call the Principle of the Determination of Sense.<sup>34</sup> I shall also defend that the notions of Plans and Mindreading are fundamental ingredients to explain the success of human communication.

*Agency* is the most central and basic character of the concept of person. Speaker and Hearer, the two heroes of the Philosophy of Language, are, above all, agents. We are constantly involved in activities that require, in most cases, the cooperation of other agents.

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<sup>34</sup> In “How to make our Ideas Clear”, *Popular Science Monthly* 12 (January 1878), 286-302. Part II, Peirce writes: “...we come down to what is tangible and practical, as the root of every real distinction of thought, no matter how subtle it may be; and there is no distinction of meaning so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference of practice.” See also Wittgenstein: “In the beginning was the deed” (*On Certainty*, § 402). And Travis (2000): “Action, Wittgenstein insisted, is at the root of understandings: in the beginning was the deed.” (p. 214).

Meanings in natural languages are not bricks introduced through definitions and that arrange themselves according to strict rules; *they are flexible tools we use in the realization of our plans*. Words and sentences give small contributions to our plans. The great illusion of classical Semantics when applied to natural languages consists in maintaining an atomistic perspective, by considering the truth-conditions of isolated sentences. Speech Acts Theory, in the beginning, used the same angle, but later on it evolved to consider discourses, conversations.

A plan is a hierarchical structured set of intentions.<sup>35</sup> A prior general intention (or a plan) determines a central goal and various future steps which need the formation of new subordinate intentions at every step, determining, thus, a sequence of actions that makes likely the achievement of the main goal. The speech acts we performed are also parts of larger plans. We rarely make a statement, a promise, ask a question, issue an order or produce an exclamation in complete isolation, without the intention of contributing to the achievement of our plans. Yelling “Ouch!” after dropping something heavy on one’s feet can be an exception. Charles Travis seems to express the same idea: “We see words as taking responsibility for serving certain purposes, in that we will count them as having said what is correct, so true, only where we count these purposes as (adequately) served”.<sup>36</sup>

Any action or activity has an *internal criterion of success* that we easily identify when the action is a “standard” one. The internal criterion of success of the activity of playing chess is to force the adversary to a checkmate; the internal criterion of success of the action of opening a door is, simply, to manage to open it, etc. Our

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<sup>35</sup> See Michael Bratman, *Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason*, Stanford, CSLI Publication, 1999, chapter 3.

<sup>36</sup> See C. Travis, “Meaning’s Role in Truth”, *Mind*. Vol. 105.419, July 1996, p. 463.



intentions and actions determine expectations. My point is simply that we “process” expectations all the time. There would be no social life without that. It is here that *Mindreading* enters the picture.

Mindreading, in the case of intention and expectations, appears very early in our lives, almost as soon as gaze-tracking. Goldman comments on the experiences of the psychologist Meltzoff. He discovered that “... infants in their second half-year of life are obsessed with the success and failure of plans.” They use interjections “to comment on a mismatch between their own intentions and real-world outcomes.”<sup>37</sup> Empirical evidence also shows that in the case of intentions and expectations, infants of 18 months “... ‘read through’ the observed body movements to an underlying goal that wasn’t observed.”<sup>38</sup>

Mindreading gives a decisive contribution to the correct understanding of the words in context. It works perfectly when the activity is a standard one and when we know well the person in question; it is less efficient in new situations and with unknown people. Normally, in standard situations, we notice easily the expectations of the speaker-agent. I see a friend in the queue inside the bank building; I know immediately that she has the intention to make some banking operations and that she expects to do that very soon, to be treated correctly by the staff, etc. That’s the way things are done in a bank, and she has a right to form such an expectation. (Of course, this is a fallible procedure; perhaps, she is involved in a bank robbery. But what is highly probable is good enough as a guide for everyday life.) The learning of a first language (the mother tongue) is inseparable from the discovery of the world, of its natural and social regularities. Learning how to speak is the same as integrating oneself into a community and participating in all its

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<sup>37</sup> Alvin Goldman, *Simulating Minds. The Philosophy, Psychology and Neuroscience of Mindreading*, Oxford. O.U.P., 2006, p. 195.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.

activities or “forms of life”. The normal use of a language requires a solid dose of “worldliness and reasonableness” (Travis, 2000, p. 209). In Travis’ example of a client buying a bottle of blue ink, she is correctly understood and served when she received a bottle containing a stuff looking black; what matters is the color on the paper. This is why, in spite of the appearance, the stuff counts as blue on that occasion.<sup>39</sup>

The correct understanding of an utterance usually requires the perception of the goals pursued by the speaker in the context, and *the immediate goals are perlocutionary ones*. They are usually parts of a bigger plan. Jones is telling jokes to his boss every day. He wants to entertain and to please him (perlocutionary intention), as part of a plan to prepare his claim for a pay rise next month. But as soon as the boss discovers the plan, the perlocutionary effect possibly disappears....

Here I only want to suggest an idea that cannot be fully developed. Consider the internal accusative of the verb “understanding”. It is simply huge! It covers everything that is intelligible. We understand sentences, languages, cultures, books, face expressions, persons, attitudes, expectations, arithmetical series, problems, strategies, musical phrases, paintings, narratives and situations, physical systems, mechanisms, you name it! My point is that linguistic understanding is only a small part of it, and not an autonomous (modular) one. *Linguistic understanding relies on more primitive forms of understanding, specially the understanding of situations*. It is hard to say exactly what a situation is, and I won’t try to do that here. However, Travis seems to be proposing something very akin: “But on the present view, it is precisely ways things may be — and not, in the first instance, expressions — that crucially admit of

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<sup>39</sup> *Unshadowed Thought*, p. 213.

understandings.”<sup>40</sup> Any declarative sentences-type describes *generic situations* that may be found (or not) in the world; but we saw that the tokens of declarative sentences are always produced in a very *specific situation*. In ordinary language, an understanding of the specific situation (including the identification of expectations, intentions and plans through mindreading) is usually decisive for a correct understanding of the token produced in the context. I think that Austin’s theory of truth interestingly captures that difference, with its two types of conventions (descriptive and demonstrative). Politicians frequently complain that they have been quoted “out of context.” I know it sounds like a cliché, but it is a respectable line of defense! Take a sentence (token) from the specific situation where it has been produced, and many possible different understandings immediately come to mind. A sentence taken from a specific context of use may serve different purposes from the one for which it has been uttered.

### THE IDEAL VERSUS THE MESSY. CONCLUSION

As is well-known, contemporary philosophy of language developed into two phases: Firstly, the logical trend or philosophy of ideal languages, initiated by Frege, and then pursued by Russell, Wittgenstein, Carnap, Tarski, etc.; secondly, the Ordinary Language Philosophy, with Wittgenstein, Austin, Strawson, Searle, etc. In the logical trend, context-dependency enters the picture very late, with Russell’s egocentric particulars (1940) and Reichenbach’s token-reflexivity (1947/1966).<sup>41</sup> In Ordinary Language Philosophy,

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<sup>40</sup> *Unshadowed Thought*, p. 26.

<sup>41</sup> Bertrand Russell, *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1940, chapter VII: “Egocentric Particulars”; Hans Reichenbach, *Elements of Symbolic Logic*, New York, The Free Press, 1947, §50-51.

plasticity of sense or occasion-sensitivity has always been taken seriously.

I understand and accept the formal language philosopher's dissatisfaction with ordinary language. Ordinary language is not "perspicuous"; it masquerades logical form; it accommodates degrees of grammaticality and many different types of non-literal uses; the conditions of application of its terms are not well-delimited; vagueness, syntactic and semantic ambiguities, incompleteness, polysemy, are just a few among many other "flaws" *that make ordinary language unsuited for scientific communication and investigation, or for systematic theorizing.*

But I fully understand and accept ordinary language philosophers' contention that ordinary language is a valuable, indeed an indispensable philosophical tool that should not be depreciated. It is always and necessarily the ultimate metalanguage we have; it is the depository of all the distinctions marked by centuries of linguistic practices and wisdom, and consequently is extremely rich in subtleties, nuances that went through a kind of evolutionary test: They are still there because they are valuable. Its expressive power is much greater than that of any regimented language and possesses what Tarski calls "universality"; it always constitutes the first universal environment in which we get our first "semiotic experience", etc. If ordinary language is all wrong, how could we construct anything right on such a ground?

"Contextualism" is the title of a new chapter in the history of what has been called "Ordinary Language Philosophy". It is no surprise that the main sources of present contextualism are the later Wittgenstein and Austin. Of course, Ordinary Language Philosophy is more than a philosophy of language; it is also a method of philosophical investigation that has been applied to many traditional issues. Nowadays, in a similar vein, contextualist theses are sustained in epistemology, philosophy of mind, ethics and ontology. A

contextualist does not need to oppose regimentation or the use of formal languages in philosophy or science. Without regimented languages, there wouldn't be science at all. But the semantic methods developed in logical semantics do not give us the right picture when applied to natural languages. And this is what any contextualist should be ready to oppose.

Semantics has been conceived as a theoretical representation of the ability of the speakers-hearers of a language L to produce and understand systematically a potentially infinite number of well-formed and meaningful sentences of L so that the knowledge of the meaning of any complex expression depends *solely* on the knowledge of the meaning of its parts and the rules for their combination. In the Semantics elaborated in the Logical Trend, a declarative sentence expresses a proposition or thought when its parts are meaningful and correctly arranged. A sentence considered as *type* has truth-conditions independently of the context of use, and the thought that it expresses is precisely the thought that its truth-conditions are satisfied (Frege, *Basic Laws of Arithmetic*, Vol. 1, section 32). Understanding a sentence is to know what is the case if it is true (Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 4.024). The truth-conditional Semantics elaborated by Tarski and Carnap is one of the great heritages of this logical trend. In regimented languages, the truth-conditional content of an utterance is *stable*; it does not vary from one speaker to the other, from one context to the other (with the exception of sentences containing indexicals and demonstratives). Each declarative sentence of a regimented language has truth-conditions that the Semantics of this language attributes to it *once and for all*. The bearers of Semantic properties are the *types*, and not the *tokens* (with the exception of "token-reflexive expressions"). *The tokens simply inherit, without alteration, the Semantic properties of the types*. Instantiations of the Convention-T of classical Semantics are all *types*, and the application of the Convention-T makes sense only if we can guarantee that the

meaning is always the same on the right side of the bi-conditionals. A T-sentence displays the meaning of a sentence. We saw why it doesn't work in natural languages.

In the sciences of language, idealizations sometimes are as necessary as they are in any other science, but here we should be careful. The more you idealize, the less realistic the resulting picture. Perhaps we should stop trying to construct theoretical representations of our semantic competence as if we were all lexicographers. I tell you: "I'll see you there in a fortnight," but for you a fortnight is a period of ten days; so our rendezvous never took place. Jones believes that it is possible to get a mortgage not only on a house or a land, but also on a car, and believes that his uncle has a mortgage on his car.<sup>42</sup> Are these cases mere exceptions? Are they so rare? I think the following is a much more realistic view: Most of the time, for most people, the knowledge of the meaning of a word corresponds simply to the capacity to apply it correctly *in most occasions of use*. And the way we apply a word depends on our knowledge of the previous uses of the word, and of judgments concerning the similarity of the new situation of use with the previous ones. These judgments determine if it is reasonable or not to use the same word in the new situation.<sup>43</sup> We have established a connection between this view of our knowledge of meaning and Austin's theory of truth. Our knowledge of language (not understood as a simple idiolect, but as the norm of a community, sometimes a whole nation) is always as imperfect and variable as our knowledge of the world.

We share the same world, that's for sure. Taken at its face value, that does not take us very far. The knowledge of the world is so different from one person to another. And the world we inhabit – not the one described by physics – is forever changing! The same

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<sup>42</sup> For these examples, see Tyler Burge "Individualism and the Mental", *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 10, 1979.

<sup>43</sup> See Putnam (1999) and Recanati (2004).

holds for the knowledge of our language (as the norm of a community) and we know that many things contribute to create discrepancies in the idiolects of the people living in the same community (social class, education and learning, scientific discipline, influences from good or bad neighborhood, etc.). What we call “ordinary language” itself is changing all the time, even if you define it as the degree zero of “regimentation”.

But we have the right to understand something much broader by “our knowledge of the world,” something that includes all the knowhow, all the practices we learn just by growing up in a community, with almost everyone as a teacher, including linguistic conventions – and this is an especially important kind of social regularities. *This is huge and widely shared among the members of the community.* We do not agree or converge on meaning simply because we “grasp” somehow the same eternal “forms,” but rather because we share a world in which we are integrated, and because we are worldly enough to see what to expect from each other. Our mutual linguistic understanding relies on that encyclopedic knowledge concerning how things are and how they are done, and on basic abilities like mindreading and inferential ability. Sometimes, we just don’t care too much.<sup>44</sup> However, in scientific communication or in a court room, we are expected to choose carefully our words, and we may use explicit definitions or other forms of regimentation. There are also metalinguistic techniques (“what do you mean by ‘...?’”; “Are you saying that...?” etc.) to check and secure mutual understanding. The phatic function in verbal interaction is another

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<sup>44</sup> Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, *La Langue des Calculs*, in *Oeuvres Philosophiques de Condillac*, Tome II, Tome XXXIII du Corpus général des philosophes français, ed. by G. Le Roy, Paris, P.U.F., p. 419: “... nous nous contentons de savoir à-peu-près ce que nous voulons dire, et (...) nous nous embarassons moins encore de savoir ce que les autres disent, nous parlons avec des expressions qui sont à-peu-près celles qui nous conviennent”.

mechanism designed to secure joint attention. Of course, there is no guarantee of success for any human action: The possibility of a failure is always present, and human communication, a cooperative activity, is no exception. There are no fixed stars. But we continue steady and firm because we know we have enough resources to keep going, as we always did.<sup>45</sup>

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