

## **What is Language: Some Preliminary Remarks<sup>1</sup>**

**By John R. Searle**

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### **I. Naturalizing Language**

I believe that the greatest achievements in philosophy over the past hundred or one hundred and twenty five years have been in the philosophy of language. Beginning with Frege, who invented the subject, and continuing through Russell, Wittgenstein, Quine, Austin and their successors, right to the present day, there is no branch of philosophy with so much high quality work as the philosophy of language. In my view, the only achievement comparable to those of the great philosophers of language is Rawls's reinvention of the subject of political philosophy (and therefore implicitly the subject of ethics). But with this one possible exception, I think that work in the philosophy of language is at the top of our achievements.

Having said that, however, I have to record a serious misgiving I have about the subject. The problem is that its practitioners in general do not treat language as a natural phenomenon. This may seem a strange charge to make, given that so many contemporary and recent philosophers of language are anxious to emphasize the empirical character of their theories of language. Quine and Davidson are striking examples of resolute empiricism. My objection is that few contemporary and recent philosophers of language attempt to treat language as a natural extension of non-linguistic biological capacities. Language is not seen as continuous with, nor as an extension of, the rest of our specifically human biological inheritance. I think there is a deep reason, both historically and intellectually, why language has not been treated naturalistically. It is

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<sup>1</sup> This is a revised and expanded version of a talk that I have given at various universities and international conferences. An earlier draft was published in the proceedings of the German Philosophy Conference in Berlin, *Kreativität. XX Deutscher Kongress für Philosophie*, Günther Abel (ed.), Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2006

The tentative title marks the fact that I do not regard this as a finished piece. It is still work in progress. I thank Tecumseh Fitch for his detailed comments on an earlier draft. I am also grateful to Dagmar Searle for her help and advice.

because the philosophy of language went hand in hand with the development of mathematical logic. Indeed, Frege, in effect, invented both the philosophy of language and modern logic. And the growth of the philosophy of language through Russell and the early Wittgenstein was very much seen as an application of mathematical logic. Even later Wittgenstein and Austin, both of whom reacted against the excessive logicism of the philosophy of language, did not see language as a natural biological phenomenon. It is not hard to think of language as an extension of biological capacities, but if by “logic” we mean formal systems of the sort developed by Frege and his successors, then logic is definitely not a biological phenomenon. On the contrary, specifically human biology existed for tens of thousands of years before logic in this sense was ever invented.

What would it be like to try to treat language, in my sense, naturalistically? The first step would be one that many philosophers have resisted and that is to see linguistic meaning, the meaning of sentences and speech acts, as an extension of the more biologically fundamental forms of intentionality that we have in belief, desire, memory and intention, and to see those in turn as developments of even more fundamental forms of intentionality, especially, perception and intentional action. Among the most basic forms of intentionality, the most biologically primitive, along with hunger, thirst and sexual desire, are perception and intention-in-action. Given perceptions and actions, animals have the capacity to develop memories and prior intentions, as well as beliefs and desires and other forms of intentionality, such as expectation and fear, anger and aggression. I believe we should see the biological foundations of language in prelinguistic intentionality. Our initial question should be, What are the similarities and differences between the prelinguistic forms of consciousness and intentionality and the linguistic forms? We do not know how in fact language evolved, and in the absence of fossil evidence we may never know exactly how it evolved, but we do know that it did evolve, and we ought at least to be able to answer the question, What are the logical, conceptual relations between prelinguistic forms of consciousness and intentionality and the evolved linguistic forms?

I want to emphasize that this approach is quite different from the standard approaches. Davidson, for example, thought that only a being that has a language can have intentional states such as beliefs and desires. I think he had the biology exactly

backwards. Many species of animals have perceptions, perform actions and are capable of acquiring beliefs, desires and intentions, though they have no language. Furthermore, several species are capable of prelinguistic thought processes. I suggest that we think of human language as an extension of these prelinguistic capacities.

The aim of this article is to explain some of the essential features of human language, and I will emphasize especially those features of language that relate to human society. Notice I say “What is language?” and not “What is *a* language such as French, German or English?” I will not be interested in what makes one language distinct from others, but in what they all have in common. In addition to the naturalism urged in previous paragraphs, a second main theme of this article will be that the standard accounts of language in philosophy of language and linguistics tend to underestimate, and therefore misrepresent, the role of society and of social conventions. The general accounts of society given in such disciplines as sociology tend to underestimate, and therefore misrepresent, the special role of language in society. I will be arguing, among other things, that language is essentially social, but not just in any old way; rather, in a way that makes human society essentially linguistic. The key connecting link between language and society is the notion of *deontology*, a notion involving commitments of various kinds, about which I will say more later. Language, for reasons that I will attempt to state, requires a deontology, and the deontology introduced by language makes specifically human forms of society and human civilization possible.

One of the essential questions addressed in this paper is this: Since human societies are importantly different from animal societies, which of those differences are accounted for, and how exactly are they accounted for, by the existence of human languages?

## **II. Language as Phonology, Syntax and Semantics**

The standard textbook accounts of language say that specific languages such as French or German consist of three components: a phonological component that determines how words and sentences are pronounced, a syntactical component that determines the arrangement of words and morphemes in sentences, and a semantic component that assigns a meaning or interpretation to words and sentences. More

sophisticated accounts add that there must also be a pragmatic component that is not a component of specific languages; rather, it sets certain constraints on the *use* of language and is not internal to specific languages in the way that the syntax of French is internal to French and the syntax of German is internal to German. For our purposes we can ignore phonology because it is not essential to language that it be spoken. (It is important, however, that any language, whether spoken or not, must be thinkable. It is sometimes said that people think in words. Unless they are talking out loud to themselves, that is not true. They think in *images* of words.) The relation of syntax to semantics is however crucial. Syntax organizes semantics according to three principles: discreteness, compositionality and generativity. Discreteness is that feature by which syntactical elements retain their identity under the various syntactical operations. So, for example, when you change a sentence around, the words (and morphemes) do not lose their identity. Unlike baking a cake where the ingredients are changed by being mixed together, forming a sentence does not change the words and morphemes that are being mixed together; and you can have a sentence containing eight words or twelve words, but you cannot have a sentence containing nine and a half words. Compositionality is both a syntactic and a semantic property. Syntactically, a complex element such as a sentence is built up out of simple elements, words and morphemes, according to the formation rules of the language. Semantically, the meaning of the whole sentence is determined by the meanings of the simple elements together with the syntactical structure of the sentence. For example, we understand the sentence “John loves Mary” differently from the sentence “Mary loves John”; even though they both have the same elements, because the elements are arranged differently. Generativity, as I am using the term, implies that the syntactical operations of the language allow the speakers to generate an indefinite number of new sentences. There is, strictly speaking, no upper limit to the number of sentences in any natural human language.

This account is OK as far as it goes but it is incomplete. I will be arguing that it leaves out a crucial dimension of language, namely the element of what in ordinary English we could describe as *commitment* and which I will describe more generally as deontology. Deontology is essential to the nature of human language in ways that I need to explain.

### **III. Society and Language**

In linguistics and philosophy, there is a more or less orthodox conception of language but there is no such commonality in social science accounts of society. It seems to me that the accounts of society that I am familiar with, ranging all the way from Aristotle to the present, radically misconceive the role of language in that, in an important sense, they take the existence of language for granted and then ask: How does society work, how is it constructed?, and so on. When I say that they take language for granted, I mean that in accounting for the nature of society they do not ask: What is language? Rather, they simply assume the existence of language and go on from there. Perhaps the worst offenders in this regard are the Social Contract theorists, who presuppose beings like us, who have language, and then ask how these beings could form society on the basis of a social contract. The point I will be making is that once a society has a common language, it already has a social contract. The situation with authors such as Bourdieu, Foucault and Habermas is not really better. They think of themselves as acutely conscious of language and its importance for society, but they do not ask, What is language? in a way that would enable them to ask, How exactly is language constitutive of society?

### **IV. What does Language Add to Prelinguistic Cognition?**

I am not sure how best to argue for the theses that I want to maintain. I think one way to argue for them is, so to speak, genetically. I propose to treat the question as an engineering or designer question. Imagine that there was a species like us, having a full range of prelinguistic conscious experiences, voluntary actions, and prelinguistic thought processes, but no language. What capacities would they have to have in order to create language for themselves and what exactly are they creating when they create a rudimentary language? At one time, animals more or less like us, hominids, walked the earth without language. Now we have language. What happened in between? And when I ask what happened, I do not mean the question historically, but conceptually. What conceptual (logical, cognitive) capacities did they acquire when they acquired language?

And what sorts of cognitive capacities did they have beforehand on which language could have evolved? We have a language in a sense that other species do not. What is it that we have and how could we have gotten it? I must emphasize that I am not trying to do speculative evolutionary biology, rather I am trying to do a logical analysis of the relations between prelinguistic cognitive capacities and language, with the aim of figuring out what language is.

In response to earlier drafts of this article, some people thought I was trying to enter into current discussions of animal cognition and the actual evolution of language. That is a misunderstanding. I am, to repeat, not engaging in speculative evolutionary biology nor animal cognition. There is currently a sizable amount of research on animal cognition<sup>2</sup> and important work is done on the evolution of language.<sup>3</sup> I am not addressing the empirical issues in these fields. For comparison I will sometimes make reference to other animals, but if it should turn out that everything we currently believe, for example, about bee languages and primate thought processes is false, that would be only marginally relevant to my questions. And even if it should turn out that some animals have full blown languages in the sense that we do, and that human language did not gradually evolve but was the result of a single evolutionary Big Bang that produced brains with full blown generative grammars, such facts would be only marginally relevant to the questions I am asking about logical dependencies. I am emphatically not arguing for the superiority of our species. If it should turn out that some other animals have what we have, I welcome them to the club.

When I ask the question, “How could language have evolved?” I mean something quite different from empirical researchers who ask a different question using the same sentence. They are asking: Given what we know about human evolutionary history and animal cognition, how could human languages have developed in our evolutionary history? My question is conceptual. Subtract language from a species like us: What do you have? Now add language: What are you adding?

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<sup>2</sup> For a good survey, see J. Vauclair, *Animal Cognition: An Introduction to Modern Comparative Psychology*, Cambridge MA, 1966

<sup>3</sup> For a good survey, see W.T. Fitch “The Evolution of Language: a comparative review” in *Biology and Philosophy* (2005) 20: 193-230.

Notice that the way I am posing the question presupposes that the *nature* of language and the question of the *functions* and *uses* of language by human speakers cannot be separated. We can explore which structural features of language are useful or even essential, by exploring what use humans make of these structures.

There are apparently intermediate cases between humans and species that communicate but do not have language in a human sense. The bees are the best known example. When a bee returns to the hive she performs a waggle dance that conveys different types of information depending on the variations in the dance. She conveys that there is nectar in the neighborhood, that it is in a certain direction and that it is a certain distance away from the hive. In hot weather, she can communicate the location of water, and even, during swarming, the location of possible hive sites. Different combinations of the elements of the dance convey different elements of information. In one experiment, the experimenters towed a boatful of flowers to the middle of a lake. The returning bee conveyed this information. Her hive mates showed no interest in flying to what apparently they knew to be the middle of a lake.

I will proceed by addressing four specific questions: What features of language are already present in prelinguistic consciousness? What features of language are lacking in prelinguistic consciousness? What special features of consciousness are lacking in language? What functions do humans need language to perform, given prelinguistic consciousness?

## **V. Features Common to Prelinguistic Intentionality and Language**

I have already said that the hominids have conscious perceptions and intentional actions together with conscious thought processes, all of these in a prelinguistic form. This implies, at the very least, that the animals have beliefs, desires, intentions, and at least some form of memories, enough to enable them to recognize familiar objects and situations.

These prelinguistic forms of intentionality already have some crucial logical properties. Specifically, because perceptions, intentions, beliefs, desires, and so on, are forms of intentionality, they carry within them the determination of conditions of success or failure. An animal that is hungry, for example, has a desire to eat; and pathologies

apart, it thus has the capacity to recognize when that desire is satisfied and when it is not satisfied. We can generalize this point as follows: Any intentional state determines its conditions of satisfaction, and a normal animal that has intentional states must be able to recognize when the conditions of satisfaction are in fact satisfied. If it is thirsty, it must be able to tell when it has drunk; if it is hungry, it must be able to tell when it has eaten; if it is trying to do something, it must know when it has done it, and so on. We can summarize this point by saying that when we supposed that our animals had intentional states we were already supposing that they had mental representations with propositional contents and conditions of satisfaction. But when I say that, I am speaking logically not ontologically. I am not saying the animals had a set of picture-like or sentence-like entities in their heads called “representations”. Rather, to have beliefs and desires, for example, is already to have something that determines conditions of satisfaction, and that implies the capacity to recognize success and failure. Presumably these capacities are realized in neuronal structures, but, for our investigation, it does not matter how these capacities are realized, provided only that the realization is rich enough to carry the logical properties. When I say the representations are propositional, I imply nothing linguistic. I mean that there is something that sets the conditions of satisfaction; and because a condition is always a condition *that such and such*, it follows trivially that the conditions are propositional.

We can summarize the formal features of intentionality, prelinguistic as well as linguistic, by explaining the following notions and the relations between them: *propositional content, conditions of satisfaction, psychological mode and direction of fit*. Our evolutionary history has given us different ways in which our mental states relate to reality. The aim of beliefs is to represent how things are, therefore beliefs can be said to be true or false. The aim of desires and intentions is not to represent how things are but how we would like them to be or how we intend to make them be. For this reason, desires and intentions are not true or false, but fulfilled or frustrated. I find it useful to characterize beliefs as having the *mind-to-world direction of fit* (the belief in the mind is supposed to fit the state of affairs in the world) and desires and intentions as having the *world-to-mind direction of fit* (if all goes well with the desires and intentions, the world comes to fit how it is represented in the mind). Not surprisingly these distinctions carry



over exactly to speech acts. The assertive class of speech acts: statements, assertions, etc., are expressions of beliefs and are supposed, like beliefs, to represent how the world is and thus they have the *word-to-world* direction of fit. The directive class of speech acts: requests, orders, commands, etc., are expressions of desires and so have the *world-to-word* direction of fit. The commissive class: promises, offers, etc., are expressions of intention and so have the *world-to-word* direction of fit. These different directions of fit are a function not of the propositional content, by itself, but of how the propositional content is presented in the speech act. This is why in standard speech act notation, the total speech act is represented with a distinction between the illocutionary force, or type, of speech act and the propositional content.

Thus

$F(p)$

represents the propositional content  $p$ , presented with the illocutionary force  $F$ .

And this corresponds exactly to the representation of the intentional state as

$S(p)$

The “ $p$ ” represents the propositional content and the “ $S$ ” represents the type of intentional state, that is, its psychological mode, whether belief, desire, or whatever.

. Our question is: How do we get from the intentional state  $S(p)$  to the linguistic resources that would enable us to perform the speech act  $F(p)$ ? Our task is made easier by the fact that the formal apparatus of the content and type, together with conditions of satisfaction and direction of fit, are already present in prelinguistic intentionality.

. So far so good. But what about those speech acts where the fit is taken for granted: expressives, such as apologizing and thanking? If you look at the forms of intentionality that correspond to these speech acts, and are expressed in their performance, forms such as regret and gratitude, it seems to me these typically are combinations of beliefs and desires. That is, they are forms of desire based on the presupposition of the truth of the belief.<sup>4</sup> For example if I regret having done something I must believe I did it and wish I had not. So the existence of speech acts where the fit is

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<sup>4</sup> In general this is true of most of what are called the “emotions.” The concept of an emotion is not very clear because we are not sure what to count as an emotion and what not. But the paradigm cases of the emotions, strong forms of love, hate, lust, disgust, shame, and pride, I think are all agitated forms of desire, presupposing beliefs.

presupposed, which have what I have called the null direction of fit, does not pose an insuperable problem for moving from prelinguistic intentionality to speech acts, because the prelinguistic forms also include cases where the fit is presupposed. These cases, such as pride and shame, gratitude and regret, contain beliefs and desires, which do have a mind-world or world-mind direction of fit

In addition to the problem of expressive speech acts there is a special problem about *declarations*, speech acts that make something the case by declaring it to be the case, for example, adjourning a meeting by saying. "The meeting is adjourned". Declarations have both directions of fit simulataneously because they make something the case by representing it as being the case. I cannot exaggerate the importance of this phenomenon for answering the question that poses the title of this paper. These have no echo in prelinguistic thought, and I will discuss them further in this article.

*The categories.* Another feature of prelinguistic consciousness -- and this will prove crucial for the evolution of language-- is that any animal that has the biologically primitive intentional apparatus of conscious prelinguistic hominids already has a hefty number of the traditional philosophical (e.g. Aristotelian and Kantian) categories. It already has *space, time, causation, agency and object*; and with *object* it has to have *identity* and *individuation* together with *property* and *relation*. I do not mean that it has to have concepts corresponding to these categories, but rather, for example, that it has to be able to recognize that one object is over there in front of it and another one on the left (space), it has to recognize that its eating occurred in a temporal sequence (time), that it did something, as opposed to something just happening (agency), that some things it did, made other things happen (causation). Perhaps most importantly, if it can perceive and recognize objects including other hominids, it must have identity and individuation, because it must be able to perceive that this is the same object as before (identity), and that this object is a separate object from that object (individuation). But once it has objects, with their identity and individuation, it already has properties and relations of objects. It can see that this person is next to that person (a spatial relation) and it can see that this object is brown (property). Given all of this apparatus, it also has the concept of change; thus it can see that this hominid, who was previously over there, has now moved over here (change from one location to another of the same object). Finally, it can

recognize objects of the same type. For example it can recognize other animals as being or not being of the same species as itself.

## VI. Features of Language that Consciousness Lacks

What does prelinguistic consciousness lack? Perhaps above all, it lacks *internal* and *controllable* structures in its thought processes. Thus a dog can perceive and hence think that, as we would put it, “Someone is approaching the door”. But, unlike us, it cannot distinguish that thought from the thought, “The door is being approached by someone”. Furthermore it cannot use its true thought, “Someone is approaching the door” to form the false thought “The door is approaching someone.” This is an important point. Prelinguistic forms of intentionality have structure, but they do not have the sorts of *indefinitely manipulatable structures with semantic content* that the syntax of language provides. Thus perception is structured by the sheer physical impact of the objects perceived and by the physiology of the perceptual apparatus. For example, the animal sees a man walk toward the door. The structure of memory is similarly shaped by the sheer physical events and the physiological apparatus. But without syntactical elements the animal does not have a rich structural apparatus the elements of which it can manipulate at will in an indefinite number of ways. Birds can perform new permutations of their songs, and an animal constructing a tool can distinguish removing the leaves from the twig and removing the twig from the leaves. Neither of these cases is, in my sense, a case of freely manipulating syntactic structures with semantic content. The beauty of human languages is not just that they have compositionality and generativity but the user can freely manipulate the *semantically loaded* syntactical elements at will.

I think that what I just said is obviously true but it is controversial. Some philosophers, especially Fodor<sup>5</sup>, think that all thought requires a linguistic syntax, and that humans can acquire a natural language only because they already have an inborn “language of thought” with a syntax as rich as that of any human language. Others,

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<sup>5</sup> Jerry Fodor, *The Language of Thought*, Cambridge:Harvard University Press, 1975

especially Davidson<sup>6</sup>, believe that without language thought is impossible. So, they, incredibly, deny that animals can have intentional states such as beliefs and desires. I, on the contrary, think that it is obvious that many animals, my dog Gilbert for example, have perceptions, intentions, beliefs and desires, and yet they have nothing like a language with freely manipulatable syntactical structure. And even if I am wrong about Gilbert, there is just too much biological evidence of animal cognition to make Davidson's view credible.<sup>7</sup>

*Structure and Segmentation.* Another difference between the linguistic and the prelinguistic is that the flow of consciousness in prelinguistic thought and perception, though structured in all sorts of ways, does not, or does not necessarily, come in discrete segments in the way that language does. Non linguistic thought is, or at least can be, a continuous flow, broken only by sleep or other forms of non-consciousness. Language, however, is essentially segmented. The utterance of sentences cannot be a continuous undifferentiated flow, but each sentence, and even each sentence fragment, if uttered as a complete speech act, must be discrete. So the situation we are in when we move from experience to language is analogous to the situation where we move from a movie to a series of still pictures. By thinking in language we break up our thought into words and sentential segments. Though actual discourse takes place in time, the intentionality of the discourse is in discrete segments in a way that the flow of prelinguistic thought and perception in action in conscious life is not in that way in discrete segments. A typical speech act, though performed in time, is, semantically speaking, instantaneous. This is why it does not matter to the identity of the speech act whether, for example, the language spoken requires that the verb phrase comes before or after the subject noun phrase. This difference between unsegmented consciousness and segmented discourse is disguised from us, or at least, for a long time was disguised from me, by the fact that beliefs and desires are naturally talked about as if they were discrete units. But when they are, so to speak, in action, when I am actually looking or acting or perceiving, then they become part of the continuous flow. Suppose, for example, I have the following thought in English, "Now I have to go because it is time for dinner." Though that

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<sup>6</sup> Donald Davidson, "Thought and Talk" in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984, pp155-170

<sup>7</sup> See J. Vauclair, *op. cit.*

thought occurs in time, because it is expressed in an English sentence it has a kind of discreteness that pre-linguistic thoughts do not have. If, for example, I am dancing or skiing, the stream of conscious thought need not contain any words and can be in a continuous flow.

*Declarations.* A third special feature of language that does not exist in prelinguistic intentionality is that in language we get a type of speech act that I have baptized “declarations.” These have a double direction of fit, both word-to-world and world-to-word in the same speech act. These are not two independent fittings but one fitting that goes both ways. Consider the cases where, for example, an authorized person adjourns the meeting, or declares war, by saying “The meeting is adjourned” or “War is declared.” Or consider linguistic declarations where somebody makes a promise by saying “I promise” or gives an order by saying “I order.” These are performative utterances; and all performatives are declarations (though not all declarations are performatives). In these cases we have the double direction of fit, because we make something the case, and thus achieve the world-to-word direction of fit, by representing it as being the case, that is by representing it with the word-to-world direction of fit. This is one of the most important powers of language, the power to create a reality by declaring it to exist. There is nothing analogous to that in pre-linguistic forms of intentionality so we need to be able to show how an extension of the prelinguistic forms to language gives us the capacity to create forms of institutional or social reality that exist only because we collectively and linguistically represent them as existing. We need to show how prelinguistic forms of intentionality could have evolved into human social and institutional reality. What we will require in order to explain this evolution is the notion of meaning and the notion of a convention. I will get to these shortly

## **VII. Some Special Features of Consciousness. The Unity of the Proposition and the Salience of Objects with their Features.**

In explaining the transition from prelinguistic intentionality to linguistic intentionality, we have some wonderful resources in consciousness that go beyond the possession of the apparatus of intentionality and the various philosophical categories – space, time, causation, identity, etc.- that I mentioned in section V. Specifically, in

prelinguistic intentionality the problem of the unity of the proposition does not arise. Why? Because the sequence of conscious thought and experience is one where the representation of the conditions of satisfaction is built in at every step of the way. There is no problem about how I can put the elements of my experience together to form a unity in a way that there is a problem about how I can put discrete words together to form a unified sentence. The experience comes with unity built into it. In conscious hunger, thirst, and visual perception, for example, the determination of the conditions of satisfaction is internal to the experience. Another resource that we have is that the actual structure of our conscious, perceptual experiences makes objects with their features salient. We consciously see, and otherwise perceive, distinct objects and their properties. We see, for example, tall trees, ripe apples and snow covered mountains.

The combination of the unity of the proposition and the salience of some features of our experience gives us an apparent paradox, but I think it is a paradox we can resolve. Our experiences give us a built in unity corresponding to the unity of the proposition in language, but at the same time our experiences give us distinct objects and their features as salient, and this corresponds to the noun-phrase verb-phrase structure in language. How do these two apparently inconsistent features relate to each other? We can only succeed in seeing when we see *that something is the case*, see *that such and such*. But all the same we do see objects, we see *that object*. I will attempt to resolve this apparent paradox in section X.

Another way to put the problem is this. It is easy enough to imagine a language which segments objects differently from the way we do, which treats a tree not as a unified whole, but as a top half and a bottom half. And has separate words for each. That is certainly a logical possibility. It is also possible to imagine a language that does not allow reference to objects, but only to processes as states of affairs. We could imagine a language where instead of saying, "That's a tree," or "That's a stone", we could say "It's treeing here" or "It's stoning here," on analogy with "It's raining here" or "It's snowing here," where the "it" does not refer to any object. We could imagine such a language, but such a language, if it exists, runs counter to our perceptual phenomenology. Our existing perceptual apparatus is constructed so that we naturally treat spatio-temporally discrete entities as single units, and these are represented by typical noun

phrases of our language. Furthermore, identity as preserved in memory is crucial to the development of reference over time, because a pre-linguistic animal can nonetheless recognize the same object on different occasions, and recognize the same object as having different features on different occasions. The paradox I mentioned earlier is that the unit necessarily represented by an intentional state is a whole state of affairs, not an object. Yet perceptually objects and not states of affairs are phenomenologically salient. In language the problem is to explain the unity of the proposition, given the separate syntactical representation of reference and predication.

### **VIII. The Functions of Language: Representation versus Expression**

So far, I have attempted to answer three questions concerning (1) features common to language and consciousness, (2) features special to language and (3) features special to consciousness.

We now go to the last of our four questions. For what primary functions do we need language? By primary functions I mean those functions that are essential to something's being a language at all. We have to specify the primary functions before we can explain the structures which are necessary and sufficient to perform those functions.

The first primary function is this: we need language to provide a mechanism by which our critters can communicate with each other. What does "communicate" mean? And what gets communicated? The standard answer to the second question is that in speaking we communicate information. But "information" is one of the most confused and ill defined notions in contemporary intellectual life. So I am wary of using it except incidentally. I will just state flatly that what typically gets communicated in speech acts are intentional states, and the point of doing that is that the intentional states already represent the world; so what gets communicated, by way of communicating intentional states, is typically information *about the world*. If I communicate to you my belief that it is raining, the point is typically *not* to tell you about me and my beliefs, but about the weather. But there is no way I can intentionally tell you something about the weather except by way of using my mental representations of the weather, my weather directed intentional states, such as my beliefs.

Our prelinguistic hominids already have perception, intentional action and prelinguistic thought processes. All of these are intentional states with full propositional contents. And when one such creature intentionally communicates to another, it tries to reproduce its own intentional content in the head of the other person. When it communicates, for example, “there is danger here” it has the belief that there is danger here and it acts in such a way as to convey this belief to another animal.

The simplest type of communication would be the cases where one animal communicates information about the world by communicating an unstructured proposition to another animal. By unstructured I mean that the propositional content so far has no internal syntax. There is nothing there corresponding to the words of natural languages. This type of communication is already very common among animals. Think of warning cries of birds, mating calls of all sorts of species, and even some dogs’ barks. All such examples are cases of what Peter Strawson<sup>8</sup> once called “feature placing.” We simply communicate the presence of a feature in the environment. In actual languages these feature placing utterances can often be done with one word. “Danger!” “Rain!” “Fire!” And when we expand one of these into a whole sentence, the other parts of the sentence are sometimes semantically empty, as we when we say “It is raining” though there is nothing referred to by “it”. Such simple cases of intentional communication do indeed transfer an intentional content from one animal to another, but they are a very small step on the road to real language because they are so limited. The fact that all sorts of animals have this kind of communication should tell us that it is not yet linguistic, or anything like it.

We might say that the first step on the road to language would be to introduce conventional devices for communicating intentional contents from one animal to another. In most of the cases we considered the animals already have natural devices for the communication, but we can easily imagine that our hominids develop conventional devices for intentional states that have no natural external expression. A dog does not need a conventional device to convey aggression. It can just bark aggressively. But humans, for example, do not in that way have a natural way of conveying the fact that it

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<sup>8</sup> P.F. Strawson, *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics*, London: Routledge, 1959, p.202ff, p.214ff.



is raining. Such reflections about the distinction between natural ways of conveying intentional states, and evolved conventional ways, will I think force us to distinguish representation from expression. We need to distinguish between those communicative acts that involve intentionally representing a state of affairs in the world and those that simply express (in the original sense of pressing out, of giving vent to) an animal's internal state, where that expression may convey information about the world but it does not do so by representing that something is the case, or by representing other sorts of conditions of satisfaction. Thus if I say "Rain!" I represent the weather even if the representation is unstructured. But if I say "Ouch!" as a spontaneous expression of pain, I convey information but I do not represent anything. Let us now make a generalization that will make our task clearer: Simple expressive speech acts, even when performed intentionally, are not "linguistic" in the sense we are trying to make explicit, and the corresponding words of actual languages are not "words" in our sense. Ouch! Damn! Yuck! Wow! are all used to express mental states, both intentional and nonintentional, but they are not the kind of linguistic phenomena we are trying to explain. Why not? Because, though they give vent to intentional or other states of the speaker, they do not represent. What we want to understand is, how can our hominids evolve linguistic *representation*?

What is the difference exactly between representing and expressing? If I say "Rain!" my utterance can be literally true or false, because it represents the current state of the weather. I can, for example, lie when I make this utterance. But if I say "Ouch!" though I do convey information about myself, I say nothing which is literally true or false. If I say "Ouch" when I am not in pain I may mislead and misinform, but I do not lie.<sup>9</sup>

So the first thing our hominids have to create are some conventional devices for representing the same states of affairs in the world that their existing intentional states represent. One type of such a device would represent the same state of affairs, the same conditions of satisfaction, as "there is food here", another, "It is dangerous here", another, "it is raining", etc. By producing a token of such a device, in what we might as well call

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<sup>9</sup> We can construct examples where what is normally a purely expressive speech can be performed representatively. If my dentist tells me to say "Ouch" if it hurts too much, then in saying "Ouch" I am making a statement to the effect that it hurts too much.

“an utterance”, a person can convey to another person the same content as he has in his existing intentional state. For example, he believes it is raining, so he produces the appropriate device to his interlocutor and thus communicates that it is raining.

There is a lot of philosophical weight contained in this simple story so let us slow down and go over it one step at a time. We are assuming that the prelinguistic people can recognize tokens of the same type. That is a reasonable assumption because the cognitive apparatus we assumed they came endowed with, implies a capacity for recognizing exemplars of the same on different occasions. We assume that the speaker is able to utter a token intentionally. That is implied by his stipulated capacity for intentional behavior. But now what exactly is added when he utters the device for purposes of communication? Well, he already has an intentional state with conditions of satisfaction, for example, the belief that it is raining. So what he does, is intentionally impose these conditions of satisfaction on the utterance. The utterance now has the same conditions of satisfaction as his belief, and since we are supposing that he and his hearer both know the convention for using the symbol in question, he can make the utterance with confidence that the hearer will recognize that it has those conditions of satisfaction.

The introduction of conventional devices for representing states of affairs already presupposes the notion of speaker meaning. Any agent who is capable of using those devices must be able to use them meaningfully.

### **IX. Speaker Meaning as the Imposition of Conditions of Satisfaction on Conditions of Satisfaction**

We can now clarify the notion of meaning. We need to distinguish between the conventional meaning of words, sentences and other symbols, and the speaker meaning which the speaker expresses in making an intentional utterance. In the case we have discussed, the symbol in question has a conventional meaning: it is raining, and when the speaker makes an utterance with this symbol he expresses a speaker meaning, a speech act meaning: it is raining. When the speaker intentionally utters a token of the symbol, the production of the token is the condition of satisfaction of his intention to utter it. And when he utters it *meaningfully* he is imposing a further condition of satisfaction on the token uttered. The condition of satisfaction is: That it is raining. That intentional

imposition of conditions of satisfaction on conditions of satisfaction is the essence of speaker meaning.

The capacity to do this is a crucial element of human cognitive capacities. It requires the ability to think two levels at once, in a way that is essential for the use of language. At one level the speaker intentionally produces a physical utterance, but at another level the utterance represents something. And the same duality infects the symbol itself. At one level it is a physical token like any other, at another level it has a meaning, it represents a type of a state of affairs.

There are two separate aspects to what I have said so far. First, speaker meaning consists in the double level of intentionality I have tried to describe. The speaker intentionally produces an utterance, and he intends that the utterance should itself have conditions of satisfaction, for example truth conditions. But, and this is the next crucial point, if he is to succeed on a regular basis, then there has to be some *socially recognized conventional device*, some repeatable device, the production of which can be regularly and conventionally taken by his interlocutors to convey the message. Now we are getting much closer to language, because the first phenomenon is essential to the performance of speech acts, and the second phenomenon, the repeatable devices, consist typically of words and sentences of a language.

For the sake of explanatory simplicity, I introduced the idea of a convention before that of speaker meaning. But which really comes first, speaker meaning or convention? In the order of logical dependence the speaker intentionality must be logically prior, because these conventions for unstructured propositions encode preexisting speaker meanings. However, without language and its conventions you can only have very simple speaker meanings. You can think, and mean, for example: It is raining here. But you cannot even think, much less say and mean, for example, "It would be nice to visit the zoo next Sunday but I have to stay home and work on my income tax." We will get to this point, the dependence of complex thought and meaning on language, in the next section when we get to symbols that have a compositional structure. For now I will just remark: if the speakers and hearers are to evolve a system where they can communicate effectively, they will have to develop a set of conventional devices for conveying speaker meaning.

When our animals develop a language, they are developing a set of devices for public, social, representation. That means they develop a set of devices, the production of which will be the imposition of conditions of satisfaction on conditions of satisfaction, *by convention*.

This is a first step on the way to language, but only a first step because so far we do not have syntax. The devices we were imagining correspond to unstructured propositions, and have no internal syntactical structure. In English we would have to translate them as one word sentences: Rain! Danger! Food! etc.

### **X. A Further Step. Syntactical Compositionality.**

A further step on the road to language (and remember, the metaphor of “steps” implies nothing historical - I am speaking of logical components, I have no idea in which order they occurred historically) is the introduction of simple syntactical devices which can be combined with other syntactical devices to produce complex syntactical devices, and each one of the complex devices will be used to communicate an entire intentional state. That is another way of saying that the hominids need to evolve elements that correspond to our words and morphemes and to ways of combining these into sentences in a compositional manner, in a way that enables the participants to figure out the meaning of the sentences from the meanings of the elements and their arrangement in the sentence. For us the minimal unit of communication, the minimal unit of the speech act, is the whole sentence. The principle that guides the selection of the syntactical devices within the sentence is that they must perform a semantic function. There must be repeatable devices each of which can function as a possible communication unit (sentence) and these must be composed of elements (words) which are such that the communicative content of the whole is determined by the elements and by the principles of their combination in the sentence.

How do we introduce these features—words and sentences----where the sentences are systematically built out of the words? We have to build on the resources that the animal already has, and these are in fact quite rich. Because our beasts already have the capacity to identify and re-identify objects, we can introduce names of objects, and because they have the capacity to recognize different tokens of the same type, we can

introduce such general names as ‘dog’, ‘cat’, ‘man’ etc., and because the objects have features, we can introduce something corresponding to adjectives and verbs. But notice the crucial constraints on these. We are not assuming that reference and predication, the speech acts corresponding to noun phrases and verb phrases, are in any way simple independent elements, but rather that once we have the total speech act we can abstract these as component elements. Following Frege, we think of the nouns phrases and verb phrases as derived from the total sentence and not the total sentence as arrived at by combining nouns phrases and verb phrases.

What does that mean? Our animals already have unstructured propositional contents. But corresponding to these are structured features of the real world and the animals have the capacity to recognize these structures *and their elements*. So we are not begging any questions when we give the animal a sentential structure that corresponds to the conditions of satisfaction that it already has. The semantic function comes for free because we have already introduced meaning. Here is the basic idea: The animal has perceptual and belief contents that lack syntactic structure: It can see, and therefore believe, something that we can report (but the animal cannot report) as “It is coming toward me”. Now if the animal has the capacity to create meaningful events, i.e. speech acts, then it can already represent this state of affairs with the double level intentionality that I described earlier. From the animal’s point of view the representation might be of the form: “Coming-toward-me-thing-now”, where we are to think of this so far as if it were one word, without repeatable elements.

The animal has feature placing, but not yet reference and predication. To get reference and predication it needs symbolic devices that break up the propositional content into components. But it already has the material to construct those components from its prelinguistic intentionality. It can see something coming toward it now, and thus believe that something is coming toward it now. But that is enough to give us at least the possibility of introducing devices that can perform the functions of reference and predication, devices that are forms of noun phrases and verb phrases. We will add rules or procedures for arranging those devices (words) into the complex resultant structures (sentences). It does not much matter how we construct these subsentential elements or how we combine them as long as they break up the sentence into repeatable components,

and as long as the components match the components of the prelinguistic intentional contents. I have been assuming that they are broken up in a style similar to European languages I know, but that is not a necessary assumption. I have been assuming that the presyntactical *coming-toward-me-thing-now* breaks up into a device which refers to a contextually specific object, such as a man, and the predication of coming toward me now, as in the English

The man is coming toward me now.

It is not logically necessary that it be done this way, but doing it this way fits our prelinguistic phenomenology better than some ways we can imagine. As I said earlier, we can imagine a language where what we think of as objects are treated as recurring and repeatable processes, so it would come out as

It is manning now towards me comingly.

on analogy with

It is raining now on me heavily.

But such a language would not reflect the object salience of our perceptual phenomenology.

Furthermore there are built-in structural features of human intentionality which carry the solution to the paradox I mentioned earlier, and any evolutionary account has to face this paradox. The paradox is: how do we achieve the unity of the sentence (and hence the unity of the expressed proposition) when the sentence is entirely composed of discrete entities, the string of words and morphemes that constitute it? A related second question is: How do we explain the pervasiveness of noun phrases and verb phrases in human languages, and how do we explain that typically sentences contain both noun phrases and verb phrases? The solution to the first problem, the unity of the proposition, is provided by the fact that, because of the nature of speaker meaning, it is a requirement on something's being a sentence at all capable of encoding a speaker meaning that it must encode an entire intentional state. All intentionality, conscious or unconscious, perceptual or nonperceptual, comes to us propositionally in the trivial sense that each discriminable intentional state has conditions of satisfaction and a condition is always that such and such is the case. The sentence is designed to encode the entire propositional content of the intentional state. So once we require that sentences encode whole intentional states,

the unity of the proposition expressed comes for free. The unity of the proposition is built into the very logical structure of biological intentionality.

Now we turn to the second question. If we now look at the phenomenological structure of our experiences, particularly conscious, perceptual experience, we will see that *objects and their features* are salient. Though the conditions of satisfaction of our visual experiences require whole states of affairs, so that we never just see an object, but, for example, we see that an object with such and such features is over there; all the same, phenomenologically, we are aware of seeing objects and seeing that they have such and such features. So the propositional unity expressed by the complete sentence is already provided by prelinguistic intentionality, and the internal subject-predicate structure is provided by the way our phenomenology presents the propositional content to us.

So far then we have taken three steps on the road to language: first the creation of speaker meaning, that is, the imposition of conditions of satisfaction on conditions of satisfaction. Second, the creation of conventional devices for performing acts of speaker meaning, which gives us something approaching sentence meaning, where sentence meaning is the standing possibility of speaker meaning. Sentence meaning is conventionalized. Speaker meaning is typically the employment or use of those conventions in the performance of the speech act. Third, we have added internal structure to the speech act in the form of discriminable syntactic elements that have meanings, semantic content, but cannot stand on their own in utterances. They are parts of sentences, and thus correspond to words, but they are not yet whole sentences. We also need rules for combining these devices into whole sentences and distinguishing between grammatical and ungrammatical strings. Both of these are crucial to any account of language. The first gives us meaningful units big enough to function in communication, the second gives compositionality. The sentence is composed of meaningful elements and those meaningful elements together with their rules of combination enable us to generate new sentences and to figure out the meanings of sentences and utterances that we have never heard before.

We do not yet have generativity, that is the capacity of speakers to produce and understand a potentially infinite number of new sentences, but it is easy to add generativity to compositionality by simply adding some recursive rules, rules that apply

over and over endlessly. Examples of ways of providing generativity are such expressions as “It is possible that,” “Sally believes that” or rules for forming relative clauses. What about sentence connectives? They do not seem hard to add either. Indeed we already have an implicit sentence connective when we conjoin two sentences in the speech act. If I say “It is raining. I am hungry” I have already said something equivalent to “it is raining and I am hungry” And we can add explicit connectives to do these jobs, connectives corresponding to the English “and” “or” “if...then” and “not”.

Notice that with the addition of linguistic syntax to animal intentionality we enable speakers to do something no nonlinguistic animal can do. The speaker can intentionally construct arbitrarily many different representations of actual, possible and even impossible states of affairs in the world. The speaker can now think and say not only the man is coming toward me now, but the man will come toward me next week, or the mountain will come toward me, and so on endlessly.

With the apparatus so far developed the hominids can extend the vocabulary to enable them to think thoughts and perform speech acts that are literally unthinkable without language. The prelinguistic animal can count on his fingers. Given numerals, initially introduced to match the fingers, he can count indefinitely and have thoughts with numerical components that he cannot have in the prelinguistic form. Without language he might think, “There are three dogs in the field,” but with language he can think, “I wish there were a thousand dogs in the field.”

## **IX. The Next Step: Deontology**

So with meaning conventions plus compositionality and generativity we are well on the road to language.

Why is that not enough? Why are we just on the road and not already there? I think there is a sense in which we are already there if we understand the implications of the account that I have given so far in a certain very specific way. It is essential to see that in the account I have given so far it is implicit that the speaker employing the conventional device in a social setting for the purpose, for example, of conveying some truth about the world to the hearer, is thereby *committed* to that truth. That is, we will not understand an essential feature of language if we do not see that it necessarily involves



social commitments, and that the necessity of these social commitments derives from the social character of the communication situation, the conventional character of the devices used, and the intentionality of speaker meaning. It is this feature that enables language to form the foundation of human society in general. If a speaker intentionally conveys information to a hearer using socially accepted conventions for the purpose of producing a belief in the hearer about a state of affairs in the world, then the speaker is committed to the truth of his utterance. I will now try to explain this point.

We saw earlier that the formal structure of the intentional state,  $S(p)$ , looks a lot like the formal structure of the corresponding speech act,  $F(p)$ . But  $F(p)$  represents an intentional act, and in the cases we are considering it represents an act deliberately performed in accordance with the conventions of a socially accepted language. Recall that the essence of speaker meaning is the intentional imposition of conditions of satisfaction onto utterances, the imposition of the same conditions of satisfaction as the intentional state expressed in the utterance. Thus, if I believe that it is raining and I want to say that it is raining, I express my belief by making an utterance which I intend to have the same conditions of satisfaction as the original belief. And that utterance inherits the direction of fit of the belief and thus, like the belief, the utterance can be true or false. When I say “it is raining”, my utterance has the word-to-world direction of fit and will be true or false depending on whether or not the propositional content is satisfied. And so on through the other cases.

But now an interesting problem arises concerning the relation between the speech act and the corresponding intentional state. The speech act involves a commitment that goes far beyond the commitments of the intentional state expressed. This is most obvious in the case of statements and promises, but it is also true of other sorts of speech acts such as orders and apologies. When I make a statement I not only express a belief but I commit myself to its truth. When I make a promise I not only express an intention but I commit myself to carrying it out. Where do these commitments come from? The belief and the intention have nothing like the commitments of the statement or the promise. If we are trying to explain the logical, conceptual evolution of a language that has statements and promises, it is not enough that we explain how a speaker can convey his belief and his intention to the hearer. We need to know how the speaker adds these

special deontologies to the speech act. It is tempting, and indeed true, to say that the constitutive rules of the institutions of statement making and promising make every statement into a commitment to truth and every promise into an obligation to do something. The rules typically have the form “X counts as Y in C.” (For example, making such and such an utterance X in this context C counts as making a promise, Y) The question is, How do we get the rules?

Notice that one wrong, but very common, answer, is to think that the deontic requirements are somehow external to the type of speech act. First we have statement making and then we have a rule that commits us to making only true ones; first we have promise making and then we have a rule that obligates us to keep the promises. This view of the relation of statements to truth is held by philosophers as diverse as Bernard Williams<sup>10</sup>, Paul Grice<sup>11</sup> and David Lewis<sup>12</sup>. But it is not correct. You cannot explain what a statement or a promise is without explaining that a statement commits the maker of the statement to its truth and the promise commits the maker of the promise to carrying it out. In both cases the commitment is *internal* to the type of speech act being performed, where by “internal” I mean it could not be the type of speech act it is, it could not be that very kind of speech act if it did not have that commitment. But, to repeat the question, how do we evolve the deontic power out of the act of meaning something by an utterance? Does the act of representing the same conditions of satisfaction as those of a belief somehow essentially involve a commitment that goes beyond the commitment of the belief, does the action of representing the same conditions of satisfaction as an intention necessarily involve a commitment that goes beyond the commitment of the intention? Or are these other commitments just add-ons? Are they further accretions that come with the historical development of the linguistic institutions? I think they are internal.

To see why, we have to see that the speech act is more than just the expression of an intention or the expression of a belief. It is above all a public performance. I am

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<sup>10</sup> Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002

<sup>11</sup> Paul Grice, “Logic and Conversation” in Peter Cole and Jerry L. Morgan (eds) *Syntax and Semantics*, Vol 3, New York: Academic Press, 1975 pp.41-58

<sup>12</sup> David Lewis, “General Semantics” in Harman, G. and Davidson, D. *Semantics of Natural Language*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Dordrecht Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Co. 1972, pp169-218

telling something to someone else. But I am not just telling him that I have a belief or that I have an intention; I am telling him something about the world represented by those beliefs and intentions. By committing myself to the conditions of satisfaction of the belief I am telling him that this is how the world is, by telling him about the conditions of satisfaction of my intention I am telling him what I am actually going to do. (The self referentiality of promises comes in here. I do not just promise to do something, but in so doing, I promise to *do* it because I *promised* to do it.). In ordinary parlance, I give my word.

We can summarize this part of our discussion as follows. In evolving a language we found that we needed speaker meaning, conventions and internal syntactic structure. But if you understand these as relating in a certain way to human intentionality, you can see the different types of illocutionary acts and in so doing, you already get the commitments that typically go with those types of illocutionary acts. Nothing further is necessary to guarantee that speakers will be committed by their utterances. In following the common sense idea that language could have evolved, and may in fact have evolved, out of prelinguistic forms of intentionality we found that language so evolved provides something not present in pre linguistic intentionality, the public assumption of commitments.

## **X. The Extension of Deontology to Social Reality. How Language Enables Us to Create Social Institutions**

The argument given so far is that intentional acts of meaning, that is the intentional imposition of conditions of satisfaction on conditions of satisfaction, performed according to accepted conventions and with the intention that they should so accord, necessarily involve a deontology. Now, once that deontology is collectively created by these intentional actions, then it is very easy, indeed practically inevitable that it should be extended to social reality generally. So, once you have the capacity to represent, then you already have the capacity to create a reality that consists in part of representations. Let me give some examples of this. If you have the capacity to say “He is our leader.” “He is my man.” “She is my woman.” “This is my house,” then you have the capacity to do something more than represent pre-existing states of affairs. You have

the capacity to create states of affairs with a new deontology; you have the capacity to create rights, duties and obligations by performing and getting other people to accept certain sorts of speech acts. Once you and others recognize someone as a leader, and an object as someone's property, and a man or a woman as someone with whom you have a special bond, then you have already created a public deontology. You have already created public reasons for action that are desire independent. But notice the functioning of the language that we use to describe these phenomena. It creates them. The language constitutes them in an important way. Why? Because the phenomena in question only are what they are in virtue of being represented as what they are. The representations which are partly constitutive of institutional reality, the reality of government, private property, marriage as well as money, universities and cocktail parties, is essentially linguistic. The language doesn't just describe; it creates, and partly constitutes what it describes.

Compositionality figures essentially in the creation of social and institutional reality. Given compositionality the animal can do much more than just represent existing states of affairs; it can represent states of affairs that do not exist but which can be brought into existence by getting a community to accept a certain class of speech acts.. So, for example, the man who says "This is my property" or the woman who says "This is my husband," may be doing more than just reporting an antecedently existing state of affairs, they may be creating a state of affairs by declaration. A person who can get other people to accept this declaration will succeed in creating an institutional reality that did not exist prior to that declaration.

We do not yet have performatives, because they require specific performative verbs or other performative expressions, but we do have declarations with their double direction of fit. If I declare, "This is my property" then I represent myself as having a right to the property (word-to-world direction of fit) and, if I get others to accept my representation then I create that right because the right only exists by collective acceptance (world-to-word direction of fit). And they are not independent: I create a right by representing myself as already having it.

This basic move underlies much of society. It is not easy to see this point but I think it is essential to understanding society. The utterance creates desire-independent

reasons for action, and these are then recognized by the collectivity. That same move, that same X-counts-as-Y-in-context-C move, by which you create desire-independent reasons for action in the case of the individual speech act, is now generalizable. So what we think of as private property, for example, is a kind of standing speech act. It is a kind of permanent speech act affixed to an object. It says, the owner of this object has certain rights and duties, and other people, not the owners of this object, do not have those rights and duties. And think of money as a kind of standing permanent speech act. (Sometimes the speech act is written out. On American currency it says: “This note is legal tender for all debts public and private.”)<sup>13</sup>

I have throughout this article been drawing attention to several remarkable features of human language. None is more remarkable than this: In human languages we have the capacity, not only to represent reality, both how it is and how we want to make it be, but we have the capacity to create a new reality by representing that reality as existing. We create private property: money, property, government, marriage, and a thousand other such phenomena by representing these phenomena as existing.

#### **X. Summary of the Argument So Far.**

There are three essential points I want to get across in this article in addition to the analysis of relations of nonlinguistic to linguistic intentionality. First I want to emphasize how the structure of prelinguistic intentionality enables us to solve the problems of the relation of reference and predication and the problem of the unity of the proposition. The second point is about deontology. The basic intellectual motivation that drives this second part of my argument is the following: There is something left out of the standard textbook accounts of language as consisting of syntax, semantics and phonology with an extra-linguistic pragmatics thrown in. Basically what is left out is the essential element of commitment involved in having a set of conventional devices that encode the imposition of conditions of satisfaction on conditions of satisfaction. The third part of the article is about the creation of a social and institutional ontology by linguistically representing certain facts as existing, thus creating the facts. When we understand this

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<sup>13</sup> These points are developed further in my *The Construction of Social Reality*, New York: The Free Press, 1995

third point we will get a deeper insight into the constitutive role of language in the construction of society and social institutions. Let me review the steps of the argument so that it is as clear as I can make it.

Step 1. We imagine a race of beasts capable of consciousness and pre-linguistic intentionality. And, of equal importance, they are endowed with a capacity for free action and collective intentionality. They can cooperate and they have free will.

Step 2. We have to assume that they are capable of evolving procedures for representing states of affairs; where the representations have speaker meaning, as I have defined it. They can represent states of affairs that they believe exist, states of affairs they desire to exist, states of affairs they intend to bring about, etc.

Step 3. These procedures, or at least some of them, become conventionalized. What does that mean exactly? It means that given collective intentionality, if anyone intentionally engages in one of these procedures, then other members of the group have a right to expect that the procedures are being followed correctly. This, I take it, is the essential thing about conventions. Conventions are arbitrary, but once they are settled they give the participants a right to expectations

Step 4. We can also imagine that they break up the representations into repeatable and manipulatable components that perform the functions of reference and predication.

Step 5. The central idea in the argument is this: Just having a belief or a desire or an intention does not so far commit a person in any public way. Of course, a belief is a commitment to truth and a desire is a commitment to satisfaction and an intention is a commitment to action, but none of these so far are public undertakings. There is no deontology involved, no publicly recognized obligation. But once you freely commit yourself to the conditions of satisfaction of these corresponding intentional states and you do this in a public way by imposing conditions of satisfaction on conditions of satisfaction, and you do it according to the conventions of a tribe, then you have a system for creating obligations and other sorts of deontic commitments. Notice that the commitment is to states of affairs in the world and not just to the corresponding intentional states. Thus if I make a statement I commit myself to the existence of a fact, if I make a promise I commit myself to the performance of a future action, and so on.

Step 6. The same basic linguistic move that enables speech acts to carry a deontology of rights, duties, commitments, etc. can be extended to create a social and institutional reality of money, government, marriage, private property and so on. And each of these is a system of deontologies. Once we introduce the elements of compositionality and generativity into language there is literally no limit to the institutional realities we can create just by agreeing, in language, that we are creating them. We create universities, cocktail parties and summer vacations, for example. The limits on institutional power are the limits on deontology itself. Deontic powers are powers that exist only because they are recognized and accepted as existing. Sometimes we back them with physical force, in the case of the criminal law for example, but the police and armies are also systems of deontologies.

## **XI. Why Standard Semantic Theories Fail to Account for These Features.**

I have now completed the main arguments of this article. In this section and the next I will answer some leftover questions.

I said earlier that traditional accounts of language are unable to get at this essential deontic feature. Now, why couldn't, for example, standard truth conditional accounts get at it? The truth conditional accounts that I am familiar with make a connection between truth and meaning. What they do not see is how that connection is necessarily mediated by commitment. It is not enough that there should be a matching or satisfaction relation between the sentence or the utterance on the one hand and its truth conditions on the other, there must also be a representing relation and the representing relation is not explained by a kind of matching or satisfaction. The only way to get the representing relation is to see that an utterance with a meaning doesn't just match the truth conditions or is satisfied by the truth conditions but rather is a *commitment* to the existence of those truth conditions. You can see this weakness in its most extreme form in the case of the picture theory of meaning. Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* is the classic statement of this view. The problem is that if we are to try to think of the sentence as a picture of a fact, where picturing is defined in terms of the isomorphism of the structure of the picture and the structure of the corresponding fact, then equally the fact is a picture of the sentence. Isomorphism is a symmetrical relation: If A is isomorphic to B, then B is

isomorphic to A. If this sentence is somehow or other a structural model of the fact, then the fact is equally a structural model of the sentence, and we have lost the representing relation which is essential to language. Now, oddly enough, a similar difficulty affects Tarski-style model theoretic accounts such as Davidson's, because if we are to say that the key notion is satisfaction, and we can explain satisfaction recursively, then the problem is that if an object satisfies an open sentence, then there must be a relation in which the open sentence stands to the object, the relation of being satisfied by that object. But neither of these, neither satisfier of nor satisfied by, gives us representation or commitment. The particular form of asymmetry that is required between the representation and the thing represented essentially involves a commitment on the part of the speech act to the existence of the state of affairs represented. It is not enough to present language and reality as simply staring at each other blankly. Language is used to represent reality and the notion of representation essentially involves more than the notions of truth or matching, or satisfaction. It involves the notion of a *commitment* to truth or satisfaction.

### **XIII. Why Language is Essentially Conventional and Why There Are so Many Different Languages**

If language is biologically based, then why is it that we speak so many different languages? If evolutionary biology gave us the capacity for language, why did it not give us a single language which all humans could speak? Humans have, with minor variations, the same way of seeing because they all have the same visual apparatus, but they certainly do not have the same way of speaking. Why not? The answer derives in part from the fact that speaking is a voluntary activity, perhaps the most paradigmatic form of the human freedom of the will, and where free voluntary actions are concerned, people perform these actions in their own free voluntary ways. Biology can give us a basis for talk, but it is up to us how we talk, and it is up to us what we say.

Suppose there had been exactly one primordial language with its own syntax and lexicon. We know from historical linguistics that it would have evolved into different dialects, all of which would be conventional. Even if everyone tries as hard as they can to imitate what they take to be the "correct" way of speaking, variations are bound to emerge. In a sense the Roman Empire gave its subjects a common language, but over



two thousand years they evolved into contemporary, mutually incomprehensible, French, Portuguese, Spanish, Romantsch, etc. So even assuming one biologically determined language, the free will of language speakers would have evolved the Ursprache into any number of conventional dialects, where “conventional” implies both arbitrariness and normativity. There is a right way and a wrong way to speak any language, but the way that the language fixed rightness and wrongness is conventional and therefore arbitrary.