CHAPTER 10
What Does You (Language) Mean?

Chapter Outline:

Introduction: Paying Attention to Language

1. Words and Names

2. Thoughts and Ideas

3. Reference to Reality

4. Sentences and Form

5. Interpersonal and Cultural Communication

6. Sign and Symbolization

7. Life

Conclusion: Putting Language Into Practice

Chapter Objectives:

In this chapter you will explore the nature of language and meaning, in particular the meaning of what we communicate. You will look at language and meaning through seven different "windows," each of which provides a unique perspective on the topic. Because of this format you will be reading smaller samples of writings from other lovers of wisdom. You will get the most out of this chapter if you stretch yourself to "see" language from each point of view, through each "window." In the journal assignment you will have a chance to apply your skills of wisdom to your understanding and life of language. After reading this chapter you should be able to:

- List the most common questions when reflecting philosophically about language.
- Identify a few key schools or figures in the field by name and key contribution to language philosophy (Confucius and Hzün Tzu, John Locke, Michel Foucault, John Stuart Mill, the Nyaya school, logical positivism, "Continental" philosophy, Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles S. Peirce)
- Summarize the following:

    - what we *do* with words in interpersonal and cultural communication

    - what we learn about language by studying the brain

    - what the principle of verification is

- Describe each of the seven windows and what they reveal about the nature of language and meaning.

Introduction: Paying Attention to Language

"What does you (language) mean?" Now that is a strange sentence. It is wrong no matter how you look at it. I could have said "What *do* you mean?" (leaving out the term "language"). Or I could have said "What does *your* language mean?" (removing the parentheses). Or I could have simply said "What does language mean?" (removing the "you" altogether). But I did not.

Something is wrong in the sentence in every possibility. So you, the reader, are left not quite knowing what I mean.

And that, of course, is the point. My aim is to draw attention to the question of meaning, specifically with regards to our use of language. But I also wanted to hint that language both speaks and is ambiguous at the same time. My aim is to get you thinking about language and about meaning.

Alice and Humpty Dumpty were talking about "unbirthday presents" (see chapter five of Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*). After doing some mathematics, Alice demonstrated to Humpty Dumpty that there were three hundred and sixty-four days when one might get unbirthday presents. This, in turn was confirmed by Humpty Dumpty:

"Certainly," said Alice.

"And only *one* for birthday presents, you know. There's glory for you!"

"I don't know what you mean by 'glory,'" Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. "Of course you don't--till I tell you. I meant 'there's a nice knockdown argument for you.'"

"But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knockdown argument,'" Alice objected.

"When *I* use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean--neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master--that's all."

What *does* 'glory' mean? Could someone just choose that it means 'a nice knockdown argument'? Would it really mean 'a nice knockdown argument' because we chose it to mean that? *Can* you make a word to mean so many things? Which meanings are the "masters" over words, and who makes them master?

One the one hand, we do not think much about questions of this kind. They seem rather abstract and, well, "philosophical." But, when we look at things a little closer, we find that we ask questions about language and meaning all the time. We have a dispute with a special friend that ends up becoming an argument about what I "meant" when I said something. You tell your child not to run around the swimming pool and he responds, "I was not *running*. I was just walking fast!" We hire accountants to figure out what, of our expenses can qualify as an "exemption" under the current tax laws. A close friend wonders why you repeated your invitation to do something tonight and you respond, "Because your words said one thing, but your tone of voice and mannerisms said another, and I wanted to clear up what you really meant." We try to figure out what teachers want when they give a test question, we wonder what employers or employees mean by a comment, and we listen for the voice of God.

As you can imagine, philosophers have been wondering about language and meaning for some time. In the East perhaps as far back as the period of the Vedic worship of *vak* or "speech" (*c.*1500 bce), and certainly in the West with Socrates and Plato, we find evidence of reasoned reflection on the nature of language. Some, like the Stoics, asked questions about language along side attention to the structure of language ("grammar"). Others, like the Nyaya school of philosophy in India, explored language in terms of its connection with logic: the clarification of proofs within argumentation. Still others, like the Chinese, explored language in the context of social life, how we govern our use of words with one another. And, of course, questions about language led to other questions about knowledge, reality, society and so on. During some periods of history, attention to language was minimal. But during other periods language was a matter of primary concern. In particular in the first half of the twentieth century--especially in England and the United States--there were many philosophers who saw the entire enterprise of philosophy as a clarification of language.

Out of the centuries of reflection on language and meaning a few key questions seem to persist:

- How is language formed? How do words combine to form meaningful sentences, in different ways for different cultures?

- What does "meaning" *mean*? On what grounds do we say that we "mean" something by what we say? How do we determine the meaning(s) of words or sentences?

- What is the relationship between language and knowledge? Do we have knowledge first and then find words to express it, or does language constrain the possibilities for knowledge itself?

- How does the human mind process language and thought? Does the mind process thought as an interior language, or language as thought? How does the mind organize the language we use? Is language something that is "hard-wired" into the human brain (and if so, in what sense), or does it grow only from experience?

- What is the relationship between language and the world (or between language and "reality")? In what sense can language give us an accurate picture of the world as it truly *is*?

- How is language actually *used* in society? Is language primarily about propositions of fact and "making statements," or is it about *doing* something, changing the way others feel, think, or behave? What is the relationship between language and communication?

- Is human *language* (either spoken or written) really the proper or central topic of a philosophy of language at all? Is language a unique (or a uniquely human) mode of being, or is it merely a sub-category of symbolic interaction, of a more general signification, through which humans express themselves (such that it is not "language" but "signification" or "symbolization" that really should be studied)?

- What are the ethical implications of our language? What does it mean to "say what we mean," to be "honest," or, on the other hand, to "lie"? What does it mean to value veracity in the marketplace, in government, in interpersonal relationships?

Needless to say, we can only address a few of these questions, and even with regard to those questions we address, we can only probe so deep. We shall explore this topic by looking at

language and meaning through a variety of different perspectives or "windows." Though each "window" we see language and meaning in new ways. We attend to different aspects of things, we discover new questions, and our practice is addressed at different levels. We will peek at language and meaning through seven different windows, considering language in terms of (1) words and names, (2) thoughts and ideas, (3) references to reality, (4) sentences and paragraphs, (5) interpersonal and cultural communication, (6) sign and symbolization, and (7) life itself. Whereas in previous chapters you have read larger samples of writings from the great lovers of wisdom throughout the world, in this chapter you will read shorter pieces of philosophical writing. My aim is to give you a sense of looking at language and meaning through each different window.

1. Words and Names

The window of *words* and *names* is perhaps the first and most obvious window through which we look at language and meaning. We speak to the toddler who reaches out for her mother and we say "mamma, mamma." We travel to a foreign country and ask, "what is the word for 'bathroom'?" We learn to read and begin by associating particular words with individual pictures of things. We learn about philosophy by learning a whole set of new words (epistemology, metaphysics, materialism . . .). And we appreciate poetry by paying attention to the sight, to the sound, to the subtleties of words. Consider, for example, this poem by Denise Levertov (as a teacher of philosophy, one of my favorite). Read it slowly, perhaps aloud. Enjoy every word.

> Just when you seem to yourself
> nothing but a flimsy web
> of questions, you are given
> the questions of others to hold
> in the emptiness of your hands,
> songbird eggs that can still hatch

if you keep them warm,

butterflies opening and closing themselves

in your cupped palms, trusting you not to injure

their scintillant fur, their dust.

You are given the questions of others

as if they were answers

to all you ask. Yes, perhaps

this gift is your answer.[1]

Individual words ring in your ears ("scintillant"). Words provoke images ("songbird eggs"). They speak and they suggest ("emptiness" tells us about the shape and character of hands as they hold a butterfly; but "emptiness" suggests much more about how we "hold" the questions of others). Words both provide and withhold meaning (What does she mean by "question" / "answer"?). Language is about words.

Words are important to us. When we use the wrong word, we pay for it. Think of the various terms used in American history for those with blackish skin ("nigger," "negro," "colored," "black," "African American" and so on). When we use the right word we are rewarded. Just think of the Junior High school student who is able to speak fluently in the current street-lingo ("Zowie, that cat on the drums be way groovy, eh?"). The right word is important in education (match the right definition with the word), in employment (that's not a "bolt," that's a "screw"), and in politics (just what is "terrorism" anyway?). Chinese philosopher Confucius thought words were so important that he argued that if he were made ruler, he would make the clarification of the meanings of important terms (what he calls the "rectification of names") the first and most important item of business:

> Tzu-lu said, "The ruler of Wei is waiting for you to serve in his administration. What will be your first measure?" Confucius said, "It will certainly concern the rectification of names." Tzu-lu said, "Is that so? You are wide of the mark. Why should there be such a

1. Denise Levertov, *Sands of the Well* (New Directions Publishing, 1996).

rectification?" Confucius said, "Yu! How uncultivated you are! With regard to what he does not know, the superior man should maintain an attitude of reserve. If names are not rectified, then language will not be in accord with truth. If language is not in accord with truth, then things cannot be accomplished. If things cannot be accomplished, then ceremonies and music will not flourish. If ceremonies and music do not flourish, then punishment will not be just. If punishments are not just, then the people will not know how to move hand or foot. Therefore the superior man will give only names that can be described in speech and say only that which can be carried out in practice. With regard to his speech, the superior man does not take it lightly. That is all."[2]

The "rectification of names," or the clarification of the definitions of key terms, enables the language of the country to be practiced according to truth (or we understand what we say and what we mean). What does "stealing" mean? Is it "stealing" when I defraud a customer out of lots of money by giving false impressions about the product I am selling? If we do not clarify terms like these ("wages," "stealing," "dependent," "right" and so on) our fundamental values cannot be communicated (in Chinese culture, these values were frequently communicated to the public through ritual - "ceremonies and music"). If these fundamental values are confused then punishment is not just (and those who "steal" millions, harming many, through some slick scam go unpunished, while a petty thief may be locked up for years). Consequently the people of the nation are confused. They don't know how to act. Ultimately the productivity and the vitality of the country is compromised. Consequently, a good leader pays careful attention to words.

The field of "lexical semantics" is an academic discipline that studies the meanings of words. Here we ask questions like the following: How are the signs of our language (such as the letters H-O-T) related to the notion of temperature? How do we distinguish the meaning of "hot" from the meaning of "sweltering"? How do we distinguish the meaning of "hot" from the meaning of *picante*? How is the meaning of a word established: by a government? by the history of the word ("good-bye" can be traced back to the phrase "God be with you")? by the conventions and use of everyday life? Or is there some ideal standard of reality which links

2. Confucius, "The Analects of Confucius," in *A Source Nbook of Chinese Philosophy*, trans. Wing Tsit Chan (Princteon, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), 13.3, p. 40.

certain words with their meaning? Even when we look at language in terms of words, we find ourselves in the midst of difficult questions.

Plato faced these very questions in his dialogue called *Cratylus*. In this dialogue, Socrates, Hermogenes, and others discuss the nature of names (words) and how they gain their meaning. In this brief excerpt Socrates--self-deprecating as always, only having taken the "single drachma/dollar" course in grammar and language--proposes to discuss the topic and Hermogenes responds with his first question. Notice how clearly he identifies this question.

> *"SOCRATES: Son of Hipponicus, there is an ancient saying that 'hard is the knowledge of the good.' And the knowledge of names is a great part of knowledge. If I had not been poor, I might have heard the fifty-drachma course of the great Prodicus, which is a complete education in grammar and language--these are his own words--and then I should have been at once able to answer your question about the correctness of names. But, indeed, I have only heard the single drachma course, and therefore I do not know the truth about such matters. I will, however, gladly assist you and Cratylus in the investigation of them. When he declares that your name is not really Hermogenes, I suspect he is only making fun of you; he means to say that you are no true son of Hermes. because you are always looking after a fortune and never in luck. But, as I was saying, there is a good deal of difficulty in this sort of knowledge, and therefore we had better leave the question open until we have heard both sides.*
> *"HERMOGENES: I have often talked over this matter, both with Cratylus and others, and cannot convince myself that there is any principle of correctness in names other than convention and agreement. Any name which you give, in my opinion, is the right one, and if you change that and give another, the new name is as correct as the old--we frequently change the names of our slaves. and the newly imposed name is as good as the old. For there is no name given to anything by nature; all is convention and habit of the users. Such is my view. But if I am mistaken I shall be happy to hear and learn of Cratylus, or of anyone else."[3]*

As you can see, Hermogenes and Confucius might have a serious disagreement about words. Confucius is careful to "rectify" words with their correct meanings so people know what things mean and their speech and action are governed by truth. Hermogenes, however, can find no principle of correctness in words outside of the way people use them in general. 'Glory' can

3. Plato, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, reprint, 1941, Bollingen Series (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), Cratylus, 384b-d, p. 422.

mean 'a nice knockdown argument' if one chooses it to mean so. But can we define "stealing" any way we wish?

2. Thoughts and Ideas

What are "words" but expressions of thoughts and ideas? Whatever we believe about the source of the meaning of words, we cannot deny that they have some intimate connection with the human mind. Let's take an example. You are a new senior executive in a growing business firm. After reviewing the corporation's information, you are unsure about the meaning of a few of the paragraphs in the company policy manual. So you ask to meet with the board of directors along with the author of the manual. Your purpose in this meeting? To get a sense of the "mind of the company" on these matters, to clarify what was on the mind of the leaders when the policy manual was made. Your assumption? That the policy manual (language) was an expression of the thoughts and ideas of the board, and therefore of the company.

Another example. Your ten-year-old daughter has just told you that dad said it was OK to go out tonight, so she is off for an all-night party at her friend's house. Now you know that this friend could be a bad influence, and that an all-night party at that household is not a safe atmosphere for your ten-year-old. In fact you are fairly sure that "dad" would agree on this matter. But why did he say it was OK? Time to check things out. So before you let your daughter go, you go and speak with dad. "Did you really give permission for our daughter to go to an all night party at that person's home?"

"Of course not." Dad replies. "I wouldn't have dreamed of such a thing. You know I care for her more than that. She just asked me if it was OK if she went out to a friend's house tonight and I said I couldn't see why not. I thought she was talking about the subject in general and needed my permission before she worked out details."

So now you two must work things out with the daughter. But my point is this: underlying the conversation is an assumption that language is grounded in thoughts and ideas. You could not

imagine that dad would give permission. Those words would not be expressions of his ideas. And you confirmed that indeed, they were not.

So what are words? They are the external manifestations of the thoughts or ideas of our minds. Our minds may be confused about things (and so our ideas don't necessarily reflect reality correctly). And our grasp of the language may be only partial. Nonetheless, when we look at language and meaning through the window of thoughts and ideas, the   meaning of words is found in the thoughts and ideas that are expressed through them.

Such was the viewpoint of John Locke. If you remember your chapter on truth and knowing, John Locke was the philosopher who argued that all our knowing, all our *ideas* come to us through experience. Locke believed that just as the physical universe was made of tiny, simple, particles configured together in various ways, so our mental life was composed of "simple ideas" (brought to us through experience) which combine to form complex thoughts and reasonings and the like. According to Locke, these ideas, both simple and complex, are shared between people by means of language. Here are Locke's own words:

> *1. Words are sensible signs, necessary for communication of ideas. Man, though he have great variety of thoughts, and such from which others as well as himself might receive profit and delight; yet they are all within his own breast, invisible and hidden from others, nor can of themselves be made to appear. The comfort and advantage of society not being to be had without communication of thoughts, it was necessary that man should find out some external sensible signs, whereof those invisible ideas, which his thoughts are made up of, might be made known to others. For this purpose nothing was so fit, either for plenty or quickness, as those articulate sounds, which with so much ease and variety he found himself able to make. Thus we may conceive how words, which were by nature so well adapted to that purpose, came to be made use of by men as the signs of their ideas; not by any natural connexion that there is between particular articulate sounds and certain ideas, for then there would be but one language amongst all men; but by a voluntary imposition, whereby such a word is made arbitrarily the mark of such an idea. The use, then, of words, is to be sensible marks of ideas; and the ideas they stand for are their proper and immediate signification.*

> *2. Words, in their immediate signification, are the sensible signs of his ideas who uses them. The use men have of these marks being either to record their own thoughts, for the*

assistance of their own memory or, as it were, to bring out their ideas, and lay them before the view of others: words, in their primary or immediate signification, stand for nothing but the ideas in the mind of him that uses them, how imperfectly soever or carelessly those ideas are collected from the things which they are supposed to represent. When a man speaks to another, it is that he may be understood: and the end of speech is, that those sounds, as marks, may make known his ideas to the hearer. That then which words are the marks of are the ideas of the speaker: nor can any one apply them as marks, immediately, to anything else but the ideas that he himself hath: for this would be to make them signs of his own conceptions, and yet apply them to other ideas; which would be to make them signs and not signs of his ideas at the same time, and so in effect to have no signification at all. Words being voluntary signs, they cannot be voluntary signs imposed by him on things he knows not. That would be to make them signs of nothing, sounds without signification. A man cannot make his words the signs either of qualities in things, or of conceptions in the mind of another, whereof he has none in his own. Till he has some ideas of his own, he cannot suppose them to correspond with the conceptions of another man; nor can he use any signs for them of another man; nor can he use any signs for them: for thus they would be the signs of he knows not what, which is in truth to be the signs of nothing. But when he represents to himself other men's ideas by some of his own, if he consent to give them the same names that other men do, it is still to his own ideas; to ideas that he has, and not to ideas that he has not.[4]

A few items in this sample should be noted. First, Locke believes that words are *sensible* signs of our ideas. What is private and inaccessible to others is made externally available to others through language. Second, words are an *arbitrary* sign of our ideas. There is no necessary reason that the letters D-O-G in English speaking lands should express ideas about animals with wet noses and waggy tails any more than C-H-I-E-N should refer to the same in French speaking lands. The spelling, this word (or sound of the word spoken) is simply what a given society uses. It is what Locke calls "arbitrary." Yet (third) these words are significations of *this person's* ideas. One cannot speak about what one doesn't know. One might use fancy words, but these words do not articulate the thoughts or ideas in the speaker's mind. A hearer might think that, but such is not the case. And so we are led to all kinds of confusion.

4. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book III, chapter 2, sections 1-2.

Just as there is an entire field of lexical semantics that explores the meaning of words, so there is a field of psycholinguistics that explores the ways which the mind processes language. And psycholinguistics, in turn, is further informed by studies about the human brain. It was a major breakthrough in brain and language studies when   Paul Broca in 1865 identified a specific area of the brain that appeared to control our word formation. Some thought we had discovered the "place" of language. But then other scientists found other "places." To make a long story short, it appears currently that a number of sub-functions of language (auditory and visual perception, interpretation of perceptual code, categorization and interpretation of terms and sentences, muscle control for speech or writing or other forms of communication, and so on) are each performed in separate regions of the brain. All are necessary for full communication. There is no "one place" where language is found in the human brain. Rather some argue that it is better to consider language in terms of a state or pattern of integration of different locations in the brain operating in a given situation (and affected by damage to this or that part of the brain).

There is an age old debate among philosophers regarding which this neuro-psycholinguist research has perhaps some bearing. Where do humans get our facility for language? Or our framework for language? Some will argue that humans are unique in that we have a special "faculty" of communication. Language is in some way innate to human existence. We are hard-wired for language. This is, among other things, what makes us different from "lesser" animals. Others argue that acquisition of language is simply a matter of experience. There is no built-in "faculty" or "hard-wiring" for language. The patterns, the words, and the mistakes of any give language system are developed only as experience is collected or as behaviors are reinforced throughout time. Still others see language acquisition as a process of "hypothesis testing," for example, using a word as long as it seems to comprehend a given perspective we have on hand.

So what might brain research have to say to this debate? It appears that *something* is currently hard-wired in the human brain ("innate"?), and yet language is not present as a single "faculty" but rather as an integration of networks of a number of simpler operations. Each particular network develops and stores information differently according to the operations it

performs. Perceptions, memories, hypotheses, and more all play a part in human language processing. Consequently, when we look to the human mind/brain to explore the meaning of language we do not find a simple answer. Even the narrow world of vocabulary requires perceptual memories, translations of perceptions to ideas, and categorizations of meanings. And is all this neural "processing" what we really mean by the "meaning" of language? Of course, here we are led further into questions of the relationship of mind to body and more, to be taken up in our chapter on the meaning of human life. Nonetheless, this much is clear at present: human language is *embodied* language. It is experienced and expressed through the integrated language processing systems we currently possess. For those who, for some reason, have damaged body parts or processes essential to this system, language is a struggle.

What does it mean to say that language expresses our ideas? The notion seems so central to our intuitive understanding of our own communication. But it is much harder to explain just what this means in the world of human science. Yet "idea theories" of meaning still persist among some philosophers (some now speak of "semantic internalism"). In any case, looking at language and meaning through the window of human interiority offers a unique view on the topic. What is the meaning of a word? From the window of thoughts and ideas, we might say that the meaning of a word is the place is has or the function it serves in human mental life, however that mental life has been configured or developed.

3. Reference to Reality

Nevertheless there are problems with a strictly "idea" approach to language and meaning. The connection of an idea with a term must have an origin somewhere in experience ("out there") for it to find its way into the human mind ("in here"). Is that connection really as "arbitrary" as Locke argued? Perhaps both the French and the English terms are what they are because of an historical and concrete identification of term ("dog," "chien") and object (that wet-nosed, waggy-tailed animal). And so we turn to look at language through the window of "reference to reality."

John Stewart Mill (1806-1873) took on the "idea theories" of meaning directly, arguing not against John Locke, but against Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), who he took to hold similar views. He writes:

> *1. [Names are names of things, not of our ideas] "A name," says Hobbes, "is a word taken at pleasure to serve for a mark which may raise in our mind a thought like to some thought we had before, and which being pronounced to others, may be to them a sign of what thought the speaker had before in his mind." This simple definition of a name, as a word (or set of words) serving the double purpose of a mark to recall to ourselves the likeness of a former thought, and a sign to make it known to others, appears unexceptionable. Names, indeed, do much more than this; but whatever else they do, grows out of, and is the result of this: as will appear in its proper place.*
>
> *Are names more properly said to be the names of things, or of our ideas of things? The first is the expression in common use; the last is that of some, who conceived that in adopting it they were introducing a highly important distinction. The eminent thinker, just quoted [Hobbes], seems to countenance the latter opinion. "But seeing," he continues, "names ordered in speech (as is defined) are signs of our conceptions, it is manifest they are not signs of the things themselves; for that the sound of this word stone should be the sign of a stone, cannot be understood in any sense but this, that he that hears it collects that he that pronounces it thinks of a stone."*
>
> *If it be merely meant that the conception alone, and not the thing itself, is recalled by the name, or imparted to the hearer, this of course cannot be denied. Nevertheless, there seems good reason for adhering to the common usage, and calling the word sun the name of the sun, and not the name of our idea of the sun. For names are not intended only to make the hearer conceive what we conceive, but also to inform him what we believe. Now, when I use a name for the purpose of expressing a belief, it is a belief concerning the thing itself, not concerning my idea of it. When I say, "the sun is the cause of day," I do not mean that my idea of the sun causes or excites in me the idea of day. It seems proper to consider a word as the name of that which we intend to be understood by it when we use it; of that which any fact that we assert of it is to be understood of; that, in short, concerning which, when we employ the word, we intend to give information. Names, therefore, shall always be spoken of in this work as the names of things themselves, and not merely of our ideas of things.[5]*

"Names are not intended only to make the hearer conceive what we conceive, but also to inform him what we believe. . . . a belief concerning the thing itself, not concerning my idea of it."

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5. John Stuart Mill, *System of Logic: Rationcinative and Inductive*, reprint, 1843 (Stockton, CA: University Press of the Pacific, 2002), 1,2, sect. 5 .

"Names therefore, shall always be spoken of in this work as the names of things themselves, and not merely of our ideas of things." For Mill, the function of language was not merely to signify an idea but to refer to *things*, things which could be identified by others (even when the thing referred to was an idea in our mind). Mill called this function of language "denotation" (referring or pointing to something out-there, much as the term "the dog" might refer to a particular animal the wet-nosed, waggy-tailed type) in contrast to the "connotative" function of language (implying an attribute of something, much as the term "professor" suggests an expert in some academic field and with some position in a school). Following Mill, those who view language and meaning through the window of reference look for the meaning of a word not to the idea in a speaker's mind, but to the *thing* referred to by the word. Consequently, meaningful language, for Mill's followers, is intimately connected to the possibility of confirming the things to which language points. And we shall come to this in the section below.

We have encountered Confucius' views on "rectifying names" above. He thought that words were so important that their clarification was the first work of government. We shall learn more of this position below. But Confucius was not the only figure in China who thought about language and meaning. A group who developed the teachings of Mo Tzu (the "later Moists") also considered what should govern our use of words. They were unsatisfied with the Confucian system. Philosophical and ethical disagreements were not merely manifestations of the lack of government control of language, but rather reflected different ways of perceiving, categorizing and using language. They argued that a world-guided approach to language would serve to provide an objective basis for resolving questions about words. In these later Moists we find another example of approaching language through the window of reference to reality.

Interesting enough, Plato himself held to a form of reality-centered approach to the meaning of words. But for Plato, as you can imagine, that reality is not the realm of sensible perceptions, but rather the world of eternal forms or ideas. The entire argument of the *Cratylus*, from which you read an excerpt above, moves from Hermogenes' suggestion that the meaning of language is rooted in social convention to a detailed account of the   spellings and backgrounds

of various individual words in an effort to demonstrate that there was a natural correctness of names, that in fact names "refer" to the reality of the forms of things. Plato, in effect, suggests that language has its meaning *both* through reference to reality (the reality of the eternal forms, which are the only *real* reality, anyway) *and* to thoughts and ideas (not the shallow particular ideas of individuals, but rather the ideal patterns of words). Later Medieval philosophers, as Hermogenes and Socrates did, would debate whether the existence of these ideal patterns of words (called "universals" in the Middle Ages) was an eternal existence in the mind of God or whether they were rather the expression of social conventional naming procedures.

The similarities and differences between Mill and Plato show us something about a "reference to reality" based approach to language. The reality-based, reference-oriented, window into language and meaning offers a different view depending on what we consider to be the primary reality toward which language refers. Language "refers" to something different for Shankara, for example (who believes that the material world is ultimately illusion and that pure Spirit is the *real* real), than for Epicurus (who believes that reality is made up of atoms and void). Nevertheless, in either case, viewing language in terms of its reference to reality points us beyond the word itself or the mind of the speaker to the "world" indicated by language.

True, the "reference to reality" window enables one to see beyond the interiority of the speaker and into the world denoted by words. Yet at the same time, it leaves a few matters unclear. If meaning is dependent upon pointing to the "thing" denoted by a word, then is a sentence like "unicorns do not exist" a meaningful sentence? And what about sentences within which two different phrases refer to the same thing (like "Mt. Kilimanjaro is the tallest mountain in Africa" - both "Kilimanjaro" and "tallest mountain in Africa" refer to the same object)? Do they offer any real meaning?

One way of resolving these kinds of difficulties is to think of expressions as having different "aspects" or "parts," each of which affects meaning in different ways. For example, the Nyaya school of philosophy in India (a school which centered attention on the analysis of

language and logic) argued that the meaning of words arises not from the referent alone (what they called the "individual"), but rather from a combination of factors: the individual referent, the "form" or shape or pattern of the referent, and the "genus" or universal idea which provides a standard by which individuals are named. The *Nyaya Sutras* (iii bce) argue their case as follows:

> *Examination of the nature and potency of words*
>
> *59. There is doubt as to what a word (noun) really means, as it invariably presents to us an individual, form, and genus.*
>
> *60. Some say that the word (noun) denotes individual, because it is only in respect of individuals that we can use "that," "collection," "giving," "taking," "number," "waxing," "waning," "colour," "compound," and "propogation."*
>
> *61. A word (noun) does not denote an individual, because there is no fixation of [restriction to] the latter*
>
> *{editorial note - ...what is denoted by the word "cow" is not the mere individual by itself, without any qualifications, and as apart from the universal (to which it belongs),--but the individual as qualified by (and along with) the universal . . .}*
>
> *63. Some say that the word (noun) denotes form by which an entity is recognized.*
>
> *64. Inasmuch as the 'washing' etc. (laid down to be done to the 'cow') cannot be done to the 'cow' of clay, even though it is endowed with individuality and configuration,--it must be the universal (that is denoted by the word)."*
>
> *65. In reply, we say that it is not genus [universal] alone that is meant by a word (noun), because the manifestation of genus depends on the form and individuality.*
>
> *66. The meaning of a word (noun) is, according to us, the genus, form, and individual.*
>
> *67. An individual is that which has a definite form and is the abode of particular qualities.*
>
> *68. The form is that which [indicates or] is called the token of the genus.*
>
> *69. The "universal" is the cause (or basis) of comprehensive cognition."[6]*

6. *The Nyaya Sutras of Gotama*, translated by S. C. Vidyabhusana, Book II, Chapter II, in

In a similar manner, Western philosophers at the beginning of the twentieth century spoke of the distinction between the *sense* and the *reference* of a word. The *sense* of a word indicates the way the word conveys meaning (for example "unicorn" calls up material from myths and fantasies), whereas *reference* indicates the "thing" identified by the word ("unicorn" refers to a specific--though fictional--entity in these fantasies). In this case the meaning of a word is seen to arise from the sense of the word in combination with its referent.

What does language mean? For the reference-oriented philosopher--whether oriented to reference alone or as mediated through other "aspects" of linguistic communication--language is the means by which we collectively relate to our world. And insofar as it serves this function, we are obliged to interpret speakers in terms of the world toward which their language points.

4. Sentences and Form

Consideration of the distinction between the *reference* of a word (that toward which a word points) and the *sense* of a word (the way in which a word communicates meaning) leads us to consider another way of looking at language: the window of sentences and forms. For if a word expresses a sense, its own way of communicating meaning, it does so not only within the confines of the word itself, but also--and perhaps even more so--from its function within a sentence. And so we are drawn from "words" to "sentences," from the "particles" of language to its "form." What if we looked at language, not through the window of "words," but through the window of *sentences*?

Think of H-O-T. What does it mean? Well, that depends on the context. "That fire is really *hot*." "That is the *hottest* salsa I have ever eaten." "That fashion model is so *hot*." The word itself does not point us to a referent. Rather the sentence provides the context within which the word has meaning. We learn the meaning of H-O-T only when we know something about

Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore, eds, *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), 369–70.

the words around it in a sentence. The words give meaning to the sentence and the sentence gives meaning to the words. Neither can be understood without the other.

Now think about P-O-T. What does it mean? Again it depends on the context. Consider: (a) "Why don't you use that *pot* over there to cook the stew?" (b) "I think I will *pot* this geranium and bring it into the house for winter." (c) "Have you ever smoked *pot*?" (d) "Early American crafts people used to *pot* with gray clay and kick-wheel, but now we *pot* with electric wheels and clays of various colors." As with H-O-T, we see that the surrounding words provide a context for the meaning of an individual word. We associate "stew" with a different kind of *pot* than "smoking" *pot*. And yet there is something else to be noticed. In these examples, the meaning of a word is also ascertained by recognizing its function within the sentence. In (a) *pot* functions as a noun. It refers to an item of a specific type. That particular word in that particular location of the sentence communicates its meaning. What if we used the same word but changed its location in the sentence? Consider: (e) "Why don't you *pot* with that stew over there?" Now you wonder if the speaker isn't suggesting that someone use stew to create some new soil for propagating transplanted flowers (or perhaps is throwing some stew onto a ceramic-creating wheel). By changing its location in the sentence, we (in English) change the function of the word in the sentence, and in doing so we change the meaning of the word and, in turn, the meaning of the sentence.[7]

Furthermore, when you look at sentences you find that they have particular forms. Some are questions (What was that noise?). Some make statements (The noise was a horn.). Some specify conditions (If it is a horn then someone must be using it). Some offer alternatives (Either Tom or Sophia must be using it because they are the only people over there.). And so on. When we look at language through the window of the sentence we see that meaning is conveyed through form.

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7. Sometimes (and especially in other languages) changes in the relationships of words to sentences are made not only by changes in location, but through changes in *inflection*, for example, through prefixes or suffixes placed on words (pot-ting, pot-s, re-pot, and so on).

Philosophers have explored the forms of sentences--and the functions which different kinds of words function within various forms of sentences--in great detail. That a central concern in the history of logic. One the one hand, this kind of analysis can get very technical, similar to advanced mathematics. On the other hand we do it all the time. Remember in chapter three when we learned how to read philosophical writings. There we learned to recognize different things a philosopher might *do*:

- State a thesis - "I propose that . . .," "I believe . . ."
- Make an appeal - "X is true *because* . . .," "If we look at Y, we find that . . ."
- Illustrate a point - "Just as . . .so also," "It is like . . ."
- State a conclusion - "Therefore . . .," "We now see that . . ."

and so on. The form of the sentence gives us a framework within which to understand the function (and the meaning) of the words. And indeed, though words may change in sentences the way we understand their meaning often remains constant. We know how to interpret "appeals," for example because of their similar form. Consider: (f) "flossing is beneficial because dentists have said so," (g) "God is real because I experienced God last year". Each of these two examples invites us to consider the "authority" to which the appeal is made: dentists, personal experience. The form of the sentence tells us how it is to be understood (how to understand the meanings of the words).

But we can take a further step. Not only are particular words understood within the "whole" of a sentence (the surrounding words and their form), but particular sentences are understood within the "whole" or the "form" of the sentences that surround them. The structure of a set of sentences determines the kind of discourse within which the meaning of an individual sentence (and, in turn, individual words) is understood or communicated.

Again, consider P-O-T. What does it mean? Who knows? Now consider "throwing" a pot. What does that mean? Again, we could picture a couple of possibilities. But let us examine the phrase within two different structures of discourse:

(h) "How to Throw a Pot: In Seven Easy Steps

    1)

    2)

     . . .

(i) "Her husband looked at her, enraged that she had cheated on him. He took one step toward her, a second, clenching his fist. She was scared, frantic. She reached for the closest object, the pot of boiling water on the stove next to her. Without thinking she snatched it and threw it."

In these examples, the meaning of the word is signalled in part not just by the context of the sentence, but by the very *form* of the sentence. The form suggests the type of discourse (instruction manual, novel) and the way we interpret the sentences and words are shaped by that more general form. And once again, linguists and philosophers have explored the structures and meanings of various forms of sentences at great length.

One of the forms of discourse most examined by philosophers is the "proposition." As you learned in chapter 5, propositions are claims that are made regarding the state of things. Propositions serve as elements of "arguments" which in turn form a part of "inference," the evaluation for the evidence of things. Let us hear what Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) has to say about the forms of propositions and their role in inference:

> *"In every proposition and in every inference there is, besides the particular subject- matter concerned, a certain form, a way in which the constituents of the proposition or inference are put together. If I say, "Socrates is mortal," "Jones is angry," "The sun is hot," there is something in common in these three cases, something indicated by the word "is." What is in common is the form of the proposition, not an actual constituent. If I say a number of things about Socrates--that he was an Athenian, that he married Xantippe, that he drank the hemlock--there is a common constituent, namely Socrates, in all the propositions I enunciate, but they have diverse forms. If, on the other hand, I take any one of these propositions and replace its constituents, one at a time, by other constituents, the form remains constant, but no constituent remains. Take (say) the series of propositions "Socrates drank the hemlock," "Coleridge drank the hemlock," "Coleridge drank opium," "Coleridge ate opium." The form remains unchanged*

throughout this series, but all the constituents are altered. Thus form is not another constituent, but is the way the constituents are put together. It is forms, in this sense that are the proper object of philosophical logic.

It is obvious that the knowledge of logical forms is something quite different from knowledge of existing things. The form of "Socrates drank the hemlock" is not an existing thing like Socrates or the hemlock, nor does it even have that close relation to existing things that drinking has. It is something altogether more abstract and remote. We might understand all the separate words of a sentence without understanding the sentence: if a sentence is long and complicated, this is apt to happen. In such a case we have knowledge of the constituents, but not of the form. We may also have knowledge of the form without having knowledge of the constituents. If I say, "Rorarius drank the hemlock," those among you who have never heard of Rorarius (supposing there are any) will understand the form, without having knowledge of all the constituents. In order to understand a sentence, it is necessary to have knowledge both of the constituents and of the particular instance of the form. It is in this way that a sentence conveys information, since it tells us that certain known objects are related according to a certain known form. Thus some kind of knowledge of logical forms, though with most people it is not explicit, is involved in all understanding of discourse. It is the business of philosophical logic to extract this knowledge from its concrete integuments, and to render it explicit and pure.

In all inference, form alone is essential: the particular subject-matter is irrelevant except as securing the truth of the premises. This is one reason for the great importance of logical form. When I say, "Socrates was a man, all men are mortal, therefore Socrates was mortal," the condition of premises and conclusion does not in any way depend upon its being Socrates and man and mortality that I am mentioning. The general form of the inference may be expressed in some such words as, "If a thing has a certain property, and whatever has this property has a certain other property, then the thing in question also has that other property." Here no particular things or properties are mentioned: the proposition is absolutely general. All inferences, when stated fully, are instances of propositions having this kind of generality. If they seem to depend upon the subject-matter otherwise than as regards the truth of the premises, that is because the premises have not all been explicitly stated. In logic, it is a waste of time to deal with inferences concerning particular cases: we deal throughout with completely general and purely formal implications, leaving it to other sciences to discover when the hypotheses are verified and when they are not."[8]

8. Bertrand Russell, "Logic as the Essence of Philosophy," in *Philosophy in the Twentieth Century: An Anthology, Volume II*, eds William Barrett and Henry D. Aiken (New York: Random House, 1962), 636–37.

Russell encourages "other sciences" to discover which hypotheses are verified and which are not. Nonetheless, Russell and other philosophers which followed him saw the two steps (formal clarification of propositions, empirical verification of hypotheses) as inextricably intertwined. The window of sentential form and the window of empirical reference were joined in Anglo-American philosophy in the first half of the twentieth century. By this joining of windows, the school of "logical positivism" sought to clarify the whole spectrum of philosophical discussion. What was both formally analyzable and empirically verifiable was considered "meaningful" and appropriate for philosophical discussion. Matters that were not so analyzable and verifiable (issues of metaphysics, religion, ethics, soul and so on) were regarded as nonsense and inappropriate for philosophical discussion. Central to this approach was the "principle of verifiability":

> *"The criterion which we use to test the genuineness of apparent statements of fact is the criterion of verifiability. We say that a sentence is factually significant to any person, if, and only if, he knows what observations would lead him, under certain conditions, to accept the proposition as being true, or reject it as being false."*[9]

Others have looked more beyond mere empirical verification more broadly to various "truth-conditional" theories of meaning. The style of doing philosophy known as "analytic" is a child of these developments in language philosophy. How do we know the meaning of a word? By knowing how it functions in a sentence. How do we know the meaning of a sentence? By knowing the conditions under which we could determine it to be true. In both verificationist and truth-conditional approaches, the windows of word, reference, and sentence are joined to clarify what we mean by meaning.

9. Alfred Jules Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (New York: Dover Publications, 1936), 35.

5. Interpersonal and Cultural Communication

The move from "sentences" to "forms of discourse" (as, for example, the proposition) takes us one step further. What if we look at language and meaning through the window of interpersonal and cultural communication? What might we see from this perspective?

First, let's go back to sentences for a moment by looking at a quote from British philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951):

> *But how many kinds of sentence are there? Say assertion, question, and command?--There are countless kinds: countless different kinds of use of what we call "symbols," "words," "sentences". And this multiplicity is not fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten. (We can get a rough picture of this from the changes in mathematics).*
>
> *Here the term "language-game" is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or a form of life.*
>
> *Review the multiplicity of language-games in the following examples, and in others:*
>
> > *Giving orders, and obeying them--*
> > *Describing the appearance of an object, or giving its*
> > > *measurements--*
> > *Constructing an object from a description (a drawing)--*
> > *Reporting an event-- . . .*
> > *Forming and testing an hypothesis--*
> > *Presenting the results of an experiment in tables and diagrams--*
> > *Making up a story; and reading it--*
> > *Play acting--   . . .*
> > *Guessing riddles--*
> > *Making a joke; telling it-- . . .*
> > *Asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying.*[10]

How about "blogging," "flirting," or "writing a legal contract"? Where does meaning come from? Perhaps from the social life of the people who speak it.

Language is part of shared activity. As such its meaning is comprehended within the community that shares the activity. Think about it. Have you ever had a special friend or a

10. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations: The English Text of the Third Edition*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1958), #23, p. 11e.

special circle of friends? Did you share some "insider" words? One of the signs of close relationships is that over time the partners develop a kind of "private language," in which words or ways of speaking have a meaning known only to the partners themselves. So perhaps language is only a network of "circles of shared activity." Philosophy students share a language others don't share. Not only words, but ways of meaning (recognition of fallacies, for example). And philosophy professors share a language the students don't know. Construction crews have their own way of speaking. Mothers speak to preschool children differently than to their peers. Ludwig Wittgenstein calls all these "language-games." What is the meaning of language? Perhaps it depends on the game we are playing.

Looking at language and meaning through the window of interpersonal communication can change the way we view other aspects of language. Take, for example, the idea of "reference" or "representation." Does language point to something? Well, speaking of games, think of the term "game." What does "game" mean? Perhaps you thought of chess or Monopoly. People sitting around boards, with rules, winners and losers. But what about a baseball game? What about playing catch? What about card games, video games? What about hop scotch? What about ring-around-the rosie? What about the times you play with your pencil? "What are you doing?" "Oh, nothing, it's just a game." There is no clear reference for the word "game." It is determined in the context of the interpersonal world (the "language-game").

Words which are a part of interpersonal communication do not merely *say* things. They also *do* things. Wittgenstein's reflections on language stimulated others to explore various social functions of language. Contemporary philosopher, John L. Austin, in his book *How to Do Things with Words*, identified a host of circumstances in which language does not *say* something, but rather *does* things ("I pronounce you man and wife." "I bet you can't eat just one."). He also identified a number of non-propositional functions that words serve. He spoke of the different "acts" of language. I voice the words "The phone is ringing." It seems like a clear propositional statement, yes? Oh, no. My *locutionary act* is to say the sentence. But what am I trying to *do* with this sentence? The fact of the matter is, I am in the bathroom and cannot get up to answer

the phone right now. I am trying to alert someone else to answer it. Alerting another is the *illocutionary act* of my language. But, as I mentioned, I am alerting them in order to get someone to answer the phone. That is the *perlocutionary* act of my language. So again, I ask. What is the *meaning* of the sentence "The phone is ringing." Perhaps not primarily in the assertion of a fact. Perhaps the meaning lies more truly in the social conditions themselves.

Austin's "speech-act theory" offers only one "look" through the window of interpersonal and cultural language use. One might also consider rhetoric, an aspect of language which has been discussed for millennia. In rhetoric we learn the art of persuasion, the skill of how to do things with words: in a courtroom, in a sermon, in a political speech. In each of these venues (the court, the worship service, the political gathering) there are particular expectations about how language is delivered. Words of grief regarding the tragedies of war would be heard differently in a funeral service than in a candidates debate.

Reflection on speech-act theory and rhetoric, in turn, lead us to ask questions of language and power. What do we try to *do* with our words? *Who* do we try to change with words, and *how*? Can language be an expression of social power? Can language be used to establish, maintain, or adjust power? Michel Foucault, a primary figure in recent French philosophy, argues "that in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed."[11] Think for a moment about "inclusive language." First, why is there an interest in inclusive language (why "flight attendant" and not "stewardess"; why "chair*person*"; why mix "he" and "she" examples in a text . . .)? Because the fact of the matter is that our language practices (in English) have reflected the assumptions of a male-dominated culture. The language itself framed reality in terms of a male-ruling hierarchy (leaders were chair-*men*; servants were steward-*esses*; people in general are called *men*, and so on). Whether the development of language to this stage was intentional or not, is not the question. The point is, the language as it

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11. Michel Foucault, "Appendix: The Discourse on Language," in *The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 216.

stood fifty years ago was a language embedded in a culture of power-relations, relations with which we began to be uncomfortable. And so, in a remarkable effort to reflect our changing understanding of power relations, we are actually changing a society's use of language.

Is the control of language by those in power a bad thing or a good thing? As we mentioned at the very start of this chapter, Confucius thought the "rectification of names" to be the most important activity of those in power. Hsün Tzu (298-238 bce) followed him in this belief. For Hsün Tzu, as for Confucius, it is the obligation of government to set the direction of "convention," which clarifies the meanings of key words for the public. He is very concerned with those who (unlike the past) "split terms" (wrangling about definitions) and arbitrarily creating names. Could he be talking about the unscrupulous lawyers advertising firms of his day? Hsün Tzu writes:

> *"When sage-kings instituted names, the names were fixed and actualities distinguished. The sage-kings' principles were carried out and their wills understood. Then the people were carefully led and unified. Therefore, the practice of splitting terms and arbitrarily creating names to confuse correct names, thus causing much doubt in people's minds and bringing about much litigation, was called great wickedness. It was a crime, like private manufacturing of credentials and measurements, and therefore people dared not rely on strange terms created to confuse correct names. Hence people were honest. Being honest, they were easily employed. Being easily employed, they achieved results. Since the people dared not rely on strange terms created to confuse correct names, they single-mindedly followed the law and carefully obeyed orders. In this way, the traces of their accomplishments spread. The spreading of traces and the achievement of results are the highest point of good government. This is the result of the careful abiding by the conventional meaning of names.*
>
> *Now the sage-kings are dead and the guarding of names has become lax, strange terms have arisen, and names and actualities have been confused. As the standard of right and wrong is not clear, even the guardians of law and the teachers of natural principles are in a state of confusion. . . .*
>
> *Names have no correctness of their own. The correctness is given by convention. When the convention is established and the custom is formed, they are called correct names. If they are contrary to the convention, they are called incorrect names. Names have no corresponding actualities by themselves. The actualities ascribed to them are given by convention. When the convention is established and the custom is formed, they are called names of such-and-such actualities."[12]*

12. *The Hsün Tzu,* chapter 22, "On the Rectification of Names," in Wing-tsit Chan, *A

As you can see, questions about the nature of our responsibilities toward each other, the roles we play in society, and the character of historical change are all involved in viewing language and meaning through the window of cultural communication. And this, in turn leads us to questions of morality (What does it mean to "lie"? What does a standard of "truth in language" mean for an individual? for a family? for a nation?). These are questions that join language philosophy and ethics, questions that are both challenging and important.

6. Sign and Symbolization

We can go still further. We have spoken of words, sentences, forms of discourse, and interpersonal or cultural communication. But all this is about *linguistics*, about verbal (or written, or deaf/braille . . .) language. Is language where language gets its meaning? Is language where communication solely (or primarily) resides?

It is common knowledge among interpersonal psychologists that more is conveyed through tone of voice and gesture than through the particular words and sentences that are spoken. How frequently we "check" the comment of a friend, making sure we understood the relationship of what they said to how they said it. Implied in this "checking" is that there is an entire "grammar" made up of nuances of tone and gestures and facial expression through which our attitudes are communicated. Have you ever thought about the "vocabulary" of gesture? Try it some time. See if you can demonstrate some of this vocabulary to someone else. See if they can guess what it means. Now try making linguistic statements that say one thing and body statements that say another? What do others perceive?

But still, all this is about communication. Don't we express ourselves in ways other than *communication*?

Let's take a funeral service, for example. It is a language-game we know. We have a basic idea of what to expect and what might be said. Indeed, the service itself says that we value those who have died enough to remember them publicly. It tells mourners that they are regarded and *Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963),124,126.

permitted a space to remember and to grieve together. It acknowledges the communal reality of loss. So what does it "mean" when we hold a funeral service for a car, or for aspects of an educational institution?[13] The mere act of having a funeral service for a car or for aspects of an educational institution "communicates"--by means of the ritual itself, apart from any words that might be spoken in the service--that we value the car or these aspects of the school, that their absence is a loss, and that we value those who feel that loss enough to remember what was lost together.

Now, think beyond a funeral service. Are there other ways we reveal our thoughts, ideas, attitudes, references, impressions, and responses? What does a "parade" say? How does our participation in a parade "speak" to others? What about the mere act of standing in line? What does a line itself communicate? What does it say when we "cut" in line? What about architecture? What did it "say" when we made identical-looking houses and schools and public buildings laid-out in perfectly straight rows? What does it say when we make each one different, complete with ornamentation designed for each building, each geographic location? Perhaps there is "meaning" in much more than language.

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) was a linguist who suggested that language was only one way of expressing things in society. He was concerned that language had been examined in a slavishly historical and comparative manner, and that as a result we were not really exploring the structure of language at all. Through his *Course in General Linguistics*, he pioneered not only a new approach to linguistics (Structuralism), but he also invited the world to establish a discipline which would explore human symbolization itself, of which linguistics would be one expression. He writes,

> *A language, as we have just seen, is a social institution. But it is in various respects distinct from political, juridical and other institutions. Its special nature emerges when we bring into consideration a different order of facts.*
> *A language is a system of signs expressing ideas, and hence comparable to*

13. See for example, the opening scene of the movie "Who Killed the Electric Car," and the article "Students Challenge Shift at CCU [Colorado Christian University]," *Rocky Mountain News* (October 18, 2007).

writing, the deaf-and-dumb alphabet, symbolic rites, forms of politeness, military signals, and so on. It is simply the most important of such systems.

It is therefore possible to conceive of a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life. It would form a part of social psychology, and hence of general psychology. We shall call it semiology (from the Greek semeion, 'sign'). It would investigate the nature of signs and the law governing them.[14]

Saussure's *semiology* permitted European philosophers to broaden their horizons. Instead of thinking in terms of "words" and "ideas" or "referents" people began to think in terms of "signals" and "significations." With these broader concepts in mind, anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, for example, was able to uncover valuable insights about primitive cultural life, distinguishing between the particular constituents (signals) of various myths and the common structure (signification) which orders the communication of these myths.

While Saussure was exploring "semiology" in Europe, Charles Peirce was pioneering what is called "semiotics" in the United States. Like Saussure, Peirce saw that verbal language, though central to human existence, was only one means of a more general pattern of signification. He defines a sign broadly as "something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity."[15] The insights of Peirce's three-part system (to somebody, for something, in some respect), along with those of Saussure's two-part system have stimulated some of the most fruitful philosophical reflection of the century. By exploring language as a sub-category of human signification in general, we find ourselves exploring not only the character of words, but the character of life itself.

14. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, eds Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. Roy Harris (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1983), Intro, ch. 3 #3, p. 15.
15. Charles S. Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, eds Paul Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931–58), Vol 2, sect. 228.

7. Life

Finally, there is the window of life. Remember Wittgenstein's comment above, that "the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or a form of life"? Whereas some philosophers focused their gaze through the window of words and sentences, others have looked at language in terms of its connection to life itself. This is especially true for the philosophical approach which has developed in last half of the twentieth-century in Germany and France (known as "Continental Philosophy"). As one contemporary philosopher writes, "continental philosophy also has a markedly different view of language [than the style of analytic philosophy]. For continental thinkers, language is inseparable from rhetoric, metaphor, context, history, and, again, life."[16]

First, let us think, not about "language," but about "languag-ing." Instead of thinking about language as something "out there" which we are examining in a effort to discover its hidden meaning, let's try thinking about language simply as an activity of human life: languaging. Just as we live out our life in acts--eating, shopping, relating producing, playing, and even thinking--so "languaging" can be seen as one more medium of life. I turn to my sources of wisdom. I ask questions about things. I apply myself to the areas of life. And in the end I say something. Or I ask a question. These words I say--my languaging--is itself, whatever the context it arises within, an embodiment of my life at that moment. In this sense language is not some separate affair outside my being, it is one vehicle of my being (read, "living") itself.

On the one hand, we can see the process of languaging throughout history as the human development toward a comprehensive grasp of reality. We can think of human languaging as the progress of a kind of "concrete logic" that, by means of the corrections of our speech through time, presses ever closer to a full realization of Truth. Such was the "dialectical" view of Georg W. F. Hegel. From this perspective, languaging is seen as a vehicle for the integration of life.

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16. Babbette E. Babich, "On the 'Analytic-Continental' Divide in Philosophy: Neitzsche and Heidegger on Truth, Lies, and Language," http://evans-experientialism.freewebspace.com/babich02.htm.

From a slightly different angle, Structuralism (Saussure, Lévi-Strauss and followers) also view languaging as the activity of life that integrates a culture's world. Our patterns of speech provide a central framework within which thought and life itself is synthesized and ordered.

Others are less optimistic about things. Some are suspicious the analysis of forms and sentences, doubtful that logical language can answer the questions of human history. Some consider languaging not to be a means of grasping an inherent harmony in the world, but rather as the imposition of an artificial totality upon a more "real" world of spontaneity and richness (or one of chaos and dis-harmony). Some see languaging not as the progress toward unity and synthesis, but rather as the manifestation of an inevitable conflict of forces in human history. Does language, or history (you realize that "history" is what we say of the past), have "meaning"? Michel Foucault wonders.

> *"History has no 'meaning', though this is not to say that it is absurd or incoherent. On the contrary, it is intelligible and should be susceptible of analysis down to the smallest detail--but this in accordance with the intelligibility of struggles, of strategies and tactics. Neither the dialectic, as logic of contradictions, nor semiotics, as the structure of communication, can account for the intrinsic intelligibility of conflicts. 'Dialectic' is a way of evading the always open and hazardous reality of conflict by reducing it to a Hegelian skeleton, and 'semiology' is a way of avoiding its violent, bloody and lethal character by reducing it to the calm Platonic form of language and dialogue."[17]*

Language arises out of our lives, and as our lives themselves arise out of a mix of harmony and disharmony, the act of languaging our lives embodies those ambiguities.

Some might argue that it is the *lack* of meaning in life which lies behind the inability of language to encompass it. Others argue that it is rather the *fullness* of meaning which surpasses the capabilities of language to grasp it. Lao Tzu, in the *Tao de Ching* writes,

The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.

The name that can be named is not the eternal name.

The nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth.

17. Michel Foucault, *Power and Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 114–15.

Similarly, when Moses, soon to be leader of the Hebrew people, found himself confronted by God in a burning bush, he asked God for God's name. God simply responds, "I am."

Conclusion: Putting Language Into Practice

So, what does you language mean? We have learned that it is very hard to answer this question, whatever the question "means." We have explored the philosophical questions of language by looking at language through seven different "windows" through which we have explored different aspects of the meaning of language:

1. We first looked at the particles of meaning, the words and names we use in language. We considered the connection between sounds and visual marks and the letters and words with which we recognize language. By looking through the window of words and names we see language as a construction of fundamental building blocks.

2. We then explored language from the perspective of thoughts and ideas. We all communicate thoughts and ideas. Perhaps language is best understood not simply as a collection of words, but as a means of the communication of ideas. From this angle, we consider not simply the construction of language, but the referent of language. Toward what are we trying to point through language. Those who take a "thoughts and ideas" approach to language would argue that language is about communicating what is inside our mind. When we look through the window of thoughts and ideas, we see a language that serves an expressive function in human mental life.

3. But others would dispute this conclusion. They would argue that the primary referent of a word is not human ideas in-here, but a real thing out-there. The reality-based, reference-oriented, window into language and meaning introduced us to another way of looking at the function of words. Like the "thoughts and ideas" window into language, the "reference to reality" approach centered attention on the nature of the object toward which a word derives its meaning. But for the reference to reality approach that object was the world pointed to by a name rather than an idea in the mind of the speaker. Whether that reality was a material object or a

Platonic Idea, the point of language was that it referred to a "world" indicated by language. When we look through the window of reference to reality we see words pointing to things.

4. But perhaps we understand language best not by thinking of words at all, either their construction or their referents. Perhaps we understand language best by examining words within the context of the sentences in which we find them. And this brings us to the "sentences and forms" window into language. How do we know the meaning of a word? By knowing how it functions in a sentence. How do we know the meaning of a sentence? By knowing the conditions under which we could determine it to be true. In both verificationist and truth-conditional approaches, the windows of word, reference, and sentence are joined to clarify what we mean by meaning. In one sense the "sentence and form" window is a larger window that tries to encompass the word and referent windows into one single approach with the further advantage (for the logical positivsts) of identifying a means of confidently ascertaining meaning through logical analysis and empirical verification.

5. But we can enlarge our perspective further. Perhaps words and sentences really only possess their meaning in light of the shared activity of commun-ication. And in this case meaning is comprehended within the community that shares the activity. Here language and meaning are not so much what we *say*, but what we *do* with words. Language is seen as a vehicle of power. It is not the referent, but the effect of words that is explored through this window. When we look through the window of interpersonal and cultural communication we see language not so much as words combined into sentences and propositional forms, but now as a tool of society.

6. We can expand the window still further. Perhaps interpersonal and cultural communication are mere sub-components of a larger horizon of signification in general, including word, gesture, tone of voice, and a wide and unexplored world of symbolic actions. What is a word? For the semiotician, a word is a means of signifying some *x* to some other by means of a commonly accepted system of signs. From this perspective, not only words and sentences, but funerals, parades and more signify things to others through recognized patterns of symbolic acts. Thus, by peering through the window of sign and symbolization we see language

as a sub-category of human signification in general. Furthermore, we capture the meaning of language when we discern the dynamics of the larger contexts of human signification within which language operates.

7. Finally, we can try to encompass all this (word, referent, sentence/form, social communication, signification) within the window of "life." Language is just a form of life. In fact we are better off understanding language as a verb (language-ing) rather than as a noun. Languaging is simply one way we navigate ourselves in this world-in-front-of-us. Whether meaningful or not, we language our way through this life, however adequate or inadequate it may serve. By exploring language through the window of life we see language as one way humans (or other species?) survive in a multi-personed, ambiguous, and perhaps transcendent, life.

But what does all this have to do with real life? How do our beliefs about language influence the nuts and bolts of how we live each day?

We do a lot of speaking. And a lot of our speaking is guided by values, guiding values that are shaped by our beliefs about language. Once again there is the question of truthfulness. Do you value truthfulness? In what forms? Why? Do you believe that truthfulness is possible to determine? In what contexts? Is language merely a form of language-game between consenting individuals or should we also look through the window of reference-to-reality? Do we trust someone because of the form of their words or because of the wider significations communicated? How do you see the words of your teachers, your civic leaders, the advertisements that surround you? Are they sentences frames to be verified in the context of empirical realities or are they forms of life expressed in the context of cultures of power, carefully designed to persuade and control another?

Needless to say, as one who communicates, your approach to language will have distinct effects on the practical details of your daily life. And especially in the areas of community, employment and the like. How do you navigate communication with family or close community?

Will you be one to dispute about precise meanings of words? How will you live out your language in work, politics, or persuasion? Will you "fudge" when filling out forms? Why or why not? What might it mean for you to have someone who "really understands" you? Is this a matter of words, cultural context or some other element that transcends words? And what about your approach to religion? Is religion understood best by affirming the proper propositions or by exploring the nameless? How, in real life, will you integrate the various perspectives each window offers you? How will you choose to language your way through life?

What does language mean? What is the meaning of life? When we look more closely we find that these two questions are not as far apart as we might have imagined. But that is the subject of another chapter.

JA 10.1   The Meaning of Your Language

In this assignment you will get to know your own language and meaning a bit through applying the skills of wisdom:

1. Paying Attention

One way of paying attention to your words is eliminate them (stop). Silence is a great teacher, and a great teacher of language and meaning. Take a day and be silent. Only speak when you absolutely have to (but please don't use our class period as part of the experiment -- I need all the input from you all that I can get). If you cannot afford a day, take as long as you can. Now during the day, take note of what you learn. When would you have liked to talk and what would you have liked to say (but didn't)? Why did you want to speak? Were there others ways that you found yourself communicating? What does silence tell you about your words?

Another way of paying attention to your language is to keep a journal. By writing our thoughts and feelings we can name what is going on and look at it from a different perspective. By "languaging" ourselves in a journal we can discover and establish ourselves on paper in dialogue with the ways in which we embody ourselves in other actions of life. Try keeping a journal for a few days and see what you notice about your favorite words, they ways that you make-meaning of your experience, what you *do* with your words, and so on.

2. Asking Questions

It is one thing to pay attention to your language. It is another to consider what you might believe about language and meaning. Take another look at the questions that philosophers ask about language near the beginning of the chapter. After having read this chapter, what questions do you have remaining about language and meaning? What would you like to explore further? And what (at least for the time being) do you believe about language? Where do we find meaning? Who do you trust to mean what they say, and why? What about language and

knowledge: can you determine that someone's speech is *true*? Under what conditions might you determine the referent of someone's language? What do you think language is "about"? Which window do you tend to look through more, and why? What do you think it means to be honest, or not to lie in different situations? Knowing what you intend to believe about language, what kinds of values or virtues regarding language do you seen developing in your future? What guiding values might structure your languaging from here forward?

3. Putting Language into Practice

We have talked about practicing reality in terms of "practicing what you preach." But what about practicing reality as "preaching what you practice"? What might it mean for you to have integrity in your languaging? What does the love of wisdom look like for your own use of words? Now that you have taken a look at your languaging, and have asked a few questions regarding what you believe about language and meaning, what might you *do* to live these values and beliefs out in the context of your own relationships, activities and such? What might the love of wisdom look like in your own use of language? What changes would you like to experiment with?