

Towards an Explanation of Language

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Abstract: After reviewing basic features of language, this paper reviews a central debate among twentieth-century philosophers over the proper analysis of linguistic meaning. While some center the analysis of meaning in language's capacity to be true, others locate meaning in the communicative intentions of the users of the language. As a means of addressing this impasse and suggesting its unfounded character, the paper draws on recent studies of language acquisition and relates them to existential dimensions of language.

καὶ Ἄμῃν λέγω ὑμῖν,
ἐὰν μὴ στραφῆτε καὶ γένησθε ὡς τὰ παιδιά,
οὐ μὴ εἰσέλθητε εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν.

Matthew 18, 3

The following paper is an attempt to work towards a philosophical explanation of language and by that I mean an account of what is essential to language. What distinguishes this account is the fact that it is based upon consideration of some key conditions of language acquisition. I contend that this genetic turn is justified and suitable since, far from outgrowing these conditions, we—normal users of a natural language—realize them in existential uses of language.

The paper contains three parts and a conclusion. In Part One I give a preliminary sketch of what language is. In Part Two I consider a central and long-standing impasse among philosophers of language over the proper analysis of linguistic meaning. While some philosophers look for the source of linguistic meaning in the intentions of language users in communicating, others insist that meaning essentially depends on the truth or falsity of what is communicated. After drawing up the lines and stakes of this impasse, in Part Three I look to new, usage-based approaches to language acquisition for clues to resolving this impasse. In conclusion I suggest that the key to the essence of language is its existential dimension, not least because that dimension—the situation-based demand to speak and listen as authentically as we

can—incorporates in a paradigmatic way the conditions of language acquisition, set forth by the new approaches discussed in Part Three.

I. What Language Is

Language is a means of communicating. I take ‘language’ here to designate our native tongue(s), *Muttersprachen* in the sense of both the languages of our respective mothers and the languages on which we have been nursed. Language under this description is a living language, a language natural to groups of native peoples and their descendants in the course of their evolution, in contrast to the more straightforwardly artificial languages of science, computers, or even music. Not every means of communicating is language, so construed. Other species communicate and we speak, more or less figuratively, of telecommunications, of intercellular and intracellular communication of information, genetic and otherwise, and so on. So to assert that language is a means of communicating is in no way to give, in the traditional sense, a definition of language. We have no specific difference; we have, at best, identified a genus and, indeed, a rather indeterminate one at that.

Yet from the commonplace that language is in some sense communication, we can infer that language always involves at least two parties, even if the speaker and the listener are in the same body. Communication in natural languages is a conversation, a dialogue, where each speaker has some understanding not simply of her words (what they say and what she is trying to say with them) but of how the listener is likely to take them. The understanding need not precede the utterances or come fully formed in advance of them, particularly in a running conversation, but even in the latter the conversant can usually give at least an *ex post facto* rationale for what she finds herself saying or to have said. That rationale, like the understanding and the communication itself, is locally and globally inter-subjective: local because it involves the two or more immediate, actual conversants; global because it draws its warrant from more potential subjects than the actual conversants themselves.

The speaker and the listener, I suggested, may be in the same body, agreeing with the Eleatic Stranger’s observation in Plato’s *Sophist* that thinking is an “inward dialogue carried on by the mind with itself without spoken sound.”¹ Whether thinking is always and only an inner dialogue remains unclear to me, but it does seem right that most of the time thinking is a conversation that I am having with myself.² The point is controversial, to be sure, with Chomsky and maybe Husserl insisting for different reasons on sharply differentiating communication from thinking in the form of soliloquy.³ But there are reasons to think that the difference is not an essential one. In the first place, whether talking with one another or talking with ourselves, we rely upon the same words and sentences to understand, make judgments, and come to conclusions about something. Moreover, even if we allow for wordless thoughts, “the use of language for self-addressed utterances is,” as Dummett puts it, “an imitation of its use in linguistic interchange.”⁴

This brief excursus into the controversial status of soliloquy brings to the fore the other salient dimension of language. In the conversation there is something

communicated or at least an attempt to communicate something. The conversation is about something. If language is fundamentally intersubjective, involving a relation between subjects or between a subject and itself, it is no less objective, involving a relation between the subject or subjects and some object. Note that this aspect of language, what we might call its “disclosiveness,” “aboutness,” “inherent intentionality,” or simply its “meaningfulness” is present not simply for declarative sentences, assertions, and judgments, expressed in the indicative mood, but also for questions, commands, and wonderings expressed in the subjunctive. It also bears noting that lots of things other than language can be about something else, can mean something in the sense of designating or denoting it. Pictures, signs, works of art, buildings, and arguably even some thoughts may mean something in the absence of language.

Like these other forms and objects of meaning, however, language is about things in particular ways that have been inherited and become established, making it possible to investigate the ingredients and structure of language itself. Here I have in mind what is explicitly said and heard, the words and word-combinations themselves, at arm’s length from any particular user, usage and references. If we use words to speak about things, we do so in ways ordained by the grammars and lexicographies, the syntax and semantics, of our mother tongues.

II. How Language is Able to Mean Something: The On-going Debate

Thanks to the rules of standard usage in our native language, we use words to designate things, i.e., to refer to them, and to do so in certain ways because the words have meanings that allow us to refer to things as this or that. As is well known to all of us, this semantic aspect of language has particularly exercised philosophers in the twentieth century. Seminal in this connection is the work of Frege who urged us to distinguish meaning from reference in order, among other things, to be able to make sense of identity statements where the symbols identified have the same referent but each mean something different, as in “The Evening Star = The Morning Star” or “ $7 + 5 =$ the number of Apostles.”⁵ In this tradition, Donald Davidson developed the basic insight that we understand a language when we understand what it is for a sentence to be true in that language. Putting Tarski’s formal semantic definition of truth to work in the service of a theory of meaning, Davidson argued that “to give truth conditions is a way of giving the meaning of a sentence”; or, as he also put it, “we want to achieve an understanding of meaning or translation by assuming a prior grasp of the concept of truth.”⁶ Regardless of what a speaker intended or meant to say, we can trace the meaning of what is said, at least what is said in the form of a declarative sentence, by determining the conditions under which it is true or false.

Though this emphasis on formal semantic analyses of linguistic meaning seemed to come at the cost of considerations of communication, other philosophers of language midway through the last century were, of course, paying close attention to speech acts and conversation. On the view of these thinkers, the fact that syntactic and semantic rules of linguistic meaning can be formalized is less significant for understanding their role in language than the fact they are rules precisely for the

purpose of communication. For Paul Grice, the meaning of a sentence is to be elucidated in terms of what the speaker of the sentence means and the speaker-meaning in turn is to be elucidated in terms of the speaker's intentions.⁷ In other words, the way to understand a sentence's meaning is to understand what someone means by uttering the sentence. Notice the patent shift from the Davidsonian approach discussed earlier; speaker-meaning replaces sentence-meaning as the center of gravity for the understanding of language. Grice analyzes the speaker's meaning, i.e., what someone means by uttering a sentence, into an intention to elicit a response from a hearer or audience on three levels. The person uttering the sentence intends that the audience (a) has a particular response to the utterance, (b) recognizes that this response was the utterer's intention (or, more precisely, recognizes that the utterer intended the audience to have this response to what the utter said), and (c) has this reaction on the basis of this recognition. For example, Brutus's shame on hearing Caesar's words "*Et tu, Brute?*" is based upon the recognition that Caesar makes this utterance precisely to produce this response.

Of course, even when our fictional Caesar asks his questions, he's relying upon the conventional meanings of these words. We could imagine Caesar using the same words in happier times ("*Et tu, Brute? Do you want come over to the house for a beer, too?*"). Grice himself distinguishes between speaker meaning and word or sentence meaning. However, his insistence that the latter is founded in speaker meaning has continued to be controversial, not least because the words appear to retain a certain meaning, regardless of the speaker's intention on a certain occasion. Neo-Griceans, like Wayne Davis, have modified Grice's account to the effect that an expression is said to mean this or that if and only if it is conventional for people, i.e., the users of the language, to use the expression to mean this or that. Corresponding conventions regarding communication and interpretation must also be in place.⁸ Grice's basic idea that meaning supposes ideas, beliefs, and intentions on the part of the users of the language remains in force. But understanding how conventions enable us to express ourselves allows for "the transition from speaker meaning to linguistic meaning."⁹ At the same time, as Davis puts it, "The neo-Gricean analysis also enables us to explain why, despite the autonomy of word meaning, speaker meaning is the more fundamental phenomenon."¹⁰ Sometime in the last thirty years, for example, people began to use the word 'spin' for public apologetics and that usage caught on, so that this meaning of the term is now conventional. A host of other terms related to the internet have similarly become conventional, through usage, but came into being because of speakers' intentions in using them.

In the past few paragraphs I have been glossing two different directions taken in the philosophy of language over the last half-century or so. Peter Strawson contended that the proponents of these two orientations were engaged in "a Homeric struggle" over what is essential or basic and what is inessential or derivative in language.¹¹ The formalists espouse the general idea that "the syntactic and semantic rules together determine the meanings of all sentences of a language and do this by means, precisely, of determining their truth-conditions."¹² On this formalist account, no recourse to communication is needed to determine these truth-conditions. By contrast, the

“communication-intention theorists,” as Strawson labels them, insist that the meanings of language can only be understood by reference to communication.

Forty years after Strawson’s presentation of this conflict, the two approaches continue to resonate. In a 2003 study, Wayne Davis recognizes the truth-conditional analysis as the leading alternative to his Neo-Gricean analysis.¹³ In “Arguments for the Truth-Condition Theory of Meaning,” William G. Lycan defends this sort of theory against possible objections from positions he lumps together as “use” theories.¹⁴ This past year, in an entry entitled “linguistic understanding” for *A Companion to Epistemology*, Christopher Peacocke calls the thesis that a sentence’s meaning is given by its truth functions “the most influential idea in the theory of meaning for the past hundred years.”¹⁵

The debate in short is long-standing and, while philosophers of language on both sides of the debate constantly refine its terms, the issue of explaining language at bottom in terms of its potential truthfulness or its potential to be communicated remains in force. If, as suggested at the outset, language is fundamentally both communicative and disclosive, the seeds of this debate are patent. As soon as we inquire into the relation between these dimensions, the prospect presents itself that one of them is more basic, at least for language.¹⁶

Of course, given the truism that language is both communicative and disclosive, there is a “specious” form of the debate, as Lycan puts it.¹⁷ Consider two potential voters, hearing a candidate for re-election declare: “There were no scandals among my staff.” Voter A takes the declaration at face value, its meaning is the meaning of the sentence; by contrast, Voter B takes the declaration as the candidate’s attempt to set up a contrast between his staff and his opponent’s; for Voter B, the meaning of the declaration is the speaker’s meaning, what the speaker meant or intended by saying it. But there is no incompatibility here since the two voters are concerned with different meanings, sentence-meaning and speaker-meaning respectively. If one pounds on the table and insists that one of the two meanings is the *real* meaning, it is hard to see how that insistence reveals anything more than a preference for the interest of one or the other voter.

If, however, one argues, à la Neo-Griceans, that sentence-meaning and even the truth conditions for it, are grounded in “a complex function of possible speaker intentions,” then there is a form of the debate that is far from specious. So, too, the debate is substantive if one maintains that truth-conditions characterize, not merely sentence-meaning, but what a speaker means in making an utterance on a particular occasion. On one side of the debate are those who take language’s communicative function to be prior to its disclosive function; for those on the other side, the reverse holds.

Both sides of the dispute obviously have something right. Language is something that we do, more or less intentionally. It seems to fly in the face of our experience of using language to discount the fact that we intend something by what we say or to regard it as secondary to the formally determinable constraints on the semantics of the language we use to say it. On the other hand, whatever we intend to say and however we intend to say it piggy-back unmistakably on the possibility of saying

the truth, a possibility that is given by conventionally instituted sentence-meanings. Intentions to lie, to dissemble, to suggest, to hypothesize, to express a belief, and so on by saying certain things suppose that saying those things or saying other things to which they are directly connected can be true. In light of such considerations, it would seem that the attempt to treat one of the two basic factors of language as more basic than the other is a mistake. But if it is a mistake, then some account must be given of their equally basic character and, indeed, in tandem with one another.

III. How Language is Acquired

For some clues to such an account, I would like to turn to some relatively recent approaches to explaining language acquisition. Here, too, there is a feud instructively analogous to the philosophical debate we have just been reviewing. In the 1950s B. F. Skinner theorized that the way that children learn a language is through instrumental conditioning (based upon principles of association) combined with generalizations (based upon the requisite stimuli and principles of induction).¹⁸ In 1959 Chomsky advanced an influential argument that the stimuli, on Skinner's theory, were too meager to account for what children learn when they learn a language. There is a "poverty of stimulus" available to children, as Chomsky put it, to account for their ability to acquire the correct grammar for their language. Since reliance upon induction from experience alone is incapable of providing a mechanism for determining which set of possible grammatical principles is the correct one, Chomsky infers that, in acquiring a language, children are guided by an innate, universal grammar.¹⁹ Today Chomsky's basic argument for an innate, generative grammar continues to resonate positively with theorists of language acquisition.²⁰

In the past decade, however, researchers have challenged this reigning approach to language acquisition on the basis of new research on early childhood development and new approaches to linguistics. Perhaps the most striking feature of the new research is a better understanding of children's pre-linguistic abilities to read others' intentions and to recognize patterns, auditory as well as visual. In contrast to the Chomskian tradition, Michael Tomasello argues that linguistic structure emerges from language use, such that "the essence of language is its symbolic dimension, with grammar being derivative."²¹ Without denying by any means that humans are biologically prepared for language, Tomasello contends that language is a product of ontogenetic and historical processes of social interaction and the cognition entailed by that interaction.²²

Tomasello puts forward specific and, as might be expected, controversial arguments against Chomsky-inspired approaches.²³ More important for our purposes are the new perspectives on the phenomenon of language that Tomasello's positive account of language acquisition yields. His account, it bears noting, is phylogenetic as well as ontogenetic. He claims that humans alone communicate symbolically because, in contrast to other animals, they alone attempt to direct or share the attention of others (their conspecifics).²⁴ Tomasello seems to me to be overreaching here and, for that reason, I pass over his phylogenetic arguments.²⁵ Yet, even if the

difference between some nonhuman primate communication and human communication may in some regards be more a matter of degree than kind, Tomasello is certainly right to emphasize the overwhelmingly symbolic character of human communication. After all, humans have developed natural languages, systems of communicating through symbols, unlike any system of communication of any other animal, let alone primates.

In Tomasello's ontogenetic account of language, he stresses how, far from fitting the old Skinnerian-behaviorist model of isolated associations and induction, a child's process of learning a language is "integrated with other cognitive and social-cognitive skills."²⁶ By the time children are five months old, they have concepts, recognition of sound patterns, and capacities of associating different aspects of experience with one another. Yet they typically remain unable across cultures to produce or comprehend linguistic symbols at that age and, indeed, until after their first birthday. At around nine months, however, children develop capacities to act in ways that require an understanding of their social worlds. Tomasello hypothesizes that the social and cognitive development involved in acquiring these pre-linguistic capacities is precisely the place to look for the explanation of the subsequent language acquisition in children. Because there is an important sense in which we do not outgrow these capacities, I would like to take a moment to review Tomasello's account of them and the evidence for them.

The first such capacity is the capacity for joint attention. When a child learns to follow the gaze of an adult, it takes a crucial step forward by, in effect, learning to share a joint attentional frame. For example, when a child and an adult play together with a ball or building blocks, they jointly attend to the same objects and combinations of objects, ignoring other objects within the same perceptual field. This attentional interaction is not simply triadic (as Tomasello puts it), involving the partners in dialogue and the subject matter of the dialogue, but quadratic, since it also involves a common, perhaps undifferentiated intentionality. In other words, what is distinctive about joint attention is not simply a common frame of relevance but rather that a shared intentionality constitutes that frame, providing the background condition for communication generally.

The next key pre-linguistic, but language-enabling capacity is the child's capacity to differentiate the intentionality of others, to understand their communicative intentions within those shared attentional frames. It is one thing for a child to hear a parent's voice, even as indicating something, quite another to read an intention off that voice as the parent's intention. There is no doubt a progression to this ability of intention-reading. For example, a child may or may not come to recognize a parent's intention as the parent places it in a seated position. There is a higher level of complexity when the parent says to the child "Sit down" and the child recognizes the point of the command and acts on it. But there is an even higher level of complexity when the child *obeys* the command, i.e., acts on what it perceives is the parent's intention from what the parent says.

Joint attentional frames and understanding another's intention go hand-in-hand and not simply in early communication between a child and parent. To illustrate

this dual-structure in an adult setting, consider the following two scenarios. In a foreign country whose language you do not know, a local asks you for directions to the train station; you do not have a clue what she is saying. By contrast, at a train station in the same country, you may manage to communicate to the ticket agent that you want a ticket to some well-marked destination. The difference in being able to communicate in the latter context is the common background provided by the setting (train station) and the roles and places of particular possible communicators in that setting (ticket agents, customers), allowing them to read off or at least guess each other's intention.

The third capacity crucial to a child's ability to communicate symbolically is the capacity for role reversal imitation. Imitation, Aristotle tells us, is "one of a human being's advantages over the lower animals" (*Poetics* 1448b6f) and, while children mimic adults very early, around nine months they begin to imitate adults' intentional actions on outside objects. Included in this mimicry is the use of tools, including the symbolic artifacts that form language. Tomasello cites two studies, albeit of children between 16 and 18 months old, which provide evidence of this capacity to imitate intentional behavior.²⁷ In the first study, one group of children witnessed adults successfully perform a certain action, while another group witnessed adults failing at the action; yet children from both groups subsequently reproduced the target actions equally well. In the second study, after watching adults perform certain actions that produced a desired result intentionally and other actions that produced it accidentally, children mainly reproduced the intentional actions.

However, it is not mere imitation but a certain kind of imitation that allows a child to learn a communicative symbol. In order to be able to use a symbol to communicate, the child must do more than simply imitate an adult when an adult says to it, for example, "Mama's over there." If it literally imitated the adult, the child would be saying this to itself. Instead, it must imitate by way of reversing its role with the parent, so that it directs the expression to the adult in the way that the adult directed the expression to it. In role reversal imitation, the child, formerly the addressee, exchanges roles with the adult who now becomes the addressee. Only at this stage of development does the child display an ability both to produce and consume a token of the language, to understand that speaking and listening go hand-in-hand, that one speaks because one presupposes a listener capable of a token of that same speech, albeit from her own position.

In this sense, language acquisition presupposes rudimentary forms of social-cognition from (a) joint attention (sharing attention toward some object with others) to (b) recognition of another's distinctive intention to (c) imitation of others through role reversal. Hand-in-hand with the development of these levels of social-cognition, children learn to grasp what others are attentively pointing at and to direct others' attention to distal objects by pointing themselves. Learning to point in this sense takes time; it is typically absent in infants before they are six months old, but present in most by the time of their first birthday. Tomasello identifies three levels of gestures, running from the non-symbolic to the symbolic, learned by children prior to learning language. The most elementary gestures are ritualizations, such as a child

raising its arms as a sign that it wants to be picked up. Ritualizations are gestures that children and nonhuman primates have learned are effective. Ritual gestures are not symbolic; the child makes the gesture without the intention of affecting the intentions of the adult. The child makes the ritual gesture simply to be picked up. There is communication here, to be sure, but not via a shared communicative symbol.

The next level of gesture is indexical, holding up something or pointing to something in ways that are designed to focus someone else's attention on it. Not all such pointing involves this purpose, Tomasello notes, and in many cases pointing remains ritual gesture, performed simply to get something done, "not as an invitation to share attention using a mutually understood communicative symbol."²⁸ In order for a child to point in this way, it has to see and imitate, not simply what the adult does, but the adult's process of doing it to communicate an intention.

The third level of gesture is the referential gesture, via iconicity or metonymy, as when a child spreads its arms to indicate an airplane or blows to indicate something hot. Here, too, the outward character of the gesture may be the result of some ritualization. But the distinctiveness of these referential gestures is the fact that they involve role reversal as the child imitates the adult's use of them to direct the child's attention to the referent.

Referential gestures are clearly symbolic and a child's ability to communicate through such gestures appears to be an important precursor of its ability within a few months to learn language. Thus, in its first year, building on its capacities for joint attention and recognizing that others have intentions, indeed, communicative intentions, a child develops a capacity to imitate by reversing roles, enabling it to engage, not simply in ritual gestures, but in indexical and iconically referential gestures. With this development, the child learns to infer others' communicative intentions from their gestures and, through role reversal imitation, to use gestures itself for its own communicative intentions.

Allow me to summarize this gloss of Tomasello's theory of language acquisition, insofar as it depends upon the aforementioned key aspects of language acquisition. Children are able to learn a language, a symbolic form of communication, precisely by virtue of developing prelinguistic capabilities, each of which entails distinctive levels of social interaction and cognition. Co-operative communication does not depend upon language acquisition but rather language acquisition depends upon it.²⁹

Conclusion

What does the ontogenesis of language tell us about the nature of language? Are there aspects of language acquisition that we do not outgrow? Conventions and the so-called deferential meanings of linguistic expressions no doubt allow us, quite efficiently, to bypass repeating the painstaking process a child goes through in learning to wield particular symbols for the purposes of communication and in general to communicate symbolically.³⁰ Moreover, conventions are not simply convenient but necessary, even despite the fact that all too often, thanks to the convenience of

convention, talk is cheap, perhaps no more so than in our 24/7 media world and with the seemingly endless possibilities of communicating over the internet.

Nevertheless, there are cases, running from the exceptional to the quotidian, where we are called upon—sometimes by ourselves, sometimes by others, by the context or even the nature of the linguistic symbols themselves—to own up to our language. On one end of this spectrum are instances such as responding to a police inquiry, testifying in court, making marriage or priestly vows, confessing, speaking in the course of performing a sacrament, counseling and being counseled, speaking intimately, signing our names, and so on. On the other end, there is the situational use of indexicals and demonstratives, the use of ‘you’ and ‘this’ and other such context-sensitive expressions. In these cases I cannot rely on lexicography alone any more than I can when I make a vow. I have to authenticate my uses and, indeed, I have to somehow see to it that you take me as doing so. When I say ‘you’ here, I mean you, my audience, here and now, and this meaning can only hold thanks to our presence to one another in this situation, your presence to me as what I refer to when I say ‘you’ and my presence to you as the one using ‘you’ in just this way. Here the twin functions of language, to communicate and to refer, necessarily and happily coincide.³¹

The uses of language just glossed point to the fact that, despite the talk of use and usage, language is not simply a tool that we can pick up or put down as we wish. Instead in these uses of language we testify to who we are, the thoughts we think, the lives we live, and the worlds we inhabit. For this reason, I refer to such uses as existential uses of language, in keeping with a now familiar use of the term ‘existential.’ Language in this existential sense, symbolic communication that allows us to be responsible to the world and to one another, defines us but only insofar as it is the language we speak. Like a child’s pre-linguistic pointing and gesturing, these existential uses of language are at once disclosive (i.e., referential and potentially true) and communicative. What I am proposing is that, for a philosophical explanation of language, for a determination of the essence of language, we look to the existential uses of language, the very uses that are grounded in human development, specifically, the sorts of social interaction and cognition that appear to underlie language acquisition. If we take language in this sense, we can continue to distinguish its disclosive (referential and alethic) dimensions from its communicative dimensions, but we can never separate them, never pretend to derive one from the other or construe one as more fundamental than the other.³² From this existential and developmental vantage point, the debate between formalists and communication-intention theorists is, as Strawson aptly but inculpatingly dubbed it, a “Homeric struggle”—a struggle grounded in myth.

When we teach children how to speak, to listen, and to use language at all, our interest is in getting them to do so authentically. To this end, we avoid tropes and speak to them sincerely, straightforwardly, and simply; in this way, without conceit, we name, describe, and thereby communicate things to them. Of equal importance, they imitate us. So there are strong reasons to suppose that the early use of language is highly authentic—children are concerned with communicating effectively, and

their teachers are generally concerned with helping them do so—and that our later inauthentic uses of language are parasitic upon learning how to do things, correctly, with words. What we find in these authentic uses of language are the two components mentioned at the outset—communication and world-disclosure—inseparably combined in a single intention.

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Notes

1. Plato, *Sophist* 263e; see *Theaetetus* 189e; Michael Dummett, *The Seas of Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 184f.

2. Three difficulties with the thesis that soliloquy is communication deserve flagging here. The first difficulty is that of applying Grice's maxims to thinking. A second difficulty concerns miscommunication as a standing possibility of communication, something that is arguably precluded in soliloquy (thus, while I can misunderstand the content of someone else's utterance, it's hard to see how I could misunderstand what I myself meant in uttering it). A third difficulty is the regress that the thesis seems to set off. If I communicate what I think—my thoughts—to someone via language, then communication presupposes that I already have the thoughts. So if thinking were itself communication, then it would seem we need to communicate before we can communicate. While I suspect that these considerable difficulties are surmountable, I set them to the side since the main argument of this paper does not depend upon the interpretation or correctness of the thesis that soliloquy is communication.

3. Chomsky, *Reflections on Language* (New York: Pantheon, 1975), 71; Husserl, *Logische Untersuchungen*, II/1 (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1968), §8, S. 35–36.

4. Dummett, *Seas of Language*, 185.

5. Gottlob Frege, *Grundgesetze der Arithmetik* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1962), § 32, S. 50–51; John McDowell, "On the Sense and Reference of a Proper Name," *Mind* 86 (April, 1977): 159. Challenging Frege's and Russell's descriptivist accounts of names, Kripke taught us that we have to understand names, not as definite descriptions, but as rigid designators, identifying the same reference in all possible worlds.

6. Donald Davidson, "Truth and Meaning," *Synthese* 17 (1967): 310 and "Belief and the Basis of Meaning," *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 150.

7. Paul Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 91. Not to be overlooked in contributing to this shift in focus to what speakers do in using language is the influential work of J. L. Austin, with his differentiation of locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts, critically taken up by Peter Strawson and John Searle; see J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962); Peter Strawson, "Intention and Convention in Speech Acts," *Philosophical Review* 73 (1964): 439–460; and John Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969). For a concise review of how differences within this group amount to different ways of developing Austin's approach, see Anita Avramides, "Intention and Convention," in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Language*, ed. Bob Hale and Crispin Wright (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1999), 69.

8. Wayne A. Davis, *Meaning, Expression and Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 163: “We will observe that conventions to use words to express or indicate certain ideas are correlative with conventions to use them to communicate those ideas and with conventions to interpret the words as expressing the ideas.” See, too, *ibid.*, 166–167, 192–193.

9. Avramides, “Intention and Convention,” 60 (see, too, Avramides’s helpful review of Lewis’s view of convention and her concluding remarks in *ibid.*, 80–84). Of course, construing convention in this way can serve to underscore that a Gricean analysis remains essential to understanding language or that it is in fact dispensable, at best a ladder that can be kicked away. As Blackburn notes, even if Grice has given us a useful account of how, in the absence of language or some communicative system, one person manages to communicate with another (i.e., an account of the necessary conditions for that sort of communication), communication, once learned, can give way to conventions that dispense with the analysis of the intentions; see Simon Blackburn, *Spreading the Word: Groundings in the Philosophy of Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 113.

10. Davis, *Meaning, Expression and Thought*, 194.

11. Peter Strawson, “Meaning and Truth,” in: *Meaning and Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 104–105; see, too, the discussion of “Use Theories vs. Formal Theories,” in Avramides, “Intention and Convention,” 61–63.

12. Strawson, “Meaning and Truth,” 107.

13. Davis, *Meaning, Expression and Thought*, 170.

14. William G. Lycan, “Direct Arguments for the Truth–Condition Theory of Meaning,” *Topoi* 29.2 (2010): 99–108; Gabriel Segal, “How a Truth Theory Can Do Duty as a Theory of Meaning,” in *Donald Davidson: Truth, Meaning, and Knowledge*, ed. Urszula M. Zeglen (London: Routledge, 1999), 45–52.

15. Christopher Peacocke, “Linguistic Understanding,” in *A Companion to Epistemology*, ed. Jonathan Dancy, Ernest Sosa, Matthias Steup (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2010), 492.

16. After noting language’s two primary functions of being “an instrument of communication” and “a vehicle of thought,” Dummett contends we are “impelled to ask which of the two is primary”; see Dummett, “Language and Communication,” in *The Seas of Language*, 166.

17. Lycan, “Direct Arguments,” 100.

18. B. F. Skinner, *Verbal Behavior* (New York: Appleton-Century-Croft, 1957).

19. Noam Chomsky, “A Review of B. F. Skinner’s *Verbal Behavior*,” *Language* 35 (1959): 26–58; see, too, *Language and Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968) and “Rules and Representations,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 3 (1980): 1–61. By the 1980s, building on Chomsky’s work, many researchers set forth the continuity assumption, the notion that, throughout a child’s development, the basic linguistic representations are the same since they stem from a single universal grammar.

20. See Stephen Laurence and Eric Margolis, “The Poverty of the Stimulus Argument,” *British Journal of the Philosophy of Science* 52 (2001): 217–276. Laurence and Margolis defend a version of this argument against its philosophical critics, from the early challenges by Nelson Goodman and Hilary Putnam to more current objections by Fiona Cowie and others. Without any innate biases, Laurence and Margolis argue, children would be unable through induction

alone, based upon the data available to them, to come up with the principles of regularity governing the structure of language. “Not only are the data invariably an idiosyncratic finite sampling of an infinite set of sentences, but they’re also degenerate” (Laurence and Margolis, “The Poverty of the Stimulus Argument,” 230). Yet children overcome grammatical failures and infelicities that they hear. Moreover, they do so, that is to say, they grasp and incorporate into their use of language structures that are homologous across different languages, thus lending further support to the Chomskian contention that there is an innate language module, a universal grammar.

21. Michael Tomasello, *Constructing a Language: A Usage-Based Theory of Language Acquisition* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 5.

22. *Ibid.*, chap. 8, “Biological, Cultural and Ontogenetic Processes,” 282–322.

23. *Ibid.*, 288–290. Among other things, according to Tomasello, neither the universality of structure nor the poverty of stimulus (both supposed by Chomsky’s theory) are in fact present and a combination of evolutionary and historical features of interpersonal communication adequately explain the development of grammars.

24. As Tomasello puts it, “nonhuman primates do not use communicative signals to convey meaning or to convey information or to refer to things or to direct the attention of others, but rather use them to affect the behavior or motivational states of others directly”; see *ibid.*, 11.

25. While treatment of these arguments need not affect the central aims of the present paper, two issues in this connection may be flagged. First, there is the issue of how one goes about determining the negative in question, namely, that, in gesturing or making sounds, nonhuman primates and other species are not attempting to direct or share the attention of others. Second, while nonhuman primates may make sounds or may gesture, on Tomasello’s account they do so primarily in the form of commands and to regulate dyadic interactions (grooming, play, sex, travel) rather than to refer to outside objects. As he puts it: “Most strikingly, nonhuman primates do not point or gesture to outside objects or events for others, they do not hold up objects to show them to others, and they do not even hold out objects to offer them to others” (*ibid.*, 10–11). However, at least some commands or sounds regulating those interactions would seem necessarily to include information about the environment (hence, at least a triadic relation). Indeed, Tomasello seems to contradict the statement just quoted when, in discussing the most primitive level of gesturing in children, he observes: “This learning process is essentially the one by which nonhuman primates learn their gestures” (*ibid.*, 32).

26. *Ibid.*, 3.

27. *Ibid.*, 26–27.

28. *Ibid.*, 33.

29. In terms of the Homeric philosophical struggle over meaning discussed earlier, this account of language acquisition supports both sides of the debate. On the one hand, the child begins to communicate with a parent within a proto-Gricean framework for interaction, a shared intentionality. That is to say, the child develops an awareness that doing certain things will not simply produce certain behavior in the child’s mother but will produce the behavior because the child knows that the mother understands or interprets what it is doing or saying and why, i.e., its intentions for doing or saying what it does. On the other hand, the child learns a language no less because its intention in communicating is also referential, aimed at—among other things—directing its mother’s attention to something outside them both.

30. Gareth Evans, "The Causal Theory of Names," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes*, 47 (1973), 205: "Although standardly we use expressions with the intention of conforming with the general use made of them by the community, sometimes we use them with the *over-riding* intention to conform to the use made of them by some other person or persons. In that case I shall say that we use the expression *deferentially* (with respect to that other person or group of persons)."

31. Note that there are three dimensions to this claim, coinciding with the three dimensions of speaker meaning, sentence meaning, and truthfulness. In owning up to our use of language, we place ourselves under an obligation to match speaker meaning with sentence meaning, to mean what we say and say what we mean, correctly intimating our beliefs, desires, and so on in the process. But, under certain interpretations, a liar may be said to do as much; i.e., she says what she means and means what she says. So the obligation, in keeping with these paradigmatic uses of language, is also to the truth of what is said, to depicting and acknowledging—as faithfully as one can—the world as it actually is. The proviso 'as faithfully as one can' is necessary for anyone who, as a non-expert, is faced with the limitations of relying at times upon deferential word-meanings, where the most likely truthful story is a matter for an expert.

32. Language consists of seven elements: (1) a speaker, (2) a listener, (3) a set of symbols (conventional signs for intentional acts of meaning, referring to, questioning, commanding, exhorting, exclaiming, wondering, etc. some thing or some state of affairs), (4) a speaker's intention in speaking, i.e., using those signs, (5) a listener's recognition of the speaker's intention and/or the conventional significance from that use, (6) a communicative context, including a set of historically definite, background conditions, and (7) the truth or falsity of what is said or of what is entailed by what is said as a paramount background condition. Neither the communicative nor the referential and alethic aspects of language are more basic than the other. A suitable explanation of language should not attempt to reduce one to the other but recognize their equally fundamental status. A child points because there is something to which it is pointing and because there is someone whose attention it wants to direct to the object of its pointing and because it has learned that others use this gesture in an analogous way. Symbolic communication in the form of natural languages rests upon this pre-linguistic phenomenon.