

Michigan Philosophy News

Fall 2005

for friends, alumni, and alumnae of the Department of Philosophy,
The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor



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Dear Friends of the Department,

Greetings from Ann Arbor, where philosophy is thriving! I hope you have had a restful summer. The academic year 2004-2005 was among the most eventful in the Philosophy Department's recent history, and I would like to bring you up to date on some of the more noteworthy developments.

Faculty News: This has been a year of accomplishment and a year of change for our faculty. Let's begin with the accomplishments. Michigan remains among the strongest Philosophy Departments anywhere, and the intellectual world recognizes it. Larry Sklar has been elected president of the Philosophy of Science Association (he assumes the position in 2006). Though only a handful of the best philosophers of science ever get to hold this prestigious office, Larry's election came as no surprise to those of us who know how critical his work has been in setting the agenda for the philosophy of physics in our day. Peter Railton, whose many seminal contributions to moral philosophy, the philosophy of science and epistemology make him one of the most versatile thinkers around, was one of only four philosophers elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences this past year. He is the sixth member of the Department to receive this exceptionally rare and high honor. Allan Gibbard was elected to the American Philosophical Society. Founded by Ben Franklin in 1743, this was the Nation's first learned society, and it remains among its most prestigious. Despite its name, the APS has traditionally been very stingy when it comes to admitting philosophers: only sixteen have been elected to its ranks since 1975, and all are household names (in philosophers' households, anyhow). This well-deserved honor indicates the high level of Allan's intellectual accomplishments, and his great influence in the area of moral philosophy.

As for the changes, beginning in September the Department will welcome five new colleagues. Three have regular, full-time appointments in Philosophy, and two hold appointments outside the Department. Professor Victor Caston, a specialist in classical philosophy, comes to us from the University of California at Davis. Victor's work centers on the problem of intentionality in ancient Greek philosophy. This puzzle, which involves explaining what it means for a thought to be *about* something, is among the most difficult in all of philosophy. Victor's nuanced, analytical treatment of the Greek philosophers' attempts to understand intentionality represents the cutting edge of work on this topic. His eagerly-awaited manuscript *The Problem of Intentionality in Ancient Greek Philosophy* will surely set the standard in this important area for years to come. Victor also has interests in medieval philosophy and Austrian philosophy. He thus adds to the Department's already

impressive strength in the history of philosophy. Assistant Professor Andy Egan comes to us from the Ph.D. program at MIT by way of a postdoctoral research fellowship at the Australian National University. Andy's research focuses on a variety of topics in metaphysics and epistemology, including the metaphysics of properties, the status of claims about epistemic possibility, and the individuation of material objects. His work has already received the sort of attention that is usually reserved for much more experienced philosophers. Indeed, one of his articles has already been reprinted! Boris Kment, an Assistant Professor and newly minted Princeton Ph.D., works in metaphysics. Boris's dissertation, which has already begun spawning articles that have been accepted for publication, proposes a novel and daring reconfiguration of the accepted theory of modal notions. In contrast with standard approaches, Boris argues that claims about metaphysical necessity are grounded in truths about counterfactuals. This imaginative and carefully argued work has the potential to fundamentally alter our understanding of modal notions. We all hope, and confidently expect, that Victor, Andy and Boris will contribute significantly to the vitality and prestige of our program for years to come.

Philosophy at Michigan has also benefited from hirings in two other units of the University. Scott Shapiro, a leading scholar in jurisprudence and the philosophy of law, assumes a professorship at the Law School this fall. Scott is known for defending an intriguing version of legal positivism according to which law is not necessarily founded on morality. In addition to his impressive accomplishments in law, Scott also holds a Ph.D. in philosophy from Columbia University, and has published influential papers on the theory of action. His 1998 essay, "On Hart's Way Out," was the co-winner of the American Philosophical Association's coveted Kavka Prize (awarded in 2001) for the best essay published on political philosophy during 1998-2000. Scott is cross-appointed in philosophy, and will regularly be teaching courses for the Department. The addition of Professor Shapiro to Liz Anderson, who holds a joint appointment in Philosophy and Law, and Don Regan, another eminent law professor who

is cross-appointed in philosophy, makes Michigan one of the very best places in the world to pursue philosophy and law. Philosophy at Michigan has also been strengthened by the Medical School's hiring of Chandra Sripada. Dr. Sripada, who holds a Ph.D. in philosophy from Rutgers University as well as an M.D. from the University of Texas, is beginning a residency in psychiatry at Michigan and is pursuing research on the evolutionary roots of depression. In addition to his position at the Medical School, Chandra has been appointed as an Adjunct Professor of Philosophy, and as a Faculty Fellow at the Institute for Social Research. Though he completed his Ph.D. only last year, Chandra has already published influential articles in both philosophy and neuroscience. We are all very excited about having these two intellectual powerhouses as part of the Michigan philosophical community.

The Department bids a fond, if bittersweet, farewell to two valued colleagues. David Velleman, who came to Michigan in 1982 as an Assistant Professor and rose to the rank of Collegiate Professor, has accepted a senior position at New York University. In addition to lending his prestige to the Department for all these years as a leading light in ethics and action theory, David made significant contributions to the Department and the University in all levels. A splendid instructor, David was willing to teach elementary classes. He even designed an online textbook for introductory logic that many of our graduate student instructors now use in their courses. He served on more than his share of committees and advisory bodies, and was a great friend to the University Library. We will all miss David greatly, and we wish him well in New York. Jessica Wilson, an Assistant Professor in the Department who works on issues in metaphysics, has accepted a job at the University of Toronto. Even though she was here for only a short time, Jessica had a significant impact on the life of the Department, especially on the training of graduate students interested in metaphysics and the philosophy of mind. We hope that she too thrives in her new intellectual environment.

Undergraduate News. The undergraduate program is flourishing. As of May 2005 we had more than

one-hundred and seventy majors and nearly forty minors enrolled in our program! These numbers, which have been similarly strong for the past five years, signal a significantly renewed interest in philosophical matters among Michigan undergraduates. While some of this can be traced to a general increase in the popularity of philosophy across the nation, much of it is surely due to the excellent teaching of our Faculty. By offering stimulating and demanding courses on a wide variety of topics, and at all levels of the curriculum, the Department has been able to consistently attract strong and serious students. This year three such students completed honors theses in philosophy, all earning high honors. Sarah Coolidge's "The Is/Ought Problem" was written under the guidance of Steve Darwall, as was Nic Bommarito's "On Sincerity." Eric Lormand supervised David Bissig's thesis "The Mental Blind Spot." Greg Malivuk and Sarah Coolidge were jointly awarded the 2004/2005 William K. Frankena Prize for Excellence in the Philosophy Concentration at our gala reception for graduating philosophy concentrators and minors in May. Sarah will be going on to graduate school in philosophy at UCLA, a top Ph.D. program.

The long-term future of the Department's undergraduate program was significantly enhanced by the promise of a large bequest from a donor who wishes to remain anonymous. The bequest is explicitly intended to support undergraduate education in philosophy at Michigan. It is wonderful to think of how many Michigan students will be able to benefit from this generous gift. We are most grateful for this support, and we are committed to using it wisely to improve our undergraduate program.

Graduate News. The Department awarded three new Ph.D.s this year. Steve Daskal finished the requirements for his degree in June by successfully defending his dissertation *Rebuilding Society from the Ground Up: Contextual Justice, Fellow Citizenship and U.S. Welfare Policy*. Steve assumes a tenure-track position at Virginia Tech this fall. Christie Hartley's *Justice for All: Constructing an Inclusive Contractualism* was also completed in June. Christie is bound for a tenure-track position at

Georgia State University. Gerhard Nuffer completed work on his dissertation, *Information, Belief, and Possibility*, last September. He has taken up a teaching position at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee for 2005-2006.

Michigan's graduate students continue to make important contributions to the discipline of philosophy. Remy Debes, a Ph.D. candidate in our program, had two papers accepted for publication in *The British Journal for the History of Philosophy*. The articles, entitled "Humanity, Sympathy, and the Puzzle of Hume's Second Enquiry" and "Has Anything Changed? Hume's Theory of Association and Sympathy after the Treatise," should appear in print next year. Remy was also named as a research assistant on a National Endowment for the Humanities Collaborative Research Award to study the role of the sentiments in moral theory. The project is being directed by two of the Department's own: Justin D'Arms (Ph.D. '95) and Dan Jacobson (Ph.D. '93)! Third-year student Josh Brown had his paper "Kant on Spatial Infinity" accepted by the Pacific Study Group of the North American Kant Society. Second-year student Howard Nye commented on Joseph Millum's paper "Moral Realism and Natural Kinds" at the American Philosophical Association's Central Division meetings in April.

Many of our graduate students received honors and prizes this year. The 2004-2005 Charles L. Stevenson Prize for Excellence in the Graduate Program was shared by Jim Staihar and Kevin Coffey. Matthew Silverstein was awarded the John Dewey Prize for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching. Second year students Erica Lucast and Michael Allers received Marshall Weinberg Summer Fellowships, which are funded by the Weinberg Endowment for Philosophy. Mr. Weinberg made a large donation this year that significantly enhanced the Endowment. This generous gesture should make it possible for us to provide our graduate students with much needed summer support for many years to come. As always, we are grateful to Marshall for his continued support of the Department.

Finally, it is with deep sadness that I must announce the death of Candace Bolter, our friend and colleague, who died this past March, at the age of twenty-seven, after a long and courageous struggle with cancer. Candace, who was from Swartz Creek, Michigan, did her undergraduate work at UM Flint, where one of her professors described her as the best student he had in 32 years of teaching. She entered our Ph.D. program in 2002. Candace was a kind and generous person, a dedicated teacher, and a first-rate young philosopher. It is a great pity that anyone should die so young, and that such considerable promise should remain unfulfilled. Everyone who knew her will remember Candace's dedication and resolute courage in the face of debilitating illness, and her good humor and unflagging optimism, which never left her throughout her long ordeal. To commemorate Candace's contributions to the social and intellectual life of the Department, the faculty has established the *Candace Bolter Fund for Graduate Students*, which will be used to assist graduate students with occasional academic or personal needs that are not covered by other funding sources.

Events. We had an unusually full calendar of philosophical events during 2004-2005. This year's installment of the Annual Michigan Spring Colloquium (now age twenty-six, and still going strong) focused on action theory. The Colloquium was organized by one of our current Ph.D. candidates, Soraya Gollop. It gave a number of Michigan graduate students the opportunity to comment on the work of established philosophers. Michael Bratman of Stanford, a leading light in the field, presented a paper "Intention, Belief, Practical, Theoretical," which was skillfully discussed by third-year student Jim Staihar. Soraya Gollop gave an insightful commentary on "The Secret Lives of Reasons," which was presented by Nomy Arpaly of Brown University. Second-year student Erica Lucast offered lucid comments on University of Iowa professor Sara Buss' "Needs (someone else's), Projects (my own), and Reasons."

Scott Sturgeon of Birkbeck College, University of London spent the Winter Term in Ann Arbor as the *Marshall Weinberg Distinguished Professor of*

Philosophy. In addition to teaching a well-received undergraduate class, and an exciting graduate seminar, Professor Sturgeon delivered a major public lecture "Aprioism on Modality" to the Department and University community in March. The visit was funded by a generous endowment, established by Marshall Weinberg, which makes it possible, nearly every academic year, for us to invite important senior philosophers out to visit for an entire semester. Faculty members and students alike benefit greatly from the presence of Weinberg visitors like Scott Sturgeon.

The Department also hosted two weeklong visits by Nelson-Philosophers-in-Residence this year. Ian Rumfitt, who was once on Michigan's faculty but now holds a position at Oxford, spent a week in Ann Arbor this fall, giving three talks on the philosophy of logic. Robert Stalnaker, a renowned philosopher from MIT, was the Nelson visitor this spring. He gave talks on game theory, the epistemology of indexical beliefs, and the interpretation of conditional assertions. As part of our regular colloquium series, the Department heard talks by Erin Eaker of the University of Western Ontario, Elisabeth Camp of Harvard University, Daniel Nolan of St. Andrews, Tamar Szabo Gendler of Cornell, Pamela Hieronymi of UCLA, Adam Elga of Princeton, and Matti Eklund of the University of Colorado. As you can see, we do philosophy "twenty-four/seven" here at Michigan!

Let me close by directing you to two other entries of special interest in this year's Newsletter. Peter Ludlow's fascinating essay, "The Myth of Human Language," defends some novel and controversial theses about the workings of human communication. You might also want to look at the "Spotlight on Tanner" section. The Department's lovely jewel, the Tanner Philosophy Library, turns forty this year! Our departmental librarian, Molly Mahony, has written a short account of Tanner's history. It makes for interesting reading.

I wish you the best for the coming year!

Sincerely,

James M. Joyce,
Chair

The Myth of Human Language¹

Peter Ludlow

God, having designed man for a sociable creature, made him not only with an inclination and under a necessity to have fellowship with those of his own kind, but furnished him also with language, which was to be the great instrument and common tie of society.

John Locke

Essay Concerning Human Understanding

The standard view about language is roughly the one advanced by Locke in the epigraph above (only *sans* God): Languages like Urdu, German, Polish and Portuguese are robust and fairly stable abstract systems of communication that are learned (with varying degrees of success) by human agents. Those agents in turn use the languages that they have learned to communicate ideas, perform certain tasks (by giving orders, instructions, etc.), and in some cases as media for artistic expression. It is often argued that the better one learns a language, the better equipped one is to successfully communicate, accomplish complex tasks, etc. Sometimes the standard view uses the metaphor of language as a widely shared common currency that agents use to communicate, with individual words being the common coins of the realm. Crucially, these common coins are fixed; as Locke argued, even Augustus, though he ruled the world, was unable to coin new Latin words.

This standard view, although not *universally* held, is at least *widely* held by academics and lay persons alike, ranging from philosophers and language instructors, to anthropologists and computational linguists, to politicians and pundits. Unfortunately, the standard view is badly mistaken, and its uncritical acceptance has had devastating consequences in all of these domains. It has led anthropologists to think that languages constrain the conceptual space of language users, and has led language departments into disastrous alliances with French philosophers of language and their word salad warfare on the hegemony of “language” and its alleged tendency to encode the interests of patriarchy and other evil

powers. It has led to wooden approaches to language instruction on the one hand and to failed attempts at human/machine communication on the other. On the political end, it has led to silliness on both the left and the right by way of attempts to clean up or reform or otherwise render standard languages politically correct - a general sentiment that has led to downright discriminatory social policies like English Only laws, and in its extreme form, to attempts at language purification by Fascists like Mussolini.

It would make for an interesting book to sort out all the ways in which the standard view of language has crept into these domains of human activity and the corrosiveness of its effect, but my goal here is substantially less ambitious. I’ll begin in Part 1 with the negative case against the “common coin” view of language and offer an alternative in Part 2. The alternative picture will be one in which there is a core part of our linguistic competence that is fixed by biology (perhaps by low level biophysical principles) but that this provides just a basic skeleton which is fleshed out in different ways on a conversation-by-conversation basis. To shift back to the monetary metaphor, there are some common coins, but we also have the ability to mint new coins on the fly in collaboration with our partners discourse, to control which of those common coins are in circulation at any given time, and to coordinate and precisify the shared meanings of those common coins that are in use. As we will see the meaning of most linguistic common coins is vastly underdetermined. I will suggest possible ways in which coins are minted, and their values determined, as discourse participants form dynamic communicative partnerships, resulting (if we really must deploy the term ‘language’) in what we might call *micro-languages*. In Part 3 I will provide an example of how the received view can lead us astray.

1.0 The Myth of Human Language

Let’s begin by following Chomsky (1986) in making a distinction between I-language and E-language. Thus far, when talking about “language,” I have been talking about language in the sense of E-language: that is, the conception of language as an “external” stable abstract object that is deployed by

a large population of language users for purposes of communication. I-language, on the other hand, is Chomsky's term for the internal cognitive mechanisms that underwrite our linguistic competence.

For most linguists, the traditional notion of an E-language like Portuguese or German or English is suspect at best (see Chomsky 1980; ch. 6). Consider the case of German, for example. In what sense is a "speaker of German" from the Dutch border of Germany and a "speaker of German" from Bavaria speaking the same language, given that their speech is not easily mutually intelligible. The fact that we say these individuals speak the same language is more of a political decision than anything else, and indeed an individual raised in northern Germany and an individual raised in The Netherlands may find that their languages are more mutually intelligible than do the two aforementioned German citizens. As Max Weinreich is supposed to have said, "a language is a dialect with an army and a navy."

Saying that two individuals "speak the same language" is at best a loose way of talking about some superficial similarities in style of communication that have been raised to salience for political and social reasons rather than linguistic reasons. Chomsky (1994) compares it to saying that two cities are "near" each other; whether two cities are near depends on our interests and our mode of transportation and virtually not at all on brute facts of geography. The notion of "same language" is no more respectable a notion in linguistics than "nearness" is in geography. Informally we might group together ways of speaking that seem to be similar (relative to our interests), but such groupings have no real explanatory power.

One might try to retreat slightly by giving up on the idea of an E-language and endorsing a notion of E-dialect or E-idiolect, but even this retreat will not save the language-as-external-object position. Considerations that make it arbitrary when to say that two individuals speak the "same language" also apply to saying when they speak the "same dialect." That is, do the people in this village speak the same dialect as the people in the next village? Do we speak the same dialect as our next door neighbors? For that matter do we speak the same dialect as the people living under the same roof? My ex-wife pronounced

the words 'Mary', 'marry', and 'merry' differently, while I pronounced them the same. Did we speak the same dialect? Do we? It depends on whether we want to identify with each other, and this is a kind of very local political decision.

At this point you might think we could retreat to a notion of E-idiolect - in other words, that there is an abstract thing that people speak, but it varies from person to person; each person has their own personal E-language. Even this is wrong (and it is certainly a mistake to conflate the notion of I-language with that of an idiolect - the notions cross-cut each other).

The problem with the notion of an E-idiolect is that we have no way of identifying the linguistic forms that would be part of a given individual's E-idiolect. Consider a hypothetical agent, Chesner. Chesner speaks in different ways with different groups of individuals (say Chesner uses a different vocabulary among philosophers than among family members) and indeed at different stages of life (contrast Chesner's use of language at age 3 and age 30). Do all of these ways of speaking count as being part of the same idiolect? What unifies them other than that they are ways in which Chesner happens to have spoken?

Of course one might argue that in this discussion I have already introduced a perfectly acceptable notion of language - one that is defined in terms of political identity etc.² But the problem is that this notion of language, to the extent it is coherent, plays no explanatory role. Why do certain people communicate with each other so well? It is no answer to be told that they speak the same language. This is like saying that wood burns because it contains phlogiston or (to borrow a joke from Moliere) that opium makes one sleep because it has a "dormative virtue".³ In effect, we have expunged God from Locke's story about language, but the remaining picture still has all the explanatory power of intelligent design theory in biology: none.

What we are looking for here is some way of understanding *how* people are able to successfully communicate. Being told they speak "the same language" is no answer to this question, and in fact it leads us away from the answer; we want to probe the mechanisms that underwrite their ability to communicate. If we pursue these questions in a

serious fashion, then we are driven far from the initial picture of a widely shared common coin system of communication.⁴

2.0 The FLN and the LCS

Some writing on language tends to treat linguistic competence as a unified phenomenon, perhaps supervening on a single mechanism or module of human cognition. It seems more reasonable to suppose that the broad class of phenomena that we call “linguistic” or think of as having to do with “language” are supported by a combination of narrow mechanisms of the mind/brain (what Chomsky calls the FLN, for “faculty of language narrowly construed”) and at the same time an entirely different set of abilities that are underwritten by world knowledge and various coordination strategies that we deploy. It seems doubtful that these coordination strategies are grounded in any single module of human cognition, but we can use the acronym LCS -linguistic coordination strategies - to speak of this broad class of abilities.⁵

2.1 The FLN

Chomsky has argued that the FLN is a natural object that is part of our biological endowment. Recent work by Hauser, Chomsky, and Fitch (2002) has speculated that the mechanisms that underlie this core linguistic competence did not evolve gradually in response to selectional pressures, but was sudden in evolutionary terms and involved what in effect amounts to a bio-physical wiring solution - a solution for hooking up the perceptual/articulatory system (the system that affords speech comprehension and production) with the conceptual/intentional system (the system that interprets and uses linguistic communication). The thesis is speculative, but not without supporting evidence. In the simplest form, support for the thesis involves the observation that low level physical and mathematical principles, underlie many of the recursive patterns that we see in nature - ranging from the spiral patterns that we see in shells to the Fibonacci patterns we see in the distribution of seeds in a sunflower.⁶

To illustrate the recursiveness of natural language, consider the following very simple case.

(1) This is the cat that ate the rat that ate the cheese that was made by the farmer that...

These sorts of patterns, in Chomsky’s view, provide some of the evidence that the structure of the FLN is largely determined by basic biophysical properties.

It is reasonable to think that the FLN also underwrites significant aspects of the lexicon as well. This certainly seems to be the conclusion one would draw from work by Mark Baker (1988) which argues that that morphological and lexical properties of linguistic items are actually determined by the syntax. Following Higginbotham (1989) we can illustrate the basic idea by consider the following fragment from Lewis Carol’s poem “The Jabberwocky”.

(2) Twas bryllyg, and the slythy toves did gyre and gymble in the wabe...

Just from the surrounding syntactic environment we can deduce quite a bit about the meaning of the term “tove”. We know, for example, that toves are the sorts of things one can count (unlike substances like water), that they are spatially located and can move and undergo state changes (unlike numbers), they are quite possibly capable of acting under their own volition. All of this is defeasible, but these are reasonable suppositions to deduce from the surrounding linguistic structure.

Given the rapid acquisition of lexical items by children during their critical learning period (ages 1.5-6) and given their corresponding acquisition of and grasp of these basic thematic relations (provided only impoverished data, no reinforcement, etc.) it seems reasonable to speculate that these thematic relations are part of the FLN. But as Bloom (2002) has argued, all of this just gives children a first pass at understanding word meanings. To flesh things out children also need to incorporate a broad range of contextual information and real world knowledge. Of course, Bloom is assuming that there is “a meaning” to be learned. As I will argue below, it is more precise to say that

children, like adults, must ultimately collaborate with their discourse partners to establish word meanings.

2.2 The LCS

While the FLN is often deployed in communicative endeavors, it is generally a very small part of such endeavors. As suggested earlier, it is, in effect, a kind of thin, rigid, skeleton onto which other types of abilities must be added for communication to be possible. What we need to understand are the natures of those abilities - in particular the LCS — the ways they interact with the FLN, and the consequences that can be extruded from the emerging picture.

The Dynamic Lexicon

Minting new coins. One crucial element in this new point of departure has to do with the lexicon itself. As noted above, most philosophers of language suppose that the words we use are “common coin” in a broad social context — that when you learn a language, among other things you learn a set stock of shared word meanings. Rejecting this picture, we can opt instead for the idea that many of the terms that we use are invented “on the fly” during individual conversations.

In effect this is a generalization of conclusions that have been reached by psycholinguists (e.g. Garrod and Anderson 1987, Brennan 1986, Brennan and Clark 1996, and Clark 1992) and their study of lexical “entrainment” — a process whereby the use of certain words - sometimes novel words — are introduced on the fly by discourse participants.⁷

Studies on entrainment also undermine the myth of a common-coin lexicon by showing that even individuals who overhear or witness a conversation are in a much weaker position to understand what is being said than are the participants. Schober and Clark (1987), for example, show that discourse participants are in a much better position than eavesdroppers at understanding what is being said because participants are involved in the introduction of the lexical items that will be employed in the evocation of certain concepts.

Consider, for example, how much of a lecture you can comprehend by dropping in on a course in the middle of the term. If you are not familiar with the subject you may well be quite lost, and not just because you lack familiarity with the objects under discussion (if it is a philosophy class you might have dropped in on an unintelligible discussion of whether tables and chairs exist). One obstacle you may face is that you are unfamiliar with the terminology in play (of course, grasp of the terminology and knowledge of the subject matter are not so easily separated - more on this later). You were not involved in the entrainment process whereby certain terms were introduced into the course. In such a situation you may dismiss the terms being used as “jargon”, but this is just a way of saying that you don’t understand the mint.

Common coins placed in and out of circulation. One important result of the entrainment experiments is that those common coins that do exist are not always in circulation, and indeed, are strategically retired and placed back into circulation depending upon the demands of the micro-language under construction. The situation is analogous to the position of the traveler who finds that various combinations of US Dollars, Euros, Yen, and Argentinean Pesos are accepted in different settings. Some are more widely accepted than others, and some can be introduced in the odd transaction with a bit of cajoling, but at the end of the day there are still establishments where only a Peso will do. Linguistic common coins are like this too, but their deployment is more strategic.

The experiments on entrainment are particularly illuminating here because they show that additional common coins are introduced into the micro-language in response to conversational demands on the discrimination of the concepts being deployed. If similar concepts are being deployed (and the greater the need to discriminate concepts and kinds of objects), there is increased pressure to reissue certain coins.

Common coins are thin. Linguistic common coins, whether in circulation frequently or rarely, are “thin.” By that I mean that the shared part of the lexicon consists of just hints and clues (like one finds in dictionary entries) that may help us to deploy cognitive

resources to flesh out the word meanings, and the way we flesh them out will vary according to contexts and social settings. A classic illustration would be the dummy terms like “whatchamacallit” and “thingamajigger”, which are reissued often but typically with different denotations each time they are reissued.

Another example of this is the meaning of the term “good”. This is a widely shared common linguistic coin, but there is much to its meaning that is underdetermined. For example, it is a typical phenomenon of sports talk radio to debate which of two sports stars is better. Was Mickey Mantle better than Barry Bonds at baseball? Well, one of them hit more home runs, but the other was on more championship teams. One of them may have cheated by using steroids. Should that be a factor? What is really up for grabs here is the question of what counts as a “good” baseball player - it is about the meaning of ‘good’.

Jamie Tappenden (1999) offers a formal example of this phenomenon, introducing a language in which some meanings are open-ended and to be precisified at a later time. The language leaves “certain objects as ‘unsettled’ cases of a given predicate, in that it is open to the speakers of the language to make a further stipulation that the object is, or is not, to be counted as having the property in question.”

As Tappenden notes, these cases happen frequently both unintentionally and intentionally outside of formal languages, with an example of intentional cases coming from the realm of law:

This happens with some frequency in law: it may be convenient to stipulate a condition for only a restricted range, leaving further stipulation for the future. There have been many different reasons for such reticence: courts have wanted to see how partial decisions fly before resolving further cases, higher courts may want to allow lower courts flexibility in addressing unexpected situations, legislatures may be unable to come to the needed political compromises without leaving “blanks” for courts to fill in.

Tappenden is thinking of cases in which matters are intentionally left open, but we can imagine lots of

reasons why aspects of word meaning might remain open as a kind of natural default state - it may simply be too complicated to specify everything (even for an expert) or it may be that crucial aspects of word meaning depend upon facts about the world that remain open. Or it may just be that the FLN is only accidentally suitable for communication and that for no reason in particular it just happens not to fix robust lexical meanings.

It would be a mistake, I think, to try to assimilate these cases of open meanings to that of vague predicates like “bald”. Many of the disputes that arise have little to do with vagueness. To see this, consider the following case from a dispute I heard on WFAN (a sports talk radio station in New York) when *Sports Illustrated* announced its “50 greatest athletes of the 20th Century”. Some listeners called in complaining that a horse - Secretariat - had made the list, while host Mike Francesa defended the choice. Clearly this is a dispute about what should be in the extension of “athlete”, and the callers wanted to argue that a horse had no place here. It is not as though the dispute would be resolved if Secretariat were a little bit faster or could throw a baseball, so it seems hard to imagine that these are vagueness cases.⁸

This is also a good example of a case where fleshing out the meaning of the term is up to us and our communicative partners. So, even when we are deploying a common coin term (like “athlete”, for example) the extension of the term within a given context may be up for grabs and may require some form of coordination strategy - in the sports talk radio case the coordination took the form of a debate where discourse participants argued their respective cases.

At least in this narrow instance there is an obvious similarity to the legal realm, where competing parties may come together to resolve a dispute - in this case the way in which the term is to be understood with respect to the new cases in question (think of question of whether an existing patent “reads on” (applies to) some new technology). The key difference is that rather than taking place in a formal courtroom setting, these debates play out in less formal realms, ranging from sports talk radio to arguments with colleagues, friends, and partners.⁹

Assigning meanings to common coins by jurisdiction.¹⁰ Tappenden's metaphor of court decisions can be extended in fruitful ways. Disputes over the best baseball player or whether a horse counts as an athlete are often just wheel spinning, but sometimes a consensus is achieved. This might be due to a series of rational arguments or it might be a simple case of someone asserting a claim and other participants deferring. In a bit we will look at how this kind of deference works, but first it is worth noting that when these disputes are resolved there are often jurisdictional limits.

When courts come to a decision on a particular dispute they set a precedent which may carry over into other jurisdictions. On the other hand it may not. Similarly, we may resolve a dispute or coordinate on the meaning of a term, and expect that to carry over into other micro-languages that we form. We may be disappointed to find we have to reargue our point of view, or re-establish our credentials.

Alternatively, it may be that some of the disputes that we engage in (about sports, television, movies, and questions like "Is Chesner a smoker if he only smokes when drinking?") which *appear* trivial or silly are valuable precisely because they are litigating the content of certain key terms and this may be valuable in contexts where more is at stake and communication is critical. In other words, idle talk may well serve the function of helping us to calibrate our lexicons during periods of down time. These periods of calibration may be serve us well later when we later need to collaborate on some important project or problem.

Assigning meanings to common coins by deference. Sometimes we may not be involved in litigating the meaning of a term, but we may rather defer to the usage of someone (perhaps in the conversation, or perhaps in the greater community). For instance, we may defer to an expert on the proper individuating conditions of the terms "beach" and "elm". There may be a social division of labor involved in fixing the semantic content of our utterances.

It is one thing to say that semantic deference takes place and quite another to explain how it works. Friend and Ludlow (2004) considered the thesis that

deference-worthiness is earned discursively via a series of challenges. More precisely, we argued that expertise in a domain must be established via a series of interactive "partial knowledge proofs."

The phrase "partial knowledge proof" is a riff on the notion of "zero knowledge proofs" in computer science (in particular in the field of public key cryptography). The basic idea of a *partial* knowledge proof is this: if I have a particular expertise, how can I prove to you that I have that expertise when it is something that you lack? To illustrate the idea, imagine a situation where we are hiring a philosopher in ancient philosophy but no one in the department is an expert in the area. We all have *some* knowledge of ancient philosophy, of course, but we are hiring in the area because we recognize we are not experts. We resolve this dilemma by issuing a series of challenges to the job candidate. With each question/answer exchange we learn more, allowing our colleagues to press on with deeper and more informed questions. In the end, via this interactive inductive proof procedure, we satisfy ourselves that the candidate is worthy. Or not.

Stacie Friend and I argued that this kind of procedure is more typical than one might think, applying even in cases like the meaning of the word "cool" (in the social not the thermodynamic sense). We might think that Richie and Pottsie always blindly defer to Fonzie on the meaning of "cool", but in fact there are times when challenges are issued, and there are at least person-internal debates about whether Fonzie is really the appropriate arbiter of the extension of the term. Fonzie's deference-worthiness is constantly subject to challenge, and may well be undermined as we encounter other arbiters of cool (as when Richie goes to college) or learn more about Fonzie (as when he goes water skiing and jumps a penned up shark - definitely not cool).

It is an interesting question as to what counts in a decision to defer to Fonzie on the meaning of "cool". Presumably Richie and Pottsie had partial knowledge of the concept, and their deference is not tied to credentials possessed by Fonzie; Fonzie did not have a diploma from the College of Cool. In other cases, however, semantic deference *does* appear to be tied to credentials.

For example, one day a “tree guy” came to my house and while pruning some trees, identified the trees in my yard. Along the way he assured me he had gone to horticulture school. Did that provide him with the expertise to say what is a beech and what is an elm? Should I defer to him? Well, not much hung on the question, so I was perfectly happy to adopt his usage. For similar reasons I’m happy to defer to the doctor when she says I can’t have arthritis in my thigh. But *why* do I defer?

Well, presumably it is not because these experts have pointy heads or impressive accents - it is because they hold credentials (diplomas for example) that show they have been vetted by a kind of process not so different from the one we used to hire our Ancient philosopher - as students they were subject to an interactive inductive proof procedure which convinced their institutions that they had the relevant domain knowledge. It would be interesting to explore this process in more detail, when we turn to the semantics of word meaning a more pressing question arises: why does your domain expertise matter *here*?

The point of my question is that once domain expertise is established, the “semantic reach” of the domain expertise must be also established (e.g. should I defer to the materials scientist when she says that the glass in that window falls under the extension of “liquid” in our conversation? Or is the materials scientist overreaching her jurisdiction when she asks us to adopt her linguistic usage?). In Ludlow and Friend (2004), we consider the thesis that this semantic reach must also be established discursively, via a series of challenges. But clearly this doesn’t happen all the time. Nor should it.

Copycats. There is obviously a lot going on here - a combination of coordination strategies, litigation of deference and semantic reach, and the creative coining and fleshing out of lexical items. But in addition to all this there are presumably also cases of just flat out copying as well - cases where we blindly or at least indifferently adopt the linguistic practices of those around us, apparently for no reason at all. Well, *maybe* it is for no reason.

It is certainly the case that human agents are quite adept at simply doing as their neighbors do. In the United States someone started driving on the right hand

side of the road, and everyone else followed suit. Similarly, we eat our pie with the wedge pointing towards us. It seems doubtful that anyone debated the issue. Joseph Epstein (2001) has shown that one can successfully model group political behavior with a population of cellular automata that basically just do what their neighbors do as long as no new agent comes along and violates conventions.

It is interesting to reflect on whether this behavior, hardwired or not, could count as being rational or normative in some sense. Surely *some* unreflective imitation must be warranted. It would certainly make for an interesting time if all conformity required pause for reflection. Quite apart from making driving an adventure, many of us would simply be paralyzed with indecision. One can easily imagine a semantic theory that established our warrant for reflexively following our neighbors when they introduce novel lexical items or when they offer precisifications and adaptations of those already in use. (The case for warrant would parallel recent work on perceptual warrant by philosophers like Burge [2003].)

There are moments however, when it is time to reflect on the imitative behavior we are engaged in, and this is true when we engaged in the assignment of word meanings no less than when we are engaged in the overtly political. Application conditions for terms and phrases like “murder”, “life”, ‘family values’, and “good character” must be fleshed out and precisified, and it would seem to be a mistake to just blindly follow our neighbors or the powerful on their precisifications. Here is a place where we want to insist on deliberation and good reasons for a choice.

Power relations in lexical choice

Here is also the place where we see the role of power relations. It is not rare at all to find power relations in linguistic interactions, and they are reflected in everything from the pronunciation we adopt to the coining and precisification of lexical items. Sometimes discourse participants will attempt to “impose their will” on their discourse partners, even in the face of resistance, and sometimes we comply even when we don’t like it.¹¹ I suppose this happens in the classroom all the time, but my favorite example

comes from one of the entrainment experiments conducted by Susan Brennan.

In one of the entrainment experiments, subjects were asked to coordinate on the selection of terms for certain pictures that they would subsequently use when showing each other the pictures again later in the experiment. Transcripts of these experiments showed there to be little discussion of the choices - someone usually just called the shots. But who? And why did *they* get to call the shots?

In some cases the shot-caller appeared to have real world knowledge which they took to establish a kind of semantic authority (e.g. knowledge of cars). In other cases the transcripts are unilluminating, but one can imagine all sorts of factors ranging from relative age to dress to more discrete social factors. And, as I suggested, sometimes the deference relation is recognized but not appreciated. The case I have in mind involves an experimental subject that chose the word “rice burner” to refer to a picture of a Japanese car. When the picture came up again the other subject complied with the coinage, but registered disapproval by referring to it as “*your* ‘rice burner’.”

Notice though, that we are never *compelled* to defer – we are never prisoners to our own or someone else’s “language” as suggested by the following passage from Deleuze and Guattari, cited in Venuti (1995; 273).

How many people today live in a language this is not their own? Or no longer, or not yet, even know their own and know poorly the major language that they are forced to serve? This is the problem of immigrants, and especially of their children, the problem of minorities, the problem of a minor literature, but also a problem for all of us: how to tear a minor literature away from its own language, allowing it to challenge the language and making it follow a sober revolutionary path? How to become a nomad and an immigrant and a gypsy in relation to one’s own language.

We cannot be imprisoned by something that does not exist. On the other hand we *do* need to be cautious in when and how we defer to the linguistic practices

of our discourse partners, and we need to insist that semantic deference be paid only when it is warranted. More to the point, the proper response to attempts at regimenting our linguistic practice is not to retreat into infantile word games, but rather to exercise care and creativity in clarifying the terms we wish to deploy, explaining their usages, and making sure that our discourse partners understand and respect these usages. Care and clarity are the answer, not word salad.

3.0 An Illustration

My first job after I got my Ph.D. in 1985, was not in academia, but working for the Intelligent Interface Systems Group of the Technology Strategies Center, run by the Honeywell Corporation. My first assignment was to study the then existent machine translation projects - an assignment that sent me traveling to research centers around the world. In those days, machine translation was crude, but in certain circumscribed contexts, it was economically viable to have machines do rough drafts of certain documents. If necessary, the documents could be cleaned up by human translators.

Back then, my computer was an Apple II with 48K of ram, and the computers we used at the center (Symbolics Lisp Machines) had substantially less power than the low end laptops available for a few hundred dollars today. One might have thought that after 20 years significant advances in computing power we would also see advances in machine translation and natural language “front ends” for data bases. But we haven’t. And this is not the least bit surprising.

Most of the work on machine translation and natural language processing has been based on a mistake - the idea that one has to find an algorithm that can take some text in a “source language” and in one stroke translate the text into the “target language.” But given that there are no languages, we can see that this is a confusion from the start.

The next time you go to a bank or a store with a particular request, think about the way your conversation plays out. Do you just make a request and receive an answer? How many times have you had to ask the teller or the clerk to clarify something?

(The first time a bank clerk asked “Do you want that large?,” I had no idea what she wanted to know.) How many times has the teller or clerk asked you to clarify what you need? How many times did you go back and forth with phrases like “sorry, did you mean...” or “I’m sorry, I didn’t catch that” or “I’m not sure what it’s called but I need something that...”.

Interesting work has been done on the nature of conversational repair, even including the important role that is played by expressions like “um”, “er”, and “hmmm” in communication – so called “disfluencies.”¹² But even before we get to the role of these items we need to understand that the lexicon is not stable but must be recalibrated on a conversation-by-conversation basis. For example, in studying the way agents attempt to communicate with computers with natural language interfaces, Furnas et al. (1987) found that the likelihood that any two people would produce the same term for the same function ranged from only 7 to 18%. For example, when wishing to remove a file, persons used a broad range of terms including *remove*, *delete*, *erase*, *expunge*, *kill*, *omit*, *destroy*, *lose*, *change*, *rid*, and *trash*. You might think you could get around this problem by treating these terms as synonyms and having the system regard any of them as an instruction to delete a file, but as Furnas et al. discovered, even with as many as 20 synonyms for a single function, the likelihood of people generating terms from the synonym set for a given function was only about 80%. And then a new problem is generated. When people *do* use the same term, more likely than not they don’t mean the same thing by the term. As Furnas et al. showed, even in a text editor with only 25 commands, if two people use the same verbal command, the chances that they intend same function by it was only 15%.¹³

In the light of these considerations think about how silly it is to try and build a machine that “just understands you” when you walk up and begin talking to it. No human can “just understand you” and no machine will ever be able to do it - such a machine is a fantasy machine designed around the myth of language. We don’t speak languages, so if machines did they would be no use in communicating with us anyway. If someone created a “perfect language” we would have no use for it.

This point can be extended to human translation as well. What is it that translators do? They surely don’t translate from one fixed “source language” to another fixed “target language.” To see this consider the situation faced by two Serbian friends of mine who are translators from “English” into “Serbian”. One was translating Tolkein, the other was translating *The Color Purple*. Exactly how does one translate Elvish expressions or Rural Black English Vernacular into “Serbian” (one common and very unhappy strategy in Serbia is to translate Black English Vernacular into “Bosnian”). In point of fact translators are not in the business of translating so much extending and morphing the “target language” so as to communicate the ideas in the book. Pannwitz (1917) had an interesting insight on this score:

The fundamental error of the translator is that he stabilizes the state in which his own language happens to find itself instead of allowing his language to be powerfully jolted by the foreign language. (in Venuti 1995; 148)

Of course on my view, it is not that the translator’s language is changing so much as the translator is establishing a micro-language with the readers of the so-called translation. Direct coordination is out of the question, but assumptions about the knowledge and background of the audience will direct the way in which the micro-language is constructed.

4. Conclusion

The real mystery in all of this is the question of why persons find the myth of language so persuasive when they have so much evidence against it. To sustain the myth they must ignore the dynamical nature of human communication, the widespread coining and reissue of novel terminology, the pervasive divergence in pronunciation and meaning, the repair strategies, the debates over and refinements of meaning and the alternating deference and conflicts over meaning, and still cling to the idea that there is a thing there – a language – that is helping us to communicate. One wonders why everyone doesn’t come away with the impression expressed by James Joyce’s in *Finnegan’s Wake*:

Because, Soferim Bebel, if it goes to that... every person, place and thing in the chaosmos of Alle anyway connected with the gobblydumbed turkey was moving and changing every part of the time: the traveling inkhorn (possibly pot), the hare and the turtle pen and paper, the continually more or less intermisunderstanding minds of the anticollaborators, the as time went on as it will variously inflected, differently pronounced, otherwise spelled, changeably meaning vocable scriptsigns. No, so help me Petault, it is not a miseffectual whyacinthinous riot of blots and blurs and bars and balls and hoops and wriggles and juxtaposed jottings linked by spurts of speed: it only looks as like it as damn it.

Perhaps the problem is that we just cannot see how communication could emerge from this riot of blots and blurs and balls and hoops and wriggles; but somehow it does. If we are interested in *how* it does, then we need to retire the standard picture and begin investigating the nature of our linguistic coordination strategies, their origin, and use, and then we need to get about the business of rethinking those enterprises of ours that continue to rest upon the myth of human language.

Footnotes

- 1 Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Conference on Cognitive Systems as Representational Systems, Nicolaus Copernicus University, Torun, Poland (2004) and at the Conference on Meaning and Communication, Instituto de Filosofia da Linguagem, New University of Lisbon, Portugal (2005). Thanks to attendees for discussion (some noted below) and to Patrick Grim for comments on an earlier draft.
- 2 Thanks to discussion with Rob Stainton here.
- 3 Thanks to Liz Camp and Barry Smith for discussion.
- 4 In "A Nice Derangement of Epitaths," Donald Davidson offers a similar thesis. "I conclude that there is no such thing as a language, not if language is like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed. There is therefore no such thing to be learned, mastered, or born with. We must give up the idea of a clearly defined shared structure which language-users acquire and then apply to cases."(446) My view is that Davidson's conclusion is correct, but only *half* correct. I agree that there is no such thing as language (construed as I believe Davidson construes it). What doesn't seem at all clear to me is why we "must give up the idea of a clearly defined shared structure which [human agents] acquire and then apply to cases." And while I agree that there is no such thing as language, my reasons for thinking this are rather different than Davidson's. In short, Davidson is half right, but for the wrong reason.
- 5 This distinction between the FLN and the LCS sounds like the traditional distinction between syntax and semantics on the one hand and pragmatics on the other, but matters are not so tidy. I am assuming that core syntax and the basic rules of semantics are indeed determined by the FLN, but I am also assuming that the lexicon straddles the FLN and the LCS. Lexical items are thus strange hybrid creatures that have their skeletons anchored by the FLN, and have their full meanings fleshed out by the LCS.
- 6 For a good general introduction to this type of phenomena, see Stewart (1998).
- 7 Thanks to Paul Pietroski for discussion here.
- 8 The term 'entrainment' appears to be a metaphorical extension of the use of the term to describe the process by which coupled oscillators become synchronized. See Watts (1999; 225-226) for discussion.
- 9 John Hawthorne suggested to me that maybe the relevant Sorites scale is along another dimension: "maybe if Secretariat were a bit more human." Suppose Secretariat could talk like Mr. Ed, do basic math, run on two legs, etc. Would this change minds? Um, I think not. And I have no idea if Hawthorne was serious or just messing with my head.
- 10 There are technical issues that I am avoiding here, not least of which is the logic of underspecification. How do inferences work when meanings are incomplete or underspecified? For a sample of work on this topic see van Deemter and Peters (1997).
- 11 This section was inspired by Henry Jackman.
- 12 Thanks to Liz Camp for discussion here.

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13 See Brennan and Schober (1999) for an illustration.

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In the fall of 1970, the main reading room opened on the first floor of Angell Hall. By 1973 Tanner owned approximately 1,200 monographs and subscribed to 50 journal titles. In 1975 Professor Tanner gave an additional donation which permitted the Library to open a second room. A third room, opened in 1996, serves both as a repository for journals, and as the Department's main seminar space.

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The Department acknowledges with gratitude the following individuals who made contributions during the period of July 1, 2004 through June 30, 2005.

Endowment Contributions

Mrs. Malcolm L. Denise, to enhance the Denise Philosophy Endowment, honoring Theodore C. Denise, B.A., '42, Ph.D., '55. Marshall M. Weinberg, A.B., '50, to enhance the Marshall M. Weinberg Endowment for Philosophy.

Annual Fund Contributions

Robert M. Andalman, A.B., '88	Alan B. Folz, A.B., '90, B.S., '90
Aaron C. Ahuvia, A.B., '85	Amit Gagger, B.S., '97, M.D., '00
Amedeo W. Armenti, A.M., '59, Ph.D., '59	Mark J. Gannon, A.B., '92
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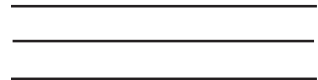
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