Language in Social Worlds

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Contents

List of Figures x
List of Tables xi
Preface xii
Acknowledgments xvi

1 The Contextual Framework for Social Psychology of Language in Communication: Aims and Issues 1

1.1 Introduction 1
1.2 The Nature of Verbal Communication 2
1.3 Semiotics 6
1.4 Terms of Reference in the Study of Language in Communication 10
1.5 Summary and Implications 12

2 Language in and out of Context: Structure and Substance 14

2.1 Language 14
2.2 Language as System and Language as Resource 17
2.3 How the English Language Works 23
2.4 Implications for the Study of Language in Communication 36

3 Functions of Language 41

3.1 Introduction 41
3.2 A Framework of Functions 46
3.3 A List of Functions – with Illustrative Introductory Comments 57
3.4 Commentary 64

4 Non-Verbal Communication (NVC) in Non-Human Creatures 69

4.1 Introduction 69
4.2 Avoiding Starvation and Predation 70
4.3 Achieving Reproduction 72
4.4 Criteria of Competitive Advantage 73
4.5 Animal NVC in Relation to Functions of Language 73
4.6 F1 to F9: Vocalization in the Eastern Phoebe: Ambiguities and their Resolution 77
4.7 Features Common to Animals and Human Beings 78
4.8 Discussion 80

5 Human Non-Verbal Communication 81

5.1 Introduction 81
5.2 Features of NVC 82
5.3 NVC in Relation to Functions of Language 91
5.4 Organizing NVC 92
5.5 NVC in the Wider Context of Communication 95
5.6 To Carry Forward 98

6 Encounter Regulation and Conversation 100

6.1 Preliminary 100
6.2 Introduction 101
6.3 Small Group Dynamics 103
6.4 Non-Verbal Communication (NVC) 104
6.5 Californian Linguistic Turns 106
6.6 First, Catch Your Interlocutor 110
6.7 Greetings are Special 111
6.8 Kinds of Encounters: Procedural Rules 112
6.9 Political Interviews 113
6.10 Legal Difficulties with DWI 114
6.11 New Modes of Encounter 118
6.12 Old Mode of Encounter: Conversation 121
6.13 Conceptual Frameworks 127
6.14 Commentary 131

7 Regulation of States and Behavior of Self and Others 133

7.1 F5a: Expression of States 133
7.2 F2: Regulation of Self 134
7.3 F3a and b: Regulation of States and Behavior of Others 136
7.4 Attitude Change 136
7.5 Compliance 139
7.6 Accounting 141

8 Regulation and Marking of Social Relationships: Shaking Hands, Terms of Address and Reference, and Being Polite 149

8.1 Introduction 149
8.2 The Act of Shaking Hands 150
8.3 S Addresses L or Refers to O 154
8.4 Politeness 161
8.5 The Role of Politeness in Human Behavior 166
8.6 Grice and Politeness 169
8.7 Accounting in Social Relationships 170
8.8 Complications 173

9 Marking of States, Identities, and Settings: Issues 175

9.1 Conceptual Distinctions and Clarifications 175
9.2 Stability and Change 179
9.3 Circles of Realities and Linkages to Truth 181
9.4 Summary 188

10 Marking of States, Identities, and Settings: Data and their Interpretation 189

10.1 Marking Emotional/Motivational States 189
10.2 Impressions of Others 193
10.3 A Taxonomy for Personality 197
10.4 Marking of Social Identity 203
10.5 Marking of Setting 207
10.6 Inference Processes: A General Comment 209
10.7 Articulating the Comments 211

11 The Representational Function (F7) 215

11.1 Setting the Scene 215
11.2 Domains of Representation 221
11.3 Extended Representations: Arguments 235
11.4 Arguing Crookedly 236
11.5 Crooked Arguments in Different Domains 237
11.6 Pro tem Conclusions 241

12 Mass-Mediated Communication: Spirals of Spin and Broken Swords of Truth 243

12.1 The Truth-Value of Statements and the Validity of Arguments in the Public Domain 243
12.2 The Mass Media 253
12.3 Raising the Stakes 259
12.4 Tyranny and the Media 264
12.5 Differential Access to Wisdom and Knowledge 266
12.6 Endpiece 272

13 Representation and Regulation: Their Relevance to Social Class 273

13.1 Bernstein 274
13.2 Mother–Child Interactions and the Representational Function 275
13.3 Commentary 282

14 Five Theories and a Representation-as-Default Thesis 285

14.1 Introduction 285
14.2 Language Expectancy Theories 287
14.3 Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) 291
14.4 Linguistic Category Model (LCM) 293
14.5 Linguistic Relativity and the Whorfian Hypothesis 295
14.6 The Representation-as-Default Hypothesis 300
14.7 Discussion 305

15 Retrospect and Prospect 308

15.1 Introduction 308
15.2 Cultural Contexts of Research 311
15.3 Conceptual Concerns 312
15.4 Approaches: Functional/Structural versus Structural/Functional Approaches 314
15.5 What is to Count as Evidence 315
15.6 Methodological Diversity: Advantages and Pitfalls 317
15.7 Participants, Materials, and Procedures 327
15.8 Data 329
15.9 The Changing Games in Changing Social Worlds 330
15.10 The Whorfian Challenge and Beyond 332

References 338
Name Index 357
Subject Index 363

Figures

Figure 1.1	Shannon and Weaver's Model for Communication	4
Figure 3.1	Functions of Language Distinguished by Focus of Attention	49
Figure 8.1	Brown and Levinson's Five-point Hierarchy	163
Figure 9.1	Some Layers of Reality	183
Figure 11.1	Issues of Precedence in Discussions about Constructions of Realities	223

Tables

Table 2.1 Hockett's (1958) Design Features of Human Spoken Language 16
Table 2.2 Language as System and Resource 18
Table 2.3 Language Structure and Content 24
Table 3.1 Functions and Forms of Language 51
Table 6.1 Speaker and Auditor Signals Hypothesized for the Turn System 105
Table 7.1 Strategies for Obtaining Compliance 142
Table 7.2 Typology of Compliance-Gaining Strategies 143
Table 10.1 Characteristics of Vocal Expressions Contained in the Test of Emotional Sensitivity 191
Table 11.1 Strengths and Weaknesses of English as a Scientific Language 220
Table 15.1 Approaches: Emphases and Contrasts 318

Preface

If an aspiring author is foolhardy enough to attempt to write about language in communication from a social psychological perspective, problems peculiar to that choice of topic have to be faced. The text itself will include references to what is involved in the achievement of effective communication. Questions will be raised about the extent to which speakers and writers take into account the current understanding of listeners and readers. Successful verbal communication might at some point be defined as:

> Not to let a word get in the way of a sentence,
> Not to let a sentence get in the way of its intention,
> But to send your mind out to meet the intention – as you would a guest –
> that is understanding. (Mencius)

Is the author sensitive to such issues in writing about language in communication? Is due heed paid to the implicit prescription? Are the messages conveyed and received accurately? To fail to communicate is like writing badly about how to write well. It is threateningly embarrassing, and any measure of failure comes too late for correction. A precautionary face-saving device is to point to the difference between knowing that something is so and knowing how to do it, but the awareness of the logical validity of this distinction does not necessarily serve to quieten the soul. What are the current states of knowledge and belief about language in communication held by students of any age majoring in psychology in Montana, Sao Paulo, Lagos and Singapore, assuming that their concerns have sufficient in common to render the question sensible and that they are fortunate enough to be reading this volume?

One can guess and trust that they will have acquainted themselves with

the contents of one of the encyclopaedic American-style introductory psychology texts. Unfortunately this is unlikely to have mentioned the social psychology of language!

All readers will have much experience of language in use, but it will not be assumed that they have made a formal study of it at tertiary level. Hence the first three chapters are intended to serve as an introduction to the constituents of language, how they fit together, and how their articulation comes to render it a vehicle for communication.

What general knowledge and beliefs can be presupposed as common to all readers? What Mencius did not mention in the opening quotation was that successful communication depends on using what is shared as a basis for introducing the new. This is now very difficult. There is no global culture. There are no shared myths and legends. There is no shared literature. Historical examples are doubly dangerous in that they may be either unfamiliar or slanted misleadingly. Just as the new can be developed from what is shared, the abstract can sometimes be best exemplified through apt illustrations, but these too lack global familiarity. Where examples are used in the text, attempts have been made to render them comprehensible even if unfamiliar.

More generally, is one writing for skeptics or enthusiasts, optimists or pessimists? Are specific items to be learned for recall in grade-related multiple-choice tests or is there a concern to find out answers to questions about language and its functioning in communication? I shall assume that serious students have something in common; they are trying to find out which beliefs about topics are the most plausible constructions currently available. They will be neither too skeptical nor too enthusiastic; they will not persist intemperately with demands for evidence on matters psychological too greatly in excess of the demands they make for accepting the reasonableness of other beliefs they hold, but neither will they be too easily seduced by exciting ideas or persuasive gurus. They will exhibit patient respect for what authorities can give good reasons for believing, but will wish to probe the validity of such ideas against their own experience. Their eyes will be open and their ears will be alert outside the laboratory as well as within it. They will know how to evaluate the quality of evidence. They will not make a fetish of one technique or method to the general disparagement of others, but will see that methods are to be judged in relation to the kind of question being posed. They can accept and see that some explanations are better than others and why. Problem-centred and truth-seeking, they realise that while simplicity is to be preferred to complexity, reality is often complex and not immediately amenable to unmodified generalizations. Conceptual analysis is often a necessary preliminary ex-

ercise to be undertaken before academic or pragmatic progress can be made. On the other hand, while precision of definition is important, the discreteness and qualities of defined categories should not be pursued in excess of reality.

Most important of all perhaps, they will suspend judgment about the author and not categorise him as an "-ist" of any particular type. It seems to be a strange characteristic of social scientists that they have a propensity to classify each other with labels rather than ask what are the most sensible ways of investigating sensible questions. To save readers from coming to a false categorization, let me say that this particular volume is at risk of classification as being too eclectic. Some enthusiasts for "natural" data will find the citation of experimental findings anathema. From another perspective, hardline experimentalists may see some of the claims made as resting on uncritical interpretation of weak data, as too subjective and wishy-washy.

Ironically, social psychologists are the group of academics particularly concerned with the operation of *labels* and *stereotypes*, and the dangers of distortion and over-simplification that these can bring about. Forewarned, such readers will be careful to exercise restraint, focus on the best ways of conceptualizing relationships between what is written and what the writing is about, and reduce the significance of the personal and social identity of the authors to its proper irrelevance.

With such students in mind it becomes much easier to write. Such virtues of intellect are likely to be correlated with compassion and humor, so that their possessors will readily forgive mistakes and misjudgments! They will see irony as good-willed, humor as kindly, pomposity as simulated, and possible arrogance as modesty.

The structure of the text is orthodox, but the treatment does have peculiarities. First, the field is too large now for comprehensive coverage. The substantive topics selected are intended to exemplify the range and the different approaches available. There is an emphasis on the importance of being clear about conceptual foundations. Historically, too many social psychologists have been cavalier in their use of terms and prone to rush into the use of quickly administered and cheap measuring instruments, using readily available participants in premature experiments. The field has been too heavily driven by the cultural imperatives imposed on academics, and too little by the scientific issues. Hence, the emphasis here on the variety and eventual complementarity of approaches, methods, and techniques. It is not an oversight that the last chapter focuses on methodology. Neither is it an accident that some investigations are described and evaluated in considerable detail, whilst for others their results and inter-

pretations are reported briefly. The variety of ways of finding out answers to questions has to be considered for all questions posed, and it is hoped that the detailed descriptions may help in this regard.

A final feature that may be seen as a personal bias is one that I see as a fundamental heuristic in any scientific endeavor. For any issue, data on the one hand and descriptions and explanations on the other, should be in dynamic dialectical relations with each other, with neither rushing too far ahead of the other. In a new field, this normally means starting out with natural observation and case studies, until it becomes feasible to describe the phenomena well enough to shift into systematic large-scale studies that may include surveys and experiments guided by hypotheses. Insofar as these are successful, it will be the "error variance" participants who are most interesting for further investigation. Why do they not act in accordance with the explanations being subjected to testing? The reasons may be trite, but they may also be important. These cyclical operations have stood other disciplines in good stead over the years, and it will be to the advantage of social psychology of language when we design studies fit for current purposes rather than because we have been socialized into a particular ideology.

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The University of Bristol and its Department of Experimental Psychology have generously provided me with the material resources to bring this book to completion. I am pleased to thank Elizabeth Robinson and Brian Richards for their clear and straightforward comments on parts of the manuscript. I have not molested the ever active Howard Giles for his zippy insights on this occasion, but I am delighted to note our collaboration over the last thirty years in the promotion of the study of language and social psychology. Our hopes for the development of a Research Center for Language and Communication did not materialize, but it has been very satisfying organizing conferences and handbooks with Howard. If Britain itself has been slow to recognize that the social psychological perspective is central to the study of language in communication, at least some of her ex-colonies have taken up the challenge, with Howard as a lead pioneer.

Chapter 1

The Contextual Framework for a Social Psychology of Language in Communication: Aims and Issues

1.1 Introduction

Asleep we escape the pleasures and pains of interacting with other people. Waking, we face another day, and this brings with it the necessity of coordinating our behavior with that of other people. Unless we are hermits or members of societies where maximal silence is held to be a virtue, this coordination will require that we communicate with other human beings. Language may well invade our activities before breakfast, and we may not be able to guarantee safety from speech again until the last goodnight has been said. We can telephone around the globe from almost anywhere to almost anywhere. If we are to participate in our societies we need to be able to read and write. We can fax and e-mail, again on an international scale, if we so choose. And in the next few years we can look forward to visual as well as auditory internet connections, supplemented with conversions between speech and writing and simultaneous translations into a variety of languages. We converse. We know roughly how to interpret what others say, write, and do, more or less. We know how to speak and act, and they manage likewise. But what do we know? And how do we manage?

To answer these questions, persons with scientific pretensions will want to analyze what goes on in communication. They will find out what is already believed or known. They will observe what happens. They will try to construct descriptions and explanations of plausible kinds. They will take everyday activities apart, separating out the bits and pieces and exploring the relationships between them. They will look for regularities and patterns, all the time trying to make sense of what they observe and endeavoring to express this sense symbolically in terms that others can understand. They will try to classify. It is a hazardous business.

1.2 The Nature of Verbal Communication

It is good to be able to record that studies of non-verbal communication in human beings and other creatures have flourished impressively over the last half century without the emergence of fundamental methodological and philosophical conflicts (Cappella & Palmer, 1990; Patterson, 2001; chapters 4 and 5). In contrast, the study of verbal communication has been and is suffering from pronounced disagreements, some of which can be viewed as unproductive and destructive. Others are simply irritating issues that are commonly present in young fields where key concepts still lack accepted definitions. Since much of the rest of the book reviews the substantial progress made in the theoretical and empirical study of topics at the intersect of language and social psychology, it is perhaps most useful to focus early on some of the issues of conflict in the frames of reference within which the study of language and social psychology is taking place, and to seek reconciliation among those in which the oppositions posed are unnecessary, false, or are in fact productive tensions within language and its usage. This will mean attending to some of the most elementary and fundamental issues, such as the very conceptualization of verbal communication, the nature and use of language, and the methodological issues associated with questions about the kinds of evidence which are to count as a basis for holding well-founded beliefs and within which kind of epistemological framework these are to be generated and evaluated (see chapters 11 and 15).

Successful communication between human beings incorporates encoding, production, transmission, reception and decoding within already shared frames of reference; for example, what is novel can be assimilated or accommodated to only when it becomes linked to what is already shared contextually. This apparently innocuous claim can of course be shown to cover many contestable issues. It is inherent in the nature of communication with speech or writing that its delivery and reception is sequential; it is impossible to say at once all that is intended. Hence, as already mentioned, it will be important for readers to avoid premature categorization of the writer of this text with any particular stereotype. To proceed, we shall need to analyze the components of communication and the relationships between them, and at this point I am caught on the horns of a dilemma. The strongest binary contrast in approaches to human communication is between starting with such technical problems as transmitting signals along a telegraph wire and gaining a purchase on the semiotic systems of whole cultures. Let me hasten to say that both of these will

be addressed. However, I have found that while introductory semiotics is more commonly perceived as being full of exciting questions and insights, the advantages of these surprises are prone to dissipate as students become overwhelmed by the divergent possibilities of interesting questions. Once switched into the game, observant eyes, ears, noses, tongues or skins connected to active brains can proliferate an infinity of pertinent but uncoordinated questions. It becomes feasible and scientifically defensible to write a research monograph on the meanings and significance of the discernible details and their relationships of just one page of a newspaper, one TV news broadcast, one choir singing, five minutes of a psychiatric interview, a handshake, an almost anything. Generating questions to pose is easy; answering many of them and evaluating the value of the answers can be the work of more than a lifetime. How do we select what is worth doing from the array? How do we save our brains from being overwhelmed by what we find out? And how do we prevent our ideas from soaring into wild interpretations and implausible world-views?

The first question is unanswerable. One answer to the second is to start with the smaller and simpler. One answer to the third is to demand at least some empirical evidence to support claims made. Of course, we then have to agree on what will constitute adequate evidence, and we need to require that empirical evidence and descriptive/interpretive accounts of phenomena act as reciprocating constraints on each other. Data need to be evidence relevant to some issue. Ideas need to be anchored in plausible constructions of experience.

By such a route I am retreating to a justification for introducing communication as coded signals travelling as impulses along wires or through the atmosphere, before facing up to the cornucopia of semiotics. The initial model to be presented is skeletal and incomplete, emphasizing as it does a single message travelling in one direction only and focusing on the message rather than its origin and fate. This model can be and was expanded in due course to cope with multiple sequential exchanges occurring between real people through real time in real contexts.

Meanwhile, to begin at a beginning. Shannon and Weaver (1949) developed a model of information transmission that has become known as the *Conduit Theory of Communication*. It was not and is not a theory. It simply lists some of the components to be considered in any single communicative act. Referring to it as a conduit was intended to give the idea of a wire down which signals travel, relaying a message that emerges at the other end. Shannon and Weaver were primarily concerned with telecommunication and radio problems and the reduction in loss of information between source and destination. The model also presupposes that the en-

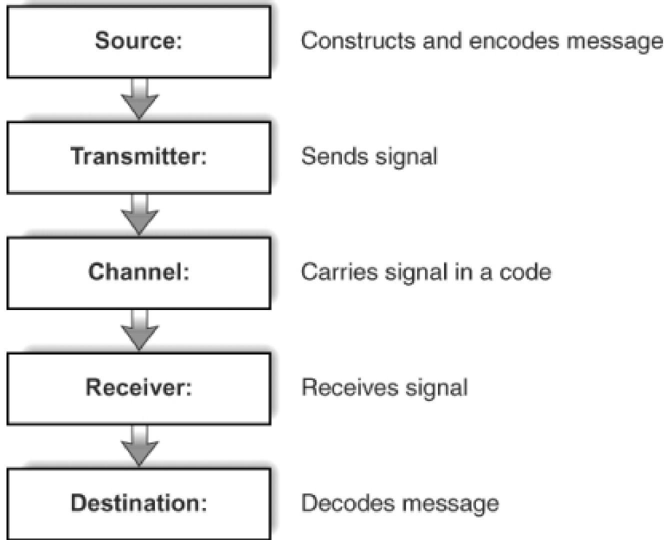

Figure 1.1 Shannon and Weaver's Model for Communication.

coder is intending to reduce uncertainty with the transmission, and knows how to reduce uncertainty, neither of which is necessarily the case in human communication. Here, the object is to introduce the basic model rather than report and evaluate its measures of success and its limitations across the whole range of its applications. One of the key concepts, *noise*, will not figure in this account, which is confined to the other five: *source*, *transmitter*, *channel*, *receiver*, and *destination*, along with the concepts of *signal*, *messages*, *medium* and *code*.

There is nothing contentious in selecting the nine features as components to be considered. If we wish, we can pursue any one of them into levels of greater complexity or specificity. We can apply the model from problems of the warning colors of wasps (black and yellow) through to human beings using private *ciphers* to mean the opposite of what they say. Before we ask more detailed questions about the code itself, we can ask the dangerously idealistic question about the true (real) meaning of any message. This has proved to be one of the great stumbling block to progress, and is one example of a false presupposition leading to a false opposition about the nature of both language and communication. Each candidate advanced as having the right to define the "real meaning" of a message can be shown to be unsatisfactory. If we claim that the *speaker's intentions* have the strongest claim, we may observe that the message itself may not

be a culturally correct realization of the intentions, either in construction or delivery – or both. Wrong units (for example words) may be selected, either out of ignorance or anxiety. What is intended as a compliment may be delivered insultingly. How can we be sure of what the speaker's intentions were? We cannot be.

If we exclude intention, and suggest that the meanings of messages can be defined objectively, then it should be the case that there will be a cultural consensus as to the "real meanings" among proficient users of the language. Disagreements should not arise. If they do, one line of argument would be to invoke the defensible hypothesis of sub-cultural differences in meanings of the same patterns. But fruitful as such a defence can be initially, it will ultimately fail. The "real meaning" can only be in the text if the contextual presuppositions are shared fully. This entails of course that the meaning is *not* in the text, but in a cultural consensus. Involving abstractions such as the *generalized other* or the *typical member of the culture* will not salvage the situation, because their perceptions are necessarily not objective. The third possibility of defining the "real meaning" as the *interpretation of the reader* or hearer, shares comparable weaknesses to the other two possibilities. Interpreters have no special status as objective judges.

The rejection of all three of these possibilities might then be used to advance the idea that the true meanings are not the privilege of any one party, but are simply a matter of *negotiation* among the participants. If that is so, there is no true meaning. However this position of meaning as being negotiated has also been pushed to a *reductio ad absurdum* argument that the transmission model of communication should be abandoned in favor of fuzzy flexible perspectives, that will permit creative constructions by individuals who will be freed from the constraints heretofore imposed upon them. It could be argued that this position is self-destructive as well as self-contradictory. Since generally the use of shared conventions is the essence of the systems, particular changes have to be negotiated and cannot be asserted and demanded by individuals; otherwise Humpty Dumpty ends up talking to himself alone, or worse.

Since human beings seem to manage to communicate with language more or less successfully much of the time, perhaps those asking about true meanings have posed inappropriate questions. *Information Theory* was intended to provide ways of analyzing reductions (and increases) in uncertainty in transmission and not its elimination in its generation. Communication can reduce uncertainty, but it cannot eliminate it. Such a position copes with what may be defended as the most rational construction of reality without giving rise to a claim that there is an objective reality that could be discovered. In cases where some party claims that

communication failure has occurred and where for some reason it is decided to allocate blame for the failure, there will be examples where it would be pragmatically silly not to blame one or other of the participants, but peculiar defences may well be made. In 1998 the President of the USA invoked a legal rather than a commonsense definition of "sexual relations" to justify the claim that he had not lied under oath: no communication failure and no lie. Later he changed his mind.

However, the focus on the transmission/reception components did lead to a relative neglect of the activities of the people, the encoder and decoder. The terms of *source*, *transmitter*, *receiver* and *destination* are still being attacked as implying passivity, an absence of agency, and a neglect of constructive/interpretive activities, even though it was as early as 1956 that Gerbner elaborated on and humanized these components. This should have precluded further adverse criticism of the model for being mechanical and passive.

In Gerbner's model, a human source actively selects and interprets from the external (or internal) environment what is to be encoded into a message, and the receiver is similarly an active interpreter of messages. Source and receiver can be interactive, and clearly are if conversing, and hence meanings and significance can both be negotiated. With his own special interest in media, Gerbner himself was more concerned with what the controllers of media select for transmission and what is made available to an audience, but his flow-chart could represent a conversation equally well.

1.3 Semiotics

The conduit model is not alone in having been misrepresented by subsequent critics for failing to achieve what it was not intended to achieve; it was indeed limited by its point of departure, but not as much as some antagonists pretend. Semiotics is the science of signs in all their realizations and given this scope, it is not surprising that semiotic approaches too have been a victim of the orientations of their progenitors. Semiotics has been further handicapped by its multi-discipline origins and continuing variety of practitioners. Peirce, the philosopher (1931–1935/1955) introduced an analysis of a relational approach between the signifier and signified, as the basis of the signification linkage to "meaning". The resultant triangle linked *sign*, *interprant*, and *object* to each other. Part philosophical, part literary critical, Ogden and Richards (1923) introduced a somewhat different triangle in which *reference* as thought was linked to a

referent on the one hand and a *symbol* on the other, so that the symbol can *stand for* the reference. Both of these similar approaches were attempts to escape from the tangles and muddles that had engulfed philosophers such as Mill, Frege, Wittgenstein, and others who had difficulties in distinguishing between sense and reference (Mill, 1873), denotation and connotation (Frege, 1980), semantic and associative meaning, and the relationships between symbolic propositions and what they appear to be about (Wittgenstein, 1951; 1922/1961). The last continues to figure as a central concern (for example Davidson, 1984; 1986; Putnam, 1988; Rorty, 1991).

Independently, the linguist de Saussure (1925/59) had been developing his ideas on the distinctions between *langage, langue*, and *parole* (terms are defined in section 1.4), which also remain of crucial importance, but continue to be neglected by some monolingual English-speaking social scientists. Semioticians cite his observation that *signs* (symbols) gain their *significance* by virtue of contrasts with other signs in the *system*. In a sequence of signs, questions of both the sequence selected (*syntagmatic*) and the choices at each point in the sequence (*paradigmatic*) are important for meaning. (In non-linguistic systems more general questions of juxtaposition than sequence can arise, and in linguistic systems patterns of *collocation* [co-occurrence] are also important.)

From these three origins in particular, various systems for classifying signs have been developed, with comments being offered about the ways in which they function in a cultural context. Typically the materials used are referred to as *texts*, a term which can be extended to any cultural artefact(s). If, for example, a page of a newspaper is chosen, then a general question would ask which conventions of the culture are being used to convey what kinds of ideas. Questions can range from the size, shape and quality of the page, through the types of arrangement of language texts, photographs, and other graphics, to which items have been selected for reporting and how these have been framed. The Glasgow Media Group (1976) provide classic examples of such ideas in their analyzes of news broadcasts. It is not surprising that those who control the media should encourage particular perspectives through what they present and the way they present issues. It is the task of semioticians to find out how particular *readings* (interpretations) are encouraged by the devices available, and it could be their task to find out which readings are in fact adopted by which readers. This is certainly an activity for social psychologists to engage in. The citing of a verbal/visual example of presuppositions here should not be seen as excluding other domains; the issues are omnipresent in our everyday experience. Analysis of oil paintings through time and across

cultures can be subjected to comparable treatment, as can clothes and ornaments worn, literature, or any other type of artefact.

Such activities have been very productive in generating ideas that have helped to raise explicit questions about matters previously treated as unproblematic or natural. They have been used to demonstrate how taken-for-granted "facts" should not be taken for granted. They have raised consciousness in particular about the moral qualities of our cultures and societies, including many of the false beliefs underpinning matters of procedural and distributive justice.

Unfortunately, the field has also generated its own difficulties. Where is the true meaning in an artefact or text? It is probably fair to say that opinions have been polarized between locating the true meaning as either in the text or in the *reader*, with the speaker or writer often conflated with the text. Either position can be criticized along identical lines to those used against the Conduit Model. We can never be sure what the intentions of the creator were. We can never be sure that the creator's product instantiates the intention. Which readers are to be credited with the right to decide which reading is correct? If a particular reading is "preferred" by experts, this does not transcend its subjectivity.

If the advocates of the expert approaches were to be criticized for just one characteristic, it would have to be for their predispositions to assume that their ingenious personal explanations of the richness of texts bear any correspondence either to the intentions of the creators or more importantly perhaps, to the interpretations of or influences upon ordinary readers. Such stories are often advanced and disseminated without any checks on their empirical validity; if they are not so evaluated, then they remain as plausible hypotheses awaiting testing. Not all experts make such unsupported claims.

In contrast, if the advocates were to be commended for just one strength, it might be their emphasis on the *multiplicity of meanings* available in texts (discourse or whatever material is being examined). Eco (1979) introduced a distinction between *closed* and *open* texts. A closed text is one where the reader has in theory only one plausible interpretation, the author having structured the meanings to minimize possibilities of other readings. An open text is not one where interpretations are impossible, but one with multiple possibilities, and in the light of the information provided, offer a bundle of options. His illustrations are literary rather than conversational. In narrative stories about crime detection or espionage, for example, the author typically leads the reader along a single track using a variety of literary devices to puzzle, excite, frustrate and otherwise retain the reader's attention on a predestined train of thought. This does not mean that

there are no ambiguities or vagueness. It does not mean that the narrative has to follow a linear sequence of real time. The primary focus is on the eventual discovery of who has been deceiving who about what – an exposure of the constructed reality.

This kind of story contrasts with those depicted in the film *Rashomon* or Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet* novels; in each of these, the same events are played out from three different perspectives. As viewers or readers, we can appreciate this multiplicity of personal agendas. The use of repetition renders the multiplicity explicit. More commonly the uncertainties are left for individual characters (and readers) to interpret and act upon.

Insofar as many novels are narratives in which biographies of characters are woven together, they bear clear similarities to real life. Films and plays more so, since they add a visual channel. Soap operas go one step further in that their regular and long-term serialization add a continuity of years or even decades. The audiences they attract on a regular basis can extend to nearly half a country's population. Currently Britain has four indigenous TV soaps: two urban, with predominantly working class/lower middle class characters, one rural, and one suburban upwardly mobile. As Livingstone (1998) argues and demonstrates, these offer open texts whose characters have entered into the lives of their audiences as "real" people facing comparable difficulties and problems. The episodes provide ideas for ways of overcoming or resolving such difficulties, as well as setting up topics for conversation and characters for evaluation.

The study of ways in which these long-standing narratives mesh psychologically into the everyday lives of real people could help to re-anchor social psychology into the world it is expected to describe and explain. For the present, *narrative analysis* (see Sunwolf & Frey, 2001) in its various forms is not mainstream, but just as various forms of Conversational and Discourse Analysis have drawn attention to units and structures larger than that of the main clause and its coordinate and subordinate attachments, so narrative analysis may encourage an elaboration of those social–cognitive and attitudinal approaches which have adopted what is essentially a hypothetico–deductive model to single judgments in abstracted situations.

Whilst it is not strange that social psychologists would seek to generate theoretical models that can explain single judgments or actions in terms of general properties of the person in context, such judgments may be no more than task-specific reflective comments and in fact may bear little relation to the mechanisms that typically drive the scripts of the everyday talk and other actions of most people most of the time. Schank and Abelson (1977) are normally credited with the introduction of *Script Theory*, which

was an attempt to describe behavior sequences in semi-ritualized contexts. Scripts for speech and writing, for monologues, dialogues, and polylogues can also be devised and tested for their descriptive generality. Combinations of narrative analysis and script theory have more than begun to have their status as explanatory models of behavior recognized (Abelson & Lalljee, 1988; Antaki, 1988; Cody & McClaughlin, 1990).

How these various approaches to verbal communication will come to be collated remains to be seen. There are clear kernels of importance, relevance, and validity in each. Their diversity in part reflects the frightening breadth of topics embraced by the concept of verbal communication. Some of the possible claims or emphases have already been explored to some limiting *reductio ad absurdu*m. Now their virtues need to be articulated.

1.4 Terms of Reference in the Study of Language in Communication

So far, a number of everyday words have been used in technical senses, and some novel words have also been introduced. At this stage it may be useful to specify how which words will be used in this text. Difficulties arise from several sources. One is that English may not make a binary contrast with two opposing words that cover the range, for example above/below. While these mark two opposite vertical directions relative to an object, there is no single term for either above nor below, and "not above" means either at the same height or below! Another is that English may not make the distinctions needed, neither in its everyday usage or in its specially developed technical vocabularies. A third is that different academic disciplines, or even different persons within the same discipline, may use the same term with different meanings or different terms with the same meaning.

Even "communication" itself is not without its difficulties. For a display or action to be communicative, does its originator have to *intend* to communicate? Here no such requirements will be made. Those who wish to render intention integral to communication have difficulties referring to animal displays and much human behavior.

French makes useful distinctions with *langage* as the superordinate term embracing both *langue* and *parole*, with langue being used to refer to the language system and parole to its use. English has three phrases for coping with the phenomena of parole: speech and writing, verbal behavior, and language use (or more rarely language behavior). Do each of these three include the vocalic/graphical? My guess is that while almost all linguists

would include vocalic/graphical features within linguistics, most social psychologists would treat them as components of non-verbal behavior, probably on the grounds that the meanings are not being carried by the phonemics, lexico–grammar, and semantics of the language system. Fortunately, these are issues of labelling at a super ordinate level only. The area of vocalic features with its three sub-areas is distinctive, and graphology has been a recognized legitimate area of study for years, even if to date the inferences drawn about character and personality on the basis of handwriting have not stood up to systematic empirical testing. Social psychologists have been disposed to link the vocalic with the non-verbal for two main reasons. One is that those interested in non-verbal communication (NVC) have invariably asked about NVC in animals, many of which have vocal but not verbal capacities, and one question typically posed here, and discussed in chapter 4, relates to how much can be communicated without involving language. The other reason is connected with the first in that the functions of the vocalic and the other non-verbals are prone to be treated as comparable to each other and contrastive with those of language.

One danger of separating the vocalic from the verbal, even for analytic purposes, will be apparent through most of this text. Transcriptions of speech are frequently reduced to be similar to this text, i.e. no vocalic indicators are recorded. If the Stanislavsky method school of acting required its students to be able to say "hello" in more than 50 ways, these presumably had over 50 distinguishable sub-purposes beyond the common one of greeting. As is illustrated in chapter 11, "the cat is on the mat" may be semantically equivalent regardless of which word is stressed, but where the stress falls is determined by which of six different questions it is an answer to.

Conversational and discourse analysts (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Turnbull, 1992) have developed transcription rules that go beyond ordinary prose in certain respects, but these do not include all the variations in pitch, volume, duration, and timbre that an expert in prosodics might require, and they are both comparatively light on paralinguistic and extralinguistic information. In polite English society, no one would ask whether John tells lies, but if the question were posed, then the answer should be the equivalent of "Oh no," with the delay in the reply determining whether this actually meant "Yes."

Even with the selection of terms met so far, the issue of different terms with the same meaning, and the same terms with different meanings remains unresolved. Barthes (1968) uses *denotation* for the object referred to by a word and *connotation* for the individual person's total set of experien-

tial associations of the object. This contrasts with the consensus among philosophers who agree on denotation as reference, but treat connotation as comprising the criterial or prototypical features of the concept as a semantic unit; it provides the comparative and contrastive qualities mentioned by de Saussure. Psychologists are as careful as philosophers in distinguishing between *semantic* (connotative) and *associative* meaning, but 'associative' is used for the same purpose as Barthes uses "connotation." No discipline has developed the minimally differentiating three terms to cope with denotation, connotation in the philosophers' sense, and associative meaning used by psychologists. Here *denotation* will be used for reference. *Connotation* and *semantic sense* will be treated as synonymous, and used to refer to the sets of criterial or prototypical characteristics that define or capture the concept, i.e. their sense. Ideally this specification would include all the similarities to and differences from cognate and hence confusable concepts. If one follows Wittgenstein's proposal that the meaning of a word is its use, then this is its semantic sense, provided that there is a consensus among competent users. "Associative" meaning will be used to refer to the personal experience of the words and their referents.

It is to be regretted that terms central to the whole enterprise remain sources of discord and muddle, and there is no way that suggestions offered here are likely to do more than evoke feelings of further regret that we cannot arrange for an *Academie de Communication* to recommend to all relevant journals and publishers and the invisible college of scholars as to which term is to be used to mean what. We lag way behind biologists, chemists, geologists, and physicists in agreeing terms. Some colleagues are simply carefree and careless in not including definitions of terms in the text or in glossaries and inventing their own usage unnecessarily. It is to be hoped that this section will help to carry the reader through the text.

1.5 Summary and Implications

The chapter has referred to mundane conversational exchanges, the reflective thinkings of scientists, and the wider contexts of the studies of communication. Any culture is embedded geographically and historically, with a selection of its natural and humanly created objects and events being accorded symbolic significance. While social psychologists have been inclined to focus on the two-person face-to-face (FtF) conversational dyad as having some special significance as the prototypical interactive set of processes, we have to acknowledge the relevance of the givens of climates and cathedrals, TVs and mobile phones, rituals and uniforms, museums

and theme-parks, flora and fauna. The semioticians are entirely right to draw attention to the plethora of possible and actual extra-linguistic vehicles of meanings influencing our lives. Language may be used to refer to and exploit these, but it is easy to see that they also have non-verbal power. Someone desecrating a war memorial might be lynched without words being spoken. A person wearing an invented uniform may derive authority from it. It is no accident that the price of red roses rises for St. Valentine's Day. A setting sun on a Mediterranean verandah can create an ambience that is difficult to achieve in an Arctic blizzard. We shall meet these considerations again in chapter 2 and Table 2.3, where the point will be stressed that all language use occurs in particular contexts that will be relevant to its likely meanings and significance.

That our routine daily contexts are typically treated as shared givens is liable to cause us to ignore how much they presuppose and lead us into the temptation to dash straight into the structures and processes of the conversations which make up the commonest form of language use by individuals in our kind of society, but we must delay. So what is this language system whose use is so liable to be taken for granted?

CHAPTER 2

Language in and out of Context: Structure and Substance

2.1 Language

According to Morris (1946) language is composed of

1 A plurality of arbitrary signs, which have
2 A common significance to a group of organisms,
3 A significance independent of the immediate situation, and
4 That are produced as well as received by the users;
5 It is a system in which signs are articulated by certain rules of combination.

In an extended treatment of such a definition we would need to define and defend the choices of *arbitrary*, *sign*, *significance*, *independent of the immediate situation*, *system*, *articulated* and *rules of combination*, but as it stands, the recommendation helps to set the scene.

The signs of a language may be made up of units of sound that can be represented in the International Phonetic Alphabet by symbols like [p], [i] and [n] (see Crystal, 1998). They may be made up of visible marks like *pin*. Many languages have both systems, with variable and varying degrees of isomorphism between them. Very few languages rely on fewer than 25 of either. The phrase "group of organisms" does not exclude non-human beings, but arguments about the competence of other species are probably trivial in the sense that the answers arrived at depend upon the definitions chosen; we can continue to investigate the natural and human-initiated capacities of other creatures (and machines) without prejudice as to whether we label the systems they come to master as *languages*. The signs are not to be combined in haphazard fashion. To have meaning and significance only certain combinations are acceptable among adults, and those

combinations are associated with particular meanings and significance. Acts of speech and writing can transcend the here-and-now, escaping the immediate limits of time and space; they can refer to the past or future as well as the present, to the *there* as well as the *here*.

Other definitions mention additional characteristics such as a facility for constructing novel sentences and a reliance upon cultural rather than genetic means for intergenerational transmission (Hockett, 1958: see table 2.1). For Chomsky (1957) the essence of language resides in its facility for pairing patterns of sound with patterns of meaning. Since patterns (structures) are constructed from units combined in accordance with specifiable rules, this comment is consistent with Morris's definition and serves to highlight a feature left obscure by him.

Morris did not mention *meaning*, which will be treated here as different from *significance*. One can ask what significance for action the meaning of a pattern has. In the European Union the meaning of a road sign with a bent shape upon it is that there is a bend in the road just ahead; the significance for action is that any driver travelling too fast to negotiate that bend should prepare to reduce speed. Morris half-appears to jump over meaning (*semantics*) to arrive directly at significance (*pragmatics*). In contrast Chomsky does not proceed to the point of asking what people are likely to do or can be expected to do when they receive messages. It is not however surprising that Chomsky did not proceed to the extra-linguistic; in elaborating his concern to find rules that could generate grammatically acceptable surface structures of sentences from their deep structure constituents, it was inevitable that preservation of the elegance of the rules could be bought only at the price of postulated *ideal speakers* and of relegating the behavior of real speakers beyond the boundary of interest. To study structure in that manner, without attention to behavioral functions, not only resulted in ignoring substantial components of the study of language in communication, it thereby also missed solutions to some of the issues he himself tackled. It also deprived Chomsky of any source of evidence against which to check the truth–value of his hypotheses. The persistent inability or unwillingness of apologists for Transformational Grammar (TG) to state conditions for refuting the truth–value of any claim they were making should have been challenged earlier as being a symptom of mysticism replacing science; science must have checkable hypotheses. While Chomsky's ideas were being heralded as revolutionary for linguistics, a less time-bound observer might have viewed the move as one kind of structuralist replacing another (Bloomfield, 1935); neither approach seemingly being aware of more comprehensive views of language which were capable of posing different questions about language and its workings. The Prague school

Table 2.1 Hockett's (1958) Design Features of Human Spoken Language

1. Vocal-auditory channel
   (communication occurs by the producer speaking and the receiver hearing)
2. Broadcast transmission and directional reception
   (a signal travels out in all directions from the speaker but can be localised in space by the hearer)
3. Rapid fading
   (once spoken, the signal rapidly disappears and is no longer available for inspection)
4. Interchangeability
   (adults can be both receivers and transmitters)
5. Complete feedback
   (speakers can access everything about their productions)
6. Specialization
   (the amount of energy in the signal is unimportant; a word means the same whether it is whispered or shouted)
7. Semanticity
   (signals mean something: they relate to the features of the world)
8. Arbitrariness
   (these symbols are abstract; except with a few onomatopoeic exceptions, they do not resemble what they stand for)
9. Discreteness
   (the vocabulary is made out of discrete units)
10. Displacement
    (the communication system can be used to refer to things remote in time and space)
11. Openness
    (the ability to invent new messages)
12. Tradition
    (the language can be taught and learned)
13. Duality of patterning
    (only combinations of otherwise meaningless units are meaningful – this can be seen as applying both at the level of sounds and words, and words and sentences)
14. Prevarication
    (language provides us with the ability to lie and deceive)
15. Reflectiveness
    (we can communicate about the communication system itself, just as this book is doing)
16. Learnability
    (the speaker of one language can learn another)

(see Vachek, 1966 for a review) of linguists and the anthropologists/linguists deriving from Malinowski (1949) through Firth (1951) were not being trapped by a perspective that saw language only as a system.

Preferring the word "rule" to "system," Halliday (1978) traced a history of differential emphasis upon *language as rule* versus *language as resource* back into the mists of antiquity. In that framework, both Bloomfield (1935) and Chomsky (1957, 1965) became the heirs of Plato, classifying, abstracting, and generalizing from selected examples against ideals culled from some vision of what a classically-trained mind might wish language to be like. Meanwhile, politicians, lawyers, and advertising agents perpetuate the practical and degraded rhetorical tradition of the later Sophists. Earlier Sophists such as Protagoras were concerned with how language worked as a vehicle for persuasion and communication, just as the Prague school, Firth, and more recently Halliday (1978) have been concerned simultaneously with language as resource and language as rule.

2.2 Language as System and Language as Resource

Halliday (1978) opposed *rule* and *resource*. Somewhat diffidently, my current preference is to contrast *system* with *resource*. If we contrast the opposition of views of *language as system* with *language as resource*, and ask what other contrasts correlate with this, we find that the pair can be associated with a series of parallel oppositions that are not all entirely linguistic – neither are they quite parallel. However, if one were to ask whether the listing of any pair would be more sensible if it were reversed, the answer would be "no."

Part of the purpose of this book is to explore some of the reasons why there are associations between the sociological and psychological on the one hand and the linguistic on the other. In the meantime, let us note the absurdity of an exclusive emphasis on *either* language as system *or* language as resource. Language only developed and continues to develop as a system because it is a resource; the developments extend its utility. Language is only viable as a resource because it is a system whose particular units, rules and conventions are known, understood, accepted, and generally followed by a sufficient number of communicating people. This would seem to be obvious, and if it is, why is there so much disagreement and fuss?

The reasons are many, and differ from group to group and from individual to individual. For a few their beliefs may be simply an expression of their personality; some people find it difficult to submit to order, and oth-

Table 2.2 Language as System and Resource

LANGUAGE as SYSTEM	**LANGUAGE as RESOURCE**
Structure Unity	Function Diversity
Rule Observation Prescription	Flexibility Description
Correctness Propriety	Effectiveness
"Pure"	"Degenerate"
Knowing "that"	Knowing "how to"
Idealism Nominalism	Realism Pragmatism
Stability	Change
Conservative	Progressive Anarchic
Educated Cultivated Elite	Uneducated Earthy Ordinary

ers cannot cope with any threat to order. For others, the emphasis on one side rather than the other may be based on a judgment that the forces of the other side are becoming too strong at a particular point in time, and citing school curricula as their concern. If we ask questions about whether or not linguists are trying to describe or prescribe, the answer is that they are trying to describe. However, if we ask whether or not their products, such as grammar books and dictionaries, are descriptive or prescriptive, the mistake is to choose either answer. The correct answer is to ask about functions rather than the purposes, and then the answer is "Both." For example, at its inception, a dictionary may well describe how the dictionary-maker thinks some usually undefined but nevertheless highly literate

sample of persons in a language community do use or have used the words listed; what meanings these words were given and have acquired and to what uses they have been put. While prescriptive elements could easily enter into these processes, in theory the venture is a descriptive one. But once the dictionary is published, the meanings and uses listed will have prescriptive force. People will consult dictionaries to learn how to use words in accordance with what appear to be the conventions of the society. This will be especially true if the society has a formalized educational system whose authorities recommend and support the use of dictionaries. To deny that any grammar or dictionary has *de facto* prescriptive power is to ignore the realities of social processes. How are people to learn the conventions appropriate to the language use in their communities within which they communicate without prescription? One cannot use a system based on conventions unless one follows those conventions. Much learning, or even all of it, could be oral, but it will still be prescriptive, and once linguists intervene to describe and codify, the community members are likely to use the descriptions as the rules. Given that there is variability in the culture, any description is likely in itself to be an abstraction of norms. In any case, the speech of sub-cultures will change: sounds will shift, new words and structures will be constructed, and old ones will be given new meanings. If a change is accepted by certain groups then the norms of these groups will operate to encourage would-be members to use these forms. At present in the Western world, we can see these forces working vividly among teenagers and other special groupings such as drug-takers and geeks. The speech helps to identify a group member, just as the clothes or other actions help to identify one. One of the interesting features that might be claimed for the speech of such groups is its rate of change; this has the effect of isolating both outsiders and those whose membership is either half-hearted or lapsing. (Oddly enough, the facts of these matters have yet to be systematically documented.) While then linguists are correct in claiming that they can study rule systems without subscribing to those systems themselves, and while they may well believe that they are disinterested observers, the systems they are describing are socially prescriptive and necessarily so.

Of potentially equal interest to a social psychologist is the nature of the relationships between those who emphasize language as system and those who emphasize it as resource. While no one has studied this matter empirically, it would seem that extremists on the resource side (linguistic anarchists and extreme progressives) do not presently constitute a strong force in either the academic or the educational world. At the other pole, conservative extremists are a force in the land, and the conflict seems to

be mainly between those who are defending a view of language as system and those who insist on its dual character. The defenders seem to despise and fear the dualists. They argue for the preservation of proper pronunciation, correct grammar, for words having "real" meanings; it is wrong to sometimes split infinitives. The extreme position simply ignores the historical character of language. Most of those who argue the case for viewing language as resource endorse the validity of the positive case of those who assert the importance of language as system, but are themselves treated as though they are anarchists or creative eccentrics. This is a good example of the bible's assertion "Those who are not with us are against us" and its social psychological update as the assimilation/contrast hypothesis (Sherif & Hovland, 1961).

One way of beginning to answer some broader questions about the conflict is to ask why the attitudes are not reversed. A quick answer to that question might be that although one could conceive of a language in a state of total ossification, it is impossible to conceive of one in a state of perpetual anarchic change. The idea that individuals should shift the meanings of their phonological, lexico–grammatical, semantic and pragmatic rules continuously is both logically impossible and practically absurd. If the language system serves to send negotiable messages from one head to another, there must be some consensus about the meanings and significance of the constituents of the code. That perpetual substantial change is indefensible might explain why there are no extremists on the resource side. Maintenance of the status quo is a defensible if unpragmatic position to adopt and allows extremists on the language as system side to have a case.

Anarchists and progressives were linked in the diagram, and it is in part the failure of the conservatives to see the difference between the two that leads to the clash. With the measure of stability and consensus that English has achieved, it could be judged there are still very severe problems of individual and sub-cultural negotiations about meanings without encouraging excessive moves towards uniqueness of meanings. Although in one sense users of English individually have unique (associative) meanings for both the units and structures we use because we have unique biographies, in a more important sense our command of English cannot be a command of an individualized language – in this sense a "private language" is a self-contradictory concept. Barzun (1959) must be right when he points to the nonsense of a student defending a totally illegible handwriting on the grounds that at least it was his own; handwriting that is not legible even to its writer has ceased to be handwriting. Noises decodable to oneself only are not a language. While on the one hand we can argue against the dan-