Entry title: **Conventions in Language 1154**

Author(s):   **Max Kölbel**

Affiliation: **Philosophy Department, University of Birmingham**

Email address: ~~m.kolbel@bham.ac.uk~~   maxkolbel@yahoo.co.uk

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100-word abstract

It is uncontroversial that linguistic meaning is in some sense a matter of convention. However, there is lively debate on what exactly a convention of language is, as well as on the extent to which language is conventional. The entry focuses mainly on the first question. The main contenders here are those who view linguistic behaviour as a special case of intentional action, and those who view it as issuing from the workings of a dedicated Chomskian language module. On the question of the extent to which linguistic communication is conventional the answers range from "largely" to "hardly".

Independently of the question of what exactly linguistic meaning is (see entry on Meaning, philosophical theories of), a question arises as to the nature of its attachment to linguistic expressions: why does the word "banana" mean what it does rather than something else? Why doesn't some other word have the meaning that "banana" actually has? The answer almost everyone agrees upon is that it is a matter of convention that words mean what they do. Had there been different conventions of language, then words would have had different meaning. Views diverge, however, on the significance of the conventionality of language, on the question of what exactly a convention of language is, and on the extent to which meaning is conventional (as opposed to, say, inferential). In what follows the focus will be mainly on the second of these issues, i.e. on the nature of linguistic conventions.

Convention and analyticity

In the background of current thinking on language conventions is the attempt of the logical empiricists to explain a priori knowledge as knowledge of analytic truths, i.e. propositions that are true in virtue of meaning (Carnap 1947 and Ayer 1946. See entries on analytic/synthetic and a priori knowledge). An example are the truths of arithmetic: while Kant had thought they were synthetic (not true in virtue of meaning), Ayer and Carnap followed Frege in claiming that they are analytic, i.e. true by definition. Carnap extended this approach to modality: necessary truths are just those that are true in virtue of linguistic rules.

Conventionalism was opposed by Quine, who argued against Carnap that there is no coherent way of drawing a distinction between analytic and synthetic truths (Quine 1951, 1960). According to Quine, it is impossible to separate the conventional from the empirical ingredient of any truth, because every attempt to explicate analyticity will ultimately rely on some other inexplicable semantic notion, such as synonymy or possibility.

The debate between Carnap and Quine forms the historical background for recent efforts to explain in detail how language is conventional. The most influential account is that by David Lewis (1969, 1975), who provides a game-theoretic account of convention in general and then explains the specific nature of conventions of language within this framework. However, Lewis's account builds on Grice's earlier analysis of linguistic meaning in terms of speaker intentions.

Grice

Grice claims that linguistic meaning is ultimately a matter of the communicative intentions of speakers (Grice 1989). Grice starts by defining a notion of speaker meaning ("non-natural meaning") in terms of speaker intentions and then analyses the meaning of expression types in terms of their use by speakers to speaker-mean something with them (see entries on Grice, expression meaning vs utterance/speaker meaning). He defines speaker-meaning as follows: a speaker S speaker-means that p by uttering s just if in uttering s S intends his or her audience to think that (S believes that) p on the basis of the audience's recognition of that very intention (Grice 1989, 213–223 and 123). For Grice, the meaning of expression-types depends on what speakers in a speech community use these types to speaker-mean on particular

occasions of use. A little more precisely, the dependence is as follows: a sentence type *s* means that *p* in a community *C* just if members of *C* have the habit of speaker-meaning that *p* by uttering *s*, and they retain the habit conditionally upon other members doing likewise. In short, words mean what they do because speakers use these words habitually with certain communicative intentions, and this habitual procedure is conditional upon other speakers doing likewise. (For the fine details of the account, see Grice 1989, 124–8.)

Lewis

Grice's analysis of linguistic meaning in terms of speaker intentions was initially perceived to be in competition with accounts offered by formal semanticists (see e.g. Strawson 1969). The formal semanticist's central notion in the explanation of meaning is not than of intention but that of a "truth condition". However, it now seems that the two approaches can complement each other, and need not be viewed as in competitors. Formal semanticists study artificial languages (which often serve as models of fragments of natural languages) with the aim of elucidating phenomena of compositionality (see entries on compositionality, philosophical aspects of, and formal semantics). Grice's framework does not address questions of compositionality, but it can in fact accommodate the formal semanticists' approach. David Lewis's theory of linguistic conventions not only shows how the insights of formal semantics can be appropriated within Grice's theory of communicative intentions, it also offers a detailed explication of the notion of convention itself (Lewis 1969, 1975).

According to Lewis, there is a vast range of possible languages. Restricting himself initially to simple cases (languages with only context-insensitive declarative

sentences), Lewis thinks of a possible language as a function from a domain of sentences into a range of truth conditions. Many of the languages described by formal semanticists are possible languages in this sense. Most possible languages, however, are not used by anyone. According to Lewis, this is where convention plays a key role. He uses his game-theoretic notion of convenion to specify under what conditions a possible language is an actual language, i.e. is actually used by a population of language users.

Lewis's general notion of convention

Any word could in principle be used to mean anything. If two language users are to communicate successfully they therefore need to coordinate their use of words and make sure they use the same words with the same meaning. This type of situation, where several agents have a common interest in coordinating their actions, is called a "co-ordination problem". Conventions are a way of solving coordination problems— linguistic conventions are just a special case of this more general phenomenon.

According to Lewis, conventions (linguistic or not) are regularities in the behaviour of the agents of a population. These regularities arise from the common interest of the agents to coordinate their actions and is sustained because each agent expects the others to conform to the regularity and prefers to conform him or herself if the others conform. There are potential alternative regularities which could also secure coordination, hence the need for a convention.

For example, if our phone conversation is interrupted and we have the common aim of continuing the conversation, then there are two alternatives: either I phone back and you wait, or you phone back and I wait. No other combination of

actions will achieve our common aim. Each of us prefers to phone back if the other waits and prefers to wait if the other phones back. But how do we know what the other is doing? If the problem is a recurrent one, then a convention can help. For example, if each of us expects the other to phone back just if the other was the original caller and not to phone back otherwise, then each of us will prefer to phone back if and only if he or she was the original caller.

Lewis's definition of convention is roughly as follows (see Lewis 1975, 165 for full details):

> A regularity R is a convention in a population P, just if
> (1)   Everyone conforms to R.
> (2)   Everyone believes that the others conform to R.
> (3)   The belief that the others conform to R gives everyone a decisive reason to conform to R him or herself.
> (4)   R is not the only regularity meeting (3).
> (5)   (1)–(4) are common knowledge among P: they are known to everyone, it is known to everyone that they are known to everyone, etc.

Conventions of language

Lewis uses the above definition of convention in his explication of what it is for any of the many possible languages (as described by a semantic theory) to be the language actually used by a population. According to Lewis, a population P uses a possible language L just if members of P have a convention of uttering sentences of L only if they are true in L, and of coming to believe in the truth in L of sentences that are uttered by others. The relevant coordination problem for a population here is the problem of converging on one possible language. It is in the interest of each member to use the language the other members are using because there is a common interest in

communication. Lewis calls this a "convention of truthfulness and trust".

There are some difficulties of detail that can be resolved by further refinements. For example, the proposal as sketched above does not take into account indexical languages or languages with non-declarative sentences (e.g. interrogative sentences). Lewis himself discusses how his approach can be suitably extended (Lewis 1975). Another difficulty is the fact that too few speakers try to utter only sentences that are true in their language, and similarly too few speakers believe everything they are told. There is therefore no convention of truthfulness and trust in English among English speakers. Lewis's account can be modified to deal with this problem. For example, instead of saying that users of a language try to utter only sentences that are true in that language, Lewis could say that they utter sentences only if they *accept*, or want to commit themselves to, their truth for the purposes of the conversation.

A basic difficulty for Grice-Lewis

There are also some more fundamental difficulties, which concern the basic assumptions on which the Grice-Lewis approach is built. It is part of both Grice's and Lewis's account to attribute to language users highly complex mental states. On both accounts, language users are required to have unrealistically complex iterated preferences and beliefs concerning other language users (see definitions above). Typical language users, however, do not report these mental states. Lewis's reponse to these doubts concerning the psychological reality of these mental processes is to say that they are merely "potential": users would explicitly have these cognitive states if they bothered to think hard enough (Lewis 1975, p. 165) and presumably they would

also be able to report these intentions if they thought hard enough. However, it is unclear whether the phrase "hard enough" is substantial enough to render the theory empirically testable. Will Lewis accuse anyone denying the psychological reality of the account of not thinking hard enough?

Some psychological findings seem to add weight to this line of objection. The fundamental assumption behind Grice's and Lewis's approach is that linguistic behaviour is a product of a special case of instrumental reasoning. This much seems to be implied by Grice's idea that linguistic meaning is a matter of communicative *intentions* and linguistic behaviour a special case of intentional action. As Laurence (1996) points out, however, there are cases which suggest that language processing and instrumental reasoning are independent faculties. A disability in instrumental reasoning can be accompanied by full linguistic abilities. Conversely, lack of linguistic abilities can be accompanied by fully functioning instrumental reasoning.

Chomskian accounts of linguistic convention

A Chomskian view of language processing lends itself to a different account of linguistic convention. Any account of linguistic convention needs to preserve the idea that what a given word means is a contingent and largely arbitrary matter; that words could have meant something other than what they actually mean, and that other words could have meant what they actually do. Laurence (1996) argues that a Chomskian view does preserve this idea.

On such a Chomskian view, language processing is performed by a special language processing faculty. This faculty processes language at various levels, phonologically, syntactically and semantically. At each level, the faculty associates

certain representations with utterances. On this view, one might say that the various representations the language faculties of a group associate with a given utterance determine that utterance's meaning in the language of that group. The meaning of an expression type would then be a function of the representations the language faculties would associate with any utterances of that type.

On this view of the meaning of expression types, it does indeed turn out to be contingent: each type might have meant something other than it actually means etc. For the precise working of the language faculty in an adult is partly the result of environmental influences. Within the constraints of universal grammar, children learn the language spoken in their surroundings. Thus, the representations computed by a given language faculty will depend in part on the language learning environment. Had the environment been different, the representations associated by the language processor would have been different, thus its meaning would have been different.

This model works best for the conventions of a language spoken by people who have learnt the language in the natural way. But it would also explain explicit linguistic conventions (e.g. when a new technical term is explicitly introduced in a scientific paper, or when an adult learns a natural language). Presumably, these are cases where instrumental reasoning provides input for, and interacts with, the separate language processing faculty.

Convention versus inference

The controversy between Griceans and Chomskians concerns the role of instrumental reasoning in the determination of what expressions conventionally mean. There is another controversy, again involving Grice at centre stage, concerning the extent to

which the meaning of utterances is the product of the conventional meaning of the expression types used as opposed to other, linguistically unanticipated inferences. Grice distinguished between what is literally said by an utterance from what is "implicated" (see entry on semantics/pragmatics boundary). What is literally said is more or less determind by the conventional meaning of the expressions used. However, language users often aim to convey messages that go beyond what is literally said, such as the polite referee in Grice's famous example: when the referee says "the candidate has an excellent command of English" he is relying on the audience's ability to infer that he wished to convey that the candidate is no good at philosophy (see Grice 1989, 33)

The controversy concerns which aspects of communication should be viewed as arising from pragmatic inferences, as in the case of Gricean implicatures, and which aspects should be viewed as pertaining to literal meaning. (Another, related question is whether any implicature can be conventional.) Davidson is at one end of the spectrum of possible views here: he practically denies (in good Quinean fashion) that there is any conventional meaning. It may be helpful in interpreting an utterance to start with a conjecture that the expression types uttered have certain stable meaning, but ultimately such a conjecture is merely a "crutch" (Davidson 1984, 279). For more on these questions see Recanati 2004 and the entries on Semantics/ Pragmatics and on non-standard language use).

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Other relevant entries in the encyclopedia

A priori knowledge, linguistic aspects

Analytic/synthetic, necessary/contingent, and a priori/a posteriori

Compositionality, Philosophical aspects

Expression meaning vs. utterance/speaker meaning

Formal Semantics

Meaning, Overview of philosophical theories of

Natural vs. non-natural meaning

Non-standard language use

Semantics/pragmatics boundary

Biography

Originally from Berlin, Max Kölbel got his PhD from the University of London. He subsequently taught philosophy at the UNAM in Mexico City and at the universities of Swansea, Cambridge and Birmingham in the UK. His research interests are centrally in the philosophy of language but extend into many neighbouring areas, such as epistemology and meta-ethics. He is the author of *Truth without Objectivity* (Routledge 2002), editor (with B. Weiss) of *Wittgenstein's Lasting Significance* (Routledge 2004) and has published articles in philosophy journals such as *Inquiry*, *Mind*, *Journal of Philosophy* and *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*. He is currently Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Birmingham.