

# Reason and Language

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When I woke up the other day, I coughed. My coughing was not something I did, but merely something that happened. Some time later, I told my wife that I love her. In contrast to my coughing, that was something I did, and it is important both to me and to my wife that it was not something that merely happened. Of course, there is, in that respect, nothing special about this particular linguistic performance: In general, speaking is something we do, and we are held responsible or given credit for our saying what we do, much as we are held responsible or given credit for other things that we do. And rightly so, since speaking is something we do.

The fact that speech<sup>1</sup> is a form of rational action was emphasized by many of the philosophers in the ordinary language school and is at the center of H. P. Grice's discussions of implicature. Not many philosophers have given the fact much notice in recent years, however, though there are two very notable exceptions: Michael Dummett and John McDowell.

My own interest in the rationality of speech was inspired by Dummett's many discussions of the subject in his writings. Many of the papers that post-date "What is a Theory of Meaning?"<sup>2</sup> are dominated by the question how a recognition of speech's rationality should be incorporated into the theory of meaning. This concern derives, at least in part, I believe, from Dummett's recognition of the force of certain of McDowell's criticisms. The core of these criticisms, which were first elaborated in "Truth-Conditions, Bivalence, and Verificationism" (McDowell, 1998f), is that, though Dummett attempts to distance himself from W. V. Quine's behavioristic conception of language-use, Dummett too

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<sup>1</sup> I shall write mostly of speech, since that is the most basic form of language-use, but some of the examples will be of other forms of language-use and I mean to include them within the scope of these remarks.

<sup>2</sup> All of these are now collected in Dummett (1993a).

ultimately represents speech as a non-cognitive enterprise. Dummett effectively concedes this point, at least as regards the view he takes in "What is a Theory of Meaning?" (Dummett, 1993c) The idea that understanding a language is a 'purely practical ability', which plays such a central role in that paper, is subjected to intense critical scrutiny in "What Do I Know When I Know a Language?" (Dummett, 1993b) and does not appear in his later work.<sup>3</sup>

I have attempted to moderate the debate between Dummett and McDowell elsewhere (Heck, 2005), agreeing with McDowell that Dummett has never elaborated a position that satisfactorily acknowledges the rationality of speech. McDowell has argued further that the only way to acknowledge it is to abandon Dummett's characteristic conception of the philosophical significance of the theory of meaning: specifically, to replace his requirement of 'full-bloodedness' with an embrace of 'modesty' (McDowell, 1998c). This further aspect of McDowell's position is one I am not ready to accept. But since the argument is largely a 'how else' argument, the only way to evaluate it seems to be to investigate the constraints a due recognition of the rationality of speech does put upon the theory of meaning and to see where that leaves us.

The central question in this paper is thus what the fact that speech is a rational activity teaches us about human linguistic abilities. Ultimately, I would like to argue that a proper appreciation of the rational structure of linguistic action shows that a mature human speaker's understanding of her language consists, to a good first approximation, in her consciously knowing the truth-conditions of utterances of sentences in that language. I shall not be able to complete that argument here, however. Here, I

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<sup>3</sup> Most interestingly, it does not appear in Dummett (1991), although the lectures on which the book was based date from about the same time as "What is a Theory of Meaning?"

hope to establish a slightly weaker claim, namely, that a competent human speaker's understanding of her language consists, to a good first approximation, in her consciously knowing what utterances of sentences in that language do, or would,<sup>4</sup> mean. The question whether knowledge of meaning, in the relevant sense, is knowledge of truth-conditions is one I consider elsewhere.<sup>5</sup>

The paper is organized as follows. The first two sections address some questions about the structure of linguistic action: Intuitively, when a normal human speaker utters the sentence "It's cold out", she and her audience know both that she has said that it is cold out and that she has uttered the words "It's cold out". Section 1 discusses the former aspect of linguistic action, arguing that it is what is most fundamentally responsible for the phenomenon of conversational implicature and, more importantly, that implicature is an inevitable product of speech's rationality, one without which our use of language would not be use of *language* at all. Section 2 considers the question how our linguistic activity is shaped by our awareness of the words uttered and raises, but does not resolve, the question how our awareness of what is said and our awareness of the words uttered are related. Together, these two sections motivate the view that semantic competence rests upon semantic knowledge. The next two sections argue for this view by considering and disposing of the available alternatives. Section 3 argues that competence with a language is not simply the ability to use it; section 4 argues that competence is not simply the ability to put one's thoughts into words (to borrow a phrase from McDowell). The final section considers the objection that my view is committed to an overly strong form of the claim that thought is prior to language.

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<sup>4</sup> The point of this qualification has been obscure to some readers: It is intended simply to register the fact that one's linguistic knowledge does not concern only utterances that are actually made.

<sup>5</sup> See Heck (2007). There are many senses in which we are idealizing here. One is that we will not so much as consider phenomena related to compositionality. How precisely these impinge on our subject is a very important, and much neglected, question, but it is one I shall also have to leave for another time: See Heck (2004b) and note 19.

## 1 Implicature and the Rationality of Speech

Saying that speech is a form of rational (or intentional) action leaves open the question under what descriptions it is intentional. This is a sort of question one can ask about any action. Consider a particular non-linguistic act, say, my squirting my kitten, Joe Joe, with a water pistol. There are many ways to describe what has happened when I do this: I have squirted Joe Joe; I have squirted him, say, in the hind-quarters; I have stopped him from eating the cat bed; I have moved the muscles in my arm in such-and-such a way (which could, in principle, be described physiologically). The action in question—my squirting Joey—is intentional under some, but not all, of these descriptions: Squirting him was something I did intentionally; squirting him in the hind-quarters was not, though it might have been (that's just where the water happened to hit him, though on other occasions I might also have tried to hit him there). Moving the muscles in my arm in such-and-such a way was not something I did intentionally and is not the sort of thing I ever do intentionally: Of course, if I am to squirt Joe Joe, the muscles in my arm must move somehow; but how exactly they move is not something under my rational control. As for stopping him from eating the bed, that too is something I did, though it was obviously not something I did, as it were, directly, but only something I did by doing something else, namely, by squirting him.

Linguistic actions—such as telling my wife that I love her—are also intentional under some, but not all, descriptions. In the example I used above, what has happened could again be described in many ways, including: Telling my wife that I love her; uttering the words "I love you"; moving my tongue and lips in certain ways, physiologically described; making such-and-such a sound, acoustically described. My speech in this case is obviously intentional under the first description, what I shall call the *propositional* description: Telling my wife that I love her. Equally obviously, it is not intentional under the physiological description, nor under the acoustical one: Neither moving my tongue and lips in that particular way—physiologically described—nor making that particular noise—acoustically described—was something I did intentionally. Of course, if I am to say something, my tongue and lips must move somehow, and some particular sound must emerge, but exactly how my mouth moves, and exactly what sound emerges, are not things under

my rational control.

The claim that speech is rational thus amounts, in the first instance, to this: Speech is intentional under propositional descriptions, such as “saying that *p*”. Let me emphasize that I make this claim not on the basis of *a priori* reflection but on the basis of empirical observation. That is not to say that it is not a conceptual truth (if such there are) that speech is intentional under propositional descriptions: In fact, I doubt that we would be prepared to call anything ‘speech’ or ‘the use of language’ that was not intentional under propositional descriptions.<sup>6</sup> But I doubt it matters, for present purposes, whether the claim that human speech is propositionally rational, as I shall put it, is a conceptual or merely an empirical truth.

That speech is propositionally rational is obvious, or so it seems to me, so I shall not argue for the claim directly. What I am going to do, though, is argue that the propositional rationality of speech is what ultimately explains the phenomenon Grice called ‘conversational’ implicature. I shall argue, moreover, that once we appreciate how central the propositional rationality of speech is to Grice’s own treatment of implicature, we can see that his failure to recognize its centrality is responsible for certain problems with his account. It is worth being clear about these matters for their own sake, since implicature is a pervasive and intrinsically interesting phenomenon, but there is another reason to want a better account of it than Grice offers. As he makes clear in the Prolegomena to his William James Lectures (Grice, 1989b), Grice hoped that a proper understanding of implicature would allow us to restore the notion of *literal meaning* to the place from which J. L. Austin and others had sought to remove it. For some time, Grice was widely thought to have won that battle. But in recent years, a number of annoying questions have been raised regarding the extent to which Grice’s machinery really can secure the place of literal meaning. I shall not discuss these questions in detail.<sup>7</sup> But there has been—or so it seems to me—a tendency to conclude that such-and-such a phenomenon cannot be explained in terms of implicature when all that has actually been argued is that it cannot be explained in terms of the specific account that Grice offered. I hope that what follows will help to discourage this tendency by making

<sup>6</sup> This seems also to be the point of Dummett’s ‘barely intelligible fantasy’ (Dummett, 1991, pp. 89-91).

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion with which I’m sympathetic, see (Stanley, 2000).

it clear how the spirit of Grice’s account can be preserved even while many of its details—some of them characteristic of Grice’s own approach to language—are abandoned.

The phenomenon in which Grice was interested is easily enough illustrated. To vary an old and justifiably famous example (Grice, 1989a, p. 33), suppose a professor writes a letter of recommendation for a student, one that says:

To whom it may concern,  
Mr. Jones is punctual and has excellent penmanship.  
Yours sincerely,  
Prof. Smith

Obviously, Smith has not *said* that Jones is poorly prepared for graduate study, but his opinion of Jones as a student nonetheless shines through. In general, speakers frequently manage to get something across, to communicate something, by means of a particular linguistic performance, even when they do not, in any reasonable sense, actually *say* it by uttering the words they do. Grice explains how that happens in terms of the conversational maxims of Quality, Quantity, Relevance, and Manner, which are themselves consequences of what he calls the Cooperative Principle: “Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged”. At the root of the Cooperative Principle is the idea that conversations—talk exchanges, as Grice calls them—are cooperative enterprises governed by some shared purpose “or at least a mutually accepted direction” (Grice, 1989a, p. 26). Now, one might question whether conversations do always have a shared purpose or accepted direction. But a yet more fundamental idea is at work here, namely, that conversation—the use of language—is a rational activity on the part of speakers: If a conversation is governed by a shared purpose, then of course speakers can be expected to act rationally in an attempt to further that shared purpose; but even if there are cases in which conversation has no shared purpose, not even “a mutually accepted direction”, that need not prevent speaking from being a rational activity.

Taking it as a basic case, Grice focuses upon conversations whose purpose is the exchange of information: In itself, this move should not

be too problematic—at least it should not be unfamiliar—for it is just the obvious conversational analogue of the more familiar tendency of philosophers of language to focus on assertion (or on declarative statements). It is in the presence of this more specific assumption about conversational purpose that Grice’s maxims take the forms they do: The maxims specify means toward the shared end of exchanging information; thus, for example, if that is one’s purpose, then one certainly should not say anything one believes to be false. The core idea is thus that speech is a rational activity: Everything else Grice says is, in effect, by way of elaborating or developing this core idea.

Grice would have us explain Prof. Smith’s ability to communicate (without explicitly stating) his opinion of Jones as a student in terms of the conversational maxims: In this case, the professor has not provided the kind, or amount, of information he knows is expected (and so has violated the maxim of Quantity); the reason, or so the reader of the letter is said to presume, is that he has nothing else positive to say about Jones (Grice, 1989a, p. 33). Now, in a sense, I have no problem with this explanation: It is fine as far as it goes, and for most purposes it even goes far enough. Still, though, it seems to me to obscure something important about the phenomenon being explained. In particular, since the explanation appeals directly to the maxim of Quantity, it can easily look as if that maxim is what does the explanatory work. But it isn’t. The central idea behind Grice’s explanation of such cases is independent of any views about the content of any conversational maxims—if such there are. The really important observation is that, when Smith wrote the letter, he *did something*, namely, say that Jones is punctual and has good penmanship. This is something that, at first glance, it simply makes no sense for him to have done. Smith knows what is expected of his letter; he knows that he is supposed to be providing information that will be helpful to the admissions committee. He has failed, apparently knowingly, to meet those expectations. One can’t but ask why. One explanation would be that he has other aims as well: Perhaps his mother told him not to say anything if he had nothing nice to say, and he means to obey her injunction; he has said everything positive he can think to say and will say no more. In any event, he has conspicuously declined to say anything *else* positive about Jones, although he surely must know that his doing so would improve Jones’s chances for admission: Perhaps the reason he has not done so is that he does not think there is anything

else positive he could honestly say.

One could spin many such stories. But my point is not to raise questions about the details. My point is that all such stories begin at the same place, namely, with the question why Smith said what he said (or did not say certain sorts of other things): It is in answering this question that we come to appreciate his opinion of Jones as a student. But the question cannot even be asked unless Smith’s *saying* what he said was his *doing* what he did, that is, unless his speaking (or, in this case, his writing) was a rational act on his part. It is in that sense that the claim that speech is a form of rational action, and that utterances are intentional under propositional descriptions, is at the foundation of Grice’s treatment of implicature.

What I have so far said about implicature omits something Grice regarded as a central element of his view: In particular, I have made no reference to speakers’ *communicative intentions*. For example, in telling the story I did about Smith, nowhere did I say that he was trying to communicate to the admissions committee that Jones is a poor candidate: My story makes reference to some of Smith’s mental states, and to others’ recognition of those states, but not to any communicative intentions Smith may have had. When he tells the story, Grice indicates the sort of explanation he intends by saying that Smith “must. . . be wishing to *impart* information that he is reluctant to write down” (Grice, 1989a, p. 33, my emphasis). But that is just not true. Smith *may* be hoping to communicate such additional information, but I see no reason at all to suppose that he *must* be: He may have been compelled to write the letter and firmly, if vainly, hope his letter will not harm Jones’s chances; that may even be part of his reason for refusing to say anything negative about Jones. Nonetheless, Smith’s saying what he does (or, in this case, his not having said other things) reveals something about what he believes—in particular, what he thinks of Jones as a student—whether he intends it to do so or not.

In case this example is not convincing, let me offer another one, one that is more important, for Grice’s purposes, and so less liable to seem tangential.<sup>8</sup> Consider the word “most”. Austin, so far as I know, never

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<sup>8</sup> This example is, in one respect, different from the preceding one, in so far as it concerns so-called ‘generalized’ conversational implicatures. The phenomenon in which I’m interested here seems to be more pervasive with generalized implicatures than it is

discusses this word, but it is easy enough to imagine what sort of thing he might have said about it, namely, that a sentence like

(1) Most of the students passed the exam.

is *misused* if all of the students passed the exam, just as “Some of the students passed the exam” would also have been misused under the same circumstances. Grice, presumably, would have wanted to say that the sentence is *true* if all the students passed, though it might be indeed be misused in those circumstances, because its use will ordinarily implicate that not all of the students passed. And we know what the explanation of this implicature would be like, too: It would appeal to the maxim of Quantity. If all of the students did pass, uttering

(2) All of the students passed the exam.

would ordinarily be more informative. One’s uttering (1) thus ordinarily implicates that (2) is false;<sup>9</sup> similarly for other sentences involving “most”. That is why it might seem that “most” means: most but not all. But if one utters (1), one does *not* ordinarily do so with the intention to *communicate* that not all the students passed: It is not plausible that one almost always has such an intention when one uses the word “most”. A sufficiently reflective speaker will, it is true, recognize that her uttering (1) will usually suggest that (2) is false—and so will on occasion cancel the implicature explicitly—but it does not follow that she typically intends to communicate that (2) is false.

Similar remarks could be made about most of the examples Grice discusses. I conclude that, in many cases, including cases Grice regards as exemplary, one can implicate something even when one does not, in any sense, intend one’s audience to acquire information beyond what one literally says.

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with particularized ones, but it arises in both cases.

It’s worth considering Grice’s various examples with the distinction I’m trying to draw in mind: Both example (3), on p. 32, and example (1b), on pp. 33-4, seem not to require the speaker to have any particular intention to communicate what is implicated. Other examples perhaps do, for example, examples (1) and (2), on p. 32.

<sup>9</sup> Or, at least, that one has no good reason, or insufficiently good reason, to believe (2), but let us leave this qualification aside.

It will perhaps be objected that a very general conception of implicature, founded not on communicative intentions but on the rationality of speech, whatever its other virtues might be, will utterly fail to capture the notion of *what a speaker means*. What Grice wanted, the objector might say, was not a notion of what someone’s act of uttering S might indicate to her audience, but of what a speaker might *communicate* by uttering S. That is true. And Grice may be right that what is distinctive about cases in which the speaker *means* something she does not literally say is that she has certain sorts of communicative intentions. I am neither endorsing nor denying this part of Grice’s view. What I am arguing is that cases in which a speaker means something she does not say, in Grice’s characteristic sense, are *special cases of a more general and more fundamental phenomenon*, a phenomenon that is due almost entirely to the rationality of speech. I shall return to this point shortly.

First, I want to draw attention to another feature of Grice’s account of implicature. According to his definition (Grice, 1989a, pp. 30-1), one conversationally implicates that *p* only when one intends one’s audience to take one to have intended to communicate that *p*. One thing that is notable about this definition is the specificity of what is implicated: I am supposed to intend to communicate some *particular* proposition and to expect that you should be able to work out which particular proposition that is. This condition does not always, or even often, obtain (and the finer propositions are individuated, the less often it will obtain). Consider once again Prof. Smith. In explaining the example above, I said that he managed to communicate that Jones is a poor student. But is that what he communicates? Or is it that Jones is poorly prepared for graduate study? Or that he should not be admitted to graduate school? Even if Smith does intend to communicate some such message, I see no reason to suppose that there has to be a *particular* such message he intends to communicate; even if there were, he could not reasonably suppose that his audience could work out which specific message that was.

Grice’s discussion of implicature seems to be informed by the following sort of picture: The speaker has something quite specific in mind that she wishes to communicate, but, for some reason, she chooses not to express it literally (that is, to ‘say’ it), but opts instead to communicate it indirectly. Grice writes as if the speaker manages, without speaking literally, to do just what she might have done if she had spoken literally,

that is, to communicate a specific proposition. What I have argued is that this is, in general, false. How much this point matters depends upon what one's larger purposes are. There is, however, a case to be made, or so I would argue, that a proper understanding of non-literal speech demands the rejection of the Gricean picture: I strongly suspect that part of what explains the power of non-literal speech is precisely the fact that it usually does not communicate anything *particular*. But I shall not defend that claim here.<sup>10</sup>

Now, just as I do not want to deny that, in some cases of implicature, we have communicative intentions of the sort Grice isolates, I do not mean to deny that, in some cases, we intend to communicate something quite specific *via* implicature. Consider the referential use of a definite description. There at the party, someone in the corner is drinking a bubbly liquid from a tulip-shaped glass, laughing and smiling, and Smith says, "The man drinking champagne is having a good time". On a Russellian analysis, Smith will have spoken falsely if no one in the room is drinking champagne, whether the man in the corner is drinking champagne or not. As Keith Donnellan noted (Donnellan, 1966), though, there is a strong intuition that Smith has *said of* the man in question that he is having a good time and so has spoken truly if that man is having a good time, even if he is not drinking champagne.

Saul Kripke was the first to offer a reasonably convincing Gricean treatment of such examples (Kripke, 1977), one later developed in detail by Stephen Neale (1990). Very roughly, the story is as follows. If one says something of the form "The *F* is *G*", there are two kinds of reasons one might have for the claim. One might have a general reason: One might have reason to think that every *F* is *G* and that there is one and only one *F*; then one would have reason to believe that *the F* is *G*. On the other hand, one might have a particular reason: One might have reason to think that *a* is *G* and, as well, that *a* is the one and only *F*; one would then also have reason to believe that the *F* is *G*. So, if someone says "The *F* is *G*", we may ask how he satisfies the maxim of Quality, which demands that he have sufficient justification for his claim. If the context makes it clear that he has a general reason, the use of the description will be attributive; if he has a particular reason, then the use will be

<sup>10</sup> To my mind, this is the central insight of Davidson's work on metaphor (Davidson, 1984), though he overshoots the mark when he claims that metaphors are not used to communicate anything *at all*.

referential. So, looking at the sad corpse before us, we conclude that only someone who had snapped could commit such a horrible crime and say, "Smith's murderer is insane"; this use is attributive. Observing the odd behavior of Jones in the dock, we conclude that *he* is insane and, independently convinced that he murdered Smith, say "Smith's murderer is insane"; this use is referential.

I find this sort of treatment convincing, though it remains controversial. I am not going to add to its defense here, however, other than by remarking that examples of referential use are special, because they actually do satisfy Grice's definition of conversational implicature. Ironically, it is because this sort of case *does* have the features Grice claims to characterize *all* cases of conversational implicature, most of which do not actually have those features, that these cases might seem not to be cases of implicature. In this sort of case, we can easily imagine that the speaker intends to communicate something other than what the Russellian analysis delivers as the literal meaning of her utterance; there may well be a particular proposition he intends to communicate, namely, that *that* man is insane, having a good time, or what have you. In this sort of case, one really may intend to communicate something one could also have communicated literally and succeed in doing so: One really does *mean* that *that* man is having a good time.

Note, however, that, even in this sort of case, the speaker can implicate something in the absence of appropriate communicative intentions. Suppose Smith says, in the course of a conversation regarding the dangers of alcohol, "The man drinking champagne is a millionaire". In these circumstances, the assertion that *that* man is a millionaire might be quite irrelevant to the conversational purpose: The point of the remark might be that one doesn't have to be a teetotaler to be financially successful. Still, it may be clear to his audience that Smith has particular grounds for his claim (its not being plausible that he has general ones). If so, he will still implicate that *that* man is a millionaire.

Once again, one might want to say here that Smith will not *mean* that that man is a millionaire. I would not disagree. My point, as earlier, is that this phenomenon—the phenomenon of meaning something one does not literally say—is a special case of a phenomenon for which the propositional rationality of speech is chiefly responsible. The basic notion here, or so I am suggesting, is a weak notion of implicature that does not require one to have any communicative intentions regarding

what proposition is implicated: These propositions are ones the audience can conclude the speaker believes on the basis of an inference to the best explanation concerning her specific act of saying what she did; it makes no sense for me to have said that *p* specifically, in this context, unless I believe that *q*; my saying that *p* therefore implicates that *q*, in this weak sense. Meaning something one does not say is a less fundamental notion: Meaning, in this sense—and so implicature, in Grice’s sense—is implicating something, in my weak sense, *plus* having the appropriate communicative intentions.

The reason to prefer my picture is simple. Even in standard examples of conversational implicature, the condition that the speaker should intend to communicate some proposition *p* is often not satisfied: In some cases, such as those involving the word “most”, the speaker will typically fail to have the right sort of communicative intention; even when she does have some such intention, as in the letter of recommendation example, this intention may not be appropriately specific. Very few of the standard cases of conversational implicature, then, are conversational implicatures as Grice defines that notion. Some other notion is therefore required. And once we have it, it is easy enough to reconstruct Grice’s in terms of it.

My view is similar, in a way, to Christopher Gauker’s (2001). Gauker argues, as I have, that even in paradigm cases of conversational implicature, an implicature can be present even if the speaker did not intend to communicate it to the hearer. But Gauker goes further, claiming that there is no such thing as conversational implicature in Grice’s sense: Implicatures are, he alleges, *never* a product of inferences the audience makes regarding what the speaker might have wanted to say; rather, they are the result of “situated inferences”, inferences made from what is said and aspects of the situation in which it is said. My own view, it should be clear, is different. On Gauker’s view, a speaker’s psychology is all but irrelevant to what her utterances implicate. I do not accept that claim. On the contrary, my view is that conversational implicature (in my weak sense) is an inevitable product of speech’s rationality. If speaking is acting, one’s saying what one does is as much a function of one’s various beliefs and desires as anything else that one does. Others will therefore frequently be able to draw conclusions about what one believes (or does not believe), or wants (or does not want), from what one says (or does not say), in much the same way, and for much the

same reason, that they are able to make such discoveries by considering other things one does (or fails to do).<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, non-literal communication, at least in certain of its forms, is the inevitable result of speakers’ *self-conscious recognition* of the rationality of their own and others’ speech. Human agents are able to rationalize the acts of others, in the sense that we can discern why people act as they do. We also know that others are capable of rationalizing our own actions, in this same sense, and we can, with some reliability, predict how others will rationalize our acts. We are, therefore, often in a position to act with a reasonable expectation—and perhaps even knowing—that our so acting will be interpreted by others as due, say, to our having a certain belief. So, for example, Smith might write his letter expecting those reading it to conclude that he believes that Jones is a poor student, and that expectation might partly explain why he writes the letter he does. If so, then he may have a communicative intention of the sort Grice identifies. But it is Smith’s self-conscious recognition of the rationality of his speech that is fundamental, not his intention to communicate something he does not literally say: It is his knowledge that others recognize his speech as rational that is the source of whatever communicative intentions he may have.

Communicative intentions of the sort Grice identified therefore seem to me to play a much less fundamental role in linguistic action than he supposed. This observation, I think, ultimately undermines his attempt to reconstruct *saying* on the basis of *meaning*. I cannot make that

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<sup>11</sup> My reason for not accepting Gauker’s position is as follows. Gauker works hard to show that one *need not* appeal to claims about what the speaker might have meant to say, etc., to determine the relevant implicatures. To argue for this claim, he offers alternative accounts of how one might arrive at these implicatures without appealing to psychological claims about the speaker. But he does not argue, and I do not see how he could argue, that such appeal *must* be out of bounds: I do not see that there could be any reason to deny a speaker the *right* to appeal to whatever she might know about her conversational partners to determine implicatures, including what they might have wished to say. But then I do not see that Gauker has given us any reason to doubt that ordinary speakers *do in fact* appeal to what they know about their conversational partners’ psychologies when they calculate implicatures. And, indeed, when reading letters of recommendation, I think of myself as trying to determine what the author believes (or what she meant to say), and I am prepared to deploy everything I know about the author’s psychology to determine what she does believe (or meant to say). So much just seems obvious to me. There is no reason we must deny ourselves this way of discovering others’ beliefs and limit ourselves to “situated inference”.

argument in full generality here. But parts of it will surface in what follows.

## 2 Words and the Rationality of Speech

To this point, I have argued that speech—or, more generally, our use of language—is intentional under propositional descriptions, such as: saying that *p*. So, to return to the example I used earlier, when I tell my wife that I love her, saying that I love her is something I do; my utterance is intentional under that description. But this description of the action is not the only one under which it is intentional. It is also intentional under *verbal* descriptions, such as: uttering the sentence “I love you”.<sup>12</sup> This too seems obvious once stated, but here we need to proceed slowly, since it is important to be clear in what sense speech is intentional under verbal descriptions. Let me emphasize, once again, however, that I am not claiming anything *a priori*: In fact, in this case, it is not too difficult to imagine something much like the use of language that is *not* intentional under verbal descriptions.

What would that be like, to be a ‘speaker’ for whom ‘speaking’ was intentional under propositional descriptions, but not under verbal ones? Well, such an agent would be able to form an intention, say, to tell his wife that he loved her, and then that would just be something he did. Of course, he might make some sort of sound—perhaps a sound speakers of English would hear as “I love you”—but it would be no part of what he (intentionally) *did* that he uttered that sentence. Indeed, such an agent need not even be consciously aware of his uttering a sentence. A sentence would just be produced, much as our own lips and tongues just move when we speak. Indeed, we can imagine that neither our agent, nor any of his fellow speakers, is capable of conscious auditory perception at all. His wife need not consciously recognize the sentence that has been uttered to be able to recognize her husband as having done something that was intentional under a propositional description, as having (for lack of a better word) said that he loves her. Communication between such agents would be like telepathy: It would seem to them as

<sup>12</sup> It is, in fact, quite a difficult question just how the verbal intention should be characterized, but the issue can be set aside here.

if communication were purely between their minds.<sup>13</sup>

That is not how things are for us. When we speak, we do not just decide to say something and then make a noise of which we are consciously unaware. Nor, when someone says something to us, do we recognize them only as having said something (propositionally described) and not as having uttered certain words. This is apparent from many features of our use of language. For example, we know that we, and others, sometimes misunderstand words: So we know that one can intend to say that Jones was angry but come out with the sentence “Jones was livid”, thereby failing to say that Jones was angry, uttering *that* sentence because one wrongly believes that “livid” means *angry*, whereas, in fact, it means *pale*.<sup>14</sup> Other sorts of failures are possible here, too: One might end up saying “That’s a nice derangement of epitaphs”, when one had wanted to say that the thing in question is a nice arrangement of epithets, not because one thinks “That’s a nice derangement of epitaphs” really does mean *that’s a nice arrangement of epithets*, but because of some sort of ‘processing error’. In other cases, such an error may be due to a ‘slip of the tongue’. It isn’t always clear, in a particular case, what exactly has gone wrong: But we do, in practice, distinguish these sorts of cases pretty well.

Similarly, we are consciously aware that our own understanding of what others have said can be compromised by a failure to understand certain of the words they are using: When we are in that sort of situation, we can ask such things as “What does ‘syzygy’ mean?” Sometimes, we are unable to determine what someone has said because the reference of a demonstrative or pronoun is unclear: Then we can ask to whom, or to what, the relevant expression was supposed to refer. We may recognize the ambiguity in a certain sentence, and ask which of two things the speaker meant when he said “Fighting administrators can be distracting”. Occasionally when speaking our own mother tongues, and often when speaking a language not well-known to us, we find ourselves wanting to say something, but not knowing what words would express it: In the latter case, we have recourse to dictionaries; the former sort of case can, as I’m sure we all know, be extremely frustrating. And, finally,

<sup>13</sup> Perhaps such agents would *be* telepaths: No one ever said that telepathy has no medium at all.

<sup>14</sup> Precisely what it might be wrongly to believe that a word has a particular meaning is a question I consider in Heck (2006).



even when we know what we want to say, we sometimes put a good deal of effort into determining just how we should say it: Sometimes that is a matter of choosing which words we shall use; other times, it is a matter of choosing among different forms of expression (say, between active and passive voice). For a writer, of course, this is all very familiar activity.

None of that would be true for the quasi-telepaths, for they are not aware of themselves as uttering words at all. They could not, for example, have our concept of ambiguity. They might have a related concept. It might be, for example, that it is sometimes unclear to them whether someone has said that it's distracting to fight administrators or that it's easy to be distracted by administrators who are fighting. Then they, like we, would have to appeal to pragmatic factors to decide what had been said. But they would lack any sense of *why* it should be unclear which of these two things had been said, for they would be unaware that one can say both of these things by uttering the same string of words.

These reflections suggest that speech is not only intentional under verbal descriptions but that it is *by* uttering a sentence that we say something. This remark is not intended simply as one about the causal structure of communication. Taken that way, it would apply equally to the quasi-telepaths I discussed above: Communication as they have it also depends upon the production and reception of sound; in a purely causal sense, they say things by uttering things, too. What distinguishes us from them is that, in a *rational* (not just a causal) sense, we say things by uttering things. So, for example, if one asks why Smith uttered the sentence "The meeting begins at 4pm", the question may be answered as follows: Smith wanted to say that the meeting began at 4pm, and he knew that the sentence "The meeting begins at 4pm" meant that the meeting began at 4pm and so that, if he uttered that sentence in that context, he could thereby say that the meeting began at 4pm. And so he uttered that very sentence and thereby said when the meeting began. For the quasi-telepaths, on the other hand, no such answer can be given: They do not utter sentences at all (though noises do get made).

To avoid any potential misunderstanding, let me emphasize that, in offering this sort of explanation of Smith's utterance, I do not mean to suggest that Smith must consciously have engaged in any such reasoning. Sometimes we do; more usually, we do not. That fact does not undermine the claim that what explains Smith's uttering what he did is

his having the sorts of beliefs and desires mentioned. There is nothing special about language here. Much of what we do is unaccompanied by any conscious awareness of this sort of practical reasoning. If I walk to the refrigerator and open the door, what explains my doing so may be my wanting a beer and my believing that there are beers in the fridge. And if someone asks me why I opened the refrigerator, that is just the sort of thing I might say: I and others explain my actions by adverting to such beliefs and desires; we do so rightly, even if my mind was elsewhere at the time. The point is one that ought to be familiar: The correctness of this sort of rational explanation does not depend upon the agent's awareness of his own practical reasoning (though it may depend upon his having conscious access to his reasons).

A related point holds about comprehension: When Smith speaks to me, I take him to have said that the meeting begins at 4pm because I perceive him to have uttered the sentence "The meeting begins at 4pm", and I know that this sentence means that the meeting begins at 4pm. That is not to say that my understanding of Smith's utterance must involve conscious reasoning of this kind. Nor is it to say that one's identification of the sentence uttered must temporally precede one's identification of what is said, nor that it must rest upon grounds independent of one's identification of what is said, or anything of that kind. Rather, the claim is that recognizing what someone says depends upon recognizing the sentence she utters, in a sense that ought to be quite uncontroversial.

Suppose I hear John utter the sentence "I bought a -oat", not clearly hearing the first phoneme of the last word, so that I am unsure whether he uttered "I bought a goat" or "I bought a coat". Given the context, it may be clear enough that John must have meant to say that he bought a goat, not a coat; and frequently, that would be the end of the matter, since we need not care to determine what John in fact said. But maybe we do care what he actually said. Then reason to think he meant to say that he bought a goat certainly would constitute reason to think he meant to utter "I bought a goat" rather than "I bought a coat". That, in turn, may constitute reason to suppose that he *did* utter "I bought a goat" and so that he did say that he bought a goat. But what John *did* say depends upon which sentence he actually uttered, and we, as ordinary speakers, know as much. If I have reason to believe that John actually uttered the sentence "I bought a coat"—perhaps someone taped the conversation and, clearly enough, those are the words on the tape—

then I am thereby given reason to suppose that he said that he bought a coat, since, if he did utter that sentence, then that is what he said, whether he meant to say it or not. In that sense, in so far as contextual evidence bears upon what John said, it must fundamentally bear upon what sentence he uttered, even if the evidence itself concerns what it would have made sense for him to say. Similarly, if I do clearly hear John utter the sentence “I bought I coat”, then I will thereby hear him as saying that he bought a coat, even if the context makes it completely obvious that he what he meant to say was that he has bought a goat. And, of course, when someone utters an ambiguous sentence, we may be clear enough about what words were uttered without knowing what has been said.<sup>15</sup>

We may therefore conclude that our utterances are intentional, and are recognized by others as being intentional, under descriptions of the form: saying that  $p$  in uttering a sentence  $S$ .<sup>16</sup> Let us say that our utterances are, therefore, intentional under *semantic* descriptions. The appropriateness of this terminology will be clear if we make explicit a conclusion that was implicit in the preceding discussion, namely, that the rationality of our speech demands explanation in terms of practical reasoning involving such beliefs as that sentence  $S$ , uttered in a particular context, did or would mean that  $p$ . That is to say: Our use of language—not any *possible* use of language, in particular, not that of the quasi-telepaths, if that is indeed use of language, but nonetheless *our* use of language—depends upon our having conscious beliefs about the meanings of the sentences we utter.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> One will, of course, typically appeal to contextual factors to determine what has been said in such a case. So, for example, if John utters the sentence “Fighting administrators can be distracting”, then I will decide what John has thereby said on the basis of what, in the present context, it would make sense for him to be saying. But, or so I would claim, what John has actually said depends upon which of the two sentences so pronounced he has in fact uttered. That, in turn, depends upon facts about the causal genesis of the sounds he uttered—facts about his linguistic intentions, perhaps, or facts about the logical form assigned to the sentence by his language faculty—and such facts are not always available to me.

<sup>16</sup> I do not, at this point, mean to rule out the possibility that the verbal description is the most basic one, intentionally speaking: Speech is intentional, on this view, primarily as the utterance of a sentence and only derivatively as the expression of a proposition. I shall return to this issue.

<sup>17</sup> As we shall see below, the view to which I shall ultimately commit myself is non-committal about the identity of the informational states involved here. But I shall speak primarily in terms of beliefs. I shall sometimes speak—as is customary in the literature—

Two points of clarification. First, the word “conscious” is significant. It is notoriously slippery, as well, and I would gladly use an alternative if only I could think of one. I use it mainly in contrast with “tacit”. What I am claiming is *not* that our ability to use our language depends upon our tacitly, or unconsciously, knowing a semantic theory for it: That claim is familiar, and one I endorse, but it is not the one for which I have been arguing. On the contrary, I have been arguing that our ability to use and to understand language depends upon our *consciously* knowing what uttered sentences do or would mean, in the sense that such knowledge is available to us *qua* agents of linguistic acts: I have been arguing that the rational explanation of our linguistic actions requires such attitudes to be attributed to us. Second, I have, to this point, been speaking of our conscious semantic beliefs as being of the form:  $S$  means that  $p$ . I have been so speaking for ease of exposition. The foregoing establishes nothing about the specific form these beliefs take. My own view, as it happens, is that the real form of these beliefs is something like:  $S$  is true iff  $p$ . But I am officially neutral on this issue here.<sup>18</sup>

Now, If I knew what an utterance of an arbitrary sentence of French would mean on any occasion of use, surely I would be able to use and understand French reasonably competently.<sup>19</sup> In that sense, conscious knowledge of the meanings of the sentences of a language suffices for understanding it. What I have argued above is, in effect, that conscious knowledge of the meanings of its sentences is also *necessary* for understanding a language, at least as we humans do: Our ability to perform the sorts of linguistic actions of which we are in fact capable requires possession of such knowledge. So conscious knowledge of the meanings of the sentences of a given language is both necessary and

*of knowledge* of meaning, but that is certainly incorrect. It may be that understanding what someone has said, in a sense that contrasts primarily with misunderstanding what she has said, requires knowledge of what she has said. Indeed, I think it does. But what is at issue here is not the nature of understanding as opposed to misunderstanding but the nature of understanding or misunderstanding as opposed to not understanding at all. Whether a speaker is right or wrong about what an expression means, or whether she has the right sorts of grounds for a true belief, is neither here nor there as far as the explanation of her linguistic actions is concerned. See Heck (2006) and Pettit (2002) for discussion of some related issues.

<sup>18</sup> See Heck (2007) for discussion of that issue.

<sup>19</sup> I say ‘reasonably’ competently, because there could be differences between me and native French speakers, if *all* I knew was what sentences of French meant in context. These differences are connected with issues about compositionality. These complications do not, however, matter for present purposes.

sufficient for understanding that language. It is tempting to express this point by saying that, to understand a language, it is both necessary and sufficient that one know what the sentences in that language do or would mean on various occasions of use. That, however, is not quite right. What we have been discussing here is what we might call *occurrent* understanding: the understanding one has of an utterance when it is actually made. And the view for which I am arguing here is that one's occurrent understanding of an utterance consists in one's knowing what the uttered sentence means on that occasion of use. If one accepts that view, then it is tempting to say further that understanding a language consists in knowing what its sentences do or would mean on various occasions of use. Such a state is dispositional: Understanding a language is, on this view, being able to determine what uttered sentences mean; better, it consists in the categorical ground of this ability, say, in tacit knowledge of semantic theory. What is distinctive of the view offered here is thus not to be found in its account of our standing ability to speak our language. It is to be found, rather, in its conceiving of our occurrent understanding of an utterance as a cognitive state, consisting in knowledge of what the uttered sentence means. Call that *the cognitive conception of understanding*.

### 3 The Use View

I take it that, at this point in the dialectic, the cognitive conception is well enough motivated, but it does not follow from what has been argued so far. One might hold, instead, that what understanding an utterance consists in falls short of the sort of semantic knowledge the cognitive conception regards as essential and explain the fact that competent human speakers do typically have semantic knowledge in other terms.

One version of this strategy would be to hold that understanding a language is simply a matter of being able to use it appropriately. Call this the Use View. So, on the Use View, one understands the sentence "snow is white" if one is able to use it appropriately: One's understanding of the sentence does not consist in one's knowing what it means. Indeed, a defender of the Use View might well want to insist, as Scott Soames does (1988, p. 189), that understanding does not even require one to possess the *concept* of meaning or truth: If not, then, in general,

competent speakers need know neither that "snow is white" means that snow is white nor that it is true iff snow is white. But many competent speakers do possess such concepts, and those who do are in an excellent position to acquire semantic knowledge: If I understand the sentence "snow is white", the verb "to mean", and the significance of quotation-marks, then I can come to know, purely on the basis of reflection, that "snow is white" means that snow is white. Soames thus concludes that semantic knowledge is not what constitutes understanding but something that flows from it.<sup>20</sup>

This way of motivating the Use View goes hand in hand with what is, I think, a common reason for dissatisfaction with the cognitive conception. According to it, what constitutes my understanding of my language is my knowledge of such facts as

(3) "snow is white" means that snow is white.

The source of our knowledge of such facts is—surprise—much disputed, but whatever its source, such 'disquotational' knowledge seems insufficiently robust to constitute knowledge of the meaning of the sentence "snow is white". There are many ways to press this point. But one familiar one proceeds by noting that, as the now famous example<sup>21</sup>

(4) "the borogroves are all mimsy" means that the borogroves are all mimsy

shows, one can know that (3) is true even if one does not understand the sentence "snow is white". The familiar response is that what we know about (4) is merely that it is *true*: We do not know that "the borogroves are all mimsy" means that the borogroves are all mimsy. On the other hand, we do know that "snow is white" means that snow is white, not just that the sentence "'snow is white' means that snow is white" is true. And since what constitutes competence, according to the cognitive conception, is knowledge of the proposition expressed by (3), not just knowledge that it is true, the objection lapses: We do not have the relevant knowledge about "the borogroves are all mimsy". But there is a deeper worry, namely, that the difference between (3) and

<sup>20</sup> Paul Horwich holds a similar view. See Horwich (1998).

<sup>21</sup> The example originates in ?.

(4) is just that we understand the sentence “snow is white” but do not understand “the borogroves are all mimsy”: What is needed to *get* from knowledge that (4) is true to knowledge of what it expresses seems to be an understanding of the sentence “the borogroves are all mimsy”. If so, then knowledge of the proposition expressed by (4) *depends upon* and so cannot constitute understanding of that sentence, and the same goes for (3).<sup>22</sup>

There is much to be said about this matter.<sup>23</sup> For present purposes, let me just say this. Even if there is a ‘trivial’ way of knowing such facts as that expressed by (3)—even if one can found knowledge of (3) upon knowledge that it is true and an understanding of the sentence mentioned in it—it simply does not follow that our understanding of “snow is white” cannot consist in knowledge of what is expressed by (3). What does follow is that our understanding “snow is white” cannot consist in our knowing what is expressed by (3) *in that trivial way*, since we can know what is expressed by (3) in the trivial way only if we understand the sentence “snow is white”. But for all that, our understanding “snow is white” might consist in our knowing what is expressed (3) in some other way, in a way that is available without any antecedent understanding of “snow is white”. Knowing it in that other way, and so understanding “snow is white”, one would then be in a position to come to know what is expressed by (3) in the trivial way, as well. If so, one would have something like *a priori* knowledge of a fact originally known *a posteriori*. But there is no contradiction in that.<sup>24</sup>

Let us return, then, to the question whether we should accept the Use View. As I am understanding it, it is the view that one’s understanding of one’s native language consists in an ability to use it, where the ability to use the language does not itself rest upon possession of conscious knowledge of the meanings of sentences of that language. This view is therefore immune to a familiar objection due to Chomsky.<sup>25</sup> Chomsky

<sup>22</sup> For one version both of the initial reply and the deeper worry, see Dummett (1993c), which contains an extensive discussion of this distinction. As noted, Soames presses a similar point.

<sup>23</sup> For further discussion of the status of such sentences as (3)—or, more precisely, of the T-sentences that are analogues of them—see my Heck (2004a) and Heck (2005).

<sup>24</sup> The fact that our discussion should reach this point is reason for confidence: Donnellan deploys much the same sort of machinery in connection with more familiar cases of the contingent *a priori*. See Donnellan (1977).

<sup>25</sup> Chomsky has pressed this objection in several places. For one, see Chomsky (1980).

observes that a monolingual speaker of English might lose her ability to speak and understand it because she was incapacitated by some sort of injury. Once she had recovered from this injury, she might recover her ability to speak and understand English as well, yet have no ability to speak and understand Japanese. So there must be some categorical basis for this ability, in whose presence competence in fact consists. But the Use View can incorporate this corrective. As Chomsky himself notes, a similar remark could be made about the ability to swim (Chomsky, 1988). Maybe it is right to say, as Chomsky does, that this ability has a substantial cognitive component. But no-one should be tempted by the idea that the ability to swim consists in the possession of certain sorts of conscious knowledge: It is by way of denying *that* claim that one might describe the ability to swim as a practical ability.<sup>26</sup> No defender of the Use View need deny, therefore, that the categorical basis of the ability to use English appropriately should be described in terms of tacit knowledge: The claim is simply that the ability to use a language does not consist in one’s *consciously* knowing what its sentences mean. It is, rather, more like the ability to swim.

There are, however, other reasons to be dissatisfied with the Use View.

In some sense, of course, to understand a language is to be able, under suitable circumstances, to use it. But language-use, among human speakers, is a form of rational action whose explanation adverts to beliefs about the meanings of the sentences they utter. The challenge for the Use View, then, is to characterize language-use as something *other than* a form of action that is intentional under semantic descriptions. A central claim of many of McDowell’s reflections on language is that there is not going to be such a characterization:<sup>27</sup>

The essential move is a radical shift from Dummett’s conception of language use. . . . For Dummett, language use. . . must be characterizable “as from outside content”. This means that

<sup>26</sup> See Chomsky (1980, pp. 102ff) and Chomsky (1986, pp. 270ff) for discussion of this same point. To a large extent, my purpose here is to explain in what sense it is important that knowledge of language should be conscious. *Contra* both Dummett and Chomsky, I am arguing, there is no reason one cannot accept that claim while also insisting that linguistic competence consists in certain sorts of tacit or unconscious knowledge.

<sup>27</sup> Similar points are made in McDowell (1998a) and McDowell (1998b). As I remarked earlier, on my reading, Dummett actually abandons this view by about 1978, but the interpretive issue is not the important one here.

particular episodes of language use must be recognizable for what they essentially are without benefit of understanding the language. . . . To embrace modesty, by contrast, is to insist that the outward aspect of linguistic behavior is essentially content-involving. . . . (McDowell, 1998c, pp. 99-100)

What an episode of language-use essentially is, McDowell is claiming, is an action that is intentional under at least a propositional description: In that sense, such an act cannot be characterized “as from outside content”; so to characterize it would be to make it unintelligible as the act of a rational agent (McDowell, 1998a, pp. 112-3). Let me reinforce this conclusion.

The appeal of the Use View, it seems to me, is due in large part to the attractions of a simplistic conception of our use of language, according to which speakers, confronted with facts, come out with sentences in response to them: Seeing the rain outside, Kurt says, “Es regnet”. One finds such a picture in straightforwardly behavioristic conceptions, such as Quine’s, but also in somewhat less behavioristic ones, such as Dummett’s and Donald Davidson’s: It is with reference to such a picture that one will talk of indications of ‘assent’; connect use with conditions of verification; or characterize it in terms of what sentences a speaker ‘holds true’.<sup>28</sup> Of course, no-one will or should deny that Kurt will sometimes utter the sentence “Es regnet” when it is raining. But he will not always do so, since, in such circumstances, it will often be obvious to all that it is raining, and the maxims of Relevance and Quantity—whatever their source—will counsel him against uttering it. More importantly, he may appropriately utter the sentence in a wide variety of circumstances, in many of which it is not raining. I do not mean by this that he might be lying or joking. Kurt might say that it is raining by uttering the sentence “Es regnet” for many different reasons, some of which require it not to be raining, and he might thereby communicate something about almost anything you please, given an appropriate context.

The conditions under which a sentence is appropriately uttered are extremely various. It is therefore hard to see why the conditions under

<sup>28</sup> A point not unlike those to follow is made by in David Lewis (1985). Nonetheless, however, Lewis’s own view is, I think, vulnerable to similar criticisms, for which see Heck (2007).

which a sentence is used—in any sense of ‘use’ that excludes the psychological states of speakers—should be expected to bear any significant relation to that sentence’s meaning. Or to put the problem differently: How, on the Use View, is one to explain the appropriateness, or rationality, of Kurt’s utterance of “Es regnet” in circumstances in which it is obvious to everyone that it isn’t raining? The earlier discussion of implicature was intended to establish that there is no answer to this question that does not invoke the the fact that what Kurt is doing when he utters the sentence “Es regnet” is *saying* that it is raining: It is essential to the explanation that both Kurt and his audience should conceive of him as doing just that, that is, as performing an action that is intentional under this propositional description.

A defender of the Use View might reply that such non-conventional forms of communication are of no fundamental significance for our understanding of language: We may abstract from such phenomena in giving our account of understanding. But the sorts of phenomena we have been discussing are, or so I argued earlier, an inevitable consequence of the propositional rationality of speech: So long as speech is a form of action that is intentional under propositional descriptions, something like the phenomenon of conversational implicature—at least conversational implicature, in my weak sense—is an inevitable feature of it. To abstract from these sorts of phenomena in giving one’s account of semantic competence is, therefore, to abstract from the propositional rationality of speech. To do that, however, is to abstract from the fact that human beings use language: No form of activity that is not propositionally rational can plausibly be regarded as use of language.

The Use View cannot simply assimilate this observation. To do so would be to regard how a sentence is used as determined, in part, by what it is used to say. We can all agree, of course, that understanding the sentence “snow is white” consists in an ability to use it appropriately if using it appropriately is using it to say that snow is white. But that would utterly trivialize the Use View. If the Use View is not to be utterly trivial, then, it is committed to characterizing the ‘appropriate use of a sentence’ without making any reference to what the sentence is used to say. What I am claiming is that the diversity of our use of language—which is itself an essential feature of our use of language—already makes such a characterization unlikely: How can one explain the appropriateness of an utterance of “Es regnet” made in the complete absence of rain

without making any reference to the speaker's knowledge that he is saying that it is raining? I haven't proven that it's impossible to answer that question. But I know of no plausible way to answer it.<sup>29</sup>

I take it that this conclusion, though reached by a very different route, is close to McDowell's: Any attempt to characterize particular episodes of language-use "as from outside content"—that is, as something other than as acts that are intentional under propositional descriptions—is to characterize them as something unrecognizable as uses of language.

## 4 The Direct View

The propositional rationality of speech is essential to it. Our understanding of language issues (under normal circumstances, of course) in the ability to act in ways that are intentional under propositional descriptions. No account that omits this fact is acceptable. That is what is fundamentally wrong with the Use View. This conclusion, however, leaves us some distance from the view for which I am arguing, that understanding an utterance is knowing the uttered sentence means on that occasion.

McDowell offers a view that can be construed as an alternative both to the Use View and to the cognitive conception. As noted earlier, McDowell emphasizes that language-use is content-involving. But it is not clear to me whether McDowell understands this point as I would. One of his main points, I do accept, namely, that understanding utterances made in a language one understands is a perceptual capacity (McDowell, 1998d, pp. 331ff): For an ordinary human being who understands a given language, perception of speech that is (or appears to be) in that language really does involve a *perception*, in the strictest sense, of meaning. That is to say, if someone utters the sentence "There are deer in the garden", then it is part of the content of one's experience itself that, say, someone has said that there are deer in the garden. One does not hear only the words: One hears what is said, as well. But McDowell elsewhere suggests that to articulate that insight "we have to entitle

<sup>29</sup> Davidson's own response to this problem would be to invoke the alleged interdependence of meaning and belief. I argue elsewhere (Heck, 2007) that, to deploy that view in the present dialectical context, one must accept that mentality too supervenes on use. Davidson held such a view, but I find it extremely unappealing.

ourselves to the idea that acquiring a first language is, not learning a behavioral outlet for antecedent states of mind, but becoming *minded* in a way that the language is anyway able to express" (McDowell, 1998c, p. 105). I myself want no part of that idea, which seems to be optional at this point in the dialectic. I'll return to this remark below and focus here on what I take to be the core of McDowell's suggestion.<sup>30</sup>

McDowell's central idea here is that the ability to use language is the ability to put one's own thoughts into words and, similarly, to recognize the thoughts of others in their words (McDowell (1998c, pp. 97-100). As I have said already, I am not sure whether McDowell intends this view as an alternative to the cognitive conception. But someone might so regard it, so let me consider a version of the view so intended: On this version of the view, the ability to put one's thoughts into words in no way depends upon one's knowing what one's words do, or would, mean on various occasions of utterance. In light of its similarities to Direct Realist theories of perception, we may call this view the Direct View.<sup>31</sup> Is the Direct View a viable alternative to the cognitive conception?

We must all agree that competent speakers can (barring injury and the like) put their thoughts into words. The disagreement between my view and the Direct View concerns the source of this ability. According to the cognitive conception, we are, of course, able to put our thoughts into words, but that is because we know what our words would mean on various occasions of use.<sup>32</sup> If I want to put my thought that snow is

<sup>30</sup> I also do not agree with McDowell that these observations (and the rationality of language more generally) must preclude any reductive account of linguistic meaning. That is in part because I reject the assumption that there is no account of the content of thought independent of an account of the content of language. Given that assumption—one McDowell shares with Dummett, who is his target in most of the remarks I'm considering—the conclusion is reasonable, but even then I am not sure it is forced. See Heck (2005) for my reasons.

<sup>31</sup> McDowell himself has often emphasized these similarities, and corresponding similarities between the Use View and sense-datum theories. It is in part for this reason that I believe he probably does intend the Direct View to be an alternative to the cognitive conception. For my own part, however, I believe that here, as elsewhere, he either too quickly dismisses or simply overlooks available alternatives: the cognitive conception, in this case, and theories that take perceptual content to be non-conceptual, in that one. See Heck (2000) for some reflections on the latter question.

<sup>32</sup> In earlier drafts, I found myself writing that we are able to put our thoughts into words because we know what words would express our thoughts. In some sense, that is true, but it actually seems to me to get things backwards. To speak, I do indeed need to figure out what sentence, in this context, will express the thought I wish to communicate.

white into words, I can certainly do so, but only because I know that ‘snow is white’ means that snow is white. What is the alternative? I do not know what it could be other than that putting one’s thoughts into words is something one *just does*, without deploying one’s knowledge (if one has it) of what those words mean. But if so, the Direct View makes us sound too much like the quasi-telepaths. Quasi-telepaths too use language in communication with their fellows. In some sense, a quasi-telepath too can ‘put her thoughts into words’ and ‘recognize the thoughts of others in their words’. Of course, they would not describe themselves that way, since they do not recognize themselves as uttering words. Putting their thoughts into words is thus not something that the quasi-telepaths *do*, though it is nonetheless something that happens.

The Direct View does not, then, present us with an incoherent picture of the use of language.<sup>33</sup> But it does present us with a picture of a use of language that is not ours. What distinguishes us from the quasi-telepaths is precisely that putting our thoughts into words *is* something we do. What is involved in our putting our thoughts into words being something we do, rather than something that merely happens? The difference between us and the quasi-telepaths is most obvious when we consciously choose words to express our thoughts. When we make such a choice, we are deciding which sentence to utter. But with reference to what sorts of considerations are we supposed to be making that decision? The only answer, it seems to me, is that we are deciding on the basis of our knowledge of what those sentences would mean in the context in which they will be uttered. Of course, we do not always make such choices consciously. But the reasons we have for saying what we do when we do not make such choices consciously are no different, in principle, from the reasons we have when we do. My walking to the fridge may not have been preceded by a conscious decision to do so because I wanted a beer and believed there were some beers in the fridge, but that is nonetheless why I walked to the fridge. My uttering “there are beers in

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But I sometimes find it difficult to do that, and I do not think that impugns my *competence*. The difference is much like that between recognition and recall, in the theory of memory. Indeed, it may well be the same difference: When I am in such circumstances, I am still quite capable of *recognizing* the sentence that would express my thought; I am having trouble *recalling* it. On the other hand, in putting one’s thought into words, one does not typically consider candidate sentences and decide which of them expresses one’s thought. That is why one can completely fail to notice that the sentence by means of which one did decide to express a thought was ambiguous. It’d be nice to know just what to say here.

<sup>33</sup> A similar suggestion seems to be made in Lepore (1997).

the fridge” may not have been preceded by a conscious decision to do so because I wanted to say that there are beers in the fridge and believed that “there are beers in the fridge” means that there are beers in the fridge, but that is nonetheless why I uttered that sentence. My not always being conscious of my reasons for uttering the sentences I do is not to the point: That my utterance of specific words is an intentional act under my rational control, partly explained by my semantic knowledge, is.

These sorts of remarks, I am all too aware, are liable to seem unconvincing: The ability to choose one’s words is what partisans of the view I am defending always mention at such points. So let me mention a slightly different sort of phenomenon. Suppose I am standing in a flower shop trying to buy a bouquet to take to a dinner party. I see the one I want and want to tell the florist which one it is. Uttering the words “I’ll take that one” won’t be sufficient. I need to arrange matters so that she will realize that, when I said “that one”, I meant *that* one. In such a case, there is necessarily a gap between the word and its meaning, a gap I cannot fill unless I have a certain semantic intention, namely, the intention to refer to a particular bouquet with my utterance of the demonstrative. A similar story can, of course, be told from the florist’s point of view: Unless she knows to which bouquet my utterance of “that one” referred, she will not know what I have said.

One might also consider examples involving ambiguity. The point of all of these examples, however, is the same: There are several ways in which our awareness of our words, both when we speak and when we hear others speak, manifests itself. It is part of how we conceive our own actions, and those of others, that we regard what has been said as depending, in a rational and not just in a causal sense, upon what words have been uttered. In short: We are not quasi-telepaths, and the Direct View fails to distinguish us from them.

Now, I said earlier that I find McDowell’s claims about our perception of speech appealing: We really do hear what people say and not just the words they utter. One might worry, however, that the cognitive conception cannot incorporate this observation. According to the cognitive conception, understanding an utterance consists in knowledge of what the uttered sentence means on that occasion. But how, one might want to ask, is such knowledge put to use in comprehension? The obvious suggestion is that it underwrites inferences from claims about what

words someone has uttered to claims about what she has said. If so, however, then it would seem that the cognitive conception is committed to denying that we hear what other speakers say: If I have to make such an inference in order to know that someone has said that Fred has gone fishing, then what I *hear* must be just the sentence “Fred has gone fishing”; otherwise, no such inference would be necessary. And now, one might add, a similar point holds for speech production: When one speaks, one does not typically have to decide what to say and then also decide how to say it. Rather, one simply says what one means. The cognitive conception, however, would seem committed to regarding one’s uttering a sentence as all one can *really* do, one’s belief about what the sentence means figuring in practical reasoning regarding what sentence one should utter.

But this argument moves too quickly. As regards speech production, my view, as I have said before, concerns the reasons one has for saying what one does: The fact that we do not ordinarily have to decide what words to utter after we have decided what to say simply does not show that our reasons do not include the belief that those words can, on this occasion, be used to say just that. Nonetheless, however, it does seem to me that there is an important lesson here, namely, that a certain simple model of the rational structure of speech production is incorrect. According to this simple model, uttering a sentence is the most basic form of linguistic action; expressing a proposition, on the other hand, is something one can only do indirectly, *by* uttering a sentence. This is, obviously, the analogue for the case of speech production of the view, for the case of speech comprehension, that one only really hears words, not what is said. Now, I have already said that I find this view of comprehension unsatisfying, and I can well understand why one might find the analogous view in the case of speech production equally unsatisfying. But I do not see why one would suppose that the cognitive conception is committed to the simple model. If the simple model is incorrect, however, the question does need to be asked with what it should be replaced. I confess that I do not know the answer to that question.

Regarding the perceptual case, it is not obvious that one’s beliefs about what sentences mean can be deployed in the comprehension of speech only by being used in inferences of the sort mentioned. It is a familiar point, for example, that one’s perception of a scene can be affected

by one’s beliefs:<sup>34</sup> When one realizes that what one thought was a cat is, in fact, a pillow, the scene itself may actually look different. Perhaps one’s semantic beliefs regularly affect perceptual content itself, then. There is, however, another possibility, namely, that the most basic informational states deployed in our comprehension of language are not beliefs but something lower-level. One might be tempted to suggest that these more basic states are perceptual, but that, I think, would be a mistake. Whatever the most basic informational states deployed in comprehension are, the same states are also deployed in speech production: *Modulo* the obvious sorts of context-dependence, a normal speaker hears a sentence uttered by other people as meaning just what she would mean by it were she to utter it herself, and that is because some single piece of information is being deployed both times. This informational state may be a belief, but it could, for all I’ve said, be of some more basic sort. This possibility does not, it seems to me, pose any real threat to the cognitive conception. The core of the cognitive conception is the claim that understanding an utterance is having information about what the uttered sentence means on that occasion. If having such information is not having a belief, nothing essential will have been lost.

## 5 Language and Thought: An Objection

McDowell’s remark that learning a language is “becoming minded” (1998c, p. 105) is rooted in his desire to reject the view that understanding a language involves tagging concepts one already has with words.<sup>35</sup> One might worry that the cognitive conception will commit us to some such view, in particular, that it implies that language acquisition presupposes an antecedent and therefore language-independent grasp of the thoughts expressed by our sentences. My own view is that we often do antecedently grasp the thoughts expressed by our sentences and then learn what words express them. But it is clear enough that not all of language acquisition is like that. Soames offers the following

<sup>34</sup> Note that the claim is that perception is sometimes so affected. That does not contradict the familiar fact that visual illusions are persistent.

<sup>35</sup> In a similar spirit, McDowell writes that the central problem here is “to understand how the mindedness of a community, embodied in its linguistic institutions, comes to realize itself in an individual consciousness” (McDowell, 1998c, p. 107).



example. I have many beliefs about Pluto, for example, that it is a distant planet. But I have had no direct contact with Pluto. My beliefs are wholly mediated by representations of the planet, most importantly, by the name “Pluto”. Before I became familiar with the name “Pluto”, I was not able to entertain thoughts about Pluto, be they that Pluto is a planet or that “Pluto” denotes Pluto. If so, then coming to understand the name cannot have involved connecting it with a concept I antecedently possessed (Soames, 1988, pp. 198-9).<sup>36</sup>

All of that must surely be acknowledged. But what follows? Soames wants to conclude that my coming to understand the name “Pluto” cannot have involved my coming to know that “Pluto” denotes Pluto. On the contrary, he says, my knowledge that “Pluto” denotes Pluto *depends upon* my understanding the name, since it is only once I understand it that I can so much as entertain the thought that “Pluto” denotes Pluto. It is thus my understanding that explains my belief, not my belief that explains my understanding. The argument thus leads to a conclusion similar to the one that motivates the Use View.

But all that follows immediately is that our ability to entertain certain thoughts, our coming to grasp certain concepts, may be *coeval* with our coming to understand words or sentences by means of which they can be expressed. In itself, that poses no threat to the cognitive conception. If understanding a sentence *S* consists in knowing that *S* means that *p*, then coming to understand *S* must at least involve coming to be able to entertain the thought that *p*. In some cases, this ability may precede our understanding of *S*; in others, the ability to entertain the thought that *p* may arise only as a result of the process by which we come to understand the sentence *S*. All of this I find deeply perplexing, but I do not find it worrying.

We can, and often do, learn what a word means by being told. If I point to one of the curved bits of wood making up the rib of a ship and tell someone, “That is a futtock”, she might thereby come to learn what “futtock” means; henceforth, she can use it appropriately. I have certainly taught her how to use the word, but I have done so *by* teaching her what it means. We can see this as follows. The recipient of the explanation—call her Sue—need not have had the concept *futtock* already, but there

<sup>36</sup> Note that Soames need not (and should not) claim that I *could not* have been able to entertain such thoughts before encountering the name “Pluto”, only that I was not. The issue is thus broadly empirical.

is no mystery about how my explanation conveys it to her: I’ve called her attention to a kind of object in such a way that she was led to form a concept of that kind of thing, which concept she takes to be expressed by the word “futtock”. Obviously, Sue’s acquiring the concept *futtock*, rather than some other concept, is necessary if she is to come to understand (and be able correctly to use) the word “futtock”: If she thinks I am pointing to the bit of wood as an example of a big wooden part of a ship and so forms the concept *cuttock* (meaning roughly: any big wooden part of a ship), then she does not understand the word “futtock”; she has to form the right concept. On the other hand, if Sue does form the concept *futtock*, then, although she does so in reaction to my explanation of the word “futtock”, her newly formed concept is independent of how she expresses it. Sue might wonder whether she has in fact understood the explanation as it was intended and so wonder whether, as she would put it, “futtock” really means *futtock*. And if she has misunderstood, her new concept may survive: She will not then have any word to express it and might wonder whether there is any word by means of which it can be expressed. The fact that Sue acquired her concept of a futtock in reaction to my explanation of the word “futtock” should thus give us no reason to suppose that her understanding of this word does not consist in her knowing that “futtock” means *futtock*.

This example is, to be sure, different in many ways from the one Soames discusses. His example concerns linguistic deference and, more generally, raises issues connected with individualism, whereas mine does not. But the point of my example is not to prove that there are no problems here: There are plenty. The point of my example is to illustrate how one might come to grasp a concept through one’s learning a word but do so in such a way that one’s understanding of the word can still consist in one’s knowing what concept it expresses. If that is possible, then Soames is simply too quick to conclude from the agreed facts about “Pluto” that our understanding it cannot consist in our knowledge that “Pluto” denotes Pluto. The process of acquiring the name might put us in a position to entertain thoughts about Pluto, including the thought that “Pluto” denotes Pluto, and our acceptance of this thought as true might yet constitute our understanding the name.

The real issue here, it seems to me, is how acquiring the name “Pluto” puts one in a position to entertain thoughts about its referent—how becoming competent with a linguistic expression can lead to possession

of a concept. This is a hard problem, and I am not going to solve it here. My goal here is to only show that it is not a *hopeless* problem for defenders of the cognitive conception. What follows is thus a sketch of a view. Do not expect a defense of it.

Suppose Smith says, “It is a distant planet”, but that Jones has just entered the conversation and has no idea what the referent or antecedent of Smith’s use of ‘it’ might be. Jones, then, cannot understand what Smith has said; that is, he does not know which proposition Smith expressed. But he certainly does know that Smith is talking about some object or other, and he can perfectly well wonder which object that might be. Now, the concept *the object about which Smith is talking* is one Jones can form at this point. If he wishes, he can even introduce a name for this object, saying, “Henceforth, in my language, ‘Mysterion’ refers to the object about which Smith is talking”. And henceforth Jones’s language really does contain the name “Mysterion”, denoting the object about which Smith was talking, whatever it might be, and Jones *knows* that it denotes the object about which Smith was talking.

As time goes on, Jones might forget how he introduced the name “Mysterion”. That need not deprive the name of reference.<sup>37</sup> Jones did not introduce “Mysterion” as an abbreviation of “the object about which Smith was talking” but as a name of the object (whichever it is) about which Smith was talking. So suppose Jones does forget. In his mouth, the name “Mysterion” still refers to the object about which Smith was talking. He no longer knows, of course, that “Mysterion” denotes the object about which Smith was talking on that since forgotten occasion, so his understanding the name cannot consist in his knowing that it does. But he certainly does still know that “Mysterion” denotes Mysterion, and I see no reason, in the description of the example, to doubt that his understanding the name now consists in his knowing precisely that fact: that “Mysterion” denotes Mysterion. Indeed, his understanding the name has, or so I would argue, always consisted in his knowing that “Mysterion” denotes Mysterion.

The case is no different if what Smith says is “Pluto is a distant planet”. Then, too, Jones might introduce a name “Mysterion” to refer to the

<sup>37</sup> In my own view, it *could* deprive the name of reference, depending on the details of the case: See Gareth Evans’s discussion of similar sorts of cases (Evans, 1982, Ch 3). But that issue is orthogonal to this one.

object Smith calls “Pluto”.<sup>38</sup> And the case is no different if, instead of introducing a name “Mysterion” into his language, he decides to introduce the name “Pluto”.<sup>39</sup> If Jones should forget how he introduced the name, then the following might simultaneously be true: His only contact with “Pluto” is mediated by representations of it, in particular, by uses of the name “Pluto”; he can entertain thoughts about Pluto only as a result of his exposure to sentences containing the name “Pluto”; and yet his competence with the name “Pluto” consists in his knowing that “Pluto” denotes Pluto.

Not that there isn’t more that needs saying. But that is enough to show that examples like Soames’s yield no knock-down objection to the cognitive conception.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Remember that Jones is not introducing the name as an abbreviation for a description. That insulates this sketch from objections of the sort Kripke brings against an otherwise similar-sounding proposal (Kripke, 1980, pp. 68-73).

<sup>39</sup> One might observe that my treatment of these examples depends upon keeping it clear whose word we are discussing, and not simply talking about *the* word “Pluto”. It may well be, in the end, that the threat such examples seem to pose to the cognitive conception depends upon our neglecting the difference between how someone understands her words and what they mean in a presumed ‘public language’.

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