

The Idea of Words as Signs

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to question the almost universal assumption that words are signs. I first offer an interpretation of that assumption, which links it to the so-called thesis of the arbitrariness of the sign. I then draw out and explain one key commitment of the assumption, on that interpretation. This commitment of the view that words are signs appears to be open to an obvious objection, which I briefly explain.

1. What Everyone Assumes

Almost everyone assumes that words are signs, although they often do so without noticing. Some hesitate a little before openly endorsing the assumption—either because they have a very particular understanding of what signs are, or because, once they are consider the assumption explicitly, they find they are not sure what signs are at all. But those who hesitate because they have a particular understanding of the notion of a sign are usually prepared to accept something a little looser or more contextualized, such as that languages (as wholes) are systems of signs; for my present purposes I will count such looser or more contextualized assumptions as just versions of the assumption that words are signs, and will take the assumption that words are signs itself as being to be understood in some suitably contextualized way. And those who hesitate because they find they are not sure what signs are, when they consider the issue explicitly, generally turn out to be committed to the same fundamental things as those who accept more easily that words are signs.

When the assumption that words are signs is made, it is made very quickly, and then scarcely re-examined. It seems to be thought that it is just obviously true, rather as if it was a commonly observed empirical truth, similar in kind to the truth that human beings are made of flesh and blood. Because it seems just obviously true, this assumption is also thought not to be very important for any of the really interesting issues in the philosophy of language: it is as if it is not really part of the philosophy of language—or any kind of philosophy—at all.

Once the assumption has been made, it is put on one side, so that we can get on with what seems really to matter.¹

My aim here is just to present an interpretation of the assumption that words are signs and to bring out one core commitment of the view. I hope it will then be clear that the orthodox view is at least open to question.

2. Arbitrariness and the Notion of a Sign

What is it to think that words are signs? The problem is not to understand what the word ‘sign’ means: perhaps we understand that well enough, or perhaps not, but it is not to the purpose. What we need to do is, rather, to understand what is really being assumed when people say—or more often simply presuppose—that words are signs. What general picture of language is involved here? What particular commitments are undertaken?

The assumption that words are signs is so widespread that there is little point in choosing some particular text in which the assumption is made and analysing that. The best we can do is to offer a provisional account on the basis of general reflection, in the hope that people will simply recognize it as the core of what they have in mind, and then to use that as the basis of a further elaboration of the commitments of the view. I offer, then, the following proposal. The one thing which is uncontentionally associated with the notion of a sign, at least as that notion is involved in the assumption that *words* are signs (I am not worried here about whether road-signs, for example, are signs), is the notion of *arbitrariness*. Something known as ‘the thesis of the arbitrariness of the sign’ is taken both to be a simple truism, and to apply quite simply to language. I suggest that we will understand what is assumed in assuming that words are signs if we suppose that what is assumed is whatever has to be the case to explain how it is that this ‘thesis of the arbitrariness of the sign’ seems both obviously true and simply applicable to language. The idea is that once we understand the basis of the assumption of arbitrariness, we will understand the notion of a sign, as it is used in connection with language. This seems a plausible interpretative proposal, because it is common to refer to the ‘thesis of the arbitrariness of the sign’ as if it were simply a thesis about language—as if, in fact, the final word of the phrase ‘thesis of the arbitrariness of the sign’ were ‘word’, not ‘sign’.

¹ The same applies to another common assumption: that words are types of mark or sound. In fact, I think this other assumption—which has no real independent motivation—is actually just a way of fleshing out the assumption that words are signs. There is not space here to argue for this claim, however.

What, then, is the ‘thesis of the arbitrariness of the sign’? Despite its fame, this ‘thesis’ is rarely spelled out. In fact, there are two distinct arbitrariness theses here. One I will call the thesis of the arbitrariness of the *sign*, speaking strictly. We can formulate it like this:

(ASn) For any sign s_1 , it is arbitrary that it is s_1 , rather than some distinct sign, s_2 , which is used to signify what s_1 signifies.

There are two things that need to be clarified about this. The first is the notion of *signification*: this will be explained more fully a little later; for now signifying is to be understood just as what signs do. The second thing that needs clarifying is the notion of arbitrariness involved here. If a thesis like (ASn) is to have any plausibility, it cannot mean that there is no motive at all for choosing one sign rather than another to perform a particular signifying task, since it is clear that once one sign has been chosen for the task, and has become established in that role, there is a very good reason for people to conform to common practice. Rather, the notion of arbitrariness needs to be understood in terms of counterfactuals. A natural analysis of (ASn) is, therefore, something like this:

(ASn*) For any sign s_1 , some distinct sign, s_2 , could easily have been used to signify what s_1 signifies, instead of s_1 .

If there is a long-established practice of using a particular sign, what we need to imagine is the possibility of an alternative practice having been set up at the outset, rather than some alternative sign being introduced now.²

² It is this kind of arbitrariness that Locke has in mind when he writes:

Thus we may conceive how words, which were by nature so well adapted to that purpose, came to be made use of by men, as *the signs of their ideas*; not by any natural connexion, that there is between particular articulate sounds and certain *ideas*, for then there would be but one language amongst all men; but by a voluntary imposition, whereby such a word is made arbitrarily the mark of such an *idea*. (Locke 1700: III, ii, 1)

The other arbitrariness thesis is naturally called the thesis of the arbitrariness of the *signified*; we can formulate it as follows for the time being (although this version will be revised shortly):

(ASd) For anything d_1 which is signified by a sign s , it is arbitrary that it is d_1 , rather than something distinct, d_2 , which is signified by s .

Interpreting the notion of arbitrariness here as it was interpreted for (ASn), (ASd) says something like this: the same sign could easily have signified something else. Where (ASn) keeps what is signified constant, and imagines a variation in the sign, (ASd) keeps the sign constant, and imagines a variation in what is signified. (ASd) is an attempt to express the kind of arbitrariness which people have in mind when they contrast an *arbitrary* relation of signification with a relation based on *resemblance*. (The locus classicus for the contrast is Plato's *Cratylus*, though what view exactly Plato is there endorsing is not immediately clear.)

(ASd) makes something explicit which perhaps was implicit in (ASn): that is, the tendency of the notion of signification to encourage the reification of what is signified. In (ASd), we find ourselves explicitly quantifying over *things signified*. I think this tendency to reification reflects something deep about the idea that words are signs—something which I will return to at several points later—but explicit ontological commitment can almost certainly be removed by some technical device. If the apparent ontological commitment to things signified in (ASd) concerns you, imagine it removed by some more cautious formulation, or a different construal (exploiting a substitutional interpretation of the quantifiers, for example). It will not be crucial to my concerns.

I have said that (ASd) expresses the contrast between *arbitrary* signification and a relation based on resemblance. That might in itself seem problematic. Here is C. S. Peirce making a famous distinction among different kinds of sign:

Firstly, there are *likenesses*, or icons; which serve to convey ideas of the things they represent simply by imitating them. Secondly, there are *indications*, or indices; which show something about things, on account of their being physically connected with

them ... Thirdly, there are *symbols*, or general signs, which have become associated with their meanings by usage.³

We can leave aside what Peirce here calls *indications* (such as that dark clouds are an *indication* of coming rain), since these clearly do not involve signification in any sense that might be relevant to language. But there is still a distinction here, *within* the category of signs, between what Peirce calls *likenesses* or *icons*, on the one hand, and what he calls *symbols*, on the other. And this does seem to matter, because representation by likenesses, in Peirce's sense, does not seem to be arbitrary. In part, this seems to matter for quite general reasons: it is hard to rule out the possibility of something counting as a language even though it contained signs which functioned by resemblance. But it has also often been thought that actual languages already contain words which function in this way: onomatopoeic words, for example, are commonly thought to represent what they do in virtue of some resemblance.

Those who hold that words are arbitrary signs tend not to give much weight to onomatopoeia.⁴ I think they are right not to, given their general view, but the possibility of likenesses, in Peirce's sense, and the actual existence of onomatopoeia, can be used to clarify what really lies behind the arbitrariness theses.

Likenesses create a problem for the thesis of the arbitrariness of the signified only if in their case 'signify' means something like *represent by resemblance*. If this is a distinct kind of signification, it cannot be true in general that the same sign could have signified something quite different—indeed, arbitrarily different. For the same sign could not have represented something arbitrarily different *by resemblance*. In order to defend the thesis of the arbitrariness of the signified, we need to claim that it is signification of the same kind, and in the same sense, which is involved in what is done both by *symbols* and by *likenesses*, in Peirce's terminology: it is just that in the case of likenesses, this common task happens to have been done by means of resemblance.

That means that in order to understand the arbitrariness theses properly, we need to focus on the notion of signification. Signifying has so far been introduced just as what signs do; that will not be enough to stop representation by resemblance being a distinct kind of

³ Peirce (1894: 5)

⁴ Thus Saussure clearly does not take the existence of onomatopoeia as presenting a significant objection, even though he gives no compelling reason for setting it aside: see Saussure (1922: 101-2).

signification. The natural response is to associate signifying specifically with *symbols*, in Peirce's sense. So we can say:

(Sig) *Signification* is the kind of meaning which *symbols* have.

If this is right, Peirce's distinction between likenesses and symbols, within the category of signs, can be seen to depend on the thought that both likenesses and symbols have the kind of meaning which symbols have—though, of course, they have it in different ways, in virtue of different particular relations to what is signified.

In order to make (Sig) more precise, we need to spell out a little more what is involved in the notion of a symbol. Peirce says that symbols 'become associated with their meanings by usage'. This does not itself make the contrast with likenesses clear. Perhaps we can make the point more carefully as follows:

(Sym) A *symbol* is a sign which means what it does just in virtue of its location in some context which could easily have been otherwise, and not in virtue of the qualitative character of the sign itself.⁵

Next we need to explain in particular how *likenesses* can be signs, if (ASd) is true. In the case of language, this will be explaining how onomatopoeic words can still be signs, as those who suppose that words are signs standardly assume they somehow are. We need first to suppose that symbols are possible: that is to say, we need to suppose that it is possible for something to have a certain sort of meaning just in virtue of being located in some easily variable context. Suppose that is possible. Then, given that the meaning which can be established in this way is signification, and signification is, by definition, the kind of meaning which all signs have, it seems we can say this: whatever any sign signifies could in principle

⁵ The reference to a context which could easily have been otherwise is meant to allow that a range of different factors might determine the meaning of a symbol: it might be stipulation, for example; or some kind of convention (which is presumably what Peirce means by 'usage'); or something else. The idea that the context could easily have been otherwise—we might easily have made a different stipulation, there might easily have been a different convention—immediately makes room for the thesis of the arbitrariness of the signified: it seems that location in a different context would have given the same sign a different meaning. So (Sig) and (Sym) together seem to give us (ASd).

have been signified by a symbol—that is, could have been signified by a sign which signifies what it does just in virtue of its location in an easily variable context. Now consider in particular some *likeness*, a sign which signifies what it does by resemblance. If symbols are possible at all, it seems that another sign could have signified what this likeness signifies, which makes (ASn) applicable to likenesses. And, conversely, if symbols are possible at all, it seems that a particular likeness, a sign which in fact signifies by resemblance, could in principle have been located in some easily variable context, in virtue of which it would have signified something else. And that seems to make (ASd) applicable to likenesses too.

But we may want to qualify this last point. We may feel that it is essential to a likeness that it signifies in the way it does—that is, by resemblance. So we may feel that whatever gets to signify something else, in virtue of its location in some easily variable context, is not actually the original likeness. That is, in short, we may feel that it is essential to a sign that it signifies what it does. In order to accommodate this point, we simply need to distinguish between the qualitative character of a sign, which is independent of what it signifies (as (Sym) insists), and other features which may include what it signifies. We can then state the following modified version of the thesis of the arbitrariness of the signified:

(ASd*) For anything d_1 which is signified by a sign s , it is arbitrary that a sign of the qualitative character of s signifies d_1 , rather than something distinct, d_2 .

With this done, we have two plausible arbitrariness theses, and a generally plausible version of the conception of signs which is likely to be involved in the assumption that words are signs. At the root of it all is the concept of signification, conceived of precisely as a kind of meaning that can be established by location in an easily variable context, such as stipulation or convention. And that concept can be used to bring out the core of the assumption that words are signs. The orthodox assumption amounts just to this:

(LMS) Linguistic meaning is signification.

If we accept (LMS), we will be committed to the following two arbitrariness theses about *words*, a thesis of the arbitrariness of *words* (AW) and a thesis of the arbitrariness of *word-meaning* (AM):

- (AW) For any word w_1 , it is arbitrary that it is w_1 , rather than some distinct word, w_2 , which is used to mean what w_1 means.
- (AM) For anything d_1 which is meant by a word w , it is arbitrary that a word of the qualitative character of w means d_1 , rather than something distinct, d_2 .

I claim that the assumption that words are signs is, at bottom, just (LMS), the thesis that linguistic meaning is signification. Once this interpretation is accepted, it should immediately be clear that it cannot really be just obviously true that words are signs, for no claim about meaning—which the claim that words are signs has turned out ultimately to be—can be just obviously true.

3. Symbols, Readiness, and Form

The view that words are signs has turned out to be, at bottom, the view that linguistic meaning is signification, with signification understood as the kind of meaning that symbols, in Peirce's sense, have. Officially, symbols have their meaning in virtue of being placed in a context which could easily have been otherwise; and such contexts are always understood to include conventions of various kinds. But what really dominates our conception of what symbols are and the kind of meaning they have is not convention, but stipulation.⁶ It is because stipulation is evidently possible that we are so confident that there can be symbols—and hence confident that, even if some signs signify by means of resemblance, the very same signs (or, at least, things of the same qualitative character) could have signified something else, and not by means of resemblance.

This means that in order to understand the view that words are signs, we need to understand stipulation. Stipulation is, in the basic case, a *linguistic act*. It involves a declaration in words, most obviously of the general form 'Let *this* be *that*', or 'Let *this* stand for *that*'. 'This' here is schematic for some way or other of picking out the item which is to be given a new role; and 'that' is schematic for some way of identifying the role which is to be given. Of course, nobody really supposes that in the general case words have meaning because of some explicit stipulation of this form: there obviously need to be meaningful words in place for a stipulation to be made in words. What is supposed, rather, is that the kind of thing which is done in a stipulation in words could, in principle, be done in some other

⁶ Indeed, it is natural to think of a convention, in the relevant sense, as just a kind of collaborative stipulation. This idea obviously underlies Quine (1969).

way: by means of some kind of habituation within an implicit convention, for example. But this only removes one respect in which stipulation is linguistic, in a crucial range of basic cases.

Consider again stipulations of the form ‘Let *this* be *that*’, or ‘Let *this* stand for *that*’. Such stipulations can only work if the role indicated by ‘that’ here is fixed and appropriately well-defined. What the stipulation does is give to some new thing—the thing indicated by ‘this’—an antecedently well-defined role. That antecedently well-defined role is then used to shape the ways in which the thing which is given the role can be used. In some cases, this role is not itself linguistic. Suppose I say, ‘Let this pepper-pot be the Imperial Guard’, as I explain the final stages of the Battle of Waterloo in a slightly obsessive dinner-party conversation. The ways in which the actual Imperial Guard were able to move on the real battlefield dictate the ways in which I can legitimately move the pepper-pot across the dinner-table: I use the antecedent determinacy of those possible movements to constrain the legitimate movements of the pepper-pot, and that obviously requires the ways in which the actual Imperial Guard could move to be reasonably well-defined antecedently. This antecedent determinacy is not itself linguistic, just as the use to which the pepper-pot is put is not naturally understood to be linguistic.

But consider a stipulation of a different kind, such as this one: ‘Let ‘yellange’ truly describe something just in case it is in the borderline between yellow and orange—just in case its colour is not quite clearly yellow and not quite clearly orange. This seems a perfectly good stipulation, and the role of the term is appropriately well-defined (even if it is vague). As before, the role which the term has to play is determinate, in the relevant sense, in advance of its introduction. But in this case the determinacy is of a clearly linguistic kind, just as the thing which is given a role by the stipulation—the new word ‘yellange’—is itself clearly linguistic. The role which the term ‘yellange’ is to play is linguistic in the following two senses: it is a role *for* a word (the stipulation gives ‘yellange’ a linguistic role), and it is a role which is defined here *by means* of other words: oversimplifying a little, the stipulation allows ‘yellange’ to *replace* those other words in certain contexts. This second point is the crucial one: the role which ‘yellange’ is to play is made determinate *by* words whose meaning is taken for granted. I will return to that in a moment.

This point is of particular importance for our present concerns, when we consider the nature of the role which is assigned to ‘yellange’ in such a stipulation, and consequently the conception of meaning which is involved in the view that linguistic meaning is simply the

kind of meaning which can be introduced by stipulation—which is, after all, just the view that words are signs. I introduce the term ‘yellange’ to play a role which is defined by means of other, antecedently understood words. What this does, in effect, is to license the use of the term ‘yellange’ in place of other words (either the words which I use to define the new term’s role, or certain closely related words) in certain contexts. In making the stipulation, I am saying, in effect, that ‘yellange’ and these other words which it can replace in certain contexts, are to be counted as *equivalent in meaning* for certain purposes. And this, in effect, defines (or partially defines) the notion of meaning which is established by stipulation. It is immediately fixed that the same meaning—an equivalence for certain purposes—can be the meaning of qualitatively different words: the words which our new term can replace in certain contexts, on the one hand, and whatever term I choose to introduce by stipulation, on the other. So whatever it is about the words that my new term replaces which is important for my stipulation, it cannot be something which only those words, or only words with that qualitative character, could possess. For stipulation, I ignore the qualitative character of the words which fix the role which the new term has to play, just as much as I ignore the qualitative character of the new term itself.

We are dealing here with stipulation which is linguistic in the two special senses I noted before: it introduces a role *for* a word (a linguistic role), and the role it introduces is defined *by means of* words. And this last sense in which such stipulation is linguistic has been seen to be characterizable as follows: it is a matter of this new term being *substitutable*, in certain contexts, and for certain purposes, for certain other *words*. The role which is antecedently fixed, which the stipulation then exploits, is introduced in just these terms: as the role played, in certain contexts, and for certain purposes, by certain *words*. And this shows the deep assumption on which the view that words are signs depends.

It is accepted that words cannot, in general, be meaningful in virtue of literal stipulation. Instead, it is supposed that something else—some kind of habituation within an implicit convention, for example—might do the work of an explicit declaration in words. But now we can see exactly what that something else has to achieve. It has to set going new terms: it has to give them a role. But the role it gives them has to be one for which the qualitative character of the terms themselves is irrelevant. It seems that it can only do that in virtue of the role being somehow defined independently of those terms, and defined in such a way as to ensure that the qualitative character of the terms is irrelevant. At this point the role cannot be defined just *as* the role played, in certain contexts, and for certain purposes, by

certain *words*. It must be a role which is fixed in some way independently of language, if we are to make sense of achieving what explicit stipulation achieves but without a declaration in words. It must be a role which is fixed by what is, in some sense at least, *outside* language.

What is to be found outside language, which might determine the role that words can play? There are two kinds of answer, each associated with a different tradition in the philosophy of language. On the one hand there is the *world*, which we can engage with linguistically in various ways—most obviously by describing it, but also by asking questions about it, by asking others to change it, and so on. And, on the other hand, there is *thought*, which we might suppose is independent of language, and which we can engage with linguistically by *expressing* it in various ways—in asserting, ordering, and asking questions. If we hold that linguistic meaning is the kind of meaning which can be introduced by stipulation, and that this can be done even when no declaration is made in words, we have to suppose that the *world itself*, or *thought itself*—or some combination of the two, perhaps—defines the roles that words can play if the world is to be described or thought expressed. Words have to be the representatives of the world or of thought, in such a way that the nature of the world itself, or of thought itself, determines how words may legitimately be used—at least in combination with other words—very much as the legitimate use of the pepper-pot in my explanation of the Battle of Waterloo is determined by the possible movements of the actual Imperial Guard.

This reveals the deep assumption which underlies the view that words are signs. The assumption is that there is some kind of equivalence—one might say isomorphism—between words and what lies outside language. But the assumption is very hard to make precise: in part, I think, because it is hard to understand what is required when the requirements of stipulation are extended beyond declarations in words. I will begin by offering a characterization of the assumption which anticipates the problem I will later find in it. This characterization is metaphorical in an obvious way. I will then present a natural and suggestive way of cashing out that metaphor, by means of another metaphor. In the next section I will offer an interpretation of what underlies that second metaphor.

Here, then, is the first characterization of the assumption which underlies the view that words are signs—the characterization which shows what I think is ultimately wrong with it. In this guise I call it a *readiness* assumption, and formulate it like this:

(Ready) Whatever can be described or expressed in a language is already, in itself, ready for that language.

Clearly, the key to understanding this readiness assumption is understanding the metaphorical use of the notion of readiness at its core. It is not altogether easy to do this without begging the question against the readiness assumption. But there is a suggestive proposal which we can use to make some headway. It is natural to understand the metaphor or readiness in terms of another metaphor—one of shape—as follows:

(ReadyF) The world (or thought) is *ready* for a language if and only if the world has the same *form* as that language.

If we understand readiness in these terms, we make the readiness assumption equivalent to the central thesis of the so-called ‘picture’ theory of meaning which lies at the heart of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*.⁷ And that should not be all that surprising: the comparison between the fixing of the meaning of a word by stipulation, and the fixing of the legitimate use of a pepper-pot in explaining the final stages of the Battle of Waterloo, is exactly the kind of comparison which Wittgenstein’s theory was inspired by. I suggest, then, that we try to understand exactly what it is that the readiness assumption amounts to—exactly what it is that the view that words are signs is committed to—by taking readiness to be defined by (ReadyF), and trying to work out independently what it might be for the world (or thought) to have the same form as language.

Let me summarize the claim I am making. One can only hold that linguistic meaning in general is the kind of meaning which can be introduced by stipulation—which is what the view that words are signs amounts to—if one supposes that the world, or thought, has the same form as language. It is only if one makes that supposition that one can think that mere location in some easily variable context is enough to endow something with meaning: the context must be rich enough to shape what anything placed in it can mean. The task now is to try to understand what this same-form assumption really amounts to.

4. Readiness, Isomorphism, and Correspondence

⁷ Wittgenstein (1922).

How are we to understand the notion of readiness, or sameness of form? It is natural to understand sameness of form as *isomorphism* (which term's etymology suggests that it itself means *sameness of form*), with isomorphism being understood in something like the way that is familiar in mathematics. In the mathematical sense, two structures are isomorphic just in case there is a one-to-one correspondence between them. This might seem a bit ambitious (there might be elements of the world or thought to which no linguistic items correspond). So a language might be said to be isomorphic with the world (or thought) in a looser sense, just in case there is a mapping function from language to the world (or thought), such that each unit of the language is mapped onto exactly one element of the world (or thought). Even this is likely to be more demanding than is plausible, since there will be many expressions (quantifiers and logical constants, for example) which are not likely to be counted as meaningful in virtue of being mapped onto items of the world: so the strict mapping claim will only be held to apply to a certain class of basic sentences and their constituents.

Even when it is understood in this restricted way, however, this way of understanding sameness of form yields an intuitive, and quite demanding, interpretation of the notion of readiness—an *assignment* interpretation—which we can formulate as follows:

(ReadyA) The world (or thought) is *ready* for a language if and only if nothing more than an *assignment* of items in the world (or thought) is needed to render the (basic) units of that language meaningful.

An assignment relation, in the relevant sense, will be one which assigns exactly one item in the world (or thought) to each relevant element of a language. If the readiness assumption is true, with readiness understood in terms of assignment, two things will be true of the relation between language and the world (or between language and thought). First, the structure of language—once we are really clear about it—will be *revealing* of the structure of the world, or of thought. And, secondly, the relation between language and the world, or between language and thought, will be, in a certain sense *unproblematic*: it consists just in a pairing of elements of language with elements in the world or in thought, and all that needs, in principle, to be discovered when one tries to learn a language is which elements of the world or of thought the elements of the language are paired with.

On one version of it, the assignment interpretation of readiness tends towards ontological extravagance, of a kind which is familiarly provoking. In order to make literal

sense of the notions of assignment and mapping we need to suppose that *entities* in the world, or in thought, are assigned to the relevant linguistic units. And this looks as if it is likely, at the very least, to encourage us to posit a distinct category of entity for each distinct basic category of language. So, in the case of the kind of theory for which it is items in the *world* which are assigned to linguistic units, there will be *objects* (in a certain technical sense) corresponding to the category of singular terms, *qualities* corresponding to one-place predicates, *relations* corresponding to many-placed predicates, and *facts* or *states of affairs* corresponding to (at least some true) sentences.

One version of the readiness assumption, on the assignment interpretation, finds a structure in the world which is isomorphic with the structure of sentences. There is another version—one which takes language to be grounded in the first instance in relations to thought rather than to the world—which finds a similar structure in thought. If we put the two together, we get something like a traditional correspondence theory of truth. The traditional correspondence theory claims that truth is to be understood in terms of a certain relation between the bearers of truth—the things which can be true—and the world. The bearers of truth might be sentences, but they are more commonly the things expressed by sentences: thoughts, or, more ambiguously, propositions, both of which have the structure of sentences. And the traditional form of correspondence theory can then be characterized as follows. It is generally assumed, to begin with, that there is a distinction between basic and non-basic sentences, or propositions. (Very few actual correspondence theorists have held that the correspondence relation holds for all true sentences or propositions.) Non-basic sentences or propositions are said to be true in virtue of the truth of basic sentences or propositions. And basic sentences or propositions are held to be true in virtue of there being items in the world which correspond to them—*facts*. For there to be a fact in the world which *corresponds* to a basic sentence or proposition is for something like the following to obtain: there actually exists something in the world, suitably independent of thought, which is structurally isomorphic with that basic sentence or proposition.

5. Readiness and Semantic Ascent

We have seen what the readiness assumption looks like on the assignment interpretation: this interpretation is the one which is prompted by understanding the idea that the world (or thought) has the same form as language in terms of a quasi-mathematical notion of isomorphism. It seems to capture the range of semantic theories which explain linguistic

meaning in terms of the correlation of both whole sentences and their components with suitably structured extra-linguistic items—whether they be in the world or in thought. But my claim is that *everyone* who thinks that words are signs—everyone who thinks that linguistic meaning is the kind of meaning which can be conferred by stipulation—is committed to the readiness assumption. But not all of these people are committed to the kind of semantic theory which can be associated with the assignment interpretation of that assumption. Donald Davidson, in particular, has claimed that it is possible to do semantics without the kind of reification of meanings or things meant which is involved in the assignment interpretation (Davidson 1984).

Davidson hopes to handle the central task of semantics, to explain how the meaning of whole sentences depends upon the meaning of their parts, by means of minimally reifying axioms which fix the semantics for parts of sentences, from which theorems can be derived which state the truth-conditions of whole sentences involving those parts. Thus we might have basic axioms like these:

(AxSal) The thing referred to by the name ‘Sally’ = Sally;

(AxTal) The predicate ‘ x is tall’ is true of something if and only if that thing is tall.⁸

And from these axioms (together with a syntactic analysis and a rule of composition) we can derive a theorem like this:

(TST) The sentence ‘Sally is tall’ is true if and only if Sally is tall.⁹

⁸ Note that I make no effort here to choose a predicate for which a simple semantic axiom like (AxTal) is likely to be uncontroversial: obviously ‘ x is tall’ is both attributive and vague. Just assume that these features of this predicate—which are, of course, very widely shared by predicates in natural languages—are handled in whatever way is best for a broadly truth-conditional semantics.

⁹ This theorem, like the axioms from which it is derived, is stated informally: in particular, there is no mention of the language to which the sentence belongs, or within whose framework it is interpreted; nor is there any mention of anything which fixes the occasion of use (which might perhaps determine that the name ‘Sally’ refers to one particular Sally). I am happy to leave it informal, in order to remain neutral about the best way of making it more formal, judgement on which would involve making a decision on a particular style of semantic theory, as well as on some larger philosophical issues (such as the nature of words). For the same reason, I leave it open how exactly theorems like (TST), which are supposed to state truth-conditions are reached: whether, in

And here we seem to have removed at least some of the ontological commitment which seemed the characteristic mark of the readiness assumption.¹⁰

Let us ask to begin with: how might a Davidsonian theory be thought to hold that the form of the world is the same as the form of language? If we can understand that, we might hope to reach a more general statement of the readiness assumption.

The key lies in statements of truth-condition like (TST). This—like the rest of the toy semantic theory from which it is derived—offers a homophonic semantics, in which we give the meaning of words and sentences by using those very words and sentences themselves. But even though the same words appear on both sides of statements of truth-condition like (TST), there is a well-known difference in their role: the words are *referred to*, in quotation, on the left, but *used*, unquoted, on the right. There are two ways in which we might try spelling out the significance of this difference. Suppose, first, that the sentence ‘Sally is tall’ is true. In that case, we can imagine using (TST) to construct two different inferences, one running, as it were, from the right to the left in (TST), the other running from the left to the right. Here is the right-to-left inference:

(RL1) Sally is tall;

(RL2) The sentence ‘Sally is tall’ is true if and only if Sally is tall; *so*

(RL3) The sentence ‘Sally is tall’ is true.

And here is the left-to-right inference:

(LR1) The sentence ‘Sally is tall’ is true;

(LR2) The sentence ‘Sally is tall’ is true if and only if Sally is tall; *so*

(LR3) Sally is tall.

(TST), which appears as both (RL2) and (LR2), is an instance of the following familiar equivalence:

particular, they are the result simply of a *semantic* theory, strictly so-called, or whether they depend on various pragmatic factors which determine how particular context-sensitive expressions are to be interpreted.

¹⁰ It is in fact an open question how successful Davidson ultimately can be in removing ontological commitment: it is striking that this toy fragment of a semantic theory contains no sentences involving quantifiers, for example.

(T) s is true if and only if p

—where ‘ s ’ names a sentence, and ‘ p ’ is replaced by a sentence which says what s says. In the right-to-left inference it appears as a principle of semantic ascent; in the left-to-right inference it appears as a principle of disquotation. And we can obviously imagine a similar pair of inferences—with opposite conclusions—if we change our initial assumption and suppose that the sentence ‘Sally is tall’ is not true.

The significance of the difference between the mention of the sentence ‘Sally is tall’ on the left of (TST) and its use on the right lies in at least one of these inferences being significant. We can use the right-to-left inference to explain what the readiness assumption might amount to in the case of a Davidsonian theory.

We might think that a significant inference represents a kind of objective grounding, a way in which the conclusion is necessitated objectively by something else—the premises—being the case. Within this framework, different directions of inference would represent different directions of explanation. So the right-to-left inference might explain how the truth of a sentence was grounded in the way the world is. It might be used to represent a certain understanding of the claim that the sentence ‘Sally is tall’ is true *because* Sally is, in fact, tall. (It is not obvious that there is a credible relation of objective grounding which might be represented by the left-to-right inference.)

It seems to me that this captures the core of the readiness assumption, at least as that applies to a broadly Davidsonian semantic theory. I suggest that to accept the readiness assumption within that kind of semantic theory is to accept that, in the fundamental case, at least, these two things hold:

- (a) Sentences are made true by the way the world is;
- (b) The way the world is necessitates the truth of sentences by means of nothing but an operation of semantic ascent (the (T) schema applying in the right-to-left direction).

It is (b) which provides the key to the readiness assumption.

The notion of semantic ascent in play here is only well-understood for trivial (homophonic) instances of the schema (T), but we can define a generalized version of it:

- (SA) A move of generalized semantic ascent is one which permits a valid inference from a judgement in which a sentence is *used* to a judgement about the propriety of using a certain *named* sentence which says what the originally used sentence says.

(SA) applies not only to more informative (non-homophonic) instances of the (T) schema, but also to other schemata, which might be used to ground the correctness or appropriateness of the use of sentences in the *thoughts* they might express (as opposed to the states of the world they might be used to describe). One such thought-directed schema might be this:

- (A) It is appropriate to use *s* if and only if it is appropriate to express the thought that *p*.

We can now use the notion of generalized semantic ascent to define the notion of readiness more generally, as follows:

- (ReadyS) The world (or thought) is *ready* for language if and only if the propriety of using sentences is necessitated by the way the world is (or: what thoughts are properly expressed) on the basis of nothing but an operation of generalized semantic ascent.

This understanding of readiness, in terms of the notion of generalized semantic ascent, is plausibly understood to underlie the assignment interpretation of readiness presented in the last section—the interpretation characterized by (ReadyA). The assignment interpretation is simply the result of understanding the notion presented in (ReadyS) in the manner of a particular, reifying style of semantic theory. Semantic theories of that style will themselves be answerable to the kinds of consideration which are at work in the reasoning which underlies (ReadyS): they will have to yield an account of the correctness of uses of sentences which meets the kinds of condition imposed by such schemata as (T) and (A). In that case, we can take (ReadyS) to be the basic account of the notion of readiness in play in the readiness assumption.

6. Readiness and Suspicious Convenience

There is a close relationship between the readiness assumption, on the assignment interpretation, and traditional correspondence theories of truth. And the readiness assumption, even in its more generalized form, is open to at least one fundamental objection to such theories. P. F. Strawson gives a hint of this objection in the following famous passage:

But what could fit more perfectly the fact that it is raining than the statement that it is raining? Of course, statements and facts fit. They were made for each other.¹¹

Let us note, first, that this objection does not apply just to the relation between statements and facts, as that is understood by a correspondence theory. It could be reformulated equally for the relation between sentences and thoughts, or for the relations between singular terms and objects, between predicates and qualities and relations, and between any type component of sentences and the corresponding (note the appropriateness of the term) type of concept.

Strawson's objection to correspondence theories is this: correspondence theories make the relationship between language and the world suspiciously simple; the fit is just too convenient to be plausible, if the world is to be as independent of language as correspondence theorists generally suppose that it is. And exactly the same objection applies to all forms of the readiness assumption: the readiness assumption makes the relationship between language and the world (or between language and thought) just too neat, too convenient to be plausible, if the world (or thought) is to be as independent of language as it is natural to think it is.

The reason why the relationship seems too neat is just this. The readiness assumption supposes that nothing more than a step of generalized semantic ascent can be needed to take one from the world (or thought) to language. And this is to suppose that the relation between the world, or thought, on the one hand, and language, on the other, meets a certain condition of *epistemic* convenience: it permits the appropriateness of the use of a sentence, on any particular occasion, to be justified by an inference of the fundamentally simple kind exhibited in (RL1)-(RL3) of the last section. But what reason could we have for thinking that the relation was so convenient?

¹¹ Strawson (1971: 179).

Certainly, this *epistemic* convenience cannot be required for language to have evolved to suit the world, if that is what we think. Such evolution requires merely that language should have ended up capable of describing the world: there is no reason to think that this result is only—or even naturally—achieved in a way which presents us with such easy justification. Nor is it credible to suppose that the real world—the world we take ourselves to be describing—is itself nothing but a construction of our thoughts, built to our specifications and to suit our epistemic convenience. And exactly the same kinds of appoint apply to the relation between language and thought.

In fact, it seems clear that we would only have reason to believe in the readiness assumption if we thought that languages were in the first instance *invented*—with words assigned to things or to concepts by some kind of stipulation.¹² And it is surely not hard to doubt that.

We seem to have come full circle. The view that words are signs turned out, on investigation, to be the view that linguistic meaning in general is the kind of meaning that symbols have, the kind of meaning which is established by stipulation. This model of language was seen to depend on the readiness assumption—the assumption that the world, or thought, is already shaped to provide the kind of determinate role for words to play which is needed if stipulation, or anything like it, is to be possible. And it now appears that the readiness assumption is only credible if we think that languages were, in fact, introduced by stipulation. That is to say, it is only reasonable to think that the relation between language and the world, or between language and thought, is of the kind which would be needed for language to be founded on stipulation if one already thinks that languages actually were, in the first instance, founded on stipulation. And that is surely enough to make us question the view that words are signs.¹³

¹² Interestingly (and ironically), Strawson himself seems to suppose just that: see Strawson (1980: 286).

¹³ I am extremely grateful to Piotr Stalmaszczyk for inviting me to give the talk at the 2009 PhiLang conference in Łódź on which this paper is based, and to many of the participants of that conference—I single out Jaroslav Peregrin for particular mention here—for helping me to get clear about what I wanted to say.

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