3 | Language

'Speech is but a broken light upon the depth/ Of the unspoken.'
GEORGE ELIOT, 1819–80

'Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun.'
CLIFFORD GEERTZ, 1923–

'The word is half his that speaks, and half his that hears it.'
MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE, 1533–92

'Language was given to man to disguise his thoughts.'
TALLEYRAND, 1754–1838

'Almost all education is language education.'
NEIL POSTMAN, 1931–2003

'Who does not know another language does not know his own.'
GOETHE, 1749–1832

'When I use a word', Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less'. 'The question is', said Alice, 'whether you can make words mean so many different things'. 'The question is', said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master – that's all.'
LEWIS CARROLL, 1832–98

'Language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is the shaper of ideas... We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages.'
BENJAMIN WHORF, 1897–1941

'Language was the real innovation in our biological evolution; everything since has just made our words travel faster or last longer.'
STEVEN PINKER, 1954–

'Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language.'
LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN, 1889–1951

'If your language is confused, your intellect, if not your whole character, will almost certainly correspond.'
SIR ARTHUR QUILLER-COUCH, 1863–1944

'Thought is not merely expressed in words; it comes into existence through them.'
L. VYGOTSKY, 1896–1934

'Man is the animal that speaks. Understanding language is thus the key to understanding man.'
THOMAS SZASZ, 1920–

Introduction

Like the air we breathe, language is something that so completely surrounds us that we rarely think about it or are consciously aware of it. Yet it has a central function in human life. We use language for a variety of purposes, such as describing things, expressing our feelings, persuading people, telling jokes, writing literature and speculating about the meaning of life.

Language is relevant to the theory of knowledge because it is one of the main ways in which we acquire knowledge about the world. By communicating with one another, we are able to break out of the small circle of our own experience and tap into the collective experience of the community. As we saw in Chapter 2, this makes possible an 'intellectual division of labour' which has been a key factor in our success as a species.

> **?** How much could you know about the world if you had no language or means of communicating with other people?

Despite its importance, language is not a perfect medium of communication, and it has drawbacks as well as benefits. One problem is that what one person means when they say something may not be what another person understands when they hear it. (How often have you found yourself saying to someone 'No, that's not what I meant at all'?) Furthermore, language is sometimes used to deliberately deceive and manipulate people – as, for example, in propaganda. So we cannot simply take language for granted, but must look in more detail at what it is and how it affects our knowledge of the world.

What is language?

Since language is a complex phenomenon, we should begin by saying more about its nature. In what follows, we shall consider three key features which might be said to distinguish it from non-language.

1 Language is rule-governed.
2 Language is intended.
3 Language is creative and open-ended.

Language is rule-governed

When you learn another language, one of the main things you have to learn is grammar. Grammar gives the rules for how to combine words in the correct order, and it helps to determine the meaning of a sentence. For example, if someone asks who did what to whom in the sentence 'Jill hit Jack', we can say that Jill is the active 'hitter', and Jack the passive 'hittee'. How do we know this? Well, in English there is

Ways of knowing

a rule which says that the noun before the verb is the subject, and the noun after the verb is the object. There is no deep reason why the rule is the way it is, and English might have evolved so that the noun before the verb is the object and the noun after the verb the subject. All that really matters is that everyone agrees on the rules.

The other main element in language – vocabulary – is also governed by arbitrary rules. For a native English speaker, it feels as if there is a natural – almost magical – connection between the word 'dog' and the animal it stands for. But there is of course no deep reason why this noise should be associated with *that* animal. It could just as well be *quan* (Chinese), *koira* (Finnish), *chien* (French), *Hund* (German), *kutta* (Hindi), *inu* (Japanese), *gae* (Korean), *sobaka* (Russian), *perro* (Spanish), or *köpek* (Turkish). For communication to work, it does not matter what noises or squiggles we correlate with objects, so long as there is general agreement within the tribe.

> Take any familiar word of your choice, such as 'table' or 'chair', and repeat it twenty times. What happens? What does this suggest to you about the relation between words and things?

Language is intended

Although language is a form of communication, not all communication is language. To see the difference between the two, consider the following two situations.

- You are bored in class and, while the teacher is writing on the board, you catch someone's eye across the room and make a yawning gesture by putting your hand to your mouth.
- You are trying to look interested in what someone says and to your horror find yourself starting to yawn.

While both of these yawns communicate information – and might loosely be called body language – only the first can really be described as language. This is because

Figure 3.1 Body language

the first is intended and the second is not. This suggests that a key thing that distinguishes the subset of communication that is language from other forms of communication is that the former is intended while the latter is not.

> 1 How would you interpret the body language in the two pictures at the foot of page 49? What do you think is being communicated?
>
> 2 How easy is it to misunderstand the body language of someone from a different culture?

There are many situations in which information is communicated, but no one would describe it as language. For example, if you put a dollar in a vending machine and press the button which says 'coffee white with sugar', you get coffee white with sugar. Although information has clearly been communicated, you would not say the vending machine *understood* that you wanted a cup of coffee. Vending machines – and other mechanical devices – are simply not in the business of understanding things.

Language is creative and open-ended

A final distinguishing feature of language is that the rules of grammar and vocabulary allow us to make an almost infinite number of grammatically correct sentences. We are able to create and understand sentences that have never been written or said before. For example, you have probably never seen the following sentence before, 'The wise cow seeks shelter when it snows at dusk', but you have no problem understanding what it means and conjuring up a mental picture corresponding to it. The creative resources of language are, in fact, staggering. The psychologist Steven Pinker (1954–) has calculated that there are at least 10^{20} grammatically correct English sentences up to twenty words long. (This is a huge number: if you said one sentence every five seconds, it would take you one hundred trillion, 10^{14}, years to utter them all – that's 10,000 times longer than the universe has been in existence!)

Moreover, languages are not static entities, but change and develop over time. William Shakespeare (1564–1616) introduced many new words into the English language, such as 'dwindle', 'frugal' and 'obscene'. As well as inventing new words, languages also borrow words from one another. English is full of such borrowed words: 'algebra' is Arabic, 'Kindergarten' is German and 'chutzpah' Yiddish. Other new words arrive on the back of technology.

> 1 Make up a meaningful – though not necessarily true – English sentence which to the best of your knowledge has never in the history of the universe been written before.
>
> 2 Give some examples of words that have entered the English language as a result of the computer revolution.
>
> 3 Do you think animals have language? Read the 'Dialogue on Animal Language' in the resource file at the end of this chapter. Who do you think gets the better of the argument – Dolly or Guy?

One thing that comes out of our discussion is that, although we usually associate language with meaningful sounds or squiggles, it could in principle express itself in any medium. The sign language used by deaf people is a language in the full sense of the word because it has rules (grammar and vocabulary), is intended and is creative and open-ended. Indeed, if we could emit distinct sequences of smells by controlling our sweat glands, then we could develop a scent language!
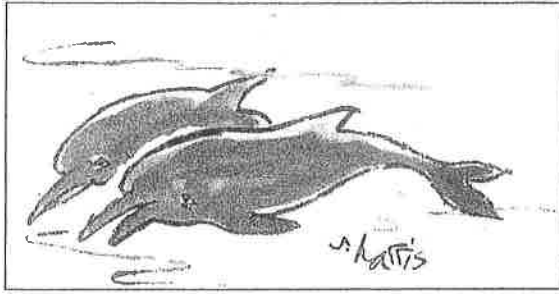
"Although humans make sounds with their mouths, and occasionally look at each other, there is no solid evidence that they actually communicate with each other."

Figure 3.2

The problem of meaning

Since much of our knowledge comes to us in the form of language, we need to be clear about the meanings of words if we are to understand the information that is being communicated to us.

> Read the following passage, attributed to Judy Lanier, which is called 'The Montillation of Traxoline', and answer the questions below.
> 'It is very important that you learn about traxoline. Traxoline is a new form of zionter. It is montilled in Ceristanna. The Ceristannians gristeriate large amounts of fevon and then bracter it into quasel traxoline. Traxoline may well be one of our most lukized snezlaus in the future because of our zionter lescelidge.'
> 1 What is traxoline?
> 2 Where is traxoline montilled?
> 3 How is traxoline quaselled?
> 4 Why is it important to know about traxoline?

You probably had no difficulty in answering the above questions – traxoline is a new form of zionter, it is montilled in Ceristanna, and so on. However, you have not really learned anything from this passage because you have no idea what words such as 'montillation' and 'traxoline' mean. (In fact, they don't mean anything!)

The above example shows that if you do not know what the key words in a passage mean you will not understand it. This raises the question of what it is to know the meaning of a word. Meaning is important in our search for knowledge because *you must know what a sentence means before you can decide whether it is true or false*. You can repeat parrot-fashion that traxoline is montilled in Ceristanna, but if you do not know what 'traxoline' and 'Ceristanna' refer to, you will have no idea whether the statement is true or false.

We tend to assume that pinning down meaning is a relatively straightforward business, and that every word has a fixed meaning that is understood and accepted by everyone. While life might be easier if this were true, I want to suggest that there is a *problem of meaning* and that words are often ambiguous and open to a variety of interpretations.

Theories of meaning

We will briefly look at three theories of what distinguishes meaningful words from meaningless ones. The first theory says that meanings are to be found in dictionaries, the second that they are found in the world, and the third that they are found in the mind.

1 Definition theory

The most obvious way of trying to resolve confusions about what a word means is to consult a dictionary. However, coming up with a good definition of a word is more difficult than it seems.

> 1 Define as precisely as you can the following three words:
>   a triangle   b table   c love.
>
> 2 How would you try to explain to a blind person what the word 'red' means? What does this suggest to you about the limitation of definitions?

If you tried the above exercise, you probably had no difficulty in defining a triangle. 'Three straight lines that define an area' might do it. When it comes to the word 'table', things are more difficult. Perhaps you came up with something similar to the following dictionary definition: 'a piece of furniture with a flat top and one or more legs, providing a level surface for eating, writing, working at, playing games etc.'. That seems fairly good, but it is not difficult to think of borderline cases and counter-examples. What about a flat surface that is built into an alcove and doesn't have any legs, or a flat surface that is suspended by chains from the ceiling? Where exactly does a table end and a desk begin? What if you regularly use an old tea chest as a table – does that make it a table? A good response to these questions might be: who cares? Life is surely too short to worry about exactly where tables end and non-tables begin!

Love is probably the most difficult of the three words in the above exercise to define. My dictionary says it is 'an intense feeling of deep affection or fondness for a person or thing' (although it also offers 'zero score in games such as tennis'). The trouble with a word such as 'love' is that it seems to have depths that cannot be captured in a few well-chosen words. If Angie turns to Jake and says 'I don't think you really know the meaning of the word "love", you are not going to solve Jake's problem by handing him a dictionary!

What seems to come out of this discussion is that the only words that we can define in a clear and unambiguous way are mathematical ones, such as 'triangle', 'circle', 'straight line', etc. When it comes to other words, they have a fuzziness at their borders that is hard – if not impossible – to eliminate.

Criticisms

The main problem with the idea that the meaning of a word is its dictionary definition is not simply that most definitions are vague and imprecise, but, more fundamentally, that they only explain the meanings of words by using other words. If we are to avoid being trapped in an endless circle of words, language must surely connect with the world.

2 Denotation theory

According to the denotation theory what distinguishes a meaningful word from a meaningless one is that the former stands for something while the latter does not. Thus 'France' means something because it stands for the country in Europe that is north of the Pyrenees and west of the Rhine, while 'jumblat' is meaningless because there is nothing in the world that corresponds to it. Since the following lines from the opening of Lewis Carroll's (1832–98) poem 'Jabberwocky' do not refer to anything, they are considered nonsense poetry:

> Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
> Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
> All mimsy were the borogroves,
> And the mome raths outgrabe.

Criticisms

While the denotation theory might work in the case of names such as 'France' or 'Socrates', it seems to fall down in the case of abstract words – such as 'multiplication', 'freedom' and 'wisdom' – which do not seem to stand for any *thing*. Admittedly, you may be able to point to examples of wisdom, but you cannot point to wisdom itself.

On reflection, problems arise even in the case of proper names. The meaning of a name such as 'Socrates' cannot literally be Socrates – for otherwise the word would have become meaningless when Socrates died. If we took the denotation theory literally, then people would be unable to talk about you after you were dead.

3 Image theory

According to the image theory, the meaning of a word is the mental image it stands for, and you know the meaning of a word when you have the appropriate concept in your mind. For example, you know what the word 'freedom' means when you associate it with the concept of freedom – being able to do what you like, not being imprisoned and so on. This view also has something to be said for it. For the difference between my speaking English and a parrot 'speaking English' is surely that, while my speech is accompanied by the appropriate mental activity, the parrot quite literally does not know what it is talking about. Rather than *speaking* English, the parrot is merely making noises that *sound* like the noises made by an English speaker.

Criticisms

The problem with the image theory is that if meanings are in the mind then we can never be sure that someone else understands the meaning of a word in the same way that we do – or, indeed, that they understand it at all. For you can never get into another person's mind and find out what is going on in it.

> 1 To what extent is your use of language accompanied by images? Does every word conjure up an image or only some of them?
>
> 2 How do you know that what we both call 'red' I don't experience as what you would call 'green' if you were looking out of my eyes, and what we both call 'green' I don't experience as what you would call 'red' if you were looking out of my eyes?
>
> 3 What difference, if any, would it make in real life if the above were the case?
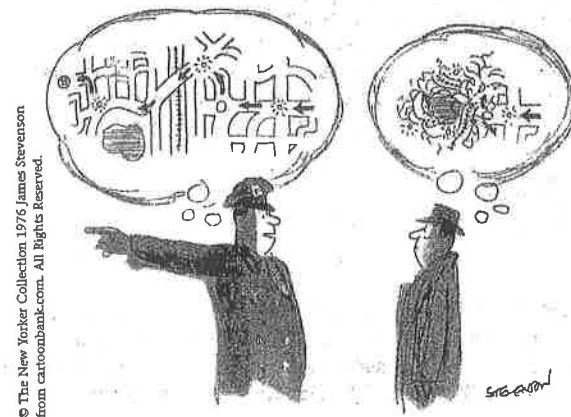
Figure 3.3 We sometimes fail to understand what someone else is saying to us

Meaning as know-how

Rather than think of meanings as something that can be found in dictionaries, or in the world, or in the mind, perhaps it would be better to say that meaning is a matter of *know-how*, and that you know the meaning of a word when you know how to use it correctly. For example, if you can use the word 'red' appropriately when discussing such things as traffic lights, red peppers and Rudolf the red-nosed reindeer, you must surely know what it means. At the same time, it is hard to resist the idea that there must be something appropriate going on in our heads when we mean and understand things.

> Do you think a robot could use and respond appropriately to language?
> What difference, if any, would it make in real life if the above were the case?

Problematic meaning

When we consider how language is used in practice, things start to get complicated. We often use language in all kinds of non-literal ways. As the poet Robert Frost (1874–1963) observed, we rarely say exactly what we mean, for 'we like to talk in parables and in hints and in indirections – whether from diffidence or some other instinct'. In what follows, we will consider five kinds of problematic meaning that can be found in everyday language: vagueness, ambiguity, secondary meanings, metaphor and irony.

1 Vagueness

Many words, such as 'fast' and 'slow', are intrinsically vague, and their meaning depends on context. For example, 'fast' means something different to a long-distance runner than to a Formula 1 driver. And, even in a specific context, people may have quite different ideas of what a vague word implies.

> 1 Without thinking too much about it, write a figure down for each of the following:
> a John lives close to his school. How near does he live?
> b Janet is a heavy smoker. How many cigarettes does she smoke a day?
> c Mr Smith is middle-aged. How old is he?
> d Nafisha's mother earns a lot of money. What is her annual income?
>
> 2 Do you think that communication would be improved if we got rid of vague words, or do you think they sometimes serve a useful purpose?
>
> 3 'It is easy to be certain – one only has to be sufficiently vague' (Charles Sanders Peirce, 1839–1914). What do you think Peirce meant by this? Give examples.

Despite their disadvantages, vague words are in fact very useful; for, although they may fail to pin things down, they can at least point us in the right direction. It is, in any case, impossible to make words completely precise. Ask yourself, for example, how little hair a man must have before you can describe him as bald? Does the loss of one particular hair change him from being non-bald to bald? The answer is, of course, that the concept is inherently vague. Some men are balder than others, but it is impossible to say exactly where non-baldness ends and baldness begins. Many other concepts are similarly vague – even ones that might appear quite precise. For example, if you say that an object is exactly 4 centimetres long, the vagueness comes in when we ask to how many decimal places you made the measurement.

2 Ambiguity

Many words and phrases are ambiguous. For example, 'The duchess cannot bear children' can mean either that the duchess is unable to have children, or that she cannot stand them. 'The author lives with his wife, an architect and amateur musician in Hampshire' would usually be taken to mean that the author lives with his wife *who* is an architect and amateur musician; but it could also mean that the author lives with his wife *and* an architect *and* an amateur musician.

> 1 Each of the following sentences is ambiguous. Give two different meanings for each of them:
> a Flying planes can be dangerous.
> b They saw Mrs Jones and the dog sitting under the table.
> c Bob tickled the man with a feather duster.
> d Refuse to be put in the basket.
> e Mia wanted to hear the pop star sing very badly.
> f Visiting relatives can be boring.
> g Many poor students are on scholarships.
> h Johnny ate the bacon on the sofa.
> i I didn't sleep with my spouse before we were married. Did you?
> j As Imran came in to bowl I saw her duck.
>
> 2 To what extent can punctuation help to reduce the ambiguity of a sentence?
>
> 3 Many jokes are based on ambiguity. Give some examples and analyse them.

Ford: You should prepare yourself for the jump into hyperspace; it's unpleasantly like being drunk.
Arthur: What's so unpleasant about being drunk?
Ford: Just ask a glass of water.
[From *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* by Douglas Adams]

While ambiguity is sometimes amusing, it can also be used to mislead people. A politician might deliberately exploit an ambiguous sentence so that it is understood in different ways by different listeners. For example, 'I am opposed to taxes which

damage incentives' could be taken to mean 'I am opposed to all taxes because they damage incentives' or 'I am opposed only to those taxes which damage incentives.'

Context can again help us to determine the meaning of an ambiguous sentence. In (b) above the most reasonable interpretation of the sentence is 'They saw Mrs Jones and *the-dog-sitting-under-the-table*' rather than 'They saw *Mrs-Jones-and-the-dog* sitting under the table'. This is because people do not usually sit under tables with dogs.

3 Secondary meaning

Words have not only a primary meaning or **denotation**, but also a secondary meaning or **connotation**. The denotation of a word is what it refers to, the connotation is the web of associations that surrounds it. While the denotation of a word is public, its connotations vary from person to person. Words such as 'love', 'death', 'school' and 'priest' may have different connotations for different people. Sometimes we use **euphemisms** for harsh words because they have more acceptable connotations. For example, 'passed away' is a euphemism for 'died'. Both expressions have the same denotation, but 'passed away' brings with it associations of peace and serenity that 'died' lacks.

> 1 When Bill Clinton entered the White House in 1993, his wife Hillary Rodham Clinton wanted to be known not as the 'First Lady' but as the 'Presidential Partner'. What is the difference in connotation between 'First Lady' and 'Presidential Partner'?
>
> 2 If Hillary Clinton ever becomes president of the USA, what do you think would be an appropriate title for her husband?
>
> 3 Explain the different connotations of each of the following sets of words:
> a slender, skinny, thin
> b stubborn, steadfast, firm
> c praise, flatter, commend
> d energetic, spirited, frenzied
> e stench, smell, fragrance
>
> 4 Think of as many different words or expressions for each of the following. What is the difference in their connotations?
> a Vomit
> b Drunk
> c Stupid

4 Metaphor

We use language not only literally, but also metaphorically. You might say that 'Miranda has got her *head in the clouds*', or 'Marvin is a *pillar* of the community', or 'Agnes has *put her roots down* in Canada'. Despite being literally false, each of these sentences might still be metaphorically true. Miranda does not have an unusually long neck, but she may walk around in a dreamlike state; Marvin is not made of

stone, but he may be an important figure in his community; Agnes has not grown roots, but she may have settled permanently in Canada.

When trying to decide whether a sentence is meant literally or metaphorically, we might get a hint from the context. Compare, for example, the following two sentences:

(1) 'My brother is a butcher.'
(2) 'My dentist is a butcher.'

Most people would interpret (1) literally and (2) metaphorically. For while your brother may well make his living as a butcher, I don't know of anyone who divides their professional life between dentistry and butchery.

In practice it can be difficult to determine where literal meaning ends and metaphorical meaning begins. For ordinary language is riddled with *dead metaphors*. Consider, for example, the following expressions: 'night*fall*'; '*sharp* tongue', '*brilliant* mind', 'chair *leg*', '*in* love'. All of these phrases are, strictly speaking, metaphorical, but they are so familiar that we have forgotten their metaphorical origin.

> 1 Explain the difference between the following two sentences. Is either of them true? If so, in what sense?
> a 'No man is an island'
> (John Donne, 1572–1631)
> b 'No man is a banana'
> (Richard van de Lagemaat, 1958–)
>
> 2 Take a paragraph from a newspaper or magazine, and identify as many metaphors in it as you can. Try to rewrite the piece without using any metaphors.
>
> 3 Birds fly and planes fly. Since fish swim, why don't we say that submarines also swim? What do submarines do?

5 Irony

Irony – the saying of one thing in order to mean the opposite – shows just how problematic language in action can be. Despite the oddity of using a sentence which literally means X in order to suggest not-X, irony is something that is found in all cultures. If the weather forecast predicted sunshine and it is pouring with rain outside, you might look out of the window and say 'Nice weather, heh?' Or if your friend makes a dumb suggestion, you might say 'Any more bright ideas, Einstein?' Irony means that we cannot necessarily take a statement at face value, and it adds another layer of ambiguity to language.

Meaning and interpretation

We could perhaps summarise our discussion of problematic meaning in three words: *language* is ambiguous. For vagueness, secondary meaning, metaphor and irony can all be seen as different kinds of ambiguity. The implication is that there is an element of *interpretation* built in to all communication. Although language is governed by rules, and you cannot make words mean anything you like, many of the rules are quite loose and there is often more than one way of interpreting a sentence. As we have seen, *context* may help you to decide what someone 'really means'. If a friend says 'It was so funny that I nearly died laughing', you do not ask if they were rushed to intensive care or chalk it up as another near-death experience. But you cannot always rely on context. If someone says 'I am so angry I could kill him', you would probably not alert the police; but perhaps this time they really mean it!

Rather than think of meaning as an all-or-nothing concept – either you understand it or you don't – it might make better sense to think in terms of levels of meaning. As we said in Chapter 2, a physics professor is likely to have a much clearer idea of what 'the theory of relativity' means than a non-physicist. And a forty-year-old adult is likely to have a more sophisticated understanding of what 'love' means than a six-year-old child.


What problems are there in trying to interpret the following sentences?
a 'If John works hard, he should do himself justice in the final exam.'
b 'It is as difficult for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven as it is for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle.'
c 'After he had said this, he left her as on the previous evening.'
d 'What's up?'
e '$E = mc^2$'

Why should we care about the meanings of words?

We have spent some time talking about the problem of meaning, but you may wonder why should we care about it. Does it really matter if we cannot pin down the meaning of a word? In some cases, I think it does. For an accused person, the difference between 'murder' and 'manslaughter' may be literally a matter of life and death. And if you want a war on terrorism, you need to be clear about what you mean by 'terrorist'.

It probably comes as no surprise to you that politicians sometimes manipulate the meanings of words in order to deceive the public. If you want to reduce poverty in a country the most painless way of doing it is to redefine what you mean by the word 'poverty'. Unemployment too high? Simple! Just change what the word means. Want to raise taxes without anyone noticing? Try calling it 'revenue enhancement'! So if we want our politicians to be genuinely accountable, it pays to keep an eye on the way they use language.
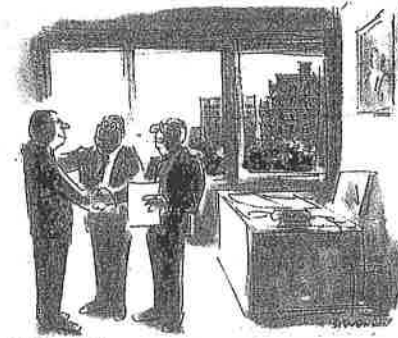
"Congratulations, Dave! I don't think I've read a more beautifully evasive and subtly misleading public statement in all my years in government..."

Figure 3.4

Another group of people who exploit vague language are tricksters who claim to have psychic powers or to be able to predict the future. In the 1940s, the eminent psychologist B. R. Forer gave each of his students the following 'individualised' horoscope, and asked them to rate how well it described their character:

> You have a strong need for other people to like you and for them to admire you. At times you are extroverted, affable, and sociable, while at other times you are introverted, wary, and reserved. You have a great deal of unused energy which you have not turned to your advantage. While you have some personality weaknesses, you are generally able to compensate for them. You prefer a certain amount of change and variety and become dissatisfied when hemmed in by restrictions and limitations. You pride yourself on being an independent thinker and do not accept other opinions without satisfactory proof. You have a tendency to be critical of yourself. Some of your aspirations tend to be pretty unrealistic.

Almost all of Forer's students rated the description as 'good' or 'excellent'. Forer concluded that 'people tend to accept vague and general personality descriptions as uniquely applicable to themselves without realising that the same description could be applied to just about anyone'. If we are not to be taken in by tricksters and charlatans, it is worth keeping this example in mind.

Language and translation

Up until now we have been speaking about 'language' as if there were only one such thing, but there are, of course, many different languages in the world. (The most commonly quoted figure is 3,000, but they are disappearing fast.)

Each of us has a privileged relation to our own native language, and we tend unthinkingly to assume that it fits reality like a glove. According to one apocryphal story, the US senate was once debating whether the constitution should be amended to state that English is the official language of the United States. A senator who supported the amendment allegedly finished his speech with the rousing words,

'And if English was good enough for Jesus, then it's good enough for me!' Whether or not the story is true, it illustrates the dangers of unthinking linguistic chauvinism. As well as enabling you to communicate with other people, one of the benefits of learning a second language is that it gives you a perspective on your own.

> 1 What would be the advantages and disadvantages if everyone in the world spoke a single common language? What would be gained by this, and what would be lost?
>
> 2 'Who does not know another language does not know his own' (Goethe, 1749–1832). What can you learn about your own language by studying a second language?
>
> 3 In what other ways does learning a second language contribute to, and expand, your knowledge of the world?

When you learn a second language, one of the things you discover is that different languages divide the world up in different ways. If words were simply labels we stuck on objects and the only difference between languages was that they used different words to refer to these objects, then translation would be a relatively straightforward matter. But it does not work like that. If you make a word-for-word translation from one language to another, you will not get a workable translation but gobbledygook. That is why translation is more of an art than a science.

Problems of translation

There are three problems that arise in translating something from one language to another that are particularly worth mentioning: context, untranslatable words and idioms.

Context

The meaning of a word in a language is partly determined by its relation to other words. For example, to understand what the word 'chat' means in English, you also need to be aware of related words such as 'talk', 'gossip' and 'discuss', each of which has a different shade of meaning. When we move from one language to another, such subtle differences can easily get lost in translation.

Untranslatable words

Every language contains words that have no equivalent in other languages, and can only be translated by a lengthy and inelegant paraphrase. For example, the English word 'quaint' has no very precise equivalent in other languages. Here are some examples from other languages:

- *Schlimmbesserung* (German), 'an "improvement" that actually makes things worse'
- *Aware* (Japanese), 'the feeling engendered by ephemeral beauty'
- *Rojong* (Indonesian), 'the relationship among a group of people committed to accomplishing a task of mutual benefit'
- *Puijilittatuq* (Inuktitut, Canadian Arctic), 'he does not know which way to turn because of the many seals he has seen come to the ice surface'
- *Mamihlapinatapai* (Terra del Fuegan), 'to look at each other, each hoping the other will offer to do something which both parties much desire done but which neither is willing to do' (According to *The Guinness Book of Records*, this is the most succinct word in the world.)

Translation problems can even arise at a relatively simple level. For example, German and French – together with many other languages – have two forms of 'you' – du and Sie, and tu and vous. When both are translated into English as 'you', something is clearly lost.

Idioms

An idiom is a colloquial expression whose meaning cannot be worked out from the meanings of the words it contains: for example, 'I was over the moon'; 'Don't beat about the bush'; 'He was born with a silver spoon in his mouth.' Such idiomatic expressions are particularly difficult to translate from one language to another. According to one story, when the sentence 'Out of sight is out of mind' was translated into Russian, and then re-translated into English, it came back as 'invisible idiot'. And 'The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak' came back as 'The vodka is agreeable, but the meat is inferior.'

> 1 Give some examples of words in your own language, or your second language, which have no precise English equivalent.
>
> 2 How would you go about trying to translate the following idioms into another language?
>   a 'David is barking up the wrong tree.'
>   b 'Tina threw a spanner in the works.'
>   c 'Samuel was only pulling your leg.'
>   d 'Daniela is resting on her laurels.'
>
> 3 Give some examples of idiomatic expressions in other languages that are difficult to translate into English.
>
> 4 What kinds of text do you think are easiest to translate from one language to another and what kinds of text do you think are most difficult to translate?

There are many amusing anecdotes about mistranslations. When *Pepsi Cola* ran an advertising campaign in Taiwan, they translated the slogan 'Come Alive with Pepsi' into Chinese. The campaign was a flop. When the slogan was translated back into English, it read 'Pepsi brings your ancestors back from the dead!', understandably a failure. And the Swedish company *Electrolux* were no more successful when they tried to advertise their vacuum cleaners in the United States with the slogan 'Nothing sucks like an Electrolux'. Here are some other entertaining examples of mistranslations:

'The manager has personally passed all the water served here.' [Mexican hotel]

'The lift is being fixed for the next day. During that time we regret that you will be unbearable.' [Romanian hotel]

'Ladies may have a fit upstairs.' [Hong-Kong tailor shop]

'You are invited to take advantage of the chambermaid.' [Japanese hotel]

'Ladies, leave your clothes here and spend the afternoon having a good time.' [Italian laundry]

'Visitors are expected to complain at the office between the hours of 9:00 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. daily.' [Athens hotel]

'Take one of our horse-driven city tours – we guarantee no miscarriages.' [Czech tourist agency]

'We take your bags and send them in all directions.' [Danish airline ticket office]

'Ladies are requested not to have children in the bar.' [Norwegian cocktail lounge]

Lost in translation

Perhaps not surprisingly, most linguists would say that there is no such thing as a perfect translation and that something is always lost when we move from one language to another. As an Italian saying has it, *Traduttore traditore* – 'the translator is a traitor'. (Something is lost even in this translation!) So what makes one translation better than another? There are three commonly agreed criteria:

- *Faithfulness* – the translation should be faithful to the original text.
- *Comprehensibility* – the translation should be comprehensible.
- *Back translation* – when we retranslate a translation back into its original language, it should approximate to the original.

To take some simple examples, consider how one might translate the following sentences:

a 'Guten Tag.' (German → English)
b 'S'il vous plaît.' (French → English)
c 'How do you do?' (English → any language)

The literal translation of 'Guten Tag' is 'Good day', but people in Britain do not usually say 'Good day' (although it is more common in Australia). So a better translation might be 'Good morning', 'Good afternoon', or 'Hello'. Similarly, we do not translate 'S'il vous plaît' as 'If it pleases you', but as 'Please'. Finally, 'How do you do?' would sound absurd in German and French if translated literally – how do you do what? Perhaps it is best translated as 'sehr efreut' and 'enchanté'.

These examples show in microcosm the tension between going with the letter and going with the spirit of a text when you are making a translation. The more faithful you are to the letter – or literal meaning – of the text, the stranger the translation is likely to sound in the target language. The more natural the translation sounds in the target language, the more likely you are to have strayed from the literal meaning of the original text.

Poetry raises particular problems for the translator. When some of his poems were translated into French, the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda (1904–73) commented: 'If I had been a French poet, I would not have said what I did in that poem, because the value of the words is so different. I would have written something else.' And

Spanish and French are closely related languages. Imagine how difficult it would be to translate one of Neruda's poems into Chinese!

> **?** Find a copy of Lewis Carroll's poem 'Jabberwocky' and translate it into another language. What difficulties are involved in doing this? How would you decide that one translation was better than another?

Although we should not get carried away with the problem of translation, it could in fact be said that there is an element of translation involved in all communication. For even when native speakers are talking together, they understand one another's words in slightly different ways. Indeed, getting to know another person could be said to be partly a matter of getting to know how they use language.

Labels and stereotypes

Our discussions about language, meaning and translation in the previous three sections have focused on the problematic nature of human communication and shown that we cannot simply take the meanings of words for granted. I now want to look at the way in which language affects the way we see and think about the world. In this section, we will look at labels and stereotypes; and we will then go on to consider how language affects the way we think and the kinds of value-judgements that we make about things.

Language consists of two main kinds of words: proper names and general words. We give proper names to such things as people, places and pets. But the vast majority of words in a language – such as 'reticent', 'rhinoceros', 'riddle', 'river' and 'run' – do not describe one unique thing, characteristic or action, but are general in nature. For this reason, we can think of language as being essentially a labelling system.

Labels

Putting labels on things has advantages and disadvantages. On the plus side, using labels is efficient and economical. If, for example, there was no general word for 'sand' and we were standing on a beach and had to baptise each individual grain with a proper name, communication would quickly become impossible. A good label enables you to predict how the object in question will behave. For example, if you take an object from a box labelled apples, you can be confident that it will look, smell and taste like an apple, and that it will nourish rather than poison you.

> **?** What predictions can you make from the following labels?
> a Dog b Tiger c Teacher
> d Bread e Mushroom

On the negative side, labelling creates the danger that you mislabel things. If you treat similar things as if they were different, or different things as if they were similar, you are likely to run into trouble. Imagine, for example, that there are three glasses, A, B and C; filled with liquid; A and C are colourless, and B is red (Figure 3.5); and you are asked which liquid is the odd one out.

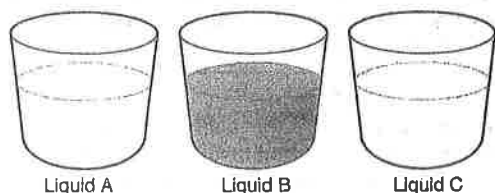Liquid A   Liquid B   Liquid C

Figure 3.5

You might naturally say that liquid B is the odd one out. But not if you are thirsty, and liquid A is water, liquid B is water-coloured with a harmless red vegetable dye, and liquid C is hydrochloric acid! This shows that if you classify things on the basis of superficial resemblance, you may overlook important underlying differences between them.

Since it is always possible to find similarities or differences between things, there are in fact many different ways of labelling or classifying a group of objects. Consider, for example, luggage at an airport: you can classify it according to shape, size, weight, colour, material, make, owner, country of origin, destination, etc. The most useful way of classifying luggage is likely to vary with context. A designer is likely to classify it in one way, a baggage handler in another way, and a traveller in a third way.

---

1 Using any system of classification that you like, divide the following eight objects into two groups, each numbering four items. How many different ways of doing this can you think of?

a Typewriter   b Cake   c Car   d Hen
e Horse   f Pencil   g Snake   h Paint

Since there are many different ways of classifying things, you might ask why we classify things the way we do. According to one view the labels we use reflect natural classes of things that exist 'out there'. According to another, labels are essentially social constructions that we impose on the world. While the first view says that labels are *natural* and there are objective similarities between things, the second says that labels are *cultural* and that similarity is in the eye of the beholder. Since we classify things using words, what is at issue here is the role played by language in the way we see the world. To what extent do our labels passively describe reality, and to what extent do they actively structure it?

The idea that our labels reflect the natural order of things is supported by the fact that there really do seem to be elements – such as gold and silver – and species –

such as dogs and cats – out there corresponding to our categories. However, other labels – especially those used to classify human beings – might seem to be more cultural than natural.

---

1 What are the main advantages and disadvantages of classifying people according to their nationality?

2 What are the main advantages and disadvantages of classifying people according to their star sign?

3 What other ways of classifying people are there? Are some more natural than others? Are some better than others?

Stereotypes

One danger with putting labels on people is that our labels can easily harden into stereotypes. A stereotype arises when we make assumptions about a group of people purely on the basis of their membership of that group. The use of stereotypes is particularly apparent in the case of nationality. Since Giovanni is Italian, he must love wine, pasta and ice cream, throw his hands around when he talks, and enjoy opera. And since Fritz is German, he must love beer, sausages and sauerkraut, work hard, and be very serious.

Despite the dangers of stereotyping people, some generalisations contain an element of truth in them. If you visit a restaurant in Rome and one in Berlin, you will notice a difference in atmosphere and the way people typically behave. According to one quip, students go to international schools with prejudices about other cultures and leave realising they are all true!

What, then, distinguishes damaging stereotypes from harmless generalisations? Typically, a stereotype is a caricature which exaggerates the negative features of a group and assumes they are possessed by *all* members of the group. Furthermore, it is usually based on prejudice rather than fact and is difficult to change in the light of contrary evidence. For example, if a racist who believes that all immigrants are lazy is shown an example of a hard-working immigrant, he will probably insist that the example is not typical, and quickly forget it.

1 What stereotypes, if any, do you think exist in your culture concerning the following groups?
   a Americans   b Islamic fundamentalists
   c Feminists   d Environmental activists
   e Lawyers   f Buddhists
   g Scientists   h Computer hackers

2 What other common stereotypes exist in your culture? To what extent do you think they affect the way people see things?

3 Which of the following pairs of sentences sounds normal, and which sounds a bit strange? What does this have to do with stereotypes?
   a1 'She's a mother, but she isn't a housewife.'
   a2 'She's a mother, but she is a housewife.'
   b1 'He's a father, but he doesn't work.'
   b2 'He's a father, but he does work.'

4 In your culture, which of the following adjectives are associated more with men and which are associated more with women? How much truth do you think there is in these stereotypes?
   a Emotional   b Reckless
   c Active   d Aggressive
   e Sensitive   f Tough
   g Affectionate   h Cautious

5 Some believers in astrology say that Leos and Cancers are incompatible – i.e. if you are a Leo, there is no point in dating a Cancer, and vice versa. To what extent could this be seen as the astrological equivalent of racism?

What comes out of our discussion of labels and stereotypes is that we need to be aware of the disadvantages as well as the advantages of using general words to label things. Despite their obvious value, labels can trap us into one particular way of looking at things. Moreover, it is difficult – if not impossible – to capture the uniqueness and individuality of things in words. If you try to describe one of your friends to someone who does not know them, you will see how hard it is to paint a verbal portrait of them. It is equally difficult to capture the taste of a strawberry, or the colour of the sea, or falling in love in the butterfly net of language. Reality, it seems, always spills beyond any description that we are able to give of it.

Language and thought

We must now consider the extent to which language affects the way we think about the world.

The Sapir–Whorf hypothesis

According to the **Sapir–Whorf hypothesis**, language determines our experience of reality, and we can see and think only what our language allows us to see and think. To give a well-known example, the Inuit are said to have many different words for snow, and their sophisticated snow vocabulary helps them to make finely grained snow discriminations. As a result, they see and experience snow-covered landscapes quite differently from the rest of us. According to Edward Sapir (1884–1939), one of the proponents of the hypothesis:

> The 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built upon the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached... We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation.

Benjamin Whorf (1879–1941), the other proponent of the hypothesis, studied the difference between the language of the Hopi Indians of North America and European languages, and came to the surprising conclusion that the Hopi language contains 'no words, grammatical forms, constructions or expressions that refer directly to what we call "time", or to past, present, or future, or to enduring or lasting'. Since the Hopi have no words for it, Whorf came to the conclusion that they have no concept of abstract time. In his fascinating book *The Language Instinct*, Steven Pinker gives several examples of Whorf's translations of Hopi language:

> 'He invites people to a feast' → 'He, or somebody, goes for eaters of cooked food.'
> 'The boat is grounded on the beach.' → 'It is on the beach, pointwise as an event of canoe motion.'

1 Could the above examples simply be bad translations? To test this idea, translate something word-for-word from a foreign language into English. Does the result sound equally bizarre?

2 If you are fluent in more than one language, to what extent do you think differently when you switch between languages?

Since the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis claims that language determines the way we think, it can be described as a form of **linguistic determinism**. A well-known fictional example of this can be found in George Orwell's (1903–50) dystopian novel, *1984*. Orwell imagines a totalitarian government called *Ingsoc* which seeks to

control, not only how people behave, but also what they think, by inventing a new language called Newspeak:

> The purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to devotees of Ingsoc, but to make all other modes of thought impossible. It was intended that when Newspeak had been adopted once and for all and Oldspeak forgotten, a heretical thought – that is, a thought diverging from the principles of Ingsoc – should be literally unthinkable, at least so far as thought is dependent on words. Its vocabulary was so constructed as to give exact and often very subtle expression to every meaning that a Party member could properly wish to express, while excluding all other meanings and also the possibility of arriving at them by indirect methods. This was done partly by the invention of new words but chiefly by eliminating undesirable words and by stripping such words as remained of unorthodox meanings, and so far as possible of all secondary meanings whatever. To give a single example. The word 'free' still existed in Newspeak, but it could only be used in such statements as 'This dog is free from lice' or 'This field is free from weeds'. It could not be used in its old sense of 'politically free' or 'intellectually free', since political and intellectual freedom no longer existed even as concepts, and were therefore of necessity nameless. Quite apart from the suppression of definitely heretical words, reduction of vocabulary was regarded as an end in itself, and no word that could be dispensed with was allowed to survive. Newspeak was designed not to extend but to diminish the range of thought, and this purpose was indirectly assisted by cutting the choice of words down to a minimum.

Testing the hypothesis

Several attempts have been made to test the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis. In his book *Word Play: What Happens When People Talk* the anthropologist Peter Farb (1929–80) discusses an experiment which used as test subjects bilingual Japanese women who had married American servicemen and were living in the USA.

> The women spoke English to their husbands, children, and neighbours, and in most everyday speech situations; they spoke Japanese whenever they came together to gossip, reminisce, and discuss the news from home. Each Japanese woman thus inhabited two language worlds – and according to the predictions of the hypothesis, the women should think differently in each of these worlds. The experiment consisted of two visits to each woman by a bilingual Japanese interviewer. During the first interview he chatted with them only in Japanese; during the second he carried on the same discussion and asked the same questions in English. The results were quite remarkable; they showed that the attitudes of each woman differed markedly, depending upon whether she spoke Japanese or English. Here, for example, is the way the same woman completed the same sentences at the two interviews:

> When my wishes conflict with my family's...
> ... it is a time of great unhappiness. [Japanese]
> ... I do what I want. [English]

> Real friends should...
> ... help each other. [Japanese]
> ... be very frank. [English]

Clearly, major variables in the experiment had been eliminated – since the women were interviewed twice by the same person in the same location of their homes, and they discussed the same topics – with but one exception. And that sole exception was language. The drastic differences in attitudes of the women could be accounted for only by the language world each inhibited when she spoke.

Despite the above evidence, some people are not convinced by the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis. According to critics, the fact that the Inuit have many different words for snow does not show that language determines reality, but instead suggests that reality determines language. For the Inuit presumably developed their snow vocabulary in response to their environment. The reason there are not many words for 'snow' in English is that it doesn't snow very often in England. But when people such as skiers require a more discriminating snow vocabulary, they don't have much difficulty in inventing words, or borrowing them from other languages. To say that the Inuit have a different experience of reality because they have lots of different words for snow is surely no more plausible than saying that printers have a different experience of reality because they have lots of different words for print fonts.

Furthermore, although the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis says that language determines thought, there is in fact evidence to suggest that thought is possible without language:

1 Psychologists have discovered that babies and animals are able to think without the benefit of language. Some clever experiments have shown that babies as young as five months can do a simple form of mental arithmetic. And pigeons have been trained to recognise general classes such as trees, human beings, bodies of water, dogs and fish.

2 Some creative people claim that language plays only a secondary role in their thinking and that their ideas first come to them in images. Albert Einstein once observed:

> The words of a language as they are written and spoken do not seem to play any role in the mechanisms of my thought. The physical entities which seem to serve as elements in thought are certain signs and more or less clear images which can be voluntarily reproduced and combined. The above mentioned elements are, in my case, of visual, and some of muscular type. Conventional words or other signs have to be sought for laboriously only in a secondary stage.

3 We sometimes struggle to find the right words to express thoughts that feel as if they are already there. You have probably had the experience of saying something, and then adding in frustration 'No, that's not quite what I want to say', and then trying to express yourself with greater clarity. This suggests that our thoughts are there prior to language and that we are simply trying to find the right words with which to express them.

4 If language determines thought, it is unclear how new words ever enter a language, or, indeed, how language could have arisen in the first place. The most obvious explanation is that some kind of pre-linguistic thought is possible for which we later find words.

While the above points count against a strong version of the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis, you might still find plausible a weaker version of the hypothesis, which says that language *influences* rather than *determines* thought. For complex thinking

does seem to be closely connected to language. A baby may have a basic concept of number before it can talk, but it is hard to see how someone could do multiplication if they did not have the appropriate mathematical vocabulary. The American cultural critic Neil Postman (1931–2003) gave a good example to illustrate the point:

> The process by which words and other symbols give shape and substance to our thoughts can be suggested by your trying to multiply 495 by 384. Except in this instance you must use only Roman numerals. I think you will find the operation quite impossible to do. Without access to the symbol 0 and a system of positional notation, the answer is literally inconceivable, i.e., you cannot think it.

More generally, it might be hard to have various abstract ideas if you did not have the appropriate vocabulary. Admittedly, we sometimes think in images and then struggle to find the appropriate words, but we usually know what we think only after we have put it into language. While language may not determine thought, it might be said to predispose it, in the sense that we tend to think along the lines of our linguistic categories. This is not to say that we are trapped in our own language. For, as we saw earlier, it is always possible to borrow words from another language. Nevertheless, to come up with a new way of thinking usually requires the development of a new vocabulary – and this is one of the hallmarks of genius.

> ...As imagination bodies forth
> The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
> Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
> A local habitation and a name.
> [William Shakespeare, 1564–1616, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V, 1]

Language and values

We use language not only to describe the world, but also to persuade and influence one another. When we gossip, for example, we don't just tell stories about people, but negotiate with one another about how to describe them. Would you say that John is a good storyteller or a liar? Is Maurice a fluent conversationalist or a wind-bag? Do you see Melissa as self-confident or arrogant? Is Paul's refusal to show emotion a sign of inner strength or of insensitivity? Which of these competing descriptions you settle on is likely to affect the way you think about the person in question.

Many years ago, the philosopher Bertrand Russell pointed out that we tend to interpret our own behaviour in the best possible light, and are less charitable when it comes to other people. To illustrate the point, he 'conjugated' the following 'irregular verbs':
'I am firm; you are obstinate; he is a pig-headed fool.'
'I am righteously indignant; you are annoyed; he is making a fuss about nothing.'
'I have reconsidered it; you have changed your mind; he has gone back on his word.'
Working in pairs, suggest how some of the following verbs might be 'conjugated' in a similar way:

1 'I speak my mind...'   2 'I am unlucky...'
3 'I compromise...'   4 'I take calculated risks...'
5 'I am eloquent...'   6 'I am idealistic...'
7 'I am spontaneous...'   8 'I am tolerant...'

Advertisers have long been aware of the power of language to influence and persuade. Here are two examples:

- It was a stroke of marketing genius on someone's part to brand water with bubbles in it as '*sparkling* water'. If it had been marketed as 'gassy water', it would probably never have become so popular.
- Since airlines have something called 'first class', it would be natural to think that the next two classes should be called 'second class' and 'third class'. Wrong! It's 'business class' and 'economy class'. Now even 'economy class' is becoming unfashionable. If you travel economy, British Airways now describes you as a 'world traveller'. This may sound impressive, but it makes no difference to the quality of the food or the leg room.

---

1 Take two advertising slogans of your choice – such as 'Just do it' (Nike) or 'Reach out and touch someone' (AT&T) – and explain why you think they are effective.

2 Why do you think so many advertisers describe their products as 'natural'? Are natural things always good? Can you give any examples of things which are natural and bad?

Using language to influence and persuade

To explore the connection between language and values further, let us consider four ways in which language can be used to influence and persuade people.

1 Emotionally laden language

Some words have not only a descriptive meaning, but also an **emotive meaning**. Emotive meaning can be defined as 'the aura of favourable or unfavourable feeling that hovers about a word'. While some words such as 'hero', 'peace' and 'democracy' have positive connotations, others such as 'thief', 'liar' or 'pervert' have negative ones. That is why everyone claims to be in favour of peace, and no one likes to be labelled a liar.

> 1 Analyse the way language is being used in each of the following pairs of expressions:
>   a Terrorist / freedom fighter.
>   b Pro life / pro choice.
>   c Genetically modified food / Frankenstein food.
>   d Free speech / hate speech.
>   e 'Blocking your child's access to objectionable material on the Internet is not called CENSORSHIP, it is called PARENTING' (Al Gore).
>
> 2 In 1947 the United States Department of War was renamed the Department of Defense. What difference, if any, do you think this makes? What is the corresponding department of state called in your country?

Euphemisms, which substitute mild or neutral sounding words for a negative sounding one, are a widely used form of emotive language. We sometimes resort to euphemisms in order to avoid taboo subjects, or to protect people's feelings. Thus, we may speak of the 'rest room' rather than the toilet. In addition to such benign uses, people sometimes use euphemisms to deliberately mislead people. For example, the timber industry no longer speaks of 'clear cutting' – an ugly sounding expression – when it cuts down old-growth forest, but of 'landscape management'. This may serve to hide the reality of what is happening and make an unacceptable practice sound acceptable.

Although the influence of emotionally laden language is a matter of continuing debate, there is evidence to suggest that how people respond to survey questions depends on how they are phrased. In one US survey, when people were asked if more money should be spent on 'assistance to the poor', 68 per cent replied 'yes'; but when they were asked if more money should be spent on 'welfare', the number dropped to 24 per cent. In another survey, people were far more willing to spend money on 'national defence' than on the 'military'.

2 Weasel words

Weasel words are words such as 'many', 'should' and 'probably' which people slip into sentences to give themselves an escape route. For example, a manufacturer might say, 'Our product will work for you if you simply follow the instructions carefully.' You buy the product; it doesn't work; and when you phone up to complain, you are told that you clearly didn't follow the instructions *carefully enough*.

> Explain how weasel words are used in each of the following cases:
>
> 1 'Our product can restore up to 25% of lost hair.'
>
> 2 'Probably the best lager in the world.'
>
> 3 'Dentifresh toothpaste helps fight tooth decay.'
>
> 4 'If Timothy works hard, he should do himself justice in the final exam.'

3 Grammar

Grammar can also affect the way people see things. For example, the passive voice may be used to cover up someone's responsibility for something. Compare the following two sentences:

(a) 'Many villages were bombed.'
(b) 'We bombed many villages.'

While the first sentence makes the bombing sound like a natural disaster, the second puts the spotlight on the perpetrators.

4 Revealing and concealing

Language can be used not only to *reveal* certain aspects of reality, but also to conceal other aspects by diverting attention away from them. Consider, for example, the following four descriptions:

(a) 'I have invited an attractive blonde to the party.'
(b) 'I have invited a cellist to the party.'
(c) 'I have invited a marathon runner to the party.'
(d) 'I have invited a lesbian to the party.'

Each description carries with it a different set of connotations, but it is possible that they all refer to the same person. Which description we use is likely to affect the way other people see the person in question.

> 1 According to a well-known children's rhyme, 'Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me.' Do you agree or disagree with this? Give reasons.
>
> 2 Find out something about the political correctness (PC) movement, which seeks to use language to change attitudes to the oppressed or disadvantaged. What arguments are there in favour of political correctness and what arguments are there against it?
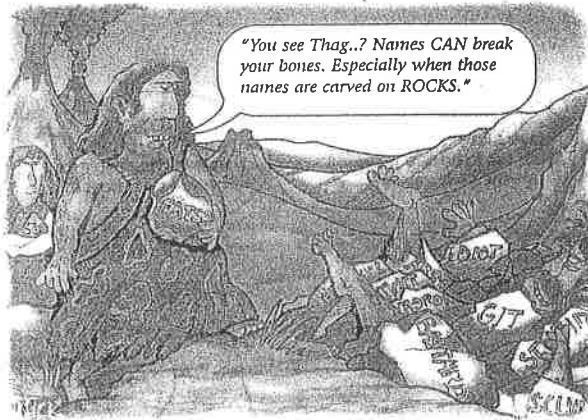
"You see Thag..? Names CAN break your bones. Especially when those names are carved on ROCKS."

Figure 3.6

Language at war

The fact that language is not innocent and can be used to manipulate the way we see things is particularly apparent in times of war. Military training camps have long been aware that to get 'our boys' to kill their troops, *they* need to be dehumanised. During the Vietnam war, enemy soldiers were known as 'Gooks' by US servicemen. And in the first Gulf War (1991), an American pilot described firing on Iraqi soldiers as a 'turkey shoot'. Whatever your views about the rights and wrongs of these military campaigns, you would probably agree that it is psychologically easier to kill 'gooks' and 'turkeys' than human beings. Here are some more examples of 'warspeak', which is often used to cover up the reality on the ground.

Warspeak	Real meaning
security assistance	arms sales
neutralise	kill
no longer a factor	dead
take out	destroy
inoperative combat personnel	dead soldiers
pacification	bombing
service a target	dropping bombs on a target
collateral damage	bombed cities
friendly fire	accidentally firing on your own troops
strategic redeployment	retreat
liberate	invade
reporting guidelines	censorship
pre-emptive	unprovoked
ethnic cleansing	genocide

Language is power

While opinions differ about the relation between language and values, the fact that political parties and businesses invest so heavily in media consultants and spin doctors suggests that they, at least, think that it plays an important role in shaping our attitudes. At the limit, the seductive eloquence of demagogues such as Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) reminds us that language can be used not only to educate and enlighten, but also to fuel the flames of hatred. So we would be well-advised to take seriously the slogan that 'language is power'.

Conclusion

Since much of our knowledge comes to us in words, our discussion of language in this chapter is clearly relevant to our quest for knowledge. Perhaps the key thing we have discovered is that language is not as simple or straightforward as we first thought. We need to know what a statement means before we can decide whether it is true or false, but in practice it is difficult to pin down the meanings of words with complete precision.

As a final point, let us conclude by briefly considering two different views about the relationship between language and knowledge. On one side, some people claim that in order to know something you must be able to put it into words, and that 'if you can't say it then you don't know it' (Hans Reichenbach, 1891–1953). Such a robust view suggests that the only way to demonstrate your understanding of something is to put it into words. Against this, other people insist that some of our knowledge lies beyond words, and that 'I know more than I can say' (Michael Polanyi, 1891–1976). Advocates of this view argue that our knowledge of things with which we are acquainted spills beyond our ability to describe them. This takes us back to the slogan mentioned in Chapter 1: 'the map is not the territory'.

Interestingly, mystics in all the great world religions have held that the deepest truths cannot be expressed in language. The Taoist sage Lao Tzu (c. 600 BCE) observes that 'Those who speak do not know; those who know do not speak'; the Buddhist *Lankaatara Sutra* tells us that 'Truth is beyond letters and words and books'; and in Judaism the Talmud says that 'If silence be good for the wise, how much the better for fools.'

One thing, however, is certain: if the deepest truths about life, the universe and everything do lie beyond words, then there is nothing we can say about them! With that in mind, I leave the last word to the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) who at the end of his great book *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* wrote: 'What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.'

- A great deal of our knowledge comes through language and this makes possible an intellectual division of labour.
- Language is a subset of communication and is rule-governed, intended and creative.
- We need to understand what a sentence means before we can decide whether it is true or false.
- Since the definition, denotation and image theories of meaning all have shortcomings, perhaps we should say that meaning is a matter of know-how.
- A great deal of language is ambiguous and there is an element of interpretation built into all communication.
- Since different languages divide the world up in different ways translation is more of an art than a science.
- We use language to label and classify and this brings with it the danger that we misclassify or stereotype things.
- Although language may not *determine* our experience of reality, as claimed by the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, it seems likely that it *influences* it.
- We use language not only to describe, but also to influence and persuade – and sometimes *manipulate* the way people see things.
- Whether or not there are some truths that lie beyond language is a matter of continuing debate.

Terms to remember

ambiguity
back translation
body language
classification
communication
connotation
denotation
emotive meaning
euphemism

grammar
idiom
irony
linguistic determinism
metaphor
Sapir-Whorf hypothesis
stereotype
weasel words

Further reading

Donna Jo Napoli, *Language Matters* (Oxford University Press, 2003). Written by a professor of linguistics, this short, accessible and entertaining book has chapters on such things as how we acquire language, whether animals have language, translation, and the relation between language and thought.

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (University of Chicago Press, 1980). According to the authors, metaphors pervade our language and often shape our thinking without our being aware of it. If you only dip into Chapters 1 and 2 you will already get a sense of the power of such metaphors as 'argument is war' and 'time is money'.

Linking Questions

REASON How many arguments turn out to be about the meanings of words?

EMOTION Does the way you describe something affect how you feel about it?

PERCEPTION How does language affect the way we see things?

MATHEMATICS How is mathematics like a language?

RELIGION Does religious experience lie beyond language?

Language

NATURAL SCIENCES What role do metaphors play in science?

ETHICS Should offensive language be censored?

HUMAN SCIENCES Is language unique to human beings?

THE ARTS Is art the language of the emotions?

HISTORY Is it possible to describe historical events in an unbiased way?