

Reducing Linguistic Content to Mental Content, Part II: Lewis on Languages and Language

Introduction

Last week we tackled the question:

- How does the intentionality of language relate to the intentionality of thought?

As we noted, many philosophers have been attracted to a *thought-first* picture:

Thought-First View: We should explain the intentionality of language in terms of the intentionality of thought.

Last week we considered one way of developing a thought-first view, due to Grice. This week we'll look at a rather different way of developing a thought-first view, due to Lewis. *Lewis' main idea is that we can explain language use in terms of certain conventions that hold among language-users.*

The Structure of Lewis' Paper

Lewis starts by presenting an apparent tension between two conceptions of language – what we might call the “formal” conception and the “social” conception. He then proposes an account that unifies the two.

The Formal Conception of Language

Formal Conception: A language can be thought of as a function that assigns meanings to sounds or written marks.

On this conception, English can be thought of as a function – which we might write: “ $f_{English}$ ” – that, when applied to the sentence “Grass is green”, gives you the meaning (in English) of this sentence. (Likewise with other languages.)¹

(This is the view of language you're likely to encounter in a semantics or syntax course.)

The Social Conception of Language

Social Conception: Language is a social activity that takes place among people.

¹ Lewis proposes a possible worlds conception of meaning, according to which the meaning of any sentence is the set of possible worlds in which that sentence is true. (Note that this is not crucial to accepting the rest of Lewis' proposal.)

On this view, when someone produces a particular sequence of sounds or written marks, they do so with an intention to affect their audience in a certain way.

The Reconciliation

How are these two conceptions of language to be reconciled? Lewis proposes to reconcile them by giving an account of *what is involved in a particular population of people using a given language*. That is, he wants to give an account of the form:

A population P uses a language L if and only if...

The basic idea – which is developed in more detail in the rest of the paper, is that we should explain the conditions under which a population uses a language in terms of various conventions that hold within that community.

What are these conventions? Lewis briefly considers the following simple proposal:

Simple Proposal: A population P uses a language L if and only if P has a convention of using L .

Question: What exactly is wrong with this simple proposal?

Lewis' proposal

Lewis offers the following account of what it is for a population to use a language:

Lewis' Account of Language Use: A population P uses a language L if and only if there prevails in P a convention of truthfulness and trust in L .

This requires unpacking...

- To be truthful in L is to try never to utter any sentences of L that are not true in L .
- To be trusting in L is to form beliefs in a specific way: to assume that others are being truthful in L .

OK, but what is a convention?

There is an intuitive notion of convention that we use in everyday speech; for example, one of the dictionary definitions of “convention” is a “usage or custom, especially in social matters.” Lewis’ notion of a convention broadly maps onto this ordinary usage. However, his notion of a convention also plays a theoretical role: he thinks of conventions as solutions to *coordination problems*.

A coordination problem is a situation in which there are multiple strategies by which multiple players/agents can coordinate their behavior for mutual benefit.

An example: suppose Qu and Abelard want to go to the movies together. Each is indifferent between seeing *Crazy Rich Asians* and *The Nun*. We can represent the situation through a payoff matrix:

	Crazy Rich Asians	The Nun
Crazy Rich Asians	1, 1	0, 0
The Nun	0, 0	1, 1

Here there are two incompatible strategies that fulfill their preferences equally well: either both see *Crazy Rich Asians* or both see *The Nun*. Here they need to coordinate in order to ensure one of these options is selected.

Lewis thinks of conventions as solutions to recurrent coordination problems.

- An example is *driving on the lefthand side of the road*. There is no particular reason to prefer *driving on the lefthand side of the road* to *driving on the righthand side of the road* – both would do equally well. But we all have strong reason to converge on our behavior: I prefer to adopt whichever course of behavior everyone else will also adopt.

In what sense is a convention a solution to a coordination problem? Lewis tries to answer this by offering the following analysis of conventions:

- A regularity R in behavior or belief is a convention in some population iff:
- i) Everyone conforms to R
 - ii) Everyone believes others conform to R
 - iii) The belief that others conform to R gives everyone a good & decisive reason to conform to R
 - iv) There is a general preference for general conformity to R rather than slightly-less-than general conformity to R
 - v) R is not the only possible regularity meeting conditions iii) and iv)
 - vi) The various facts listed in conditions i)-v) are common knowledge – they are known to everyone, and it is known to everyone that they are known to everyone, etc.

By combining Lewis' account of convention with his account of language use, we get the following account of what it is for a population – say, the people in this class – to use English:

The students in Ph3241 use English if and only if there prevails among the students of PH3421 a convention of truthfulness and trust in English. And this in turn obtains if and only if:

- i) Everyone in Ph3241 is truthful and trusting in English.
- ii) Everyone believes that the other members of the class are truthful and trusting in English.
- iii) The belief that others are truthful and trusting in English gives everyone a good & decisive reason to be truthful and trusting in English.

- iv) There is a general preference for others to conform to being truthful and trusting in English, rather than for slightly-less-than-general conformity.
- v) There is some other regularity – for example, being truthful and trusting in Bahasa, or being truthful and trusting in Chinese, etc. – that meets conditions iii) and iv).
- vi) The facts listed above are common knowledge.

Questions and Objections

1) What is the relation between Grice's program and Lewis'? Do you take Lewis and Grice to be trying to answer the same questions? Are there any objections that arise for Grice that Lewis avoids, or vice versa?

2) Clause v) in Lewis' account of language use requires that there is some other regularity – e.g., being truthful and trusting in some other language – that meets conditions iii) and iv). Clause vi) requires that this is known by everyone (and known to be known, etc.). Is this too strong? Could there be a population that speaks a language even though they don't realize that there are other possible languages that would serve their purposes equally well? (Perhaps they've never encountered anyone who uses another language.)

3) *Hawthorne's objection:*

There are sentences in English that are so long that they will never be uttered. E.g.:

- There was a woman who gave a treat to the dog which chased the squirrel which ran into the tree which...
- On the first day, it was sunny, and on the second day, it was rainy, and on the third day, it was sunny, and on the fourth day...

Consider the fragment of English that consists exclusively in these very long sentences. Call this fragment "LongEnglish." Hawthorne asks: do we have conventions of truthfulness and trust in LongEnglish? He thinks the answer is "No." Let's take this in two steps:

- Do we have conventions of truthfulness in LongEnglish? Hawthorne considers the following proposal: since we can't possibly utter a sentence in LongEnglish, we can't possibly utter a sentence in LongEnglish falsely. So we are vacuously truthful in LongEnglish. But, Hawthorne argues, even if this is right, there isn't any alternative to being truthful in LongEnglish. So, he concludes, we don't have conventions of truthfulness in LongEnglish, according to Lewis' definition of convention.
- Do we have conventions of trust in LongEnglish? Hawthorne considers the following proposal: since we can't possibly utter a sentence in LongEnglish, we can't possibly utter a sentence in LongEnglish falsely. Well, to be trusting in LongEnglish, we must be significantly *less* confident that a sentence in LongEnglish will be uttered falsely than that it will be uttered. But we are certain that no sentence in LongEnglish will be uttered. So we cannot be any less

confident that a sentence in LongEnglish will be uttered falsely than that it will be uttered. So we don't have a convention of trust in LongEnglish.

But if we don't have conventions of truthfulness and trust in LongEnglish, then, according to Lewis, we don't use LongEnglish. But LongEnglish is itself a part of English! So, Hawthorne concludes, Lewis is committed to saying that we don't use English, which is absurd.

Q: Do you find Hawthorne's reductio ad absurdum of Lewis' proposal convincing? Why or why not?