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Language without communication intention *

Galen Strawson*

Professor of philosophy, The University of Texas at Austin, USA

Abstract

This paper argues that a language can exist and flourish in a community even if none of the members of the community has any communication intentions; and that reference to the notion of communication intention can therefore be dispensed with in the core account of the nature of linguistic meaning. Certainly one cannot elucidate the notion of linguistic meaning without reference to psychological notions; the communication-intention theorists are right about this. They are, however, wrong about which psychological notions are needed. It is not possession of the ability to (intentionally) mean something that is crucial—the possession and exercise of communication intentions. What is crucial is rather the possession of certain semantic psychological attitudes. To possess such semantic psychological attitudes (semantic attitudes for short) is to be disposed to take certain publicly observable phenomena—such as sights and sounds—as (non-naturally) meaning something. The paper argues that it is possible to describe circumstances in which one can in so doing be said to understand their meaning.

Keywords: language, linguistic meaning, communication intention, understanding-experience, semantic attitudes, representation, propositionality.

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Note added in 2014. This paper was written in 1981 and revised in 1986. It was never given as a talk or submitted for publication. In recovering it from a defunct word-processing program I have made a few conservative adjustments and added a few new references. For a recent treatment of one of the main themes of this paper, see Azzouni 2013.

** E-mail: gstrawson@austin.utexas.edu

1. Introduction; the As

This paper is more a story than an argument. It is about the As, a community of beings who—I claim—have a language although they have no communication intentions, nor any grasp, explicit or implicit, of the notion of communication intentions.

I will start by appearing to beg the question. The first feature of the As is that they seem to think in language—in (disambiguated)¹ eighteenth-century English, say. That is, they seem to think in language in at least one strong sense in which we sometimes do. That is, thoughts just occur to them, consciously entertained, ostensibly linguistically couched thoughts—as can happen to us.

When we think in language in the present restricted sense—when we entertain conscious linguistically couched thoughts, perhaps with some silent mental accompaniment of subvocalized words—I take it that we are not always intentionally communicating with ourselves, even if we are sometimes doing so. Sometimes thoughts just happen. Such is the spontaneity of our minds. It is an experience we often have—the involuntary conscious impinging of the thought that something is or was the case, or will or might or couldn't be the case—and this is the only sense of 'thinking in language' that is of concern here. No doubt many other more intentionally directed things can be called 'thinking in language', but they are not of concern here.

Never mind, for now, how the As have come to be this way. They just are this way. And it is not in fact essential that they should have such conscious thought-episodes. Their thought could be much less apparent in consciousness, as most of our own thought is.

The second feature of the As is this. Sometimes, completely involuntarily, they voice their thoughts. That is, they involuntarily come out with what are apparently sentences. And so it is as if they speak. It is as if they say things. It is certainly true that they involuntarily produce complex sounds of a certain sort. But they do not do so intentionally, for they are constitutionally incapable of performing intentional actions of this sort.

Applied to the As, then, none of the verbs 'to speak', 'to utter', 'to say', or 'to voice one's thoughts' are verbs of action, but only verbs of involuntary doing. I hope it will become clear that to use these words, and words like 'word', 'sentence', 'language', 'proposition', and so on, when talking of the As, is not to beg any questions. The idea is that using these words is overwhelmingly descriptively natural for us, in the case of the As, in the sense that if we came upon them we would naturally be inclined to say that they uttered words and sentences and spoke a language and expressed propositions, and understood their own utterances and the

utterances of others. Whether this usage would in fact be justified or correct is precisely what is to be argued for, and those who think the argument fails will, when it is concluded, be able to say that although the use of all these words is indeed descriptively natural in the case of the As, it is not in fact justified or correct. I will sometimes put the words in question in ‘scare’ quotation marks, or prefix them by some word like ‘putative’, ‘apparent’, ‘supposed’, or ‘ostensible’, as a reminder that the correctness of their application is in question.

From time to time, then, an *A* emits some complex sounds. Others of the *As* hear these sounds. And what happens is this. They all automatically—naturally, immediately, and involuntarily—take the sounds produced to be words and sentences that mean something, and that they understand. And in fact what they automatically and involuntarily take the sounds to mean is exactly what the producer of the sounds takes them to mean—for it too automatically and involuntarily takes them to be words and sentences. In this respect, at least, the *As* are just like us; we have exactly the same sort of involuntary reactive dispositions. Within our own linguistic community, we can’t help taking most of the sounds that come out of other people’s mouths as words and sentences that we understand. We cannot not understand. (It is not being claimed that the fact that the *As*’ similarity in respect of their automatic and involuntary takings of sounds as words and sentences that they understand is sufficient for the truth of the claim that they are correct to take the sounds as they do.)

The *As* cannot in any way control their voicings of their thoughts—as remarked. But they are so constituted that they do it a lot, and in fact it has beneficial effects. Survival-promoting or otherwise rewarding activity is regularly furthered by one of the *As* producing utterances and its utterances apparently being understood by the others. Furthermore (the point is returned to) the sentences that are produced are always believed by their producers to be true. For the involuntary utterance mechanism is, as remarked, such that they simply ‘voice their thoughts’.

2. A remark about method

Many things are supposed in this paper. But since it is concerned to challenge a claim about conceptual connection—the claim that there is an indissoluble connection between the concepts of linguistic meaning and communication intention of such a kind that there can be no adequate elucidation of the essential nature of the former that does not advert to the latter—the domain of legitimate assumption, for the purposes of the contestation of the claim, is the domain of the logically possible. It would be quite wrong, I think, to say that the case of the *As* is philosophically

irrelevant because it is too far removed from our own case, or unhelpful because it is too obviously artificially constructed by a process of subtracting features from our own case. Deep differences of philosophical temperament divide those who find the construction of strange cases useful and natural and those who are deeply suspicious of them. But strange cases are not only useful and natural. They are effectively unavoidable when we are testing the structure and bounds of our central concepts. It is true that it is sometimes hard to know what to make of them, but we have to do our best, for they are not an indulgence. And although our central concepts are anchored in ordinary usage in ordinary circumstances, they impose powerful constraints on our speculations about strange cases, in a way that makes such speculations genuinely elucidatory of the concepts.

3. The basic description

I have proposed that the *As* naturally ‘think in language’ in essentially the way in which we sometimes do. Their experience is, in certain vital respects, very similar in character to our experience when linguistically couched thoughts occur to us in conscious thought. At the very least, it can be correctly described as experience *as of* thinking in language. They are, furthermore, liable to emit ‘utterances’ that ‘voice’ the thoughts they think, although they have no communication intentions—no overt, conscious, explicit communication intentions, nor any other kind that there might be. They do not even have the concept of communication intention. The utterances just come out, and, whether it is veridical or illusory, the automatic and involuntary experience they have, when thinking, ‘speaking’, and hearing others ‘speak’, is experience *as of* understanding their own thoughts and utterances, and the utterances of others, as expressions of propositions. The experience they have when thoughts occur, or when they hear the utterances of others, has this character for them—this character of involving understanding. They can do nothing about this, it just is so. And in this they are again just like us.

I will call this ‘understanding-experience’ and mean by this specifically linguistic understanding-experience.² I will speak of understanding-experience instead of thinking in language, first because the supposition about conscious thinking is not essential to the case, as remarked, second because if such understanding-experience occurs at all, in the case of the *As*, it occurs not only when they produce and hear utterances but equally when they think in language in the present sense. To this extent it is the basic phenomenon.³

Two immediate objections. (1) The view that thinking in or understanding (or seeming to understand) language can be said to be or

involve any sort of experience may be thought very dubious. It will be defended in the next section. (2) It may also be objected that, so far as thinking in language can be said to be an experience at all, it must be an experience that is essentially informed by, or which presupposes, grasp of the notion of communication intention. This will be questioned in §5.

4. Understanding-experience: response to objection (1)⁴

Talk of understanding-experience may be thought unacceptable by some philosophers quite independently of the case of the *As*. They may concede that ‘thinking in language’ can be partly a matter of conscious experience (involving Saussurean ‘acoustic images’, and so on). But they will question what the experience (as) of understanding sounds or utterances is, or might be. And behind their question lies a familiar doubt as to whether there is ‘anything going on’, experientially, which either is, or necessarily accompanies, the understanding. This question may be asked: does the difference between Jacques (a monoglot Frenchman) and Jack (a monoglot Englishman), as they listen to the news in French between t_1 and t_2 , consist in the Frenchman’s having a different experience?

Well, there may indeed be nothing in the way of conscious mental phenomena that can be picked out as constituting the understanding on the part of Jacques—even when his ‘understanding’ is taken to be some entirely automatic and involuntary process, not any sort of intentional directed activity. But of course Jacques’s experience between t_1 and t_2 is utterly different from Jack’s; and this is so although there is a clear enough sense in which Jacques and Jack have the same aural experience.

In one sense, of course, they do not have the same aural experience, given Jacques’s automatic segmenting of the sounds into words. Compare the case in which two English speakers hear a coded message in which nothing but whole English words are used to stand for other English words. One of them is intensely familiar with the code, the other does not know it. Here the basic aural experiences of the two people will be very similar, although one has an automatic and involuntary understanding-experience that the other does not have.

Exposed to the stream of sound Jacques has understanding-experience, and Jack does not: unlike Jack, Jacques automatically and involuntarily takes the sounds as signs, and indeed as words and sentences, that he experiences as expressing certain propositions that he understands and that represent reality as constituted in certain ways. Jacques’s experience is thus quite different from Jack’s between t_1 and t_2 . And the fact that Jacques understands what is said is not only the principal explanation of why this is so, it is also the principal description of the respect in which his experience differs from Jack’s.

To talk about ‘understanding-experience’, or ‘meaning-experience’, is simply to talk about such undeniable facts as these; it is to postulate nothing suspect or mysterious because it is to postulate nothing that is not to be found in these facts. For a being to have understanding-experience is just for things to be for it, in one central respect, just as they can be for us, experientially, when we hear utterances in languages that we understand.⁵

To talk of understanding-experience (or meaning-experience) is not to commit oneself to the implausible view that there is some particular qualitative type of experience that anyone who has understanding-experience must have. Still less is it to commit oneself to the view that particular qualitative experiences go with understanding particular sentences in particular languages. The claim is essentially less precise. It is not that understanding-experience involves any kind of inner mental theatre. What is true is this: there is something it is like, experientially, to understand a sentence, uttered or read. You have just done so, and are continuing to do so. Your doing so is not nothing, experientially. It is part of your life, part of your actual course of experience. It is happening at this moment.

This is, perhaps, an obvious point. But the mood of much recent philosophy of mind and language may make it worth stressing. I take it that it is compatible with any sense in which Wittgenstein is correct to say that ‘understanding is not a mental process’, and in which Ryle is correct to say that there need be ‘nothing going on’.⁶

Certainly understanding is not something one does intentionally; it is something that happens. What there is, is automatic taking of sounds (or sights, etc.) as words and sentences, and as thereby representing something, or that something is the case. Understanding-experience is simply such automatic, involuntary taking of sounds (etc.). It involves no sort of intentional action. As John McDowell remarks, beings can be such that sounds or marks ‘impinge on them with content’, whether they like it or not (1980: 137). This is how we are.

The point bears repetition. It is not the case that nothing is happening to one, experientially, here and now as one reads or hears this sentence. Obviously there is the visual or auditory experience; in the reading case there is, perhaps, a rapid process of forming acoustic mental images. But this is not all, for—*barath abalori trafalon pagorill*—one can have all this without the experience of understanding. There is something else—*the mass of the moon is just over one per cent that of the earth*—a certain sort of complex modification of the quality of one’s course of experience, and not just of one’s dispositional set (remember the experiential difference between Jack and Jacques). That is, there is (linguistic) understanding-experience; understanding-experience whose very existence is sometimes

doubted, perhaps because it has no distinctive experiential correlate that it can call its own, no experiential feel which has a distinct qualitative character in the way that experience in any of the sensory modalities has.

The present suggestion, then, is that there is something understanding sentences is like for us—sounds impinge on us as having meaning, this is an (automatic and involuntary) experience we have—and that the As have the same sort of experience as we do, in this respect.⁷

The next question is this. Suppose it granted that the As can have understanding-experience, automatically taking sensorily apprehended items as words and sentences that they understand: under what conditions could this experience as of (linguistic) understanding be veridical experience, experience of understanding—so that the As were correct in taking the sounds they heard to mean what they took them to mean? Clearly it could be said to be veridical only if they could be said to have a language, a language given which there was a right and a wrong about what the sensorily apprehended items meant. So the question is: Can they really be said to have and to share a genuine language? Can one enrich the description of them in such a way that this seems the most plausible thing to say?

I will try, but there is a prior question to consider. So far it has simply been stipulated both that the As lack communication intentions and that they have understanding-experience. But is it actually possible to have understanding-experience while having no communication intentions, nor any grasp of the notion of intentional communication? The next section argues that it is.

This section has put a polemical accent on the idea that we can legitimately talk of understanding-experience, but the fundamental notion is simply that of the (automatic and involuntary) taking of sounds (etc.) as representing that p or that q, etc., and it may be that one can speak of such taking of sounds (etc.) without explicitly raising the question of the place of experience. The claim that there is in our case (and in the case of the As) something that can correctly be called understanding-experience does not commit one to denying that there could be beings of whom it seemed right to say that there was a sense in which they understood utterances although there was nothing at all that understanding was like, for them. However, it does seem that an entirely experienceless being could never properly be said to understand anything (see §§12-14 below).

5. Understanding-experience without communication intentions: response to objection (2)

Is it really possible to have understanding-experience without any grasp of the notion of communication intentions, theoretical or practical? It seems

so. It seems that it could just be a primitive fact about a communication-intentionless creature that it had understanding-experience willy-nilly, and completely unreflectively—involuntary experience of sounds as expressing that this or that was the case. It seems clearly logically possible that sounds could have the property of ‘representing reality as constituted in certain ways’ for a given creature, and could ‘impinge on [it] with content’, before it had any sort of conception of, or capacity for, intentional communication.

It would not have to conceive of these sounds as intentionally produced by their originators for this to be so. In the case of children it seems that sounds may and in any case could have for them the character of representing reality before they have any thought of intentional communicative acts being performed by others. Repeating and savouring their first words, uttering their first sentences—‘Ball gone’, and so on— young children may often have some communicative intent. At times, however, there is something about the satisfied, baldly assertoric tone of their utterances that strongly suggests that they just enjoy producing sounds that they experience as representing that what is so is so, and have no communicative intent.

Even if they did always have some such intent, it would not follow that it was essential to their automatic and involuntary experience of sounds as representing reality. It is equally unclear why their attributing (or ability to attribute) communication intentions to others would be essential to their experience of sounds as representing reality. Why must one have some implicit sense that a being wants to get one to believe something, or let one know something, in order to be so disposed that one (involuntarily) takes certain of the sounds that it produces as representing reality as constituted in certain ways? There is strong reason to believe that some autistic people understand language perfectly well while having no clear sense that others have communication intentions.

These are questions and assertions, not arguments (the problem is returned to in §16). But consider—we could conceivably become like the As tomorrow. It might just happen that we lost not only the ability but also the very conception of what it is to engage in intentional communication, while retaining untouched our automatic and involuntary propensity to take sounds (and sights) as words and sentences that we understood. It seems profoundly implausible to suppose that if we suffered this loss it would necessarily lead to loss of all our *semantic attitudes*—all our dispositions to automatically and involuntarily take sounds or sights as expressing that something—that p or that q—is the case. We might rather come to treat the fact that certain perceivable items—sounds, marks on paper—had complex and precise meaning for us as a fundamental natural

fact, like the colour of grass. We might be extremely unreflective about this phenomenon, as we are in ordinary life.

Consider how this might happen to a man who had suffered brain damage. He might read science textbooks, and learn and understand a lot, while having lost any grasp of the notion of communication intention. However deeply grasp of this notion is (in the ordinary human case) bound up with the ordinary development of the disposition to automatically and involuntarily take sounds (etc.) as expressing propositions, it is not essentially constitutive of it.

Appeal to this possibility does not by itself show that reference to the notion of communication intention is unnecessary in elucidation of the notion of linguistic meaning, or the notion of the meaning of a word in a language. The notion of communication intention might prove to be indispensable in the account of the conditions of acquisition of language ability (although the autistic case makes this seem doubtful). More interestingly, it might turn out to be indispensable in the account of what it is to be a true member of a linguistic community. For it is arguable that if we did cease to be intentional communicators in the way just imagined, then it would no longer be possible to say that we were still speaking the same language: not only believing that we were understanding one another's utterances (and our own) but actually understanding them. It might be argued that possession of the ability to engage in intentional communication is an essential part of what binds us together as genuinely participant in the same language.

This view will be questioned later. For the moment the purpose of the suggestion that we might overnight become like the As is simply to encourage a more vivid grasp of the basic situation of the As. They are not mindless, or machines. Lacking the notion of communication intention, they can have understanding-experience which is very like the understanding-experience we have, whether or not they can really be said to have and share a (single) language, and so have genuinely veridical understanding-experience. Certainly (linguistic) meaning-experience is essentially conceptually informed experience—experience one cannot have without a prior grasp of certain concepts which are deployed by one, consciously or not, when one has it. But according to the present view the concept of communication intention is not among those concepts; and this is so even though (linguistic) understanding-experience is essentially informed by semantic concepts such as the concept of representation, or standing-for, or being-predicated-of.⁷

6. Propositionality

A creature that automatically and involuntarily takes sounds (sights, etc.) as expressing propositions doesn't simply take sounds to be signs. It takes them to be words and in particular sentences that it understands, as we do. It may be suggested that there are lesser forms of taking sounds as signs, forms that fall short of taking sounds as sentences (and, in particular, as expressing propositions that one understands).⁹ Bells, shapes, and gestures can in some clear sense be signs of or represent things for dogs, dolphins, and chimpanzees—they can represent things with which they have no iconic or intrinsic representational connection (so that they are genuinely 'arbitrary' signs in the way characteristic of linguistic signs). But such signs, we may suppose, are not taken by dogs or dolphins as expressing propositions.¹⁰ Even if there is in their case some (automatic and involuntary) taking of sounds to stand for things or qualities which is genuinely akin to our own, we presume that the sounds are not apprehended by them as expressing sentences or propositions.

Is it at all possible to say, however briefly, what is distinctive about

(1) taking of sounds as expressing propositions given the great range of actual and possible semiotic capacity among sentient beings? It seems that we may reasonably take it that (1) is sufficient for

(2) specifically linguistic understanding-experience—as opposed to lesser kinds of genuinely semiotic capacity that may be attributable to non-human animals.

Such understanding-experience may differ very considerably from person to person, so far as its contingent accompaniments are concerned. Some of us think and conceive very imagistically, others do not. The existence of differences of this sort do not mean that we never really or fully understand one another when we converse, for such differences may be supposed to have what one might call 'beetle-in-the-box' irrelevance (cf. Wittgenstein, *op. cit.*, §293), so far as the meanings of the words of the language we share are concerned, and the fact that we associate different bodies of collateral information with terms is also quite compatible with full mutual understanding as understood here.

But what is distinctive of (1)? This is a large question. Here, very briefly, it will be supposed that what is minimally sufficient for (1) is something like this. Consider a simple sentence, 'Grass is green', and consider the sound as of someone uttering that sentence. One may say that for a being *b* to take those sounds as proposition-expressing, in the automatic and involuntary way that an ordinary English-speaking person does, is

(i) for *b* automatically to take the sounds /*grass*/ and /*green*/¹¹ as signs standing for things, stuffs, or qualities—the precise nature of this

most fundamental form of taking of sounds as signs may be obscure, but it is not disputable that it happens (it happens all the time);

(ii) for b to take the sounds */grass/* and */green/* that it automatically and involuntarily takes to be signs, and automatically and involuntarily distinguishes as distinct components of the whole, complex sound that it hears, as coupling up in some way: in such a way that the sound, taken as a whole, represents this: that grass is green; that the stuff, grass, is possessed of the quality of being green.

It may be objected that what is minimally sufficient for (1) is not sufficient for (2), because any being capable of (2) must also be capable of

(3) taking sounds as expressing sentences that involve negation, generalization, or past-tensedness.¹²

The suggestion about negation is particularly plausible, and can be accepted here, but I will not pursue the question, because it does not bear on the main issue, which concerns the place of the notion of communication intention. It would be implausible to suppose that one could be capable of the minimal form of (1) without grasp of the notion of communication intention, but could not possibly be capable of (3) without such grasp.

It might be said that even if (1) is sufficient for (2), it is not necessary, because (i) alone is minimally sufficient for a form of (2): surely there could be a creature that automatically and involuntarily takes sounds (*/rose/*, */ball/*) as words very much in the way we do, although it has no automatic and involuntary taking-sounds-as-articulated-sentences semantic attitudes? Children may very well pass through such a stage, and Frege's slogan 'Only in the context of a sentence does a word have meaning' is at best a dramatic exaggeration. In fact we can imagine a mentally abnormal human being getting stuck at this stage, acquiring a great range of taking-sounds-as-words semantic attitudes, but no taking-sounds-as-sentences semantic attitudes, nor any grasp of the notion of communication intentions. It seems such a person could be possessed of (perhaps somewhat impoverished) concepts in essentially the same way as we are—dog, triangle, and so on—these being associated, for him, with sounds, as they are for us. It is plausible to say that this amounts to a genuine if limited form of linguistic understanding. Language is not some high mystery that becomes possible only after a 'quantum leap' in intellectual capacity, but something that lies on a continuum of semiotic capacity, ranging from dogs to dolphins to Ameslan-trained chimpanzees up through the whole bestiary of actual and possible creatures, and has deep and recognizable links with the lesser forms of semiotic capacity.

Generally, to take physical phenomena like sounds not only as signs but as specifically propositional signs is to take them as having a certain

sort of reality-representationality whose fundamental nature may be hard to express but is easy to illustrate, since it is fully exemplified in the simple case just given—‘Grass is green’—however complex other cases may be. It is to be such that one naturally takes phenomena like sounds and marks as things that are possessed of what Wittgenstein called ‘general propositional form’—explicit ‘this-is-how-things-are-expressingness’.¹³

All this is obvious enough. It doesn’t help to explain the fundamental psychological phenomenon in question; it just spreads it out a little, descriptively. Still, surely only some sort of conceptual bewitchment, or an inability to tear one’s thoughts away from the familiar human case, can lead one to suppose that this sort of (automatic and involuntary) taking of sounds as specifically propositional, and as thereby expressing that something is the case, is actually logically impossible in a creature that lacks the notion of communication intention.

It may be asked how this account might be extended to more complex sentences. But this is not currently of concern, for two reasons. First, it seems plausible that a language in use in a population—something that had all the minimally essential features of a language—could be very simple and consist only of declarative sentences and their negations. Second, even if it were held to be a necessary condition of something’s counting as a true language that it should contain resources for the construction of relatively complex declarative sentences, it would be implausible to suppose that grasp of the notion of communication intention was necessary for the taking of sounds as words making up very complex sentences and yet not already necessary for the taking of sounds as making up relatively simple sentences.

What about questions and imperatives? Surely understanding these does entail grasp of the notion of communication intention? No doubt. But there is no good reason to think that nothing can count as a language unless it contains these forms, or that the phenomenon of linguistic meaning cannot exist if they do not exist (see §8 below).

7. Semantic attitudes

Fully fledged linguistic understanding-experience, then, involves the taking of things like sounds not only as signs but as sentential signs, proposition expressing signs.¹⁴ The story of the As, resumed in the next section, is intended to provide further support for the claim that such experience is possible in the absence of any grasp of the concept of communication intention. First, though, it is worth saying something more about the notion of ‘semantic attitudes’.

It may be hard to say precisely what they are, but their existence is not in doubt. Whatever else they are, they are attitudes to perceivable items like sounds or sights that involve taking those items as words and sentences that one understands—usually in a completely automatic way (perhaps one can add ‘or mental items’ after ‘sounds or sights’). They are those dispositional psychological properties in virtue of possessing which a being is disposed to treat certain data of sense as words and sentences expressing propositions.¹⁵

One could simply say that they are beliefs about meanings. But whatever descriptive idiom one adopts when talking about the nature or psychological basis of the phenomenon of linguistic competence, semantic attitudes, characterized in this general way, need to be recognized as real, enduring psychological properties, as real as rabbits. In the richer idiom of understanding-experience, a being’s semantic attitudes are simply whatever those psychological properties are in virtue of its possession of which a hearing of a succession of sounds (e.g.) is or can be an understanding-experience for it.

It may be suggested that even an *ex hypothesi* experienceless computer can have semantic attitudes. For it can treat input data that it receives in such a way that it seems natural to say that it takes them as words and sentences that it understands—given a certain sort of complexity in its output responses. This suggestion will be rejected in §§12-14, where it will be held that even if the automatic and involuntary taking of sounds as words and sentences can involve no sort of experience at all, nevertheless there is a key sense of the word ‘understand’ in which a completely experienceless being cannot be said to understand anything. Hence it cannot have semantic attitudes, in so far as these are defined in terms of understanding. Nor, therefore, can it ever properly be said to be conversant in a language, since no being can properly be said to be conversant in a language unless it can understand it. The phenomenon of understanding, is, then, treated as fundamental in the definition of semantic attitudes. No understanding, no semantic attitudes. Semantic attitudes are not reducible to behavioural dispositions.¹⁶

This general position will raise some formidable hackles [in 1986]. But even those who think that understanding never involves any experiential going-on, in itself, may be prepared to accept it. For they may be strongly inclined to accept the intensely natural view that no completely experienceless being can ever properly be said to understand anything. They may be strongly inclined to accept this view even while admitting that it is very unclear indeed exactly what contribution (a), possession of the general capacity to have experience, can be supposed to make to (b), possession of the property of being such that one can truly be

said to understand things, or have semantic attitudes, or be conversant in a language.

8. The As; origins and elaboration

Various elaborations of the story of the As will be considered shortly. A question that presses is the question of genesis. How did they come to be the way they are? And perhaps some carefully hedged evolutionary story could be worked out. But it does not matter much, for present concern is with logical possibility.¹⁷ It is with whether it is actually unintelligible to suppose that there should be language and linguistic meaning in a universe in which there were no communication intentions.

This being so, two simple versions of the story of genesis are adequate for present purposes. According to the first, the As simply occur by chance. According to the second, the As are created by divine fiat, or by some superintelligent but not supernatural being.

So here are the As, all thinking away in language (so it seems to them), all disposed to emit sentences of the language in which they apparently think, and (most happily) all thinking away in, and disposed to produce sentences of, the same language—in at least the following sense: the general congruence among their automatic and involuntary interpretative reactions (or semantic attitudes) is just like the congruence that is found among ordinarily competent speakers of a human language

Clearly, the agreement in the interpretative reactions or semantic attitudes of the As need be no greater than that found in the case of two ordinarily competent speakers of human language (with respect to the common core of the language). Two of the As may agree in semantic attitudes while having very different affective and imagistic associations with regard to particular words and sentences—just like two human beings.

In what ways might one elaborate the story? Suppose first that they produce only declarative sentences; and that what they utter is in fact always what they take to be the truth (for their utterances are involuntary ‘voicings’ of their thoughts or beliefs); and that it usually is the truth, since most of their beliefs are true.

They have, for example, no strange religious beliefs. Given this supposition (it is discussed further in the next section), one can provide for an analogue of questions and answers: one can suppose that they often emit sentences of the form ‘I wonder whether p’, and that emissions of this kind tend to cause others in their presence to emit ‘p’, or ‘It is not the case that p’, depending on their beliefs. But this is not a necessary part of their story.

One objection might now be this. The *As* are purposive agents: we may suppose that they are capable of intentional action of various sorts. How is it conceivable that they should have failed to have the thought that sentence production might itself be intentionally undertaken? Surely they must be able to have this thought, and must indeed have done so—even if we suppose that the physical mechanisms by which they produce their speech sounds are not subject to the will in any way?

To this the answer is simple. It is conceivable that they should not have had this thought. It does not have to be impossible for them to have it; it suffices to suppose that none of them have thought of it up to now. Just as nearly all our thoughts ‘just occur’ to us, so their utterances just occur. They experience these utterances rather as we experience those thoughts that ‘just occur’ to us. This is how things are. And even if they did have the thought that sentence-production might have been intentionally undertaken, this would change nothing essential. They would still experience sentence production as in no way subject to the will, and although they would now have the notion of communication intention, it would have no essential part to play in an account of their apparently linguistic thought or utterance.¹⁸

9. Speaking the truth

As remarked, the *As* only utter sentences that they believe to be true. Each of them knows from experience that this is true of itself, and each automatically assumes (1) that it is true of the others. It has no particular reason to doubt this (it is as unreflective and unquestioning about linguistic phenomena as most human beings). It also has positive reasons to believe it, given its implicit assumption—which is again a natural assumption which it has no positive reason not to make—(2) that the others have the same beliefs about the meaning of words and sentences (i.e. the same semantic attitudes) as it does itself, as well as similar needs and beliefs about the world. These positive reasons for assumption (1)—which are of course not conclusive reasons—derive (for example) from its appreciation of the use that it finds it can sometimes make of others’ utterances in the pursuit of its various ends. Similarly, positive reasons for assumption (2) derive from its observation that others behave predictably when it emits certain utterances itself—e.g. utterances giving information about the location of prized materials. They are reasons of the sort furnished by the regularity and variety of such ordinary kinds of occurrence as the following: one comes in and emits ‘There are mushrooms at the foot of the hill’; another takes up a basket and departs in the direction of the hill, and returns with the basket full of mushrooms. A third watches and hears.

It might be said that to suppose that they only utter truths is to beg the question in some way. It might be said that it is to take into the story something that can be properly accommodated only given reference to communication intention—reference to something like the desire to speak (and be told) the truth. But this seems to be a mistake. It is a basic fact about the As that they are so constituted that they have a natural and entirely involuntary propensity to ‘voice their thoughts’ in certain circumstances. This fully explains why they only utter what they believe to be true. No reference to a desire to speak truth is necessary.¹⁹

10. The natural interpretability of the As

An enthusiastic team of Terran linguists—monoglot Portuguese who have never heard of English—arrives on the planet of the As. They set to work recording and collating utterances and contexts of utterance, noting what sequences of apparently—and, in fact, actually—intentional activity follow upon what utterances, and so on. Unsurprisingly, they ‘learn the language’. Or rather, they come up with what they take to be a language. They assemble what they take to be a fairly complete lexicon and a descriptively adequate grammar. They note that there is apparently no interrogative form.²⁰

‘Learning the language’ of the As, the linguists have, naturally, to attribute certain desires and beliefs to them. But they do not have any great difficulty here. For the As are human in form, and evidently have need of food, warmth, sleep, shelter, and so on, in order to survive. The linguists naturally suppose the As to need or want what they bring back from their forays; and although they could of course be wrong, they are in fact right.²¹

In time they come to be on good terms with the affable but strangely distant-seeming As—or so they think. Their superior technology enables them to discover the whereabouts of materials that are valued by the As, and in scarce supply. One way in which they can test their theory of meaning for the putative language of the As is by announcing where these materials are, in what they take to be that language. The As react as predicted; and in this way the linguists engage in linguistic communication with the As—or so they think. For there is a considerable interchange of information between them (or so it seems), transmitted in the medium of a (syntactically complex system of signs that are ‘arbitrary’ in the way characteristic of linguistic signs.

Suppose the linguists are now told that the As have no communication intentions whatever, and that they are constitutionally incapable of wilful utterance, or of any intentional production of sounds at all; that the physical mechanisms by which they produce their speech-

sounds are simply not subject to the will. No doubt the linguists will feel that this explains a lot about the strangely detached character of the As. But the present question is this: must they immediately concede that the As' utterances have no meaning at all? Is that what the theorists of communication intention (the CI theorists, for short) would have them believe? And what about us? We are not in the 'radical translation' situation of the linguists, but know by stipulation that each of the As automatically and involuntarily takes its own utterances and the utterances of others as words and sentences that it understands, very much as we do. Can this apparent understanding be dismissed as simply illusory, given the present story—as not genuine understanding at all? Is there no sense in which the As—or the linguists—can be said to be right about what the utterances mean?

Well, what exactly supports the claim that there is language among the As? Couldn't the linguists just be completely wrong, however natural their conviction?

11. Narrow communication

One could make some further use of the notion of communication in support of the claim. Certainly there is no linguistic communication in the normal, full sense—linguistic communication in the normal, full sense necessarily involves communication intention. Still, one could say that there is linguistic communication in at least the following 'narrow' sense: (1) the As regularly acquire true information from each other as the result of their productions of sounds that they (automatically and involuntarily) take to be words and sentences that they understand. (2) It is specifically because they (involuntarily) take the sounds to be words and sentences that they understand that they acquire true information in this way. And (3) the meaning that each (involuntarily) takes the sounds (that it takes to be words and sentences) to have is the same as the meaning that those who produce the sounds (involuntarily) also take them to have—in at least the sense of 'the same' in which two ordinarily competent human speakers of a single language can be said to take a sentence that they both understand to have the same meaning (obviously no stronger sense is required).

It seems, then, that there is genuine exchange of information. And although the exchange of information is not intentionally undertaken, it is *de facto* highly successful communication, in the *narrow* sense: for in fact they all understand the same things by the utterances they hear and produce; and in that sense they understand each other. They are not of course trying to let each other know things, or to get things across to each other, or to influence each other's mental states or behaviour. There is no

communication, or success in communication, in that sense. But they are in fact informing ('informing') each other of things, and they are doing so because they do in fact share an unquestioned set of semantic attitudes to a system of sounds automatically-and-involuntarily-taken-as-signs that have—among other things—the arbitrariness of linguistic signs as found in human languages. The *As* are not like birds uttering and reacting to warning cries. Given the way they are, the sounds are, irresistibly, proposition-expressing words and sentences for them. The question is not whether this is so; it is stipulated to be so. The question is rather whether these apparent words and sentences can correctly be said to be genuine words and sentences of a genuine single language that they all understand.

12. The 'language' of the *Bs*

In §15 it will be suggested that one way to make it seem plausible to say that the *As* form a linguistic community despite lacking communication intentions is to couple facts of the sort discussed in §§8-11—facts about entirely unintentional but *de facto* highly successful communication carried on in a medium of a certain 'arbitrary'-sign-involving) sort—to a story about how the transmission of the 'language' of the *As* from generation to generation. First, however, it may be worth asking what else CI theorists may have had in mind, in insisting that one cannot fully analyse the notion of linguistic meaning without reference to the notion of communication intention.

Perhaps the fundamental idea is simply that no adequate elucidation of the notion of linguistic meaning can be conducted in complete independence of any reference to psychological notions (it cannot, e.g., be conducted just in terms of truth-conditions or satisfaction). In the next three sections this (hardly resistible) view will be defended in the context of the story of the *As*. The basic point is familiar, if disputed, and those who need no convincing can skip to §15.

The *As* preserve the idea that no adequate account of linguistic meaning can be given without reference to psychological notions; for the notion of understanding features prominently in their description. One simple way to show how important the reference to psychological attitudes is is to try to remove it completely while changing the rest of the story as little as possible. In the place of the *As*, take a race of similarly formed and behaviourally identical but *ex hypothesi* experienceless creatures—the *Bs*. The *Bs* are a completely chance occurrence, or the product of some bizarrely constrained process of evolution.²²

Being experienceless, the *Bs* do not of course 'think in language' in the sense of §1; nor do they have 'understanding-experience' in the way in which we and the *As* can be said to do (§4). There is nothing at all that it

is like, experientially speaking, to be them. But they ‘utter sentences’—that is, they emit complex sounds in just the same way, sonically speaking, as the *As* do; highly complex processes go on inside them; and, like the *As*, they react to each other’s sonic emissions in regular and complex ways.

Some monoglot Portuguese linguists arrive. Facing exactly the same data as the linguists who dealt with the *As*, they naturally work out the ‘language’ of the experienceless *Bs*. That is, they finish up assigning meanings to the sounds produced by the *Bs*, taking these sounds to be words and sentences in a way that accounts perfectly for the behaviour of the *Bs* on two natural assumptions that are in fact false: (1) that the *Bs* are experiencing beings that take the sounds to be words and sentences that they understand, and can therefore be said to have semantic attitudes in the present sense, (2) that the *Bs* have certain (very naturally attributed) desires and beliefs about the world.²³

As in the case of the *As*, the linguists, with their superior knowledge of the whereabouts of certain scarce ‘prized’ resources, learn to affect the behaviour of the *Bs* in precise ways by uttering certain sounds. (They believe they are communicating with the *Bs*.) Reacting to the linguists’ utterances, the *Bs* behave as beings would behave if the utterances did indeed have for them the meaning that the linguists take them to have, and if they did indeed have the desires—for food, sleep, warmth, mushrooms, etc.—that they appear to have. Clearly, what the linguists think of as the language of the *Bs* can be used by intentional communicators for intentional communication; if the Portuguese linguists settle on the planet of the *Bs*, they may bring their children up to speak it. They may find its structure and sonorities preferable to those of their own language, or that it lends itself particularly graciously to the composition of poetry. And their children will be able to ‘communicate’—so they will believe—with the affable-seeming natives.

Ignoring a number of complications, suppose that the behavioural and ostensibly linguistic output of the *Bs* is sufficiently complex for it to seem that there is in effect a single right answer to the question of what the sounds mean (in some highly extenuated sense of ‘right answer’ to be examined shortly,²⁴ and, connectedly, to the question of what desires and beliefs the *Bs* may reasonably be supposed to have—given the (in fact false) assumptions (1) and (2) mentioned above. This is the answer that was right in the case of the *As*—being right in the sense that it correctly matched their in fact interpersonally uniform semantic attitudes.

But what exactly is this sense in which the linguists have got it right in the case of the *As*?

First, note once again that the semantic attitudes of the *As* need not be any more interpersonally uniform than the semantic attitudes of any two ordinarily competent human speakers of a single language, with respect to the (vast) set of sentences that they both understand. The present notion of the rightness of a translation is perfectly compatible with this sort of interpersonal slack, even though the rightness has been explicitly defined in wholly psychological terms—in terms of the translation's having some sort of strong mirroring correspondence to the semantic attitudes of the *As*.²⁵

The basic idea is simply this: the indisputably real (enormously widespread) psychological phenomenon of automatically and involuntarily taking of sounds as signs—as words and sentences with meaning—is taken as a fundamental, given fact. The linguists are right in their interpretation of the language of the *As* in the sense that their own increasingly fluent (and increasingly automatic and involuntary) taking of the *As*' utterances as words and sentences that they understand is increasingly similar to that of any one of the *As*. In the end their (automatic and involuntary) semantic attitudes vis-à-vis the *As*' utterances differ from those of the *As* only in ways in which any two ordinarily competent human speakers of a single language may differ in their (core) semantic attitudes.²⁶

In the case of the experienceless *Bs*, however, there are no semantic attitudes at all to be mirrored or matched. There is, no doubt, a great deal of complex processing machinery, but there are no semantic attitudes in the present sense because there is no understanding, and semantic attitudes are defined in terms of understanding (§7).

This may be dismissed as antiquarian a priorism. How can one be so sure that it is correct to say that (i) there is no understanding in the case of the *Bs*? Well, (i) does not rest essentially on the claim that (ii) (linguistic) understanding necessarily involves what has been called 'understanding-experience', although human beings have such understanding-experience all the time (§4). The question of whether or not (ii) is true has been left open (§7). (i) is simply a particularization of a general thesis which, with Searle, I take to be evident: the thesis that completely experienceless beings understand nothing at all, ever—however they move, whatever they do. Pocket calculators understand nothing; and we may safely take them as a clear model for all other *ex hypothesi* experienceless beings. For it isn't as if mere difference in degree of complexity of function in an *ex hypothesi* experienceless being could possibly make any difference to understanding.²⁷

The point can be put intuitively like this. If there is to be understanding, there has to be 'someone there'—a 'subject of experience'.

But in the case of an experienceless being there is *ex hypothesi* no one there. However natural we find it to adopt the 'intentional stance' to some being, the question of fact remains: is there or is there not something it is like to be this being, experientially speaking? If not, it understands nothing. Hence, on the present terms, it has no semantic attitudes to anything.²⁸

In the case of the *Bs*, then, there are no semantic attitudes at all to be mirrored or matched. So the linguists can be said to 'get the language of the *Bs* right' in only the following sense, at best: they come up with that interpretation of the supposed language which all (serious) groups of human linguists would in the long term converge on, up to a limit that one could define as follows: two groups of human linguists who are native speakers of languages L1 and L2 are at the limit of convergence when—roughly—their respective translations S1 and S2 of a *Bs*' 'sentence' p, for each p, are such that S1 in L1 translates S2 in L2 and vice versa.

Such convergence is all very well. But it does not enable one to avoid the question as to whether, bluntly, there is any meaning at all in the case of the *Bs*. What if the *Bs* are the only creatures in the universe? Assume they are. Do words, sentences, language, or linguistic meaning then exist in the universe? Do these phenomena exist, given the existence of the sound as of declarative sentences of eighteenth-century English being spoken by beings whose behaviour appears (to human understanding, at least) to jibe perfectly with what they say (given false assumptions (1) and (2), once again)?

No. The *Bs* are only dramatic representatives of the fact that for the phenomena of language and linguistic meaning to exist at all, in the universe, given the existence of certain other complex phenomena (physical movements, sounds, and so on), there must also exist experiencing beings which have certain specific psychological attitudes to those physical phenomena; psychological attitudes in virtue of which it is true to say that they automatically and involuntarily take those phenomena as words and sentences that they understand; psychological attitudes which somehow serve by their presence to constitute the physical phenomena as genuinely linguistic phenomena. The existence (present or past)²⁹ of such experiencing beings, and such attitudes, is at least a necessary condition of there being a fact of the matter about what a word or sentence of the supposed language means or refers to. And experienceless beings understand nothing, ever.

So it cannot be said that 'gold' denotes gold, in the 'language' of the *Bs*. It is true that the *Bs* behave exactly as if they were taking the sound 'Jack' as a sign denoting one of their number (whom we may call 'Jack'). For when one of the *Bs* 'sees' Jack spluttering in the river and emits 'Jack

is drowning down by Two-Plank Bridge', others who 'hear' proceed at the double to Two-Plank Bridge and fish him out. But although all these things are so, there is no sufficient sense in which 'Jack' can be said to denote Jack in the language' of the *Bs*. For no pattern of movement or output (or 'behaviour'), on the part of experienceless beings, however complex, can ever suffice in itself to constitute the fact that 'Jack' denotes Jack, or 'gold' gold—whatever the pattern of sensory stimulation that that pattern of behaviour follows upon.³⁰ The sounds 'Jack' and 'gold' can never in these circumstances be words. 'Jack is drowning' cannot be a sentence or have meaning.³¹

Some—instrumentalists, or 'No-experience-is-necessary' theorists (NEIN theorists, for short)—reject this view outright. We know the theoretical pressures that motivate them. But those who do reject this view *a fortiori* reject the CI theorists' approach to the question of linguistic meaning (given that experienceless beings cannot have communication intentions), and it is the CI theorists who are the principal target here.³²

At the risk of compounding a difficulty I cannot hope to settle here, let me add this. It isn't as if endowing the *Bs* with just any old capacity to have experience will suffice, given the complexity of their 'behaviour', to bring linguistic meaning into their universe. Endowing them with a bare capacity for sensation will not suffice. We require something more: they must possess characteristically *semantic* attitudes—attitudes which constitute them as creatures disposed to take certain sounds as signs and, in particular, as words and sentences that they understand. No amount of highly complex behaviour on the part of experienceless beings can make it true that they are so taking signs—for there remains a paramount sense in which they understand nothing. Equipping them with experiences in the form of sensations of colour, sounds, shapes, etc., will not change anything. Something more is required, for such experiences may be quite unconnected with whatever it is that makes them seem like language-understanding creatures. If we call whatever it is that makes them seem like language-understanding creatures 'Q', it seems that we require some involvement of experience in Q if there is to be understanding, and I am inclined to think that we cannot in the end be satisfied with anything less than the requirement that they must at least be capable of the kind of conscious 'understanding experience' that we sometimes have. Indeed it seems that one has to grant the troublesome, imprecise, elusive, and probably 'infertile'³³ point that experience, conscious mental life, whatever one chooses to call it, has something essential to do with understanding—as it has something essential to do with seeing, hearing, and so on, although experienceless beings can also behave just as if they saw, heard, and so on.³⁴

There is tremendous resistance to such a view in current philosophical literature. Some of the resistance flows tiresomely and tirelessly from the old ‘Evidentialist’ (see note 22) conflation of questions about what we can know (or have evidence for) with questions about what there is or might be. Some of it flows from a sense of the difficulty of fully grasping the case of the *Bs* (the sense of difficulty is partly a product of deeply ingrained Evidentialist habits of thought). Some of it flows slightly more reputably from the Ryle-Wittgenstein points about the sense in which ‘there need be nothing going on’, experientially, when someone thinks or understands something.

This last sort of resistance couples helpfully with our increased understanding of the importance, complexity and ubiquity of the ‘sub-personal’ or rather ‘sub-experiential’ processes that subserve our (conscious) mental life. But the basic (anti-instrumentalist) intuition remains: an (*ex hypothesi*) experienceless being doesn’t really understand anything, ever—any more than a pocket calculator. Anyone who denies this may have to grant that the phenomena of language and linguistic meaning can exist in the totally experienceless universe of the *Bs*. *A fortiori* they will have to reject the CI theorists’ approach to meaning (unless of course they think that experienceless beings can have communication intentions).

Although it is indefensible, the NEIN-theoretic (or instrumentalist) position is well motivated in certain respects. Perhaps the correct philosophical attitude to this question has a certain dialectical dynamic: it is right to continue to feel the testing pull of the NEIN-theoretic thought, while always returning to the point that experienceless beings understand nothing.³⁵

13. A radio star

Another question might be thought to arise at this point (although it is perhaps a rather foolish question). Suppose certain complex sounds or radio impulses are being emitted by something in the universe, and that they are the best candidates, in that universe, for being language-like phenomena. Given that there must be (or must have been—I ignore this qualification) a being that has semantic attitudes to sounds like these somewhere in the universe, if these sounds are to have any chance of counting as genuinely linguistic phenomena, must the emitter or originator of the sounds itself have such semantic attitudes, or is it sufficient if there are creatures that (automatically and involuntarily) take sounds like these to be words and sentences that they understand? (Those uninterested in this question should turn to §15.)

This last thing is clearly not sufficient. We require semantic attitudes—understanding—in the originator of the sounds, or at least somewhere behind, and in some way suitably causally involved in, the production of the sounds.³⁶ Without this there is no possible fact of the matter about the meaning of the words and sentences that the sounds are taken as. Suppose a ‘radio star’ seems to be sending us King Lear in Morse Code—except that each word is spelt backwards—over and over again. Suppose we know it’s a radio star and, like the *Bs*, experienceless. Can anything then make it the case that ‘gnik’ means ‘king’, or ‘roop dekan sehcterw’ ‘poor naked wretches’? No—for ‘gnik’ to mean ‘king’ it has to be true, not necessarily that whoever or whatever produced it produced it with some communication intention, but at least—assuming that it is a lone being—that it itself took ‘gnik’ to mean ‘king’. It may be said that there cannot be facts of the matter about what a being takes (things that it takes to be) words and sentences to mean in the absence of a surrounding community with a shared usage. But it can just be a simple if evidentially speaking entirely fugitive fact about a lone individual incapable of intentional communication that it takes particular sounds (or radio impulses) to be words and sentences with particular meanings. Sounds (impulses) can impinge on it, as they can on us, as sentences meaning that so-and-so is the case. (The question of whether or not it can be said to be ‘following a rule’ in its solitude is irrelevant to the intelligibility of this possibility.) This is at least necessary, even if not sufficient.

Here one is close to one of the CI theorists’ main themes. For what one has, in effect, is insistence on the crucial importance of something that is at least akin to utterer’s meaning or ‘emitter’s meaning’, although it doesn’t require intentional utterance, or any communication intentions at all. The actual (proximal) emitter of the sounds or radio impulses may be an experienceless entity like a tape recorder. But there must be something which is in some clear sense the source of the sounds or impulses, and to which one can properly attribute something like utterer’s meaning just on the basis of its semantic attitudes to what is emitted. It need not have any communication intentions, but it must have such semantic attitudes—dispositions to take the sounds or signs as words and sentences that it understands.³⁷

14. The *Cs*

The point can be re-expressed by reconsidering the experienceless *Bs*. They are the only creatures in the universe, until the *Cs* occur—just like that. The *Cs* are qualitatively identical (mentally and physically) to the monoglot Portuguese linguists at the point at which they have just become

fully conversant with the apparent 'language' of the *Bs*. They have many spurious memories, false beliefs about a planet Earth, and so on.

The *Cs* 'cooperate' with the *Bs*, pointing out scarce resources, and so on. Everything goes swimmingly. The question is this. Does the presence of the *Cs* bring linguistic meaning into the universe of the *Bs*, given that it is not there when only the *Bs* are present?

In one way it obviously does. The *Cs* are all fluent speakers of a language they call 'Portuguese'. So subtract this feature. They forget their 'Portuguese' and are conversant only with the 'language' of the *Bs*. The question is then this. Does the presence of the *Cs* make it true that 'gold' (e.g.) denotes gold in the 'language' of the *Bs*—whereas before their arrival there was no sense in which this was true?

Suppose the *Cs* talk to each other in the 'language' of the *Bs*. Then they are not merely hearers of, and ostensible 'understanders' of, but also intentional communicators in, the 'language' of the *Bs*. This is not the case that is needed. The case that is needed is one in which the *Cs* are mere or pure hearers and 'understanders'.

Suppose, therefore, that the *Cs* become like the *As* in having no communication intentions, and become even more limited than the *As* in having no ability whatever to produce sounds, even unintentionally, nor even to think thoughts spontaneously. Yet they remain like the Terran linguists in respect of their automatic and involuntary 'understanding' of the 'language' of the *Bs*. They are now entirely inactive observers, pure hearers and 'understanders' of the supposed 'language' of the *Bs*, without communication intentions, dumb, knowing no other language.

Now reconsider the question. Given the presence of the *Cs*, pure hearers/'understanders', do the apparent 'words' and 'sentences' of the apparent 'language' of the *Bs* have meaning, given that they didn't have meaning before the *Cs* arrived?

It seems that the answer must be negative—even though there is full-fledged understanding-experience. Given that the *Cs* are entirely non-participant in the 'language'—looking on, hearing sounds, automatically and involuntarily taking them as words and sentences that they understand—their presence cannot make the 'language' of the *Bs* into a language. For even given the presence of the *Cs*, we cannot properly substantiate the idea that 'Jack is drowning' means that Jack is drowning, in the 'language' of the *Bs*, except by some sort of reference to facts about how the *Bs* understand 'words' like 'Jack', 'is' and 'drowning'. But *ex hypothesi* the *Bs* understand nothing by these 'words'. They understand nothing at all.

Some may again be tempted to say that there is an important 'purely behavioural' sense in which they do 'take' the 'words' and 'sentences' to

have a certain meaning, given how they behave. But what is this 'behaviour'? They have no desires, beliefs, or intentions. Even given the complete apparent fit between their 'utterances', circumstances, and other 'behaviour'—the fit that shows up given false but (humanly) natural assumptions about their basic beliefs, desires, and needs, and causes (genuine) Terran linguists to converge spectacularly to agreement in their account of what the 'words' and 'sentences' of the 'language' mean—even given all this, there is no sufficient sense in which it can be correct to say that 'Jack is drowning' means that Jack is drowning in the 'language' of the *Bs*. And this is so, it seems, even if one imagines that it could make sense to suppose that 'Jack is drowning' means that Jack is drowning in the language' of the *Bs* is part of the best possible hypothesis (from the point of view of the universe, not just from the human point of view) about what the words' and 'sentences' of the 'language' of the *Bs* mean, on the assumption that they mean anything at all.

15. The language of the *As*

So far the following two theses have been defended:

(1) that the notion of communication intention plays no indispensable part in the elucidation of the notion of linguistic meaning;

(2) that the notion of understanding does play such a part.

If this is so, then it must also be the case

(3) that the notion of communication intention plays no essential part in the elucidation of the relevant notion of understanding.

But, so far as (3) is concerned, there is at least one major avenue of protest open to the theorists of communication intention.

Consider the *As*. They have (linguistic) 'understanding-experience' (§4). Clearly, if this experience is to be veridical—if they are to be right in what they automatically and involuntarily take the sounds they take to be words and sentences to mean—then there must indeed be some fact of the matter about what the apparent words and sentences of the apparent language mean.³⁸ And for there to be such a fact of the matter, there must be a real, single language, and not just 'understanding-experience'. Even interpersonally uniform understanding-experience, such as the *As* have with respect to the sounds they take as words and sentences, will not do on its own. There must be a language for there to be such a thing as a correct assignation of meaning to the candidate 'words' and 'sentences'.

So—can we reasonably say that there is a language in the case of the *As*? *Ex hypothesi*, they are all similar in their semantic attitudes to certain sounds, and they engage successfully in 'narrow' communication in the sense of §11. But is this enough? In order for there to be facts of the matter about the meaning of the things that they take to be words and

sentences that they understand, doesn't it also have to be the case that the merely *de facto* congruence of their semantic attitudes is, in some sense (e.g. in the way characteristic of the living languages of human communities), an effect of that which it makes possible, to wit, processes of intentional communication? Don't we need intentional communication between them to—as it were—bind their semantic attitudes together, and thus make it a fact that 'gold' denotes gold in their language—their single, shared, public language? Don't we need a practice of intentional communication in order to be able to provide a certain sort of necessary explanation of the congruence of their semantic attitudes? Without this, isn't their profitable organization of their activities in response to each other's 'utterances'—utterances which they take themselves to understand—a fluke, in some sense which is fatal to the claim that there are any facts of the matter about the meaning of their 'words' and 'sentences'?

It will shortly be argued that this is not so. First, though, one further feature will be added to the story of the *As*—with the proviso that although this feature helps to make the claim that the *As* have a language more vivid, it is not essential (see §18 below).

16. 'Language-acquisition' among the *As*

Suppose that the *As* reproduce and multiply. Their children are born languageless, but adults are disposed to become loquacious in the presence of infants, issuing large numbers of initially simple and progressively more complex utterances about how things are in the immediate vicinity. Like many animals, the children have strong mimetic inclinations, the same sort of sensory equipment as their parents and as each other, the same sorts of discriminatory capacities and instinctual pre-linguistic dispositions to separate the sensory field into figure and ground, into salient and non-salient features, and so on. Like us they have a fundamental, natural and automatic tendency to associate the sounds adults produce with features of the environment with which the sounds frequently co-occur, and to come to take certain of the sounds to represent the features in question.³⁹

This story could be elaborated at length. There seems to be no good reason at all to think that these instinctive, proto-semantic tendencies necessarily involve either some tendency to engage in intentional communication, or some tendency to attribute communication intentions to others, or that they could not be innate or 'pre-programmed' in such a way that they could develop (given suitable exposure to sounds) in the complete absence of (and in any case well in advance of) any such communication intention involving or attributing tendencies. As remarked

in §5, it seems that children could come to be such that ‘pieces of behaviour ... impinge on them with content’ before they were in any way aware of being involved in processes of intentional communication; indeed pieces of behaviour could ‘impinge on them with content [even] in advance of being taken as expressive of belief’.⁴⁰ Given their strong and involuntary mimetic inclinations, the As children start producing sentences in their turn. Their mistakes diminish rapidly as they are exposed to more utterances. And so it goes on. Much of their language (or ‘language’) acquisition is very like parts of our own.⁴¹

We come upon the As after many generations—none of the founding members remain. All the appearances are that they speak a language. Given that they transmit their language or ‘language’ from generation to generation in this way, it seems that we may have at least as much reason to say that there are facts of the matter about the meaning of words and sentences in their case as we do in our own case, and that we certainly have something more than a flukish *de facto* coincidence of merely private meanings or ‘private languages’.⁴²

Consider an adolescent of the *n*-th generation. It has a well-developed set of semantic attitudes, a well-developed automatic and involuntary tendency to produce utterances and to take sounds as words and sentences that it understands. And it has the semantic attitudes that it has entirely as a result of having been exposed to sounds produced by other As. Knowing what we know about its constitution, and about the particular way in which it has been exposed to these sounds, we have the correct explanation of why it has come to have the semantic attitudes that it has.

Exactly the same general sort of explanation is true (*mutatis mutandis*) of an adolescent member of a human (illiterate) community. And the question is this: Why exactly should the fact that the adult human beings and the growing human child have communication intentions, and attribute them to each other, be thought to make them more truly sharers of meaning, in their having of semantic attitudes, than the communication-intentionless adult and adolescent As?

The As, like the humans, have the same semantic attitudes as each other, and this is entirely as a result of their exposure to sounds produced by other As. Of course the As don’t communicate with each other in the normal sense of the word. That is, after all, precisely the initial hypothesis. But they communicate in the narrow sense described in §11: they regularly acquire information from the sounds the others produce, given the way they take those sounds as words and sentences that they understand; and children in their community, born languageless, grow up to conform with the others in their usage (‘usage’), semantic attitudes, and

(automatic and involuntary) understanding-experience. For these reasons, I suggest, it seems reasonable to say that the As form a genuine linguistic community.

In fact, mere congruence in semantic attitudes and involuntary understanding-experience seems to provide very good grounds for the claim that the linguists can be said to get it right in their interpretation of the language of the As (cf. §12). And if there is such a thing as getting it right, there are facts of the matter about what the apparent words and sentences of the apparent language mean.⁴³ In which case, the phenomenon of linguistic meaning can correctly be said to exist in a universe in which the As are the only sentient creatures, merely on the basis of their congruence of semantic attitudes. Nevertheless, the story of how they acquire the language may provide some further support for the claim that they are truly members of a (single) language community. It changes the picture by giving a certain account of the causes of the fact that they coincide in semantic attitudes.

17. A realist aside

Wittgensteinians and others may object to the free use of the notion of semantic attitudes. It is, however, arguable that the only major difference between the present account of what is right so far as the meaning of a word in the language of the As is concerned, and a Wittgensteinian account of what is right so far as the meaning of a word in a human natural language is concerned, is of little importance. For it is arguable that the only difference is this: that what is right—what a word means—is in the latter case held to be a function not of (1) the semantic attitudes of the community, but simply of (2) the practice, the (intentional) usage, of the community with respect to the word. And this difference seems to be of little importance here. For we are not concerned with Evidentialist problems (cf. note 22)—with epistemological questions of evidence, or of what we could find out or verify, and the natural view of the relation between (1), the semantic attitudes of individual members of a normal human community with respect to a word, and (2), the overall pattern of (intentional) usage of that word in the community, is simply this: (2) is an effect of (1)—an ordinary causal effect: the pattern of use in the community is an effect of those undeniably real (if descriptively speaking evasive) things, the semantic attitudes of members of the community.

True, each member of the human community has come to have (1), the semantic attitudes that he or she does have, as a result of nothing more—or less—than exposure to (2), the essentially public phenomenon of the pattern of use as already established in the community. This is an important fact.⁴⁴ But (2), the pattern of use, is as it is because (1), the

semantic attitudes, are as they already are—once a language (or ‘language’) is under way. And it can do no harm (once one is free from Evidentialist prejudice) to say that what is right, where the meaning of a word in a language is in question, is a function of (1), the semantic attitudes of the members of the language community, rather than saying that it is (merely?) a function of what those semantic attitudes conspire to produce, i.e. (2), the actual pattern of (intentional) use of the word in the community. As remarked in §7, semantic attitudes are just those features of a being which—however else they can be described (e.g. in physical terms, or in terms of ‘sub-experiential’ states)—make it such that it is disposed to take sounds and sights as words and sentences that it understands to say that p or that q; and, in the richer terminology of understanding-experience, make it such that has or can have understanding-experience (§4). Whatever terminology one chooses to talk about these features, they are indubitably real, for beings who possess them—you and I— indubitably exist.

There is, then, a clear sense in which (1) is more basic than (2), when one comes to ask what facts about reality make it the case that X means Y in a given language. Semantic attitudes are more basic than what they cause—a pattern of (intentional or involuntary) usage—even though they are not open to direct inspection and are caused to develop in each individual member of the community by a process of exposure to a pattern of usage. So says a robust sense of mental reality.⁴⁵

18. Conclusion: 1

Returning now to the As, it may be asked whether some process of language-learning is actually a necessary condition of their forming a language community. I think not, for if it were, then one would have to say that if the original As had been sterile and immortal then they could never have formed a language community. It seems very implausible to say this, because the character of their putatively linguistic interactions could be just like that of the mortal and fertile As described above.

Suppose they are mortal and fertile, and transmit their apparent language in the way described in §16—but don’t start reproducing for two hundred years. Do they fail to form a linguistic community until then? This also seems very implausible. If so, the story of the As’ language learning cannot be an indispensable part of the case for the claim that they have a language, and form a linguistic community.⁴⁶

The case of the As is very different from our own. It may be hard to envisage clearly, hard to know quite what to say, given certain questions. This may be so even if the basic description is clear. Our criteria for what makes a language community are not definite enough for it to be proved

that they do or do not form a linguistic community. My claim, for all that, is that the base phenomenon of linguistic meaning exists fully in a universe in which the only candidates for being linguistic beings are sentient, communication-intentionless creatures like the *As*—beings that have and share semantic attitudes in the way that they *As* do, and acquire them in the way that the *As* do. The present story may at least shift some burden of proof onto those who insist that there is something essential missing in the case of the *As*.

On one view, the base phenomenon of linguistic meaning exists (in some important sense compatible with the argument in §§13-14) even in a universe in which there has only ever been one creature like one of the *As*, thinking thoughts or listening completely unreflectively to recorded talk. The base phenomenon of linguistic meaning exists simply because of the existence of the psychological phenomenon of a being automatically and involuntarily taking sounds or sights or items in thought as words and sentences that it understands.⁴⁷

The *Ds* are a community of silent creatures who resemble the *As* in respect of their endowment with semantic attitudes, but who do not and cannot ‘voice their thoughts’. An experienceless object in the centre of their village emits sounds that they take as representing how things are, and act on, and in this way benefit from (for it nearly always tells them true and useful things, given what their semantic attitudes lead them to take the sounds it produces to mean). It is, however, a fluke that its sounds, so experienced, are useful—no one has planned this.

Is there linguistic meaning in this case? Do the semantic attitudes of the silent *Ds* suffice to make it reasonable to say that the phenomenon of linguistic meaning exists, even if—even though—it is not correct to say that a language exists? There is I think an important respect in which the answer to this question is Yes—although one might want to call it ‘linguistic*’ meaning instead. Some, though, will be sure that I have succumbed to a temptation identified by P. F. Strawson in his 1969 inaugural lecture ‘Meaning and Truth’, in which he remarks that ‘we may be tempted, here as elsewhere, by a kind of bogus arithmetic of concepts. Given the concept of Audience Directed Belief Expression, we can indeed think of Belief Expression (BE) without Audience Direction (AD), and find cases of this’. But this, he says, does not show that reference to notion of communication intention is not in fact essential in an analysis of the notion of linguistic meaning, for ‘it does not follow that the concept of ADBE is a kind of logical compound of the two simpler concepts of AD and BE and hence that BE is conceptually independent of ADBE.’⁴⁸

‘Of course’, he continues,

these remarks do not show that there is no such thing as an independent concept of belief-expression which will meet the needs of the anti-communication theorist. They are only remarks directed against a too simple argument to the effect that there is such a concept.

This much is clear. If there is such an essentially independent concept of belief-expression which is to meet the needs of the analysis of the notion of meaning, we cannot just stop with the phrase 'expressing a belief'. We must be able to give ourselves some account of this concept, to tell ourselves some intelligible story about it.⁴⁹

He then goes on to tell such a story, concluding that any such story 'is going to be too perverse and arbitrary to satisfy the requirements of an acceptable theory' and giving the victory, in the 'Homeric struggle' between the communication-intention theorists of meaning and the truth-conditions theorists of meaning, to the former.⁵⁰

19. Conclusion: 2

I have argued that a group of beings can be said to have a language although they lack any notion of communication intention and any practice of intentional communication. If this is so, the phenomenon of linguistic meaning can correctly be said to exist in a universe in which they are the only creatures. It follows that reference to the notion of communication intention can be dispensed with in the basic account of the essential nature of linguistic meaning.

I will now argue briefly for the same general conclusion without reference to the As, beginning from the notion of

[1] linguistic meaning and moving down an analytic chain.

Consideration of [1], the notion of linguistic meaning, leads straight to the notion of

[2] truth-conditions

for to understand a sentence is to know what it means, and to know what a (declarative) sentence means is to know its truth-conditions. And consideration of (2), the notion of truth-conditions, leads of course to the notion of

[3] truth.

Truth is a property. So the notion of truth leads to the notion of things that can have or lack the property of truth.

What must these things be like? What property must a thing have if it is to be assessable for truth or falsity relative to the world? Clearly it must somehow possess the property of representationality—reality-

representationality or ‘how-things-are’ representationality. It must possess representational content, for only possession of representational content can give it the match/mismatchability it needs for truth/falsity assessability. So the notion of truth leads to the notion of

[4] representation or representational content.

What about the notion of representational content? How can things in the world—in particular, physical phenomena like sounds or sights—have representational content?⁵¹

Plainly, you say, they cannot have it on their own. The property of having representational content is an essentially relational property. Not just in the obvious sense that for something X to have representational content is necessarily for it to represent something Y, but also in the currently more important sense that for something X to have representational content is necessarily for it have representational content *for* something else Z. Things like sounds and sights can be said to acquire and have representational content only because they can as physical items come to be taken as having such content by certain other things. They cannot have it barely or intrinsically.

Some today disagree, holding that things like tree rings (for example) have intrinsic, ‘natural’ representational content, in as much as they represent the age of the tree. And the first thing to say about this notion of representational content is that it floods the universe with representational content, all the way down to the smallest particle. But we need not dispute it. We can simply put it aside, for we are concerned here only with specifically linguistic representational content, with essentially ‘non-natural’⁵² representational content of the sort possessed by ‘arbitrary’ linguistic signs, signs that characteristically have no natural representational content.

We can mark this by replacing [4] with the notion of

[4] non-natural, arbitrary-sign representation or representational content

and this does indeed essentially implicate the notion of

[5] something X having representational content *for* something else Y.

Here, I suggest, we reach a suitable terminus in the analysis of the notion of linguistic meaning—suitable for present purposes, at least. We stop at the simple fact that there exist creatures which are such that things like sounds or sights or pieces of behaviour can ‘impinge on them with content’, and can (to adopt McDowell’s terminology again) have the same sort of cognitive impact upon them as does sensory confrontation with certain states of affairs: the states of affairs that the sounds or sights or pieces of behaviour represent for them. Beings can be such that they

naturally have certain special reactive attitudes to the phenomena in question—ranging from the proto-semiotic attitudes that non-human animals may reasonably be said to have to the full semantic attitudes that we find in our case and in the case of the As. Never mind how these attitudes can come to exist. What matters here is simply that they do exist.⁵³ That, and the fact that the move to (5) is a move into psychology.⁵⁴

So to conclude: one cannot elucidate the notion of linguistic meaning without reference to psychological notions. The CI theorists are right about this. But they are wrong about which psychological notions are needed: they claim that intentions—communication intentions—have to be invoked; whereas it has been argued that there is a fundamental level of analysis of the notion of linguistic meaning at which one need only invoke involuntary reactive attitudes. It is not what beings may mean by sounds, sights, thought-episodes, etc., that is fundamental, where ‘mean by’ implies intentional production of the phenomena in question, but rather what sounds, sights, thought-episodes, etc., may mean to beings. It is not the ability to mean something that is crucial, but the disposition to take something as meaning something. *It is semantic attitudes, not communication intentions, that are essential*, and the former can exist without the latter. One can perhaps make some sense of the idea that a perceivable item (like a picture) represents something else simply by reference to objective resemblances (and causal relations) between the two things, but one obviously cannot do this with perceivable items (or indeed items in thought) that are held to be linguistic signs, for they are as such standardly ‘arbitrary’, bearing no iconic resemblance either to what they stand for, or (more generally) to their function in the language. Given a series of such items, we must refer to certain psychological attitudes—semantic psychological attitudes that are not communication intentions, do not in any way necessarily involve communication intentions, and do not reduce to behavioural dispositions—that are entirely extrinsic to those items, in order to say what the objective fact that the items have linguistic meaning, and so represent that something is the case, consists in. But this is the only essential connection between linguistic meaning and psychology, whatever other connections must be made in any full account or natural history of the phenomenon of specifically human natural language.⁵⁵

Notes:

1. A simplifying assumption. The language could be simpler in many ways, and still be a fully-fledged language.
2. Putting aside such things as the experience involved in the process of coming to understand how some machine works, or the phenomenology of the *Aha! Erlebnis*.

3. Note that misunderstanding involves understanding-*experience* just as much as accurate understanding; understanding-*experience* no more entails genuine understanding than pink-elephant-*experience* entails the existence of pink elephants.
4. Note added in 2014. This section became pages 5–13 of Strawson 1994. See also Strawson 2011.
5. ‘Can be’: our immersion in intentional communication may deeply colour our understanding-*experience* in a way that the *As* cannot know, but this colouring is not necessary for understanding-*experience*.
6. Wittgenstein 1953 (§154); Ryle 1949.
7. These are central cases of what I call ‘cognitive phenomenology’ (Strawson 1986 *passim*).
8. Where deploying the concept BEING-PREDICATED-OF does not essentially involve attributing predication as an intentional activity to anyone, but simply involves (automatically) taking certain complexes of sounds in a certain way—taking the sound /*Fa*/ as made up of /*F*/ and of /*a*/, and as representing that a is F. Cf. n. 16 below.
9. The parenthesis is motivated by the possibility that Jack could reasonably be said to experience a string of sounds (a sentence uttered in German, say) as a sentence even though he had no idea what it meant. ‘Experience of sounds as sentences’ will henceforth be taken as short for ‘experience of sounds as sentences that one understands’.
10. ‘Express’ and ‘represent’ are verbs of action that ordinarily imply the presence of some sort of communication intention on the part of any being that is correctly said to express or represent something. But it does not follow that to speak of a being taking sounds (etc.) as expressing or representing that something is the case is already to have slipped the notion of communication intention into one’s account of what is going on. *As* remarked in §5, it seems we might lose all notion of communication intentions and continue so to take sounds (etc.).
11. These are names for the sounds of these words being uttered.
12. See e.g. Bennett, 1964, and 1966, §24.
13. 1922: §5.47.
14. Genuinely linguistic understanding-*experience* may conceivably involve less.
15. And, it may be, to undergo mental episodes which are (whatever the obscurity of their phenomenology, if any) such that it is correct to say of the being that, undergoing them, it is thinking in language.
16. The apparently logically possible experienceless being that is behaviourally speaking indistinguishable from a human being has no semantic attitudes, although it must possess, in some form, most of the mechanisms that underlie or ‘realize’ our possession of such attitudes.
17. It seems plausible—but not mandatory—to suppose that evolution by natural selection in a non-magical universe would always produce communication intentions wherever it produced experience (as) of thinking in and understanding language.
18. Here are two more alternatives. (1) One may suppress the supposition that the *As* are capable of intentional action, and redevelop the story. They think in

sixteenth-century Dutch, and are stationed close together in a circle around the crown of a hill. Each one has a restricted angle of view. Each one sees a part of, and jointly they see the whole of, a great Brueghelian bustle of human activity on the surrounding plain below, where the Tower of Babel is being built. Each frequently and involuntarily 'voices its thoughts'. Each gains, from the utterances of the others, a more or less complete picture of the changing whole. Each unthinkingly assumes that the others take certain sounds to be words and sentences in the same way as it does itself, and that the others too only produce sentences that they believe to be true. It never occurs to any of them to doubt these things. In any case, each finds that the utterances of its immediate neighbours about what they are seeing fits exactly with its own experience: one of them watches a laden cart pulled by oxen dragging slowly out of the left hand side of its field of vision, and hears its left-hand-side neighbour announce the arrival, on its right, of just such a cart. (2) They do after all produce their utterances intentionally; but not with any communication intention (having no notion of such a thing). They just enjoy voicing their thoughts, and do so intentionally and often, but have no thought of communication. The main reason for avoiding this version of the story is that it becomes harder to believe that the *As* would never in these circumstances cotton on to the possibility that they might be able to use their ability to utter sentences to communicate with others. (One could, however, imagine that it would never be in any way useful for them to do so, given their purposes.)

19. It may be suggested that grasp of the possibility of deliberate untruthfulness is essentially constitutive of true linguistic competence; but if communicative intent and grasp of the notion of communication intention are not necessary for linguistic competence, as is presently being suggested, then this is just not so. In fact it would not follow that it had to be so even if communicative intent and grasp of the notion of communication intention were necessary for linguistic competence. Perhaps the suggestion contains a deep truth about human beings; but not about linguistic competence as such.

20. One can, if one wishes, provide for clear 'assent' or 'holding true' behaviour by supposing that if one of the *As* utters a sentence—which, of course, it believes to be true—then, if another of the *As* hears it and also believes it to be true, it is common for it to be stimulated to emit 'That is true' (or 'That is not true', if it does not believe it). But this is not necessary

21. Direct evidence (evidence in the form of actions) about what they take sounds that they take to be words and sentences to mean is provided only by how they act in response to the 'utterances' of others, not by their own unintentional 'utterances', which are not actions at all. But it would not matter for present purposes if there were no such evidence at all. It is after all a matter of stipulation that they have the beliefs about meanings, or semantic psychological attitudes, that they do have. It is mere 'Evidentialist' prejudice (see following note) to suppose that such a stipulation is illegitimate or unintelligible in the absence of some account of what behaviour (intentional or unintentional) might reveal their semantic attitudes. It makes sense to attribute desires and beliefs to an immobile observer creature that is (stipulated to be) constitutionally incapable of any sort of

action or observable behaviour. It watches the weather. It hopes it will rain. When it rains, it comes to believe that it rains, and is pleased that it is raining. It is not logically impossible that there should be such a being, although we could never know that it had any sort of mental life.

22. It may be objected that this hypothesis is illegitimate or spurious in the absence of some account, here unavailable *ex hypothesi*, of how one could distinguish the *As* from the *Bs*. Verificationism may be dead, but a close relative, Evidentialism, survives: the view that one has not really given any content to a supposition or hypothesis about what is or might possibly be the case unless one has specified what would constitute evidence for it. Now this raises well known problems (Evidence for whom? Evidence that could in principle be accessible to human beings, given time-travel, intergalactic mobility, and immortality?) But they will not be considered here. Instead it will be taken for granted that sometimes philosophy needs to consider hypotheses (e.g. the present one, or the hypothesis that two people may differ systematically in their colour-experiences while agreeing in all their colour-judgements, or that Berkeley and Locke embraced genuinely alternative views) in which lack of any evidence for the hypothesis is an essential part of its description.

23. Although the *Bs* are entirely experienceless, there is a straightforward sense in which they can be said to have the same sort of sensitivity to the environment as we or the *As* do. Thus they may be discriminatorily sensitive to the same wavelengths of light, the same range of sounds, and so on. We say that an experienceless machine can sense or detect sound or light; the same applies to the *Bs*.

24. The complexity requirement derives from the idea that greater complexity leads to greater determinateness, by reducing the number of plausible hypotheses. Presently unimportant Quinean considerations about the indeterminacy of translation are bypassed here; they disappear into the 'interpersonal slack' mentioned in the next paragraph of the text.

25. The propriety of such a definition, which may be thought highly unregenerate, is defended in §17.

26. I have made the simplifying assumption that the *As* are very similar in overall linguistic competence—to put aside issues arising from possible differences of speciality, and any ensuing 'linguistic division of labour'.

27. Complexity of function may eventually undermine our confidence that the being is experienceless, even if it is an inorganic machine, but this merely epistemological issue is beside the point. Searle's views are to be found in his (1983).

28. Someone might grant the point that experienceless beings never really understand anything, and none the less redefine 'semantic attitude' in a toughly reductive functionalist (or 'logical behaviourist') way, so that such attitudes were correctly attributable to experienceless beings merely on the basis of their behaviour. But I will stick to the original definition according to which a being can have semantic attitudes only if it is capable of understanding.

29. Dead languages are languages, even if no longer understood. If life on earth were destroyed, and all that survived was an endlessly repeating machine playing

a recording of a reading of the closing chapter of Edouard von Hartmann's *Die Philosophie des Unbewussten*, it would still seem reasonable to say that the sounds were sentences of a language, because some being causally involved in their production (in a certain kind of way) had had psychological attitudes of the right kind to them.

30. 'Sensory stimulation' in the sense in which an experienceless being can have sensory stimulation (see n. 33). Presumably even radical Wittgensteinians will grant this general point. For it is true even if 'meaning (and reference) is (just) use'—so long as 'use' is so understood that it necessarily involves some sort of intentional activity, and, therefore, psychological attitudes, over and above behaviour. (Those who deny this run the risk of having 'use' come down to patterns of sound-emission; they will find it hard to deny that language can exist in the entirely experienceless universe of the *Bs*.)

31. One could say that the 'language' of the *Bs*, considered at first as an uninterpreted formal system, does receive an 'interpretation' in the case of the *Bs*: their behaviour constitutes an interpretation. But then the present point is that such a behavioural interpretation is not *ipso facto* a semantic interpretation.

32. Although the CI theorists and the NEIN theorists both oppose the present position, they also oppose each other.

33 From the point of view of suggestiveness of research.

34. The claim about sensation is clearly easier to accept than the claim about understanding, in the present climate of discussion

35. Note that even if one feels forced by one's theoretical commitments to concede that it is acceptable to attribute preferences and beliefs to experienceless beings, one may still stick fast at the idea of attributing understanding, or intention, to them (or indeed propositional attitudes like fear or hope). Even those who are tempted to attribute understanding to the experienceless may still worry about attributing intention to them.

36. Perhaps in the way that one of the *As* is intentionlessly causally involved in the production of sounds. This might be the minimal case, but the exact requirement of causal involvement can be left undecided here.

37. Obviously 'utterer's meaning' in this sense is not analysable in terms of utterer's intentions.

38. It need not be any more solid or determinate a fact in their case than it is in our case (given e.g. semantic vagueness or fuzziness, together with what is correct in Quine's views about the inscrutability of reference and the indeterminacy of translation, and in Wittgenstein's approach to questions concerning the foundations upon which we may correctly base the claim that words and sentences have meaning). But it must be at least as solid or determinate.

39. We might even imagine something that has the same effect as ostension (or 'ostension'). Adults in the presence of children turn or gesture involuntarily in the direction of the things about which they uttering simple truths—or are holding them in their hands. The children latch on to what the utterances are about not because they take the gestures to be intentional pointings out or indicatings, but

simply because they are so constituted that the gestures or turns draw their attention to the things.

40. McDowell, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

41. Of course much of our language acquisition is not that simple. But some of it is—and the language of the *As* may be very simple. It is true that very different sorts of things are said to a human child—there is a lot of encouraging, ordering, scolding, commiserating, congratulating and questioning. But we can imagine a human child brought up on a bare fare of declarative sentences quickly cottoning on to the central linguistic reaction—the taking of sounds as groups of articulated signs expressing propositions.

42. One objection to the claim that the *As* have a language is that there is *ex hypothesi* no place for the application of the notion of convention in the description of their putatively linguistic behaviour—for a convention can be said to be governing creatures' behaviour only if it is intentional behaviour. But the question of whether or not there is any place for the notions of language and linguistic meaning in the case of the *As* cannot be settled so quickly. From the present perspective this point simply puts in question the view that the notion of convention is indispensable in an account of the nature of language.

43. It is certainly not the case that, so far as any individual member of the *As* is concerned, 'what seems right, is right' (Wittgenstein 1953: §258).

44. Perhaps the principal point of Wittgenstein's 'private-language argument' is to develop the consequences of this fact for any adequate account of the meaning of words—'pain', 'red', whatever.

45. A robust sense of mental reality is fully compatible with treating attributions of semantic attitudes as attributions of dispositions, and with holding that since such dispositions can be correctly attributed to someone in a dreamless sleep, their reality consists ultimately in the existence of some enduring electro-physico-chemical structure-process in the brain.

46. Suppose they are, when created, scattered in a wood. They converge on a clearing and start to 'speak'. When do they come to form a language community? There can be no precise answer to this question. But to say that a language community could never evolve from such origins, simply because we could never say when it had started, would surely be a mistake. Imagine the same beginning for beings with communication intentions. At what point are they speaking a language? Or again, imagine that Earth and Twin Earth are qualitatively identical in every respect—'water' denotes H₂O on both worlds—and that people from the two planets meet and talk and later interbreed.

47. Plainly this is not a 'private language' in the supposedly unacceptable sense; and one may suppose that the way it takes them is in fact consistent through time.

48. In the present case one does not even have BE, conceived of as intentional action performed without communication intention, just completely involuntary BE or thought-voicing.

49. 1969: 185-6. He develops the point further on pp 186-8.

50. *Ibid.* 188. He retains, for all that, a clear sense that it is not a 'zero-sum game'.

51. I leave aside any further issues that might be raised by the question of how mental states, or 54 patterns of active neurons, may have representational content.
52. Grice 1957.
53. Quite independently of the discussion of the *As*, it seems clear that it cannot be logically impossible that these automatic, involuntary, purely reactive attitudes should exist independently of any practice of intentional communication.
54. Psychology in a full-blooded sense: it seems, as remarked in §12, that one has to grant that experience has something essential to do with understanding just as it has something essential to do with seeing, hearing, and so on.
- 55 If to seek to ‘explain the content of marks and sounds in terms of the content of mental states’ (Schiffer 1986: 84), or to ‘explain the semantic in terms of the mental’ (Block 1986: 639) is to be Gricean, then this paper is Gricean.

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