

MEANING AND INTERPRETATION

ROBERT D. VAN VALIN, Jr. *

This paper addresses the question of the relationship between the meaning of linguistic elements, as traditionally investigated by linguists and philosophers, and the interpretation of speech in conversation and discourse. Starting from Wittgenstein's concept of the meaning of words being a function of their use and of language as part of forms of life, it is argued that the meaning of many linguistic elements is ultimately sociocultural in nature and that language can therefore be viewed as a system of sociocultural knowledge. The discussion then turns to the situated interpretation of speech in conversation, which is achieved through the process of conversational inference. Meaning and interpretation are found to be linked in two ways: first, sociocultural background knowledge is crucial in many cases for the use of words and for the interpretation of speech through conversational inference, and second, words often function as contextualization cues which serve to create the context in which the utterance of which they are a part is to be interpreted. This account points toward the necessity of developing a holistic, pragmatically-based framework for linguistic theory and analysis.

1.

Meaning is a problem with which both philosophers and linguists continually grapple, with their primary concern being the development of a theory of the meaning of words and propositions. This inquiry has been broadened recently in two directions: first, the study of the conditions on the meaningful utterance of a sentence (the study of illocutionary acts), and second, the study of the on-going interpretation of speech and speech activities by the participants in verbal interactions (the sociolinguistic analysis of conversation). All of these investigations are concerned with meaning in language and in communication, but it is not at all clear how the work of the linguist or philosopher concerned exclusively with the meanings of words ties in with that of the conversational analyst who deals with actual language use. In other words, beyond the trivial fact that one needs to know the meanings of words in order to understand the speech of which they are a part, the role that words and their meanings play in the interpretation of conversational interaction is unclear.

* Requests for reprints may be sent to Robert D. Van Valin, Jr., Dept. of Anthropology, Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University, Box 4, Canberra, A.C.T. 2600, Australia.

In this paper I will examine the concepts of meaning and (situated) interpretation and try to explicate the relationship between them. The discussion will proceed as follows. In section 2 Wittgenstein's alternative to referential theories of meaning will be considered; a key notion in his account is that of language as a "form of life", which is the topic of section 3. In the following section language will be examined with respect to its being social knowledge which a speaker makes use of in his everyday activities. I then turn in section 5 to the question of (situated) interpretation itself, followed in section 6 by the conclusion, in which I will discuss the relationship between meaning and (situated) interpretation [1].

2.

Many traditional theories of meaning are founded on the idea that the basic way in which words become meaningful is by referring to something, the referent being the 'meaning' of the word. In such a theory all words function as names, and in most versions as proper names, e.g., the relation between the word 'dog' and a dog is the same that between 'Berkeley' and a city in California. Wittgenstein's alternative to traditional theories of meaning is the doctrine that words derive their meaning from the way they are used in a language.

For a large class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word "meaning" it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language. (1953: 43)

It must be pointed out at the outset that the kind of use Wittgenstein has in mind is *not* referring. A couple of the best examples of words which derive their meaning solely from the way we use them are the nouns 'tabs' as in 'John kept tabs on Harry', and 'lurch' as in 'Mary left me in the lurch', which are clearly not referring expressions. Even for nouns which appear to have some sort of referent, e.g. 'mind', much of their meaning is a function of linguistic use. Consider the way this word is used in sentences such as 'What do you have in mind?', 'I just can't get her out of my mind', 'I wonder what John has in the back of his mind', and 'He looks so worried; he must really have something important on his mind'. The meaning of 'mind' in these sentences cannot be accounted for purely in terms of reference to

[1] I would like to thank John Gumperz, Hubert Dreyfus, Hans Sluga, Charles Guignon, John Searle, Jeri Jaeger, Charles Fillmore and Kenneth Whistler for very helpful discussion of some of the topics discussed in this paper and for comments on earlier versions. Needless to say, none of them is responsible for any mistakes or misinterpretations herein. This work was partially supported by a National Science Foundation Graduate Fellowship and National Institute of Mental Health Grant MH 26831 to John Gumperz. N.B.: In citations from Heidegger's *Being and time*, the first page reference is to the English translation, the second to the German edition. Unless otherwise noted, references to Wittgenstein's *Philosophical investigations* are to paragraphs.

the human mental faculty. Verbs such as 'know', 'believe', 'expect', 'want' and 'decide' derive their meaning exclusively from the way we use them; there is nothing we could say they directly refer to or describe. The most obvious classes of words which are meaningful purely by virtue of their use in the language are prepositions, adverbs, conjunctions and interjections.

In discussing his account of meaning, Wittgenstein describes very simple uses of language such as the following.

The language is meant to serve for communication between a builder A and an assistant B. A is building with building-stones: there are blocks, pillars, slabs and beams. B has to pass the stones, and that in the order in which A needs them. For this purpose they use a language consisting of the words "block", "pillar", "slab", "beam". A calls them out; – B brings the stone which he has learnt to bring at such-and-such a call. – Conceive this as a complete primitive language. (1953: 2)

Such simple uses of language are called *language games*, and they include not only the verbal utterances but also the actions with which they are interwoven (see 1953: 7). In the simple language game Wittgenstein describes, the word 'block' does not mean the same thing it does in English, because it is used in English in a multitude of ways which are not possible in this language. We must gloss 'block' as meaning 'bring me a block' in English. Note that this meaning would make no sense apart from the activities which accompany the use of the word. If we wish to ascertain the meaning of 'block' in English, we must look at the way it is used in various situations not only in terms of the verbal utterances in which it occurs but also of the actions and activities attending the utterances. We may thus conclude that "the use of the word *in practice* is its meaning" (1958: 69 [emphasis in original]).

Someone sympathetic to the traditional view of meaning might object at this point that some notion of reference must be involved in Wittgenstein's example, since each word in the language is related to the bringing of a unique kind of stone. When A says 'block', B brings him a block rather than, say, a slab, and therefore 'block' must refer to blocks, just as 'slab' refers to slabs. There are a number of confusions lurking in this objection. First of all, Wittgenstein certainly would not deny that there is some connection between 'block' and blocks, but the point he is making is that naming or referring has little if anything to do with *meaning*. The meaning of 'block' in the example is not constituted by its relation to blocks. If we conceive of 'block' as a label (see 1958: 69), thereby making the relation explicit, we have said nothing whatsoever about its meaning, which is a function of its use in the language game. Using 'block' as the label for block is a *terminological convention* which the members of a linguistic community have adopted, and this convention is prior to the use of the label in the language and meaningless apart from it (see 1953: 49). The language game in Wittgenstein's example would be impossible without prior agreement of the participants as to terminology (although agreement itself would be impossible without language), and furthermore apart from the calling for and passing of stones, the word 'block' is devoid of meaning, as are the

ther words. Wittgenstein further illustrates the dependence of the label on the language game for its meaning with the following example.

am explaining chess to someone; and I begin by pointing to a chessman and saying: "This is the king; it can move like this, . . . and so on." – In this case we shall say: the words "This is the king" (or "This is called the 'king'") are a definition only if the learner already 'knows what piece of the game is'. That is, if he has already played other games, or has watched other people playing 'and understood' – and similar things. Further, only under these conditions will he be able to ask relevantly in the course of learning the game: "what do you call this?" – that is, this piece in a game.

We may say: only someone who already knows how to do something with it can significantly ask a name. (1953: 31)

Labelling a piece 'the king' is meaningless apart from the game itself and if one knows nothing of chess.

Language games play a prominent role in Wittgenstein's analysis of language and meaning, but they are not the ultimate framework within which we are to contemplate them. Language games are part of what Wittgenstein calls "forms of life".

But how many kinds of sentences are there? Say assertion, question, and command? – There are countless kinds: countless different kinds of uses of what we call "symbols", "words", "sentences". And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten . . .

Here the term "language-game" is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life. (1953: 23)

Language games, as we noted earlier, consist of more than just linguistic utterances: they are made up of "language and the actions into which it is woven" (1953: 7). Thus the multiplicity of language games is tied to the multiplicity of practices which constitute the human forms of life, all of which are conventional in nature [2]. In Wittgenstein's view, we can explain things no further than this. It is the rock bottom of convention which turns our inquiring spade (see 1958: 24). "Here one can only describe and say: such is human life" (1967: 236).

The notion of the human form of life as the ultimate framework for the interpretation and understanding of human activities, language and meaning, is one of the most profound and important in Wittgenstein's later philosophy, and yet it receives very little elucidation in his works. In order to make this notion more explicit and to make clear how human practices constitute this background, we must look beyond Wittgenstein.

2) See Stroud (1965) for a discussion of the notions of 'convention' and 'conventionality' in Wittgenstein.

3.

Language games are a part of the activities in which human beings are involved in their every day dealings with the world, and these dealings are the focus of Heidegger's phenomenological investigations in *Being and time* of human existence in the world (1927). Heidegger and Wittgenstein came out of radically different philosophical traditions, but their investigations ultimately converged in their common rejection of traditional philosophy. In the previous section we discussed language, language games, and forms of life in our analysis of meaning. Our discussion of Heidegger begins with the recognition that when people talk, more often than not they talk about some event, activity or entity in the world around them. In order for there to be meaningful discourse about the people, events, activities and things in the world, words must be linked in some way to what people talk about. Such links were called 'terminological conventions', but little was said about them. These connections between words and the world must be examined more closely, and as we have already looked at words in some detail, we now look at the world.

What is the "world"? In reality there is no such thing as "the" world, but rather there is the multitude of 'worlds' in which human beings are involved, ranging from e.g. a classroom to Western industrial civilization. These we refer to as "the world of finance", "the business world", "the world of sports", "the academic world", and so on. These worlds do not have to be institutional in any sense, even though the examples mentioned above happen to be. For example, my study is the world in which I am involved in the writing of this paper. Kitchens, workshops, offices, lecture halls, filling stations, laboratories, factories and many other similar loci of human activity can be viewed as separate yet in a deep sense related worlds. In fact, human beings are always involved in one world or another.

When one thinks of the world in the broadest sense, one also thinks about the entities in it, e.g. birds, trees, cars, pencils, politicians, soccer balls and books, to name a few. Many of these entities are part of nature and are encountered on that basis. Within these smaller worlds objects are also encountered, and many of these are directly related to the type of activity that goes on in that particular context. Every such activity may be characterized as *goal-directed*, i.e., we do a particular activity to achieve a particular goal. For example, when one is cooking in a kitchen, one encounters pots, pans, knives, forks, condiments, a stove, an oven, a sink, and many other items. Now, if one reflects on one's own kitchen and in particular on the items named above therein, it should be immediately clear that normally they are not distributed or placed randomly around the kitchen; rather, they are arranged so that they will be handy when one needs to use them. When I am engaged in preparing *coq au vin rouge*, for example, the various implements, bowls, condiments, chicken, onions, wine and other ingredients, pots and pans are situated around me so that when I require one of them, I instinctively know where they are and can easily bring them into play, even though I am not consciously aware of

their exact locations. Put another way, the kitchen is made up not only of the entities which I encounter therein but also of the totality of assignments of these entities to the possible tasks in which they can be used in the various goal-directed activities which we call 'cooking'. From this it follows that we understand an object primarily in terms of the context of involvement in which it is normally encountered. As an example of this, let us consider a spatula. This is a small implement which is very handy for flipping over such things as pancakes, hamburgers, and corn fritters while they are being cooked, and then for removing them from the pan when they are done. In fact, if one were asked to tell someone else what a spatula is, the most likely explanation would involve a description not very different from the one just given. The description does not center around the features one would use to describe its appearance but rather around the way it is employed in the appropriate activities. We understand what a spatula is because we know how one normally uses it in the appropriate activities. In many cases, we derive this knowledge from our own practical experience with an entity, and in others we may acquire this knowledge through reading, hearsay, or watching someone else use it. It must be noted, however, that knowledge of an entity derived indirectly is not on a par with that derived from direct involvement; the knowledge of skis of a person who has never skied and has only seen other people skiing is not the same as that of a skier, although both know what skis are for and can recognize them.

We have been investigating "the world", and we have discovered that there are a multitude of worlds, each characterized by its being the locus of a particular human activity. These are not mutually independent worlds but rather are bound together into the totality we call culture. These practical cultural activities in which human beings engage define their social and 'natural' worlds, and in doing so these activities delimit that which can be encountered in those various spheres of activity. The collective understanding of the world that is the way people in a particular culture encounter entities within the world is that culture's sense of *reality*. Within this conception of reality, those entities which can be encountered are the *real*. It is crucial to see that 'reality' or 'what counts as real' are entirely culturally specified notions that vary across cultures and in the same culture through history. From the time of Aristotle until just a few hundred years ago, the four basic building blocks of the world were earth, air, fire and water, whereas today the world is considered to be constituted of electrons, protons, neutrons and a host of other atomic and subatomic particles.

We have been talking about how the worlds in which human beings are involved are part of that larger totality we call culture, how these practical activities define and organize society and nature, and how they culminate in a conception of reality which specifies what counts as real. But something is missing. What integrates these various activities into a culture? By what means is this knowledge of reality and the real shared, *i.e.*, what makes it public instead of private knowledge? The answer to both of these questions is *language*. In order to understand exactly how language performs its invaluable role, we must go back and reexamine the world.

We said above that a world, *e.g.* a kitchen, is made up not only of the pots, pans and other implements used therein but also of the possible functions which they can be assigned. Returning to the kitchen we discussed above, we first of all should mention a fact about it that was overlooked in our earlier discussion, namely that the activity carried on there is significant. An activity is significant in this sense if participation in it is considered by the culture to be a part of what it is to be human. Cooking is a significant activity in every culture because all human beings have bodies and therefore must nourish themselves in order to survive. The functional entities encountered in cooking do not exhaust all of the entities in the kitchen, but they are the ones which are significant in terms of the activity of cooking. On the basis of their functional involvement in such an activity, entities receive significations, as do the activities in which they are employed. In that it is made up of functional entities and the totality of their possible assignments, a world is a totality-of-significations. These significations are what are put into words. As Heidegger puts it:

To significations, words accrue. [Den Bedeutungen wachsen Worte zu.] But word-things [Wörterdinge] do not get supplied with significations. (1927: 240, 261)

In this way language articulates the structure of a world. In terms of our example, the functional entity which is used for cutting is called a 'knife', that which is used for baking food is called an 'oven', that which is used for flipping hamburgers and pancakes is called a 'spatula', and so on. Language encodes a world in terms of the functional entities encountered in it and the ways they are encountered. In that all of the worlds of a culture are thus encoded, the language captures the sense of reality derived therefrom. The significations which get put into words are the meaningful functions of the entities encountered in the world of the activity, *e.g.* "something used for cutting and chopping" is the signification for a knife. The same is true of the activities as well, *e.g.*, "preparing an egg in boiling water" is the signification for 'poach'.

We saw earlier that a terminological convention associates a lexical item with a kind of activity, event or object, and what Heidegger has shown in his phenomenological analysis of the organization of the world is that the entities, events and activities which are significant with respect to this cultural organization are the ones which are given a label in accordance with the terminological conventions of the culture. But to say only that we have a word for *e.g.* spatulas because they play a significant role in our cultural activity of cooking is not enough. The reason we need words for the entities we encounter in the activities in which we are involved is that our involvement in them is seldom solitary, and consequently the need for words arises out of the need to communicate with our colleagues about our activities. With respect to cooking, for example, we may ask someone else where something is, how to prepare this or what the recipe for that is; we may give advice, answer questions, or simply hand over the needed implements when we are asked to.

Wittgenstein's terms we may say that there are many possible language games relating to cooking [3].

To sum up what has been said: that we have words for activities, events and entities is a function of our need to communicate with each other about them in our everyday activities and cultural practices, and what we have words for is a function of the significance of the entity, event or activity in terms of the cultural organization in which we dwell.

A very important concept in Heidegger's account is that the entities which we come upon in a world are related to each other in terms of their functional roles in activities, e.g., spatulas and frying pans have interrelating functions in that a spatula is used to remove something from a frying pan as part of the project of cooking, and these in turn are related to stoves, forks, knives, etc. If this is the case, then we should expect that in the semantic domain associated with such an activity, the interrelationships between lexical items would parallel those between the entities they are associated with. A method of semantic analysis for directly expressing such relationships is presented in Agar (1974), who is concerned with the lexicon of urban American heroin addicts. Rather than analyzing such semantic domains in terms of hierarchical relationships of referential inclusion, as in ethnoscientific investigations, Agar proposes an analysis in stage-process terms, with the entities encountered in the activities under consideration being related to each other through their functional roles in them. These functional roles are captured by means of semantic case relations of the type originally proposed by Fillmore. Thus in our cooking example, we can analyze the process of preparing *coq au vin rouge* into a number of stages: preparing the vegetables, cutting up, flaming and boiling the chicken, and removing the bones. In each of these stages different objects are involved, and they may play various functional roles, e.g. a knife is the instrument in the stages of preparing the onions, mushrooms and garlic and cutting up the chicken, while brandy and red wine are instruments in the flaming and boiling of the chicken. Such an account captures a person's knowledge of these activities and the entities encountered in them much better than a taxonomic approach which would set up independent taxonomies of various kinds of "segregates" [4]. Moreover, it yields a semantic domain whose structure relates directly to that of the cultural domain it expresses.

Note further that the lexical items within a given semantic domain are meaningful only in terms of that domain. For example, what meaning could 'spatula' have apart from cooking? Spatulas are only significant within the context of certain cultural practices, and so it is entirely natural that the word 'spatula' is meaningful only in the context of certain semantic domains. The same can be said of the

[3] An Excellent example of the relationship of what is named to communicative need can be found in Basso's (1972) analysis of ice and travel categories among the Slave of Fort Norman, Canada.

[4] See Agar (1974) for further discussion of this point.

activities themselves and the lexical items naming them. Indeed, activities and the entities involved in them are not meaningful and hence intelligible in and of themselves but rather are so only within a particular cultural context. This question of the intelligibility of actions and ultimately of words with respect to some shared cultural background relates to the chess example from Wittgenstein discussed earlier. (See page 216.) There he talks about the possibility of explaining the word 'king' to someone who knows nothing about chess in particular and games in general. He concludes that "only someone who already knows how to do something with it can significantly ask a name" (1953: 31). The point there was that a name independent of any knowledge of what is named and the context in which it is encountered is meaningless. We may take this one step further now and say that one could not even use the name meaningfully without the proper background knowledge. Consider the following example. A small child is visiting at a relative's house, when she sees a hammer lying on a shelf. Never having seen one before, she asks her mother what it is. Her mother replies, "It's a hammer". The child has never heard this word before either, but before she can ask any more questions, her mother goes off. Then a younger sibling comes up to her and, pointing to the hammer, asks what it is. She says, "It's a hammer". Now, if her sibling then asks, "What's that?", what kind of answer could she possibly give? Would we say she knows what 'hammer' means? She could not tell her little brother that it is a tool used for driving nails. Moreover, she would not be able to tell him "Daddy needs a hammer to build Rover a new dog house", because to be able to use the word 'hammer' in this way presupposes that the speaker knows that hammers are used to build things, something this little girl cannot know.

In section 2 we discussed meaning in terms of the way words are used in the language, and we see here that knowing how to use a word, i.e. knowing its meaning, is in some cases a function of one's knowledge of the world, in particular knowledge of the entity, event or activity identified with the word. In other words, in order to be able to use the word 'hammer' the way speakers of American English normally do, one must know what one normally does with hammers in our culture. In this fashion the way we use words is linked to the way we deal with things in the world. This does not apply to all words, of course; as we saw in section 2, the use of many words depends solely on linguistic considerations. But note that the words to which this does apply include those whose meaning has been traditionally analyzed in terms of reference or sense and reference (intension and extension), in addition to many which resisted such referential analyses.

One of the consequences of our analysis is that the intension or sense (if one wishes to think in these terms) of a word like 'hammer' or 'king' is not some abstract concept but rather *socio-cultural facts*. And the relevant facts are not limited to just those pertaining directly to the associated entity, since, as we have seen, being able to understand a spatula as something used for flipping fried food or a hammer as something used for driving nails entails having the shared cultural background which renders these entities and the activities in which they are em-

played intelligible. What is this shared background? It is a *form of life*.

We have arrived back at the place we began our investigation in this section, namely, at Wittgenstein's notion of a form of life. We have taken Heidegger's analysis of the world and shown how the totality of our cultural practices makes the entities, events and activities in the world intelligible and therefore this totality qua our form of life underlies our language games, *i.e.* both our use of language and the activities into which our language is woven.

4.

We have seen that in many cases knowing how to use a word in a language entails knowing facts about the world, and furthermore that the use of language in language games is crucially tied up with our cultural practices. It follows, then, that *knowing a language is knowing a culture* and that language can be conceived of as *socio-cultural knowledge*.

In section 3 we examined how language captures the entities and activities we normally encounter in our everyday dealings with the world. Now, if I have worked in one particular woodshop, for example, I know that if I encounter another world called 'woodshop', I can reasonably expect it to be like the one I have already encountered in terms of the objects and types of activities found there. If someone asked me how I know that, I could answer, following Wittgenstein, "because I speak English" (1953: 381). This brings us to an important point about language, namely, that the language one speaks encodes the minimal knowledge about the world one needs in dealing with it. This includes not only the possible worlds one may come upon (excluding, of course, specialized worlds requiring training and learning a new vocabulary), but also the cultural values, beliefs and sense of reality. We may say, then, following Sapir (1929), that language is a symbolic guide to culture.

We argued that in so far as language encodes a world, *e.g.* a woodshop, knowing how to use the word 'woodshop' presupposes knowledge about wood shops, so that when I see a room with a sign on the door saying 'woodshop', I can feel confident I know what I will find in there. Another way of putting this is to say that I have certain expectations about things called 'woodshops' based on my knowledge of the cultural activities and conventions pertaining to them. Language is functioning, in a sense, as my guide to the worlds I encounter, and consequently to what I encounter in them. In more general terms, we may say that since each culture has its own concept of 'what counts as real' (reality) and since it is captured in the language of the culture, it follows that language is one's main guide to encountering 'things', *i.e.* what counts as real, in the world. Wittgenstein has argued that it doesn't make any sense to say that as I sit down at the dinner table I 'take' the object to the left of my plate 'as a fork', any more than it makes sense to say that when I eat I 'try to move my mouth' or 'aim at moving my mouth'; in the former case I merely see a

fork, and that is all there is to it, since by virtue of my culture and its language it could be nothing else, while in the latter case I simply move my mouth when I eat (1953: 195). Taking this example one step further, suppose that a stone-age New Guinea tribesman and I are both looking at a small piece of metal which is long, flat and thin, with one end having three or four prongs sticking out from it; we both receive the same "ocular irradiation", but *only I see a fork*. He encounters the object as something which is not part of his culture's notion of reality, and it is therefore uninterpretable in terms of the categories of his language. In such cases, he would try to describe it in terms of things in his own culture. Rosch (1973: 124) reports that when Dani tribesmen in New Guinea were shown certain geometric forms and asked to describe them to other Dani (there are no terms for any geometric forms in the Dani language), they described them in terms of specific familiar cultural objects: "It's a pig" or "It's a broken fence".

The knowledge we have of entities and activities generates expectations about those we have not yet encountered, as pointed out above. We expect that the fork we pick up at dinner will be solid and usable rather than being of rubber and totally useless, and that in a woodshop people saw wood, hammer nails and build things rather than sing and dance, for example. The expectations we have about things, especially activities, are a function of the conventions governing them in our culture. When these are met, we say that the behavior, reasoning or talk of the individual with regard to a particular activity is rational. What counts as real and what counts as rational in a culture are intimately related, and language plays an important role in both.

In our discussion of language as social knowledge, we began by talking about the meaning of words and have ended up with the question of how language affects (and effects) our interpretation of what is real and what is rational. At the beginning of the paper I stated its purpose as an examination of the notions of meaning and interpretation, and the first part of this task has been accomplished. We must now turn our full attention to the notion of interpretation, one we have been making implicit use of in this section.

5.

The meaningful use of words has been the primary subject of investigation up to now. I have not discussed the problem of how propositions are meaningful, as there are a plethora of theories of proposition meaning ranging from Wittgenstein's account in the *Tractatus* to the more recent proposals of Davidson (1967) and Searle (1975). It is not my intention to investigate propositions in any detail, as our present concern is with the communication of propositions and not with propositions themselves.

When we communicate verbally with others, we are performing a series of acts, as philosophers of language have shown, and we are therefore engaged in *activities*.

In our discussion of meaning and social knowledge, we analyzed cultural activities such as hammering and cooking and found that each has a number of significant aspects which are encoded in language, that they are goal-directed, *e.g.*, we cook in order to feed ourselves, that they are governed by certain norms and conventions, and that we as members of the culture have certain expectations with respect to them; *e.g.* when we say someone is cooking, we expect that food is being prepared for human consumption and not being burned so that it can be thrown away, and in such a case we are unlikely to call the activity cooking or the agent sane or rational, under normal circumstances. The same can, in general, be said for *speech activities*, such as chatting, discussing, complaining, arguing, lecturing and preaching. First, there are significant aspects of each involving certain acts on the part of one interlocutor and certain responses on the part of another, *e.g.* asking a question and responding to it. Second, these activities are likewise governed by norms and conventions relating to, among other things, various kinds of rights and duties with respect to speaking (*e.g.* turn-taking), and the goal or outcome of the activity. Grice's Cooperative Principle and its maxims (1975) are a set of very general conventions which, according to Grice, govern all kinds of talk exchanges. Third, we as speakers of the language have certain expectations with respect to these activities; for example, we expect that when we talk to someone he will observe the maxims of conversation just as we do; when a person fails to follow one of them, the result is often a conversational implicature or indirect speech act, if we maintain our assumption that the person is cooperating with us in the talk exchange. Fourth, speech activities are goal-directed, and differences in goals serve as a means of differentiating various kinds of speech activities, *e.g.* lecturing and preaching have different goals from chatting and discussing, which in turn have different goals from commanding or questioning. Another important fact about *all* cultural activities, speech and non-speech alike, is that we are trained into them and learn them for the most part by doing them. A child learns how to communicate just as he learns how to brush his teeth and ride a bicycle, and in all of these cases he learns by watching and listening to others and doing it himself. Finally, speech activities are encoded in the lexicon of a language as are non-speech activities, so that language can be said to encode social knowledge with regard to its own functions [5]. Furthermore, knowing the difference between 'chatting' and 'discussing', for example, and consequently knowing how to use these words in the language, presupposes knowledge of the norms, conventions, expectations and goals appropriate to the activities, *i.e.* knowledge of the relevant socio-cultural facts, and so meaningful use of the terms for speech activities presupposes the same kind of social knowledge on the part of a speaker that the meaningful use of words like 'hammer' and 'cook' does. Thus, speech activities are very much like other activities in a culture, and since most non-

5) This provides the basis for metapragmatic discourse about language itself; see Silverstein (1976) for further discussion.

speech activities are intelligible only within a certain cultural framework, the same can be said of speech activities as well.

It is a very obvious fact about talking that it always takes place in context; what is not so obvious is that the use of language itself creates the context for its interpretation. Gumperz (1976) gives an excellent example of this.

The following example recorded during a helicopter trip will illustrate the point. As the craft begins to descend, the stewardess picks up the microphone and says:

S: We have now landed at San Francisco where the local time is 10:15. We would like to thank you for flying SFO Airlines and wish you a pleasant trip. [The stewardess then continues over the P.A. system, with only a slight pause.] Isn't it quiet around here? Not a thing moving.

The first passage is spoken in staccato rhythm, even stress and contoured intonation. Both topic and prosody identify it as an announcement. In the next passage, rhythm, intonation and stress shift to suggest conversation. The shift caused the audience to look around and provoked comments like *I wonder what's happening*. Others replied by saying that some ground personnel were on strike. (1976: 282)

Here the speaker (the stewardess) goes from announcing to conversing, and this change is signalled by the shift in prosody and syntax. The prosody and content of the first passage indicate that she is making an announcement, and in this context *you* in 'thank you' and 'wish you' is impersonal; as Gumperz observes, "if a passenger had responded to the stewardess 'We thank you ...' with 'you're welcome', his remark would have been interpreted as impertinent or perhaps as a bad joke" (1976: 282). But when in a completely different tone a voice she remarked "isn't it quiet around here?" to the same audience, a comment from one of the passengers would not have been so inappropriate, as the context is now entirely different from that of the announcement. Nothing in the extralinguistic setting has affected the context; rather, it is the shift in her prosody and syntax which effects the change. In this example the relevant context is not available outside of the linguistic communication.

Thus language itself is creating the situation which governs further possible actions of the participants. In other words, the use of language creates the social reality in terms of which the participants act and react. In the examples above this is seen most clearly in the potential appropriateness of responses to the stewardess' utterances. Another example is the use of grammatical elements which explicitly signal the social status of the interlocutors *vis-à-vis* each other, as in Japanese, Russian, Javanese, German and many other languages. Here the social situation and concomitant parameters of social action are defined by the forms which speakers use to express deference, superiority or equality; once these status relations are established, subsequent interaction is constrained by the conventions relating to them. The fundamental role of language and its use in the construction of social reality has been documented not only by sociolinguists and anthropological linguists (*e.g.* Gumperz 1977; Silverstein 1976), but also by ethnomethodologists

(Garfinkel 1967; Sacks 1972a, b). Language and language games thus show themselves again to be crucial parts of our form of life.

This process of constructing social reality in which social action occurs and in terms of which it is interpreted may be called *contextualization*, and it implies a very different notion of context from that which linguists usually employ. In analyzing the distribution of meaningful grammatical elements, linguists have taken contexts to be clusters of linguistic and extralinguistic factors: physical setting, topic, previous discourse, and certain social characteristics of the participants. Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz point out that "the reason why these factors and their interrelationships are not specified in more detail is that a social assumption is made that these factors are (a) *known*, i.e., that their perception presents no problem and that speaker, hearer and analyst perceive them in the same way; and (b) that their effect is *direct*, i.e., that if they are kept constant and if function is constant then both formation and interpretation of message is predictable" (1976: 4). While this notion of context might perhaps be appropriate for the tasks facing linguists interested in grammatical problems, it is totally inappropriate for the analysis of conversational interaction. Instead of viewing context as a cluster of background information, it must be viewed as socially dynamic, as part of what is actually communicated in speech. Only from this perspective can sense be made of what is going on in situations such as that involving the stewardess discussed above. Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz argue that "the focus of the analyst's concerns determines the understanding of what context constitutes as a theoretical notion" (1976: 5). The linguist and the conversational analyst have different concerns and hence employ different notions of context.

How is context signalled in speech? Gumperz argues that it is signalled primarily through *contextualization cues*, which "act as metaphoric clues to signal message function and affect the interpretation of meaning" (1976: 279). In the stewardess example, the contextualization cues which mark her first utterance as being an announcement are both prosody and syntactic style, i.e. declarative, as well as the topic addressed. The shift to conversation prosody plus the use of a question and sentence fragment indicate the change in speech activity type from announcing to conversing and therewith the change in context. Note that in this case it is neither prosody or syntax alone which signals announcing or conversing; rather, it is the *cooccurrence* of certain prosodic features with certain syntactic styles.

Many different prosodic, syntactic and semantic devices may function as contextualization cues, "including lexical or phonological choice, use of idiomatic or formulaic expressions such as greetings, openers, interjections or frozen sequences, or code-switching" (Gumperz 1977: 199). Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz (1976: 10) give an example of how style-switching and lexical choice can serve as a means of contextualization.

... [I]magine a mother somewhere in the United States calling her child as follows:
Johnny come here.

Johnny come here.

John Henry Smith come here.

Most speakers of American English would agree that the third sentence is more than just a repetition. It is also a slight warning, suggesting that if Johnny does not come home, there may be some consequences.

The juxtaposition of the more formal style in the last sentence with the normal informal style of the first two indicates that the speaker is serious, since in general a speaker tends to be more serious in formal than in informal speech. The formality is conveyed entirely by the use of the addressee's full name, as the verb is in the same form in all three sentences. In this case one would say that the lexical choice of the full name is the contextualization cue which indicates a change in style (less formal to more formal) which in turn implies a warning. Here again a change in context has been effected entirely by linguistic means, without any change in the extralinguistic setting necessarily taking place [6].

The process of arriving at an interpretation of on-going speech, a process which continues throughout verbal interactions, has been called *conversational inference* by Gumperz (1976, 1977). He describes it as follows.

'Conversation inference'... is the 'situated' or context-bound process of interpretation, by means of which participants in a conversation assess others' intentions, and on which they base their responses... [It] is part of the very act of conversing. One indirectly or implicitly illustrates one's understanding of what is said through verbal and non-verbal responses, by the way one builds on what one hears to participate in a conversation... (1977: 191).

Conversational inference is not merely a process of interpreting sentences but is rather a process of active involvement in conversation in terms of which a person interprets the utterances of others and responds to them. A speaker brings several different types of knowledge to the task: (1) linguistic or grammatical knowledge in the traditional sense; (2) social knowledge, e.g. assumptions about role and status relationships and knowledge of the conventions governing speech activities; (3) knowledge about the setting and environment; and (4) personal background knowledge [7]. The result of conversational inference is always a *situated* interpretation which yields conversational meaning.

One of the most important functions of contextualization cues is to signal the kind of speech activity that is going on. The participants in a talk exchange must come to some kind of agreement as to the activity they are engaged in, for otherwise they will have very little chance of maintaining any sort of communication. This is because the notion of the activity one is involved in sets up 'boundaries' for the interpretation of the talk, and it is essential that all interlocutors agree as to the activity so that they will all be operating more or less within similar boundaries.

[6] See Gumperz (1977) and Silverstein (1976) for further discussion.

[7] See Gumperz (1977) for further discussion.

Since the type of speech activity is signalled through contextualization cues and is therefore part of the message rather than something given, this agreement is not purely conventional or automatic. Hence an important part of a person's communicative competence is the ability to *negotiate agreement* with interlocutors as to the kind of speech activity that is going on. If the various interlocutors bring different sets of expectations, beliefs and social assumptions to the interaction, as is usually the case, some common ground must be negotiated before successful communication can take place.

The boundaries on the interpretation which are placed on an interaction by an interlocutor's understanding of the speech event he is involved in relate directly to his expectations about that activity. We observed earlier that we have expectations with regard to the content, course and way speech activities are carried on in the same way that we have expectations about non-speech activities such as hammering and cooking, and that their being fulfilled (or not fulfilled) is very important to the interpretation of speech: if they are met, we feel our understanding of the situation is correct, and we use this as the basis for interpreting what happens subsequently. Furthermore, if the behavior of our interlocutor is in line with our expectations about the activity, then we judge that behavior to be rational and normal. For example, if one understands oneself as being engaged in a discussion with another person, some of one's expectations are that there is semantic continuity between utterances and that all participants have the privilege of making their views on the topic known, usually in an orderly fashion. Now suppose one thinks one is discussing something with someone who not only refuses to let anyone else get a word in anywhere but also does not seem to be talking about any particular subject. One's first reaction is likely to be to consider this person as abnormal in some way: perhaps obnoxious, rude or even irrational. One is also likely to stop thinking that one is involved in any sort of discussion and to look for another way to make sense of what is going on. Our understanding of the speech activity we are engaged in forms the rock bottom of the process of conversational inference, through which we come to a situated interpretation of the on-going talk exchange. In more general terms, our understanding of any activity forms the basis of our interpretation of the behavior we are observing or are engaged in: this understanding is in turn founded on a shared background of cultural practices, *i.e.* on our form of life.

6.

We are at last in a position to address the question with which we began: what is the relationship between meaning (as discussed in sections 2–4) and situated interpretation? From the discussion it is clear that knowing how to use words in a language presupposes in a great many cases knowledge of cultural activities, the entities encountered therein, the norms and conventions governing them, and so on; and it

is this very same socio-cultural knowledge which is also crucial for the process of conversational inference through which speakers arrive at a situated interpretation and understanding of the linguistic interactions in which they are involved. Meaning is thus inherently social and ultimately a function of our cultural practices which provide the background (form of life) upon which we interpret events, entities and activities (both linguistic and non-linguistic) in the world in which we live. The situated interpretation of an utterance in discourse is not determined by the meanings of the words which constitute it; the meaning of an utterance is not equal to the sum of the meanings of its parts. Nevertheless, what one says lexically is of obvious importance, since the choice of one word rather than another usually totally changes the interpretation of the utterance. It appears, then, that words set boundary conditions on the situated interpretation of an utterance rather than determine it. This is accomplished in two ways: first, words make up part of the propositional content of an utterance, and second, they may function as contextualization cues, thereby contributing to the creation of the context in which the utterance is to be interpreted.

This account has significant implications for linguistic theory and analysis. Linguistic analysis has traditionally started with sounds which are combined into morphemes which are combined into words which make up sentences. At this point such atomistic analyses reach their limit. With the addition of the theory of speech acts, atomistic analyses could get as far as one speaker uttering a sentence and meaning it but no farther. Since the meaning of an utterance is greater than the total of the meaning of its parts, meaning in communication, *i.e.* situated interpretation, must necessarily escape such atomistic analyses, since they cannot get beyond the isolated ideal speaker-hearer. If we wish to include communication between interlocutors within the scope of linguistic theory and analysis, then we must *start* with it and adopt a *holistic* approach to the description of language rather than an atomistic one. In concrete terms this means that the results of the sociolinguistic analysis of conversation along with the analysis of texts and other forms of discourse, would be the starting point of analysis. If one takes this approach, sentences no longer appear as abstract formal objects independent of speaker, hearer and context but rather as aspects of situated human communication. If we make this move, then it no longer makes sense to think of grammatical rules as being context-free rules for combining context-free primitives into sentences; rather, within this framework grammatical rules are *semantic and pragmatic constraints on grammatical structure*, and they are for the most part situation-bound, *i.e.*, what may constitute an acceptable sentence in one context may not in another [8]. And just as sentences are aspects of a text, conversation or story, so are lexical items and grammatical morphemes aspects of sentences which we may pick

[8] See Van Valin and Foley (1979) for a discussion of role and reference grammar, an approach to syntax which tries explicitly to describe grammatical structure in primarily semantic and pragmatic terms.

out and analyze. It is important to notice that we have arrived at the same elements from which an atomistic analysis starts, but the crucial difference is that they are no longer context-free primitives but rather are context-dependent aspects of larger linguistic units from which they are abstracted [9]. The study of semantics of these elements would be in terms of their function in words, sentences or discourse, as well as in terms of the type of analysis found in Agar (1974). We thus arrive at Wittgenstein's notion of the meaningfulness of a word being a function of its use.

In addition, traditional methods of linguistic analysis are incapable of dealing with lexical items functioning as contextualization cues. Traditionally, the (presumed) referential use of lexical forms has been taken to be basic and has formed the foundation of Western grammatical analysis, as Silverstein (1976, 1977) argues. Thus if linguists are to be able to deal adequately with contextualization phenomena (and this includes grammatical forms as basic as pronouns), then they must adopt a wider view of the function of linguistic units and concomitantly an analytic framework which provides the tools for accounting for the pragmatic phenomena involved in contextualization and, ultimately, communication, and which subsumes the domain of traditional linguistic analysis. Such a "pragmatic grammar" is proposed in Silverstein (1976), and it is another aspect of the holistic approach mentioned above. Within such a framework the distinction between linguistics, sociolinguistics and anthropological linguistics evaporates, as the focus of inquiry is language in terms of both its function in communication and the structures which execute those functions; the study of grammar is no longer unrelated to the study of communication.

We began by inquiring about how meaning relates to interpretation, and in finding an answer we have arrived at nothing less than a conception of language itself, one which differs greatly from that assumed by generative grammar and traditional philosophy. In place of the Chomskyan view that language has no necessary relation to communication and, by extension, to human culture, we have looked at language not only as human communication but also as that which binds human activities into human culture, as public social knowledge. In other words, we have seen language as the integral and indispensable part of human existence that it is.

Hence language is the real medium of human being, if we only see it in the realm that it alone fills out, the realm of human being-together, the realm of common understanding, of ever-replenished common agreement — a realm as indispensable to human life as the air we breathe. (Gadamer 1976: 68)

References

- Agar, M. 1974. Talking about doing: lexicon and event. *Language in Society* 3: 83–89.
 Basso, K. 1972. Ice and travel among the Fort Norman Slave: folk taxonomies and cultural rules. *Language in Society* 1: 31–49.

[9] See Hymes (1974), especially pp. 4–5, for further discussion.

- Cook-Gumperz, J. and J. Gumperz. 1976. Context in children's speech. Working paper no. 46, Language Behavior Research Laboratory, University of California, Berkeley.
 Davidson, D. 1967. Truth and meaning. *Synthese* 17: 304–323.
 Gadamer, H. 1976. *Philosophical hermeneutics*. Berkeley, CA and London: UC Press.
 Garfinkel, H. 1967. *Studies in ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
 Grice, H. 1975. 'Logic and conversation'. In: P. Cole and J. Morgan, eds., *Syntax and semantics* 3: speech acts. New York and London: Academic Press. pp. 41–58.
 Gumperz, J. 1976. 'Language, communication and public negotiation'. In: P. Sanday, ed., *Anthropology and the public interest*. New York and London: Academic Press. pp. 273–292.
 Gumperz, J. 1977. 'Sociocultural knowledge in conversation inference'. In: Saville-Troike, ed. pp. 191–211.
 Heidegger, M. 1927. *Sein und Zeit*. Halle a.d.S.: Max Niemeyer Verlag. (English translation: *Being and time*. New York: Harper and Row, 1962.)
 Hymes, D. 1974. *Foundations in sociolinguistics*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
 Rosch, E. 1973. 'On the internal structure of perceptual and semantic categories.' In: T. Moore, ed., *Cognitive development and the acquisition of language*. New York and London: Academic Press. pp. 111–144.
 Sacks, H. 1972a. 'On the analyzability of stories by children'. In: J. Gumperz and D. Hymes, eds., *Directions in sociolinguistics*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston. pp. 325–345.
 Sacks, H. 1972b. 'On some puns: with some intimations'. In: R. Shuy, ed., *Sociolinguistics: current trends and prospects*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press. pp. 135–144.
 Sapir, E. 1929. The status of linguistics as a science. *Language* 5: 207–214.
 Saville-Troike, M., ed. 1977. *Linguistics and anthropology*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
 Searle, J. 1975. *Meaning, representation and communication*. Unpublished manuscript, University of California, Berkeley.
 Silverstein, M. 1976. 'Shifters, linguistic categories and cultural description'. In: K. Basso and H. Selby, eds., *Meaning in anthropology*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press. pp. 11–55.
 Silverstein, M. 1977. 'Cultural prerequisites to grammatical analysis'. In: Saville-Troike, ed. pp. 139–152.
 Stroud, B. 1965. Wittgenstein and logical necessity. *The Philosophical Review* LXXIV: 504–518.
 Van Valin, R. and W. Foley. 1979. 'Role and reference grammar'. In: E. Moravcsik, ed., *Syntax and semantics* 13: current approaches to syntax. New York and London: Academic Press (in press).
 Wittgenstein, L. 1953. *Philosophical investigations*. New York: Macmillan.
 Wittgenstein, L. 1958. *The blue and brown books*. New York: Harper and Row.
 Wittgenstein, L. 1967. *Bemerkungen über Frazers The Golden Bough*. *Synthese* 17: 233–253.

Robert D. Van Valin, Jr. obtained a Ph.D. in Linguistics from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1977. Taught linguistics at the University of Arizona, Tucson, during the academic year 1977–78. Since then he has taught in the Department of Anthropology of Temple University, Philadelphia, and is currently Research Fellow in the Department of Anthropology, Research School of Pacific Studies at the Australian National University in Canberra. His main research interests include pragmatics, functional syntax, and universals of language.