

XVI LEWIS: LANGUAGE & LANGUAGES

What is the relation of a language understood as a formal characterization, and language understood as a certain social phenomenon? Or to put the point in another way: in virtue of what is it correct to use a certain abstract object (a formal language) to characterize the linguistic behavior of a certain population? Lewis's idea is that a language is used by a population iff there is a convention to use that language; and a convention to use it is in turn spelled out as a convention to do certain things with it. But before exploring what those things are, we need to have some take on the idea of a convention.

Conventions (rough analysis): regularities to which people conform because their belief that others conform gives them pragmatic reason to conform.

Conventions (more precise analysis) regularities to which people conform because their belief that others conform gives them pragmatic reason to conform, and where: (i) there must be other regularities that could do the job (or else the regularity that is followed would be forced upon the people involved, rather than being followed as convention); (ii) the people must have a general preference that others conform (or else we would have deadlocked conflict), and (iii) all of these facts must be mutual knowledge amongst those involved.

A given language L (understood formally) can then be said to be used by a population of speakers (a concrete group of people), just in case there is a convention of *truthfulness* and *trust* in L: *truthfulness*, in that the speakers utter only true sentences of L; and *trust* in that they believe others to be truthful in L, and so come to believe what they say. And since the formal semantics work in terms of truth conditions, it is a straightforward matter to see what it would be for a sentence to be true. The formal is connected to the social.

Does this account fully determine the language that is used by a population? There are two issues here. First, knowing that there is a convention of truthfulness and trust to use a certain language leaves open the *mechanisms* by which the interpretation of that language is fixed. Take the relation of names to their bearers. It could be, for instance, that we had a convention of using a Lagadonian language in which objects name themselves, and so are related by identity. Or it could be that we use a language in which names are related to their bearers by causal chains; or one in which they are related by descriptions. We need to know how things are for English, and for the other natural languages in which we are interested. These are the issues that we have been discussing up till now: whether Frege's theory of name is correct etc. Second, there is the issue of whether, even given this information, the language is fully determined: whether there is semantic indeterminacy, perhaps of the innocuous kind in which our conventions simply do not fix whether some particular word is properly assigned one sense or another; or of a more systematic and disturbing kind, for instance as discussed by Quine, or by Goodman and by Wittgenstein, as interpreted by Kripke. We'll return to this issue at the end of the course.