Logic, Meaning, and Conversation: Semantical Underdeterminacy, Implicature, and Their Interface

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OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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To

Morton G. White, Paul Benacerraf, Rogers Albritton,
philosophers,

to

Stephen C. Levinson, Frans Zwarts, Laurence R. Horn, Jerrold Sadock,
linguists,

to

Sean D. P. Fennessy, John Robert Purvis,

and to

John Francis Walter

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PREFACE

The flight to Frankfurt on the Lufthansa 747-400 passed slowly, as August flights from the summer afternoon sun of Los Angeles into the European darkness tend to do. The seat was comfortable enough, even for my six-foot one-inch frame, the cuisine was German bourgeois respectable, and I managed to sleep. The charm of the trip was awakening to a large, healthy, hot breakfast, but only after the stretching exercises were completed. With attention to detail, hygiene, and the physical culture of northern Germany, some Mephisto at the airline had mandated a wake-up video that taught passengers a way to stretch their chair-encased muscles while they remained in their seats. It was a show and practice exercise video, done while strapped in one's seat, that loosened and stretched the feet, ankles, calves, upper legs, arms, and neck. So, at the command of the celluloid instructor, I rolled, waggled, extended, raised, and kneaded my body back to life, as did most of my fellow passengers, except for some unruly nonconforming Americans who decided to remain cramped and caged in their seat-formed postures. By the end of the video, I felt awake and physically alive. "Damn the Germans," I thought; "Such a good idea!" I enjoyed the breakfast.

Transferring in Frankfurt for a short flight to Brussels, I then took a train to Leuven in Belgium, a university city where I was to lecture for a week in August 1990 at the Second European Summer School on Language, Logic, and Information. It was to be an advanced course on "Implicature and Logical Form: The Semantics-Pragmatics Interface" for graduate students in philosophy, logic, linguistics, and computer science from universities in the European Union. Some six hundred graduate students had assembled for two weeks, 30 July–10 August 1990, at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven for this intellectual feast of a summer school, and I was on the menu. "I'm an hors d'oeuvre," I thought, and I expected about six students to show up at the lecture hall on Monday morning for the week's ten hours of course lectures that I had written. I had even bought my first laptop computer in May, a Sharp 8088 laptop with two 720K disk drives, in order to compose the lectures, realizing that without electronic help in editing I would never write, type, revise, and retype the body of lectures in time.

The commuter train was packed with students, bureaucrats, grandmothers, and me. I barely found a seat and a place to put my small backpack containing my precious lectures and my bulgy, denier nylon, soft luggage. To call it "luggage" would be infelicitous; it was a sack with cloth handles, but wonderfully light and commodious, just awkward to stow, and I had bought it on a whim at Crate and Barrel where my cousin Pamela had been working between her usual six-month walk-abouts: eight countries in Africa, or five provinces of China, or sixteen blocks of Santa Monica. I couldn't really decide, in my jet-lagged state, whether the luggage was properly a nylon crate or a nylon barrel. Fatigue made me more and more sodden as we crept away from Brussels on little steel wheels. Then, intruding into this linguistical musing, came the slightly accented, youthful voice of a university student speaking English to me. "Are you going to Leuven?" he asked. I looked up into the cheerful, handsome Flemish face of a student, who sat across the aisle from me, next to his comely girlfriend. "Yes," I admitted. "There is a summer school, and I shall be lecturing." "Where are you staying?" he asked, and I told him the name of the hotel. "It's not far from the station. I will show you the way." I thought, he even uses the first-person 'will' form correctly; hardly any of my American students could, but putting this Henry Higginsish thought aside, I accepted his aid, thanked him for his kindness, and marveled at his manners.

I registered at the hotel, examined my first room, asked to be moved to the back of the hotel where there would be no street noise, and enjoyed a hot shower—those splendid German showerheads again—and a short nap before lunch. At lunch I encountered Frans Zwarts of Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, The Netherlands, and his American wife, Sharon Parry. I had spent five days talking with Zwarts at a week's conference in Stuttgart a year before, the last afternoon of which put me and Hans Kamp on the platform together. My usual luck: playing the other bookend to someone like Hans Kamp. I had also had fascinating talks with Jaap Hoepelman, Hoepelman's and Zwarts's doctoral student Peter Blok, and Sjaak de Mey. The Dutch semanticists, I discovered, had read my published work, particularly my (1988) article on negative existence statements, which showed that the Russellian problem of the relationship between meaning and ontology had been fundamentally misconceived. Until then I knew only three people who had liked, been convinced by, or even read, the essay: Mark Richard; the Waynefleet Professor of Metaphysics in Oxford, Sir Peter Strawson; and the Most Famous Syntactician in the world at MIT, who had written me that "It is a convincing piece, and does indeed cut through a hoary tradition" (Noam Chomsky, personal communication, 12 February 1989). Everybody else had ignored it as far as I knew, until I met the Dutch semanticists.

But at the end of the Stuttgart conference, Zwarts had asked whether I would like to give a course in Leuven the following year at the European summer school. After I asked whether he thought more than five students would show up, I said "Sure." Why not? Perhaps it was time to summarize what I thought was right and what was wrong with Paul Grice's (1989a) theory of conversational inference, a model of talk as rational activity in which Grice tries to explain the grounds for the addressee's inference from what (he believes) a speaker asserts to what (he believes) the speaker "implies, suggests, or conveys" by, in, or when making the assertion. Then I'd have to try to explain my own (Atlas 1974, 1975a,b, 1977b, 1978a,b, 1979) wildly popu-

lar view that a radical, nonspecific semantics would be *required* by any theory of pragmatic inference, if the theories of the pragmatic module and the semantic module of the mind/brain's language faculty were to provide a consistent, descriptively adequate and explanatory account of utterance-interpretation (see Lakoff 1977; K. Bach 1987; Kempson 1988a; Horn 1989; Iten 1998: 63, 67; and Levinson 1997, 2000).

So this book began life in the lecture halls of the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium, during the Second European Summer School in Language, Logic, and Information in August 1990. It turned out that more than one hundred graduate students from universities throughout the European Union and a dozen or so members of the summer school faculty—even once George Bealer—showed up for my lectures. More copies of my course book of readings were sold to the graduate students for my course than for any other course in the summer school. (These people are obviously nuts, I thought.)

Out of my Leuven lectures, and my lecture in Stuttgart in 1989, the invitation for which I am much indebted to Jaap Hoepelman, grew three doctoral dissertations; those of Ana von Klopp (Edinburgh, 1993) on negation, Peter Blok (Groningen, 1993) on focus, and Michiel Leezenberg (Amsterdam, 1995) on metaphor. Von Klopp began her dissertation with the piquant remark, "At the 1990 European Summer School in Language, Logic, and Information, Jay Atlas told me about the dangers of wasting one's youth on negation. I was foolish enough not to listen, and this is the result."

After the last lecture in the series, Richard Oehrle suggested that the lectures might serve some intellectual and pedagogical purpose if published, and my then-editor Angela Blackburn at Oxford University Press, U.K., agreed. Angela wanted my lectures right then, August 1990. After all, sitting at lunch in Oxford, she had the notebook containing the typed lectures in her hand. Well, I said, perhaps a little polishing would be appropriate, as usual barely controlling my desire to rush into print, contribute papers to the annual meetings of the APA, shower the journals with paper, and generally festschrift it up.

Eleven years later I have finished this little, chatty, nontechnical book, written with the easy accessibility that I have made my trademark, supplemented with much new material but inspired by my 1990 Leuven lectures on the semantics-pragmatics interface: the relationship between literal meaning, logical form, and interpretative inference. After remonstrations from John Francis Walter, Stephen Levinson, and Thomas James Rankin, I did not throw the 1997 version of the manuscript off a cliff; actually, I was at the Max Planck Institute for Psycho-linguistics in Nijmegen, The Netherlands, at the time (fall 1997), and there wasn't a cliff within two hundred kilometers.

What I realized in Groningen during my visiting research professorship in 1995, and it was reinforced when I finally read Alberto Coffa's fascinating 1991 book *The Semantic Tradition from Kant to Carnap*, was my commitment to a semantic tradition originating in the views of the mathematicians Bolzano, Dedekind, Frege, and Hilbert and in my tutelage at Amherst College by Robert Breusch, himself Zermelo's assistant in the editing of Cantor's collected papers, the semantic tradition that survived in the Vienna Circle among Schlick, Waismann, and the early Wittgenstein. My admiration for the writings and teaching of Nelson Goodman, Morton White, Noam Chomsky, Donald Davidson, Sir Peter Strawson, Jonathan Cohen, Jerrold Katz,

Paul Benacerraf, Arthur Prior, Hao Wang, and Dana Scott, my formative schoolboy reading of Morton White, Ernest Nagel, Stephen Toulmin, and Arthur Danto and Sidney Morgenbesser's anthology in the philosophy of science during my last year at Phillips Exeter Academy, and my study of the problems and rigorous arguments of the semanticists of the fourteenth century, a century that was as catastrophic for Europe as our own twentieth century (Tuchman 1978), resulted in an antipathy to behaviorist and epistemologically motivated views about meaning.

These views are adulterated by post-positivist epistemology and have caused much philosophical misunderstanding of language—for example, see C. Peacocke (1992). I rejected neo-Kantianism and various forms of verificationism in the theories of meaning of Neurath, Reichenbach, Carnap, the middle Wittgenstein, and even those of my teacher Sir Michael Dummett, who provided so much of the philosophical stimulus to my thinking about negation and presupposition. Their views have resulted in confusions about meaning that are almost impossible to remedy in our current intellectual climate. But there are now signs of a reconsideration taking place: see Chomsky (1995b, 1996b,c) and J. A. Fodor (1998); for his re-thinking of his own views, see Michael Dummett's splendid work (1993: 157–61); for discussion of the role that Dummett's views can play in actual psycholinguistic theorizing about the acquisition of language, see Atlas (2001).

This book presents an account of the interface between literal meaning and interpretative inference that purports to be more "descriptively and explanatorily adequate" than Grice's William James lectures of 1967, but it is not a neo-Kantian essay on the conceptual possibility of any future pragmatics of language. The linguistic data are explicable if we hypothesize that the literal meanings of sentence-types are quite different from either truth conditions or assertibility conditions of sentence-tokens and that idealized interpreters conform to, and perhaps employ, certain pragmatic principles of inference. But my hypotheses are not considered by me to be necessary principles of any possible use of language or constitutive of the rationality of language use (or any other bits of the neo-Kantian, verificationist, or later Wittgensteinian framing of questions about language as a practical ability that even Paul Grice was tempted by). What I do claim to have shown, by actually constructing one rather than as a conclusion of a transcendental argument, is that a theory of interpretative inference that "saves the phenomena" and a theory of literal meaning that "saves the phenomena" will be congruent in the ways that I describe in this book: if there is an interface between the semantic and the pragmatic, between Chomsky's Internalist Semantics and the Performance System, it has the character described herein (see Atlas 1978b, 1979, 1989).

Two applications of my theory of the semantics-pragmatics interface are given in chapter 5, in my account of the semantics and pragmatics of comparative adjectives and adverbial approximatives, and in chapter 6, in my account of numerical adjectives. This work was begun at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, New Jersey, in 1983. Morton White and my colleague Robert Sleigh were wonderfully supportive and tolerant of this logical inquiry and of my youthful obsessions. The institute is my idea of heaven. Living in a Marcel Breuer–designed apartment, abutted by the woods of a wildlife sanctuary with trails for solitary or companionable ramblings, an office to work in that had once been occupied by Sir Isaiah Berlin,

surrounded by the most intelligent conversation in the world, and when one had thought enough about logic, language, and philosophy, conversing about quantum gravity or string theory with Andrew Strominger and seeing off-off-Broadway plays with John Walter—*that* is intellectual heaven.

My first inklings of my ideas on the semantics-pragmatics interface—that is, the relationship between semantical underdeterminacy (nonspecificity) and interpretative inference—germinated during the summer of 1973 at the Mathematical and Social Sciences Board Workshop on the Formal Pragmatics of Natural Language in the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, where, at the invitation of George Lakoff and Lauri Karttunen, I collaborated intensively with Stephen Levinson on thinking through Grice's theory of conversational implicature, and I had the epiphany that 'not' created not ambiguous but, as it turned out, semantically nonspecific sentences (see Atlas 1974, 1975a,b, 1977b, 1978a,b, 1979, 1989). In the spring of 1973 at the University of Texas, Austin, Conference on Performatives, Presupposition, and Implicature, Lakoff had introduced me to Stephen Levinson, then a graduate student. That was the beginning of my intellectual collaboration with Levinson on the pragmatics of language, a collaboration that has now spanned thirty years; it has been a splendid intellectual adventure enriched by a warm personal friendship with him, his wife Penny Brown, and their son Nicholas. As my late father, Jacob Henry Atlas, once remarked to me, in the persona of Atlas-Brown, Inc., Houston and Fort Worth, Texas, after dining with a group of my Princeton graduate student friends, "You have such wonderful friends. How do they put up with you?" How my father put up with me is an even more unanswerable question; I had only one conversation with him about my choice of vocation as logician and philosopher and student of language, during the Christmas vacation of my first year at Amherst College. He: "Have you thought about what you'd like to do as a vocation?" The seventeen-year-old me: "I'm enjoying physics, mathematics, and philosophy so much, I think I might continue to study one of them." He: "It's just like you to choose the least-paying profession." He never said another word about it, but he paid all the bills for it. My first book was dedicated to him, and he was able to hold a copy in his hands four years before he died.

The penultimate version of the penultimate version of this book was written at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, Nijmegen, The Netherlands, in the fall term 1997, after I had spent time in Groningen thinking about the De Morgan properties of adverbial verb phrases (Atlas 1998) brought to my attention by H. Klein (1997, 1998), Frans Zwarts, and Sjaak de Mey. The latter inquiry is a logical investigation that William of Shyreswood, Walter Burleigh, and Peter of Spain, those worthies of the fourteenth century, would understand the point of.

The penultimate version was written in the spring of 1999 and the final version was written in the summer of 2001 after the appearance of Levinson's (2000) *Presumptive Meanings: The Theory of Generalized Conversational Implicature*. Stephen, like Larry Horn in his *Natural History of Negation* (1989), provided essential stimulus and matter for reflection as I reconsidered neo-Gricean views that in concert with, and in reaction to, them I had been developing since the mid-1970s. My admiration for their work is surpassed only by their cosmic patience with my criticizing, not to say needling, them.

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Conversation is like playing tennis with a ball made of Krazy Putty, that keeps coming back over the net in a different shape. . . . The same axiom, *every decoding is another encoding*, applies. . . . In ordinary spoken discourse the endless cycle of encoding-decoding-encoding may be terminated by an action, as when for instance I say, "The door is open" and you say, "Do you mean you would like me to shut it?" and I say, "If you don't mind," and you shut the door, we may be satisfied that at a certain level my meaning has been understood.

David Lodge, *The Practice of Wriring*

We cannot assume that statements (let alone sentences) have truth-conditions. At most they can have something more complex: 'truth indications' in some sense. . . . There is no reference-based semantics. There is a rich and intriguing *internalist semantics*, really part of *syntax*, on a par in this respect with *phonology*. Both systems provide 'instructions' for performance systems, which use them . . . for articulation, interpretation, inquiry, expression of thought, and various forms of human interaction.

Noam Chomsky, "Language and Nature"

The linguistic turn was, I think, an uncompleted revolution; to *really* turn from theories of knowledge to theories of meaning, you would have to stop construing content in epistemological terms. Many analytic philosophers can't bear not to construe content in epistemological terms because they think of philosophy as conceptual analysis, and of conceptual analysis as displaying a concept's possession conditions, and of possession conditions as characteristically epistemic. If, as I believe, that whole picture is wrong, a certain kind of analytic philosophy is ripe for going out of business.

Jerry Fodor, *In Critical Condition*

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Semantical Underdeterminacy

1 Metaphor, nonspecific meaning, and utterance interpretation: Two dogmas of literary modernism

Twentieth-century studies of literary style and early, influential studies in philoso-phy of language have been conditioned in large part by a dogma.[1] It is a belief in

[1]The first version of this chapter was written in 1975 in response to a question posed to me by Mark Allen Phillips (*aka* Kontos), publicly presented in a faculty research lecture series in December 1977 at Pomona College, Claremont, but heretofore unpublished. Its inspiration was an essay by William Gass (1970), and it is offered to him as a modest gesture of appreciation. I am also indebted to the Educational Foundation of America for its sponsorship of this research through a Pomona College, Claremont, research award in 1975–76 to me and Mark Allen Phillips. The anti-Fregeanism in it bears a family resemblance to Hilary Putnam's (1975) views on natural kind terms, except Putnam preserves the thesis that meaning determines reference while rejecting that meaning (including the determina-tion of reference) is "in the head." In February 1978 Donald Davidson (1984a: 245–64) read his "What Metaphors Mean" at the University of Chicago, and in the Hilary Term 1978 I heard him read a ver-sion in a lecture in the University of London. I was struck by some of the similarities in our views of metaphor, which I had never heard him discuss in his seminars at Princeton, but I was unsurprised that I had absorbed from his teaching an approach that brought me close to his position. Yet I discovered that the position that I had taken in 1975 and continue to defend here was semantically more radical than his (see my *Philosophy without Ambiguity* [1989]), and my semantic problem of metaphor, unlike his, was formulated as a choice between "abstraction" and "homonymy"/"ambiguity" explanations, in the fashion to be found later in G. Lakoff's (1977) "Linguistic Gestalts" and in G. Lakoff and M. Johnson's (1980: 106–14) *Metaphors We Live By*. Again there is a superficial resemblance between my 1975 view and a position taken by Sperber and Wilson (1986a) in their "Loose Talk," but the prob-lem for Sperber and Wilson is their notion of "looseness," not to speak of their explanation of meta-

some fundamental cleavage between language that is figurative or literary, containing terms used metaphorically, and language that is standard or ordinary, containing terms used literally. This dogma, I shall argue, is ill founded. One effect of abandoning it is a revision of Fregean semantics, a departure not only from the view that meaning determines reference but from the view that literal meaning is determinate. A second effect is the disappearance of the supposed boundary between linguistic art and linguistic life.

1.1 The first dogma

The American philosopher and novelist William Gass's (1970: 60) thesis is that "fiction is life in terms of . . . ," that fiction "is incurably figurative, and the world the novelist makes is always a metaphorical model of our own." For Gass, art, metaphor, and imagination are all linked. To adapt a figure of W. H. Auden's, Gass should describe works of literary art like racehorses: Art is out of Metaphor by Imagination. For Gass, imagination is the writer's talent for constructing metaphors, including lengthy ones called 'novels'. Since, in Gass's view, metaphorical language is literary language, we are back to the original Auden figure: Verse is out of Language by Poet.

Gass would claim that *Clifford is a mouse* and *My life is an "Omensetter's Luck"* are statements of the same logical type, both metaphors, both presentations of imaginative transfigurations at the touch of a word. Anyone wishing to understand the modernist view of the relationship between art and life must understand an early-twentieth-century view of metaphor.

To take a recent example of the view, James Wood, in reviewing Tom Wolfe's novel *A Man in Full*, contrasts Wolfe's treatment of character with Charles Dickens's, in these words:

> Wolfe's prose always prefers the most ordinary, the most vulgar word. His descriptions are always the most ordinary details, without any capacity for simile or *metaphor* (*which is one of the absolute definitions for the literary*). But Dickens finds the unexpected detail, the vivid simile. Think of Joe Gargery in *Great Expectations*, "With eyes of such a very undecided blue that they seemed to have somehow got mixed with their own whites." Or, in *David Copperfield*, Dora's cousin "in the Life-Guards, with such long legs that he looked like the afternoon shadow of somebody else." Or Uriah Heep in the same novel, his mouth "open like a post-office." Or Mr. Trabb, who "had sliced his hot roll into three feather beds, and was slipping butter in between the blankets, and covering it up." The delight of such wit has little to do, at

phorical utterance. For interesting comment on my view, see Noel Burton-Roberts (1991: 169), who had read a samizdat copy. Since the essay elaborates the theme of this book in a rather different form, and uses the concept of semantical nonspecificity in analyzing a part of language that many humanists and literary critics find interesting, I have included it here as a foil to Grice's brief comments on the subject of metaphor. There has been an extraordinary amount of work on metaphor in the last twenty years—for example, Bergmann (1982), Fogelin (1988), Glucksberg (2001), Johnson (1981), Kittay (1987), Leezenberg (1995, 2001), Ortony (1993), Sacks (1981), Searle (1979), Stern (1983, 1985, 1991, 2000), and Sperber and Wilson (1986b). None of it makes the point that I want to make here and made in 1975. For discussion of my view, see Leezenberg (2001: 211–13).

times, with accuracy; a mouth never really looks like a post-office. The joy, the literary joy, is in the local fizz of each detail, and in the relation of each detail to the other, and then in the moral revelation that such similes provide. (Uriah Heep is like a post-office, that is, he is everyone's willing courier.) (Wood 1988: 40)

It is notable how, in literary rhetoric, the terms 'ordinary' and 'vulgar' and the words 'simile', 'metaphor', and 'literary' juxtapose.

Paul Horgan tells the following story:

My neighbor's very small boy, not quite four years old, came charging across my garden where I was working on a very hot summer morning. He was pursuing an imaginary enemy. He wore only a cowboy hat and the briefest of under-trunks, and he carried a toy shotgun. Suddenly, on becoming aware of me, he was abashed by his near-nakedness and his imaginary game. He paused in his chase and said angrily to me, "I am really a United States Marshal, but sometimes I go around like this." I nodded seriously, and, reassured, he ran on. (Horgan 1974: 94)

An imaginary enemy is a nonexistent enemy, which, as Gilbert Ryle (1949) would have remarked, is not a special kind of enemy; it is an enemy only "in" the child's imagination. The child's activity is an "imaginary game," in Horgan's words, but if that means 'game played *in* the imagination', it is a false description of the activity. The boy's was a real game, but a game "out of" the imagination, with pretend villains and mock beliefs. We might also say that the boy played his game imaginatively. When the child announces angrily that he is really a United States marshal, we credit him with an understanding of storytelling (as contrasted with lying) and the strength of imagination that energized his pursuit of his imaginary villain. But shall we say that he was sincere, even though his tone was serious? (Does the four-year-old really believe that he is a United States marshal? Surely not. Was he really asserting that he is a United States marshal? Surely not.) But, if, say, Paul Benacerraf and David Kaplan, dressed in shorts, cowboy hats, and carrying toy shotguns, ran into my seminar and said to me in angry seriousness, "We are really United States marshals, but sometimes we go around like this," should I say they were the possessors of dramatic and vivid imaginations, or should I take them to be simply deluded? Interestingly, one is common-sensically inclined to say that the adults are childishly deluded while saying that the child is culturally sophisticated. Common sense is wrong on both counts, as I shall show in what follows.

In describing the craft of the writer, phrases like these tend to come to mind: 'a work of the imagination', and 'the writer's task . . . to revive his imagination every day during his working hours'. 'Imaginative' is applied to the writer's mental state while composing, to kinds of literary product, and to the ability of a reader to understand the product created. But what do we know of these literary abilities, powers, motives, and products when we know them all to be imaginative in this sense or these senses? Have we said anything more than that these literary abilities, powers, motives, and products are . . . well, literary? The answer, I believe, is "No." And if imaginative art is just art, we most focus on that.

In the opening of the essay "The Medium of Fiction," Gass writes:

> It seems a country-headed thing to say: that literature is language, that stories and the places and the people in them are merely made of words as chairs are made of smoothed sticks and sometimes of cloth or metal tubes. Still, we cannot be too simple at the start, since the obvious is often the unobserved. . . . That novels should be made of words, and merely words, is shocking really. It's as though you had discovered that your wife were made of rubber: the bliss of all those years, the fears . . . from sponge. (Gass 1970: 27)

Modernist writers like Gass keep announcing to us the "obvious," excusing themselves in advance for doing so, because what they are after is not "really" obvious, and the claim that it is is just a rhetorical trick. They have a philosophical belief about the literary use of language, a belief shared by the mid-twentieth-century W. H. Auden, the late-century William Gass, and the early-century Karl Kraus, among others:

Auden   It is both the glory and the shame of poetry that its medium is not its private property, that a poet cannot invent his words and that words are products, not of nature, but of a human society which uses them for a thousand different purposes. (1968: 23)

Gass   The novelist makes his book from boards which say *Ladies* and *Gents*. Every scrap has been worn, every item handled; most of the pieces are dented or split. The writer may choose to be heroic—poets often are—he may strive to purify his diction and achieve *an exclusively literary language*. He may pretend that every syllable he speaks hasn't been spit, sometimes, in someone else's mouth. Such poets scrub, they clean, they smoothe, they polish, until we can scarcely recognize their words on the page. "A star glide, a single frantic sullenness, a single financial grass greediness," wrote Gertrude Stein. . . . The use of language in fiction only mimics its use in life. (1970: 30–31)

Kraus   My language is the universal whore whom I have to make into a virgin. (cited in Auden 1968: 23)

The distinctions between literary and ordinary, figurative and literal, or poetic and standard language were systematically employed throughout the 1920s and 1930s by the Russian formalists and members of the Prague Linguistic Circle. Their intent was the development of poetics as a rigorous science of "poeticality" and "literariness" comparable to structural linguistics as a rigorous science of "grammaticality." In Jan Mukařovský's highly influential essay of 1932, "Standard Language and Poetic Language," literary language is asserted to be independent of standard language, although related, in that "the standard language is the background against which is reflected the aesthetically intentional distortion of the linguistic components of the work, in other words, the intentional violation of the norm of the standard" (1970: 42). In poetic language attention is primarily on the words themselves and only secondarily on their communicative use. This attention is focused by special intonation, unusual vocabulary, and startling semantic juxtapositions of words.

Of course, there is more to this view than dispassionate linguistic analysis. Mukařovský quotes approvingly from a pre–World War I (1913) essay of Ferdinand Brunot:

Modern art, individualist in essence, cannot always and everywhere be satisfied with the standard language alone. The laws governing the usual communication of thought must not, lest it be unbearable tyranny, be categorically imposed upon the poet who, beyond the bounds of the accepted forms of language, may find personalized forms of intuitive expression. It is up to him to use them in accord with his creative intuition and without other limits than those imposed by his own inspiration. (cited in Mukařovský 1970: 52)

In the view of the early modernists the language least like Mukařovský's poetic language is, of course, the language of natural science. It is here that the literary aesthetes join forces with the logical empiricists. Both agree that scientific sentences are true or false and are communicative of thought, whereas poetic sentences are neither true nor false and are emotive. We find this supposed difference in language noted in a passage of John Locke's, who in *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* writes:

If we would speak of things as they are, we must allow that all the art of rhetoric, besides order and clearness, all the artificial and figurative application of words eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgment; and so indeed are perfect cheats. (Locke 1690: 3.10.34)

Speaking of things as they are! How far this seventeenth-century phrase seems from our self-conscious, post–World War II philosophical rhetoric! Upholders of the literal/figurative distinction have typically claimed that ordinary language is truthfully descriptive of the world and clearly communicative of thought, but figurative language is neither.

Let us consider Mukařovský's arguments in favor of the distinction. He first observes that literary language makes use of lexical and syntactic resources that are allegedly unavailable to the standard language—for example, slang in poetry; a combination of nonstandard dialect in dialogue and standard dialect in narrative within a novel; and archaic forms, like Locke's "hath." Although it is true that these features are absent from discourse in standard dialect, similar kinds of differences obtain between the standard and almost *any* nonstandard dialect. Such nonstandard dialects are just as clearly, cognitively communicative as the standard. One cannot conclude that such features make literary language uncommunicative of thought when ordinary language with such features is communicative of thought. Moreover, that the properties mentioned hold of literary texts is obviously not sufficient to show the existence of a coherent literary "language," a genuine literary dialect.

Other devices mentioned by Mukařovský include unusual intonation, choice of words, and uncommon combinations of meanings, but, I would have thought, the four-year-old's remark, describing his father's bald spot, "Daddy has a hole in his head," is not literature.

Mukařovský's (1970: 53–54) final argument concerns poetic neologisms, which, he says, are invented for aesthetic purposes, are "unexpected, unusual (in form and meaning), and unique." The argument for neologisms of a poetic kind proceeds as

follows. The aesthetic function of a term is incompatible with communicative function. Terms with standard form and meaning function communicatively. If neologisms that functioned aesthetically had standard form and meaning, they would function communicatively. If they functioned communicatively, they would not function aesthetically. Since they do function aesthetically, they do not have standard form and meaning. And, hence, they are not part of standard language.

This is a valid argument, but it begs the question. The distinction between poetic and standard language is just the distinction between aesthetic and communicative terms. The question of the intelligibility of the former distinction is the same as that of the latter distinction. Mukařovský offers no noncircular defense of the literal/figurative distinction.

In "The Medium of Fiction," which closely follows Paul Valéry's (1961) "Poetry and Abstract Thought," Gass looks for the difference between literary and literal language in the effects that language has on its audience rather than in its syntactic and semantic properties:

> The purpose of a literary work is the capture of consciousness, and the consequent creation, in you, of an imagined sensibility, so that while you read you are that patient pool or cataract of concepts which the author has constructed. (Gass 1970: 33)

Fiction and poetry provide the reader with a new self. Valéry supports the same view:

> A poem is really a kind of machine for producing the poetic state of mind by means of words. . . . Poetry is an art of language; certain combinations of words can produce an emotion that others do not produce, and which we shall call poetic. What kind of emotion is this? . . . I recognize it in myself by this: . . . that things and beings—or rather the ideas that represent them—somehow change in value. They attract one another, they are connected in ways quite different from the ordinary; they become . . . musicalized, resonant, and, as it were, harmonically related. (Valéry 1961: 79, 64, 59)

Valéry is more candid than Gass in revealing the logic of this position. Left with Gass's description of the reader's new and imagined sensibility—one characterized by attention to and absorption in the poem, the story, or the novel—it is unclear why this effect on the mind is characteristic of literary language. Could not a theoretical physicist like Steven Weinberg or a biologist like Stephen Jay Gould, in reading an essay on general relativity or the theory of evolution, experience the same absorption Gass describes? Valéry is more explicit. The answer to the question "What can poetic language do that ordinary language cannot?" is "Create a poetic state of mind in the reader." Insofar as our mental states are individuated by their causal antecedents and consequents, and by their objects, to be in a poetic state of mind is to be in a state caused by reading poetry and in a state having as its object a literary text, the poem read. The thesis now goes: poetic language differs from ordinary language because the former produces the poetic state of mind and the latter does not.

Of course, the poetic state is just that state caused by and having as its object poetic language. Thus Valéry's claim reduces to this: poetic language differs from

ordinary language because poetic language produces the mental state caused by and having as its object poetic language. Obviously Valéry has not advanced the understanding of the difference between poetic and ordinary language; he has merely restated the difference in terms of mental states.

Valéry's claim is not quite so vacuous as I've just made it seem. He characterizes the receptive state as follows:

> Observe the effect of poetry on yourselves. You will find that at each line the meaning produced within you, far from destroying the musical form communicated to you, recalls it . . . as though the very sense which is present to your mind can find no other outlet or expression, no other answer, than the very music which gave it birth. (Valéry 1961: 72)

What characterizes the poetic state of mind in the reader is the feeling of this intimate union between sound and sense. We shall de-psychologize Valéry's description and say that in literature, especially poetry, the sound and the sense of a sentence or of a word are inseparable; in ordinary language, they are not.

To emphasize the consequences of Valéry's view, I generalize his criterion of literariness:

> A sentence S of English is literary if and only if (*a*) there is no sentence T of English, T not identical to S, that "paraphrases" S, and (*b*) there is no sentence T* in any natural language L, L not identical to English, that "translates" S.

Our readerly intuitions about poetry support Valéry's claim, as long as we look none too closely at the relations of translation and paraphrase. But this calls for a little example, taken from Robert Frost, who held a view similar to Valéry's:

> It is blue-butterfly day here in spring,
> And with these sky-flakes down in flurry on flurry
> There is more unmixed color on the wing
> Than flowers will show for days unless they hurry.
>
> But there are flowers that fly and all but sing,
> And now from having ridden out desire
> They lie closed over in the wind and cling
> Where wheels have freshly sliced the April mire. (Frost 1979: 225)

Even in as uncomplicated a structure as this, it is evident that paraphrase into prose loosens the taut connection between sound and sense that makes those words worthy of attention. How would one flatly begin? Would one say, It's spring here, and there are lots of blue butterflies around today?

It is not unfair to take Gass and Valéry to claim that paraphrase or translation of poetic language into prose language is impossible because any change of wording or grammar changes the sound and so alters whatever relation between sound and sense obtains in a poetic line. But then it is equally impossible to "translate," in the sense of preserving those linguistic features of the phrase, ordinary prose into different ordinary prose. By the criterion of literariness just mentioned, this

makes a prosaic sentence poetic—and this is far from Valéry's intent. The only translation he allows is the homophonic one that paraphrases the clause 'It is blue-butterfly day here in spring' by the sentence 'It is blue-butterfly day here in spring.' The employment of this question-begging conception of paraphrase and translation is not, I believe, defensible in a criterion of literariness that is intended to defend the autonomy of literary language. But even if we adopt a more conventional notion of translation, as Robert Frost did, the criterion is still in difficulty. Auden comments illuminatingly:

> Frost's definition of poetry as the untranslatable element in language looks plausible at first sight, but, on closer examination, will not quite do. In the first place, even in the most rarefied poetry, there are some elements which are translatable. The sound of the words, their rhythmical relations, and all meanings and association of meanings which depend upon sound, like rhymes and puns, are, of course, untranslatable, but poetry is not, like music, pure sound. Any elements in a poem which are not based on verbal experience, are, *to some degree*, translatable into another tongue, for example, images, *similes*, and *metaphors* which are drawn from sensory experience. (Auden 1968: 23)

Obviously I do not believe the matter is quite as simple as Auden makes it seem, but it is a more reasonable assessment than Valéry's, Frost's, or Gass's. In turn, Auden's account will not quite do. For good translations of literature not only preserve sense and convey the connotations of the original text, it is possible for them to capture relations of sound and rhythm. If translation could capture only sense and certain implications of sense, translations of Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky" from *Through the Looking Glass* would be impossible (see Guenthner and Guenthner-Reutter 1978 and Atlas 1980b). You'll recall the first verse:

> 'Twas brillig and the slithy toves
> Did gyre and gimble in the wabe,
> All mimsy were the borogoves,
> And the mome raths outgrabe. (Carroll 1963: 191)

Not only are there two Latin "translations," a French "translation," and a German "translation," but it is possible to judge their relative quality. In my view the German "translation" by Robert Scott is better than the French one by Frank Warrin:

> Il brilgue: les tôves lubricilleux
> Se gyrent en vrillant dans le guave,
> Enmimés sont les gougesbosqueux,
> Et le mômerade horsgrave.

> Es brillig war. Die schlichte Toven
> Wirrten und wimmelten in Waben;
> Und aller-mümsige Burggoven
> Die mohmen Räth ausgraben. (Carroll 1963: 193)